



McDONALD INSTITUTE CONVERSATIONS

The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

Technologies, ontologies and agents

Edited by Chris Wingfield, John Giblin & Rachel King



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with contributions from

Ceri Ashley, Alexander Antonites, Michael Chazan, Per Ditlef Fredriksen,
Laura de Harde, M. Hayden, Rachel King, Nessa Leibhammer, Mark McGranaghan,
Same Mdluli, David Morris, Catherine Namono, Martin Porr, Johan van Schalkwyk,
Larissa Snow, Catherine Elliott Weinberg, Chris Wingfield & Justine Wintjes

Published by:

McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research
University of Cambridge
Downing Street
Cambridge, UK
CB2 3ER
(0)(1223) 339327
eaj31@cam.ac.uk
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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SAME MDLULI	

CONTRIBUTORS

CERI ASHLEY

Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas,
The British Museum, Great Russell Street,
London WC1B 3DG, UK
Department of Anthropology & Archaeology,
University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
Email: CAshley@britishmuseum.org

ALEXANDER ANTONITES

Department of Anthropology and Archaeology,
University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
Email: alexander.antonites@up.ac.za

MICHAEL CHAZAN

Department of Anthropology, University of
Toronto, 19 Ursula Franklin Street, Toronto, Ont.
M5S2S2, Canada
Email: mchazan@chass.utoronto.ca

CATHERINE ELLIOTT WEINBERG

Formerly Sainsbury Research Unit, University of
East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ, UK
Email: crelliottweinberg@gmail.com

PER DITLEF FREDRIKSEN

Department of Archaeology, Conservation and
History, University of Oslo, PO Box 1019, N-0315
Oslo, Norway
Email: p.d.fredriksen@iakh.uio.no

JOHN GIBLIN

Department of World Cultures, National Museums
Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh, EH1 1JF, UK
Email: j.giblin@nms.ac.uk

MARK McGRANAGHAN

Email: markmcgranaghan@gmail.com

LAURA DE HARDE

Wits School of Arts (WSOA), University of the
Witwatersrand, 1 Jan Smuts Avenue, Braamfontein
2000, South Africa
Email: laura.deharde@gmail.com

M. HAYDEN

History of Art, Wits School of Arts (WSOA),
University of the Witwatersrand, 1 Jan Smuts
Avenue, Braamfontein 2000, South Africa
Email: 838484@students.wits.ac.za

RACHEL KING

Institute of Archaeology, University College
London, 31–34 Gordon Square, London
WC1H 0PY, UK
Rock Art Research Institute, University of the
Witwatersrand, 1 Jan Smuts Avenue, Braamfontein
2000, South Africa
Email: tcnrki@ucl.ac.uk

NESSA LEIBHAMMER

Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative,
The John Berndt Thought Space, A C Jordan
Building, University of Cape Town, Private Bag X3,
Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Email: nmleibhammer@gmail.com

SAME MDLULI

Arts Research Africa, Wits School of Arts (WSOA),
University of the Witwatersrand, 1 Jan Smuts
Avenue, Braamfontein 2000, South Africa
Email: A0031677@wits.ac.za/samemdluli@gmail.com

DAVID MORRIS

Archaeology Department, McGregor Museum, and
Sol Plaatje University, P.O. Box 316, Kimberley 8300,
South Africa
Email: dmorriskby@gmail.com

CATHERINE NAMONO

School of Geography, Archaeology &
Environmental Studies, Faculty of Science,
University of the Witwatersrand, 1 Jan Smuts
Avenue, Braamfontein 2000, South Africa
Email: Catherine.Namono@wits.ac.za

MARTIN PORR

Archaeology/Centre for Rock Art Research +
Management, School of Social Sciences, University
of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley
6009, Australia
Email: martin.porr@uwa.edu.au

JOHAN VAN SCHALKWYK

Formerly Ditsong National Museum of Cultural
History, Pretoria, South Africa
Email: jvschalkwyk@mweb.co.za

LARISSA SNOW

Formerly University of Witwatersrand,
Email: larissasnow@hotmail.co.uk

CHRIS WINGFIELD

Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia,
Norwich, NR4 7TJ, UK
Email: Chris.Wingfield@uea.ac.uk

JUSTINE WINTJES

Wits School of Arts (WSOA) & Wits Institute for
Social and Economic Research (WISER), University
of the Witwatersrand, 1 Jan Smuts Avenue,
Braamfontein 2000, South Africa
KwaZulu-Natal Museum, 237 Jabu Ndlovu Street,
Pietermaritzburg 3200, South Africa
Email: jwintjes@nmsa.org.za

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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 9

Art, animals and animism: on the trail of the precolonial

Chris Wingfield

In the wake of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall campaigns in South African universities, and as calls to decolonize institutions and particularly curricula continue to be heard around the world, questions of how we can come to know precolonial forms of knowledge are becoming increasingly urgent (see Hamilton 2017). There is, however, an inherent danger that the precolonial comes to be treated as a blank screen onto which understandable fantasies, that attempt to invert the violent distortions of colonial forms of knowledge, come to be projected. As the colonial increasingly becomes the 'other' against which contemporary constructions of the 'self' are contrasted and defined, the precolonial acquires the allure of a romantic lost past with the potential to inspire both the present and the future. Arguably, however, at least in scholarly contexts, this makes it all the more important to question how we can know the precolonial past, and what potentials and affordances are offered by various forms of evidence. When it becomes necessary, as it inevitably does, to deploy the imagination in our reconstructions of the precolonial past (cf. Collingwood 1946), we need to be clear about the grounds on which we proceed. Many archaeological interpretations of material evidence from southern Africa's precolonial past have depended, to a very large degree, on colonial and apartheid era ethnographies. These were, themselves, very often exercises in the historical (or at least anthropological) imagination – attempts to imagine a tribal social system operating outside of the contexts of colonial encapsulation in which the ethnographer invariably encountered them. Frequently, the precolonial emerges from exercises of this kind as a residue – what is left when what can be directly attributed to conditions of colonial and indirect rule have been subtracted. But such exercises were invariably limited by the range of imagination that was possible within the ideological frameworks of colonial and apartheid contexts, and

in many cases that range is insufficient to respond to the increasingly urgent demands of the postcolonial present. How can we enable our understandings and imaginings of the precolonial to escape the structures and modes of thought that developed in the service of colonial and apartheid political projects, while at the same time ensuring that we proceed on a sound evidential basis, rather than falling into flights of fantasy of the kind that are an inherent danger in so many romantically inspired attempts to recover lost pasts?

In order to contextualize and concretize these introductory remarks I will discuss an image of a colour plate (Fig. 9.1), printed in 1822, and bound into the Rev. John Campbell's (1822a, opposite p.268) published account of his *Travels in South Africa Undertaken at the Request of the London Missionary Society*. An accompanying caption describes the image as the 'Interior of Sinosee's House, Kurreechane', and the image seems to depict, from within, a circular, or possibly oval, thatched structure with a number of vertical wooden columns that reach from the floor to the roof in front of a low exterior wall, which rises to the height of the thatch. At the centre of the image, and of the structure, is depicted what can only be described as a rectangular mantelpiece with two forward projecting pavement type structures and three vertical rectangular panels, decorated with large silhouette images of elephants and giraffes, and what could be an ostrich, painted onto a white background. Above these images is a reddish-brown vertical panel that extends across the whole width of the structure, and above that is a white-edged ledge upon which a number of what appear to be white vessels are standing. Emerging from behind the ledge, what looks like a round stupa-type structure rises to the roof, ringed by five white bands immediately below the thatch. As well as the paintings on the vertical panels of the central structure, the perimeter wall of the house is also decorated with a



Figure 9.1. 'Interior of Sinosee's house, Kurreechane', originally published in John Campbell's 1822 *Travels in South Africa*. Image courtesy New York Public library (<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-6d8f-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>).

repeating geometric motif, which cannot be seen in the black and white version that accompanies more recent editions of the book, but are clear in the original colour plate, as is a red or pink geometric border of repeating triangles around the top of the exterior wall. A male and female figure are shown conversing within this space, the man wearing a conical hat and cloak and gesticulating towards the woman who is shown seated on the forward projecting pavement structure, with what may be a tasselled apron around her waist. The place this image is supposed to depict is a long-abandoned settlement, now known as Kaditshwene, in the Northwest Province of what is now South Africa, though long before this area was encompassed within a colonial political order. The image was produced to accompany a description by John Campbell, one of the first Europeans to visit this place, of his journey as a representative of the London Missionary Society (LMS), scouting for new locations to which missionary activity could be expanded in the interior of the African continent. What is perhaps most remarkable is that this image depicts an interior domestic space

quite unlike those found in the region today, but also unlike those recorded by colonial era ethnographers. The image appears to document not only the use of figurative painting in a domestic interior, where twentieth-century house painting in the region was largely external and dominated by geometric designs, but also suggests that depictions of large mammals may have been central to this practice. Does this image provide us with a glimpse of the precolonial, of art and painting practices that have not survived the violent confrontations that unfolded in the region over the last two centuries?

If human relationships with animals are central to the operation of different ontological frameworks (Descola 2013 [2005]), and the forms taken by their representations provide an insight into the operation of alternative ontologies, as suggested by Descola in his 2010 exhibition *La Fabrique des Images*, can this image tell us about not only precolonial art making, but also precolonial modes of thought? Descola (2010) has suggested that beyond what 'images represent and depict, beyond their content, they display the

conventions according to which these prototypes are depicted. These conventions teach us a lot about the way in which humans conceive relations of continuity and discontinuity between themselves and other beings'. Can the manner in which these animals are depicted tell us about the ways in which the world, and perhaps particularly non-human animals, were understood and related to at the time these images were produced, but also some of the ways in which this has changed over the past two centuries? Descola (2013, 26) has elsewhere suggested that the apparent 'puzzling similarity of Africa to Europe' in relation to ontological forms described by ethnographers may 'be a product of the intellectual habits that characterize all specialist studies in cultural areas', but might it also be, at least partly, a consequence of a shared colonial history – a history in which the mass slaughter of large wild mammal species was integral to the establishment of subsequent economic formations? Might the precolonial past in southern Africa be understood as one in which relationships with animals were shaped as much by animistic, totemistic and analogistic ontological understandings, as they were by naturalistic ones? Before we leap too far into this flight of the historical imagination and anthropological speculation, let us return to the evidence before us. Can we really even

begin to say something fundamental about the way in which people in precolonial Kaditshwene understood and related to animals on the basis of a plate that was printed in London in 1822? How much is this image of a domestic interior, complete with its paintings of elephants and giraffes, simply a missionary fabrication or fantasy, intended to display the residents of Kaditshwene in the best possible light for potential supporters of the mission in England?

Disentangling the nexus

This plate can be understood in Alfred Gell's terms as an 'index', located at the centre of what he called an 'art nexus' (Gell 1998, 12). If one mode of engagement with art objects proceeds through the abduction of agency, as Gell has argued, whose agency can we actually 'abduct' from this particular index? Immediately beneath the image at the left and right corners are two smaller textual fragments 'Campbell del.' and 'Clark sculp.', Latin abbreviations that suggest the image was originally drawn by John Campbell himself, but the engraving was made by Clark (most likely John Heaviside Clark, author of *A Practical Essay on the Art of Colouring and Painting Landscapes* in 1807). Below the central caption is a further line of



Figure 9.2. Map showing the sites mentioned in this chapter.

text: 'London. Pub.d by F. Westley, Stationer's Court, 1822'. These short inscriptions evoke a series of mutually embedded *Gellian* Agent-Patient relationships. Let us consider the image in relation to Gell's 'Four Basic Terms' – Artist, Index, Prototype and Recipient. Starting with the Recipient, this is the reader of the book, who was presumably originally anticipated primarily as a nineteenth-century European and potential or actual supporter of the LMS (but now includes the twenty-first-century reader) and is therefore the primary patient upon which the plate, as index was intended to act. The plate, as index, would presumably have been printed by F. Wesley who might therefore be understood to act as the artist, agent in relation to the print itself, but acting on F. Westley was the engraving, as prototype for the printed image, and the artist in relation to that was Clark, the engraver. Clark himself was acted upon by a further prototype, the drawing by Campbell, who is the artist in relation to this. Nevertheless, behind Campbell lies a further prototype, Senosi's house itself, which as an index was patient to an unknown African artist. Finally, that artist represented the prototypical African mammals (for diagrammatic representation of this nexus see Fig. 9.3). To use this image to abduct the nature of the agency exerted on the artist by the original prototypes, the elephant and giraffes, or rather by the ontological category of 'elephant' or 'giraffe' in nineteenth-century Kadiitshwene, involves at least nine levels of abduction.

What this image encodes about the ontologies that shaped human relationships with animals in precolonial South Africa is highly mediated by many forms of re-presentation, but there is nevertheless a trace, and a trace that I would argue is worth pursuing, as long as the steps taken in its pursuit are acknowledged. Arguably, the prototypical human mode of abducting the agency of large mammals, at least in a southern African context, is tracking. Although tracks are mediated by the surface on which they appear, and may be overlain by subsequent activity, it can be possible to follow a trail, even when only a fragmentary residue remains, if enough is known about the animal being pursued and its patterns of behaviour. The tracker must use imagination to reconstruct the movements of the animal from the traces that remain, but that imagination is informed by prior experience following similar tracks in other contexts, as well as by detailed knowledge of the behaviour of particular animals. Some trackers, in following a trail, come to know the character of the individual animal they are pursuing, which can make it easier to predict their movements when no trace remains. Tracking, as a form of abduction, necessarily involves making some leaps of the imagination, but these leaps are not necessarily blind or uninformed. The more that they are informed by knowledge, experience and ultimately by the development of related skills, the more likely they are to lead to the prey. If the quarry we are pursuing in this example

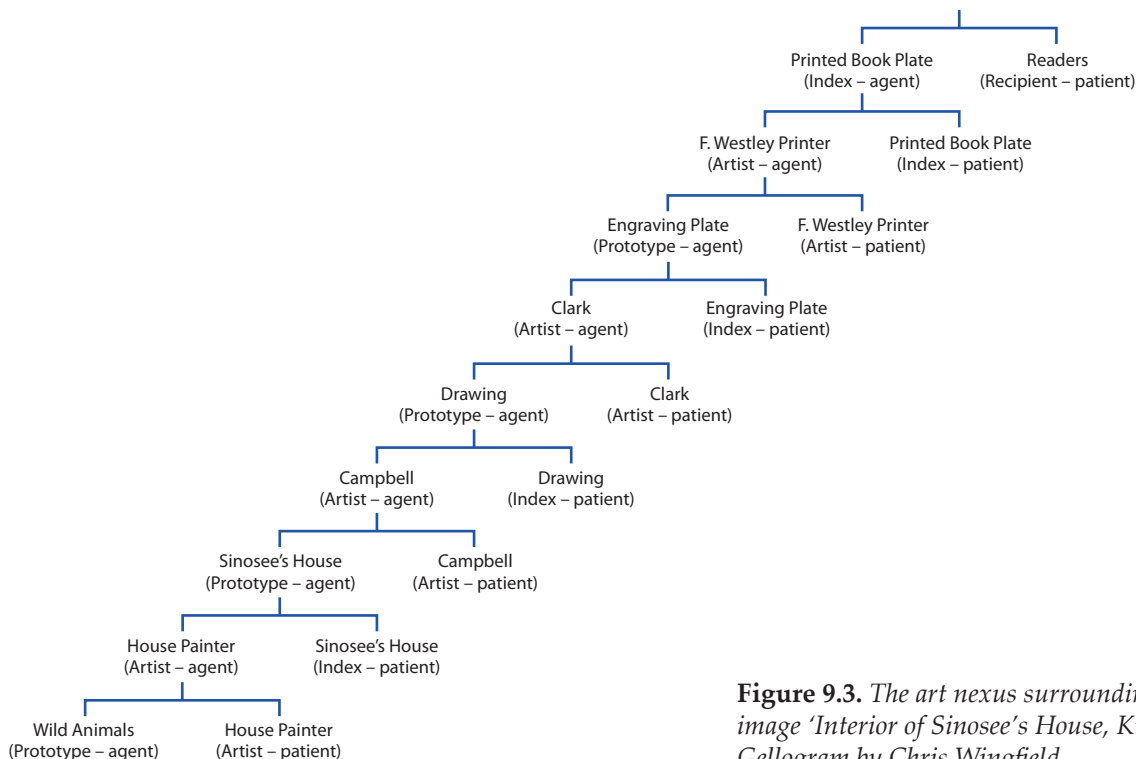


Figure 9.3. The art nexus surrounding the image 'Interior of Sinosee's House, Kurrreechane'. Gellogram by Chris Wingfield.

is the precolonial, and particularly precolonial modes of relating to and understanding wild animals, then the trace we find in this image represents the starting point for a trail that can be followed.

On Campbell's trail

Understanding the degree to which the content of the published image was shaped by its anticipated recipients, potential missionary supporters in 1820s Britain, involves following Campbell's trail – in the first instance to his published text. There, Campbell (1822a, 221) tells us that he arrived at Kurreechane [Kaditshwene], the capital of the Marootzee nation [Bahurutshe], at 4PM on Thursday 4 May 1820. It was both the furthest and the largest settlement he visited on his travels north from Cape Town, and he estimated its population to be between sixteen and twenty thousand people – as large as Cape Town at the time. After breakfast the following morning, Campbell was invited by a rain maker who had travelled with him from Lattakoo (Maruping, near present day Kuruman) to visit the place from which he came, over a mile from the centre of Kaditshwene. There Campbell visited the home of Senosi, which he describes as a neatly finished circular hut, the walls of which were plastered inside and out, including the inside of the roof. According to Campbell's published account:

The wall was painted yellow, and ornamented with figures of shields, elephants, camelopard's (giraffes), &c. It was also adorned with a neat cornice or border painted of a red colour...

In some houses there were figures, pillars, &c. carved or moulded in hard clay, and painted with different colours, that would not have disgraced European workmen. They are indeed an ingenious people. We saw among them various vessels, formed of clay, painted of different colours, and glazed, for holding water, milk, food and a kind of beer, made from corn. They had also pots of clay, of all sizes, and very strong. Every part of their houses and yards is kept very clean. They smelt both iron and copper (Campbell 1822a, 227–8).

As himself a resident of early nineteenth-century London, Campbell seems to have taken the industriousness, cleanliness and ingenuity of the people he encountered in Kaditshwene as an index of their civilization, but also of Kaditshwene's potential as a Christian city, suggesting later in his account that 'By the blessing of God it may prove a Jerusalem to the surrounding nations' (Campbell 1822a, 253). The art and

artistry exhibited in the manufacture and decoration of houses and pots, as well as in the production of metal goods, suggested that the residents of Kaditshwene shared certain values with his evangelical supporters back in Britain. Campbell's role as a missionary propagandist involved actively communicating a positive message about missionary activity in Africa to supporters and potential supporters of the LMS. Even at the time, others involved in the missionary enterprise, such as Robert Moffat, who accompanied Campbell on some of his journey, though not as far North as Kaditshwene, felt that Campbell's description of Kaditshwene may have been overly rhapsodic, suggesting in a private letter written in January 1821 that Campbell was 'building so many castles in the air about the Maharootze nation' (Moffat & Schapera 1951, 13).

Although he was sent to South Africa to adjudicate on a number of accusations of impropriety that had been made against LMS missionaries, including several of a sexual misconduct, these did not form a part of Campbell's published narrative. Instead, it focused on descriptions of his journey to places like Kaditshwene, beyond the colonial frontier. Having made a similar journey of inspection to South Africa for the LMS less than ten years earlier, of which he also published an account, Campbell's journey seems to have been undertaken in anticipation of potential recipients back in Britain, even whilst making his journey. As well as keeping a handwritten journal in which he recorded his encounters, he also kept a sketchbook, both of which thankfully survive at the National Library of South Africa in Cape Town. This makes it possible to compare the published to the unpublished text, but also to compare the original drawing to the published image, as way of considering the degree to which these indexes were shaped by the anticipation of their recipients in ways that made them less like their prototypes. Campbell's handwritten journal is similar to his published text, though a number of differences emerge:

Sinosees house is neatly finished – it is circular like all the others – not only the wall plastered outside and in, but the roof also, and the inside wall(s is struck through) painted yellow, with shields and various figures of elephants, camel leopards very well painted upon the whole round of the wall, and a wide cornish painted with(inserted above) red, immediately under the roof... In some houses, saw carved work in hard clay painted different colours, pillars &c that would not have disgraced European workmen. They are indeed an ingenious people. There

were various vessels for holding water, milk, victuals, a species of beer made from corn. The vessels were made from clay painted different colours, and glazed or burnished that might have been mistaken for Japanning – Every part of their houses and the yards around them are kept extremely clean. They are flat and smooth being used as threshing floors.

They smelt both iron and copper (National Library of South Africa, Special Collections, Campbell Travel Journal, MSB 77 2 (2), p. 19).

This makes it clear that it was the interior wall of the house that is described as painted in this way. The journal also makes it clear that the red painted cornice was immediately under the roof and suggests that it was the interior architectural features such as hard clay sculpture and pillars that ‘would not have disgraced European workmen’, and not simply the painting, as in the published version.

An early page in Campbell’s sketchbook is inscribed ‘To be copied for the engraver–’ and lists the relevant page numbers selected for the preparation of plates. Many of these relate to Campbell’s visit to

Kaditshwene, which he appears to have regarded as one of the most significant elements of his account. The image upon which the plate is based appears on p.114 of Campbell’s sketchbook, and is not wholly unlike the engraving produced by Clark for publication (Fig. 9.4). The main difference is that the human figures are absent. The pots and people in the image are similar to those that appear in other of Campbell’s sketches, but also to pots and conical hats that were deposited in the LMS museum, and therefore could potentially have been consulted by Clark when producing the engraving as something of a composite image. Nevertheless, the essential features of the interior were copied fairly faithfully – while Clark’s image shows the ledge sloping down towards the outside, Campbell’s drawing has this sloping down towards the centre, with the pots positioned slightly more centrally. The figure to the left of the central elephant looks rather more like the other two giraffes in Campbell’s sketch than in Clark’s engraving, and given that the text only refers to elephants and giraffes it seems sensible to conclude that this is what it was intended to be. What is much clearer in Campbell’s sketch is the red cornice around the top of the low wall, which takes the form



Figure 9.4. Original sketch by John Campbell showing the interior of Senosi’s house, alongside a sketch of his compound. Image courtesy and copyright Special Collections, National Library of South Africa Cape Town (ARP 9, p.114–15).



Figure 9.5. Original sketch by John Campbell showing the corn store of Mocketz, son of Senosi. Image courtesy and copyright Special Collections, National Library of South Africa Cape Town (ARP 9, p.107).

of a repeating series of red triangles, and below these a repeating pattern, which could be a geometric pattern, but approximately corresponds to a form taken by leather shields, documented in other images, so must be the shields to which Campbell refers in the text. In the sketch it appears as if the central wooden beam emerges from the centre of the stupa-like structure, which is not as clear in the plate, where the centre of the roof appears as a source of light. Is this what Campbell was referring to as a hard clay pillar that would not have disgraced European workmen? In addition, comparing the two images makes it clear that Clark has added two additional vertical pillars to the image in his version to frame the image, and the absence of these, together with the absence of the human figures which provide a scale for the plate, means that the interior space appears less expansive in the sketch than in the published image. Campbell's sketch also includes a handwritten caption, which reads:

Inside of one of Sinosee's houses containing his principal cornstore composed of a frame of timber covered with hard brown clay, smooth on the outside

On the opposite page of Campbell's sketchbook are sketches of two pots said to hold about one and a half gallon as well as a sketch of 'Sinosee's yard in front of his houses' (Fig. 9.4). This includes four houses around the edge on an enclosure where a number of people are engaged in threshing. Two of the houses have wooden pillars on the outside of their exterior walls, which would suggest that the image shows the interior of one of the smaller houses, quite possibly the one immediately behind the threshing area. The shape of the thatch has a raised rectangular section at the centre which is suggestive of a central pillar, as shown in the interior image.

It is unclear how many houses at Kaditshwene Campbell actually entered, but on another visit to Senosi's district three days later, on 7 May, he seems to have visited several (Campbell 1822a, 243–4). On p. 107 of Campbell's notebook, several pages before the image of Senosi's house, another image of a house interior (Fig. 9.5), captioned 'Vessels containing store of corn in Mocketz's house – of clay', shows several large ceramic vessels. Mocketz was Senosi's son, and the image appears to match a description given by Campbell in relation to his visit on 7 May:

I admired the cleanness and flatness of all their yards. The ground is first covered with soft wrought clay, and smoothed by rolling hard clay vessels over it. In most of them the women were employed in thrashing out the corn. Every family has a house for storing it up, containing rows of large clay vessels, neatly manufactured and capable of holding ten or twelve bushels each. They are arranged like casks in a cellar, are a little elevated from the ground, and many of them reach to the roof. For the sake of convenience, some of the vessels have a small door near the top, and another near the bottom for more easily filling or emptying them (Campbell 1822a, 244).

One of the vessels in the sketch appears to have been built around a central wooden pillar and the two largest vessels feature white panels at the front, which are presumably the doors described by Campbell, while the smaller vessel appears to have a lid. Above the image on the same page is sketched another image of the outside of a house with the caption 'House of Mocketz, Son of Senosee'. This house is shown with wooden pillars outside the external wall of the house,

and given that the image of the interior below does not show any pillars apart from that at the centre of the image, it is tempting to suggest that these images represent the interior and exterior of the same house. What is interesting about these images is that they suggest variations both in the form of housebuilding, and in the manner of storing corn, between the households of linear descendants in the same family. Indeed, the exterior image of Senosi's compound (Fig. 9.4) suggests that various different types of house were also constructed within the same household.

On p.119 of the sketchbook another interior image (Fig. 9.6) shows a very similar architectural feature to that which appears in the published plate, albeit with no suggestion of animal paintings. The central pillar has seven white bands around it, and only four vertical wooden pillars are shown, suggesting that this is a different house. Apart from the uniform colouring of the central structure, there is no suggestion that the interior was decorated, apart from a small + sign that appears on the right of the image in the space of the exterior wall, although what this was intended to signify is unclear. The central structure is much more globular in appearance, and would appear fit with a

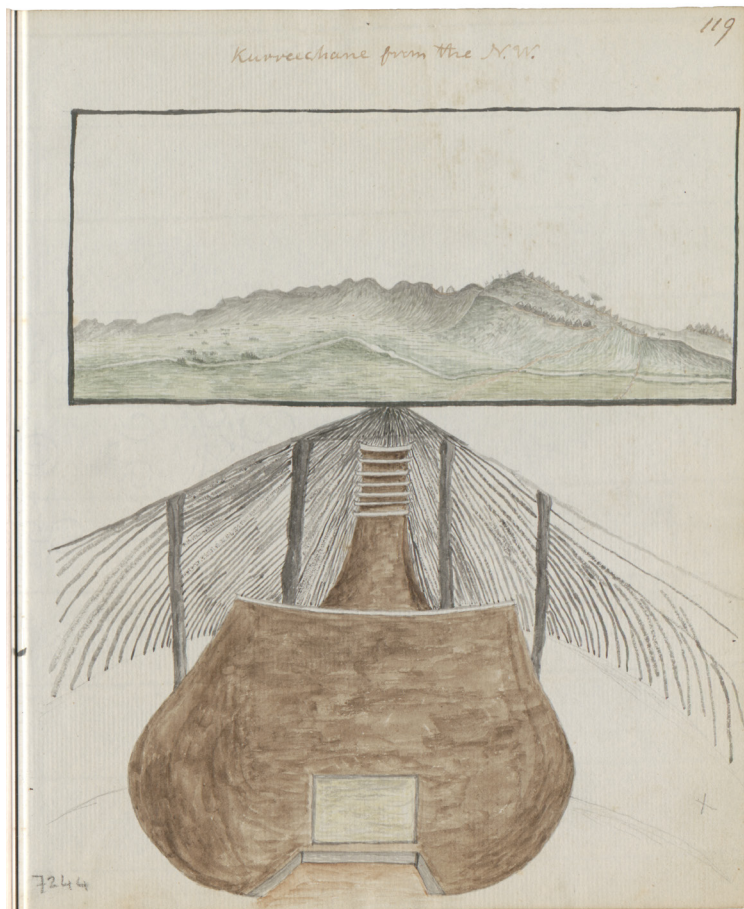


Figure 9.6. Original sketch by John Campbell showing the interior of another house at Kaditshwene. Image courtesy and copyright Special Collections, National Library of South Africa Cape Town (ARP 9, p.119).

description as a corn store, although it is very hard to understand how this globular shape relates to the rectilinear fireplace-type pavement in front of it. Above this is a lighter coloured rectilinear panel, reminiscent of the doors on the large corn storage vessels and not unlike that painted with the central elephant in the published plate. It is therefore possible that the central panel in the initial image, on which the large elephant and ambiguous giraffe are painted, may also represent a door or hatch through which the interior space was accessed. Of the three house interiors depicted at Kaditshwene by Campbell, only one includes the clear representation of figurative painting of large mammals, although a number of other architectural features were shared by the other two houses. What are we to make, then, of these images? Is it a singular example recorded by Campbell, or an example of a more widespread practice of painting?

Other travellers

John Campbell was not the only European traveller to visit precolonial Kaditshwene before it was sacked in April 1823, and the area subsequently occupied by Nkosi Mzilikazi's Ndebele in 1827. A Wesleyan Methodist missionary, Stephen Kay, retraced Campbell's steps to Kaditshwene in August 1821, just over a year later. At that time, the Bahurutshe, whose capital was at Kaditshwene, were at war with the Bakwena and Kay (1833, 226) suggested that as a result 'a gloom spiritlessness sat on every countenance'. Compared to settlements he visited further in the West, Kay (1833, 225) remarked on the greater variety of timber, which enabled people to manufacture 'different kinds of wooden utensils for household purposes'. Like Campbell, Kay (1833, 227) remarked on the cleanliness and taste of people's domestic habits, suggesting that houses were more 'substantial' and 'commodious' than those of isiXhosa speakers, with whom Kay was acquainted from his time in the eastern Cape. He then gave a description of a typical Batswana building, with a conical roof built 'on a circle of mimosa poles, forty to sixty feet in diameter, and about nine feet high' (Kay 1833, 227). Three or four feet within this, he suggests an inner ring of poles formed the basis of a wall, about seven-foot-high, creating a gap under the thatch for the flow of air and smoke. His description of the internal division of space, however, is interesting:

within this walled inclosure, an inner chamber is constructed of brush-wood, plastered with mud, round the central pole which supports the vortex of the roof, nearly a perfect parabolic conoid in shape, perhaps from four to six feet

diameter, and having a small entrance of from eighteen to twenty inches square, closed by a wicker gate. This is the hidden shrine of the Bootchuana Penates, the sanctum in which the more important domestic vessels and property of the inmates are preserved; and during the winter months it is employed as a sleeping apartment by the family (Kay 1833, 227–8).

It is clear from this description that Kay encountered houses at Kaditshwene that were constructed in the same way as those described by Campbell, and it is significant in connecting the inner chamber of the house with the Roman *penates* or household gods, suggesting that it was not simply corn that was stored there. However, Kay describes a more complicated structure behind this inner apartment:

At angles of about sixty degrees from the outer mud wall, and joining to the small parabolic conoid structure just described, two round walls are also raised... The open space at the back of the conical chamber thus detached from the dwelling-part of the house, is devoted to the storage of corn, which is preserved in large jars, similar in shape to those used for Portugal grapes, made of clay, and generally from five to seven feet high (Kay 1833, 227–9).

Kay includes a sketch plan with his account (much like that provided by Burchell, Fig. 9.7) which designates an area, open to the rear courtyard as the corn store. This makes it possible that Campbell's image represents the central apartment of the house, not from the front, inside the house, but rather from the back of the house, although the depiction of the roof and columns makes this unlikely. Kay (1833, 230) suggests that this structure was widespread, and may have been intended to 'withstand the fury of the tremendous electric storms with which this country is visited'. On the topic of decoration, he suggested that:

In the way of embellishment, however, each has his own taste to direct him; and the walls are usually decorated with pictorial and moulded representations of the native animals and human inhabitants, in a style that shows the germ of genius lies unexpanded for want of a proper stimulus to bring it into active and useful exertion.

In the course of our tour, we met with the wife of the young Chief who detained me at Mashow, and whom I now found to be the 'heir apparent'. She led me into the interior of her dwelling, which was remarkably neat. The

floor was particularly clean, and in the verandah mats were spread for us to sit upon. On the walls without, were painted a number of fantastical figures, representing animals of different kinds (Kay 1833, 230).

As well as supporting Campbell's description and images, Kay's account parallels that given by an earlier traveller to the region, William Burchell, who did not get as far as Kaditshwene, but did describe

the domestic architecture at Dithakong, a Batlhaping settlement further West, which he visited in July 1812. Burchell also described an inner apartment, which he depicted in a plan that was published in his account of 1824 (Fig. 9.7). He suggested that this was used as a place to sleep in winter, but also as 'the bed-room for the parents' (Burchell 1824, 365) and that the internal structure and arrangement of the houses he saw varied 'according to the wants or inclinations of its owner' (Burchell 1824, 364). At Dithakong:

This inner or central apartment is frequently built in the shape of a cone, or of a half-ellipsis, the point of which reaches up to the height of the roof, which it serves to support and strengthen. In other instances, as in the Plate, its form is cylindrical; and this appeared to be an improved construction (Burchell 1824, 395).

Although Burchell does not mention encountering any form of internal decoration, other than plastering with prepared clay, his description does confirm that what is depicted in Campbell's drawing is most likely the central apartment of Senosi's house. The top section at least, appears to have a conical form, and being used to store grain certainly does not prevent this functioning as a location of ritual or ceremonial significance. The allusion Kay makes to the Roman *penates* makes this clear through comparison, and the association between clay vessels and ancestors, through the brewing of beer, is a common feature of southern African ancestor veneration practices. The notion of this inner space as a *sanctum* is significant, as is the description of this place as the 'bedroom for the parents', which suggests that it may be regarded as a significant locus of both generative and ancestral power. Indeed, Jean Comaroff (1985, 56) has suggested that the female body served as a metaphoric referent for the Tswana house as a whole, with the same linguistic terms used to refer to the conjugal house and the uterine interior of the body. The homestead was, she suggests 'the site of delicate transformative processes associated with procreation and nurture' (Comaroff 1985, 56), and she represents this in diagrammatic terms as the meeting place at the centre of 'Male and Female Space-Time', associated respectively with the male chiefly court and the fields, where women spent their time engaged in cultivation. However, if the wild was associated primarily with the far peripheries of social space, as suggested by Comaroff (1985, 70), what does it mean for wild animals to have been indexed so explicitly at the literal and metaphorical centre of domestic space – the inner sanctum of the house, where connections were made between present, past and future generations?



Figure 9.7. 'Section & plan of a Bachapin house', originally published as plate 9 in William Burchell's 1824 *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* (Volume 2, facing p. 515). According to Burchell 'Plate 9 is a plan, with a geometrical elevation, or rather section, of a Bachapin dwelling. In order to show its structure, it is here represented as cut through the middle, in a direction from the great corn-jar to the side of the door-way in the outer fence. In the ground-plan, A is the veranda; B, the outer room; C, the inner, or central room; D, the storeroom; E, the corn-house; F, F, corn-jars; G, the servants' house; H, the fireplace; and I, the outer fence.'

BaHurutshe art

If the intended purpose of Campbell's sketch was to become a prototype for Clark's engraving, what was the intended function of the paintings Campbell saw in Senosi's house? They undoubtedly had an impact on Campbell, who compared them favourably to the work of European craftsmen and was prompted to sketch his own version of the scene, and Kay seems to have abducted the 'germ of genius' from the paintings and decorations he encountered, but it is clear that these two missionary travellers were not the anticipated or intended recipients of the paintings. Contemporary residents of Kaditshwene would surely have abducted some other form of agency when encountering images of this kind. It may be that the particular location and identity of the house depicted by Campbell can offer some clues in relation to the significance of these paintings. Jan Boeyens' (2016) has recently suggested that what Campbell described as Senosi's district was in fact the parallel settlement of Tswenyane, of which Senosi was head of the most senior family. He has argued that the establishment of a settlement at nearby Kaditshwene by the BaHurutshe booMenwe was a defensive measure that brought them back together with the BaHurutshe booMogatlha at Tswenyane, a branch that had separated around a hundred years previously. Boeyens suggests, on the basis of oral histories recorded by Breutz, that the BaHurutshe booMogatlha were in fact the custodians of an extremely powerful place, in some renderings the location of origin for the BaHurutshe, where a spring, waterfall and pool formed a sacred place 'intimately connected with the demigod Thobega and the rainmaking beliefs and rituals of the Hurutshe' (Boeyens 2016, 12). According to Schapera, such demigods were associated with caves and engraved footprints on rocky outcrops (Schapera & Comaroff 1991, 53). Thobega was a one-legged weather deity associated with the symbolic colours black and white. In addition, Tswenyane was the location of the mythological water snake *kgogela*. It is surely significant that it was a rainmaker, returning from service for the Batlhaping at Maruping, who was Campbell's guide to Tswenyane.

Boeyens has linked the custodianship of Tswenyane to the practice of acknowledging special relationships that existed between original inhabitants and the land, and their power, through mediation with spirits and ancestors, to ensure adequate rain, even when subjugated by or incorporated into larger political entities (Whitelaw 2015, 125–6). Should we therefore understand the paintings in Senosi's house as indexing, not simply the large mammals that could still be encountered in the surrounding landscape,

but also an earlier form of representation, rock art, associated with caves and the original inhabitants of the land? Is the prototype for the interior of Senosi's house a painted cave, and should the paintings be understood as a form of rock art that mark the inner chamber as a place of significant power? How significant is it then that Campbell appears to have been taken directly to this place by the rainmaker? Prins & Hall (1994) have suggested that the depictions found in 'late white' rock art of Bantu-speaking agriculturalists embody 'conceptual associations linking them to fertility' but also with earlier hunter-gatherer inhabitants. Should we understand the paintings apparently witnessed by Campbell in Senosi's house as a domestic equivalent to the 'late white' paintings found in caves in other parts of South Africa? The shields recorded by Campbell are possibly significant here, since they also feature in later-period rock paintings of the region. Is it significant that Campbell appears to show the animals painted in black, on a white background, since black and white can be associated with thunder clouds and the coming of rain? Is it possible that the animals, and particularly the elephant as a migratory animal, index the arrival of rain? Or are there other associations held by these particular animals that are indexed by the placement of their images in this specific location?

Conclusion: art and animals on South Africa's northern frontier

The paintings in Senosi's house are not the only indigenous representations of animals documented by early European travellers to the region. Indeed, Kay (1833, 231) described the manufacture of knives at Kaditshwene, with handles 'generally made of ivory, and sometimes carved in a superior manner; bearing the figures of different animals, large and small, from the elephant to the jackal.' A number of images of such knives were made by early European travellers to the region, including one by Robert Gordon, who travelled North from the Cape in the 1770s (Gordon 1777). This shows a bird on the handle, with a lizard on the upper scabbard and giraffe at its base (Fig. 9.8). William Burchell (1824, 575) also published three images of Batlhaping knives, for which he gave the term *tīpa*, and one of these had an animal carved into the ivory handle, as well as possibly what may be further animals on the sheath. A number of carved ivory handled knives with early nineteenth-century provenances exist in several museum collections. One of these, with a zebra on the handle, was presented by Robert Moffat to the South Africa Museum in Cape Town (S.A.M. 330b), and has a historic label associated



Figure 9.8. A Tswana or kora knife with its sheath. Drawn by Robert Gordon between October 1777 and March 1786. Image courtesy Rijks Museum (<http://hdl.handle.net/10934/rm0001.collect.435015>).

with it, suggesting it was presented to Moffat by Kgosi Sechele of the Bakwena.

As well as carved knife handles, early European travellers also remarked on the carved handles of spoons. In Moffat's (1842, 509) *Missionary Labours and Scenes*, he includes a plate showing two wooden spoons, one of which has a handle topped with a carved giraffe and the other of a carved animal that looks suspiciously like a pig. They are captioned simply 'Wooden Spoons manufactured by the Bechuanas', and may have formed part of a larger set of seven spoons deposited by Moffat at the LMS museum, the handles of which were described as 'ornamented with carvings of the giraffe, elephant, buffalo, bird, human head, &c.' (LMS 1860, 36). A spoon (1910.62.32) carved with the figure of an ostrich was acquired by the Pitt Rivers Museum from the LMS museum in 1910 (1910.62.43). This shows the localized use of burning

to create decorative patterns on the bowl of the spoon, but also to create the colouring of a male ostrich. The early nineteenth-century traveller Lichtenstein (1812, plate opposite p. 322) was also struck by the carved spoons and their burnt patterns (Fig. 9.9), suggesting that they 'are remarkable as the first essays of an uncivilized nation on the art of sculpture'.

Whereas for European observers, the naturalistic form taken by these representations, whether as wall paintings, knife or spoon handles, often seems to have indexed potential in relation to art and sculpture, it seems that there was a fairly restricted range of forms taken, most of which related to large wild animals. I would argue that these forms of art were definitely produced for local consumption and predate the development of tourist art, such as is produced in the region today, in which associations between Africa and large mammals have been secured through a significant safari industry. What does it mean, then, for giraffes, elephants, buffaloes and other large animals to be depicted in these types of material culture, before such depictions became established conventions in re-presentations of Africa to the rest of the world?

The Comaroffs have argued for the centrality of cattle in Batswana social relationships, as commodities that were both economically valuable and symbolically significant (Comaroff & Comaroff 1990). Given this, it is perhaps surprising that cattle are not included in the representations from Senosi's house, or in the carvings

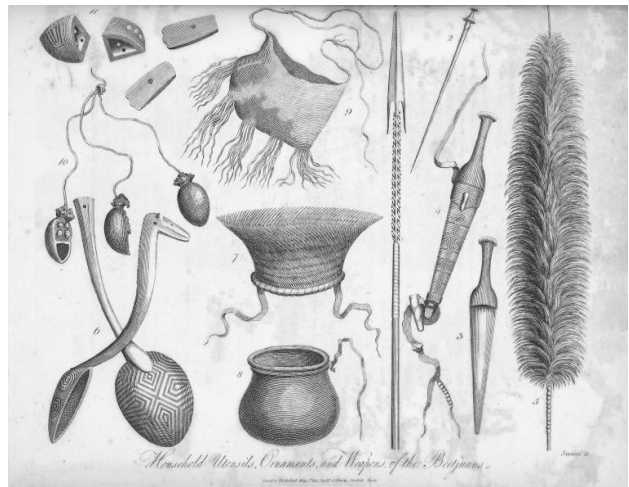


Figure 9.9. 'Household utensils, ornaments, and weapons of the Beetjuans', originally published in Hinrich Lichtenstein's 1812 - 1815 *Travels in southern Africa in the Years 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806*. Image courtesy New York Public Library (<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-73ad-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>).



Figure 9.10. Original sketch by John Campbell showing the regent Diutlwileng and Moilwa the second, son of late Kgosi Sebogodi, addressing the kgotla at Kaditshwene. Note Diutlwileng's porcupine crown, as well as the leopard skin cloaks with genet tails. Moilwa is also carrying an ox hide shield. Image courtesy and copyright Special Collections, National Library of South Africa Cape Town (ARP 9, p.122).

on the handles of knives or spoons. Indeed, there is little suggestion of a 'bovine' aesthetic, of the type identified by Jeremy Coote (1992) among Nilotic cattle keepers such as the Nuer and Dinka. The forms of ceremonial dress sketched by Campbell at Kaditshwene (Campbell 1822a, see plates opposite p. 260 & p. 264) incorporate porcupine quill headdresses, leopard skin and genet tail cloaks as prominently as an ox-hide shield (Fig. 9.10). Animal skins were, it seems, an important part of economic transactions for precolonial Tswana as was the contribution to the diet provided by hunted meat. Indeed, Burchell argued that:

The great and powerful cause which will long operate to check the extension of the cultivation of grain, is the abundance of wild animals to be met with in all parts of the country; and until these shall be reduced in number or driven out of the land, it is hardly to be expected that the natives will turn to settled agricultural pursuits (Burchell 1824, 369).

Campbell recorded a conversation that took place during his return journey from Kaditshwene with his guides, 'Pelangye', 'Munameets' and 'Maketzee'. They asked:

if the King of England kept cattle, and if there was much game in England, and plenty of

rhinoceroses, elephants, cameleopards, quachas (quaggas), knoos (wildebeest), &c. They were surprised to hear there were none of these, and that the only animals hunted were hares and foxes. It must have appeared inconceivable to them, how the inhabitants could subsist in such a land, for huge animals, in their estimation, form the glory of a country (Campbell 1822a, 284).

Jan Boeyens (2014) has demonstrated the ways in which the rhinoceros provided a significant resource for thinking about the operation of leadership in precolonial times. However, the rhino was not alone in providing cognitive resources that enabled people to think about relationships between humans. The incorporation of zebras as shield bearers into the coat of arms of the modern nation-state of Botswana, alongside an elephant tusk, is reminiscent of Sechele's gift to Moffat of a knife with a zebra carved on the handle, but also speaks to the way in which animals continue to play a significant role as markers of identity in the region. For Setswana speakers, animals are also used to stand for particular forms of common identity – the Batlhaping are the people of the Fish, the Bakwena the people of the crocodile – but beyond that, different groups are identified with specific totemic animals. Although Tswana totemism did not necessarily fulfil what early twentieth ethnographers expected of totemism (Willoughby 1905), and was



Figure 9.11. *Staircase of the old British Museum, Montague House, 1845, drawn by George Scharf (BM 1862,0614.629). Two of the giraffes shown, as well as the rhinoceros were presented by William Burchell. Image copyright Trustees of the British Museum (Image AN384492001).*

overshadowed by the significance of cattle in many ceremonies, it certainly fulfilled Levi-Strauss' (1963 [1962]) understanding of totemism as the deployment of the variation between animal species as an analogue for the differences between groups of people. Indeed, the animals involved were not arbitrary and it is tempting to link the original totem of the Bahrutshu, the eland, to the significance of this animal for autochthonous hunter-gatherer groups, while their later adoption of the baboon may have been related to the place name, Kaditshwene. Whereas elements of totemism and animism were very likely at play in precolonial relationships between Setswana-speaking

groups and indigenous first peoples, it seems that a new regime of relationships with animals was heralded by the arrival of expeditions such as Campbell's, on the missionary road. Hunting to provision these expeditions was largely undertaken by Khoe guides on horseback such as Cupido Kakkerlak and Stoffel Speelman, armed with rifles, and the meat of animals shot by them was regarded as the common property of all members of the caravan – attempts by individuals to hoard meat were criticized. Although Campbell managed to secure some specimens of local animals for display at the LMS museum, the impression given by his journal is that by the time he got to them many

had already been stripped of meat (Wingfield 2015). Burchell, who travelled in a similar manner, was somewhat prophetic in asserting that:

The introduction of fire-arms among them would ultimately operate to the promotion of tillage, notwithstanding that their first effects might occasion the neglect of it. By hunting, this people would at first obtain food in a manner so much more agreeable than by agriculture, that grain would probably become but a secondary resource; but the evil would remedy itself, and the more eagerly they pursued the chase, and the more numerous were the guns and the hunters, the sooner would the game be destroyed or driven out of the country (Burchell 1824, 369).

It is undoubtedly the case that cattle were extremely important in precolonial South Africa, and were subject to regular raiding during the period in question (King 2017). However, this importance increased during the nineteenth century as hunting with rifles and horses depleted populations of large mammals, and with them the availability of both ivory and rhino horn. Major social and economic disruptions, including the sack of Kaditshwene and other major settlements, severely impacted on the production of other exchange goods, such as metal knives, while the arrival of industrially produced goods, and subsequently colonial rule meant that some major forms of artistic production never recovered.

It is ironic that the expeditions that supplied museums in Europe with the remains of large mammals from southern Africa – giraffes were sent by Burchell to the British Museum and by Campbell to the LMS museum – themselves heralded the beginning of a period that saw the large-scale destruction of many of these species, and a decline in the forms of potency associated with these animals, both literal and metaphorical. Nevertheless, it is tempting to speculate whether we can read contemporary images of interior spaces in London, such as those in the British Museum (Fig. 9.11) and the LMS museum, not simply as indexes of a European fascination with newly encountered species, but also as an index of a contemporary preoccupation with these same animals, felt by precolonial South Africans. Just as the despatch of Polynesian ‘idols’ to the LMS museum can be read as an extension of continuity with pre-existing Polynesian practices of religious transformation, can we understand the predominance of large mammals from Africa in the collections of returning travellers as an indication of pre-existing African attitudes and practices? In an account not included in the published version of his

journal, John Campbell recorded an incident when James Read presented him with ‘a very curious animal for the museum nearly the shape of a fish’, apparently a pangolin. ‘Munameets’ and ‘Seretz’, who had travelled with Campbell to Kaditshwene, were able to supply him with quite a bit of additional information about its habits and the ways in which it could be hunted (National Library of South Africa, Special Collections, Campbell Travel Journal, MSB 77 2 (2), 114). Although South Africa’s northern frontier can be understood as a zone of cultural and religious dialectic (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, 1997), it must also be regarded as a zone of ecological transformation (Jacobs 2003), where relationships between humans and animals were fundamentally reshaped following the arrival of guns, horses and wagons. The apparent disappearance of figurative depictions of large mammals from the art produced in the region in the two hundred years since Campbell’s journey, is therefore perhaps best understood in relation to the disappearance of large animals themselves from the surrounding landscape.

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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.

Editors:

Chris Wingfield is Associate Professor in the Arts of Africa at the Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the University of East Anglia, having previously been a Curator at the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology at the University of Cambridge.

John Giblin is Keeper for the Department of World Cultures at National Museums Scotland, having previously been Head of Africa Section at the British Museum where he was lead curator of the 2016 exhibition *South Africa: the art of a nation*.

Rachel King is Lecturer in Cultural Heritage Studies at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, having previously been Smuts Research Fellow at the Centre of African Studies at the University of Cambridge.

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

The McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research exists to further research by Cambridge archaeologists and their collaborators into all aspects of the human past, across time and space. It supports archaeological fieldwork, archaeological science, material culture studies, and archaeological theory in an interdisciplinary framework. The Institute is committed to supporting new perspectives and ground-breaking research in archaeology and publishes peer-reviewed books of the highest quality across a range of subjects in the form of fieldwork monographs and thematic edited volumes.

Cover design by Dora Kemp and Ben Plumridge.

ISBN: 978-1-913344-01-6

