

## An Odyssey of two Rock Art Devotees

**Edward and Cathelijne Eastwood, *Capturing the Spoor: An exploration of southern African rock art***

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In the specialised realm of rock art studies, Eastwood's study clearly is a winner. It will satisfy layperson and professional alike, a rare feature in academic writing. To be sure, the rock art jargon is omnipresent: "scraffiti, capules, crenations, formlings ...". It rarely comes over as pedantic, though. The authors invite the reader to join in their passionate quest for the precious artistic heritage, and to appreciate the beauty of the landscape in which it is integrated. The structure of the book is as simple as it is lucid: seven distinct themes each of which is introduced with the magnificent artworks of a particular shelter. The aesthetic of text and images is warm and personal.

*Capturing the Spoor* could not have been compiled overnight. It represents a decade of exploration, dozens of fieldtrips and hundreds of hours of patiently tracing the images on the rocks. The presentation of the material combines superb full-, half- and quarter-page colour prints with copies of the actual paintings, boxes of general information and detailed discussions of individual artworks. This study successfully combines basic introduction, detailed field guide and general reference work. It also provides excellent teaching material.

Here is a comprehensive publication that ventures beyond the Drakensberg and the Western Cape; that explores rock images other than those of San origin; and that suggests an interpretation of rock art which perhaps does not compete with, but at least complements Lewis-Williams' ruling paradigm of shamanic art.

The region explored by the Eastwoods – the central Limpopo basin – includes the Limpopo valley (from the Tuli Block, over the Mapungubwe area, past Musina into the Kruger Park); the Soutpansberg range and the Makgabeng plateau. The introductory chapter outlines the basin in terms of topography, etymology and cosmology. The authors attempt to integrate the three perspectives into a "cultural topography".

The result is not exactly a “Phenomenology of Landscape” (Tilley, 1994), but is interesting nonetheless.

The first section of the book (Chapter 1, “Rites of Passage”) introduces the different authors of non-San rock art: soldiers, farmers and herders. The discussion includes Leibbrandt’s swastika as well as the graffiti left behind by SADF soldiers stationed in the Limpopo warzone; contemporary mural art, resistance art of the contact period and pre-colonial ritual paintings of the Hananwa and other inhabitants of the Blouberg; multi-coloured paintings and engravings by the Venda in the Soutpansberg and red-and-white-style paintings by the Khoekhoen.

More importantly, the chapter aims at identifying rites of passage as the study’s central theme and the kaross as its key motive or icon. Animal paintings in the Makgabeng, more specifically images of the crocodile motif (*koma*) are linked to Northern Sotho boys’ initiation lodges. Geometric designs in the same area, in eastern Vhembe and in the Soutpansberg are explained as representations of female aprons and of the different phases of the moon: symbols of status change and fertility which underlie female rites of passage in Bantu, San and Khoekhoen contexts alike.

“Rites of Passage” generally digests well. However, those who venture into a second, closer reading, are bound to discover some flaws in the analysis. Personally, I find the “moon” icons rather unconvincing, for methodological and epistemological reasons which I will expand on in the second half of the review. The suggested “tradition” of Venda paintings is equally dubious, considering the limited number of sites available to substantiate it.

The early history of the region seems accurately represented in terms of its inclusion in a wider regional narrative of trading polities. Those who are not familiar with the cultural revolution of the Limpopo basin, will find Hall’s *The Changing Past* (1987) most gratifying. For more archaeological detail, indulge in Huffman’s *Snakes and Crocodiles* (1996).

In contrast, the authors seem to be uninformed about the complex formation processes of ethnic groups, language and culture. In contemporary anthropological and historical writing, references to “the Venda” or “the Northern Sotho”, to their language or culture, are made with great reservations. In archaeological (and art historical) discourse, however, they continue to be commonplace. Perhaps this could be

explained in terms of the traditional emphasis on the typology and classification of spatio-temporal entities in material culture and artefact studies? Also, I suppose, ethnic simplification does not really come as a surprise in a country where nationalist dogma has shaped a great deal of social thought for almost half a century.

Incidentally, the reference to “the Venda” as “people of the world” is a suspicious etymology best left with the early missionaries who created it, and Thohoyandou, the legendary Singo king who united “the Venda nation” belongs in the tourism brochures of the bantustan era. I will return to the uncritical use of the Ngoma Lungundu oral tradition of a “race of short dark-skinned Ngona” autochthones when discussing the final chapter of the study.

Finally, and more importantly, the term *koma* (*ngoma* in Tshivenda) is, contrary to the authors’ understanding, not reserved for the crocodile icon only. It is used for a variety of sacred objects associated with rites of passage and also makes its appearance in other ritual contexts.

The central chapters of the book (Chapters 2 to 6), are dedicated to the art of the hunter-gatherer (the San). Seemingly, the authors are now in more familiar territory. “Tracks in Stone” (Chapter 2) explores the subject matter of spoor and takes on the challenge of investigating the poorly researched relationship between engravings and paintings. The central Limpopo basin is unique in that icons of both kinds are often found in the same shelter, representing similar species.

The introduction features the magnificent *Tshikongomoti* shelter, a unique display of ninety images of engraved animal spoor, representing fourteen different animals. It further familiarises the reader with the San and with the main features of Lewis-Williams’ interpretative approach (the shamanic model): the trance dance, supernatural potency and the somatic experience of the healer.

The authors, by means of a detailed and very informative typology, indicate to the reader the differences between utilitarian marks on the rocks (some of which appear like engravings) and the real engravings themselves: excellent field guide stuff. They then proceed to explore the meaning of spoor iconography by means of the concept of “animal potency”, the supernatural essence associated with certain species and gathered by the shaman during the out-of-body journey.

Just when you have decided that there is, seemingly, no escape from Lewis-Williams' paradigm, the authors change the analytical narrative in favour of an ethnography of first kill rites (boys' initiation) and of the sympathetic magic employed by hunters to capture prey. All in all, I would say, a more than fair attempt at solving the mystery of engraved spoor.

Chapter 3, "God's Menagerie" (I really love the titles used in this book), displays the vast range of animals covered in the San rock art repertoire. It is appropriately initiated by means of a shelter in the Mapungubwe area, featuring two hundred paintings representing sixteen species. The same site boasts South Africa's only rock paintings of the locust. The authors diligently explore ethology, San mythology and ritual in their search for meaning. This is archaeological puzzle-solving at its best: describing the images in detail, identifying patterns, sifting for clues through the literature and combining bits and pieces of information.

The field guide recipe used by the Eastwoods to formulate the results of their analysis (box-like discussions of individual paintings and animal species) works well. Rhinos and hippos are linked to thunderstorms and rain. The giraffe and zebra are found to display grace and female beauty. Carnivores are said to represent evil forces, *et cetera*. The text resounds, largely, what has been written elsewhere in rock art literature, however, the authors manage to animate and innovate existing knowledge by means of data on the rites of passage of both sexes. The discussion of images of therianthropes (half-animal representations of humans) in terms of the mythology of the First Days, provides a fresh and novel supplement to the staleness of the shamanic model.

However, that is as far as it goes analytically. If you have an interest in some deeper, theoretical understanding of the concept of animal symbolism; or if you want to know more about the quality of the interrelationship hunter-prey (man-nature); or simply wonder how the artist's mind combined metaphor, symbol, belief and pragmatic animal knowledge, you will have to look elsewhere. Why do archaeologists, generally, seem to miss out on the more exciting matter when scouting for analogous material?

The central Limpopo basin features 40 rock art sites depicting the shaman's journey to the other world, "The Path to God's Village" (Chapter 4). The authors selected the imagery of a shelter named The-Place-where-Eland-eats-Meat, to bring home to the reader the shamanic essence of San rock art. A visit to the netherworld, we are told, is the

main objective of the trance dance, be it for the purpose of healing, rainmaking, or improving the outcome of hunting expeditions.

The narrative is very descriptive at first, detailing the trance dance. Then follows a set of boxes listing the key elements of the somatic experience and “hallucinations” of the trance dancer. These are illustrated with top quality paintings of the trancer’s stomach and neck pains; the sensation of body elongation; the “death of the shaman” or “accoutrement” (bending forward position); dorsal potency lines; threads to the other world and more recent additions to the shamanic interpretation of the rock art, such as the shelter-as-cathedral; trajectories of the spirit; the rock wall as veil between two worlds and the physical entrances to the other world. A separate set of boxes is reserved for the fascinating imagery of therianthropes. An interpretation of crenations and formlings – a visual feature of trance most recently integrated in South African rock art analysis – concludes the chapter.

In essence, this chapter exemplifies the ruling paradigm established by the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) at Wits. Careful scrutiny reveals how the authors have shifted from prudent hypothesis to a firm, more determined style of analysis. Note how folklore data in this chapter are no longer pro-active providers of interpretive data. They merely add an extra defence layer around the empirical core of the shamanic model. I will return to the positivist underpinnings of the paradigm in the second section of my review.

Chapters 5 and 6 remove us from the shaman and his art. The authors take the reader on a magical mystery tour of another kind. “A Woman’s World” (Chapter 5) is, in terms of analysis, the most systematic and logical chapter in the study. The authors first identify intriguing patterns in the representation of women: small processions of female figures; nuances in the depiction of breasts; reverse articulation of the legs (lower leg bent backwards); close association between icons of women and certain antelopes, and so on. Subsequently, with the help of ethnographic analogy, many panels are interpreted as being conceptually part of the realm of girls’ initiation.

Breast-size and shape, it is suggested quite convincingly, serve as markers of status (neophyte, initiated, initiator). Reverse articulation associates girls with “antelope, prey and meat” which – in San metaphorical discourse – are ready to be “hunted and eaten” by their future husbands. Female kudas in mating posture, karosses, zebra and other icons are integrated in the same analytical meta-narrative of rites of

passage. With the help of Biesele it is also suggested that shelters like Witte Vloed (around which this chapter evolved) could well have been actual sites of initiation.

The chapter's conclusion, to a certain degree, realigns the rites of passage hypothesis with the ruling rock art paradigm. Social transformation (female initiation) is likened to "trance-formation" (the shamanic model). Neophytes, we are told, appear to be positioned between immaturity and maturity much in the same way as the shaman is positioned between the world of living and the world of spirits. The potency of women and shamans, it is suggested, are similar: both face "death", when giving birth or when travelling out-of-body.

Whereas Chapter 5 develops around the central theme of initiation, "Y-shapes and Animal Skins" (Chapter 6) explores the key motif of the study, the kaross. However, the narrative does not flow nearly as well as was the case in "A Woman's World". As a result, the arguments and suggestions put forward by the authors on the same subject of a gendered iconography, appear somewhat less convincing.

The impressive shelter selected for this chapter (TDK) depicts no less than four hundred and fifty red images, including sixty-five antelope, eighty humans and forty-five Y-shapes and animal skins. The mysterious Y-shapes, the Eastwoods explain, have been interpreted as a number of things, including fish traps, bi-forked trees, ornaments and even Buddhist symbols of good being ... Through their association with other animal skins in the rock paintings at TDK, the authors conclusively identify the Y-shapes as loincloths and solve the mystery. So far, so good.

Then follows an interesting list of analytical *faits divers* on the subject of male and female clothing, their association with potency, avoidance rules, sexuality, fertility and rites of passage. However, this cultural data is being juxtaposed to the rock art, rather than used systematically to explain it. An attempt to attribute meaning to decorations on the aprons is also aborted, on behalf of the "ambiguous, idiosyncratic and contradictory nature of San thought" (p 158).

In the second half of the chapter, the authors return to the individual images and try to explain them in terms of three contexts (transition rites, hunting and the medicine dance). They further arrange the paintings in five additional contexts. Whatever analysis results from these classifications does not reduce the general confusion of the narrative, but quite the opposite. This is followed by a discussion of six

more images (or are they types of images?). It is left to the reader to find out how these relate to the previous discussion.

Under the heading “Images of Transition” (the conclusion), the authors try to restore order by realigning the analysis with trance. An unwise move which amounts, in my opinion, to throwing in the towel.

The objective of the final section and chapter of the study (Part Three, “The Art of Interaction”; Chapter 7, “Mingling Spoor”) is to identify cross-cultural imagery and to explore its meaning. The shelter selected for this purpose (UB40) seems ideal, as it contains four phases of San paintings; images belonging to three Khoekhoen styles and two episodes of Northern Sotho paintings.

The authors reflect briefly on historical and pre-historical data on the subject of cultural contact between the three indigenous cultures. Next follows a presentation of paintings illustrating Northern Sotho-Khoekhoen; Northern Sotho-San; and Khoekhoen-San interaction. Of particular interest is the striking resemblance between Northern Sotho and Khoekhoen geometric designs and their depictions of the kaross or apron icon.

In addition, we learn that Northern Sotho painters superimposed and juxtaposed animals on San panels, copying the San originals. Finally, it is suggested that the Khoekhoen may have inspired San painters to depict sheep after introducing the animal in the region. More suggestions are made about the possible cultural meanings of painted interaction. The authors, however, are very cautious and their interpretation is definitely nothing like Peter Jolly’s proposed social symbiosis between hunters and pastoralists, or David Hammond-Tooke’s exciting hypothesis on the origin of Xhosa healing rituals in San trance (1998 and 1999, respectively). Shared iconography is vaguely explained as evidence for “strong relationships”, “cross-cultural interests” and “flow of ideas” between the different cultures.

The oral tradition of the so-called Ngoma people, who inhabited the Soutpansberg before the immigration of the Singo, resurfaces in this chapter. This time it is suggested that they might have been intermixed with the Khoekhoen and have been partly responsible for the rock art heritage in the region. However, the *Ngoma Lungundu* myth of the magical Singo war drum, in which the Ngoma feature as a degenerate and backward people, is generally understood as an aetiological myth, created to justify the invasion and occupation of the region by the Singo

“ancestors” of the present ruling clans in Venda. Many variations on the sacred drum narrative, incidentally, were recorded amongst other Rozwi clans north of the Limpopo. Myths of origin describing some master race replacing or absorbing primitive autochthones are commonplace in orature worldwide (and in our own modern history!). There is very little to substantiate any link with the rock art, however exciting as such an association might be.

In terms of epistemology and fieldwork methodology, this study raises some interesting questions. I start with the more obvious issue of methodology, whilst acknowledging, in any case, that the two are closely related.

The authors of *Capturing the Spoor* have opted for an ethno-archaeological approach, hence they depend for the analysis of the paintings on ethnographic analogy. They combine published data on San folklore and religion with personal observation and field interviews.

In history and anthropology, working with oral evidence is generally considered a challenging mission. It does not matter how well acquainted one is with the do's and don'ts of fieldwork, or how many cautionary tales one has internalised from a vast array of theoretical sources, every field encounter adds novel challenges to the confusion, discovery, excitement, scrutiny, denial and disappointment experienced previously. In short, interview data is complex and fragile evidence – handle with care!

In the intellectual realm of archaeology, things work differently. The material essence of the study object, the artefact, creates an illusion of certainty and objective truth. As a result, many archaeologists treat cultural data like (arte)facts: obvious and straightforward evidence, that is what it appears to be.

I cannot say for certain that the authors of *Capturing the Spoor* belong to this category of casual or uncritical users of cultural data, yet, the story of the discovery of girls' initiation aprons in the Makgabeng rock art, clearly does not reassure the reader of the opposite. First the authors find images which they decide look like female aprons. This leads them to think that the paintings might be related to initiation. Therefore they “immediately set off to discuss with an old Northern Sotho woman”, who then concurs the find (p 45).



Also, archaeologists worldwide, expect anthropology to provide them with clear, unambiguous and univocal answers to their archaeological questions. This can be partly explained in terms of their fascination with classification and typological ordering of artefacts. In this study, the authors do not seem to appreciate the fact that the ritual pedagogy of initiation thrives on mystery. Some of the themes are simply not meant to be clearly understood. In fact, instruction rarely encourages the rational path. Instead, non-western modes of instruction – such as emotive and bodily learning – are preferred.

Further, speaking from personal experience, informants' comments on the symbolic meaning of geometric designs can be very misleading. I vividly remember how, many years ago, I battled to find information on the form and meaning of Venda pottery designs. One bright winter morning, my research took a dramatic turning when I traced someone who could name and explain almost every single design she was prompted. Unfortunately, as I discovered only much later, the woman had been discussing similar designs from a different context. "I know these *makolo* (designs)" actually meant "I know similar designs from beadwork". And what I interpreted as "Yes, this is the ... (frog, eye, or whatever) design", should have been translated as "Yes, this looks like the ... (frog, eye, or whatever) design".

The Eastwoods claim that many women were familiar with the geometric rock art paintings that were shown to them. Yet, the same women had indicated to them that these designs occur in a variety of contexts other than female initiation: in beadwork, wall and floor decoration, ceramics, *et cetera*. In doing so, they actually acknowledged the polysemic nature of symbolic art. This concept seemingly is *terra incognita* to the interviewers, who, on the one hand, were pleased to find their initiation hypothesis confirmed, whilst, by the same token, seemed disappointed with the confusing and overwhelming data provided by the informants. The same applies to the discussion of the *koma* and animal symbolism of the boys' initiation.

Not only can symbolic designs take on different meanings in different contexts, they are also borrowed and re-interpreted. Cultures change, a basic fact that remains poorly appreciated by those archaeologists who prefer the illusion and the convenience of a static, Pan-San culture that stretches out over the subcontinent.

I would like to end this review by pointing out the ambiguous meaning of the title of this study. *Capturing the Spoor*, the blurb

explains, was inspired by “the belief held by some traditional Bantu-speakers that the San can ‘capture’ animal spoor and bewitch it [sic!] in order to ensure hunting success”. The authors explain that, by analogy, their research aims at capturing the spoor left behind by the hunters, in other words, at exploring the traces, the evidence of a vanishing culture.

There is another kind of “capturing” at work here, and it relates to the nature of the ruling paradigm in rock art studies, to which this study subscribes.

Lewis-Williams, when formulating his interpretative approach, clearly expressed his opposition to the staleness of positivist analysis in rock art. He successfully demonstrated that San ritual and beliefs could be combined with the paintings in a new type of analysis. Because of the central importance of trance in San culture, he concluded that most of the “non real” or symbolic images could be explained as the spiritual experience of healers and rainmakers. In doing so, he shifted the emphasis from an object-based, typological and distributional analysis of images to a humanist kind of understanding of the people who had painted them. Today, twenty years down the line, rock art studies and the shamanic model have, a few exceptions aside, become synonymous.

A careful analysis of the numerous publications associated with RARI, the details of which are beyond the scope of this review, shows the empiricist underpinnings of the paradigm. This is most obvious in the extensive use of data on the physiology of trance and hallucinations. In fact, the shamanic model is also known as the neuro-psychological model. Ultimately, it is just another variation on the classic scientific model. Lewis-Williams says it all, I believe, when he defines San spirituality as “a way of coming to terms with the electrochemical functioning of the brain” (see his publication of 2004, p xxiv). The spiritual is being captured, controlled, domesticated.

If you have an interest in the deeper, subjective meaning of out-of-body travel, most South African rock art studies, including this one, will disappoint you.

To summarise: *Capturing the Spoor* is a study for the widest possible consumption. The material is exciting, the graphic presentation excellent. The central theme is original, the key motif intriguing. After a bit of a false start, follows a fair analysis of the spoor icons. The synthesis of animal representations in the rock art is informative. Neophytes in the realm of rock art studies will find the discussion of

images of trance and the out-of-body journey fascinating. The analysis of gendered imagery should be refreshing to novel readers and old hands alike. The rock art displaying cross-cultural contact poses more questions than it provides answers. The text could definitely have benefited from some historical and anthropological editing.

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