



McDONALD INSTITUTE CONVERSATIONS

The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

Technologies, ontologies and agents

Edited by Chris Wingfield, John Gibling & Rachel King



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with contributions from

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Published by:

McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research
University of Cambridge
Downing Street
Cambridge, UK
CB2 3ER
(0)(1223) 339327
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www.mcdonald.cam.ac.uk



McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2020

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ISBN: 978-1-913344-01-6

On the cover: Chapungu – the Return to Great Zimbabwe, 2015, by *Sethembile Msezane*,
Great Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe. Photograph courtesy and copyright the artist.

Cover design by Dora Kemp and Ben Plumridge.
Typesetting and layout by Ben Plumridge.

Edited for the Institute by James Barrett (*Series Editor*).

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Acknowledgements

This volume is the ultimate result of a conference with the same title, held on 27–29 October 2016 to mark the opening of the British Museum exhibition *South Africa: the art of a nation*. The conference was a collaboration between the British Museum, where John Giblin was Head of Africa Section at the time, and the University of Cambridge, where Chris Wingfield was a Curator at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and Rachel King was Smuts Research Fellow at the Centre of African Studies. We are each grateful to those institutions and our colleagues there for supporting us in hosting this conference.

We are also grateful for the financial support offered for the conference by the Centre of African Studies and the Smuts Memorial Fund at Cambridge, who each funded the participation of one South African scholar. We also extend our thanks to Peter Mitchell and Paul Lane for supporting our funding applications. We are especially grateful to the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, and to Cyprian Broodbank in particular, for considering our request for funding and then offering to double it, even if this offer came with the condition that at least some of the conference be held in Cambridge – which involved us attempting to lure assembled scholars onto a 7 a.m. coach for the British Museum with promises of fresh coffee and croissants, the morning after the conference dinner! Not everyone made it....

The combined funding enabled us to invite Same Mdluli, David Morris and Justine Wintjes, whose work is included in this volume, as well as Mbongiseni Buthelezi and Carolyn Hamilton to participate in the conference. We were especially honoured to hold the

very first launch of Carolyn and Nessa Leibhammer's edited volume, *Tribing and Untribing the Archive*, at the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology as part of the conference programme.

The ongoing support of the McDonald Institute in making this publication possible is deeply appreciated – especially that of James Barrett, Emma Jarman and Ben Plumridge. We are also grateful to two anonymous reviewers of the volume for their comments and support, and to Mark McGranaghan for his assistance with standardizing the diacritics for languages that were never supposed to be written down!

As editors, we are especially grateful for the forbearance of the contributors to this volume over the period of four years that has elapsed between the conference and the publication of this volume. As a mitigating circumstance, we would just note that as well as a wedding, a baby and a family relocation to Cape Town and back between us, each of us has also moved to new jobs in new cities during that period – Rachel to the Institute of Archaeology at University College London where she is now Lecturer in Cultural Heritage Studies, John to National Museums Scotland, where he is now Keeper for the Department of World Cultures, and Chris to the Sainsbury Research Unit at the University of East Anglia, where he is now Associate Professor in the Arts of Africa. We can only hope that the extended period has enabled each of the papers in this volume to develop to a fuller maturity!

Chris Wingfield
John Giblin
Rachel King

Chapter 10

A discourse on colour: assessing aesthetic patterns in the ‘swift people’ panel at Ezeljagdspoor, Western Cape, South Africa

M. Hayden

The rainbow. It is yellow, its place which lies above; a thing which looks red [...] while the Mantis is the one who is also yellow; he is the one who lies above; while !kwammaṅ-a lies underneath [...] the Mantis is the one whose part which is uppermost, it is yellow; while his part which lies underneath it is that which is red ... the people say, the rainbow stands yonder, and the rain will break. !han#kass'o, March 1878 (Bleek & Lloyd 1879, 6600–1 & 6603–4).

The aesthetic role of colour

Colour significance has been demonstrated through studies related to African material culture (Turner 1967; Jacobson-Widding 1979; Drewal & Mason 1998; d'Errico *et al.* 2005; Henshilwood *et al.* 2011) evidenced through both universal paradigms and cultural specificity. Colour use, in the creative process, is an essential facet of expression in southern Africa rock paintings, despite its appurtenant role in interpretation. In this paper, I examine the role of colour with explicit reference to indigenous pictorial traditions. The disciplinary focus of rock art research has centred on the formal iconographic elements in the art, which, correspondingly, is reflected in the monochrome redrawings that have been ubiquitous in the field for many decades.

This paper considers the aesthetic and metaphoric dimensions of colour within southern African parietal art, with special emphasis on the ‘swift people’ motif, and its wider pictorial context at Ezeljagdspoor. The coloured elements in this imagery are highlighted in the 2011 ‘true colour’ photograph by Kevin Crause (Fig. 10.2). This vignette considered alongside the descriptive use of colour in the opening excerpt, suggestive of a metaphoric dimension, initiates my inquiry. The remarkable specificity of colour association in the reference is part of a larger passage concerning the

prolific Mantis character of Khoisan cosmology, often associated with the trickster persona, and his son-in-law, with an emphasis on their designated positioning within the spectrum of colours present in the rainbow (Bleek & Lloyd 1879, 6600–4). Might the association of colour and key figures within Khoisan cosmology point to a pattern of colour significance? A discourse on colour and the relevant impact on interpretation might lead to an examination of the fundamental function of form and content, inextricably interrelated as evident in this opening passage and other indigenous colour references relevant to this study. My approach to exegesis is facilitated through the theoretical premise of hermeneutics (Ricoeur 2006), which allows a consideration of the relationship between different translations, as well as a tool for navigating the complex terrain of multiple interpretations.¹

Evolution of a motif

Ezeljagdspoor is the name of a farmstead located just north of the city of George, near Oudtshoorn in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. It also refers to the site at the centre of this study (Fig. 10.3), which is situated in a ravine near the Brak River. The ‘poort’ part of the name refers to a pass through a mountainous ridge, and ‘ezeljagd’ translates from Afrikaans as ‘hunt of the zebra,’ (Hugo Leggatt pers. comm. 2016, although *ezel* literally means ‘donkey’). The Ezeljagdspoor site is most famous for the presence of a therianthropic motif (combining human and animal features) (Fig. 10.2), which has been viewed through an evolving nomenclature from ‘watermaiden’ to ‘swallow people’ from the nineteenth century to the present day (Lewis-Williams *et al.* 1993).

The first recording of this site occurred under the direction of British officer James Edward Alexander in 1835, published as an incidental part of his account



Figure 10.1. Map showing the location of Ezeljagdspoor.



Figure 10.2. Ezeljagdspoor 'swift people' motif, true colour enhancement, 2011. Photograph Kevin Crause.

of a larger expedition which included coastal regions and islands of northwest Africa in addition to southern Africa and his documentation of the Cape frontier conflict of 1834–5 (Alexander 1837). The drawing was one of several executed by surveyor-general of the Cape Colony, Major Charles Collier Michell, based on sites made familiar to him in the course of his work in the Uitenhage and George districts. A single colour lithograph² of the 'swift people' motif was published. Included in the publication was a suggestive association of the motif, steeped in racial proclivities of the era, as potentially illustrating the 'amphibious nature' of whites (Alexander 1837, 317). This initial public dissemination of this imagery made attempts at translating colour distinction (Wintjes 2014, 700). In fact, Alexander made note of the colour variance of the red hue that he deemed to come from the 'rust of iron,' suggesting this was a primary ingredient of the pigment (Alexander 1837, 315). It is now known that haematite is the source of hues that range from red, orange, yellow and brown in rock paintings, but the close visual interest in colour that this example demonstrates would not be picked up by subsequent generations of researchers.

Rock art researcher Jeff Leeuwenburg's confluence of this imagery and an 1870s 'legend' recorded by Bleek and Lloyd has had a significant impact on this motif and its subsequent reading and interpretation as myth manifest pictorially (Leeuwenburg 1970). The intersection of this legend and its correlation to the 'swift people' imagery stems from a tale conveyed by a Bushman by the name of Afrikaander, who lived in the area, about a young girl submerged into a dark pool by water maidens only to be salvaged through the herbal remedy applied to the water by her mother, returning unharmed but with cheeks licked white due to the affection of the mystical creatures (Bleek 1875; Leeuwenburg 1970; Lewis-Williams *et al.* 1993, 276–7).

Leeuwenburg essentially perpetuated an ideology framed a century earlier based on theories that some of the paintings depicted San myths (Orpen 1874; Bleek 1874). He explained this legend and others, provided by Afrikaander, were depicted as illustrations of folklore (Leeuwenburg 1970, 146). Although his work forms part of a larger history, his juxtaposition of 'folklore' and rock paintings correspond with prevailing theories that 'enigmatic' imagery could be interpreted through a narrative framework. This has had an effect on a near-century-long association of this painting with the mermaid context and the designation as watermeide, Afrikaans for water-maiden.

Rock art scholars David Lewis-Williams, Thomas Dowson and Janette Deacon provide a telling composite of four renderings of the 'swift people' group to



Figure 10.3. Ezeljagdspoor site, 2011. Photograph Hugo Leggatt.

track its varied construction over the years, based on the bias of artists and researchers of the time (Fig. 10.4) (Lewis-Williams *et al.* 1993, 275 fig. 1). Examination of the site by Lewis-Williams *et al.* sought to broaden the perspective of the enigmatic motif to include the curious lines that foreground and frame the figures along with the dots that are also repeated across the full width of the panel. Although they established a more inclusive panorama of site imagery, their main focus was to convey the hypothesis of entoptic, or optically derived imagery being present in the paintings, based on neurological research. For example, they propose 'somatic hallucination' (Lewis-Williams *et al.* 1993, 282) to explain the undulating attenuated figure, and refer to the sinuous lines and dots as entoptic geometric forms visible at the onset of trance (Lewis-Williams *et al.* 1993, 281).

Examples of similar circles or geometric forms exist in other areas of the panel and have been noted by other scholars such as Justine Wintjes (2014, 700) as

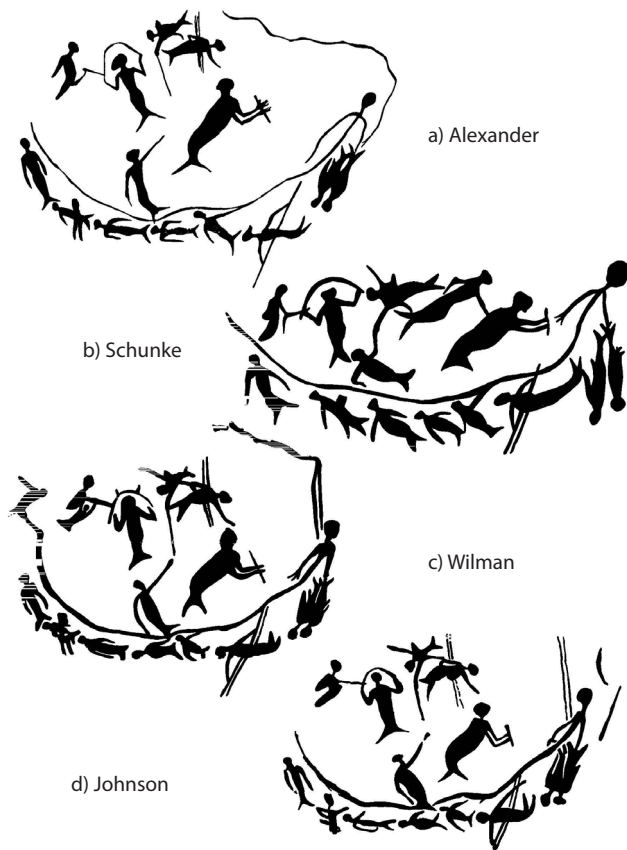


Figure 10.4. Four copies of the Ezeljagdspoor rock painting: a) Alexander, 1837; b) Schunke, 1870s; c) Wilman, 1917; d) Johnson 1979. Taken from David Lewis-Williams *et al.* (1993, 275: Figure 1).

potentially a border demarcation or fulfilling some kind of scenic role. Visually, these dots don't always appear wholly circular, possibly due to paint loss, and like the 'swift-people' motif, also lend themselves to more than one plausible explanation. A different ethnographic source – a conversation between Mapote and Marion How in 1930 in south-eastern Basutoland – indicates that in some contexts the paint was prepared with fresh eland blood at the full moon (How 1970 [1962], 26–42; Lewis-Williams *et al.* 1993, 286) and suggests that the creation of some imagery might correlate to a hunt. Additionally, the Bleek and Lloyd archive contains passages on the moon that reference the hunt as well, which may then implicate lunar cycles and therefore the passage of time.³ The circular forms range from whole circles to arcs of circles, something that might evoke different phases of the moon. These subtle aspects are most visible in the enhanced photography of Kevin Crause (Figs. 10.2 & 10.8), but this possibility requires further examination.

The most recent designation of the hybrid figures as 'swift people,' is due to extensive research involving natural modelling by scholar Jeremy Hollmann (2005a) at sixteen sites in the Oudtshoorn area. He convincingly conjoined the avian behaviours of swifts not just in relation to the individual motifs, but to the movement of the figures in relation to each other. Furthermore, he extrapolates symbolic association between the 'swift people' motif and San ritual practitioners (Hollmann 2005b).

Interpretations have become progressively complex and nuanced from one generation of researchers to another, weaving together increasingly different strands of ideas. However, focus remains on the clearest, uppermost layer of painting, which researchers translate into a black-and-white diagram, and does not explicitly address the ambiguous motifs, or other aspects of the visual appearance of the paintings such as colour. The selective focus has always been on the red figures only, when there are many other figures in other colours. Furthermore, upon closer inspection, figures outlined in black and white (Fig. 10.5) are also evident and likely an addendum to the initial layer of paintings due to the divergent visual appearance.

Polysemic implications

The identification of Ezeljagdspoor site imagery as 'swift people' is the current iteration of a motif translated through aquatic to aerial connotations from the early nineteenth century to present. The recent recognition of the polysemic qualities of this particular imagery by Lewis-Williams *et al.* (1993) and Hollmann (2005a,b), with its enigmatic ambiguity, has definitively challenged many of the assumptions built into the nineteenth-century interpretation of this imagery. And yet, even though this interpretation derives from the western mythological being of the mermaid in the first instance, it also links in convincing ways with San ideas about creatures that exist and operate between earth and water. The most recent studies (Lewis-Williams *et al.* 1993; Hollmann 2005a,b) steeped in close readings of the ethnography have led to a range of other tenable and complex readings to, arguably, a current situation of polysemic meaning (Lewis-Williams 1998), where the motif can no longer be seen to have a simple, single meaning. And yet, all of these interpretations remain narrow and achromatic, focussing on the figural shape of the clearest and most obviously depictive motif from within the wider composition.

The overview of interpretations of this single motif is site-specific, yet also provides a window into the regional history of rock art research. It exhibits a prevailing interest in a motif singled out from the



Figure 10.5. 'Swift people' motif outlined with subtle use of black and white pigment, 2016. Photograph M. Hayden.

complexity of the comprehensive pictorial design. And yet the mobilization of colour forms an integral part of the creation of any visual expression in paint, and should play a central role in the investigation of meaning.

Colour analysis

My colour analysis at Ezeljagdspoor begins with a wider perspective (often eschewed in previous interpretations), which is centred on the group that has attracted so much attention, but includes in its field many other coloured figures and natural rock colouring. Ezeljagdspoor rock-shelter is generally composed of grey and black sandstone, with patterns of brighter, more colourful hues in certain areas as schematic bands of pigment in orb and oval shapes dominate the visual plane. At this distance, the complexity of the panel is created largely by an articulation of colour hue and intensity rather than figural delineation. The clarity and cohesiveness of this cluster of motifs, may have been the reason for its dislodging from the compositional whole in previous studies.

I see colour functioning in the composition through three key attributes: linear, tonal and metaphoric. The paintings are created through a 'closed-boundary' use of colour, described in other contexts as 'linear painting'

(Wölfflin 1915; 1950 [1932]), where forms are clearly outlined and filled in with flat colour. Most motifs created by this technique at Ezeljagdspoor appear in varying red hues and most easily relatable to a narrative approach due to their figural clarity. This hard-edge modelling of form, displayed in the 'swift people' motif as well as other animal and human forms, provides the concrete visible presence of a natural entity. The tonal application of colour is more ethereal and significant visual component of the wider composition than the linear motifs. These often orbital and indiscriminate bands of colour diffuse from a highly intense red hue, circular in nature, to a more muted and atmospheric tone of yellow, and often undergird more linear and definitive figures in the composition. The metaphoric application of colour emerges from drawing links between colour references in the ethnography and the articulation of colour in the rock art, along with colour references that emphasize the relationship between colour and maturation and development. For the purposes of my analysis, I have divided the composition into four quadrants (Fig. 10.6), with some peripheral paintings occurring at the outer boundaries, not visible in this view.

The linear use of colour, applied throughout the composition provides clarity and autonomy of form.

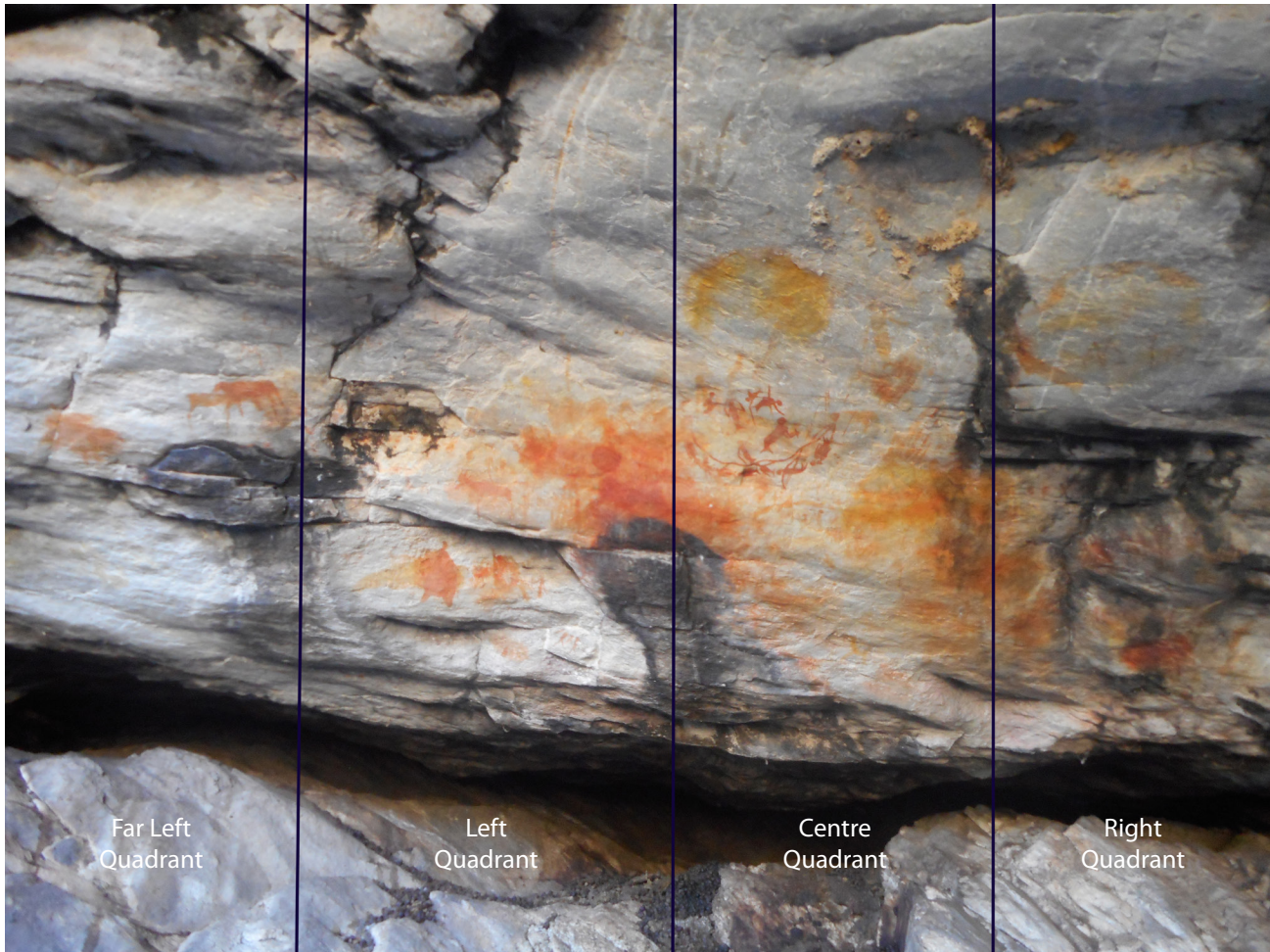


Figure 10.6. *Ezeljagdspoor site, Quadrant division of painted panel for colour analysis, 2016. Photograph M. Hayden.*

Across all quadrants, animal and therianthrope figures have all been modelled in a 'closed' boundary style in red pigment. This is in contrast to a general pattern of a more painterly approach discernible in the fleeting immersion of subject and background in yellow-orange which has apparently been deployed as an interesting coupling device, or intersection of forms. In the far-left quadrant moving from left to right, the first vignette is an intermingling of indeterminate figures in hues of red and orange. The second pulse of colour contains two indeterminate antelope that are also intertwined, as the yellow-orange antelope is immersed into the abdomen of the red animal (Fig. 10.7). This integrated use of colour as a coupling device might suggest an intermingling of a relationship between animal figures in differentiation or symbiosis of some kind, such as, male/female, doe/calf, etc. Similarly, the intermingling of human and animal figures may highlight the paradoxical relationship between prey and predator, or the

sympathetic relationship between hunter and hunted. Anita Nettleton remarks on the common use of superimposition as suggestive of 'a relationship [...] set up between the two images' (Nettleton 1985, 51). Additionally, the transformative nature of the human-animal attributes of therianthropes, in indigenous cosmology, might be evoked here visually (cf. Skotnes 1996).

Further towards the right, in what I have called the central quadrant, as mentioned above the 'swift-people' cluster emerges from the panel as the clearest and darkest set of motifs (Figs. 10.2 & 10.6). Its figures are modelled in sinuous unbroken lines of a dark red hue. Intriguing abstract figures underneath this group, most visible in the enhanced photography of Kevin Crause (Fig. 10.8), are constructed in a muted yellow-orange, systematically ignored in interpretation and analysis, despite their linear, although hazier properties as substratum providing a foundational base or background.



Figure 10.7. *Indeterminate antelope depicted in integrated use of colour through 'coupling' device, 2016. Photograph M. Hayden.*



Figure 10.8. *Ezeljagdspoor site, the 'swift people' group, enhanced false colour, 2011. Photograph Kevin Crause.*

And finally, another design element unacknowledged in previous studies and further illustrating the linear use of colour is located at the bottom left and upper right of the 'swift people' group (Fig. 10.9). Here discrete figures in yellow appear to float together in an elliptical formation that echoes the configuration of the 'swift-people' group. The stylistic difference and faded appearance of these other clusters suggest their construction at a different period. This mirroring sequence may, therefore, be indicative of a re-engaged visual dialectic between different painting episodes, reinforcing the notion of cyclical time through a return to the original.

These examples of sharply defined forms retain a clear distinction between background and foreground, subject and placement. This was not necessarily a deliberate choice on the part of the artist, as the diffused character of some of the colour might be due to differential fading of the paint, while other aspects may have been created through a deliberate grading in the application of paint. However, I proceed with

my analysis of the panel on the basis of what is visible currently, on the assumption that at least some of these devices and effects were deliberate, or observed and used to inform subsequent acts of painting. The aesthetic vacillation between a predominately linear use of a red hue with the subtle painterly yellow pigment calls forth the tension between visibility and near invisibility or visual liminality. In this duality the figures either manifest themselves through an assiduity of line or they defy boundaries, and emanate in and out of clarity. This dynamic echoes Wölfflin's (1950 [1932], 156, 163) ideas on the differentiation of 'linear' and 'painterly' brushwork of the Classical and Baroque periods in Europe, one use of colour imposing 'limits', while the other is 'limitless'. The visual fading of colours back into the rock also resonates with the idea of the rock surface as a permeable veil (Lewis-Williams 1990) from which the paintings emerge, but into which the paintings also wane. Digital enhancement techniques like those practised by Kevin Crause have the potential to show elements that are not visible

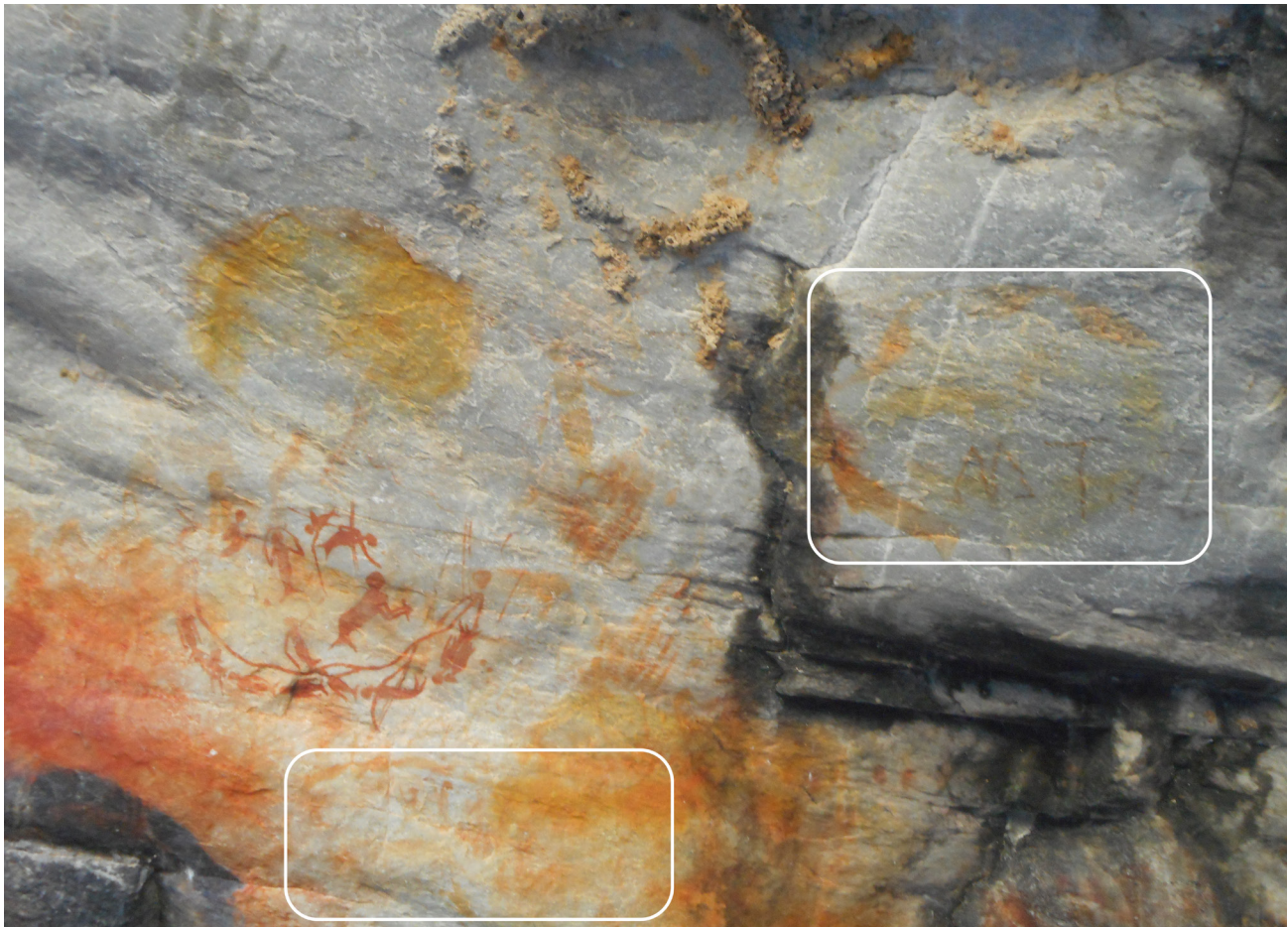


Figure 10.9. Replicated oval-like composition that is similar to the 'swift people' motif, 2016. Photograph M. Hayden.



Figure 10.10. *Figurative images superimposed on swaths of red or yellow colouring, 2016. Photograph M. Hayden.*

or recognizable to the naked eye, and therefore bring this register of hidden and liminal into the realm of what we can study (e.g. Hollmann & Crause 2011).

The function of colour through tonality is particularly evident in the left and central quadrant, and stands as a recurring aesthetic device unifying linear elements. Moreover, the display of tonality defines the picture plane and influences the figural positions within these planar spaces. For instance, in the left quadrant swaths of red or yellow-orange pigment act as a foregrounding counterpoint for the more linear figurative imagery (Fig. 10.10). These zones of colour are often diffused in intensity, calling forth a sense of the ephemeral and atmospheric, a state of the undefined.

This use of variable colour intensity is apparent in the central quadrant where the 'swift people' cluster is surrounded by diffused yellow pigment above and on the right and red pigment on the left (Fig. 10.6). The integration of these complementary colours has a unifying effect, while the varying intensity conveys depth. Embedded in the application of this paint is the circular and elliptical use of a pure colour source radiating shadowy counterparts that appear both as ethereal mist and indeterminate silhouette figures.

As mentioned above, the boundless ethereal effect of the colour modelling is suggestive of the ephemeral. The loss in clarity of line is precisely its agency, expressed by Wölfflin (1950 [1932], 157) as '[c]omposition, light and colour no longer merely serve to define form, but have their own life'. Distinctive orbs of red and yellow pigment form an integral part of the main 'swift people' arrangement and anchor the figures. The colour vibrancy conveys energetic resonance in pigment. The tonal use of colour here has the capacity to envelop or transmute light in various ways and create continuity and tension, and perhaps, even negotiate the relationship between motif and background.

Metaphoric implications of colour valence

In an attempt to explore the metaphoric dimensions regarding the colourful imagery at Ezeljagdspoor site, I employ Lewis-William's (1993, 277) position that 'the art does not "illustrate" the ethnography, nor does the ethnography "explain" the art in any direct sense. Both contain, in their own ways, metaphors that lay at the heart of Bushman belief'. Just as the figured spiritual metaphors contained in the archive can be explored in

relation to the figural content of the imagery, the use of colour as descriptor and metaphor in the archive can be used to investigate the use of coloured paint on the rocks. For example, there exists some correlation to didactic patterns of categorical designation and developmental stages (Bleek & Lloyd 1879, 6879–84 [stars]; 4071–4 [bees]; 8744–54 [locusts]). Archival references to the maturing stages of bees and locusts use colour terms, like, white (bees), red and black (locusts) to refer to primary, intermediate and adult stages of growth respectively. Furthermore, the sun and moon are associated with colour as a condition of age or culmination of time. Colour use in these instances may potentially allude to colour significance through implicit connotation by association and its adjectival affiliation. Colour metaphors discernible in the ethnography seem to find visual correspondence in the imagery, as gradient colours (red, orange and yellow) are regularly depicted with lighter hues as tonal foregrounding for darker more discrete forms. For instance, the linear use of colour both in abstract and figurative content at the site is predominately allocated in red, a colour frequently associated in the ethnography with processes of transformation and mature stages in the development of various entomological and atmospheric phenomena (Bleek & Lloyd 1879, 2517, 4074, 8753):

She threw up a scented root (eaten by some Bushmen) called !huin, which became stars; the red (or old) !huin making red stars, the white (or young) !huin making white stars. This root is, !kabbo says, eaten by baboons and also by the porcupine (Bleek & Lloyd 1911, 76) (BC_151_A2_1_034_2517).

Little bees when chewed are white like milk. They are still in their cells; these latter are red (BC_151_A2_1_052_4074).

... for the benne [locust with newly developed wings] is red like the earth. The grown up locust is black (BC_151_A2_1_106_8753).

The use of red therefore seems to reinforce the clarity and wholeness of form metaphorically as well as visually. In addition, the ways in which the interplay between the linear and tonal aspects of the imagery through vignettes in hues of red and yellow-orange allude to pictorial relationships, also seem to be reflected in the ethnography. In the opening passage, the Mantis and his son-in-law are emphasized and situated in relation to one another spatially as well as through their colour designation ('The rainbow. It is yellow, its place which lies above; a thing which looks red [...] while the

Mantis is the one who is also yellow; he is the one who lies above; while !kwammaŋ-a lies underneath'), perhaps also a metaphor for social hierarchy or behavioural proclivity. Dorothea Bleek (1929, 305) describes !kwammaŋ-a as 'quiet, and brave' and the Mantis as, 'talkative, nervous'. Furthermore, the Mantis is described in the ethnography as yellow and above his son-in-law, !kwammaŋ-a who is red and remains underneath. This adjectival mutuality exhibits a potential confluence of colour and meaning readable within a broader narrative context. Colour can then be understandable as one of several 'discursive, symbolic and ideological strands [that] converge to form a narrative' (Wessels 2010, 246). Therefore, colour isn't separable from its referent, forming one strand of a wider narrative and understandable only in a situated, relational manner.

These writings reveal pleas with the various astrological bodies to shift their positions, in a call to usher in a new phase or season. An example of this is a description regarding the breaking of the dawn (young) or new day referred to as white and the setting of sun (old, retired, or culmination of time) as red:

*!gabbuken
!game-ta !gabbuken
The Day- Break's great tani?
!goro- ta or goro-ttwai This last name refers to
the Bushwomen singing to the stars with their
throats, making it set
!loin-si-Tkunken The Sun illuminates it, mak-
ing it white. When the sun has set, it again
becomes red
(On Page 37/ January 1873 Venus).*

The relationship of young to old, implying a process of transformation, is frequently conceptualized as a shift from white to red.

Exploring the concept of actualization

Through this close analysis of the panel at Ezeljagds-poort, I have opened up an exploration of the function of colour in visual and metaphoric terms through the conceptual lens of actualization, which might reveal a pattern that could be seen to hold at other sites reflecting a potentially 'pan-San' (Solomon 2008, 61; cf. Lewis-Williams 1980; Barnard 1992; Guenther 1989) aesthetic. In other words, the concept of actualization, emerges as an overarching way of exploring the patterns of colour associations drawn out of the ethnography above. My use of the concept of 'actualization' was inspired by Wessels (2010), who explores the themes of 'non-European' representation by Jacques Derrida through the 'actualisation of the

potential facilities that slept inside man' (Derrida 1976, 257; Wessels 2010, 52). Although the context of this excerpt is related to the complex paradox of nature and culture in a teleological structure (Derrida 1976), for me it solidified a way of conceptualizing colour as a dormant, yet evocable, vehicle for meaning. Due to the often episodic rather than linear framework of indigenous oral traditions (Wessels 2010), it would not be a far stretch to imagine these aesthetic patterning devices being used in a visual context. With this in mind, repeated engagement with, including the physical renewal of, the imagery over time by a community (Jolly 1986; Lewis-Williams 1986; Lewis-Williams *et al.* 1993; Lewis-Williams & Challis 2011) would suggest a continued interaction with the visual cues through some aspect of an ongoing practice of actualization.

Actualization, or the essence of being, denotes liminal and potentially temporal stages within a visual vocabulary. I propose actualization as a concept to bring together seemingly disparate ideas collected across different authors, concerning the auspicious nature of paint preparation (How 1962); the duality of the therianthrope, never discussed in ethnography only manifest aesthetically (Skotnes 1996); the intercession of imagery by the shaman during trance (How 1970 [1962]) and the temporality/liminality of the three-tiered cosmos (Lewis-Williams 2002; 2010b). Colour plays a significant role in the manifestation of actualization. The findings of my analysis of the panoramic composition at Ezeljagdspoor immediately recall the agency (Gell 1992, 52) of the paint as a reservoir of potency explained by a woman of Bushman descent, as 'harnessed by the shaman during trance' (Lewis-Williams 1993, 287). In this respect, I see the 'harnessing' of colour use as a method of visualizing liminal states in this particular panel because colour, among other visual aspects of painted imagery, participates in bringing into a concrete expression a range of abstract ideas.

Indigenous southern African paintings have often been interpreted through a cosmological lens. An important aspect of this framework is the three-tiered ordering of the cosmos as spiritual, secular and intermediate or subterranean spiritual (Lewis-Williams 2002, 144–51; Hollmann 2005b, 30; Lewis-Williams 2010, 7&14).

The concept of actualization, albeit subtle and not always explicitly stated, has been a facet of reviewing temporal states of being (e.g. Pager 1971, 1975; Vinicombe 1976; Solomon 1997) and their relevance for the meaning of the imagery. Scholars have further noted that the visual, 'process and transition [are] as significant as [the] product' of creative work (Wintjes 2014, 693). Pippa Skotnes, who has done extensive work with the Bleek and Lloyd reference material,

asserts that transformation was a fundamental aspect of !Xam belief with occurrences related to the sympathetic relationship of hunter and prey, people of the Early Race, rain, women during menarche and the trickster god !kaggən (Skotnes 1996, 240). She understands therianthrope imagery as representative of a transitive state articulated visually rather than orally: 'The therianthrope or the zoomorph in the paintings is thus an indication of a change from one state or form to another, attributes of both being reflected in its morphology. Yet this liminal state, this process of becoming, is never witnessed in the ethnography' (Skotnes 1996, 243). Perhaps, the articulation of change is more accessible and poignant through a visual device than an aural or verbal one.

I propose that interpretations can be enriched through a consideration of colour. Rock art scholars continue to struggle with the unwanted but unavoidable imposition of an outsider perspective to an infinitely nuanced and yet complexly and fragmentarily accessible worldview of southern Africa's indigenous people. The 'swift people' panel provides an extraordinary opportunity to expand our understanding of the use of colour in southern African rock art.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to acknowledge my doctoral advisor, Dr Justine Wintjes for her insightful comments on preliminary drafts and my mentor, Dr Deborah Sanders for her consistent encouragement. Additionally, Hugo Leggatt graciously accompanied me to the Ezeljagdspoor site, and spurred fruitful discussions and friendship long after our initial visit. Kevin Crause provided the enhanced true colour imagery through his proprietary colour enhancement digital techniques, which allows in-depth analysis of colour variations and depictions. Finally, I extend my admiration and gratitude to the organizers of the 'Pasts and Presence of Art in South Africa: Technologies, Ontologies and Agents' conference, John Giblin, Rachel King and Chris Wingfield.

Notes

1. This paper forms part of the larger corpus of my doctoral research.
2. The choice of a single colour for this reproduction would have been determined by the available lithographic technology of the time. Multiple colour, or chromolithography, came later, and the illustration of rock paintings by Joseph Millerd Orpen was the first published instance of this technology in South Africa (Dubow 2006).
3. BC151 E5.1.1, 8-9.

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The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

In 2015, #RhodesMustFall generated the largest student protests in South Africa since the end of apartheid, subsequently inspiring protests and acts of decolonial iconoclasm across the globe. The performances that emerged in, through and around #RhodesMustFall make it clear how analytically fruitful Alfred Gell's notion that art is 'a system of social action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it' can be, even when attempting to account for South Africa's very recent history.

What light can this approach shed on the region's far longer history of artistic practices? Can we use any resulting insights to explore art's role in the very long history of human life in the land now called South Africa? Can we find a common way of talking about 'art' that makes sense across South Africa's long span of human history, whether considering engraved ochre, painted rock shelters or contemporary performance art?

This collection of essays has its origins in a conference with the same title, arranged to mark the opening of the British Museum's major temporary exhibition *South Africa: the art of a nation* in October 2016. The volume represents an important step in developing a framework for engaging with South Africa's artistic traditions that begins to transcend nineteenth-century frameworks associated with colonial power.

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*Published by the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research,
University of Cambridge, Downing Street, Cambridge, CB2 3ER, UK.*

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Cover design by Dora Kemp and Ben Plumridge.

ISBN: 978-1-913344-01-6

