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LAST OF THE RAINMAKERS

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They are the last. The man they call Nqabayi, the one who makes rain and who travels deepest into the spirit world, turns to the rock face and fixes his final vision; a fight with the spirits of the dead. In the distance, the sound of approaching horses, men shouting. And then the bullets. For a hundred and fifty years the veil of rock remains unanimated by consciousness. The eland below are gone, replaced by cattle and sheep. No one calls the rain.

It is 1992. A land cruiser pulls up and two men get out. Carrying camera bags and satchels they walk down the hillside, cross the river and make their way up the other side of the valley towards the escarpment. A dark rain cloud - what Nqabayi's people would have called a rain bull - approaches. Seeking shelter, the men scramble up the steep bank and enter a shallow cave formed out of an overhang. There are a few scattered paintings of no great significance and then, illuminated by a flash of lightning, the spirit world is revealed.

They call the site Storm Shelter.

I arranged to meet one of the discoverers, Geoffrey Blundell, at the small town of Maclear in the remote foothills of the southern Drakensberg, South Africa. In the 19th century this area, between the Dutch Cape Colony and British Natal, was the last stronghold of the San Bushmen and it is here that their rock art tradition reached its climax.

Researcher Pat Vinnicombe, whose writings, together with those of Professor David Lewis-Williams, are fundamental to the current understanding of rock art, has written about the special meaning that the eland with its supernatural potency, had to the San. In response to the loss of their hunting grounds, the San raided cattle from surrounding farms but they never stopped painting the eland. From their stronghold in the steep-sided winding valleys, they waged a 30-year campaign of resistance to the European farmer-settlers and their commandos until the eland were gone and there were no more San left to resist.

Lewis-Williams, who until recently headed South Africa's Rock Art Research Institute, describes Storm Shelter as “the most sensational find since the great cathedrals of rock art were discovered in the first decades of the 20th Century.” In a feat reminiscent of Freud’s deciphering of the language of dreams, he has used accounts given to ethnographers by San to decode the spirit or dream world depicted in their art. Far from being sympathetic magic or a representation of daily and hunting life by a simple people as was thought till the 1960's, rock art is now regarded as a symbolic language of extraordinary intellectual complexity which is still only gradually being understood.

The Storm Shelter panel is important because it contains all the variations that previously were found only on separate sites. "It is like finding a complete ancient manuscript when previously only fragments were known", says Blundell. Historical accounts suggest that it might be the work of a group, led by a man called Nqabayi, who was known for his painting skill. Certainly these paintings are among the most exquisitely rendered rock art images found anywhere in the world. But, as with dreams, their real fascination lies in what they can tell us at a symbolic or metaphorical level.

To Lewis-Williams they are a representation of the spirit world as it appeared to the San during a curing or trance dance, and as such are properly thought of as religious art. But this is not gallery art to be viewed as 'pictures', he warns. The rock is a veil between the material world and the spirit world on which those who travelled to the spirit world fixed their experiences. And because it had potency (eland blood is mixed with some of the pigments) it was not just a depiction - it was the spirit world. Reified, that is, in the form of paintings.

To a shaman in an altered state of consciousness, standing close to the rock, the superimposed images would have shimmered and moved, allowing him or her to move beyond the veil and into the spirit world. Thin red lines with white dots on either side which wind through the images emerging from or disappearing into crevices - referred to as 'lines of light' - would have guided the shaman to 'god's house' or to other rock sites to visit relatives; important in such threatened times.

While in the spirit world, the shaman might go into battle with malevolent spirits of the dead, thought to be a cause of illness and death, or would catch rain animals whose blood and milk would precipitate as rain in the material world. (Events in one world were believed to also take place in the other.).

Something worries me. If the San are gone, what is the situation in the spirit world? In Maclear to replenish our provisions, I stop to chat with a Xhosa man selling traditional plant medicines, knowledge of which has been inherited from the San. The click sounds in his speech reveal a history of contact with and absorption of the San. The healer/diviner who will dispense remedies made from his herbs is called, in his language, an igqirha, after the San word gixa (medicine man or shaman - literally a 'holder of power') .

According to anthropologist Frans Prins, the extinct status of the San in South Africa is largely a creation of archaeologists and historians. Not only do many people carry the blood of these first people, but aspects of their culture are embedded in the culture of the peoples with whom they had contact or into which they were absorbed. Faced with the loss of their traditional hunting grounds , the San built up a close relationship with their Xhosa-speaking neighbours; obtaining from them guns and horses in exchange for rainmaking and curing services and cooperating with them on cattle-raiding missions. The material wealth brought about changes to their normally egalitarian society, says Blundell. Traditionally a third to half of the community were able, through taking on animal powers in the trance or curing dance, to enter the spirit world and perform curing. Healing therefore was a community affair. In Storm Shelter, we see for the first time the emergence of a new class of people; what Thomas Dowson, a colleague of Lewis-Williams, has called 'pre-eminent shamans.'

In most San depictions humans have stylised heads with very little detail . In the Storm Shelter panel there are two figures with exaggerated features carefully detailed and disproportionately large heads. These, Blundell thinks, are one person, a politically dominant shaman - perhaps even Nqabayi - as he appeared in the spirit world. "We suspect that this is a form of portraiture and that the heads depict powerful shamans who had gained status through interaction with Xhosa-speaking peoples," he says. The bodies in these portraits are either absent or in 'humpty-dumpty' form -

without legs and hands - reflecting the belief that the shaman's potency is concentrated in the head.

Blundell describes the portraiture as a form of advertising declaring: "Look how powerful I am. This is what I do in the spirit world." The superimposition of a feline rain animal over one of the 'big-heads' is, he thinks, a composite message: "I have feline power (only the most potent shamans have the ability to turn into a cat-form) and I am a great rainmaker."

"My personal view," says Pat Vinnicombe, "is that like most hunter-gatherer art, it represents a search for power. None of us wants to die of famine or let the rain come in. We want to control things." Leaving the valley, rain pours down, washing the dust off our car. The world on this side of the rock-face feels suddenly very empty.

NOTES

Spirits of the dead:

Grotesque figures painted in white appear in much of the art of this area. According to Blundell they represent the malevolent spirits of the dead who are the cause of sickness and death. To affect a cure, a shaman who has gained power through the trance dance travels to the spirit world and returns the sickness to those responsible. In this image, the shaman is expelling a stream of sickness from his mouth onto the spirits of the dead who, mirroring the shaman's journey, are trance dancing to gain power to enter the material world. Because white pigment is generally fast-fading Blundell regards the clarity of these images as an indication that they are relatively recent.

Psychactive plants

Anthropologist Dr Manton Hirst thinks that the San, with their intimate knowledge of their natural environment, would almost certainly have used psychoactive plants. There have been suggestions that the nasal bleeding which is experienced by a shaman in trance (and in the dying eland) could be brought on by a snuff. Hirst says that the succulent *Sceletium* species, which is available as a snuff, has psychoactive properties if combined with a stimulant such as the leaves of *Catha edulis* (Khat), a tree which grows in the Storm Shelter area. It stimulates the desire for animal

protein and at the same time enhances the hunter's ability to obtain it.
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