

[current issue](#)

South Africa - Art

[subscribe](#)

# ROCKS OF AGES

[Ruben Mowszowski](#)[more from  
this issue](#)[recent issues](#)[more articles  
on-line](#)[home](#)

*'Standing Shaman' rock painting. photograph: Blundell/Honey/  
Mowszowski*

## **The art of the Bushman shamans reveals the spirit world.**

*from Resurgence issue 214*

TWICE DURING THE past year I have taken the long journey across the Great Karoo Basin - from the dry arid landscape of the Karoo proper in the east, to the lush twisting foothills of the southern Drakensberg mountains in the west. My purpose each time: to stand before a particular image in a recently-disclosed panel of rock art. I could get there a quicker way but there is something about this long journey through a vast empty landscape - the part of the ancient continent that did not drift off - that prepares me.

It is a terrain that is both land and mind - where spirit and landscape, like space and time, are both separate and inseparable and flow in and out of each other at caves and pools; where people who have gained power from an animal can pass through painted and engraved rocks into other realms. It is a world where everything, including thought, is connected. The painters and engravers are gone, exterminated, dispossessed,

absorbed into other cultures, but they left this to us: it is the cumulative wisdom of forty, perhaps eighty thousand years of investigation into the world of spirit. Just possibly, it might be our salvation.

When San Bushman shamans returned from their spirit or trance journeys to heal, to make rain or to visit relatives, it is said that they fixed the spirit world onto the rocks by painting and engraving what they had seen and experienced so that the images themselves became portals into the spirit world for other journeys.

However, the principal way of entering the spirit world is through the healing dance, a ritual that goes on throughout the night, perhaps four times a month, and involves the entire extended family community, around half of whom will have the capacity to heal. In the Kalahari, the Jul'hoansi say that they enter the spirit realm when the potency they call 'n/um' boils in the healing dance and they 'die'. This 'death' from which one returns - otherwise known as the spirit world - is described in the rock art in an intensely symbolic language.

If a figure in the art has stripes streaming back from the nose and bands across the stomach - representing respectively nasal bleeding and stomach cramps, both of which occur during the healing dance - it is located in the spirit world. Dotted lines that connect different images and wind in and out of cracks in the rockface seem to be what the Jul'hoansi call 'lines of light': lines which guide the shaman through the spirit world, to 'god's house', to other rock shelters and back again to the material world. IN THE WEST, entry to this realm is tightly controlled, with priests and psychiatrists guarding the portals. We seem to be in the grip of a great repression, a deep fear of what we cannot see and therefore cannot control. Take the word 'hallucinatory' often used to describe the experiences and visions depicted in rock art paintings. By describing the paintings in this way we imply that they are illusions, not actual. Yet no shaman would ever say: "I hallucinated that I turned into a lion." In the southern African indigenous world, such visions are actual and true.

Bushman rock art demonstrates a way of knowledge which was universal before it became secret; a territory of mind that was accessible to all until it became out of bounds save to the few. If we preserve the art because it is part of our 'heritage' we might feel a little better about their historic genocide, but it is not going to help heal the planet. The art needs to be preserved because it is a repository of knowledge about a territory that we have hardly used, almost forgotten and now know precious little about. We will need that knowledge if we are to become a more balanced society; we will need to reclaim the component of mind that we lost, if we are to re-soul the world.

THE IMAGE THAT has drawn me back to the rock shelter, and that sustains me now, is this: a shaman stands within a circle of dancers. On his face there are lines which look at first sight like a cat's whiskers streaming back from his nose. Who is this man? Go closer. Below is a line of eland painted with great, one might say loving, care. (The eland is said to contain the potency needed to move between worlds.) On the right, superimposed on the body of an eland is something that looks very much like a mushroom. On the left is a rain 'cow', the animal whose

blood and milk become rain in the material world. Behind the rain cow (actually a feline) is a face with exaggerated features and some kind of headdress, a great shaman who can heal, make rain, and command the power of the mushroom.

Look closer. Circling the standing shaman are a number of white figures in different stages of transformation. These are the spirits of the dead. And what are they doing? Exactly what people in the material world are doing. They are trance dancing and taking on animal powers to be able to cross into the opposite realm - in their case the material world. Now look closely at the standing shaman. See the thin red line being vomited out of his mouth onto the face of one of the white figures. The shaman has entered the spirit world to return sickness from the material world to the spirits of the dead. The statement is of a world in balance: sickness and health, life and death, no victory, no defeat. In a connected world, total victory makes no sense. I am reminded of T. S. Eliot's well-known lines: "At the still point of the turning world, Neither flesh nor fleshless, Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is."

If we fail to heal the fractured world, eventually there may be no-one left to bear witness to any dimension to life other than the material. We would have to re-learn how to be human.

The Kalahari Jul'hoansi - the 'real people' of Botswana and Namibia who have been doing the healing dance for probably as long as the painters once painted - are under pressure to become 'civilised' which means, in today's terms, to live entirely in the material world. If the paintings fade and the Jul'hoansi forget how to dance, who will be our teachers? o

The indigenous Gana and Gwi Bushmen of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve are being removed to bleak resettlement camps - the reason for which many suspect is the opening up of the area to mining corporations for the diamond deposits. Survival International is campaigning worldwide to highlight this infringement of the hunter-gatherers' rights. For further information: Survival International, 6 Charterhouse Buildings, London EC1M 7ET. <[www.survival-international.org](http://www.survival-international.org)>

*Ruben Mowszowski is a South African writer. To coincide with the WorldSummit on Sustainable Development he will be facilitating a special seven-day journey through the Great Karoo Basin which will include a visit to the site described in this article. For details fax: +27 21 789 1342 or email [info@cosmologicaljourneys.com](mailto:info@cosmologicaljourneys.com). [www.cosmologicaljourneys.com](http://www.cosmologicaljourneys.com)*

^ [back to top](#)

[from Resurgence issue 214](#)

[Subscribe to Resurgence](#)