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THERIANTHROPE IN SAN ROCK ART

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ABSTRACT

San paintings of therianthropes, beings that combine human and non-human features, are described and analysed in order to formulate a theory concerning the meaning of these paintings for the people who made and viewed them. The range of therianthrope paintings is described. Four explanations, or theories, concerning the therianthropes are discussed and evaluated in relation to San religious rites and beliefs and the physical forms taken by therianthropes in the art. These explanations or theories focus respectively on animal-masked/costumed shamans, shamans transformed into animals or other creatures while in altered states, the spirits of dead shamans and the human-animal beings of San myths. Physical as well as deeper, structural, conceptual correspondences between these classes of beings in San religious thought indicate that they are all related and relevant to the way in which we should interpret the therianthropes.

The kingdoms are artificial constructions designed by human beings in an effort to cope with the tremendous diversity of the living world. They are not rules of nature. (Keeton 1972: 703)

Keywords: therianthropes, San, religion.

Introduction

Paintings of therianthropes, beings that combine human features with those of animals or birds, are a particularly interesting, and puzzling, feature of San art, as well as the art of groups in many other areas of the world. Here, San paintings of therianthropes are described and analysed in an attempt to throw further light on this class of images. Various salient characteristics of these paintings have been identified which, together with ethnographic material relating to the rites, beliefs and myths of San and other groups, form the basis for the interpretation of therianthrope paintings that is offered here.

Evidence will be presented to support the following general explanation for the therianthropes in San art, elements of which have been put forward by other researchers. Therianthropes represent shamans, who, in altered states associated with dream or trance, were in the process of fusing with, or had already fused with, animals and birds. In the 'death' of trance they became spirits of the dead. In some cases they achieved this transformation and fusion with the help of masks or the wearing of the entire hide and head of particular animals with which they had ritual, 'possession' relationships. In trance or visionary dreams, and in animal-human form, they visited the realm of the dead. There they encountered the spirits of the dead, including other shamans, some of whom, like them, had temporarily 'died' in trance while others permanently inhabited this realm. Shamans visiting or permanently occupying the realm of the dead assumed part-animal, part-human form.

It is suggested further that the spirit realm, which included the realm of the dead, was conceived by the San as being similar in a number of important respects to that inhabited by the mythological animal-human beings of the Early Race, including the protean trickster-creator, /Kaggen. It was a liminal, magical, primal state associated with the First Order, where all structure, all rules and all boundaries, including those between people and animals and between different species of animals, were capable of dissolution. The ambiguity and liminality that characterised this state imbued it with sacred, anti-structural powers. Powers of this kind, it will be shown, are associated with, and capable of being accessed by, those whom society views as temporarily or permanently outside of the normal social structures—people, such as spirit mediators as well as initiands at puberty, who are considered socially and spiritually liminal.

It is therefore argued here that, through dreams and the trance dance (and the 'death' and physical transformations and combinations in which the latter state resulted), San shamans gained access to, became part of, and later painted, the realm of the dead, a realm structurally related to the mythological primal state. The religious symbolism of the therianthropes in San art therefore derives from San belief complexes associated with dream and trance experiences, the spirits of the dead as well as the mythical realm inhabited by the people of the Early Race.

Some characteristics of the paintings of therianthropes

Paintings of therianthropes exist in almost all areas where San paintings are found in southern Africa, including South Africa, Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Namibia. They are therefore widely spread, and, although we cannot be absolutely sure of this, it seems likely, making allowance for a degree of individual and regional variation in San religious beliefs, that they had an essentially similar meaning for the different San groups that painted them. Their hybridity of body form sets them apart from other motifs in the art and suggests that they constitute a particular class of related beings within the art.

While considerable attention has been focused on these beings and they have long been considered to occupy a central position in the religious symbolism of San art, they nevertheless comprise only a small part of the general corpus of San rock paintings. Only about 5% of the figures with human features identified by Pager (1971) in his survey of paintings in Ndedema Gorge were therianthropes and in his entire research area he found that only about 4% of the paintings with human attributes were therianthropes, including alites. In his survey of sites in the Barkly East district, Lewis-Williams (1981) found that just over 4% of the paintings of

figures with human features were therianthropes. Vinnicombe (1976) does not provide data on all forms of therianthropes identified by her in a survey of paintings in parts of the central and northern Drakensberg but only 3% of paintings with human features in her research area had animal heads. Although no study has been undertaken of regional variation in the numbers of therianthrope paintings, they are more common in the southeastern mountains and adjacent areas than in the Western Cape Province (A. Manhire, pers. comm.). They are very scarce in the Brandberg of Namibia (T. Lenssen-Erz, pers. comm.) and in Zimbabwe (Garlake 1995).

The great majority of the therianthropes in San rock art portrays beings that combine antelope features and postures with those of humans although it is frequently difficult to identify the species of antelope. Those that are identifiable are usually eland, reedbuck or other small antelope. Often it appears that it is the category of antelope in general, rather than any specific species of antelope that is represented. Almost all therianthropes have animal, not human, heads and the archetypal therianthrope is a being on two legs with a human torso and limbs and an antelope head (Fig. 1).

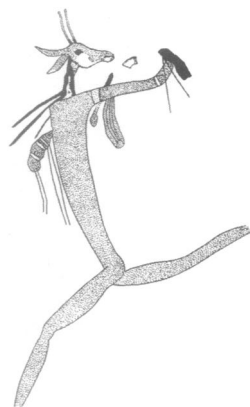


Fig 1. Eastern Cape

Human and antelope body parts and postures are nevertheless combined in many different ways in the therianthrope paintings, sometimes in ways that almost defy classification—a significant point in itself and one to which I shall return later. Human features may also be combined with unrealistic but antelope-like features. The snout or horns of the antelope head on a human body, for example, may be unrealistically depicted. Moreover, human-antelope hybrids may display additional features such as tusks that are associated with animals other than antelopes. There is apparently deliberate conflation of more than one antelope species in some of the antelope-humans and the addition in some cases of body parts of other, non-antelope species to these hybrid beings. This means that therianthropes with human and antelope features may sometimes represent a fusion of humans with two species of antelope or with antelope and other animal species.

Antelope heads, torsos, legs, hooves, tails and postures may all be combined in different ways with human heads, torsos, limbs, hands, feet and postures. The following forms and postures, amongst others, are represented in the art:

- humans on all fours;
- antelope on two legs;
- antelope depicted, in a sequence of images, standing up,

changing into humans on two legs and then changing back into antelope in typical four-legged posture;

- figures on two legs with human torsos, arms and heads, but antelope legs and hooves;
- figures on two legs with human torsos, limbs and feet but with antelope heads;
- figures on two legs with human torsos and limbs, but with antelope hooves and heads;
- figures on two legs with human torsos and limbs but antelope heads and tails
- figures on all fours with animal torsos and heads, but with human limbs;
- figures on all fours with animal torsos, heads and tails, but with human limbs.

Some therianthropes are winged, have wing-like appendages or hold their arms in a wing-like position. These usually combine antelope features with those of humans and birds. The actual species of antelope depicted is usually even more obscure than in those antelope therianthropes without avian attributes. The winged beings have been termed flying buck (Lee & Woodhouse 1964), alites (Pager 1971, 1975) and trance-buck (Lewis-Williams 1981). They form part of a spectrum of related beings that have the following forms, amongst others (see Pager 1971 for a range of examples):

- antelope-humans with outstretched arms and spread fingers;
- with arms in a backward position
- with arms in a backward position and with feathers on the body;
- with arms in a backward position and feathers on the arms;
- with arms, transformed into streamer-like lines, in a backward position.

Also included in this category and related to the above forms are:

- creatures with wings or wing-like appendages that have antelope, but not human, features;
- humans with no antelope features who hold their arms outstretched in the position of wings;
- monster-humans with no antelope features but with wings or wing-like appendages.

Since some of these beings have no antelope features and, since they are almost invariably shown with wings or wing-like appendages, or are associated in some way with flight, they are probably best described by Pager's term alites rather than as flying buck or trance-buck.

Often there are further bizarre features associated with therianthropes: their bodies may be greatly distorted—very elongated or in strange postures—or their features may combine clearly antelope features with human-like, but not fully human, torsos and limbs. Similarly, as has been alluded to above, human torsos and limbs may be combined with antelope-like, but not fully antelope, heads. Sometimes fantastic, bizarre and unidentifiable elements are combined with easily recognisable features of both humans and antelope. In a few, very rare, paintings, the human-animal cross-over is indicated by the artist's painting an animal that is normal in all or most respects but is depicted with human weaponry (a bow and a quiver with arrows) on its back.

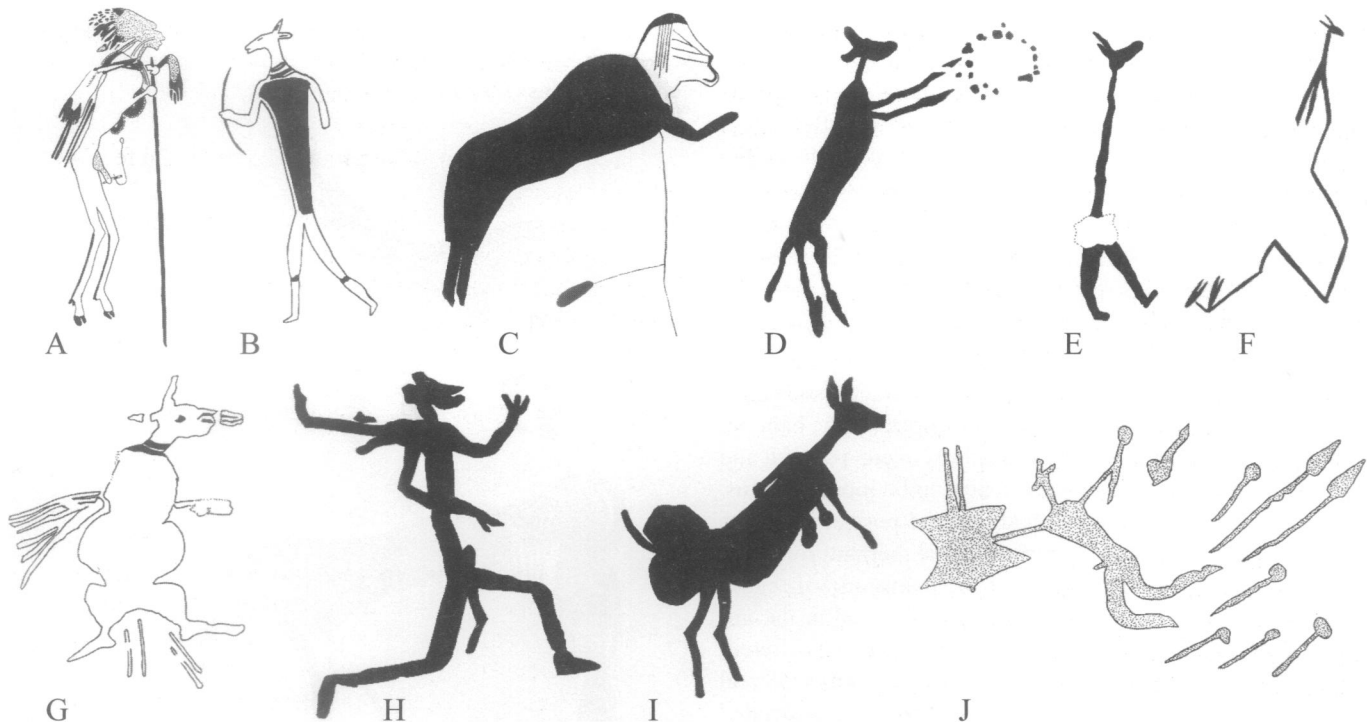


Fig. 2 Human and antelope features combined. A & J: Eastern Cape. (A redrawn from Lewis-Williams & Dowson [1999, fig. 80]); B: Free State; C & E: Eastern Lesotho; D & I: Western Cape. F-H: KwaZulu-Natal.

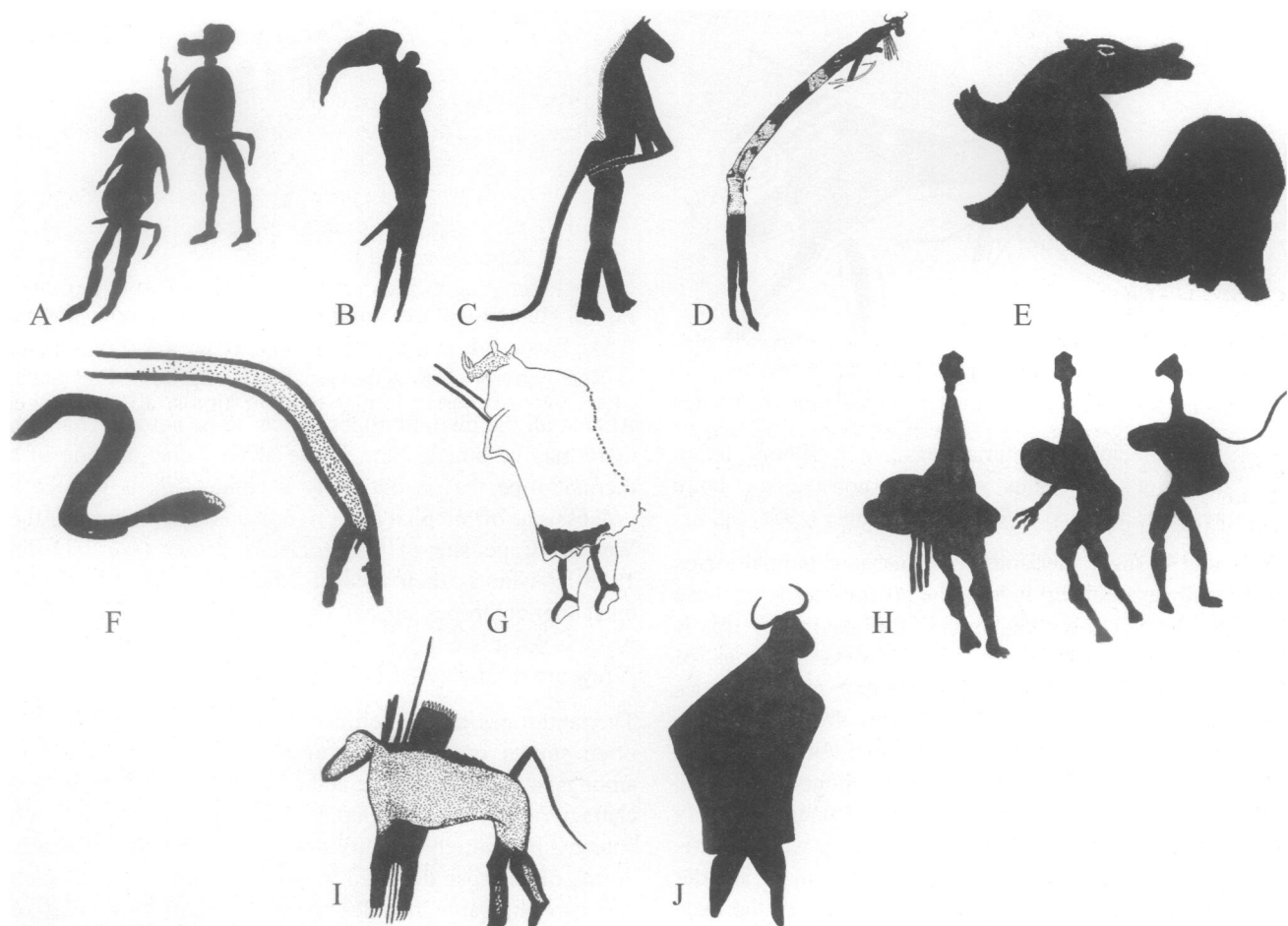


Fig. 3. Human and non-antelope features combined. A: Baboon therianthrope, KwaZulu-Natal; B: Elephant therianthrope, Western Cape; C: Feline therianthrope, Lesotho; D: Wildebeest therianthrope, Western Cape (Redrawn from Bassett [2000]); E: Hippopotamus (?) therianthrope, Lesotho; F: Snake therianthrope, Eastern Cape; G: Rhinoceros (?) therianthrope, Eastern Cape; H: Ostrich therianthrope, Western Cape; I: Baboon therianthrope with human hunting equipment, Lesotho; J: Cow or bull therianthrope, KwaZulu-Natal.

Antelope and other therianthropes may be depicted with heads and/or hooves of animals seamlessly joined, or fused with, a naked human torso and limbs to form one composite therianthrope being. Or they may be depicted with the legs of a human being projecting from what appears to be the skin and head of an animal, usually an antelope. Often the arms and hands of these creatures are shown covered by the hide of the animal. Some paintings depict people wearing antelope masks.

Elements of other animals besides antelope are sometimes combined with human forms in the art. Humans with wings and antelope therianthropes with avian characteristics have already been mentioned. Therianthropes with baboon, elephant, feline or wildebeest features were painted and some therianthropes have what appear to be hippopotamus, snake, pig, ostrich or canine features and possibly features of other animals. However, non-antelope therianthropes are very rare. There are also a few paintings of cattle therianthropes. I suggest that creatures depicted in the art, which have no human features but which combine different species of animal or which combine the features of real animals with those of imaginary creatures, are associated with therianthropes and conceptually linked to these beings, through their hybrid, shape-shifted characteristics.



Fig. 4. Hybrid being with human legs, antelope hoof, feline tail and pig's tusk plus additional non-realistic body features. Eastern Cape. Redrawn from Pager (1975, fig. 2).

The gender of those therianthropes that have animal torsos is almost always indeterminate. The great majority of those that have human rather than animal torsos and whose sex is unambiguously depicted are adult males. Paintings of therianthropes with unambiguously female characteristics exist but are extremely rare. Sometimes the sex of male therianthropes is obvious—they are shown with penises, in some cases exaggeratedly long. Male weaponry associated with many therianthropes strongly but not unambiguously suggests that these figures are male. Of those whose sex is not unambiguously depicted, most have the more slender elongated body form that is more characteristic of the male figures than the female figures in the art. While this suggests that the artist intended to depict male beings, it is nevertheless possible that some therianthropes of this kind, although male in general body form, may in fact represent women with the attenuated body form associated with

trance (Stephenson 1995) or a wider, transcendent, category of androgynous beings with animal and human characteristics (see Green 1997).

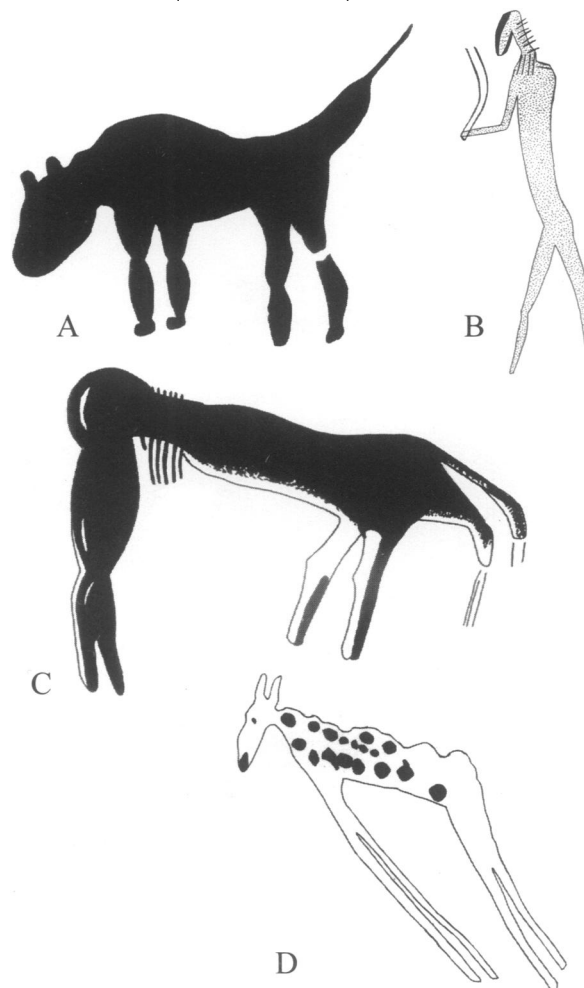


Fig. 5. Human features combined with bizarre body forms. A: Western Cape; B: Eastern Cape; C: KwaZulu-Natal. Redrawn from Lewis-Williams (1981, fig 4); D: Free State.

Almost all the therianthropes appear to be adults. Although there may be others, I am aware of only one painting of a therianthrope that is definitely a child. This is part of a procession of elephant therianthropes depicted at the Western Cape site of Groot Hekse Rivier (see Johnson 1979). As far as their race or ethnic group is concerned, most therianthropes appear to be San people although in many cases it is not possible to be sure that this is the case. A few are definitely Black (Nguni or Sotho) farmers.

Therianthropes are sometimes depicted in groups but are often shown on their own or as the only therianthrope amongst a group of people and animals that have no hybrid characteristics. They are depicted in a range of postures and engaged in a variety of activities. Some are shown dancing. Some, often those depicted wearing karosses (skin cloaks) and carrying large bundles on their backs, form part of processions. Others may be shown with a bow in hand, shooting arrows, although hunting is very seldom depicted. Some are shown relating to elands in unusual ways, reaching out to or touching these animals. In many cases it is not possible to determine whether they are engaged in any

activity or are doing anything that could be described as a goal-oriented. They are simply painted in a variety of static postures. In these cases the paintings appear to be entirely symbolic and devoid of narrative content.

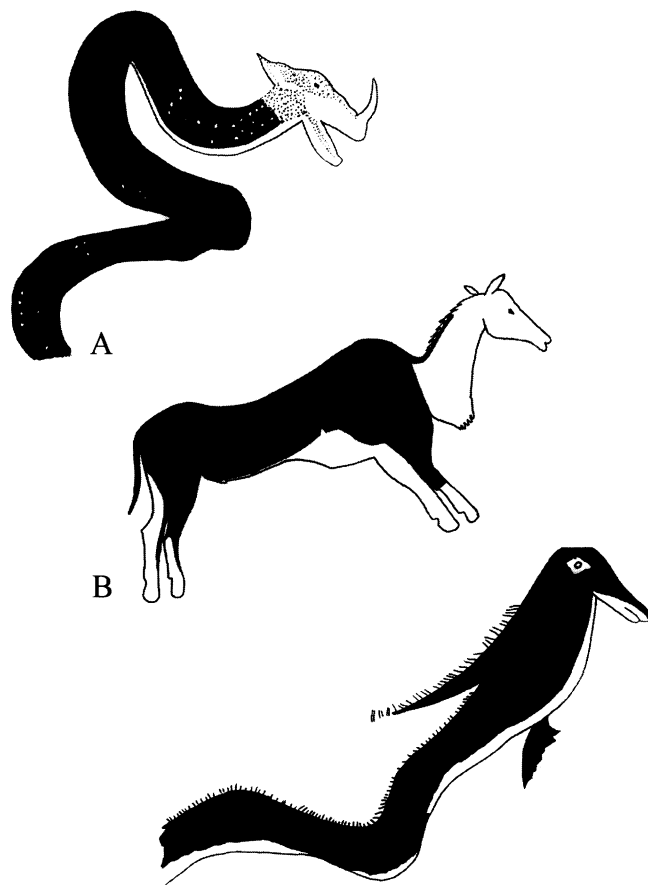


Fig. 6. Different animal forms, some of which are imaginary, combined with each other. A: Snake and imaginary tusked creature. Eastern Cape. Redrawn from Vinnicombe (1976, fig. 145); B: Eland and horse. Eastern Cape; C: Snake and imaginary creature. Lesotho. Redrawn from Lee and Woodhouse (1970, fig. D 32).

Interpreting the therianthropes

Therianthropes in San art have been interpreted by rock art researchers in a variety of ways. These include:

- hunters disguised as animals (Woodhouse 1966, 1967);
- people participating in rites involving the use of animal masks and/or costume (Woodhouse 1967, 1979; Lee & Woodhouse 1970; Pager 1975; Vinnicombe 1976; Thackeray 1984; Jolly 1986, 1995);
- trancing San shamans fused with particular animals of power with which they had a ritual relationship (Lewis-Williams 1981 and other publications);
- spirit beings, including the spirits of the dead who have transformed into animals (Woodhouse 1974; Pager 1975, 1994; Vinnicombe 1976; Solomon 1997, 1999, 2000);
- people of an Early Race associated with a primal time when no distinction existed between animals and people (Pager 1975, 1994; Woodhouse 1979; Solomon 1997, 1999, 2000).

Little evidence has been forthcoming to support the view that therianthropes represent disguised hunters, and this

interpretation therefore will not be discussed in this article. It is the other four explanations put forward for the therianthropes that will be examined here in the light of a number of the characteristics which have been found to be associated with these beings and the contexts in which they are depicted in the art.

Therianthropes as animal-masked or -costumed ritual functionaries

Perhaps because the idea that all therianthropes represented hunters disguised in animal masks, skins or costumes held sway for so long, there often has been a reluctance to consider the possibility that some of the paintings of therianthropes depict San ritually masquerading in animal masks or costume. Yet there is a considerable body of evidence to indicate that at least some of the therianthropes represent masked or animal-costumed San. It is also likely that some animal-headed figures in the art represent either San ritual functionaries influenced by the rites and beliefs of Black farmers with whom they were in close and symbiotic contact or Black farmers themselves in ritual animal dress (Jolly 1995, 1996).

A feature of many groups like the San that include shamans is the wearing of the heads and skins of animals with which these people have a ritual relationship and on whose powers they draw. Animal or bird caps and/or masks and/or costumes are, or were, worn in a range of societies by ritual functionaries whose role is, or was, to mediate between the living and the spirit world, including the realm of the dead. Animal masks and costumes covering the head and/or body of the wearer include masks made from the entire heads of donkeys (Fig. 7). Other costumes were made from the skin and head of a jaguar, with gloves made from their paws, so that the costumed person assumes the form of the animal (Saunders 1989) (Fig. 8). The ritual dress of Siberian shamans included masks with horns (Hoppál 1992), masks made of bears' heads with skin attached (Eliade 1964), wings hung from the shaman's shoulders (Eliade 1964; Waite 1966; Hoppál 1992), and a bird, such as a raven or eagle, on the head (Waite 1966; Hoppál 1992).

Bogoras (1909) relates a Koryak myth in which a woman transforms herself into a bear by putting on a bear-skin and describes the metamorphosis of trancing Chukchee shamans into animals, aided, in some cases, by their wearing the skin (including head and claws) of the animal concerned. The wild and uncontrolled behaviour of the shamans described by Bogoras (1909) is similar in many respects to that exhibited by San trancers, which suggests that the Chukchee described here went into trance with the aid of animal masks and dress:

The shamans also imitate the voices of animals and birds, stamp the ground with their feet, and jump about violently, foaming at the mouth, and even breaking such things as may come within reach of their hands. A shaman whose body is entered by a (spirit) loses the faculty of human speech, and may express his wishes either by gestures or by gibbering, unintelligible noises. He crawls on all fours, grunting and gnashing his teeth. I was told several times that some of the shamans even put on a bear or a wolf skin, taken off with the claws and the skull. (Bogoras 1909: 442)



Fig. 7. Rock engraving of men with horse or donkey masks, one pushed up on the head, from Messak Mellet, Libya. Copied from a photograph supplied by Yves Gauthier, reproduced in Gauthier (1994, fig. 3).



Fig. 8. Aztec drawing of a 'jaguar knight' in jaguar skin costume. Redrawn from Saunders (1989). Desana Indian shamans living next to the Amazon in Colombia dress in jaguar costume before transforming into jaguars (Saunders 1989).

Certainly, the agriculturist Zulu, who were neighbours of the southeastern San, possessed ritual functionaries who also masqueraded as animals. Their role, like that of the Chuchkee and San shaman/medicine-person, was to mediate between the living and the world of the spirits. Hammond-Tooke (1993) cites a description by John Ross of the dress worn by one of Shaka's praise-poets, quite possibly also a diviner:

(Our attention) was arrested by a strange and ludicrous object, which at first sight appeared to be a complete non-descript. It was a kind of wild animal in an erect posture, and proved to be a human being enveloped from head to foot in the skin of a tiger (leopard), so fitted on him that the skin of the hind legs served as pantaloons and that of the fore did duty as the sleeves for the upper garment. The skin of the tiger's head being drawn over his face served as a covering for the head, on which was mounted a pair of huge horns belonging to some animal of the deer tribe. (Hammond-Tooke 1993: 70)

Gardiner (1836) similarly describes and illustrates the animal dress worn by one of the praisers of the Zulu king Dingaan (Fig. 9). This man wears a skirt, a feature typical of the dress of Nguni diviners:

These heralds are always disguised by some grotesque attire; on this occasion, one of them was so completely in the attire of a panther (leopard), his own eyes piercing through the very holes in the skull, and his neck and shoulders streaming with long lappets of the same fur that he had no resemblance to a human being. (Gardiner 1836: 59. My bracketed addition)



Fig.9. A Zulu royal praiser, probably also a diviner, in leopard costume. From Gardiner (1836).

The above accounts indicate that animal costumes and masks could be, and were, worn by people in a range of widely-separated societies, all of which possessed ritual specialists who, like the San, drew on the spiritual powers of animals and birds to enable them to mediate between the realm of living and that of the spirits, including the dead. A number of rock paintings and ethnographic accounts indicate, moreover, that the San also, on at least some occasions, employed animal masquerade for this purpose.

Fig. 10 shows a person participating in a trance dance, indicated by the arms-back posture of the accompanying figure, who is wearing an antelope-headed mask that has been placed on the back of his head. Other examples of masked figures in the art include those illustrated by Stow (1930) (Fig. 11). See Woodhouse (1992) for photographs of the original paintings and confirmation of the accuracy of these particular copies by Stow.

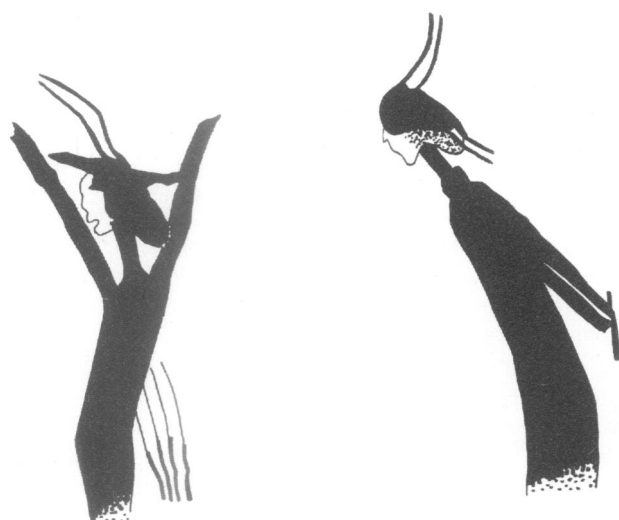


Fig. 10. Trancing men with antelope masks pushed to the back of their heads. Eastern Cape.

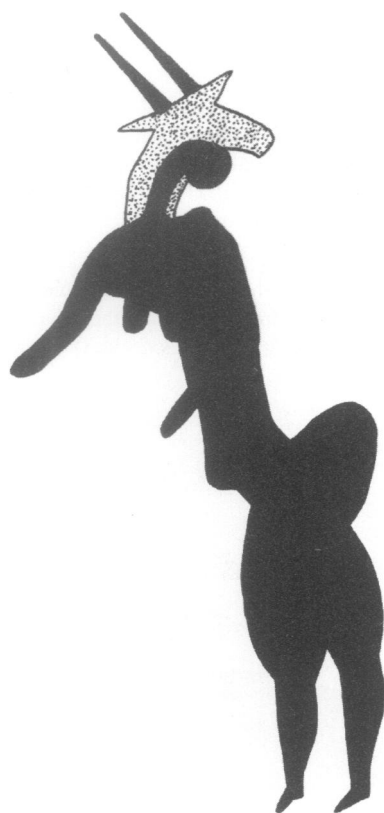


Fig. 11. Female figure with mask pushed up onto the top of her head. Other figures in this panel are shown with masks covering the head and face. Eastern Cape. Redrawn from Stow (1930, plate 13).

That the San believed that they changed into/fused with the animals whose skins they wore is demonstrated, moreover, by paintings of people clad in skins who are shown in the process of transforming into animals, in a similar manner to that reported by Bogoras (1909) for Chukchee shamans. Fig. 12, for example, depicts one of a group of dancers, who has placed what appears to be an eland hide with head, or, just possibly, the entire carcass of a young eland on his back. The eland torso is painted orange-yellow. The human is

painted dark red, except for his front leg, which is painted the same colour as the eland on his back. The artist has used this convention to demonstrate that his subject, possibly the painter himself in trance, is in the process of fusing with the eland whose skin he is wearing. (Pager [1975: 49] and Vinnicombe [1976: Figs 109, 228, 249] give illustrations of other paintings of people wearing antelope skins and heads and in the process of 'tranceforming' into antelope).

In some cases it is likely that the transformation of a shaman was facilitated simply by wearing the skin of an animal. In Fig. 13 people are shown merging with their karosses and transforming into mammals or reptiles, some of which have imaginary features. The figure at far right is shown with his front legs changed into antelope legs and hooves, which form part of his skin cloak, and the figure at far left has also begun to fuse with his kaross. Both have adopted the four-legged posture of antelope, similar to the posture of dancers who have collapsed onto their hands and knees during trance. One of the other figures is in the process of becoming a cow or ox, another appears to be transforming into a snake with tusks and yet another into an unidentified animal with tusks. In this respect, the suggestion by Parkington & Manhire (1997: 317) that people depicted wearing eland karosses were 'a kind of therianthrope, conflating human and eland' is pertinent. Although Parkington & Manhire (1997) do not argue for a shamanistic interpretation of the therianthropes, their observation that figures clad in karosses may symbolise the close association, and merging, of human with animal is relevant to the suggestion that animal dress was used by some San people to facilitate and symbolise their transformation into animals.

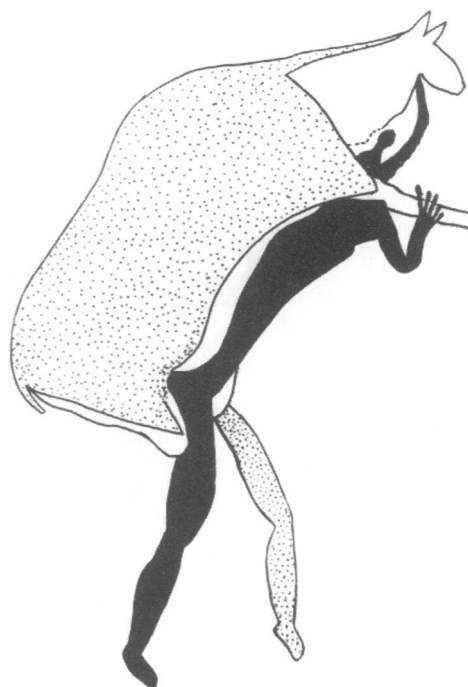


Fig. 12. Man with eland skin, or carcass of a young eland, on his back, and in the process of transforming into this antelope. Eastern Cape. Redrawn from Bassett (2001, plate 43).

In contrast to those who are shown naked, some of the kaross-clad therianthropes also appear to depict people who are wearing costumes made from antelope hides and heads. Therianthropes of this kind are not painted in the form of a part-animal, part-human being clad in a kaross, an item of dress distinct from the animal-headed being. Instead, the animal skin is shown as joined to, and as an integral part of, the animal neck of the being depicted but terminating in the manner of an item of dress at about the knees. This suggests that what is being depicted, in some cases and perhaps in stylised form, is a human figure wearing the skin and head of an animal with the person's legs protruding from the animal costume (Fig 14).

The paintings discussed above all point to the use of masks and a ritual or rituals involving the covering of a person's body with the head and skin of an antelope. Ethnographic reports of the use of ritual animal dress by San people, as well as those already cited for other groups including Nguni-speakers, support this suggestion. Thus, Thackeray (1984) cited an account by Izak Bosman of a kind of 'dance of the animals' performed by people he encountered while travelling in present-day Botswana in 1889 in support of the idea that at least some of the paintings of therianthropes 'may have been intended to represent people dressed in animal costumes ... while others may have been representations of images seen in trance during which individuals identified themselves with animals ...'. This dance occurred at a place northeast of the Okovango River in the territory of Chief Moremi (Bosman n.d.). Bosman describes how San and Moremi's hunters dressed up in animal skin costumes to dance in imitation of the animals in whose skins they were dressed:

(At this place) I saw something very interesting and quite remarkable, which I will not forget easily. Every evening the local inhabitants danced and played in a circle formed in the sand. They were clothed in garments that they had made from different kinds of animal skins, and these were made in such a way that they looked just like the animals themselves. One could see a Bushman in a jackal's skin, complete with head and ears, and one could see one of the big Kaffers clad in the skin of an elephant's head with trunk attached. Others, again, were in the skins of the wild cat, lion, hyaena, or wild dog, while some portrayed the buffalo, leopard, rhinoceros, kudu, zebra, gemsbok or springbuck.

A group of them took up position on the outside of the circle, and the appearance of a number of young girls who began to clap their hands was the signal for the start of a kind of dance, and each dancer mimicked the animal that he represented and also made noises corresponding to those made by that animal. So, for example, the one who represented the porcupine danced around on all fours and made the noise made by that animal. Some of them played an instrument that they made themselves from a calabash with a skin stretched over it and strings made from the gut of an animal.

It was truly strange to see the goings on as they know the nature of the animals well and imitate them closely - running, jumping, stamping, skipping, screeching, roaring and going mad. It must surely represent a kind of play, and in fact the only difference between their play and that of civilised people is that they re-enacted the lives of animals instead of the lives of other people. It all proceeded wonderfully, they danced in time with the music and did not even leave the circle.

I would not mind seeing something like that again, but the local inhabitants assured us that it is something that does not happen often, and then only in a year when there has been plenty of rain, so that everything is very plentiful. (Bosman n.d.: 97-98, my translation)

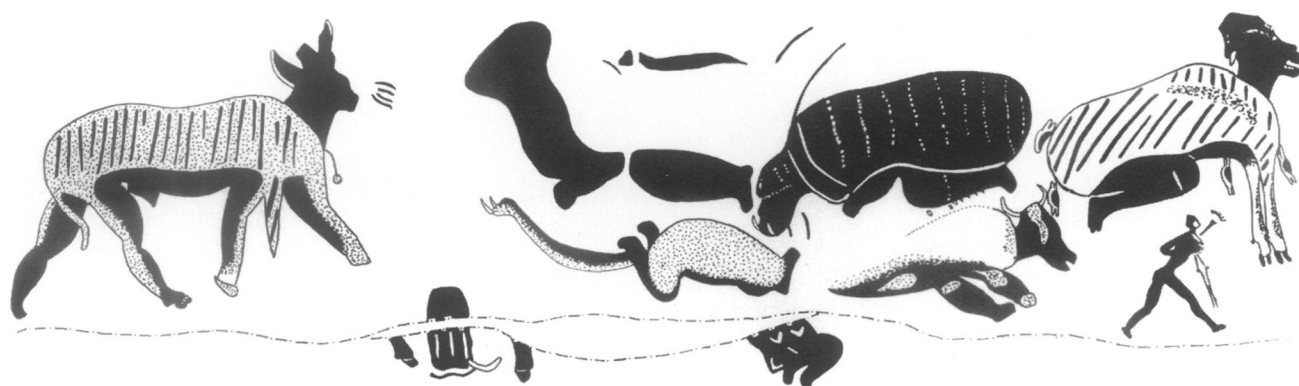


Fig. 13. People depicted 'fusing' with the skins they wear. Eastern Cape. Redrawn from Lewis-Williams & Dowson (1999; fig. 76b)

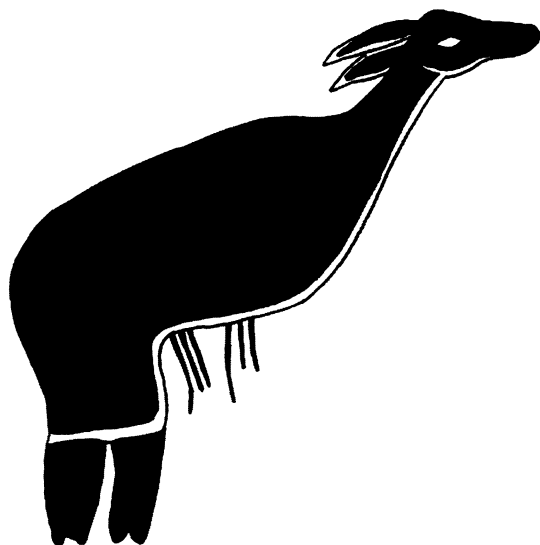


Fig 14. Possible antelope costume. Lesotho. Redrawn from Vinnicombe (1976: xiv).

The dance witnessed by Bosman was probably a means of the San's expressing the close relationship they had with animals. It is also interesting that the dance also included Blacks. It involved people dancing within a circular groove in the sand with clapping women providing support to the dancers, characteristic features of the San trance dance. It is therefore very likely that some of the people involved in the dance fell into trance, fusing with the animals that they imitated so closely. This appears to be indicated by Bosman's description of their crawling around on all fours 'screeching' and 'going mad', frenetic behaviour similar not only to that exhibited by San trancers but also by the Chukchee shamans described by Bogoras as being transformed into animals in trance.

In further support of the idea that San people masqueraded as animals, Thackeray (1993) has reproduced a photograph, taken in about 1934 in the Northern Cape, of a person bending forward, holding a stick in each hand and covered by the skin and head of an antelope. There is a striking resemblance of this person to the person illustrated in Fig. 12, as well as to therianthropes painted at Melikane in Lesotho, which are depicted in this posture and were commented upon by the 19th century Maluti San informant Qing (Orpen 1874). As Thackeray (1993) remarks in relation to the latter paintings, it strongly suggests that some therianthrope paintings depict people in dress made of animal-skin.

It is also possible that bird costume or dress may be depicted in the art. The shamanic practice of placing a bird on one's head, and the symbolism associated with this practice, could well be represented a painting from a site in the Northern Cape of a person with the head of an imaginary creature and with a bird on top of his head (Fig. 15). Reports of shamans in other societies placing birds on their heads have been

cited above, and Burchell (1953) described a similar headdress worn by a San person that he and his party encountered during their travels in southern Africa in the 19th century:

Their (the San's) chief, or captain, was distinguished in a manner so singular that my Hottentots were highly diverted at the ridiculous insignia of his rank; and as they could not clearly understand his proper name gave him the that of Oud Kraai-kop (Old Crow-head), as he wore the head of a crow fixed upon the top of his hair. (Burchell 1953: 61; my bracketed addition)

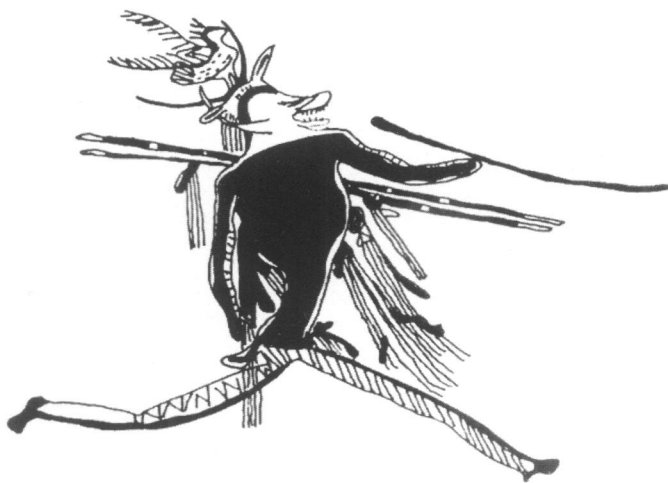


Fig. 15. Transformed shaman with bird headdress. Northern Cape. Redrawn from Lewis-Williams & Dowson (1999, fig. 38b).

The person depicted in Fig. 15 is probably a San shaman who has used this form of headdress during trance to help him attain the transformed state in which he is shown in this painting. In the same way that some shamans in a state of full fusion with animals are shown wearing karosses on top of their animal-human bodies so shamans transformed into real or imaginary creatures, like this figure, are shown with the head-dresses they wore when trancing. Bird head-dresses of this kind may well have represented the wearer's spirit in the form of a bird, the symbolism that Lewis-Williams & Dowson (1999) suggest underlies this painting.

All the evidence cited above supports the argument that, in at least some cases, San masqueraded in animal, and possibly bird, costume for ritual purposes. It is likely, moreover, that Blacks joined them in these dances on some occasions and had a greater or lesser degree of influence on both the form and underlying beliefs of these rites. Evidence that also links the therianthropes to the trance journeys of shamans, the spirits of the dead and the primal time of San myths is presented in the next section.

Therianthropes, trance experience, spirits of the dead and primal time, mythic beings

The association of many of the therianthropes and alites with altered states, specifically trance experience, is confirmed by the fact that one or more features characteristic of trance performance are associated with many of these beings (Lewis-Williams 1981 and other publications). Likely or possible trance indicators associated with therianthropes include:

- the presence of dancers and/or clapping women;
- the body depicted in an arms-back, bending-forward, or collapsed position;
- the figure depicted on all fours;
- gross body distortion including extreme elongation of torsos and limbs;
- bizarre, apparently hallucinatory, motifs, such as thin, dotted or feathery lines emerging from or entering the head or other parts of the therianthrope's body, that bear no relation to any real object or creature.

Some therianthropes are shown with blood or other substances coming from their noses, which Lewis-Williams (1981 and other publications) has demonstrated to be a feature of San trance experience. Isaacson (2001) describes the emission of blood and mucus from the nose and mouth of a San shaman while this man was in trance. Trancing shamans in societies besides the San have also been observed bleeding from the nose (e.g. Bogoras 1909; Grim 1983). Where one or more of the features mentioned above are associated with therianthrope paintings, as they often are, it is very likely that the beings depicted represent the fusion or symbolic identification of shamans in altered states with the animal helpers on whose powers they drew (Lewis-Williams 1981).

The human-antelope beings with wings or wing-like appendages are also well-explained as shamans fused with their animal helpers and experiencing out-of-body flight to the spirit world. Magical flight experienced during altered states associated with dreams, trance or hallucinogenic drugs constitutes a core shamanic experience that has been documented in many societies (Eliade 1964; Halifax 1982) and we know that some /Xam San shamans were believed to turn into birds in a dream state (Bleek 1935). Almost certainly, these avian beings symbolise the out-of-body experience of San shamans in trance and/or dreams (Lewis-Williams 1981 and other publications). In other cases, progressively deeper levels of shamanic transformation are indicated by the arms of a person changing into wings and then into lines or streamers attached to, but trailing behind, the alite. In this way, arms in the backward position become wings, which become lines of potency entering or leaving the body of the transformed shaman. Several of the alites are linked to trance through their being depicted in the arms-back posture and/or with a substance coming from their noses or mouths (e.g. Fig. 16).



Fig. 16. Trancing alite. KwaZulu-Natal. Redrawn from Pager (1975:64).

That flight is the central theme with which these beings are associated is indicated by the bird-like posture adopted by many of them (breast pushed forward, legs tucked in, arms/wings outstretched or pushed back) and the manner in which some of them are shown hovering over other figures in a panel. Fig. 17, for example, shows the transformation of a person with a quiver of arrows on his back into an antelope therianthrope with feathered legs, shown, in a third stage of transformation, in a flying position, and finally transformed into a bird, the arrows having changed into wings. Garlake (1988) describes a very similar process of transformation of people into birds that is depicted in a Zimbabwean rock art panel.



Fig. 17. Transformation into a bird. Eastern Cape.

Besides the connections to shamanic transformation and altered states indicated above, however, there are several strands of ethnographic evidence that suggest that

therianthropes are also linked to the spirits of the dead and mythical human-animal beings of the Early Race. With regard to the former class of beings, in common with spirit mediums in many societies, the San amongst whom anthropologists such as Katz (1982) worked make it clear that they believe that when a person experiences trance he or she dies. For San and other shamans in altered, ecstatic states this connection with death is not metaphorical. They believe that they actually die, becoming spirits and visiting the realm of the dead in their spirit form (Katz 1982). Eliade (1964), too, remarks that the spirits help the shaman to become a dead person, a spirit, who, on coming out of trance, is considered to have returned from the dead. It is very likely that the form believed to be taken by the spirits of San shamans after permanent death, caused by the failure of their bodies, would have been the same as the part-human, part-animal or part-bird form assumed by these people in the temporary death of trance.

In this respect, Vinnicombe (1976) points out that /Xam game sorcerers were believed to be particularly prone to becoming spirit people when they died and that when they appeared to the living they took on a form that was only part-human. This, she remarks (1976: 332), 'in conjunction with the fact that certain sorcerers were thought to possess bodies other than their own, certainly suggests a combination of human and animal traits'. She proposes that 'some of the therianthropes in the art represent game sorcerers either in flesh or spirit form'. It may be no coincidence, moreover, that the connection between the spirits of the dead and the animal-human form taken by the San shaman finds a parallel amongst the Xhosa. According to Hirst (1990: 246), the ancestral spirits of the Xhosa are believed to 'masquerade as animals and people and are half person and half beast, very much like the diviner in full ceremonial regalia'.

The idea that therianthropes in San art may represent mythical beings, specifically people of the Early Race and the trickster being /Kaggen, is also consistent with what we know of these people from San myths. People of the Early Race, who lived during the primal time, were believed by some San groups to be part-animal and part-human in form. An alternative belief was that present-day humans in this primal state were animals and present-day animals were humans. These beliefs are held in common with many other societies. As Eliade (1964: 99) remarks:

'...in numerous traditions friendship with animals and understanding their language represent paradisaic syndromes. In the beginning, that is in mythical times, man lived at peace with the animals and understood their speech. It was not until after a primordial catastrophe, comparable to the 'Fall' of Biblical tradition, that man became what he is today - mortal, sexed ... and at enmity with animals'.

/Xam San, for example, were believed to have been springbucks before they were people (Lewis-Williams 1981) and the Ju/'hoansi San of Namibia and Botswana still believe in an Early Race who had the heads of gemsbok and the bodies of men (Bieseke 1993). /Kaggen, who lived at the same time as the people of the Early Race, is described in

San myths as capable of changing himself into a great number of forms, including those of animals, and, according to a creation myth of the Maluti San, the first antelopes come into being when /Kaggen's wife gave birth to an eland (Orpen 1874). In all these cases the boundary between the animals and humans was blurred or erased, a characteristic that links these mythical beings to animal-masked or -costumed shamans and shamans fused with animals during the temporary death of trance. In all likelihood, as has been argued above, the shamans were believed to assume the same form once they were permanently dead.

The similarities between the part-human, part-animal form of the therianthropes and the form believed by San groups to be taken by 'tranceformed', 'dead' shamans, the probable form taken by the spirits of permanently dead shamans, and the form taken by the First People of the myths suggest, therefore, that these categories of beings were related in San religious thought. In addition to these overt similarities, however, there are also structural, conceptual correspondences between the therianthropes, transformed shamans, spirits of the dead and the mythological Early Race beings of primal time. These correspondences, many of which find marked parallels in the liminal state associated with initiands and their rites of passage, are explored and discussed in the next section.

Liminality, ambiguity and the sources of spiritual powers

I could not speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither living nor dead, and I knew nothing, looking into the heart of light, the silence ... (Eliot 1963: 64)

The resistance that many of the therianthropes in San art appear to offer to any form of categorisation was at first a source of frustration as I attempted to order and make sense of the wide range of forms taken by these beings. It was only at a later stage that it occurred to me that this fluidity and lack of structure is in fact the key to understanding the paintings of therianthropes. The ground for this approach to interpreting the therianthropes has been laid by Guenther (1999), whose analysis of San religious concepts and social forms places these anti-structural attributes at the heart of San social organisation and cosmology.

The essential characteristics of San social organisation and their religious beliefs and mythology, Guenther points out, are fluidity, ambiguity, ambivalence and liminality. These characteristics find their most concentrated form in the therianthropes, which are archetypally ambiguous, liminal beings. All have transformed, or are in the process of transforming, from one species and one state to another. They simultaneously confuse and unite different states of being. In some cases, the forms of which they are composed, bear no relation, in whole or part, to any known to science so that the categories that form the basis of our understanding of living beings are not only fused but also transcended. In this way, fundamental human cognitive constructs are disassembled and re-formed, freed from the constraints of reason and logical thought.

Some or all of these characteristics are shared by, and connect, San shamans fused with animals in trance, the mythical beings of the Early Race and /Kaggen. These are all liminal beings that have the form of both man and animal or are capable of transforming into hybrid forms of this kind. They deconstruct and bring together ontological categories. All are 'transrational', belonging to a realm beyond reason, and governed by the logic of the dream or trance rather than ordered thought—Turner's (1968: 5) 'timeless time', Duerr's (1985: 36) time 'between the times' or 'dreamtime', Guenther's (1999: 235) 'liminal, anti-structural, never-never land'. It is the universal, primal condition of the myths in which all things now separated but previously connected, including people and animals, are brought together, as in death. As Guenther (1999: 70) remarks:

The two elements of Bushman cosmology that convey ambiguity more directly and compellingly than any others are the people's attitudes and conceptualizations about animals and the processes of transformation and transcendence central to Bushman ritual and art. The two elements of ambiguity can also merge, when the transformation and transcendence are human-to-animal - of the dancer at a curing rite or initiation site, or of the initiand. At that point, the humans of the present order can experience a return to the conditions of existence that prevailed at primal time, suspending not only ontological states, but also chronological ones. Ambiguity becomes a palpable state, as ordinary reality is suspended through trance, human becomes animal, and present and linear time converge on the mythic past.

This dreamtime state, similar to that of death and transcending the logic and conventions of society and human thought, even of time, is widely believed to be the source of sacred knowledge and a source of spiritual empowerment. As Eliade (1994: 323) states:

" it is always in dreams that historical time is abolished and mythical time regained—which allows the shaman to ... become contemporary ... with the primordial revelations".

This state constitutes the source from which shamans/spirit mediators and other symbolically powerful, marginal and liminal people, Turner's 'edgemen' (1969), who fall in the interstices of society, are believed to derive their spiritual powers, insight and mystique (see also Kenny 1981). Access to it, and the powers and knowledge with which it is associated, are obtained only through the dissolution of normal conceptual categories and reasoned thought, which act to separate things once originally, and properly, connected. Thus Kenny (1981: 488) remarks that a Maasai ritual leader 'gains mystical insight through overcoming reason' and Duerr (1985) cites Bureau:

When a person eats eboga (a narcotic), he spends a brief period in the world of spirits ... There are no sexual relations any more, no men or women ... he can see the past, the present and the future ... There is no distinction between Blacks and Whites: this difference is a state of affairs that is overcome and that disappears after death. (Duerr 1985: 67; my bracketed addition)

Categories, conventions and rules, the constructs of society and the living, rather than the all-knowing transformed shaman and the spirits of the dead, who have been freed from these conceptual barriers to mystical knowledge, block

access to this primal state and its associated powers. Recognition of this fact is expressed in a number of ways by those classed as socially liminal. In the same way that therianthropes and other hybrid beings in San art, as well as the mythical beings of primal time, blur the edges of categories that constitute the social and biological norm, shamans/diviners/spirit mediums, who are mediators between the worlds of the spirits and of the living, may consciously or unconsciously subvert the normal order of things, reversing this order and blurring the edges of accepted social and even biological categories. Bogoras (1909), Van Gennep (1960), Eliade (1964), Lee (1969), Hunter (1979), Duerr (1985), Hammond-Tooke (1989) and Saunders (1989) all provide examples of sex reversal amongst shamans/diviners/spirit mediums. Turner (1975: 263) also remarks of Ndembu diviners that they go 'between the paths', and Berglund (1976) points to various reversals of custom practised by Zulu diviners. These range from the carrying of their shield and sticks in the right, rather than the customary left, hand to the reversal of the set-up and symbolic spaces of their homesteads. Duerr (1985) similarly points to the deliberate reversal of the customary order of things by spirit mediums in a variety of societies.

By assuming a part-animal, part-human form, made visible in the therianthrope paintings, the shaman transcends categories, putting himself or herself in contact with the powers associated with this transcendent state. Male and female initiands, in a process of transformation like the therianthropes, and positioned, like the shaman/diviner/spirit medium, beyond the bounds of society and its norms, are similarly considered to be imbued with great powers by virtue of their liminal status. In their case, their liminal, unstructured state of being, between childhood and adulthood, is believed to imbue them with powers inaccessible to those operating within the norms of society (Turner 1969). The initiand, like the shaman and the mythical trickster, is freed from the constraints of social convention. Van Gennep (1960: 115) remarks on the 'suspension of social life' among initiands, who are placed in a symbolic space beyond the conventions of society: 'During the entire novitiate, the usual economic and legal ties are modified, sometimes broken altogether.' (Van Gennep 1960: 114).

And Comaroff (1985: 95; my bracketed addition) points out that male Tswana initiands at puberty are

"placed in a liminal capsule outside of social space and time ... The bush (where the lodge was situated) was a domain of dynamic vitality, unconstrained by the categories and relations of the social world. The novices, likewise, were in a ritual space where boundaries were fluid and shifting."

This fluid, liminal state is widely associated with sacred powers. Thus Van Gennep (1960: 114) states that initiands 'are outside society, and society has no power over them, especially since they are actually sacred and holy, and therefore untouchable and dangerous, just as gods would be' and Turner (cited by Swantz 1986: 76) remarks that the ritual experiences of the person being initiated are 'felt to be high or deep mysteries which put the initiand temporarily

into close rapport with the primary or generative powers of the cosmos, the acts of which transcend society'. Turner (1969: 128) points out that states and rites of liminality/ambiguity are 'almost everywhere held to be sacred or holy', possibly because they have the power to dissolve the very basis of social structure and because they are 'accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency'. In this sense they are reminders that cultural categories and the reality they represent are ultimately artifices of human construction. They point to a reality beyond these categories of thought, re-classifying man's relationship to society, nature and culture (Turner 1969).

Ambiguities and inversions also constitute a strong feature of San puberty rites. Amongst some San groups, gender inversion at female puberty rites involves the initiand's breaking the normal taboos and touching and handling men's weapons and medicines (Guenther 1999). Amongst the !Ko, the initiand is required to take on the male role of hunter symbolically by shooting a ritual arrow at a stretched, suspended antelope skin (Heinz, cited in Guenther 1999). The !Kung make a direct connection between the girl at the time of her first menstruation and the role of hunter, stating that the girl has 'shot an eland' (Lewis-Williams 1981: 51). She thus symbolically inverts the roles of men and women and in this sense both confuses and brings together these categories. (See Comaroff [1985] for the expression of a similar sexual ambivalence attributed to Tswana initiands.) At the same time, in a further expression of her liminality and ambiguous status, the female initiand is directly equated with the meat and fat of the eland. As Lewis-Williams (1981: 51) points out, her role during the liminal period is paradoxical and 'she is spoken of as if she were a hunter and as if she were an eland'. Like the transformed, therianthrope shaman, she confuses and unites opposing categories—human and animal.

In this respect, Guenther (1999) remarks that the female initiand's status amongst the San is particularly ambiguous. Not only is she seen as being between the biological and social states of girlhood and womanhood, like female initiands in many other societies, but, as has been pointed out, she is also considered between human and animal. Her liminal, ambiguous, part-animal status imbues her with sacred powers similar to those attributed to shamans who transform themselves from living to dead and from animal to human. Liminality and the act of transforming and transcending states of being are in themselves sources of empowerment to shamans (Green 1997) and initiands. Her state of being also links her to a range of themes and motifs in San ritual, mythology and paintings. Pointing to connections between the symbolism of San female initiation ceremonies, the animal-human beings of the myths, the shamanic trance dance, and paintings of therianthropes, Guenther (1999) remarks:

(San male and female) (t)ransition rites, represent one of number of crossing stations between human and animal, like the trance dance and certain motifs in rock art and myth. Guenther. (1999: 176; my bracketed additions)

The 'tranceformed' shaman therianthrope, the initiand and the mythical beings are still further connected through their association with an earlier, primal state. Transforming into an animal in trance allows shamans access to the primal state described in the myths of many peoples, including the San. As Eliade (1964: 94, 98) remarks:

Each time a shaman succeeds in sharing in the animal mode of being, he in a manner re-establishes the situation that existed in *illo tempore*, in mythical times, when the divorce between man and the animal world had not yet occurred. ... While preparing for his ecstasy and during it, the shaman abolishes the present human condition and, for the time being, recovers the situation as it was at the beginning.

Rites of liminality, similarly, return initiands to a primal, undifferentiated state. It has already been pointed out, with respect to Tswana initiands, that differentiations of sex are often not made, males and females dressing alike. In addition, initiands in a wide range of societies may be stripped near-naked or wear only basic clothing, often only the skins of animals; they may avoid using objects that have been fashioned by humans; and they are all, regardless of status acquired through birth, placed on the same social level so that those attributes that distinguish categories and groups in the structured social order are suspended (Turner 1969). In short, they are reduced to a form of 'human *prima materia*' (Turner 1969: 170).

Finally, the trancing shaman and the initiand are connected through their common experience of death, the state in which all things are brought together. Many other groups besides the San equate the trance experience with death (see Eliade 1964). Death, like trance, is the state in which the shaman is able to come into contact with the all-knowing spirits of the dead. It is believed to be a means of transcending the profane human condition, of moving beyond the categories that this condition imposes and which limit attainment of a deeper, universal knowledge (Eliade 1964). The shaman in therianthrope form is able not only to transcend the animal-human divide but also, as Saunders (1989) points out, to transcend the most fundamental of all divides by 'dying' in trance and returning to life.

These shamanic experiences parallel closely those of the initiand. Male and female initiands at puberty are also said to die and return to life in the sense that they leave behind the old life as a child and are reborn into the new as adults (Turner 1967, 1968, 1969; Van Gennep 1960). Ndembu initiands are considered 'neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another', their condition, like that of the trickster /Kaggen and the liminal animal/bird-human shaman who visits the realm of the spirits in the 'death' of trance, 'one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories' (Turner 1967: 97). Saunders (1989: 114) describes a South American neophyte as 'a "living dead man" caught in the no-man's land between recognised states of being'. This is a description that fits not only the initiand at puberty but also the entranced, therianthrope San shaman and the protean /Kaggen. This realm, beyond society's laws and the categories of reason, is a transcendent state of being, which

Van Gennep (1960: 82) terms a 'sacred environment', that is accessible to all who, like the shaman in trance, the initiand, and the spirits of the dead, are dying or have died, in all senses in which the word is used in cultures with shamanic features.

A number of related concepts and qualities, then, serve variously to link paintings of therianthropes and other hybrid beings with San shamans in trance, spirits of the dead, and beings of the Early Race, including the primal trickster /Kaggen. Initiands, too, are associated with most of these concepts and qualities. They include transformation from one state of being to another, the merging and transcendence of different ontological states, the entering of a liminal or mythical realm associated with power, the suspension of ordinary reality and social conventions within this 'zone of ambiguity', and a return from the realm of the physically or socially dead.

Some other salient features of therianthrope paintings

Evidence has been presented linking the overt human-animal form of the therianthropes to shamans masquerading in animal dress, shamans fused with animals in trance, spirits of the dead and the first beings of San myths. I have also tried to demonstrate that conceptual links exist between all these classes as well as between the states of being with which they are associated in San religious thought.

Aside from the fact that the therianthropes all have the characteristics of humans and animals, there are other features associated with the therianthrope paintings that require explanation. These include the following:

- their rarity in the art;
- the almost complete absence of women and children;
- the combination, in some, of human features with those of animals other than antelope;
- the combination of human features with the features of more than one kind of animal;
- the presence of hybrid beings that combine human or animal characteristics with completely imaginary features;
- and the presence in the art of hybrid creatures that are like the human-animal therianthropes but have no human component, being made up of the features of different mammals, or of mammals and birds, or of mammals and reptiles.

Other characteristics that need to be explained are the contexts in which they are depicted as well as the existence of Nguni and Sotho therianthropes. Each of these features is briefly discussed below.

Their rarity

The frequency with which an image is depicted in the art is generally considered to be significant. For example, it is accepted that the large number of paintings of elands in the areas occupied by the southeastern and southwestern San indicates that this antelope had particularly great religious

significance for these groups (Pager 1975; Vinnicombe 1976; Lewis-Williams 1981). Paintings of therianthropes are relatively infrequent yet their unusual form and, in many cases, the contexts in which they are painted strongly suggest that they were potent religious symbols for the San.

In view of their evident symbolic importance, their rarity in the art is puzzling but may indicate that they represent an important, but relatively small, class of people. If they depict shamans and if this was a specific and restricted class within the painters' societies, this may, at least in part, explain their rarity. That southeastern San shamans belonged to a restricted class, mainly males, is suggested by the Maluti San informant Qing's comments that 'initiated men of the dance' (i.e. the 'dance of blood', or trance dance) were the only people who had access to the 'secret things', that is, secret shamanic knowledge (Orpen 1874: 3, my emphasis and bracketed addition). Bleek's /Xam informants made clear in their narratives, moreover, that 'sorcerers' comprised a restricted class, different from most other people (Bleek 1935, 1936). As one of these informants, Dia!kwain, remarked, they 'are not people who are like other Bushmen' (Bleek 1936: 14). If, too, as Vinnicombe (1976) suggests, the therianthropes represent mainly one kind of sorcerer who controlled the game, this would increase their rarity and may help explain why they were so seldom depicted in the art.

The predominantly masculine gender of therianthropes whose gender is identifiable

The gender of many of the therianthrope figures, as is often the case with human figures depicted in the art, is not clearly depicted and this may be significant. Solomon (1994), for example, proposes that an understanding of gender anomaly is crucial to interpreting San art. Where the sex of therianthropes is unclear or ambivalent, this feature may relate these beings to the trance state, a condition in which, as Eastwood & Cnoops (1999) point out, gender is commonly blurred. It may also relate to the generally ambiguous, liminal nature of the therianthropes. Dowson's (1988), Stevenson's (1995) and Eastwood & Cnoops's (1999) discussions of images in San art of people and/or animals that combine male and female genders, or whose sex is unclear, are relevant here; the uncertain gender of many of the therianthropes and other figures may imply that these images represent what Stevenson (1995) terms 'metaphors of unity' in which different areas of San life and thought (in this case, the male and female realms) intersect. Therianthropes of the kind that Stevenson (1995) identifies, which combine the more slender, male-like human torsos with the heads of female animals, may also relate the therianthropes to an androgynous class of beings, further reinforcing their liminal status. Green (1997) suggests that images of genderless people or beings may represent marginality or a sacred status that transcends gender. This is an idea that could usefully be explored in relation to the large number of images of genderless people depicted in San art. It is possible, for example, that this was one of the devices used to convey to the viewer that these were spirits of the dead.

However, in many cases, as has been mentioned, the sex of the human portions of the therianthrope is in fact depicted and in these cases it is almost invariably male. We need to ask how this fits with what we know of the gender of San shamans.

Amongst the /Xam, medicine-people or sorcerers could be male or female (Bleek 1935, 1936) but there is little or no information available, as far as I am aware, as to which sex most commonly participated in the trance dance and experienced the physical transformations associated with this dance. However, most anthropologists who have worked among the Kalahari San state that invariably, or almost invariably, the (vital) role of women at the curing dance is to provide a rhythmic beat and support for the dancers through their clapping, while the role of the men is to dance, trance and heal (Silberbauer 1965; Lee 1968; Marshall 1969; Heinz 1975; Katz 1976; Barnard 1979; Bieseke 1993). Moreover, while there is some evidence that women of Maluti San groups participated with men in the trance dance, it seems, as has been mentioned above, that only men were initiated into the secret religious knowledge associated with the dance (Orpen 1874), knowledge which they presumably attained as a result of the transcendent state achieved during that dance. In their description of the Maluti San trance dance, Arbousset & Daumas (1846) also suggest that it was only men who went into, and collapsed, in trance, during the trance-dance, or 'dance of blood'.

It thus seems that while both men and women participated in the southeastern San trance dance, it was mainly men who actually went into trance during the dance and experienced the hallucinatory visions and physical transformations associated with this state. This would probably explain why, of those therianthropes whose gender is identifiable, almost all are male.

Their age

There are no accounts of child San shamans or of San children trancing that might explain the child elephant therianthrope at the site of Groot Hekse Rivier referred to above. However, since this is perhaps the only known painting of a child amongst hundreds of paintings of therianthropes, it probably represents an idiosyncratic belief or vision concerning therianthropes associated with a single artist. It is unlikely that it forms part of a wider system of related San beliefs expressed in the larger body of therianthrope paintings.

The fusion of humans with animals other than antelope

Therianthropes that combine features of humans with creatures such as wildebeest, baboons, etc. are found very infrequently in the art and can be put down to rarer 'possession' relationships forged by a few shamans with these kinds of animals. Paintings of cattle therianthropes reflect the arrival of Nguni and Sotho farmers with their herds and the various ways in which these animals were incorporated into both existing and newly developed, syncretic symbolic systems of San groups during the contact period (Campbell 1987; Hall 1994; Jolly 1998).

Other combinations of features

Hybrids with a combination of human features and those of more than one kind of animal probably signify the fusion of a human with an imaginary, hallucinatory creature that combined the features of more than one species of animal. It is likely that San shamans in dreams and trance fused not only with real animals but also with imaginary, composite beings. Creatures that combine the features of mammals and/or birds and/or reptiles, but have no human features, may, at least in some cases, represent the end result of successive trance-related transformations and fusions of humans with animals or reptiles. Certainly, their hybridity of form links these beings in San religious thought to the more common therianthropic beings that combine human with animal features.

For example, antelope-headed or -eared snakes may represent the transformation of a San shaman first into the more common human-antelope form then, in a further transformation of this being, into an antelope-snake. Where antelope-snakes are shown bleeding from the nose or with emissions from the mouth, as occurs in several paintings, these features probably link the latter composite being to the earlier, part-human, shamanic form from which it originated.

Particularly deep trance would have engendered hallucinatory sensations of the human body not just merging with animals but undergoing a further process of dissolution, as depicted in those therianthropes where parts of the body are shown transforming into completely imaginary forms unrelated to any living creature (e.g. Fig. 5c).

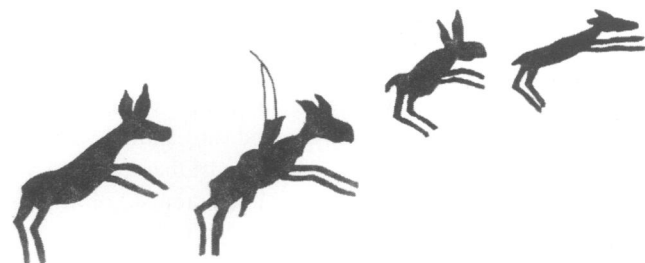


Fig. 18. Antelope with bow and quiver. Western Cape.

Contexts and postures

The context and postures in which therianthropes are represented vary considerably. Sometimes a small number (seldom more than about four or five) is portrayed together, with no other people or animals shown. Alternatively, they may appear singly in a context apparently unrelated to that of other paintings on the same rock face. Sometimes they face the viewer, as if posing or gazing out from the rock face. In other cases they appear as the only unrealistic form in what one would otherwise take to be a completely normal, or narrative, scene, thereby combining elements of surprise and revelation (Fig. 18). Paintings of this kind make visible in a striking way the interpenetration of the real and hallucinatory spirit worlds in San thought and art (Lewis-Williams & Loubser 1986).

Often the therianthropes are shown in contexts that are related to the trance dance: they bend forward, dance

energetically, have their arms in a backward position and so on, or non-realistic features of some kind are associated with them. These are probably shamans dancing to achieve the temporary 'death' of trance. It is possible that some therianthropes of this kind include the spirits of dead shamans that have appeared at the dance. In other cases, the context and postures of therianthropes are not obviously related to trance experience. Paintings in which they appear in a posing posture, looking out at the viewer, or moving in an apparently unhurried, sedate, stately procession towards some destination probably depict the spirits of permanently dead shamans, who are engaged in a range of activities in the after-life and have been encountered by trancing shamans, who had 'died' temporarily and had visited the realm of the dead.

Nguni and Sotho therianthropes

The fact that there is no difference in general form between this class of therianthropes and therianthropes of the 'traditional' kind, other than the difference of ethnic group, suggests that the symbolism attached to them was the same as that associated with the other therianthropes. It is difficult, however, to determine the exact place that Black farmer therianthropes occupy within the general therianthrope category.

In the first place, they clearly are not San shamans. Some are equipped with assegais and/or shields and in a few cases they are shown fighting against San people (e.g. Stow 1930: plate 17). We can only speculate as to what conflict scenes of this kind symbolise. Perhaps they represent an attack by the spirits of dead Black diviners on living San. Alternatively, they may depict trancing diviners doing battle with hostile San groups on behalf of their San allies.

Paintings of other Nguni or Sotho therianthropes, in non-conflict situations, may represent Black diviners who participated in, and were transformed into animals during, San trance dances and visited the realm of the dead in part-animal form. Bosman's account, cited above, of a San animal transformation dance indicates that Blacks and San danced, and probably tranced, together. Some paintings of Black therianthropes may even have been executed by Black diviners who were closely acquainted with the San. Additional research on the context of interaction between San and Black farmers is needed, however, in order to shed further light on the meaning of this class of therianthropes.

Discussion and conclusion

Therianthropes in San art have formed the focus of a recent debate between Solomon (1997, 1999, 2000) and Lewis-Williams (1998, 1999) as to whether we should draw primarily on our knowledge of San mythology and beliefs concerning spirits of the dead or primarily on the documented trance experiences of San people when interpreting San rock paintings. According to Solomon (1997, and especially 1999, 2000), San art is primarily concerned with mythology and only peripherally concerned with ritual, particularly shamanistic ritual and its associated religious beliefs. Specifically, she suggests, with Pager (1994), that the therianthropes do not represent San shamans

'tranceformed' by the potency of particular animals with which they have fused. Rather, they represent either spirits of the dead or part-human, part-animal ancestral, mythical beings of the Early Race who lived at a time when animals and humans were indistinguishable from each other and were not ranked as hunter and prey.

Lewis-Williams (1998, 1999), on the other hand, argues that the therianthropes represent living shamans who, during the central San rite of the trance dance, have fused with the animals on whose power they have drawn in order to visit the spirit world. He proposes that certain paintings, such as those of monsters and the grotesque beings that are sometimes depicted in dance scenes, probably represent spirits of the dead, including the spirits of dead shamans, but he states that the latter are not depicted in therianthrope form.

The strongest argument against the position that the therianthropes represent spirits of the dead is that they are too frequently painted in shamanic contexts and with a variety of indisputable shamanic features. (Lewis-Williams 1998: 93).

Both Lewis-Williams and Solomon thus take positions that exclude the other's interpretation of the therianthropes. Lewis-Williams argues that therianthropes cannot be spirits of the dead or be connected with the myths because they originate in shamanic experience; Solomon denies that they can be shamanic because they represent spirits of the dead or the First People of the myths. These interpretations of the therianthrope paintings, I suggest, go against the general grain of San religious belief, which does not make rigid distinctions of this kind between shamanic experience, the spirits of the dead and the mythical beings of primal time. In the same way that an antelope therianthrope is neither a human being nor an antelope and in the same way that the antelope features of paintings of a human-antelope are not always those of one species of antelope or another, so these beings do not represent 'tranceformed' shamans, spirits of the dead or people of the Early Race in isolation. Rather, they express the inter-relatedness of the worlds of the shaman, the spirits of the dead and the myths. The two theories concerning the meaning of the therianthropes in San art are therefore not antithetical: combined and supplemented with other religious concepts and rites of the San, such as the wearing of animal masks and costume, they have greater explanatory power than they do individually.

For example, with regard to the last point, ethnographic and other evidence for the use and painting of masks and animal-costume by the San reinforces rather than precludes interpretation of therianthropes in the art as shamans fused in trance with animals of power. Paintings depicting San wearing caps made from the scalps of antelopes, the entire heads of animals in the form of masks or animal-skin costumes consisting of the entire hide of an antelope with the head and horns of the animal attached are compatible with theories that relate the therianthropes to trance experience. Paintings of San wearing ritual dress of this kind are related to the experience of 'tranceformation' by San shamans. They almost certainly illustrate San customs and ritual dress that reinforce possession relationships, as

well as trance fusion with certain animals with which San shamans were ritually connected and whose skins they were wearing. In many cases, masks and animal costumes worn by shamans are believed to be imbued with great powers. These powers are derived from the animals used to make these items of dress and are a means of achieving ecstatic transformation. By putting on masks or animal-costumes shamans believe that they actually turn into animals. It thus seems likely that the therianthropes in San art represent the various stages of 'tranceformation' into animals or birds experienced by certain people, from the shaman attired in animal caps and masks, bird headdress, or full animal skin costume, to animal-costumed/masked beings shown in a state of partial transformation into animals or birds, to beings representing a total fusion of humans with animals or birds, a state probably associated with the deepest levels of trance. The full range of ecstatic and symbolic transformation into, and fusion with, animals is depicted.

In the same way, moreover, that the practice of wearing masks and animal costumes can be reconciled with, and indeed in many societies is central to, shamanistic practices and experiences, so shamans fused with or transformed into animals can be reconciled with the notion that these beings represent spirits of the dead. As has already been pointed out, shamans fused with animals in trance are believed actually to become spirits of the dead, not merely visit them in human form. Their part-human, part-animal form, therefore, represents the form taken by the shaman during temporary and permanent death.

Similarly, too, shamanistic transformations are connected with the primal state of the myths when animals and people had not yet been divided. A number of marked similarities between San shamans in trance and the San's mythical trickster-creator /Kaggen has already been identified. Like the shaman and like the trickster figures of a number of other cultures, including the Obijway American Indians (Grim 1983), /Kaggen is a 'code-breaker', a disturber of traditional patterns of behaviour and a paradoxical cosmic being capable of transformation. In a related shamanic context Grim (1983: 91) points out that alteration or metamorphosis of one's appearance, the primary characteristic of the mythic Obijway trickster figure Nanabozho, 'is continually described as the special capability of the Obijway shaman'. /Kaggen, too, shared these special powers of transformation with San shamans.

The overt, as well as the deeper, conceptual, linkages demonstrated above to have existed between masked or animal-costumed people, 'tranceformed' shamans, spirits of the dead and the trickster hero of San myths therefore indicate that these classes of beings were connected in San religious thought. Whether the visions of dream and trance or the narratives of San myth was the primary source for San paintings of therianthropes is a 'chicken or egg' question, difficult, perhaps impossible to resolve, although there can be little doubt that much, probably most and possibly all, San art is connected in some way with shamanic rites, beliefs and experiences.

Whatever the case, the important point is that the

therianthropes in San art were imbued with both the symbolism of altered states experience and the myths. The experiences of San shamans 'tranceformed' into animals, as well as the spirits of the dead, relate directly to the major themes of the myths—the primal unity of people and animals, access to a privileged realm free of the bounds of reason and social and cognitive restraints, and the ability to 'bridge the categories' by changing from one physical state to another, even from life to death. We can therefore expect the 'tranceformed' shaman's experiences in dream and trance and the oral traditions concerning the spirit world and the mythic beings to have informed each other in a process of constant mutual feedback. One of the ways in which the San rendered this process visible, it has been suggested here, was through their paintings of therianthropes.

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