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Research Article

DANCING WITH TWO STICKS: INVESTIGATING THE ORIGIN OF A SOUTHERN AFRICAN RITE

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ABSTRACT

Photographs of San descendants from Prieska, Northern Cape, form part of the Bleek Collection, Oppenheimer Library, University of Cape Town. They show some of the Prieska San performing a dance and were taken by Dorothea Bleek in late 1910, or possibly early 1911. A particular posture adopted by dancers in some of these photographs, stooped and supported by two sticks, is represented in San rock paintings. It has also been observed in the rites of some San-speakers, as well as those of some southern Bantu-speakers in South Africa. This article investigates the symbolism of the dancing sticks and whether the rites in which these sticks are employed originated with the San or whether they originated with southern Bantu-speakers. It is suggested that the sticks were used to support trancing San shamans, as has been proposed previously, but that in at least some cases they also symbolized the front legs of an animal into which a shaman was transforming. The rite probably had its origins amongst the San, but, in some cases, the meaning attached to it may have changed as San and southern Bantu-speakers exerted a mutual influence on each others' cultures.

Keywords: San, ritual, dancing sticks, rock art.

INTRODUCTION

Photographs reproduced here (Figs 1–8) come from the Bleek Collection, Manuscripts and Archives, University of Cape Town Libraries, and were taken by Dorothea Bleek (Bleek 1936). They form part of a collection of photographs taken by her of /Xam San living in the early years of the last century on the outskirts of Prieska. Photographs of the same people and scenes can also be found in the Duggan–Cronin Collection, McGregor Museum, Kimberley. Some of the people shown in them also appear in photographs taken by Dorothea Bleek on the same trip and later published in Bantu Studies (Bleek 1936). Other photographs of the San at Prieska, some of which are the same as those in the University of Cape Town and McGregor Museum collections, were published in the Cape Times (Violl 1911) and some also appear in Hollmann (2004).

A number of the photographs from the collection at the University of Cape Town, including most of those reproduced here, show /Xam San performing what appears to be a dancing rite in which they hold two long sticks, one in each hand. The photographs of the 'stick dancers', eleven in all, show men, women and children around the dancers, apparently in a circle, and some of the women in the photographs are clapping. One is shown playing a small drum. Eight of the photographs of people dancing with two sticks include a specific individual, a man, who appears to be the main dancer or ritual functionary. Two other people, a man and a woman, are also shown dancing with sticks of the same kind – the man on his own (with one stick), and the woman (with two sticks) alongside the principal male dancer. In one of the photographs, the principal dancer is shown down on one knee with the sticks held out in a crossed

position. In another photograph he is shown in a low, crouching position holding a stick in one of his hands. Most of the photographs show the dancers in a stooped posture, bent forward at the hip, their heads pushed forward and their bodies supported by two long sticks. Where it is possible to see the full body of the dancers, including their feet, it is clear that this dance was performed while standing on the skin of an animal.

The captions on the back of the University of Cape Town photographs read "/Kham Bushmen dancing in Prieska location", and the caption on the back of one of the photographs in the collection, a group portrait of the Prieska 'location' San, states that they were photographed in 1910. Dorothea Bleek visited the Northern Cape area in 1910 and 1911 (Bleek 1924: viii), and the notes she published to accompany photographs of some of the /Xam San (Bleek 1936) state that the photographs were taken in 1910 and in 1911. Dorothea Bleek refers in these published notes to the places where certain /Xam people were living when she visited the area. She mentions that one of the /Xam women, Sonkia-bo, was living in the Kenhardt 'location' in 1911, and another, ʔnanni was living at Eyerdoppa in the same year. She also states that a man named Guiman (one of the Prieska San dancers – see below) was living "on magistrate's rations" in the Prieska 'location' in 1910. It seems, from the details given by Dorothea Bleek concerning where and when the /Xam San were living in the various 'locations', that she visited the Prieska 'location' in 1910, and the Kenhardt 'location' in 1911. It is likely, therefore, that the Prieska 'location' photographs were taken late in 1910, and other photographs of /Xam San were taken in different parts of the Northern Cape early in 1911. An article published in the Cape Times by Violl (1911), who accompanied Dorothea Bleek on her visit to the Prieska San, as well as notes relating to the photographs in the Duggan–Cronin Collection, confirm that the photographs of people dancing with two sticks were taken at the Prieska 'location'.

THE IDENTITIES OF THE PEOPLE IN THE PHOTOGRAPHS

The published notes and photographs of /Xam people (Bleek 1936), and the captions to the photographs in the Duggan–Cronin Collection, allow us to identify some of the people shown in the photographs reproduced here. The principal dancer (see Figs 1–6) appears to be a man named !kommanan-!a, or "Klaas" (Bleek 1936: plate 4, and captions to the Duggan–Cronin photographs). Dorothea Bleek (1936: 202) mentions that !kommanan-!a was born south of Kenhardt at Bitterputs (see Deacon 1986 for details of other /Xam San who lived at this place). In two of the photographs (Figs 5 & 6) he is accompanied in the dance by a woman, who was also photographed playing a drum during the dance (Fig. 8). This woman is referred to by a number of names in the captions to the

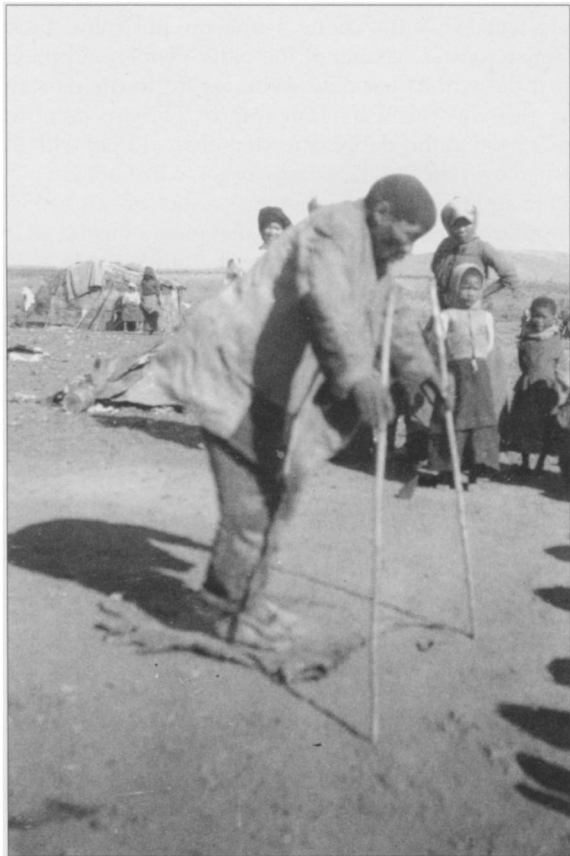


FIG. 1. !kommanan-la dancing in stooped position with two sticks. Side view. Bleek Collection, Manuscripts and Archives Section, University of Cape Town Libraries. J 2.1 (068).

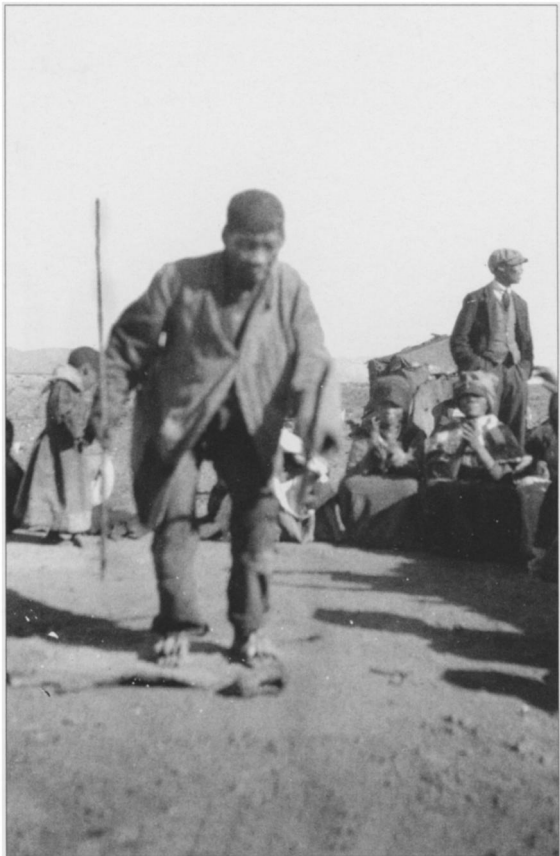


FIG. 2. !kommanan-la dancing in stooped position with two sticks. Front view. (071).

various photographs taken of her. Most of these names appear to have been corruptions of her San name. In Violl's (1911) article she is referred to as "Gaiki". A photograph of her using a digging stick, now in the McGregor Museum, identifies her as "Katje". A copy of the same photograph, published in Bantu Studies (Bleek 1936: plate 15), identifies her as "Kaiki" or "//k'āi". "Gaiki", "Kaiki" and "Katje" thus appear to be corruptions of her San name, "//k'āi". According to Dorothea Bleek (1936: 202–203) she was a servant at the house of the owner of

the farm Kucharbi. The owner of the farm was himself "half-Bushman" (Bleek 1936: 202).

THE CAPE TIMES REPORT ON DOROTHEA BLEEK'S VISIT TO THE PRIESKA SAN

Violl's (1911) article throws considerable light on the Prieska San photographed by Dorothea Bleek (Violl 1911), and confirms the identification of the people made above. Violl accompanied Dorothea Bleek to the Prieska 'location'.



FIG. 3. !kommanan-la dancing with two sticks, in partly crouched position. (067).



FIG. 4. !kommanan-!a in a low, crouched position with two sticks held in a crossed position in front of him. (069).

Violl describes the living conditions of the /Xam San at Prieska and give some details about their lives. The article includes an account of the dance using some of the photographs reproduced here. Violl mentions that Guiman and a man called "Klaas", almost certainly !kommanan-!a, had hunted springbok, gemsbok, kudu and eland in their youth. According to Dorothea Bleek (1936: 202), !kommanan-!a stated that the /Xam at Bitterputs used to eat ants' eggs, bitter 'oinkies' (bulbs), tortoises, porcupines, and game – principally springbok, ostrich and springhares. This suggests that they still lived mainly by hunting and gathering.

Violl provides details of the dance performed by the

Prieska San. While the young people did not know the traditional San dances, several of the older people said they had danced these in earlier days. With regard to the dance with sticks, this was called the 'Pot Dance', perhaps because the drum played at this dance consisted of an old pot with a skin stretched over the top. This dance began with Guiman playing the gorá and then the "going-going", a stick of bamboo with a thong attached which had a small, flat piece of wood attached to the end. This was slashed about until it made a "faint, whistling, booing sound". Violl (1911) recounts:

During Guiman's original concert, numbers of Bushmen increased the squatting ring of people around him, and the drum in a neighbouring hut grumbled restively. Suddenly the rags of Klaas's front door were pulled aside. And out stepped Gaiki, an old pot with a skin stretched over the top in her hand. Klaas followed her with a basin of water, out of which she moistened the drum skin, then he himself began to tie on his dancing rattles.... Klaas tied the dancing rattles made of springbok ears and filled with pumpkin seeds on to the top of each foot, after which he took a staff in each hand and stood up. Someone in the ring flung him a goatskin to dance on, and Gaika began a rhythmic beat upon her drum. One or two pairs of hands started a faint clapping. "Go on, louder," said Klaas bending over and beginning to shuffle his feet. Literally the translation of the word "dance" in Bushman means "to tread", and literally this was the chief characteristic of Klaas's performance. He stood almost in one place on the goatskin, treading and shuffling each foot, each movement setting the pumpkin seeds rattling in the springboks' ears. As he danced the clappers brought their hands together with more force. Now and again he fell to the ground. Instantly the ring of women raised their arms in a gesture of repulsion, at which he assumed an expression of disappointment, and scrambling to his feet began his shuffles on the goatskin again. Time after time this was repeated until Gaiki began to weary of playing the drum.

After resuming drumming for a while, "Gaiki" (/k'āi) passed the drum to 'Janikie'.

Janikie's thrumming brought new life to the dancer and the clappers, making Old Klaas shuffle and tumble about more vigorously. Several Kafirs came and swayed their hips in sympathy on the outskirts of the crowd.... In the meantime, Klaas's dancing did not satisfy Gaiki's critical eye. She rose and corrected his shuffles, and then returned to her place, clapping



FIG. 5. //k'āi dancing with two sticks. (066).



FIG. 6. //k'āi and !kommanan-la dancing with two sticks. (070)



FIG. 7. An unidentified man dancing with one stick. His other stick lies on the ground behind him. (063).

and humming. A few seconds, pause for readjusting the dancing rattles, a whiff of tobacco from a bone pipe, a sprinkle of buchu over Klaas's neck, then on again, until we broke in with presentations of joints of meat. (Violl 1911)

DANCERS WITH STICKS DEPICTED IN SAN ROCK PAINTINGS

The posture of the Prieska San dancers, bending forward and supporting themselves with two sticks, is depicted in some San rock paintings, including one from Melikane Cave in Lesotho. Qing, a Maloti San informant commented on this painting in a 19th century interview with Joseph Orpen (Orpen 1874). Copies of the Melikane painting as reproduced by Orpen (Fig. 9) and copies of the actual painting can be found in Woodhouse (1968), Vinnicombe (1976: fig. 223), Lewis-Williams (1980: fig. 1) and Botha & Thackeray (1987: fig. 2). In the Melikane painting, as well as a painting from the nearby site of Libesoaneng (Fig. 10), people supported by sticks are shown wearing what appear to be the skins and heads of antelopes. Several other San paintings of people in a stooped posture and supported by two sticks have been located and

recorded (see, for example, Lewis-Williams 1981: figs 19, 29 & 40). Both Vinnicombe (1976) and Lewis-Williams (1980, 1981) have linked this dance to the medicine/trance dance of the San, and Lewis-Williams (1981: 78 & 88) has suggested that the sticks acted as a physical support to trancing shamans when they adopted a stooped posture during a particular stage in the dance.

ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN PEOPLE DANCING IN A MANNER SIMILAR TO THE PRIESKA SAN

The 19th century /Xam San informant, Dialkwain, commenting on Stow's copy of a painting from the Tarka area, remarked that one of the figures depicted in this painting was a "great sorcerer" as he was dancing holding a long stick (Stow & Bleek 1930: caption to plate 2a). Comparable photographs of San-speakers in the Kalahari, dancing with sticks, are reproduced in Katz (1982: 33), Katz *et al.* (1997: 52), Marshall (1999: 131 & 132) and Gall (2001: plates between 200 and 201). In all these cases, however, people are shown dancing holding only one stick; perhaps a variant of the dance with two sticks

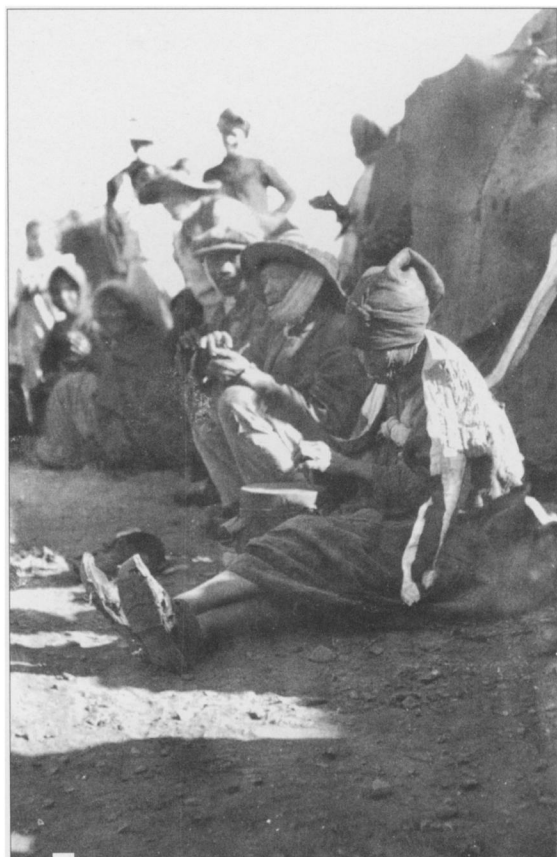


FIG. 8. //kǎi playing a drum at the dance. (064).

depicted in some San paintings (Janette Deacon, pers. comm. 2005). Perhaps of greater relevance to the Prieska San's 'Pot Dance' and the dance depicted in the Melikane rock painting are documented cases of people from southern Africa dancing in a stooped position supported by two sticks.

Burchell (1953: 46) described a dance that he witnessed in 1812 at a San encampment/kraal northwest of present-day De Aar and southeast of present-day Prieska. During the course of this rite, held in a hut, several people took it in turns to dance supported by two long sticks. They were encircled by others from the group who sang and clapped in support of the

dancer. Thackeray (1993, 2005a) has drawn attention to a photograph of an unknown person in a stooped posture, wearing the skin and head of an antelope and supported by two sticks. This photograph was taken in 1934 in the Northern Cape. It is very likely, therefore, that, on some occasions, dances of this kind were performed with the person holding sticks and covered in the skin and head of an antelope. The fact that the dancers photographed at Prieska danced on the skin of an animal may relate to this custom. Some southern Nguni diviners, too, are known to adopt a stooped posture supported by two sticks during certain rites (Botha & Thackeray 1987).

DISCUSSION

It is therefore well established that a rite involving the adoption of a stooped posture by ritual functionaries, including the use of two long sticks for support, was once performed by the San, and that a rite of similar form continues to be performed by some Nguni diviners. This begs the question whether this rite originated with the San or with southern Bantu-speakers.

Factors allowing for the possibility that the rite may have originated with the latter include the fact that the San living in the 'location' at Prieska would almost certainly have been exposed to the rites of southern Bantu-speakers. There were many Bantu-speakers living in the Prieska 'location' at the time of Dorothea Bleek's visit (Violl 1911), and some of these groups had been in the area for a long time. Xhosa-speakers, for example, had been present in the Northern Cape since the 1790s (Kallaway 1982; Anderson 1987). Although they clashed frequently with San in this area, some San joined up with these Xhosa-speaking groups. One, under the leadership of Nzwani ('Danster'), Bangela and Thole, had San members amongst them when they were encountered by van der Graaf and Lichtenstein at Prieska in 1805 (Kallaway 1982: 151). There are also reports of Nzwani, Thole and Coenraad de Buys with a party of Xhosa-speakers and many San recruits on the upper Gariep in 1814 (Kallaway 1982: 158). By 1830, Xhosa-speakers had settled at Prieska, the Pramberg, and Schietfontein. Those at the Pramberg are recorded as having inter-married with their San servants and neighbours (Anderson 1987: 39, 42 & 73). It is therefore possible, in light of the close relations between some Xhosa and San-speakers in the northern Cape region,

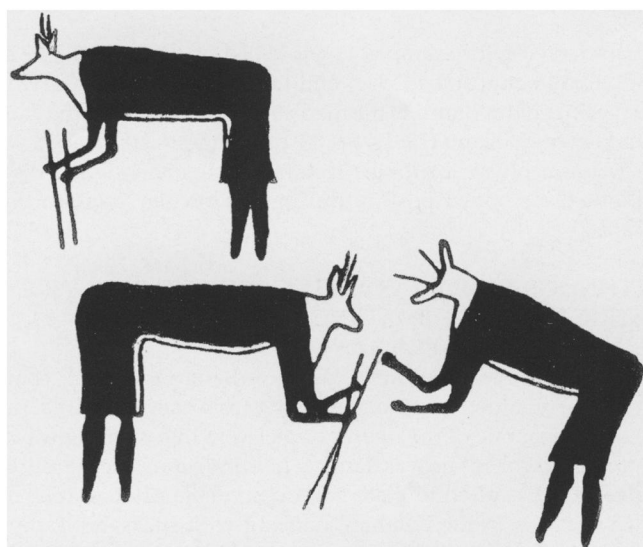


FIG. 9. Orpen's copy of a rock painting from Melikane Cave depicting antelope-headed people with dancing sticks. After Lewis-Williams (1981: fig 9a).

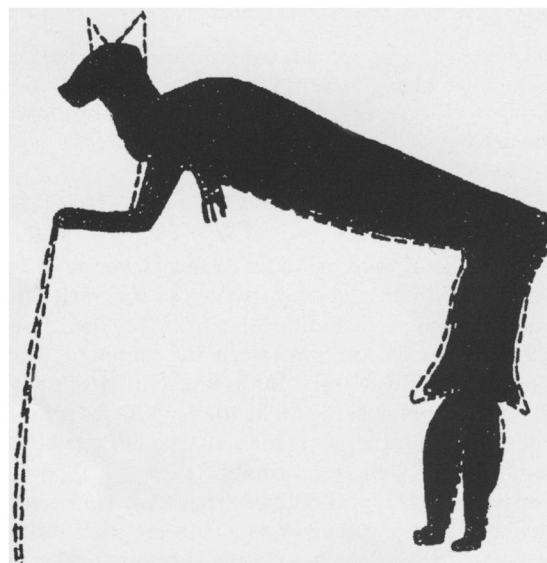


FIG. 10. A person in a stooped position, supported by one or two sticks, and covered in the skin and head of an antelope. Detail from a rock painting at the site of Libesoaneng, Lesotho. After Smits (1973: fig. 4).

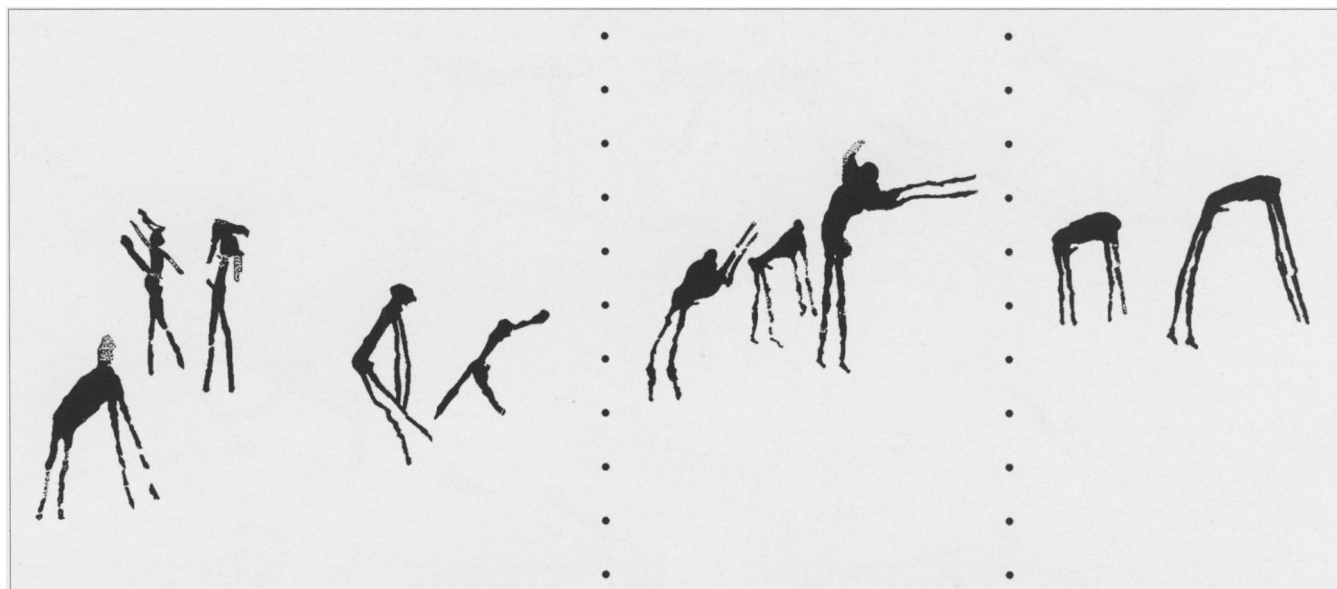


FIG. 11. Figures in a panel of San rock paintings. Two of the figures stand on two legs and hold a stick in each hand, while the front arms of three appear to have fused with their sticks, so that they resemble the front legs of an animal on all fours. A further shamanic feature is a row of dots painted below this panel. The dotted lines drawn in on the illustration indicate where the gap between figures has been reduced from what it is on the rock face. Western Cape.

that the Prieska San and the San observed by Burchell adopted the 'sticks-dance' after they came into contact with Xhosa-speakers.

On the other hand, a number of factors support the opposing argument – that the rite originated with the San and was subsequently adopted by some Bantu-speaking agropastoralists. The relatively early date (1812) when this rite is known to have been practised by San-speakers living not that far from Prieska is one. Violl's account of the dance, too, suggests that it was, essentially, a San dance and that it was associated with earlier times. The fact that paintings which appear to represent this dance are present at least at one site, and probably three others, in the Western Cape, where Bantu-speaking agropastoralists did not settle in earlier times, is congruent with the hypothesis that the custom originated with the San.

With regard to the latter point, further examination of San

paintings from the western Cape reveals that a few depict people, and in one case an antelope therianthrope, in stooped positions and supported by one or two sticks. The painting illustrated in Fig. 11 almost certainly shows at least two people holding a stick in each hand. Most of the people in this panel are depicted with thin, stick-like, very elongated arms and legs, and two are shown on all fours, as if they are turning into animals. Another Western Cape site (Fig. 12) shows people with similarly elongated and thin limbs. Most are depicted on all fours. At least one of these figures, and probably most of them, represents a person supported by two sticks held out in front of him/her, as Johnson & Maggs (1979: 81) allow in their caption to a copy of this painting. The sticks are depicted as if they have fused with the arms of the person to produce a four-legged therianthrope being. Yet another Western Cape site shows a line of hartebeest depicted in a very similar manner

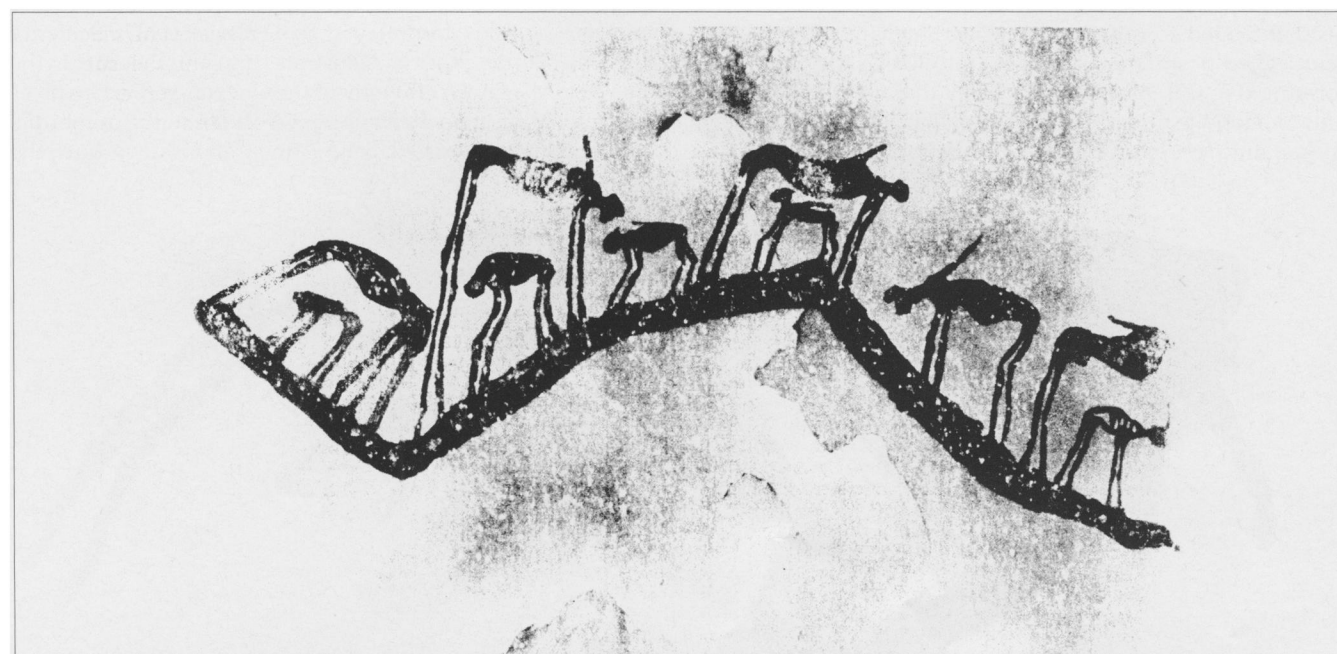


FIG. 12. A San rock painting panel of figures, most of whom are on all fours, and some of whom appear to be holding hold two sticks in a manner that suggests that the sticks are fusing with the figure's arms to form the front legs of an animal. Western Cape. After Johnson & Maggs (1979: fig. 92).

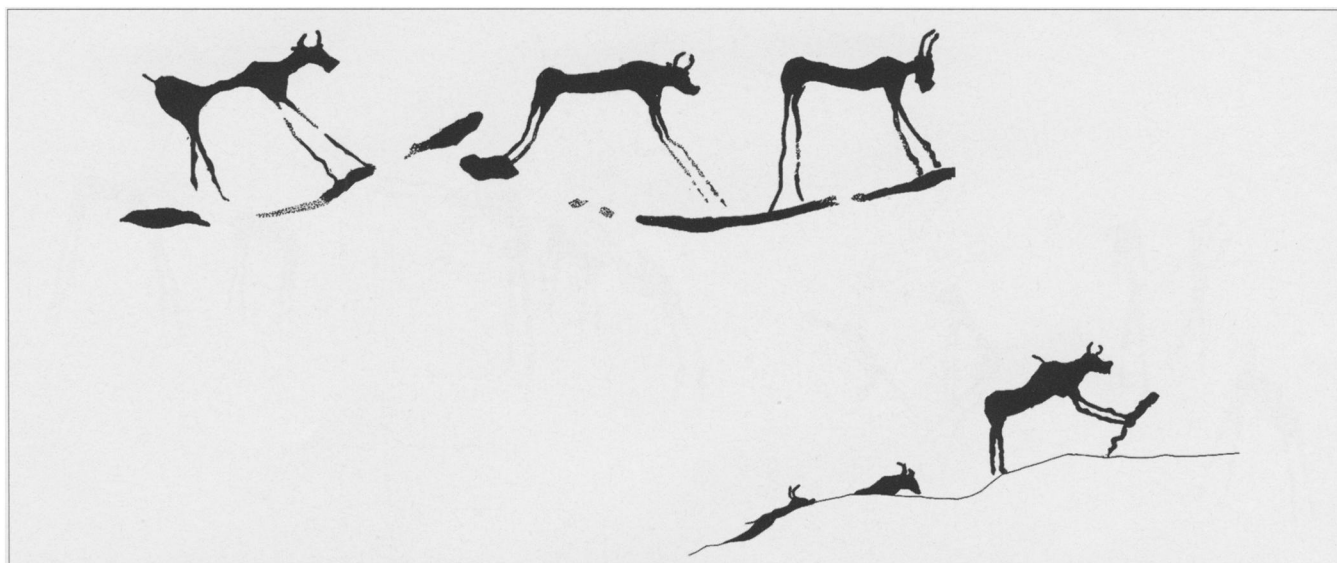


FIG. 13. Part of a panel of hartebeest with very elongated legs. At the bottom right hand side of the panel is a hartebeest depicted on two legs with its front legs outstretched and apparently holding one or two sticks. Western Cape.

to the people in Fig. 12, with thin, stick-like, elongated limbs (Fig. 13). One of the figures at this site, a hartebeest that is painted below and towards the right hand side of the upper line of hartebeests, holds its front legs forwards as if they were arms, and appears to be holding a stick in each hand, or one stick in both hands. The manner in which the hartebeest at this site have been depicted reinforces the connection apparently made between people and animals in the painting illustrated in Fig. 12. This supports the idea that the San painters intended to make a connection between the thin, elongated limbs of the animals and people depicted and the sticks held by figures in the paintings. Finally, a painting from the western Cape of an antelope therianthrope in stooped position is depicted holding either one or two sticks (Fig. 14).

People shown in a stooped position in the art with their torsos in a horizontal, or approximately horizontal, position, depict shamans in trance (Lewis-Williams 1981: 88). When they are depicted in this position, with their arms elongated, extended downwards and in front of them, I suggest that the artist intended to represent trancing shamans adopting the four-legged posture of the animal into which they are transforming (Fig. 15). It seems very likely that the dancing sticks and antelope features, of the kind depicted in the Melikane rock painting, represent the means by which the people

depicted in this painting used two sticks, representing the front legs of animals (Thackeray 2005b: 29). These were animals on whose powers shamans drew during trance (Lewis-Williams 1981, and other publications). I suggest that the sticks, representing the front legs of these animals, aided the transformation of shamans into animals during trance rites associated with healing. It is also possible that they are associated with a rite involving shamanic sympathetic control of hunted animals, as Thackeray (2005b: 29) argues. Sometimes, as depicted in paintings at Melikane, Libesoaneng and some other sites, animal costume was worn by San-speakers to aid this process of transformation. The custom of wearing animal and bird masks/costume and wearing entire animal skins as aids to ritual transformation is common in many shamanic societies (see Jolly 2002 for examples).

An example of the use of animal costume and dancing sticks that may be relevant to our understanding of the Melikane painting, and which may support the idea that the sticks were an aid to imitation of and transformation into animals, has been documented by Schlesier (1987). Schlesier (1987: 88–109) describes and illustrates the central figures in the shamanic Massaum ceremony of the Cheyenne. This involves the symbolic creation of the present world from the primordial condition, which existed before time, and shows how the

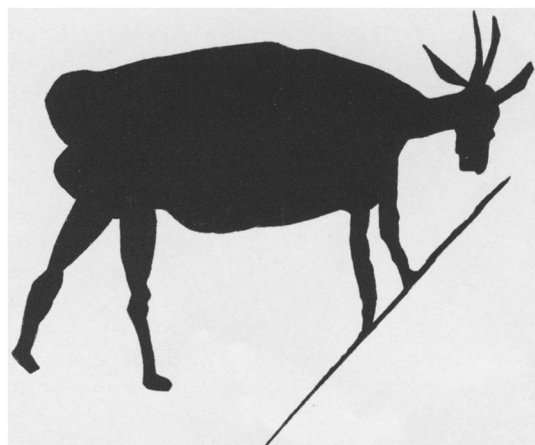


FIG. 14. An antelope therianthrope in stooped position and holding one or two sticks. It is possible that the artist intended this figure to be shown with breasts, but this is not clear. Western Cape.

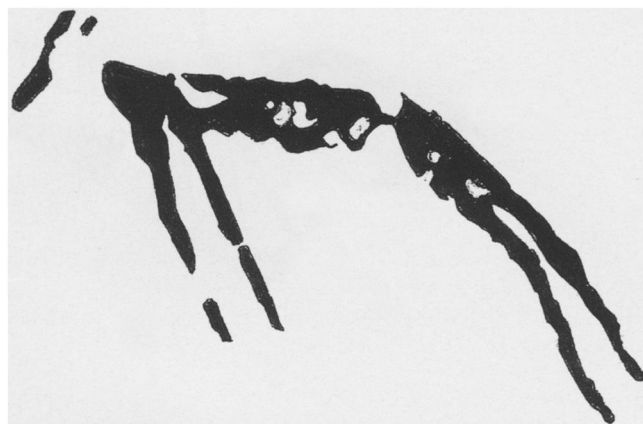


FIG. 15. A therianthrope depicted in a stooped posture with arms hanging forward. Free State.



FIG. 16. Central figures in the shamanic Massaum ceremony of the Cheyenne. Each has an entire wolf skin attached to his back and holds two sticks, representing the front legs of the wolves into which they have ritually transformed. The skins are symbolically decorated in various ways, and the figure on the right has a long strip of buffalo fur attached to the entire length of the wolf hide, with the tips of two buffalo horns attached to the head. After Schlesier (1987: fig. 12).

Cheyenne dressed and equipped themselves in a manner that is remarkably similar to that of the Melikane figures (see Fig. 16). The Cheyenne ceremony incorporated healing rites performed by animal-costumed shamans representing animal spirits. The skins worn by the figures depicted in Fig. 16 are those of an entire male red wolf and female white wolf. These were ritually decorated and added to in various ways. They were tied to onto the back and worn with the animal heads projecting over the forehead. Each masked person was then given two walking/dancing sticks. Significantly, Schlesier (1987: 100–101) states that these sticks represented the front legs of animals. The skins and sticks acted as aids to their ritual transformation into animals, the central feature of the Massaum ceremony. Later in the ceremony, the wolf shamans were joined in a great public display by other animal-costumed people:

The costumed, masked, painted impersonators of many animal species spilled from the animal dens. Herd animals and animals that lived in small groups emerged in bands from their dens.... Solitary animals appeared with single representatives. Actors imitated the behaviour of the species they represented. The colorful mass of animals walked, circled, or ran in the space between the Tsistsistas camp circle and the ring of animal lodges, drifting in clock-wise fashion. (Schlesier 1987: 105)

This ceremony is similar in a number of respects to a rite observed by Izak Bosman in South Africa in the 19th century, in the course of which animal-costumed San and Bantu-speakers imitated a wide variety of animals (see Jolly 2002: 92).

CONCLUSION

I have suggested in previous publications (Jolly 1995, 1996a) that the rite involving a person supported by two sticks and apparently in animal costume, depicted in the Melikane panel, probably originated with Bantu-speakers and was

subsequently adopted by the San. I also argued that the person in antelope costume supported by two sticks held in front of him/her who was photographed in 1934 on the southern fringes of the Kalahari (Thackeray 1993, 2005) was probably performing a rite that originated and was associated with Bantu-speaking agropastoralists rather than the San. However, taking into account the current evidence concerning rock paintings and performances of this rite, including the photographs of the Prieska San, Violl's account of the dance, and the fact that paintings of 'stick dancers', even if very rare, are found in the western Cape, it now seems to me more probable that the rite originated with San rather than Bantu language speakers – as Vinnicombe (1976) and Lewis-Williams (1980, 1981) suggest. Whether the comments made by Qing on this painting relate exclusively to San rites and beliefs, however, is not certain.

The fact that this form of dance is also known to be practised by Bantu-speakers means that we cannot be completely sure that the Melikane figures and the 'buckjumper' photographed in 1934 are San. They may be Bantu-speakers engaged in a rite that had a San origin. However, if we take the view that the Melikane figures were meant to portray San ritual functionaries, we also need to allow for the possibility that the religious meaning attached to the dancing sticks rite by the San changed, to a greater or lesser extent, with progressive exposure by particular San groups to the religious beliefs of Bantu-speaking agropastoralists. This would be an example of change in the meaning of a religious symbol or rite while its outward form remains constant, a phenomenon that Van der Leeuw has termed *transposition* (see Jolly 1998 for a discussion of this phenomenon).

We can expect this process to have occurred most often in cases where San established particularly close relationships with Bantu-speaking agropastoralists. Qing is a case in point.

The Phuthi, for example, amongst whom Qing was living at the time that he was interviewed by Orpen (1874), established very close relationships with a number of San groups (Wright 1971; Vinnicombe 1976; Jolly 1995, 1996b). Qing could speak Sephuthi (Jolly 1995), and it is likely that he was a son of the major San chief, Soai (How 1962: 22), who had very close relations with the Phuthi (Jolly 1996b). Qing would have been exposed to Phuthi beliefs and rites, and these, together with San rites and beliefs, may have influenced his understanding of the meaning of the 'sticks dance' when he made his well-known remarks about this dance and the people who performed it. Similarly, if southern Bantu-speakers living in close contact with the San adopted this rite from the San, and retained much of its outward form and aspects of its original religious symbolism, there can be little doubt that they would also have ascribed some new religious meanings to it that accorded more closely with the religious beliefs of Nguni- and Sotho/Tswana-speakers cultures rather than those of the San. In both these cases we would expect to find a syncretic blend of San and Nguni/Sotho-Tswana beliefs associated with the rite, whether it was performed by San, by Bantu-speaking agropastoralists or by San and Bantu-speakers in tandem.

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