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**HUNTER-GATHERERS, TRADERS AND SLAVERS:**  
**The 'mfecane' impact on Bushman ritual and art** \*

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During the last few decades archaeologists and historians have actively challenged widely held misconceptions concerning South Africa's pre-colonial and colonial past. Perhaps the most significant of these is Julian Cobbing's radical critique of the notion of the mfecane. While some authors agree in principle with Cobbing's argument (see for example Wright 1989; Raun 1989; including papers at this conference) many of these nonetheless disagree with certain empirical details. Despite this academic debate researchers realise the significance of Cobbing's critique as providing a framework for the reintegration of 'black' and 'white' histories of South Africa (Wright 1989: 273).

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What is emerging, then, is an attempt to rewrite South Africa's history devoid of the mfecane myth and its implications. But, because early accounts of South Africa's past have not been totally unloaded of prejudice and the Colonists' legitimizing ideologies, myths continue to act as alibis for the cultural divisionist ideologies that have ensued. One such myth is the part played by Bushman peoples in the colonial history of Southern Africa; for the purposes of this conference this would include the beginning of the 19th century in the south-eastern mountains. If we are to abandon the mfecane term and, more especially, the concept because of their role in legitimising the apartheid state, historic reconstructions that follow this crucial step should take cognisance of all peoples present on the landscape at the time.

The Bushman peoples have been politically marginalized since the arrival of European colonists in southern Africa. The white settlers brought with them a specific set of European morals and standards. And it was through these conservative attitudes that the Bushmen were seen and judged. Early writers convey these attitudes quite succinctly. The missionaries were particularly scathing of the Bushmen. Moffat (1842) and Tindall (1858) are amongst many who emphasize what they considered to be a lacuna in Bushman life:

Hard is the Bushman's lot, friendless, forsaken, an outcast from the world, greatly preferring the company of beasts of prey to that of civilized man. ... We can scarcely conceive of human beings descending lower in the scale of ignorance and vice; ... If, during a period of four thousand years, they have sunk thus low, what would have the world become if left without Divine revelation to grope in the mazes of heathen darkness? (Moffat 1842)

He has no religion, no laws, no government, no recognised authority, no patrimony, no fixed abode ... a soul debased, it is true, and completely bound down and clogged by his animal nature (Tindall 1856).

Clearly, then, it was attitudes like these that informed early travellers' and missionaries' perceptions of Bushman peoples' political role in Southern Africa. These perceptions gave rise to what have become the most widely held stereotypic images of the Bushmen in history and literature today. They are the Bushmen as stock raiders and the Bushmen as a vanishing race.

### Bushman Raiders

The early written records of events in Southern Africa abound with references to Bushman as raiders - some writers mention little else. For example, Arbousset (1840, in Ambrose and

Brutsch 1891) makes repeated references to this, including how even the Basotho would not use some of the good pastures for their cattle because they were 'exposed to the depredations' of the Bushmen. In one incident (ibid: 104) during Arbousset's expedition with King Moshoeshe, their horses disappeared during the night; they immediately assumed it was the Bushmen:

The previous winter, these vagrants had stolen all of Masopo's horses, and they had eaten them in the bush in the heart of the Maloti. We reckoned that the same thing must be happening to us. But we were wrong. Our horses had simply gone round a mountain, and we found them grazing quietly at the bottom of a valley.

This kind of incident must have happened on more than one occasion. It was supposedly because of these raids that boers mounted extensive commandos against the Bushmen, but the hatred ran deeper than this. While I would not argue that Bushman people were not involved in numerous raids throughout the subcontinent, I do argue against the importance this activity is given. These raids have to be placed within a wider, more enquiring social context (see Wright 1971).

The 'Bushman as raider' stereotype leads directly to the next. This outlawed existence, so the reconstruction goes, could not go on for much longer; there could only be one end to it.

### The Vanishing Bushman

As a result of the arrival of Bantu-speaking farmers and white colonists in Southern Africa, the Bushmen, supposedly the weakest of the various cultural groups, disappeared into the more mountainous and less hospitable parts of the country. A view still widely held and promoted in popular, local histories is that some groups were forced to move into the drier areas of the Kalahari (for example see Hawkins 1982:10).

More recently, liberal histories sometimes mention some form of economic relationship between Bushmen and pastoralists or farmers in the different regions (Wilson & Thompson 1982; Thompson 1990). But these references are scant, and the impression is still created that the Bushmen gave in to the stronger, less primitive farmers or were entirely assimilated (see Thompson 1990:fig.1). The principle of the so-called 'weaker' giving way to the 'stronger' was thus established.

This view of the Bushmen vanishing into the mountains where they lived out their last days, carrying out raids from time to time, is produced by the same ideology that constructed what Wright has termed the 'devastation stereotype' for the Natal area (Wright 1988), and that the 'vanishing Bushman stereotype' was reinforced for much the same reason. Interestingly, this situation finds a parallel in the USA with the notion of the 'vanishing American Indian' (Dippie 1982).

### The Archaeological Record

The persistence of these two stereotypes results from continuing to look at the Bushmen through the prejudices of early writers. When one reads writers who were more sympathetic towards the Bushmen, such as Bleek (1874, 1875), Hodgson (1821-1831, edited by Cope 1877), Orpen (1874) and Stow (1905), although still tainted with European values, a different image of the Bushmen and their political role in Southern Africa begins to emerge. An even more dramatically different image would emerge if a history had been written by a Bushman and from a Bushman's perspective. In the absence of such a history, we do nevertheless have a twofold record of another kind, greatly underestimated but undeniably from a Bushman perspective, to which we can turn.

The better known part of this twofold record includes material remains, and it is with these that archaeologists have been primarily concerned. During the last decade in particular a number of studies have demonstrated that contact between Bushmen and Bantu-speaking farmers was much more complex than previously thought (for example, Parkington 1984; Denbow 1988; Smith 1988; Hall 1989; Kinahan 1989; Mazel 1989). Bushman reaction to the arrival of Bantu-speaking farmers and European colonists can no longer be seen in terms of weaker people tamely submitting to more sophisticated people with more advanced modes of subsistence.

Maggs and Whitelaw (1991:11) have argued that further studies in this field need to deal with understanding the more complex 'interneshing processes' between the various economies. The key to understanding these processes is to be found in social or cognitive enquiries (cf Lewis-Williams 1982, 1984; Hall 1990; Hazel 1989). Turning to cognitive issues is a recent and important trend in archaeology (see Lewis-Williams<sup>1985</sup>, 1989; Huffman 1988). In contrast, by relying heavily on early documents and emphasizing economic concerns at the expense of cognitive issues, Kalahari revisionists (Schrire 1980, 1984; Wilmsen 1989; Wilmsen & Denbow 1990) have been able to argue that the Bushmen merely an oppressed class rather than a cultural group with its own values, religion and sense of identity.

An examination of ritual and religion shows that interaction between the Bushmen and farmers or pastoralists did not lead to the disappearance of cultural identity (Dowson in prep.). But, clearly, cultural identity did change in some respects. A social enquiry, then, leads to the second part of the twofold 'Bushman record': rock art.

Early reaction to the rock art of Southern Africa was one of great surprise, given the intellectual status ascribed to the Bushmen. Referring to paintings in a shelter in Lesotho,

Arbousset writes (1840, in Ambrose & Brutsch 1991:82):

What touching interest and poetry there is in the innocent pastimes of unfortunate people!

For well over a century views about the art did not change dramatically. It was not until researchers began to use recorded authentic Bushman beliefs that a much more deeper, intellectual appreciation of the art began to emerge. The current trend began by recognising that much of the art in Southern Africa reflected medicine men and women's (shamans) experiences and beliefs about the trance ritual (Lewis-Williams 1983, 1986, 1990; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989; Huffman 1983; Yates et al. 1985, 1990; Hall 1986; Garlake 1987a,b).

This research lead to examining the role of the shaman and rock art in Bushman society, pre- and post-contact (Lewis-Williams 1982; Campbell 1987). This analysis was, however, carried out with a misconception of what is and is not 'contact art' hence a new examination is required (Dowson in prep.).

I argue that the rock art is not just a reflection of beliefs and experiences associated with the trance ritual. The art is a material item that was always actively implicated in the reproduction of social relations. The arrival of Bantu-speaking farmers presented the Bushmen in general and the shamans in particular with a new set of social relations. The farmers

turned to shamans to perform rain-making rituals for which payment in the form of livestock was received. This resulted in a whole new social role for the shaman that inevitably led to power struggles between shamans, and between shamans and the rest of the group. Not surprisingly, the art became instrumental in forging new social relations that developed out of these struggles.

To be able to discern and interpret exactly how the art played this role we need to understand how the depictions are produced. There are two processes that produce the art, a physical process and a cognitive process. The physical processes produce such physical features as colour, technique, content and method of execution. Cognitive processes of production bring together these physical, or empirical, aspects in certain combinations in order to produce specific statements. The cognitive structure is itself socially produced in that meanings attached to specific combinations of physical features come out of social practice, and are thus intimately implicated in developing power relations and the reproduction and transformation of social forms.

In this way events such as those towards the end of the 18th century and the early 19th century, commonly referred to as the 'mfecane', had considerable impact on Bushman art (for a more fully developed discussion see Dowson in prep.).

### Bushmen in the 'afecans' Period

Today we know that interaction between the Bushman and farmers, which appears to have started almost as soon as the farmers arrived, was initially extensive and amicable; further, economic relations formed only part of this relationship (Mazel 1989:132-152). Mazel has argued that relationships, certainly at the outset were on a more equal footing, not the kind of clientship that is reported in the 19th century records (Mazel 1989:142). The possibility that clientship relations became more substantial as a result of decimation of the Bushman peoples by the European colonists should be investigated.

As a result of trade from Delagoa Bay and later from Port Natal Bantu-speaking farmers experienced major political and social transformations. Early traders, because of prejudices against the Bushmen and perhaps because the Bushmen <sup>apparently</sup> lacked central political institutions, tended to concentrate their efforts <sup>with</sup> on the farmers. Moreover, settled farming communities were probably in a better position to organise ivory trade. This does not mean, however, that Bushman groups were always passive observers of these events. Andrew Bain (in Lister 1949), for instance, was trading cattle for ivory directly with the Bushmen in what is Transkei today. At the beginning of the 19th century Bushmen were actively involved in ivory trade, which may, albeit indirectly, have extended to the period when the Portuguese were collecting ivory from the Zululand coast

(Vinnicombe 1976:12,14; see also Wright 1971:33-34). It is also likely that Bushman hunters were implicated to the trade networks as middlemen (Wright 1971:34).

These new economic relations would undoubtedly have had an effect on social relations within Bushman groups. The new sources of wealth (ivory trade and rain-making) created new kinds of ownership and statuses and, inevitably, struggle. At the heart of this new, evolving stratification of Bushman society were the shamans. In earlier decades, before the ivory trade and before the colonial influence, shamans had established relations with Bantu-speaking farmers. As the original inhabitants, the Bushmen were recognised as the custodians of the land, and it was natural for the farmers to turn to them. This relationship, posited essentially on land ownership issues, came to centre on rain-making. The farmers, more than the Bushmen themselves, were dependent on rain: even minor droughts and, perhaps more important, delayed rains affected their crops and herds far more than it did the hunting and gathering Bushmen's antelope and veldfoods. The mediator thus turned out to be the shaman. It was he or she who had [ideological] control over the farmers' economy. Even though the farmers had occupied the land, they were unable to farm successfully without rain. The shamans were paid for their rain-making services with cattle. They thus acquired new status as procurers of meat from the farmers' herds and no doubt achieved power through a newly developed right to distribute the

meat they acquired through rain-making. With the depletion of antelope herds through colonial hunting, the Bushmen shamans were in turn forced to become more dependent on the farmers: the shamans had to tighten their grip on the farmers. The power struggle of the 'mfecane' period was thus multidimensional.

Within Bushman society, diminishing resources engendered competition between shamans: people looked to them as the go-between between the Bushmen and the farmers and, increasingly, the principle producers of food. Shamans thus began to compete with one another for positions of influence.

This inter-shaman struggle manifested itself in the art. As I have indicated, the paintings were not simply pictures of daily activities, they were active agents in power struggles. In this brief account of a fairly complex matter I shall refer to only two features of the art that were used by shaman-artists to establish and increase their power: depictions of elephants, and conflict scenes.

#### Impact on the Art

In the south-eastern mountains paintings of elephants and scenes of elephant hunts are not infrequent. Given the control of shamans over other spheres of life, such as hunting (Bleek 1935), I believe it is likely that shamans

would have appropriated the ivory trade to bolster their own status. As people appealed to them for success in antelope and ostrich hunting, they probably also appealed to them to ensure success in the acquisition of ivory. This is not to say all elephant hunters were necessarily shamans. The painting of elephant hunts were statements about and evidence for the shaman's power over resources. Shamans made paintings of elephant hunts and elephants to reinforce their control over the Bushman involvement in the ivory trade. Depictions of elephants, in some instances with exaggerated tusks, seem to have become symbols of the shamans' power. The paintings were thus actively involved then in the reproduction and entrenchment of the shamans' power.

This brings me to depictions of conflict. Although reportedly numerous, conflict scenes are not found in large numbers in the art. Early rock art scholars concentrated on themes such as these because they seemed to match their views of the Bushmen as robbers. The most notable concentration of paintings of conflict scenes occurs in the Caledon River valley. As Cobbing (1983) has shown, the Caledon River valley is an important region for discussing the struggles of the 'mfecane' period. Despite the problem of exact dates for each of the paintings, the concentration of the fight scenes in this area can hardly be fortuitous.

The Caledon Valley paintings depict Bushman-Bushman, Bushman-farmer as well as farmer-farmer conflicts. An examination of these scenes in terms of Bushman beliefs show they are not simple records of actual events. Many have elements that unequivocally relate to trance experience (Campbell 1988; 1987) and thus place the paintings in the realm of shaman ideologies.

Traditionally Bushman shamans in trance fought of marauding spirits, malevolent but nameless shamans. With the development of relations with other people, the Bantu-speaking farmers and the colonists, this shamanistic activity was extended to include these new sources of conflict (Campbell 1987). The shamans now used their powers to engage the intruders on their land. This is not, however, a fully adequate explanation. We need to enquire about the social relations issuing in the fights and also about the place of the painters themselves in these relations.

With the 'mfecane' Bushman groups and individual shamans were drawn into conflicts between Bantu-speaking groups. It may be that even as shamans had long made rain for specific leaders of farming communities, so those leaders called upon the Bushman shamans in times of strife with other farming groups. Bushman powers were thus harnessed by participants in the 'mfecane' struggles. Shamans then used their art to negotiate this new opportunity for developing their own political power. As they had painted elephant hunts so they came to paint conflict

between Bantu-speaking groups and thereby enhance their status.

### Conclusion

Ironically, Moffat was right when he said "hard is the Bushman's lot, ..." But, the Bushmen's historical and political marginalization is a result of historical reconstructions relying on the prejudiced documents of early white travellers, trek boers and missionaries. By taking seriously both parts of the twofold archaeological record we will be able to start reconstructing a history of Southern Africa that includes all people who were involved, in no matter what capacity. Bushman ritual and art, an until recently neglected part of the archaeological record, thus begins to play a major role in developing a new understanding of the 'mfecane' period that draws the hunter-gatherers into history. The "invisiuble" Bushmen were active participants who should not be ignored.

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