

Ukhahlamba Drakensberg Park

South Africa boasts eight World Heritage Sites: Mapungubwe, the Richtersveld, Robben Island, the Fossil Hominid Sites of Sterkfontein, Swartkrans, Kromdraai and environs, the Cape Floral Region, iSimangaliso Wetland Park and Vredefort Dome. Only Ukhahlamba Drakensberg Park makes the list both for its natural and cultural properties.

The steep rocky slopes, rolling Alpine grasslands and densely vegetated river valleys of Ukhahlamba Drakensberg Park make it an area of spectacular and tranquil beauty, rich in diverse habitats and teeming with plant, bird and animal life – several species of which are endemic to the region. Its aesthetic quality, biodiversity and incidence of globally threatened species alone make it a place of outstanding natural value; and then, scattered amongst this natural bounty, some 500 rock shelters and overhangs house one of the world’s oldest art collections.

‘It’s the best understood rock art anywhere in the world; it’s also amongst the most exquisitely beautiful, with the most complex artistic techniques used in rock art anywhere – with the possible exception of some techniques used in France,’ says Dr Geoffrey Blundell, director of the Origins Centre. Preserved in part by the porous stone on which they were painted, the art of the San offers the sole traces of a tenure believed to have lasted at least 25 000 years.

‘The language is lost’ says Blundell. ‘There are traces of the culture that remain in Xhosa speaking groups and to a lesser degree

amongst Zulu speaking groups’. Across South Africa, successive waves of settlers – beginning with Stone Age farmers roughly two thousand years ago – challenged the hunter-gatherer way of life. While San relationships with groups such as the Nguni were often positive, at times conflict over land and cattle broke out, with at least one group of San from the Drakensberg believed to have been massacred as a result of ongoing cattle theft. The arrival of colonists heralded more suffering for the San – aggressive hunting practices decimated the herds of game while grazing cattle stripped the veld of plant foods, leaving the San to starve. In certain areas, the San were openly declared vermin and hunted down: according to Blundell, two individuals from the Sneeuberg area boasted of killing more than two thousand San people – each. While the various San groups that inhabited the Drakensberg were not subject to such outright genocide, they were nevertheless believed to be extinct by the late 19th century.

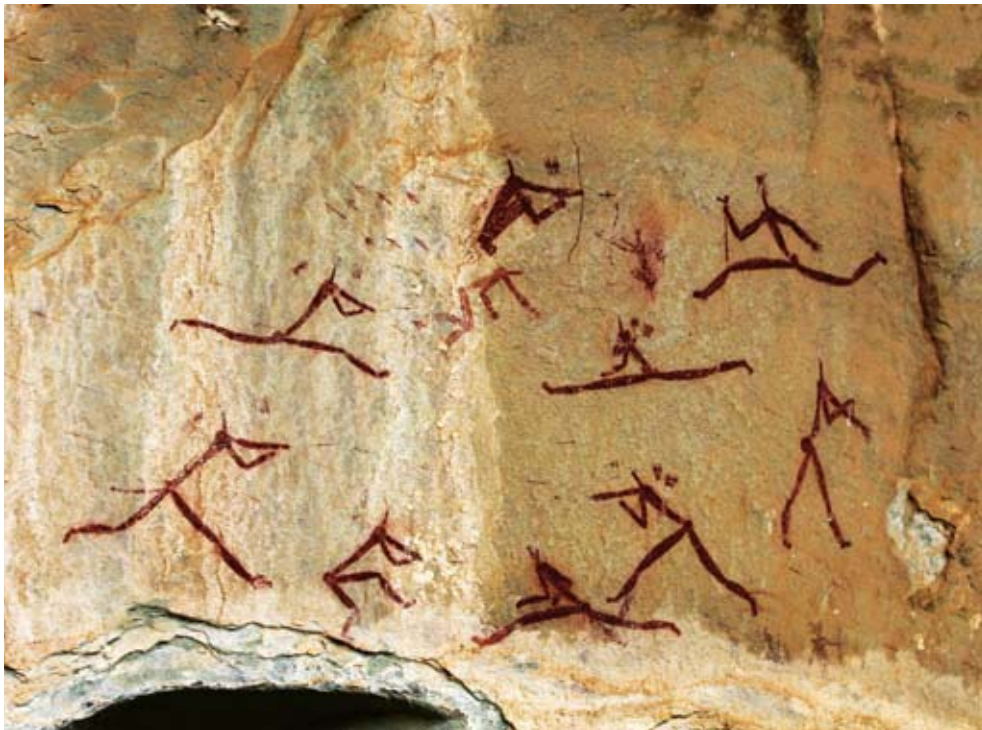
The general disregard of European settlers for the San was frequently reflected in their perception of rock art as crude and primitive – a conclusion patently belied by the images



View of the Drakensberg amphitheatre as from the upper Tugela River, South Africa

Images: Green Vision Foundation in collaboration with the National Heritage Council of South Africa, African Heritage Epic sponsored by Toyota SA, www.saworldheritageepic.com





Many of the sites in this region contain scenes depicting hunting, dancing, fighting, food gathering or ritual and trance scenes of hunting or rainmaking.

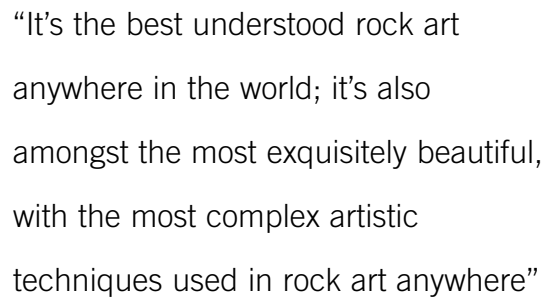
themselves. ‘We have in the Drakensberg shaded polychrome images with foreshortening, perspective...There are images painted on ceilings that are aerial views – like you were flying over a lying down eland – an aerial three-quarter view’ says Blundell. Alternatively the deft, graceful depictions were attributed to everyone from Bantu groups to Phoenicians. ‘The problem is that if you come along with the attitude that these are simple, crude, stupid, savage people ... then there are only one or two ways of dealing with that art’ says Blundell. ‘One is to say “actually it’s not that complex”, or you say “somebody else did it”’.

Insofar as any attempt was made at interpreting the images, they were taken to be narrating daily activities or listing – as Blundell puts it – a ‘kind of menu’. A peculiar menu: strange beasts and otherworldly monsters, part-man, part-animal, make occasional appearances amid the plethora of animals and humans. Yet despite oddities such as these, little systematic research was conducted into the paintings until the early 1970s, when scholars began recording the images and monitoring the frequency with which certain subjects appeared.

In order to interpret rock art, scholars turned to various historical and ethnographic sources, in particular the extensive records detailing San beliefs and practices compiled by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd in the 1870s, Joseph Orpen’s late 19th century records of his San guide Qing’s explanations of the paintings, and accounts provided by the Kalahari San. Although the Kalahari San did not themselves create rock

art, applying ideas from their beliefs and rituals allowed researchers to make sense of many of the mysterious Drakensberg images. What has emerged is an understanding of the art as complex, rich in metaphor and deeply concerned with the spiritual relationship between man, animal and God.

In his introduction to *Fragile Heritage: A Rock Art Fieldguide*, David Lewis-Williams describes the San’s understanding of the world as divided into this world; the underworld, home to the spirits of the dead; and a spiritual world inhabited by God. By harnessing a supernatural power present in all living things – the eland in particular – San shamans were able to travel between these worlds, allowing them to heal the sick, banish evil spirits and bring the rain. One of the most important means of accessing this potency was through the medium of the trance dance, during which shamans entered an altered state of consciousness.



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Imagery from the rock art frequently depicts scenes from the trance dance; people clapping and dancing, the progression of the Shaman into the spirit world; and the inhabitants of this other world. The paint used to depict these has sometimes been found to contain animal blood, suggesting that the paintings themselves are repositories of potency; indeed, the rock itself was seen as a portal to the spirit world, a site used in rituals contacting the ancestors.

According to Blundell, evidence suggests that the rituals and beliefs connected in the paintings go back tens of thousands of years. ‘The interesting thing about San languages [is that] they’re not a family of languages like French and Italian... two San languages that live next to each other are radically exclusive’ says Blundell. ‘That simply means that those languages have evolved in different directions for so long that they no longer have anything in common.

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But in spite of that, all of these groups have a trance dance, they all have incredibly similar beliefs... What does that mean? The only answer anyone’s got is that these things must be so old ...they’ve been going on tens of thousands of years’.

Ukhahlamba Drakensberg Park is one of nine rock art sites across Africa to have attained World Heritage Status,

alongside Tsodilo in Botswana; Motobo Hills in Zimbabwe; Twyfelfontein in Namibia; Chongoni in Malawi; Kondoa in Tanzania; Tadrart Acacus in Libya; Air and Ténéré Natural Reserves in Niger; and Tassili n’Ajjjer in Algeria.

Alongside prehistoric sites and those connected with human evolution, rock art falls under the umbrella of ‘prehistory’, which, according to Nuria Sanz, Programme Coordinator of UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre, ‘is a fundamental period of human history... whose significant bearing on the evolution of humanity is not congruent with its representation on the UNESCO World Heritage list’. Africa is, of course, home to many highly significant prehistoric sites; thus the work of the African World Heritage Fund – whose objective it is to aid state parties in preparing a tentative list and working towards the nomination of such sites for inclusion on the World Heritage List – may play an important role in rectifying this omission.



The Golden Gate derives its name from the brilliant shades of gold cast by the sun on the sandstone

