

## Fading vision of the spirits beyond

*Limited funding and a low level of interest in South Africa's rock art pose a threat to the preservation for posterity of the legacy of the San, producers of the world's oldest cave paintings, writes **Ruben Mowszowski***



You know there is something strange going on when a rock art site described as the equivalent of Chartres cathedral is discovered and it causes hardly a ripple in the country where it is found. The find is in the foothills of the Drakensberg in the Eastern Cape .

In 1993 Geoff Blundell and Sven Ouzman, two researchers working under rock art expert David Lewis-Williams, were driven by an approaching thunderstorm to seek shelter in a shallow cave and, in the

best tradition of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, (in a flash of lightning I like to think,) it was revealed: a six-metre panel of 231 images in glowing polychrome; the spirit world of the San. They called it Storm Shelter.

Whereas other sites have only fragments of the story, Storm Shelter is the whole thing. Billed as the most sensational discovery since the early decades of the 20th Century, it was announced only this year. How on earth did they keep it a secret? Easy. No one was interested.

South Africa has one of the world's richest collections of rock art - belonging to a tradition of painting that is among the oldest and most intellectually complex that humankind has produced. It comprises, according to current estimates, about 30 000 sites (15 000 recorded and probably the same number still to be discovered.)

The art, unparalleled in its intricacy, detail and sheer beauty, provides insights into a world view , religion and the changing social relations which were being negotiated at a critical point in our history. It is also, thanks to the work begun in the 1970s by Patricia Vinnicombe and David Lewis-Williams, the best-understood rock art in the world

One group of images in the Storm Shelter panel shows a shaman who, by gaining power in a trance dance, has crossed into the spirit world where he is vomiting out sickness onto spirits of the dead - grotesque and distorted white figures - who are themselves engaged in a trance dance to gain power to cross into the shaman's world to shoot arrows of sickness at trance dance participants.

It is a philosophic, intellectual and religious statement of great power and it is a small part of a panel which is only one of many such panels in the area. We are in danger of losing it all, Blundell says.

The threats range from natural weathering to vandalism but probably the greatest damage is from cattle rubbing up against the art and wiping it out .

Storm Shelter was protected by a fallen boulder which accounts for its excellent condition, but according to Blundell there are many painting sites in the area that are now mostly smudges. This problem is easily avoided if farmers place a small fence around the sites to keep animals out. I saw no such fence at the rock art site on a farm where I recently stayed. The farmer is a dedicated supporter of rock art conservation, but fences cost money and farmers often do not have it.

The pigments and binders in the rock art , made from materials which range from oxides to kaolin to eland blood, are water soluble. Touching them or wetting them to make the images stand out - as tourists and photographers often do - rapidly destroys them.

Some of the human destruction is innocent or based on ignorance: a farmer who every seven years repaints the images because they are fading, a priest who outlines the work to give it added visibility, children who 'contribute' to the art by adding their own images.

Paradoxically those who, like the San, regard the images as containing real potency are also quite likely to damage them. Inyangas scrape off the red oxide pigment for muti.

According to anthropologist Frans Prins, the thinking is that it will render the user slippery "like a Bushman." During the violence preceding the first democratic elections it was used by people belonging to opposing parties to protect themselves from the other side's bullets.

Walking through the area I recognised a panel from Lewis-Williams's classic book, *Images of Power*. The concluding illustration of the book is of people gathered around a shaman in trance. At the site the red ochre image of one of the main figures, a seated woman, had been carefully scratched out.

What will our children say when they find out that we were unable to protect the images that we told them were so special?

A scheme to grow medicinal plants that are considered to have the

same powers as the red oxide, and which will save the inyanga the difficult trip into the mountains, may solve the problem says Prins - unless of course the inyanga is instructed by the ancestors in a dream to use the oxide .

The best preserved rock art we have is the Linton panel, a section of rock from this area that was cut out and moved to the South African Museum in Cape Town in 1918.

It is from this panel that the figures on South Africa's new national coat of arms are derived. Although removal of rock is not favoured these days as a form of protection because the context is regarded as of vital significance, Blundell acknowledges that in some instances, where an important painting is in danger of being destroyed, it might become unavoidable.

He puts it very simply: "Rock art conservation does not exist in southern Africa."

Although we have the richest rock art heritage in the world, we have no trained conservationists because there have not been funds. An American rock art conservation expert, one of only two in the world, (the other is in Australia) comes to South Africa when she has time.

"For a country that has 15 000 known sites, that is simply not enough," Blundell says.

The major problem is graffiti. Any occurrence has to be cleaned off very rapidly as it will encourage copy-cat behavior. A rock art conservationist therefore has to have a background in both chemistry and rock dynamics.

Problems of water dripping onto the art can be avoided, for instance, by installing a drip line but the consequence might be a drying up and spalling off of the rock surface. A rock face can be sealed but water pressure behind it might cause the surface to explode.

A bursary has now been established to train rock art conservationist in South Africa.

In 1999 The Rock Art Research Institute established a rapid response unit staffed by two young Oxford graduates, Jamie Hampson and William Challis. They go round the country inspecting new finds reported by farmers and advising them on how to protect the art.

But two people for that number of rock art sites - and more being discovered all the time - is like baling out a leaking ocean liner with a teaspoon. The cash-strapped Rock Art Research Institute , is struggling to keep even the two of them going.

In the meantime, the best protection against vandalism is inaccessibility and remoteness - the reason that the exact locations of newly found art like Storm Shelter are not published. Most of the rock art is painted on sandstone that is itself subject to natural weathering

processes. Without the resources and a properly trained conservationist there is little that can be done about its gradual but inevitable erosion - save to document it.

Interfering with the actual images is taboo, but it might eventually become necessary as even our most protected rock art will ultimately fade.

Lewis-Williams says that in a hundred years time the paintings are going to be so faint that the tourists will not want to visit and "then and only then we will have to touch it up like they did when they cleaned up Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling." When that comes about, he says, "they'll just have to come here and get the photographs."

The underpinning of any conservation is therefore the documentation of the art - something that can and does take years. Each image is photographed. Then the whole panel is traced. Great care has to be taken not to damage the paintings. Friable surfaces, for instance, are not traced. Field tracings are then redrawn in the laboratory in ink.

Rock art researchers are consequently not in any hurry to announce their finds.

Since the 1980s the policy has been to limit the number of sites accessible to the public with most newly-discovered sites being categorised as closed sites.

Under new and strict legislation (National Heritage Resources Act No 25 of 1999) anyone who damages or allows damage to take place to rock art on his or her property could receive a fine of up to R100 000 or five years in prison. If cattle rub against it, or tourists are allowed to touch or wet it, the landowner could be held responsible.

By the same act the South African Heritage Resources Agency replaces the National Monuments Council as guardians of the art, but we can't have a policeman or a heritage official at each site, says the director of the Rock Art Research Institute, Ben Smith, and in any case threatening farmers with penalties can be counter-productive.

Instead the rapid response team informs farmers of the meaning of the art and advises them how to care for it. The farmers are generally very receptive, say Hampson and Challis.

From an art form, thought in colonial times to be primitive and childlike. San art is turning out to be something extraordinary and potentially valuable. Art and money, as is well known, have always been handmaidens.

If the colonists were the spirits of the dead who defeated the San shamans, then perhaps the San shamans are now having the last laugh. They've come back as tourists.

## **Inscribed on our rocks is an Alexandria library of the spirit and mind**

There is an age-old way to protect treasure. Hide it. It makes sense in perilous times. Keep the jewels out of sight. But then why does one need to have them? Tourists want to see our famous rock art and we need their money but since the art is generally distant from centres of living and is painted by people removed from us in time, we are all in a sense tourists.

Rock art sites are either public, in which case they are subject to some kind of management or, as with Storm Shelter, they are closed - which means their location is undisclosed .

And since many are on private property or in remote mountainous locations, they are effectively inaccessible except to dedicated rock art tourists with strong legs and a professional guide.

Historian and University of Natal academic John Wright complains that there is neither sufficient will nor funding to support rock art heritage on the part of the government. "If this is a side of our heritage that is going to be taken seriously then government has got to be pushing it a lot harder than it is doing at the moment, and in a much more organised coherent and thought-out way," Wright says.

Researcher Geoff Blundell on the other hand says that while government may be allocating "pathetic" amounts compared to France, which pumps "huge amounts of money" into its rock art sites, it is the first South African government to actually make a substantial contribution and to see the value in the art.

The new coat of arms and the poverty relief money allocated to Ukhahlamba-Drakensberg by the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, he says, are good examples.

The minister of environmental Affairs and tourism, Mohammed Valli Moosa, has described the rock art legacy as "South Africa's richest, most expansive and most significant cultural treasure." His department, acting in consultation with the Rock Art Research Institute, has provided funding for the reorganisation of four existing public rock art sites to bring them into conformity with current perceptions and understandings of how rock art viewing should take place.

Rock Art scientists say it is important to provide information alongside the rock art that counters previous - and still persisting - stereotypes of the San as being either simple-minded primitives or romanticised natural-ecologists; in both cases a reflection of a deeply ingrained eurocentric perspective.

Historical and cultural information should be provided to counter another persistent idea ; that of the disappeared San, a people outside of history who are somehow not a part of the modern world (despite the fact that there are many thousands of them who exist today - even if they are poor and disempowered).

But San rock art is also a repository of knowledge.

Like the great Tantric texts, it describes, by use of complex metaphors and symbols, the parallel world of the dead as experienced by its shamans, and makes of its showing a portal for the shaman to re-enter that world.

Here, written on our rocks, is a virtual Alexandria library of the spirit and mind, contained in what is perhaps the most sophisticated of all the art in the world.

It has the potential to heal one of the great splits in human consciousness - between what Mircea Eliade calls the cosmological world view and the historical one - that has left us bereft and without purpose in a seemingly material world.

But can we grasp it in time?

History is replete with examples of people disregarding or destroying what they can't understand.

Our own history of contact with San rock art makes it clear that it is we who are the barbarians, unable - until Lewis-Williams and Pat Vinnicombe pointed out its shaministic origins - to even begin to understand what it was all about.

It is all the more surprising to find a copy of the newly-announced Storm Shelter panel painted onto four slabs of concrete on metal legs in the dimly lit foyer of Witwatersrand University Library.

Built for the official announcement by the minister of arts, culture, science and technology, Ben Ngubane, the facsimile is painted onto a background which looks rather like fake-leather vinyl; an equivalent perhaps to painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling on a flat board in poster colours.

One can't imagine any shaman worth his salt taking much interest in it.