



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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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

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Chris Wingfield
John Giblin
Rachel King

Chapter 3

Poisoned, potent, painted: arrows as indexes of personhood

Larissa Snow

Socially, politically and economically, San arrows have greater import than any other single San artifact (Wiessner 1983, 261).

Twentieth-century ethnographies from the Kalahari region describe poison arrows as being made of three main components: a shaft made from a heat-straightened and knocked reed, a link-shaft made of wood or bone and the arrow point itself (see Wiessner 1983; Deacon 1992; Wadley *et al.* 2015). Sinew and plant-based bindings were used along with adhesives to secure these components. The introduction of fencing wire during the colonial period provided a highly malleable material that proved easy to heat, beat and sharpen into thin metal points, meaning that most arrow points observed by twentieth-century ethnographers were made from metal. Archaeological evidence from elsewhere in southern Africa, has demonstrated that arrow points were made from bone or stone during earlier periods.

These arrows are slight, insubstantial things and function not by causing heavy internal trauma to the victim, but by introducing poison into the blood stream. The link-shaft is designed to break away from the main shaft so the arrowhead, with poison applied to the tip, cannot easily be removed. There are various active ingredients used to make poison, such as juice from the bulb of the *Boophane disticha* plant, or the innards of Chrysomelid grubs (Bradfield *et al.* 2015; Wadley *et al.* 2015). Arrow production involves bringing together otherwise innocuous materials to create something ephemeral and yet extremely potent that anticipates and enables engagements with other species, and can therefore be understood as artworks in their own right, to extend Alfred Gell's (1996) argument for 'traps as artworks and artworks as traps'.

However, arrows also feature prominently in the rock art produced in the Maloti-Drakensberg region of South Africa, frequently featuring alongside

depictions of prey animals. Early interpretations of such images, where humans are depicted gesturing towards and interacting with game in non-real ways, regarded these as a functional form of 'sympathetic' or 'hunting magic' intended to increase the chance of a successful hunt (Thackeray 1983, 1986). However, this argument has largely been superseded by shamanistic interpretations, which have dominated the disciplinary field of rock art research in southern Africa for the last thirty years (Lewis-Williams 1981). However, the recent ontological turn in Anthropology has brought a renewed interest in relationships between game animals and ritual specialists, and the 'suite' of proper social behaviours intended to maintain desirable relationships between human and non-human persons (McGranaghan & Challis 2016). Most recently, Mark McGranaghan and Sam Challis (2016) have explored in great detail how proper 'nice' behaviour towards game animals, the use of plant charms and rock art itself, were all employed in South Africa to 'tame' wild game. To their very comprehensive study, this paper proposes adding arrows as a further technological means of enchanting game.

Engaging anthropology's material and ontological turns

Recent material and ontological turns in anthropology have set about demonstrating that non-human entities can possess agency, with some theorists even suggesting that biology is no longer a prerequisite for life (Bennet 2010). Radical theoretical positions aside, material objects, it has been argued, act as 'indexes' of agency, embedded in a social-relational nexus (Gell 1998). It is tempting to overlook more mundane objects in favour of artworks that appear more sublime and readily exalted. For instance, South Africa's parietal art is a greater focus for scholarly attention than

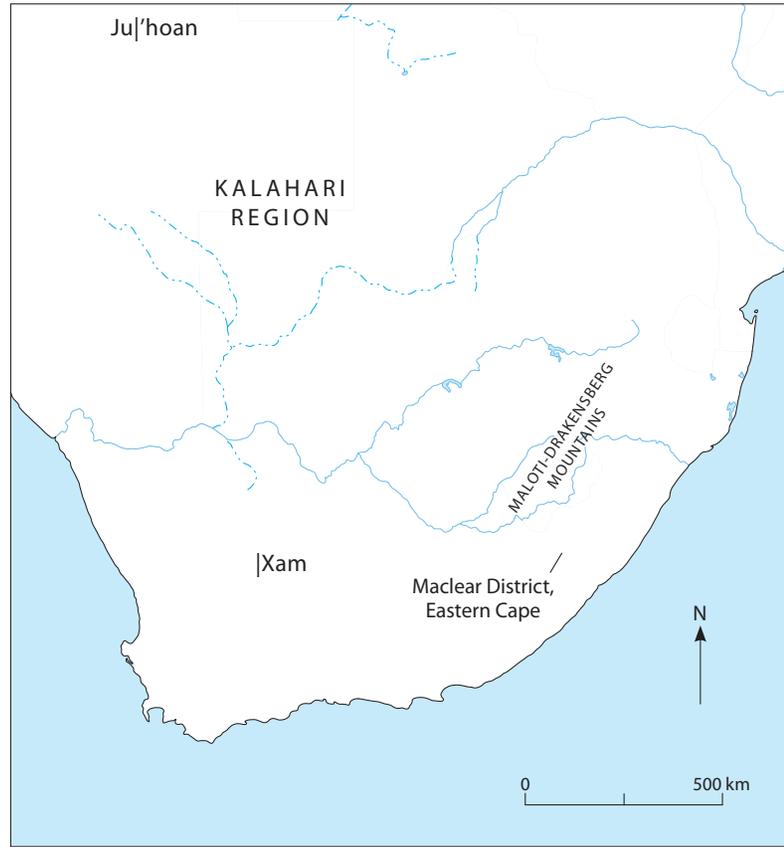


Figure 3.1. Map showing the regions mentioned in this chapter.

everyday artefacts, typically classified as tools. Yet the technological choices involved in the making of everyday objects are not determined solely by physical practicality, but also according to what is considered socially meaningful, objectifying wider practices and relationships (Lemonnier 1993). Thus, everyday tools such as arrows are as entangled in the social realm as other art forms, their utility inseparable from the ontologies associated with their production.

The ontological turn, now a widespread feature of recent theory within the humanities and social sciences, began as a backlash against the persistence of Western dualistic frameworks within anthropological analysis, particularly with regard to the agency of entities associated with the natural or material world. Philippe Descola, who is largely responsible for bringing ontology to the mainstream with his seminal book *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013), noted that the nature-culture dichotomy was an inadequate or misleading tool to account for the ways in which his informants were talking about, and interacting with, their physical environment (Descola 1996, 82; 2013). Indeed, the different ways in which people categorize humans and non-humans challenges the idea of a 'natural species' altogether, undermining the assumption that 'nature' is a transcultural and transhistoric domain

of reality (Descola 1996, 83). Diverse ethnographies have underscored that in many parts of the world the environment is not excluded from wider principles and values governing social life (Descola 2013, 14). Humans often enter into social relations and arrange formal alliances with so-called 'natural' beings like plants and animals, which are considered to have personhood, agency and cultures of their own.

While the current proliferation of ontological studies may be regarded as simply a product of the latest theoretical trend, its basis in the understandings and perspectives expressed by anthropological informants sets it apart from other theoretical paradigms. It is not so much a theoretical approach as a way to take seriously the perspectives and lived experiences of people whose lives are closely entangled with non-human entities.

Consequently, we must be open to worlds that are full of persons, only some of which are human (Sahlins 2014, 281). Descola takes pains to emphasize that personhood is not denoted by matter or form, nor is it a fixed state of being, but rather is processual and relational:

The distinction between nature and society, human and non-human is determined not by

substance or representation, but by institutionalised expressions of relations between entities whose ontological status and degree of agency vary according to the positions they occupy vis-à-vis each other (Descola 2009, 150, my emphasis).

This is the core tenet of ontological thinking. It is not so much concerned with problematizing the intentionality of non-human entities, it is enough that this is assumed in communities the world over, as it is interested in unpicking the very real social relations that form between human and non-human persons in the course of their lives. Not only can non-humans be agents, they also have the potential to be valid and productive social partners, and therefore must be approached with appropriately social modes of mediation and behaviour (Descola 2009, 149), hence the term 'relational ontologies'.

Thinking in terms of relations expands anthropological and archaeological investigations into overlooked realms of social action. The relationships people form with other entities is as crucial to the construction and maintenance of culture and society as those formed between humans. To overlook these relations or to classify them simply as symbolic is to deny important aspects of peoples' lived experience and their understandings of reality. What relational ontologies propose is that we expand the social arena to accommodate new types of persons and social interactions wherever necessary, according to the ontologies of those whose worlds we hope to understand. Non-human persons not only include things more readily conceived of as living, such as biological organisms like animals or previously corporeal spirits, but also things often considered inert and purely material: objects. Indeed, relational networks rarely consist of direct connections between humans and other humans without things actively mediating relations between them (Latour 2005).

Material culture theorists have likewise recognized and argued for the agency and efficacy of material things in their relationships with people. These systems of relation have been described variously as networks (Latour 2005), meshworks (Ingold 2006), and art-nexuses (Gell 1998), but all share in mapping the connections between humans and non-human beings, objects included. Both ontological and material approaches are concerned with blurring distinctions between categories like nature and culture; subject and object; human, non-human and thing. They tend to employ similar terminologies and are careful to stress the primacy of lived experience over semiotics in their interpretations. It can be difficult accounting

for an object's agency because carrying their effects while being silent is what they are good at, but this should not be taken as an indication of their dormancy (Latour 2005, 79; Miller 2005).

Although anthropologists engaged in the ontological turn have come to recognize the subjectivity of non-human beings through the insights of their informants, material culture theorists often problematize the agency of things not only using ethnography, but also by engaging with objects themselves, their physical components and construction i.e. their materiality. This is precisely what Alfred Gell (1992) does in his discussion of 'the technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology'. Gell sees the agency or social efficacy of an object as, to a large extent, derived from the skilled technical processes that brought it into being. What he calls 'the enchantment of technology' is the power of these objects that stems from the careful manipulation of materials and the complex, often meaningful processes involved in their making: 'the technology of enchantment is founded on the enchantment of technology' (Gell 1992, 44). Gell's materialist detractors somewhat miss this point in critiquing him for only being able to bring things to life by 'conjuring a magical mind-dust' (Ingold 2007, 12), labelled agency, when he is equally concerned with examining the material constitution of things in order to understand their animating principles. In short, it is the mingling of objects' material components, brought together through the skilled technique and ability of a maker, that enhances their social efficacy. Objectively embodying these techniques, agentive objects secure individuals in a relational nexus of intentionalities.

Arrows and 'the enchantment of technology'

Poisoned arrows, used in southern Africa to hunt large game animals, can be treated as compelling examples of Gell's (1992) argument about 'the enchantment of technology and the technology of enchantment'. The outcome of skilled technical processes and at the epicentre of social practice, arrows allow for the 'occult transubstantiations' (Gell 1992, 49–53) – of poison into meat and potency. Both twentieth-century Kalahari ethnographies and nineteenth-century accounts from South Africa suggest that big-game hunting was not merely a subsistence activity, but a crucial method of procuring potency (*n|om* in twentieth-century Jul'hoan and *!gi* in nineteenth-century !Xam), a substance essential to a community's well-being. As the interface between humans and intentional non-human beings, poison arrows mediate these vitally important relationships in a socially appropriate manner.

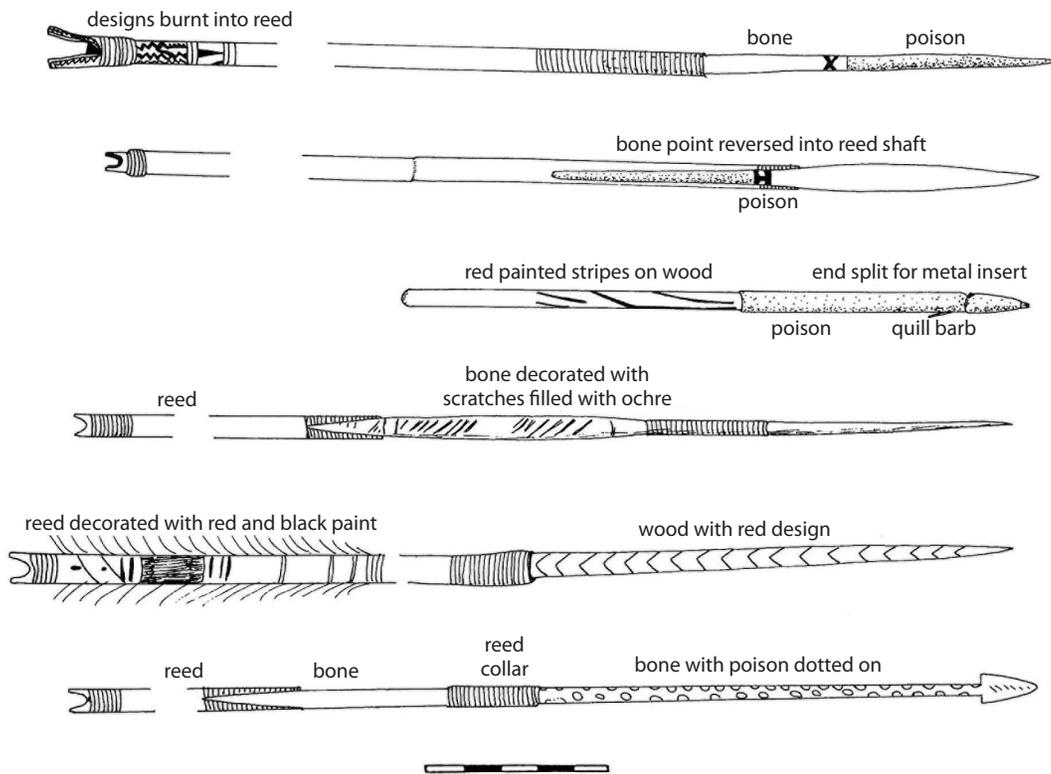


Figure 3.2. Image showing a selection of forms of decoration found on arrows in museum collections, after Janette Deacon's (1992) *Arrows As Agents Of Belief Amongst The !Xam Bushmen*. Drawing courtesy Janette Deacon.

Ethnographic accounts of mid-twentieth-century Jul'hoansi bow and arrow hunting in the Kalahari suggest that this entailed very specific inter-species social practices (see Marshall 1999, 145–61). Since arrows only have a range of about twenty meters, the greatest difficulty lay in getting close enough to animals to fire an effective shot. This required both intimate knowledge of animal behaviour and environmental conditions. Once an arrow successfully hit its intended target, depending on how long it takes for the poison to prove fatal (which could be several days), the hunting party might return to camp at night and continue tracking in the light of day. During this time there are a number of avoidances the hunter who shot the animal was expected to adhere to. The hunter was not supposed to urinate, or it might cause the animal to do so, resulting in the poison being discharged from the body. The hunter was supposed to be still and quiet and to avoid saying the name of the animal unless its tracks should fade. And he was not supposed to add wood to a fire or cook his own food as a flaring fire might give the animal strength.

When the animal succumbed to the poison and was successfully tracked, the meat belonged not to the man who shot the animal, but to the owner of the

arrow. Since arrows were swapped within groups, but also further afield between long-distance *hxaro* trading partners, these were likely to be different people. The arrow-maker would either received a large portion of the meat or was responsible for the important social duty of meat distribution (Wiessner 1983, 261). This meant that skilled hunters were not constantly responsible for distributing meat and the social stress (though potential personal gain) it entailed (Marshall 1961, 238). Individuals marked their arrows with paint or engraved patterns, to be identifiable, and despite the short manufacturing time and relatively short use life of arrows, they were rich in style and decorative variations (Fig. 3.2) (Wiessner 1983, 261; Deacon 1992, 6).

Although the acquisition of large quantities of animal protein was undoubtedly an important aim of poison-arrow hunting, and a strong motivation to adhere to proper hunting practices, big-game hunting for the Jul'hoansi was about more than just bringing food back to camp. Large game animals were also a vital source of potency, a material quality of animal fat. Whereas meat sustained the physical requirements of the community, potency ensured their spiritual survival (though the degree to which we should distinguish between the two is questionable). To hunt for

large game was also to hunt for the potency needed by ritual specialists to traverse the spirit world and successfully interact with other beings within it, whether battling bellicose spirits-of-the-dead or travelling to visit distant camps.

Gell (1992) has argued for the essential alchemy of art, which is to make what is out of what is not, and vice versa. Through processing and transforming base materials into new things, artists perform a sort of ‘occult transubstantiation’, situating themselves as ‘occult technicians’ (Gell 1992, 49). He suggests that not only do artists possess technical ability, but the things they make result in tangible social consequences; they produce things that actively create and mediate social relations between persons. As the outcome of skilled technical processes, arrows allow for the ‘occult transubstantiation’ of poison into meat and potency. This enchanted technology, which dictates social practice and sustains social relationships between both humans and non-human persons alike, enables both the physical and cosmological sustenance of society.

The enchanted materiality of poison-arrows also appears vividly apparent in painted depictions from the Maloti-Drakensburg. In particular, rock art images that appear to relate to game-control suggest that

inter-subjective relationships between humans and animals may also have been mediated by technological means during the Later Stone Age. For example, the small panel, a tracing of which appears in Figure 3.3, from a site in the Maclear District of the Eastern Cape, South Africa, shows a hartebeest and two human figures.¹ One figure seems to be reaching for arrows in a quiver slung over his back and the other is facing the hartebeest; in one hand his bow sympathetically mirrors the angle of the hartebeest’s head, while the other presents two arrows under the hartebeest’s nose. The depiction of this interaction strongly recalls Descola’s (2013, 5–6) remarks on non-human persons, whose possession of a reflexive awareness creates a ‘theatre of subtle sociability’ in which humans cajole them into systems of exchange. This scene can be interpreted as showing the human gently ‘cajoling’ the hartebeest with the bow and arrows; appropriately approaching the animal as an important social partner, demanding specific behaviour from humans. The material qualities of the arrow itself may lend it ‘taming’ abilities (McGranaghan & Challis 2016), as will be explored in the following sections.

It might seem a stretch to consider ethnographic material from the twentieth-century Kalahari alongside

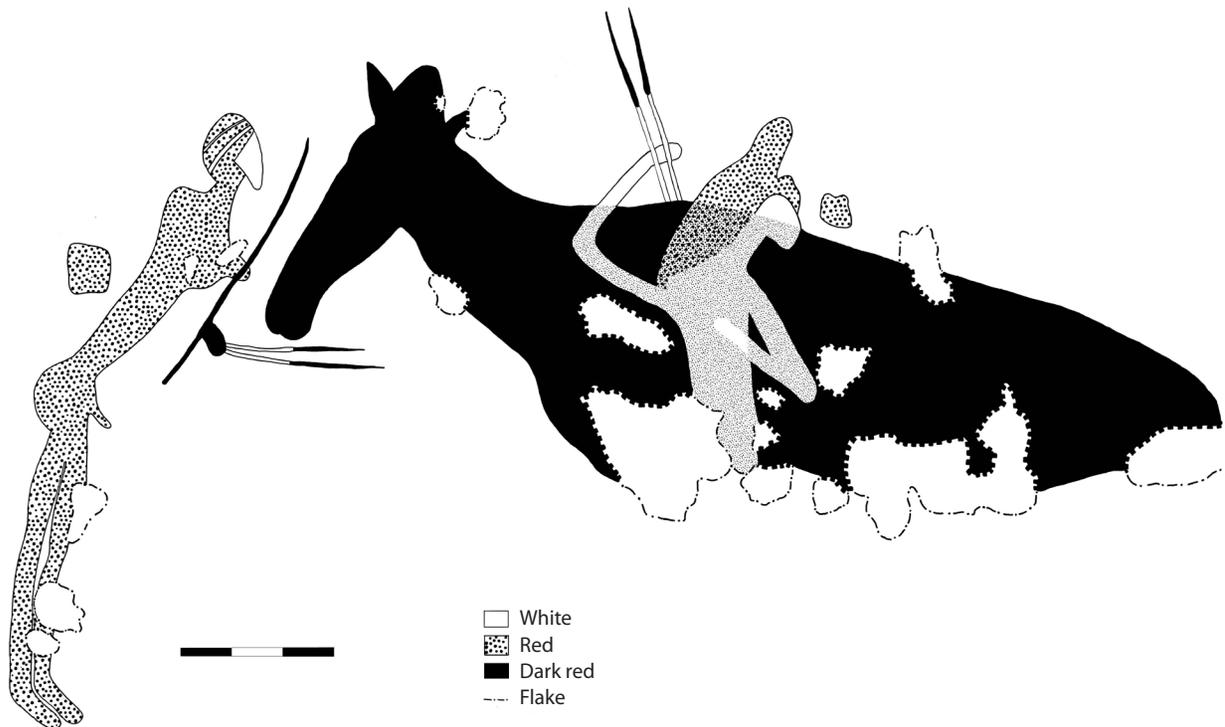


Figure 3.3. Schematic drawing of a painted scene from a rock shelter in the Maclear District, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa, which appears to show a human figure ‘cajoling’ or ‘taming’ a hartebeest with arrows. Drawing Larissa Snow (digital redrawing assisted by Stephen Van Den Heever).

Later Stone Age rock art from the Maloti-Drakensberg, but there are good reasons for this approach. Certainly, the Kalahari Debate made it clear that Kalahari groups are not 'living fossils' and have been in active contact with farming communities for the last two thousand years (Solway & Lee 1990; Wimsen & Denbow 1990; Sadr 1997). While we cannot assume that ways of engaging with the non-human world in the Kalahari should be applied straightforwardly to archaeological material further South, there is strong evidence to suggest continuities of belief and practice across much of southern Africa over a significant time-depth (Lewis-Williams 1998). The assertion of a 'pan-San' worldview has been critiqued for its assumed stasis and conservatism (Solomon 1999), but there do seem to be pervasive and enduring practices. For example, imagery suggested of trance dancing, still performed by people in the Kalahari today, is widely found in South Africa rock art. Moreover, other similarities between nineteenth-century records of !Xam mythology and more recent Kalahari ethnographies are striking. Without discounting changes that have taken place across the region over the last two millennia, continuities of practice do appear to be a feature across different hunting groups.

Making persons and managing relations

The social significance of arrows becomes even more apparent when their use in other social practices is considered. Twentieth-century Kalahari ethnographies suggest they not only played a central role in transforming poison into potency, but also in another

transformation: when a boy became a man, through a ceremony performed after he shot and killed his first large game animal. John Marshall's documentary film *A Rite of Passage*, shot in 1952–3, documents thirteen-year-old !Ti!kay's initiation after he shot and killed his first wildebeest.² His first successful hunt marked the beginning of his social maturity; a young man considered an acceptable son-in-law only once he could procure meat necessary to maintain social, and as we have seen, spiritual, relationships. During this ceremony, the arrow that made the kill was burned clean, re-sharpened and used to make small cut marks on important parts of !Ti!kay's body: his arm so that it would be flexible and strong when wielding a bow, his chest to instil the passion to hunt, his back which corresponded to calming the withers of future game so they wouldn't flee in fear, and between his eyes to help him see game quickly and clearly (Fig. 3.4). The film shows !Ti!kay's father rub a mixture of boiled fat from the killed animal and ground-up !gaowa pod, one of the ingredients in arrow poison, into the cuts. The marks on his body healed as a number of tiny tattoos, reminders to go out and hunt, not sit idly at camp.

A statement made by Silayi to the colonial magistrate, Sir Walter Stanford, in 1884 (Stanford 1910) suggests a similar link between Maloti-Drakenburg groups and arrows. Silayi was a Tembu man who united with chief Nqabayo's band of stock raiders in the Eastern Cape during the middle of the nineteenth century. He described how the men were armed mainly with bows and poisoned arrows (Stanford 1910, 435). Upon joining Nqabayo he recalled 'we received bows and arrows and became members



Figure 3.4. Digitized Film Stills from John Marshall's 1952–3 film *Rite of Passage*, showing thirteen-year old !Ti!kay being 'marked' with the arrow he used to kill his first wildebeest. The mixture of fat and !gaowa rubbed into the cuts is visible on his chest. Images courtesy and copyright Documentary Education Resources (D.E.R.).

of the tribe' (Stanford 1910, 436), before embarking on many fruitful raiding parties around the Maloti-Drakensberg. In this instance, group membership was conferred by the bestowal of archetypal hunting technology. In an initiation of sorts, outside persons were incorporated into the social group, and made substantial through their possession of arrows.

For men, arrows appear to have been instrumental in the attainment of full adult personhood. If, as in animist conceptions in lowland South America, life is apprehended as a relational process (cf. Rival 2012, 139), it seems that before becoming a full adult 'person', capable of maintaining social relationships, men first had to become adept at using this technology, embodying relevant skills and techniques. In Jul'hoansi initiation, arrows were used to physically alter the body, making openings through which both potent animal fat and poison could be incorporated. This sharing of substances created a bond not only between hunter and prey, enabling successful future interactions, but also between person and object. Arrows can also be understood as material extensions of personhood; they are a form of technology that directly facilitated a man's ability to enter into and maintain social relationships with both humans and non-human beings alike.

According to twentieth-century ethnographic accounts from the Kalahari, poison arrow hunting was a highly gendered task, performed by men. Women were expected to avoid touching hunting equipment, especially arrows, because their femaleness was said to be 'poisonous' to hunting; to weaken the poison and to 'spoil' the endeavour (Marshall 1999, 146). Wiessner (1983, 262) describes how her informants, who were well seasoned in dealing with anthropologists, eagerly awaited the slightest drop in hunting success so they could claim other foods in compensation for the animals they had failed to kill. The language used to describe the effects of femaleness suggests a potentially complicated relationship between gender and potency, perhaps explaining why bows and arrows were regarded as male items of material culture. The Jul'hoan word *kxwia* was used to mean both 'spoil' and 'to enter a deep trance' (Bieseles personal communication, cited by Lewis Williams 2002, 63), a state understood to involve potentially uncontrollable levels of potency. Lorna Marshall's (1999, 146) Kalahari informants similarly described femaleness as 'strong' potency with the potential to overwhelm and nullify the potency of hunters and their equipment.

Women, like large game animals, seem to have been understood as innately possessing high levels of potency. In Megan Bieseles's (1993; Parkington 2003) ethnography *Women Like Meat*, she noted that

in Kalahari conversations, eating and sex were often conflated, and it was difficult to tell which meat, wife or prey, a man was referring to. These associations between women and big game reinforce the position of poison arrow hunting as a paradigmatically male activity. Conceptions of full adult male personhood centred around the capacity to obtain meat (and therefore potency) making it possible to take a wife and to sustain a wider network of social relations.

Potent substances and important processes

Another way of understanding 'the enchantment of technology' is to think in terms of substances and processes; materials and the series of transformations they undergo. Whether in the Kalahari or the Maloti-Drakensberg, a number of key substances appear to have been implicated in different, but interconnected, domains of social action, that were subject to similar processes. Important substances included fat, poison, and in the Maloti-Drakensberg paint, all of which underwent processes of heating or boiling and were implicated in the different social arenas of initiation, hunting, the trance dance, and (historically) painting. The agency and social efficacy of substances was potentially amplified by their applications in different, connected, contexts. Likewise, shared processes highlight potential associations between different arenas of making and doing. By using substance and process as analytical tools, what Gell would call material and technique, we are able to further blur the divisions between mundane and sublime material culture, and between different spheres of human action. While hunting seems to have been much more of a spiritual activity than instrumental models might assume, one equally cannot make rock art without engaging in technical processes.

According to a twentieth-century oral account (Lewis-Williams 1995, 146–7), producing red pigment in the high Drakensberg mountains began with digging out ochre. This was then heated over fire until it became red hot, and was then ground between two stones. The blood and fat of a freshly killed eland was then mixed with the ground pigment. If these were not fresh, it was said that the paint would coagulate and not soak into the rock, implying that painting necessarily took place after a successful hunt. The process of heating is potentially conceptually related to the activation of shamanic potency during the trance dance. Potency was said in the Kalahari to 'boil' in the stomach of a shaman until it was hot enough to travel up the spine and out through the back of their head, resulting in trance (Katz 1982). Like dancing, arrow production took place around a fire since heat

was needed to straighten the reed shafts and harden the poison on the arrow tip.

Focusing on these shared substances and processes underlines how we should be careful in categorizing some objects as mere tools and others as art. As Gell points out, the notion that technique is dull and mechanical, as opposed to true creativity and authentic values represented by art is a by-product of the quasi-religious status given to high art in post-industrial western culture (Gell 1992, 56). In many parts of the world, 'there is an insensible transition between mundane activity, which is necessitated by the requirements of subsistence production, and the most overtly magico-religious practice' (Gell 1992, 59). Arrow-making in the twentieth-century Kalahari appears to have been as entangled in the wider cosmological order, as the making of rock art was in the Maloti-Drakensberg during the Later Stone Age. The active role of arrows in making persons and acquiring potency most likely infused them with social significance and consequence. Their potent materiality responsible for mediating relations between humans and non-humans, thus ensuring the continuation of society. In Gellian terms, action is caused directly by the material object at the centre of the socio-relational nexus. Dismissing arrows as merely functional tools fails to recognize how they can serve to objectify wider social values, practices and relationships.

Conclusion

Through transforming raw materials into the entities and vital substances of the spirit world, both arrow-makers and painters act as 'occult technicians' (Gell 1992, 49). It follows then that meat from the hunt should belong to the arrow-maker rather than the hunter. It is the agency of the arrow maker, embodied in their skilled technical abilities which ultimately enable the acquisition of fresh potency by the community. While previous explanations of this practice stress its social function, ameliorating tension surrounding the distribution of resources, an ontological and material approach enables an alternative perspective, one that acknowledges the agency of the arrow and the residue of the maker's personhood that continues to reside in the arrow itself. This steers us away from a purely instrumental economic and functional approach to hunting, bringing us closer to an appreciation of the deeper metaphysical principles that may be at play. Not only is the arrow a transformative agent, but because of the con-substantive relationship between object and person, it can also be seen as a material extension of human personhood. Person and arrow are inextricably linked.

Notes

1. In the discussion of the image, it is acknowledged that rock art does not offer a simple narrative depiction of everyday events but may represent a visual manifestation of the spirit world and happenings within it.
2. John Marshall filmed with the Jul'hoansi from the 1950s through to the early 2000s, shifts his perspective over time from conventional documentary film maker to open advocate. His corpus heavily influenced perception of Jul'hoan practices and despite later attempts to prevent 'Death by Myth', an examination of cut scenes and edits from his early films reveal the extent to which the Jul'hoansi were not the isolated and independent community presented to audiences. As a result he has been critiqued by the anthropological community for 'minimizing complex relationships and propagating monolithic views' (Bieseles in Tomasselli 2007, 126).

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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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