



Dances with

ELAND

The Rock Art of the San-Bushman.

BY BROOKE CHILVERS

If you've ever hunted eland (*Taurotragus oryx*) in the acacia savanna or miombo woodland of Africa, you've been humbled by the majesty of this one-ton antelope crowned with its two-foot corkscrew horns—and grateful for its delectable meat.

If you've wounded a wary old bull whose impressive dewlap recalls a rodeo Brahma, and tracked it on foot until you were both foaming at the mouth, you can appreciate their allegorical importance in Bushman (now called San) cosmology as they expressed it on rock surfaces with pigment-laden fingers, feathers, or gnu-tail paintbrushes.

The San are the diminutive, golden-skinned, original hunter-gatherers south of the Zambezi River, harassed over centuries by Khoikhoi (Hottentot) pastoralists, Bantu farmers, and white settlers.

There is great difficulty in radiocarbon-dating their rock art via the pigments made with red and yellow ochre, gypsum, manganese, or charcoal, mixed and bonded with blood, egg, fat, casein, bone glue, or latex from certain plants. Estimates of the age of the earliest painted works vary from 27,000 to 19,000 to 10,000 BP. What is for sure is that this age-old tradition, along with the San's lifestyle (and much of the wildlife), disappeared by the 20th century. Today, San family groups remain mostly in Botswana's and Namibia's Kalahari Desert, where they work on cattle farms and game ranches, with few artists among them.

Luckily for scholars, two 19th-century characters, Wilhelm Bleek (1827–1875), a linguist and librarian to the Governor of the Cape Colony, and his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd (1834–1914), recognized the significance of San parietal art, and in 1870 started closely questioning the click-speaking and now extinct /Xam. By asking, "Does God love one antelope more than the others?" they developed an inkling of San beliefs, allowing us to interpret the connections between San thought and San art. Unfortunately, Bleek and Lloyd never saw the rock art or the vision-inspired "trance dances" that shamans transformed into engraved or painted works of art.

"God made the eland first and then the giraffe," the San told them, which explains why, in many regions such as South Africa's western Cape and Drakensberg Mountains, representations of eland outnumber all other species (kudu, harte-

beest, giraffe, sable antelope, elephant, and buffalo) combined. Also, the San artists devoted more attention to detailing eland by using a wider variety of colors and shading the figures. Eland were also portrayed from every possible angle—broadside, frontal, from the back, and even from above; in every activity—lying down, running, browsing, and in association with other animals, people, or hard-to-interpret geometric symbols.

Interestingly, eland were never the primary target of San arrows dipped in cardiotoxic poison; nor is it the most common species of their arid homeland where gemsbok, hartebeest, springbok, and even elephant are more common.

One hundred years after Bleek and Lloyd, scholars have evolved from thinking that San rock art was mere decoration, a chronicling of events, an early form of writing, or "magic" for hunting success, to interpreting the figures accompanied by dots, circles, grids, crosses, chevrons, zigzags, and undulating lines as "metaphors of trance," known as *!kia* in the Kalahari, as experienced by shaman mystics.

Shamans (who can count half of the men and a third of the women in a clan) healed the ill, brought rain, and attracted game by performing "medicine" dances and songs during communal curings and entering into a clapping- and breathing-induced entoptic hallucinogenic trance. Their out-of-body journeys into the realms above and below the material world were intended to harness the energy and invisible potency, called *n/om*, possessed by certain animals like eland, as well as rain and plants, like the grasses from which their smallest arrow shafts were fashioned.

The images in the resulting artwork are symbols

of the potency channeled during the trance. Even touching a pictograph allowed the viewer to absorb its power.

During a medicine dance, the trancer moves like an eland hit with a poisoned arrow; he trembles, staggers, lowers his head, bleeds from the nose, sweats, and falls unconscious. In their art, the dots may represent sweat and zigzags the urinating of the dying eland, whose fat, heart, blood, mouth foam, dewlap skin, and tail possess especially powerful *n/om*.

Why did Africa's tallest (standing six feet at the shoulder), slowest-running, but longest trotting antelope possess the most *n/om*? Probably because eland was the favorite antelope of their creator god, /Kaggen, and it appears in a variety of creation and other myths. For example, when /Kaggen's son killed an eland that the god's wife had given birth to, he mixes its blood with its fat and brought forth a multitude of eland. /Kaggen created the moon from a feather used "to wipe eland's gall from his eyes," and even transforms himself into an eland bull. "Other animals are like servants to the eland," whose elegant coloring and stripes "has no equal in beauty," recounted one elder.

The eland's *n/om* also derives from its creation near a waterhole. /Kaggen dug into a well and found red, white, and black sand. He used red (associated with both beauty and goodness) to create eland, white for giraffe and gemsbok, and black for elephant, warthog, buffalo, and wildebeest. This association with water extends to eland blood, used by shamans to make rain where it falls. "A very long time ago, the Rain was like an Eland," said one old San. Those who wished to acquire the animal's power smeared its blood on their throats and backs; it also protected them from various dangers, including lightning.

Because of its *n/om*, numerous rituals surrounded eland hunting, especially the killing of a boy's first. When he shoots his link-shaft arrow, the point stays embedded in the animal and its reed shaft falls to the ground. He doesn't touch it, but turns it over with his bow to check for blood that indicates the extent of the wound. If the boy were to touch it, the eland wouldn't die, so an elder puts it back into the quiver.

The boy walks slowly so as not to make the

eland's heart afraid; if he runs or sneezes, the eland will run away—connected acts that express the empathetic bond between hunter and prey. He stays in the veldt, makes a fire that cannot be used for cooking, and uses the ash to draw a circle on his forehead and a line down his nose, creating a visual representation of that bond.

Because "the game knows the things we do when we are in our home," he avoids drinking, for if he urinates so will the eland, thus evacuating the poison. He avoids contact with things associated with women, like cooking pots, and the children are instructed to stay quiet or the eland will run away.

When tracking the wounded eland, the hunters don't cross or tread on the spoor. When the animal is found dead, the boy doesn't approach it until the heart has been removed. The hunters are careful not to cast a shadow across the eland, as that would make it lean; instead they beat it with its tail to fatten it. They build a fire to cook the medicine parts, and make a broth from the throat and collar bone for the elders, who will perform the eland dance to cure all present known and unknown illnesses.

Finally, they return to the village with the boy carrying the heart, ears, and other medicine parts on a stick. The women shout "Euu! Euu!"—a sound reserved for the eland, said to resemble the wailing of hyenas deprived of meat. Then the boy is scarified, and medicine, made from the eland's fat and hair mixed with plant essences, is rubbed in. Then everyone joins in the curing dance, eland song, and meat sharing.

Although we can comprehend the representation of eland as a symbol through which the San expressed their understanding of both natural and divine phenomena, our interpretations of this mysterious art may still be tainted by our Western attitudes and theories—despite 30 years of research based on San ethnography. But because the eland is also associated with passages to puberty, female fertility, and the ability of girls to attract rainfall, perhaps its esteemed position in art is really a reflection of its real-world power to bond a tiny community.

Standing on a rare hill in the heart of Botswana's
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Art

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Chobe National Park at the place called Savuti, where thorny scrub covers the vast Mababa Depression, in the cool light of morning I examined a pictograph daubed in brick-red ocher of silhouettes of eland, elephant, and sable antelope stacked on top of one another. Like today's Cape Nguni diviners, who return to old San rock art sites to tap into the power of the ancestors through these images, I can only say that I sensed it, too. ■

Brooke thanks her husband, Rudy Lubin, for climbing like a klipspringer through the rocky outcroppings of Botswana and Namibia to photograph these testimonies to an ancient human presence in the wilderness.



Chicken Chase

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seeking escape from the gene pool. I had all the time in the world to track the lead bird, cover it with the gun muzzle, and claim my first chicken.

And I missed again. I invoked the Deity and swung the gun, more in anger than with shooting skill, and fired the second barrel as the two birds swept past. The lead bird tumbled head over feathered feet and thumped to the frozen turf, as dead as its ancestors.

It took a while to sink in. After 37 years I had killed my first prairie chicken. I was one with the pioneers.

Unlike them, however, I celebrated with a 20-minute hot shower and a cold drink. ■

Joel Vance is the author of Grandma and the Buck Deer; Bobs, Brush and Brittanies; Tails I Lose; Down Home Missouri; and Autumn Shadows.

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