

## ENTANGLED LIVES, RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY AND ROCK PAINTINGS: ELEPHANT AND HUMAN FIGURES IN THE ROCK ART OF THE WESTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA

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### ABSTRACT

From the form and composition of painted images of humans, elephants and ‘elephantropes’ (elephant human therianthropes) from the northern Cederberg, we propose that elephants were considered as ‘other-than-human-persons’ by painters. This is supported by the role of elephants in San stories, the ethnography of relational ontologies among hunter-gatherer communities in southern Africa and beyond, and the selective choices of painters in constructing images. We argue that paintings and stories of deliberately associated elephant and human subjects from a range of San expressive contexts are evidence for this ontological position, derived from ecological entanglement in ‘real life’. Painters considered their and elephants’ lives to intersect at conceptual as well as ecological levels. From the contexts in expressive culture, elephants were viewed as intelligent and socially coherent beings, occasionally difficult neighbours, and sensitive affinal relatives, needing respect and careful treatment. Paintings of elephants reference these relationships.

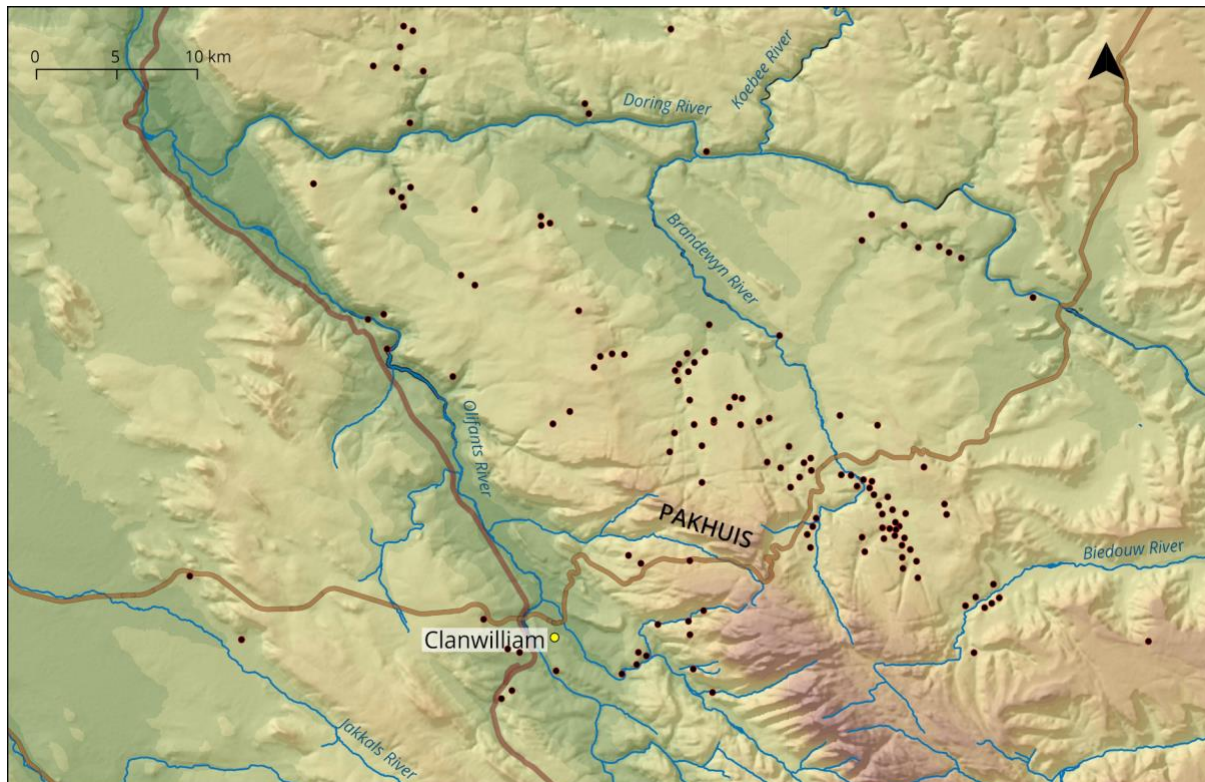
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### 1. Introduction

The Olifants River in the fynbos biome of South Africa is so named because the earliest European travellers observed some 300 elephants as they first crossed into the valley on December 8th, 1660, guided both by advice from local ‘Soaqua’ hunter-gatherers and likely the preexisting elephant paths (Parkington 1984). Soaqua is the most frequently used version of the name, almost certainly not self-referential, that indigenous guides from the Cape gave for local, non-stock-owning hunter-gatherers, linking them to the later, more widely applied but no less problematic, term ‘San’ and likely distinguishing them from local pastoralists, whom they referred to as Namaqua or Chariguriqua (Parkington 1977). We do not know how the painters labelled themselves and use Soaqua, because of its hunter-gatherer reference, in the absence of such a term. Rock art surveys show clearly that this valley may have been an elephant landscape long before these encounters (Johnson & Maggs 1979; Paterson 2007, 2018; Parkington & Paterson 2017, 2021; Parkington & de Prada-Samper 2021). The iconic elephant is one of the most frequently painted animal species locally (Wiltshire 2011). The Soaqua painted elephants in ways that reveal a complex human-elephant relationship that we hope to understand better. Our recent fieldwork in the Agter Pakhuis region of the northern Cederberg (Fig. 1) has focused on drone-based site mapping, re-photographing and digitally enhancing painted images (see Supplementary Online Material [SOM File 1] for enhancement methods used), and clarifying these as clues to the creations of personhood, place and landscape. Obviously, this presupposes that we can approach the mindset of the painters rather than imposing our own (for an extensive treatment of this academic mission in another geographic context, see the essays in *The American Indian and the Problem of History* by Martin 1987).

In the absence of knowledgeable local informants, we use the most relevant contexts to assess painters’ perceptions of their relations with elephants and other animals. We judge these contexts, in order of usefulness, to be the extensive accounts of /Xam (San) experiences gathered in the Bleek and Lloyd

project from 250 km away (Bleek & Lloyd 1911; Hewitt 1986; Bank 2006; Skotnes 2007), San folklore and ethnographies from further afield (Lee 1979; Bieseles 1993, 2009; Marshall 1999; Guenther 2020), and a recently expanding set of relational ontologies from hunting and gathering societies beyond southern Africa (Bird-David 1999; Willerslev 2004; Hill 2011, 2012, 2013). We follow Ingold (2000) in viewing a landscape as an integrated network of places, that is locations given meaning by their ongoing use ('dwelling' following his terminology); we regard local paintings as valuable clues to those meanings (Parkington & de Prada-Samper 2021; Parkington & Paterson 2021), in this case to Soaqua elephant relations.



**Figure 1.** Map of sites with elephant paintings, marked by red dots, in the Agter Pakhuis of the northern Cederberg.

In this we hope to add to the inspirational project of Mathias Guenther (2015: 302) by filling out his assertion that “the central, unifying theme in San ontology is that of ontological flux, of human and non-human person beings” and his brief reference (Guenther 2015: 279) to “rock art, which the European interlocutors [Bleek & Lloyd] also brought into the discussion because of its linkages to myth (Bank 2006: 242-243, 314-339)”. Our focus, then, is on rock paintings, elephant societies, and the life histories of painters and elephants that we judge to have been linked by ecological circumstances but, more significantly, in the minds of painters. We claim that the coherence around sociality, communication and interspecific relations between people and elephants, visible in texts and images of southern San groups, and paralleled in other ethnographies with other species, broadens the range of possible, rooted painted image interpretations available to us. Conflations of human and animal characteristics in painted images, for example ‘therianthropes’ in rock art terminology, may be solutions to representing ‘other-than-human-persons’ (*sensu* Bird-David 1999; Willerslev 2004).

## **2. Therianthropes, personhood and ‘other-than-human-persons’**

How do we access the minds of painters? About halfway downstream along the course of what is now known as the Olifants River, within a few metres of the water, a line of therianthropes (Fig. 2) marks a place in what must have been viewed as a landscape containing ‘elephant-headed men’, as we have previously, and informally, termed them (Parkington & de Prada Samper 2021: 226). Are these “human figures wearing elephant trunk disguises” (from a 1961 South African Archaeological Bulletin cover caption); are they therianthropic ritual practitioners, depicted ‘trance-formed’ into their elephant helpers

(*sensu* Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004: 172-175); are they elephant human confluations that reflect the ‘ontological instability’ that “pervades San (especially /Xam [and we would include Soaqua]) cosmology” (Guenther 2015: 277)? Although recently consensus may favour a shamanist answer, possibly buoyed by the cross-hatched component of the imagery, we argue the viability of the ontological option here.



**Figure 2.** A line of elephantropes, confluations of elephants and humans, from the middle reaches of the Olifants River (tracing by Royden Yates).

We are in agreement with Lewis-Williams (1998: 86-87), under his heading *Pan-San Beliefs*, that “rock art research would not progress towards some idea of the meaning(s) of the art without recourse to San ethnography”; that “there were [are?] striking commonalities between twentieth century Kalahari San ethnography and the ethno-historical records of the 1870s that were compiled far to the south”; that “‘scenic’ groups (loosely called ‘compositions’), made by one or more painters, and complex groupings, including superimpositions, of many images” show “the interdigitating of the spirit realm and the material world” (Lewis-Williams 1998: 87). He concluded that “the shamanistic explanation certainly proposes a focus on diverse shamanistic beliefs and activities, but it does **not** deny other meanings. What we need to study is **how** and **what** other meanings are encoded in the images” (Lewis-Williams 1998: 87). Our purpose here is to work within that space of ‘many meanings’ by referring to the global and local literatures on hunter-gatherer notions of personhood.

Nurit Bird-David (1999: S71) argues that:

Personhood concepts and ecological perception are two fruitful areas from which to re-evaluate our theories of animist practices and beliefs. Irving Hallowell’s ethnography of the Ojibwa (from fieldwork conducted in the Lake Winnipeg area of northern Canada during the 1930s) and especially in his paper *Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior and World View* (1960) are provocative starting points for our reassessments of theories of animism. Hallowell observed that the Ojibwa sense of personhood, which they attribute to some natural entities, animals, winds, stones, etc., is fundamentally different from the modernist one. The latter takes the axiomatic split between “human” and “non-human” as essential, with “person” being a sub-category of “human”. The Ojibwa conceives of “person” as an overarching category within which “human person”, “animal person”, “wind person”, etc., are subcategories. Hallowell furthermore argues that, contrary to received wisdom and in the absence of objectivist dogma, experience itself does not rule out Ojibwa ideas. On the contrary, he argues, experience is consistent with their reading of things, given an animistic dogma.

Referring to her own work, Bird-David (1999: S73) explains that the Nayaka of South India “make their [own] personhood by producing and reproducing sharing relationships with surrounding beings, humans and others” and “they share the local environment with some of these beings, often objectified by kinship terms”. In sum, “[a]s and **when** and **because** they engage in and maintain relationships with other beings, they [Nayaka] constitute them as kinds of persons: they make them ‘relatives’ by sharing with them and thus make them persons” (Bird-David 1999: S73). Elephants are among these relatives. This habit of **relating to** rather than **separating from** others (stones, winds, plants, animals) gives rise to the term ‘relational ontology’ and allows ‘other-than-human-persons’ to exist in a shared environment.

Ojibwa- and Nayaka-like notions of ‘other-than-human-persons’ are widespread. Writing of the Yukaghirs for example, a small group of hunters in northeastern Siberia, Willerslev (2004: 629) notes:

It is a commonly held assumption in the West that attributes of personhood, with all that this entails in terms of language, intentionality, reasoning and moral awareness, belongs exclusively to human beings. Animals are understood to be wholly natural kinds of being, and their behaviour is usually explained as automatic and instinctual. However, among the Yukaghirs a different assumption prevails. In their world, persons can take on a variety of forms, of which human beings are only one. They can appear in the shape of rivers, trees, and spirits, but it is, above all, mammals that Yukaghirs commonly see as ‘other-than-human-persons’.

Similarly, Robin Ridington (1987: 130) records from the Canadian subarctic ‘other-than-human-persons’ in the experiences of his Dane-zaa informant Japasa (which translates as ‘chickadee’), partly told by Japasa’s son just before he (Japasa) died:

My dad said that when he was a boy, about nine years old, he went into the bush alone. He was lost from his people. In the night it rained. He was cold and wet from the rain, but in the morning he found himself warm and dry. A pair of silver foxes had come and protected him. After that the foxes kept him and looked after him. He stayed with them and they protected him. Those foxes had three pups. The male and female foxes brought food for the pups. They brought food for my dad too. They looked after him as if they were all the same. Those foxes wore clothes like people. My dad said he could understand their language. He said they taught him a song.

In these dense but revealing thoughts, Ridington lays out the differences between the “filters, prisms and mirrors” by or through which “people comprehended themselves and construed the world” (Martin 1987: 7).

As Hill (2011: 407) explains in the context of Canadian Ojibwa:

‘Other-than-human-persons’ were considered by the Ojibwa to be capable of acting as agents; that is, they had the ability to think and behave in ways that resembled or mirrored the ways that humans thought and behaved. This sort of ontology, or set of beliefs about the nature of being and existence, privileged certain animals with agency, intentionality and sentience, abilities usually reserved for humans in Western thought.

Were these ideas of ‘non-human person-beings’ (Guenther 2015) prevalent among southern African hunter-gatherers? Likely so, if, as Bird-David (1999: S78) asserts, notions of ‘other-than-human-persons’ are widespread among “cultures of peoples we call hunter-gatherers”.

Initially introduced into the southern African San context by Dowson (2007) and Low (2014), ‘the ontological turn’ has been championed and expanded by Mathias Guenther (2015, 2020). He has argued that (Guenther 2015: 277):

Studies of the relational ontologies of such peoples in Amazonia, sub-arctic America, Siberia and south Asia have revealed a number of commonalities, chief of them human-non-human



ontological instability and continuity and, deriving from it, the attribution of personhood to non-humans. This [his] article is concerned with the first aspect, ontological flux, which pervades San (especially /Xam) cosmology, manifested in myth, ritual and hunting, through such ontological and experiential processes as hybridity, transformation, mimesis and sympathy, as well as trance-induced transcendence.

By his acknowledgement of the integrated breadth of San expressive spheres, and his innovative and overarching use of concepts of ‘instability’, ‘mutability’ and ‘flux’, Guenther has invited us to view rock paintings as manifestations of, in his term, ‘(S)animism’ (Guenther 2015: 277). We present some examples of elephant imagery from the northern Cederberg and offer a (S)animistic understanding of them, arguing that what has become an almost obligatory resort to ‘shamanism’ is limiting.

### 3. Elephant depictions

A relational ontology is harder to demonstrate in the material archaeological record than it is in the attitudes, practices and stories of living communities, where it may be overtly expressed. Archaeologist Erica Hill (2013: 122) suggests that “through the study of imagery, species frequencies, and the contexts of animal remains, archaeologists may identify animals of symbolic or religious import”. We follow her advice on painted imagery here. In the paintings of the greater Cederberg region, but not necessarily throughout southern Africa, elephants and people are only rarely deliberately juxtaposed and intentionally associated, although more often than appears to be the case with other species. Note that we do not argue that these ‘compositions’ (*sensu* Lewis-Williams 1998) are simple narratives, but rather that some lifelikeness is needed to convey whatever meanings are intended (Parkington & Paterson 2021). Virtually all inter-specific associations involve humans.

#### *Numbers*

In a large sample of some five thousand mapped and recorded sites and likely tens of thousands of individual images in the Western Cape (Wiltshire 2011), we have recorded over two hundred sites with a combined total of more than six hundred elephant paintings, demonstrating a substantial interest in elephants by the painters.

#### *Sociality*

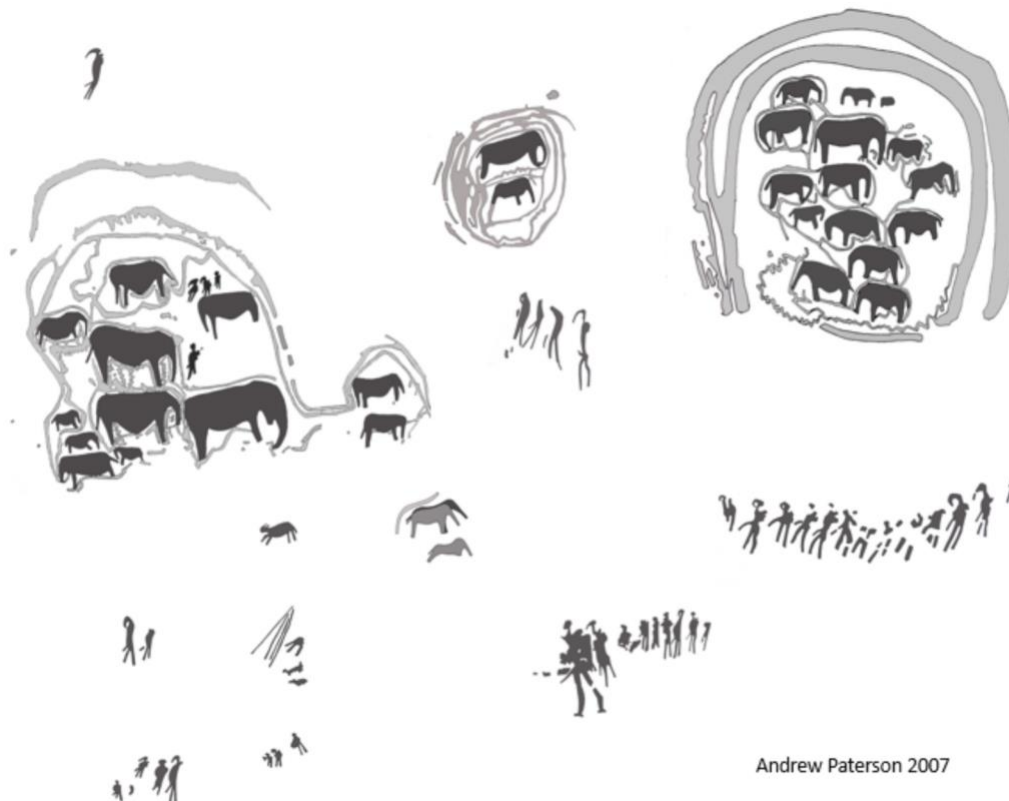
This sample of elephant paintings illustrates an engagement with sociality, life history and communication among these iconic animals, none of which feature nearly as strongly in depictions of eland (Paterson 2007, 2018; Parkington & Paterson 2017) or other less frequently depicted species (baboons, rhinoceros, hartebeest, equids). Eland imagery is related to the significance of the hunt and the association of hunting with sex (McCall 1970). Among the elephants, by contrast, mother and calf pairs, domestic matriarch-led herds, consort pairs and male-only ‘bachelor’ groups are discernible, and depictions of single large elephants may represent adult males, as otherwise elephants are rarely seen isolated from conspecifics. Recognisable social configurations are, very occasionally, found among depictions of other animals in Cape paintings, but never with the regularity of those among elephants, implying, as Paterson (2007) has noted, that painters were well-aware of the life histories and social coherence of elephant society.

#### *Therianthropes*

The therianthropic elephant/human figures from Groot Hex Rivier (Fig. 2) are clothed, equipped, and presented in a way reminiscent of nearby lines of male armed and cloaked human figures (Parkington & de Prada-Samper 2021). Those at Groot Hex Rivier are far more carefully drawn than those at Monte Cristo (Fig. 3), although the latter are more numerous, more variable and more clearly integrated with images of both people and elephants. The paintings at Monte Cristo are next to a secluded waterfall, placed on a sloping rock face offering almost no domestic living potential. In both locations, paintings of conflated human and elephant forms are critical to place creation. ‘Dwelling’ in both cases may have meant the use of sites as painting opportunities.

### *Sound-lines*

At Monte Cristo ‘elephantropes’ are located in a web of elephants surrounded by nested, crenelated and lobed lines that touch the elephants at the foot, the trunk, the belly, and the groin in ways that we have suggested, pioneered by Paterson (2007), depict sound lines (Parkington & Paterson 2017) and reference the physiological loci of sound generation and detection. Lines of figures – adjacent to these and including possible elephantropes, humans and others with accentuated penises – ‘dancing’ together, expand this elephant human relationship into ritual contexts. Enclosing lines similar to those from Monte Cristo but not identically arranged, surround elephant figures at Klipfonteinrand and Floreat, images we have also suggested reflect elephant sound (Parkington & Paterson 2017), effectively a recognition of elephant communication, if not language.



**Figure 3.** Human, elephant and elephantrope figures from Monte Cristo, immediately west of the Olifants River Valley.

### *Inter-specific associations*

Four additional examples of plausibly associated paintings of human and elephant figures are included here. The first (Fig. 4) is from the ‘Elephant Hunt’ site on the Bushmanskloof property and involves at least two armed hunters with drawn bows confronting two distressed elephants, seemingly mother and calf. The mother, breasts depicted, has a set of what look like arrows embedded in her trunk and the calf is trumpeting with a raised trunk. The second, from another Bushmanskloof site near to a very prominent waterfall and pool, also depicts a mother and calf in a circumstance of distress. Here (Fig. 5), two adult elephants, likely a mother and close female relative, are lumbering to the left toward an isolated small, stationary calf threatened by at least two armed, presumably male, bow-wielding humans. There are white arrows, revealed by digital enhancement, lodged in the baby elephant. This rock shelter shows substantial evidence of domestic use. These two ‘compositions’ appear to emphasise the vulnerability of elephants with young to human attack.





**Figure 4.** ‘Elephant Hunt’ site on the Bushmanskloof property (photograph by John Parkington, enhanced by Royden Yates).

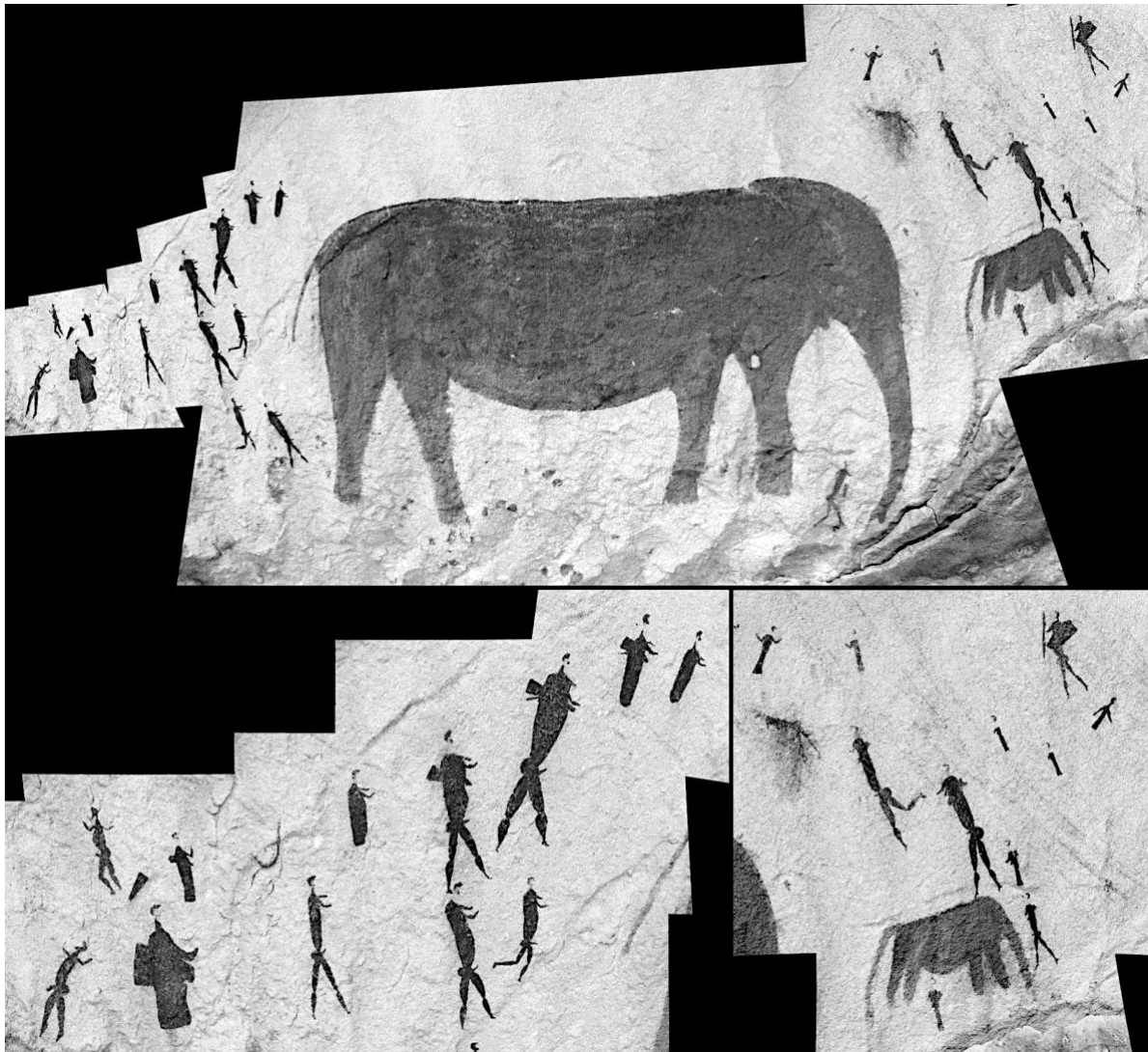


**Figure 5.** Elephants and human figures in an apparent composition at Meidegat on the Bushmanskloof property (photographs by Stephen Wessels, enhancement by Royden Yates).

At Zuurvlaakte, another site but with minimal signs of domestic use, painters have delivered an unquestionable ‘scene’ by juxtaposing at least twenty-seven human figures and a mother and calf



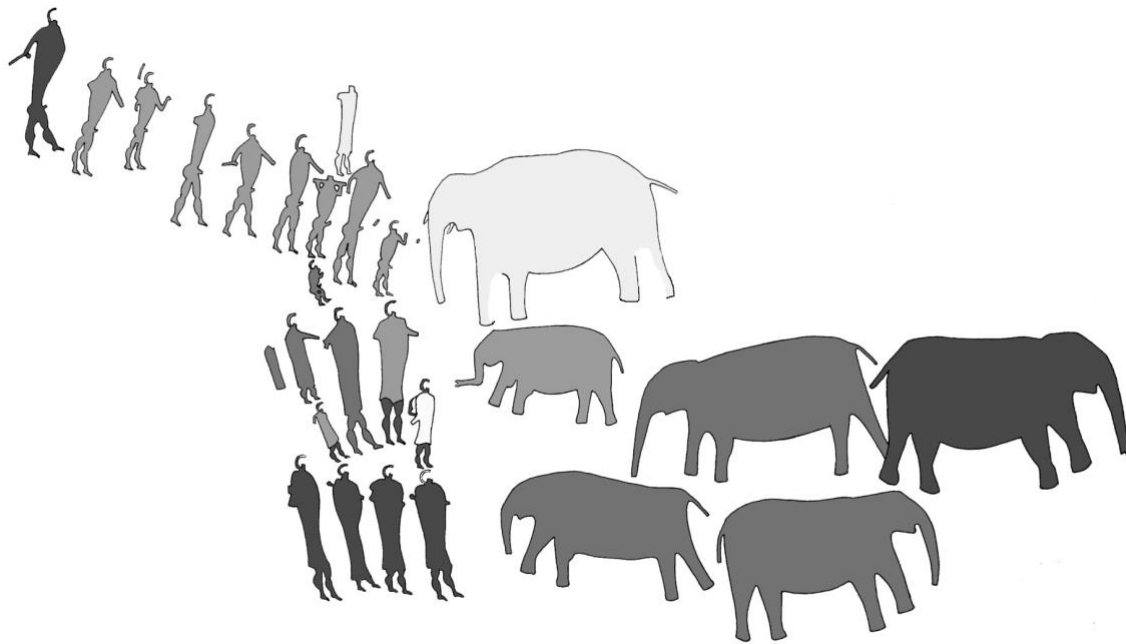
elephant (Fig. 6). Of the human figures, eleven have only their upper bodies painted, eight or nine appear male with penises and hunting bags, none are definitively female, and most of the males are shown in 'bow-holding' posture but without surviving bows. No arrows are visible. One male is positioned between the mother's trunk and her front legs, and all humans are clearly painted after the elephants and oriented toward the mother and calf elephant pair. This 'composition' does not appear to be a straightforward hunting occasion, but, along with the previous two examples, does reflect some risks of violent interactions between elephants and people, although a general antagonism between the two species is not frequently portrayed. Frequent involvements of extremely young elephants may signal the vulnerability of calves and their pivotal significance in potential interspecific tensions.



**Figure 6.** Elephant and human figures at Zuurvlaakte (photographs by John Parkington, enhancements by Royden Yates).

A somewhat different, but equally evocative, juxtaposition of human and elephant figures is the painting at a site, again without signs of domestic use, near Stadsaal in the central Cederberg (Fig. 7). About nineteen humans, most of them male, and six elephants, arguably all male in the absence of a size gradient, have been arranged in three opposed lines, humans and elephants juxtaposed but facing one another. In the upper line of humans, all are naked, whereas in the lower two all are cloaked. In the centre of the group, the elephant at the front of the middle line is seemingly scenting from very close range a small, white-cloaked human figure. His is the only white cloak among red ones. It is hard not to read in this deliberate 'composition' (*sensu* Lewis-Williams 1998: 87) a special interspecific, in this case clearly non-combative, relationship between humans and elephants, focused on the central pair where a personal link may be depicted.





**Figure 7.** Elephant and human figures at Stadsaal (tracing by Andrew Paterson).

#### *Elephants on heads*

We also illustrate a series of small elephant figures painted on the heads of humans, some recently and dramatically recognised through our digital image enhancement. The two examples from Sevilla (Fig. 8) are on the hook-headed shapes of naked male dancers. Those from Uitsig in the Olifants River Valley are also on hook-headed males (Fig. 9). At the Bushmanskloof site, one small elephant is on a cloaked and heavily-equipped male human figure, the other on a (likely) woman standing behind him (Fig. 10). In the line from Rocklands (Deacon 1993: 69) at least one of six male human figures, some cloaked and some naked, has what is likely to be a small elephant painted on his head (Fig. 11). It may be significant that, once again, domestic artefact and food waste remains are insubstantial. These sites, and there will be many more as digital enhancement proceeds, reveal a significant entanglement in the minds (and on the heads) of painters. At least one context for this is in male initiation events.

#### *Entanglement*

Along with imagery not reproduced here (shown in Paterson 2007, 2018), these paintings emphasise the painters' recognition and celebration of the intense sociality of elephants, of elephant life histories, of the centrality of motherhood in generating social cohesion, and of the underpinning of cohesion by communication. There is an additional hint of human elephant tensions, perhaps resulting from a recognition of the similarity between painter and elephant values and practices. If we had to pick out the features of this 'entanglement' of people and elephants ('engagement, respect with caution') we would point to the intersection of these components. The majority of sites are not marked as domestic places, but would appear to be significant in terms of visual recording of elephant-human relations.

#### **4. Why elephants?**

The Kalahari San stories of elephants, related by Biesele (1993, 2009) among the Ju/'hoansi, and Guenther (2020) among the Naro, for example, focus on affinal (in-law) relations between elephants and humans, sometimes extending to other species, brokered through the exchange of wives. Stories include episodes of deceit, violence and vengeance, which presumably reflects not only the tensions between in-laws but also a perceived underlying tension between elephant-beings and human-beings. As with other 'animal' participants (vultures, lions, the mantis, hyenas) in San stories in both the Kalahari and Karoo, elephants seem a deliberate choice to represent human issues with 'other-than-human-person' actors.

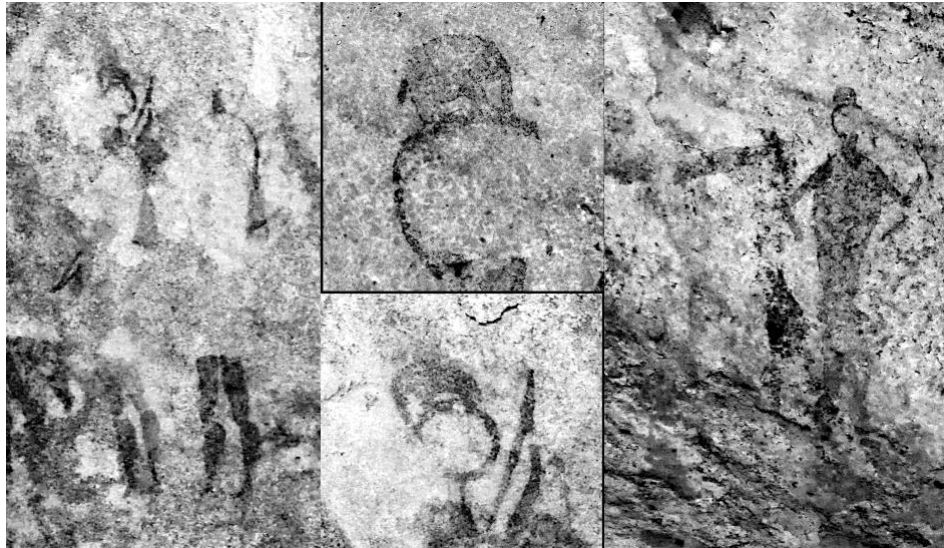


**Figure 8.** Small elephants depicted on the heads of two human figures at Sevilla (photographs by Joe Alferts, enhancements by Joe Alferts and Royden Yates).

Prompted by two stories told to him by the Naro elder Qhomatca, Guenther (2020: 378) asks “why elephants? Why is this species repeatedly featured as the ‘animal wife’ and ‘woman meat’?”. In answering, he observes that “the animal (the elephant) is not a girl but a married woman and mother of at least one small child, living with her in-laws at her husband’s place” (Guenther 2020: 378). Biesele (1993) makes it clear that this ‘why elephants?’ question is situated and may derive from a widespread and broad acceptance of elephants as being ‘like people’ in many ways, behavioural as well as physiological. Whereas the eland figures in issues of sex and marriage, the elephant’s role lies in marital relations, social reproduction and ongoing social coherence. More specifically, “[t]he Elephant Wife attains the status in San orature as a charter myth for in-law tension” (Guenther 2020: 380).

From a context closer to the northern Cederberg, in a story related by /Han=kass’o to Lucy Lloyd in February and March 1878 (Digital Bleek and Lloyd 2005: L.VIII.4: 6334-6413, L.VIII.5: 6414-6455), !gwa!nuntu (/kaggen the creator/trickster figure in another version) is digging honey and has left his granddaughter, whom he is minding, above ground and out of his sight. A group of passing elephants steal the young girl and take her away to their home, leaving one of their own young daughters behind in her place. When !gwa!nuntu realises what has happened he pursues the elephants to their village and retrieves the human girl. All ends well (except for the elephant child, whom !gwa!nuntu kills) and the story seems, in part at least, to refer to the exchange of young women between groups that creates difficult, sometimes confrontational, relations between in-laws. It is notable that there is an attempted exchange of young girls, human and ‘other-than-human’ equivalents, by the elephant mother that is rejected by the human grandfather.





**Figure 9.** Small elephants depicted on the heads two human figures at Uitsig (photographs and enhancements by Royden Yates).



**Figure 10.** Small elephants depicted on the heads of two human figures at Mike's shelter, Bushmansklouf (photographs and enhancements by Royden Yates).





**Figure 11.** Small elephants depicted on the heads of (one or more) human figures at Rocklands (photograph by Janette Deacon, enhancement by Royden Yates).

Another response to the ‘why elephants?’ question is suggested by Erica Hill’s (2011) insightful account of Yupiit ‘other-than-human-person’ thinking and a comparison between the roles of subarctic bear and fynbos elephant. Many human-animal relationships are those between a human predator and an animal prey, with the relationship often presented as one of respectful negotiations around the hunt and the kill. “Elk, for example, a key prey animal, were understood as human ancestors, mythic kin with whom humans maintained special relationships” (Hill 2011: 409). Such a relationship may apply to the eland in southern Africa. In the cases of non-prey, Hill (2011: 409) records that “bears in circumpolar societies occupied a privileged ontological position as other-than-human-persons. Such animals could be considered kinfolk and behaved in ways that paralleled human society – living in houses, organising themselves in social groups and engaging in exchange relationships”. This was because the bear was among species “considered especially powerful, dangerous or similar to humans in key respects” (Hill 2011: 409). Elephants meet these requirements, competing with their human neighbours not for food, but for water. Human and elephant societies in the Olifants River were organised as fission and fusion social units with movements co-ordinated by communication, and arrangements based on social coherence, a commonality that must have been obvious to San painters.

### 5. Transformation or permanent instability?

In these ethnographies, ‘other-than-human-persons’ are often not strictly instances of transformation, in the sense of shifts from one category to another through time. Willerslev refers to “in-between identities” (2004: 638), and “not **not**-animal” (2004: 629). Similarly, Japasa’s foxes are not people transformed, they are ‘in-between’ beings whose identity, in Guenther’s terms, is unresolved. Robin Ridington (1987: 133-134) noted “I can be a frog or a fox and still be a person. I can know them as I know myself. If I am an Indian, I can be led toward a place where this knowledge will come naturally”, an interesting reference to the role of place in identity creation.

Nearer, in a context more relevant to that of Soaqua painters, “in the context of such an ambiguous, mutable, often capricious world and the apparent comfort with this conveyed by the /Xam informants” (Skotnes 2009: 39), Pippa Skotnes (2009: 39) argues that:

The perception of things not being what they seem is not a perception of ambiguity. It is not just about seeing something as one thing at one moment and as another thing at another. It is about perceiving the two simultaneously, about observing one thing and seeing another at once bound up within its differing form.

Referring to a young man ‘turned into a tree’ after receiving the forbidden gaze of a young girl at her first menstruation, Skotnes (2009: 40) extracts from a narrative by //Kabbo to Lucy Lloyd:

He has his eyes, because he was a man  
 he has his head, he has his head hair,  
 because he is a tree, which is a man,  
 he is a man, he is a tree,  
 he has his feet, he is shod,  
 he has his nails, he has his ears,  
 he is a tree, because he is a man, he is a tree  
 ...  
 While he is a tree, he is a man.

In explanation, Skotnes (2009: 40) offers:

Yet this is not a simple transformation from one state to another. What //Kabbo struggles to describe is the simultaneous condition of being both a tree and a person. What he conveys is a man with the appearance of a man yet the ontology of a tree.

//Kabbo’s struggle reminds us of Lewis-Williams’ (1980: 20) wrestling with the identity of the /Xam “trickster-creator figure //kaggen, a name which the Bleeks translated as ‘Mantis’”. Lewis-Williams (1980: 20) concludes that “//kaggen neither **is** nor **is not** a praying mantis”, in effect a mantis who is married to a hyrax and hunts with bow and arrow. This anticipates the notion of an ‘other-than-human-person’, in the sense of being a ‘cannot-tell’ (Parkington 2003) or an ‘in-between’ (Willerslev 2004). Japasa’s foxes are foxes who are people, !gwa!nuntu’s elephants are elephants who are people, the Groot Hex Rivier images are of elephants who were people. Beings are persons or people by what they do rather than what they look like. If you stride around cloaked and equipped you are a person, in this case an elephant person. When /han=kass’o told Lucy Lloyd that “all things were once people” (Digital Bleek and Lloyd 2005: L.VIII. 7593v), he did not mean that they were human beings, but rather they were ‘other-than-human-persons’ at a time before personhood became more regularly restricted to human persons.

We are suggesting a painters’ world where an elephant is sometimes just that, an elephant encountered in the veld, but at other times manifests as an ‘other-than-human-person’ capable of communicating, interacting and, potentially, harming. ‘Other-than-human-personhood’ is thus a capacity or a potential, situationally manifested to and recognised by hunter-gatherers who share the world with such unstable neighbours. Pippa Skotnes (2001, 2009: 17) has described the capacity of an object to be “precisely what it did not appear to be” as ‘real presence’, using the example of the Roman Catholic host, which is neither wafer nor body but both.

Referring to the most appropriate context from which we have detailed first hand San, in this case /Xam, accounts of identities and landscapes some 200 to 300 km to the east of the Agter Pakhuis, Skotnes (2001: 9) writes:

The knowledge of things being what they do not appear to be is evident in many of his [//Kabbo, the Bleek and Lloyd’s chief instructor on /Xam ontology] accounts. In //Kabbo’s world there once existed an Early Time, a First Order in which things were different from how they became. Sentience was resident in almost everything from the wind to the moon to the stars. Every object had conferred upon it the qualities of being alive and taking responsibility for what happened in the world. After the Early Times animals became wild and lost their humanity, people developed

laws and the forms of creatures and heavenly bodies became more stable. Yet the First Order continued to permeate the Second.

The Soaqua lived in this permeated Second Order, where, given the commonalities asserted by Lewis-Williams (1998), ‘other-than-human-persons’ should be anticipated in painted imagery. Referring to the inchoate ‘netherworld’ of the First Order, Guenther (2014: 196) suggests that “ordinary people know, and are in touch with it, through dreams and visions or by means of sacralised sites in the landscape that are physical manifestations of beings or states from the world beyond”. Groot Hex Rivier, Monte Cristo and other painted sites mentioned above, may well have been the ‘sacralised sites’, and the references to ‘manifestations of beings’ to which Guenther refers. We view these painted sites as places of memory in an enculturated landscape.

## 6. Religion or ontology, rituals and specialists

We subscribe to the view that these frameworks are better described as ontological than religious from the following perspective (Hill 2011: 420-421):

Whilst the category of ‘religion’ is dependent on a dichotomy between the known and the unknowable, the natural and the supernatural, the mundane and the numinous, Eskimo [sic, as used by author] understood other-than-human-persons as social actors with whom they shared the world. Relations with these persons involved sets of rules and expectations and were predicated upon mutual respect, just as one’s relations with human kin were.

For Yupiit, Ojibwa, Yukhagir, Nayaka and, we argue here, for Soaqua painters, ‘other-than-human-persons’, including elephantropes in the Cederberg painted record, were as real as themselves, inhabiting (Riley 2007: 292):

A place where ‘reality’ or temporal certainty, what one would regard as ‘real time’ or ‘real interactions’ of nature and common life, was constantly being interrupted by beings and powers from another dimension and history.

The impacts of ‘other-than-human-persons’ could be, in fact had to be, mitigated by the attitudes and practices of **all** hunter-gatherers. Hill (2011: 407) concludes that:

Focusing on shamanism in the study of hunter-gatherer belief obscures the roles of hunters and their wives. Their thoughts and actions established and maintained relationships with prey animals and may be more productively conceptualised as dynamic social behaviours, embedded within the context of daily life, than as privileged ritual acts.

Riley (2007: 292) has written:

The Early Times constantly emerged into the daily lives of the /Xam and it seems that they experienced these incursions of time and space not just as hallucinations or linked with the activities of people, living and dead, such as healers and rainmakers or game sorcerers, but in the daily lives of all people.

In many regions of the world game and other animals were and perhaps still are thought to display agency, intentionality and sentience, when interacting with human hunters and gatherers. Elephants display these criteria, supported by extensive wildlife observations (Moss et al. 2011) and as San stories, ascribing personhood, confirm (Biesele 1993, 2009; Guenther 2015, 2020). Regarding relations between human and other-than-human-persons, Riley (2007) suggests and Hill (2011: 411) states:

We should not relegate interacting and communicating with other-than-human-persons to the realm of the religious or the supernatural. Rather, such encounters are part of life [for Eskimo of Alaska and Chukotka] and often did not require either the presence or mediation of ritual specialists.



Relational ontology and the belief in animal personhood provide the conceptual space for a healer entering trance to access the potency of an animal helper; a mature woman at an eland dance to welcome the young ‘new maiden’ into the herd; a male initiate to feel the presence of the eland and ‘own’ the skills and success rate of the mantis at the initiation camp; a skilled hunter to enter the mind of, and thus control, the kudu he’s trying to kill; and a Soaqua family to have confidence that their relatives, the elephants, feel respected, more inclined to share and less prone to violence. These understandings of the world provide the umbrella for distinguishing the ‘many potential meanings’ of rock art images (Lewis-Williams 1998), perhaps especially of the therianthropes.

## 7. Why paintings?

Megan Bieseles’s (1993) comments on the adaptive value of expressive forms is persuasive. She argues that these forms, among which we should include painted imagery, “may accomplish things for society”, among which things we may include dealing with ‘other-than-human-persons’, “that can be done in no other way” (Bieseles 1993: 192). Stories and paintings “codify and condense meaning” and, using metaphor, have “a multiplier effect on experience” (Bieseles 1993: 201), that perhaps in Lewis-Williams’ (1992: 59) words, “informs attitudes and affective responses to many of life’s situations”. Relations between people and elephants in the northern Cederberg were likely to have been among these ‘situations’.

References in San folklore, ethnography and, we argue here, rock art support the suggestion that San hunter-gatherer-painters viewed elephants as ‘other-than-human-persons’. Painters shared with elephants the physical landscape of the Olifants River and surrounds, tracking between water holes and pools and likely following paths used by elephants and people alike. With their similar lifespans, comparable land use habits and shared water dependence, it is not hard to envisage life-long relations of mutual respect between families of both species with human persons, no doubt, exercising some caution in their dealings with very large, intelligent competitors. The prominence and specific manifestations of elephants in the rock art no doubt reflect the reciprocal obligations and responsibilities among fellow-travelling painters.

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## Supplementary online material

[Parkington & Alferts Supplementary Online Material File 1](#)

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