SOUTHERN AFRICAN ROCK ART: PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION*

by

Kyalo Mativo

This essay sets out to investigate the concepts and ideas behind the current controversy surrounding different interpretations of Southern African rock art. These interpretations fall into three categories: the aesthetic interpretation, the functionalist perception and the materialist viewpoint. Each of these 'models' is discussed briefly to delineate the assumptions underlying corresponding arguments.

The implications of the whole question of interpreting southern African rock art are drawn to inculpate the interpreters in the tragic 'disappearance' of the southern San community whose artistic wealth the interpreters have inherited. For their audible silence on the genocidal crime committed against this African people incriminates them as historical accomplices in the act. The extent to which indigenous participation is excluded from the interpretation gives the debate a foreign taste, thereby removing it farther away from the reality of the African people.

Needless to say, the arguments advanced in this analysis are not a detached academic description of the "main trends" genre. The thesis here is that the 'model' of interpretation one adopts leads to definite conclusions with definite social implications. There are two perceptions under investigation here: the idealist approach and the materialist point of reference. The generalisations corresponding to the one are necessarily different from, and in certain cases actually antagonistic to the other. In this matrix of opposing viewpoints, an eclectic approach would seem to be a sure loser. Nevertheless, inasmuch as a 'model' acknowledges contributions by others, any approach is electic in function. It is only when a given 'model' makes a unilateral declaration of independence of perception that it ceases to be eclectic and assumes full responsibility for the consequences of its action. But we are jumping ahead of our topic.

---

*This is a revised version of a slightly different paper presented to Dr. M. Posnansky, Professor of African History and Archaeology, UCLA, thanks to whose 'disagreements' and critical comments I have all the more been able to clarify my views on the subject.

Before we examine the different 'models' of interpretation, and in view of the polemical nature of the subject, a few preliminary remarks are in order.

In an academic framework, to take up a position and defend it is regarded as an act of defiance. But genuine scholarship should have the elasticity to absorb different viewpoints to a given issue, even if the established line of thinking cannot absolve independent ideas. In matters of interpretation of a subject matter - and it must be borne in mind that interpretation is the zenith, hence, the most important component of any analysis - the general tendency is to commend the 'conformists' and condemn the 'dissenters'. Yet, ironically, the ideas that have revolutionised human perception of reality have come from intellectual 'renegades'. Thus, Martin Luther for religion, Nicolaus Copernicus for science and Charles Darwin for the development of species, to make only three safe references from European social history. But these are giant cases by any standard and cannot be used as models for any issue involving different perceptions. Furthermore, the argument has been made to the effect that we are all prisoners of the intellectual trends of our times, so that we cannot transcend the limitations of our own particular intellectual age. But this is true only in the extent to which the force of traditional outlook weighs heavily against new scientific inventions. Albert Einstein was a product of a cumulative scientific thinking of 19th century Europe. Therefore, by the logic of intellectual 'imprisonment' of an age, he should not have been able to formulate the theory of relativity which has ushered in new concepts of space in the 20th century. Traditional scientific perception of reality was still slumbering under the lullaby of Newtonian mechanics when, on October 5th, 1957, the news about the flight of Sputnik I broke down the prison walls of the age, setting its prisoners free.* Consequently, we are today living witnesses of a technological epoch which has brought the skies closer to the earth, albeit one beset with abuses and insane plans of infinite inhuman magnitude. But that is beside the point, at least for the purposes of our topic.

The above remarks are intended to establish the principle of world view, which is essential for our argument. We make no pretences of introducing 'bright' ideas into the subject, nor do we seek to develop a 'model' of interpretation that is not in existence. But it is important to hold certain convictions and defend them to the best of one's own ability.

---

*Many informed and open-minded American Scientists are now willing to accept this as an historical fact. It is about time.

To get a clear view of the issues involved, it is necessary to identify those aspects of the southern African rock art about which there are no significant disagreements. These include the authorship of the art, the fact of the 'disappearance' of the community responsible for the creation of the art, and the material subject of the artists, e.g., the types of the animals depicted. Another area of agreement is the characterisation of the art as a system of communication and a means of storing information for the community as a whole, hence a system of education in its own right.

If these aspects of rock art are accepted as constituting a system of beliefs of the community which produced it, there is less tolerance to the more 'radical' assertions about the social basis of such beliefs. The assertions involve 'meanings' of the art and 'motives' of individual artists. Here disagreements spring up and different views abound.

It is relevant to pause for a moment and ask why this particular factor in the interpretation of southern African rock art provokes such a heated debate. The answer is to be sought not in the belief systems of the people who created the art, but in the belief systems of the interpreters. This is why the whole issue about world views cannot be eschewed. But it would be incorrect to argue that the differences in interpretation necessarily reflect ideological differences of the interpreters. What is interesting is rather the mere fact of differing in the social context of present day South Africa.

Of the three different methods of interpretation, viz., the aesthetic, the functionalist and the materialist, it is the aesthetic approach which has suffered the most casualties in the battle of ideas. Even the most ardent exponents of this view have had to tread with extreme caution when it comes to expounding it. C.K. Cooke, for example, offers this guarded defence of that viewpoint:

> Although some of the pictures may have had their uses as sympathetic magic, some are most certainly the record of events which had happened, whilst others are possibly 'art for art's sake'.[1]

His argument is based on the hypothesis that people painted because they had leisure time at their disposal:

> In a primitive society, because it has far fewer distractions, more people will draw providing they have the leisure to do so.[2]

A.R. Willcox is another believer in the aesthetic urge. He refers to experiments with chimpanzees in which the animals

proved to be natural aestheticians when it came to painting. He explains:

> These animals go through the early stages of human children in their artistic development, but never achieve representation. The level of motivation and concentration observed was often striking. Bella, a female chimp, was so docile that she would accept attractive food being taken away from her, but if interrupted in the middle of a drawing, she bit the interrupter.[3]

What Lewis-Williams had to say about the aesthetic interpretation should suffice to lay the method aside as exhausted:

> The aesthetic interpretation reduces cultural phenomena to an innate tendency and directs explanation inward to mental states about which we can know nothing. Ecology, economics, social structure, and demography, for instance, are eschewed in favour of supposed individual states of mind.[4]

It should be mentioned in passing, though, that the aesthetic principle in art is a valid element. It cannot be denied, for instance, that rock art, like any other genuine art, affords aesthetic pleasure to an observer with a keen artistic taste. In that sense it cannot be dismissed simply as an old model of interpreting art. It is essential to distinguish between aesthetic pleasure derived from rock art and the initial purpose for which the art was produced. It is in this context that the functional interpretation finds its justification.

Studies on prehistoric art are unanimous about its functional character. Eckart von Sydow, for instance, writing in the 1920's found the evidence in favour of functionalism so overwhelming that even the term 'functional art' appeared to him to be quite superfluous:

> Perhaps the expression (functional art: Gebrauchskunst) should be rejected altogether, since the whole of primitive art is to some extent always associated with practical activities.[5]

Even though he makes statements to that effect, Sydow is not so much arguing that prehistoric art had no aesthetic value as that it is the practical aims for which it was brought into being that underlie its form. Or, as he puts it:

> It is not the aesthetic, but the functional instinct that is overwhelmingly predominant.[6]

The question then suggests itself: how is the distinction to be made between what is and what is not functional in prehistoric art? Sydow submits that perhaps the best way of doing this is to examine closely the correlation between its structure as an article of use and its form as an art object; which yields this result:

> The usefulness of an object is what is emphasized as its artistic form.[7]

This would appear to confirm Lewis-Williams' ethnographic studies among the !Kung people on the significance of the 'fat' of the eland to the southern San community. Commenting on the meaning of the 'Eland Bull's dance', as explained to him by Kun, the old !Kung woman informer, in connection with 'A girl's puberty', he writes:

> The fatness of the girl is connected with ideas of balance or harmony in food supply, the availability of water, the weather and the land in general.[8]

Arnold Hauser, another researcher on prehistoric art, poses appropriate questions concerning the motivations behind the creation of the art:

> Under what circumstances and for what purpose was the art produced? Was it an expression of the joy of living which had to be verified and reproduced? ...Was it the product of leisure time, or did it have definite practical aims? Do we see in it a toy or a tool; an opiate and a luxury item or a weapon in the struggle for existence?[9]

Like Sydow, Hauser finds enough evidence to suggest that prehistoric art was basically functional. He points out, however, that the difference between 'functional' and 'aesthetic' in ancient art is one of historical demarcation. For this to be properly understood, the whole spectrum of the history of culture has to be taken into account:

> The separation of productive labour from magic, like that of science from religion, and of law from tradition, or artistic invention from mere invocation for magical, animistic and cult purposes, was undoubtedly a process extending over the largest part of the early history of culture.[10]

George Thomson describes magic as a technique in the labour process. He states that the collective nature of labour in prehistoric societies concealed its operative mechanism. It was only when the distinction between technique and the illusion of magic was finally made that the process

was understood in its entirety, rendering magic effectively ineffective as a tool of labour. But then this separation of technique from the illusion of magic gave rise to magical rite. Henceforth magic ceased to be a tool in its own right and turned into a supplementary component of social labour. Thomson explains:

> With this distinction, the magical rite began to emerge as an independent process, either assuming the form of a rehearsal in preparation for the real task, as in the dances associated with hunting, planting, and other kinds of labour, or else directed more or less consciously to the supernatural end.[11]

This is the gist of Burchard Brentjes' interpretation of African rock art. Referring to an account left by an old prospector who had witnessed !Kung hunters prepare for a hunt, he files this report:

> Before they go out to hunt they draw the outline of the beast in the sand, then with all sorts of ceremonies they shoot an arrow at the drawing. And the place where the arrow strikes is the part of the living animal that they wish to hit.[12]

Brentjes goes on to offer a further example of this functional character of prehistoric art among the pygmies. He quotes Leo Frobenius' story about his experiences with the pygmies of the forests of Kasai and Luebo. The story unfolds as follows: Frobenius wanted to eat deer meat, so he made his wish known to his guides. His request was at first rejected on account of it being too late to allow for proper preparations for the hunt. But eventually the hunters agreed to oblige on condition that they would prepare for the task the following day at dawn. Being curious about the event, Frobenius hid nearby where the hunters were making their preparations. This is what he saw:

> The men crouched down, plucked the grass of a patch of earth and smoothed it flat. Then one of them grovelled on the ground and drew something with his finger in the earth... The sun came up over the horizon. One of the men, with his bow strung, stepped up to the bare patch of earth...; the man loosed his arrow at the picture; the woman cried louder; then the men with their weapons at the ready darted into the bush.[13]

When in the afternoon the hunters returned with their kill of a bush-back, says Frobenius, "it had been shot in the jugular with an arrow," the exact place where the arrow on the drawing had struck.

These examples should suffice to verify the principle of sympathetic magic, and therefore, the functional factor of prehistoric art. But one is keenly aware of the objections advanced against any generalisations which tend to give certain artistic practices a universal validity. It has been argued, for example, that European pehistoric art had little or nothing in common with its contemporary African counterpart. Whitney Davis, for instance asserts that, even though the depiction of animals appears almost everywhere in prehistoric art, this cannot be regarded as a common denominator of that art. He formulates the thesis that prehistoric art represents aspects of the natural and social world, expressed aesthetically, with each region representing its own unique conditions under which the art was produced. By the canons of this logic, African rock art should have nothing in common with European ones. His own words are:

> The late upper palaeolithic and neolithic technologies of Africa have little direct relation with the supposedly ancestral technologies of palaeolithic Eurasia, and represents the local evolution of indigenous cultures.[14]

This manner of thinking offers little or nothing original. Of course, as KI-Zerbo rightly argues, African prehistoric art must be explained with reference to indigenous sources of information,* but this does not preclude inferences by comparison and contrast with similar cultures elsewhere in the ancient world. We shall examine KI-Zerbo's views on the subject below in some detail. Here it should be remarked that, in their hypocritical crusade to "free" Africa from "Eurocentric" perceptions, guilt-ridden western liberal intellectuals and their African cohorts have been instrumental in the isolation of the African people from the rest of the human race by assigning to them "unique" characteristics. The effect has been to deny the African people their rightful claim to a contribution in the development of human science, technology and culture. What is at issue is not the delimitation of these or those characteristics of indigenous cultures, these must of necessity differ merely by virtue of belonging to different social and environmental conditions. The task is to investigate the actual forces accounting for

*See KI-Zerbo: "African prehistoric art," General History of Africa, I, UNESCO, 1981; p. 668: "African prehistoric art must be interpreted by reference to indigenous values and it is only when the local environment of time, space and culture fails to provide an answer to a problem that we are entitled to look elsewhere for the solution."

the way human beings respond to their environment irrespective of their respective habitats. Amilcar Cabral, that prodigious African liberation fighter left this advice for the African posterity:

> "The important thing is not to waste time in more or less air-splitting debates on the specificity or non-specificity of African cultural values, but to look upon these values as a conquest by a part of mankind for the common heritage of all mankind, achieved in one or several phases of its evolution."*

Certain social practices in the evolution of humanity are valid for all societies living under similar historical and environmental conditions. The practice of image creation, either by painting, drawing, carving or by any other technique, is a common property of the human race. It is a general practice. The various forms which these images take, and the immediate purposes for which they are intended may differ because the natural factors to which the images are a response also differ.

That prehistoric art was functional is a truism. That it was therefore 'materialist' in character is a matter of perception. The confusion arising from the interchangeable use of these two terms has landed many a writer into a quagmire of erroneous and contradictory statements about the nature of this art. It is important to be clear about one fact: what is 'materialist' is functional, but the 'functional' is not necessarily 'materialist'. Trance performances and other forms of hallucinations, for example, are socially functional since they can be used effectively to cure certain diseases and regulate social behaviour. But they are based on beliefs in non-material objects, such as ancestral spirits and other supernatural powers.

The 'materialist' interpretation of rock art, therefore, covers the functional category. The 'functional' is juxtaposed to the 'aesthetic' as 'materialism' stands in opposition to 'idealism'. The latter set of terms entails world views, while the former simply describes the external manifestations of art objects. When Lewis-Williams talks of "the economic and social context of the southern San rock art," his is a materialist perception. But as soon as he succumbs to the hypnotic power of trance performances and begins to describe them as reflections of the San people's

*See Amilcar Cabral: "National Liberation and culture," Unity and Struggle, Monthly Review Press, 1979; p. 150. Or, Return to the Source, Africa Information Service, ed., 1973; p. 51.

social beliefs, his 'model' turns willy-nilly idealist. In perception he is 'materialist' but idealist-functionalist in exposition. That in effect constitutes his strengths and weaknesses. But more about him later.

We want to examine briefly the connotations of the 'materialist' and the 'idealist'viewpoints as they apply to the interpretation of rock art. We need to say from the outset that one does not have to be a philosopher to acknowledge the important but mutually antagonistic positions corresponding to 'models' adopted according to these two world views. In our topic, unless one confines oneself to the narrative or descriptive approach - which would leave much to be desired - it is almost inevitable that one always ends up adopting a viewpoint which lends itself to the one or the other world view.

J. KI-Zerbo confirms that the "two main approaches to the interpretation of prehistoric art" are precisely "the idealist approach and the materialist one."[15] The idealist standpoint treats this art as a product of religious or mystical beliefs. Thus KI-Zerbo quotes Erik Holm who writes in reference to southern African prehistoric art:

> The art of southern Africa is seen in its true light if we regard it as an expression of religious fervour and the urge to transcend reality."[16]

From the materialist approach, on the other hand, this art is suspected of holding the key to understanding the economic and social structure of the people who created it. It is the function of their material existence. The obstacles encountered in the analysis of the art, to paraphrase KI-Zerbo, spring from lack of knowledge about the precise nature of the economic life of the people whose art we are studying. Or, to borrow his exact words:

> L'ignorance des conditions sociales de production de cet art est en fait le plus grand handicap pour son explication correcte.[17]

But in KI-Zerbo's opinion, neither of these two methods of interretation is complete by itself. His own approach calls for a synthesis of the two. This is defensible on the grounds that the utilitarian intent of the art was complemented by a spiritual fulfilment:

> The spiritual function can, in fact, sometimes exist independently, in which case it stops being a means and becomes an end in itself.

Which observation leads to this proposition:

> The spiritual purpose does exist even if it often carries a functional content.[18]

KI-Zerbo's caution against an exclusive emphasis of either of these two methods of interpretation, or of any other for that matter, is quite valid and should be heeded. This is because, as he goes on to say, a complete study of African rock art is still at large, in the absence of which no definite conclusions can be reached about the subject. But, as indicated above in deference to Eckart von Sydow, Arnold Hauser, George Thomson and other studies on prehistoric art in general, certain conclusions, albeit tentative can be risked in regard to the southern African rock art. These can be summarised as follows: the initial impulse for graphic reproduction of reality was materially determined. The aesthetic value accruing to these images was the historical sequel to a social practice which, having ceased to be purely utilitarian following inventions of more efficient means of subsistence, became spiritually meaningful. That in effect puts the materialist perception in a better position to explain much of the symbolism of rock art. Perhaps the most central of these symbolic images is the fertility rite. KI-Zerbo agrees substantially with Lewis-Williams that fertility rites were the motive force behind some of the paintings, especially those depicting metaphorical procreation:

> In some cases, fertility rites are clearly the motive of the figures who appear to be engaged in ritual intercourse (e.g. the coitus between a woman and a masked man, at Tin Lalan, Libya) or who are performing rigorous dances with protuberant phalluses.[19]

Undoubtedly, this is the motive in "A girl's puberty," in the "Eland Bull dance" painting, which shows women mimicking the mating behaviour of the eland cows, with the participation of men equipped with 'exaggerated' phalluses.*

To recapitulate the principal arguments about the materialist and idealist interpretations of rock art, an important factor should be introduced: the human hand. In the deliberations about the origin of art, the fact that it was the human hand - itself an instrument of labour - which was responsible for the execution of the graphic images corresponding to the mental visions of the objects to be produced, establishes a link between human labour and art. The materialist interpretation of prehistoric art in general,

---

*See Lewis-Williams: Believing and Seeing, London., 1981; p. 42.

and that of southern Africa in particular, finds its claim to explanatory potency in the direct connection between practical needs and corresponding mental means of fulfilling these needs. On this premise, it can be inferred that the initial motives for the production of these early works of art were practical in content, i.e. intended to satisfy definite material objectives.

But this observation does not answer the question whether or not the individual artists were conscious of the secular character of their artistic activities. This topic is too wide to be sufficiently dealt with here, encompassing as it does the nature of human cognition and the development of consciousness. Suffice it to invoke the concept of 'symbolic labour' in connection with motives and meanings in rock art. Which brings Lewis-Williams on the line.

Of all the recent analyses of southern African rock art, perhaps David Lewis-Williams' contribution has made the greatest impact. His can rightly be categorised as fresh insights into an otherwise self-contented discipline which hitherto had threatened to remain impervious to new ideas. With the possible exception of Linguistics - which still holds tenaciously onto the crutches of Hamitic myth, despite the verbal protestations of its purveyors to the contrary - most other fields of study have had to contend with "radical" views. This is true for social and economic History, Literature, Political Science, Sociology, and even Anthropology, the traditional headquarters of conservatism. With Lewis-Williams, Archaeology, as a tool of interpreting African History, comes of age.

What distinguishes Lewis-Williams' method of interpreting southern African rock art from a whole series of others, is his recognition of the central role the economic factor plays in the production of this art. In this conception, the religious, the mythical and the aesthetic elements blend to congeal into a solid economic base, which, in the course of their development they effectively conceal. In the analysis of the art, one has therefore to take into account what Lewis-Williams describes as "the social relationships surrounding the individual artist." He further writes:

> In the type of society with which we are concerned each of these relationships had an economic or potentially economic component.[20]

This point about the relationship of the individual artist to the milieu of his or her creations is so cardinal to Lewis-Williams' method that he finds it necessary to reinforce it whenever the opportunity arises:

> The consciousness of the artist was influenced by a web of social relationships, all of which had an economic or potentially economic component. In short, we must analyse the articulation between the art and the economic base of the San social formation.[21]

Here, what appears as the work of an isolated individual transpires in reality to be a communal product mediated through the activities of an individual artist. Here social labour is expressed symbolically through images, and anybody can add whatever detail s/he deems appropriate to a particular mood or purpose. Eckart von Sydow comes to the same conclusion from his own studies on the subject:

> We can easily talk of collective representations - or even of mass Psychology - to indicate the distinguishing feature or the spiritual base (geistigen Lage) on which they (the representations) are founded.[22]

The concept of symbolic labour relates artistic activities of the prehistoric painter to the level of technology of his or her society. In this framework the art becomes a tool in the service of the community in general, and the artists constitute a work force. Everybody is engaged in an economic activity in one form or another. Nothing is done for the sake of it, even 'tranceformations' transform themselves into economic phenomena.

As Lewis-Williams admits, the idea of symbolic labour is not new. He refers to Godelier who is reported to have done some research among the Mbuti pygmies and drew similar conclusions about the relationship between ritual forms of labour and economic factors. What may be regarded as relatively new is its application to the analysis of the southern African rock art. Lewis-Williams explains the process in trance performances:

> First, the medicine-men's symbolic labour was believed to ensure the reproduction of nature itself by working on the (imaginary) powers which gave or withheld rain and game; then the medicine-men maintained economic relations by curing sickness and reducing tensions within the camp....[23]

From which he draws some 'un-orthodox' conclusions of social and political import, namely,

> that the means of production were not the exclusive property of any single camp and that the wider complementarity between numerous camps was the real foundation of the San social formation, a foundation

> which had to be maintained if the social formation was to reproduce itself over protracted periods which might include times of strain on local resources.[24]

If Lewis-Williams' 'materialist' approach finds its strength on the basis of its reference to ethnography and quantitative analysis to verify its theoretical assumptions, it is because he stands on scientific pedestal as an analytical weapon. If his method is nevertheless still prone to destructive criticism from the idealist camp,* it is because he hangs precariously between the two perceptions. As stated above, though materialist in conception, Lewis-Williams remains nostalgically idealist. Here is an example: according to him, the 'meaning' of southern African rock art is an external imposition on the part of the observer:

> Certainly, in interpreting rock art it is principally meaning generated by human minds rather than impersonal laws that we seek.[25]

But whence the material objects on which meaning is to be sought? Does the human mind create the object of its interpretation? He fails to grasp the difference between functionalism as an external manifestation of art objects, and the materialist perception as a method of interpretation. How he errs in his rejection of the view that the rock art of the southern San community had something to do with sympathetic magic is exemplified in these words:

> In neither the modern nor the nineteenth-century record is there any indication that the Bushmen believed (or still believe) that the manufacture of a representation would have any magical effect.[26]

How far removed from magic are trance performances? Lewis-Williams might argue that they are symbolic in meaning. But what is important is that, like magic, they are socially functional. Like magic, the idea is an attempt to manipulate external forces of nature and subject them to human control. George Thomson formulates the principle of magic in the following manner:

---

*See, for example, C.K. Cooke who makes this remark in response to Lewis-Williams' method: "The cloak of Marxism in which Lewis-Williams has clothed the Bushmen is an extraordinary assumption that cannot be proven from the evidence." Current Anthropology, vol. 24, no. 4, p. 538.

> Primitive magic is founded on the notion that, by creating the illusion that you control reality, you can actually control it.[27]

It requires little or no imagination to draw the connection: once "you can actually control" reality by scientific means, magic as a means for the same purpose loses its validity and becomes a superfluous convention.

To summarise our views on Lewis-Williams: his method amounts to an appropriation of the 'materialist' conception with an idealist interpretation. That explains the ambivalence and apprehension with which his effort has been received by his foes and admirers. Yet we are compelled to acknowledge the importance of his contribution to a correct understanding of the southern African rock art.

We have been arguing in this discussion that the problems of interpreting southern African rock art reflect two world views adopted for the purpose: the materialist perception and the idealist viewpoint. Failure or refusal to acknowledge this fact accounts for much of the confusion surrounding the issue. A closer examination of the general character of prehistoric art reveals that practical aims dictated the terms and conditions of its production. As a practical tool, prehistoric art was therefore functional in content. Its religious, symbolic, narrative, hence the totality of all the elements amounting to its aesthetic value, were mere stages of its development from an instrument of labour to an object of sensuous pleasure. Thus the question is wrongly formulated to wonder whether prehistoric art was aesthetic, functionalist or materialist. It was all these at different phases of its development. The proper point of departure in the interpretation of this art is one which seeks to see it from a world view framework.

If we prefer the materialist perception over the idealist one, this is because the former conception allows for a historical perspective which shows the stages described by human artistic activity and the transformations undergone by different forms of artistic practice.

This discussion would be incomplete without indicating how the issue of the interpretation of the southern African rock art relates to the present political situation in South Africa. The danger of drawing connections between academic studies and political reality is not that the attempt is futile since it does not involve "the people who matter," as one argument holds, but on the contrary; that most academic studies avoid making such connectins. The southern San community who left this rich heritage behind are no more. They were virtually effaced from the face of the earth. It is

morally wrong, to put it mildly, for specialists on this art to pass over this fact in silence. But then, this is not surprising given the fact that most, if not all the participants in this issue remain cultural aliens in the world of the subject matter of their analyses.

In this respect, in spite of his confusion, credit goes to Whitney Davis who brings the political element into the question of the interpretation of rock art:

> ...among other aspects of interpretation, its political weight cannot be overlooked; prehistoric and primitive art has figured in living political, racial and national debate.[28]

The absence of African participation in the interpretation of southern African rock art is the 'missing link' between the past and the present of that country. Only with full input by the indigenous people in all aspects affecting their lives and the lives of their ancestors can a proper balance be established between contending views. As Brentjes reminds us, the African personality can only be properly defined in the context of such input, where fresh African views about the fate of the African people, past and present, are included in the agenda:

> The African personality and the African nationalism have their part to play in the rediscovery of African rock art, in which they will also find an affirmation of their goals.[29]

And KI-Zerbo is completely right in describing African prehistoric art as "the continent's first history book."[30]

As for the extermination of the people who created this art, perhaps there is no better fitting epitaph than this song from a contemporary neighbour:

> The body perishes, the heart stays young.
> The platter wears away with serving food.
> No log retains its bark when old,
> No lover peaceful while the rival weeps.[31]

What course of action the African people will take when they have done enough passive weeping, only history will tell.

Meanwhile, in this system of social events in which everybody involved will be called upon to justify their presence, will the Africanist historian still continue to flatter himself that his is a neutral role? That, as a professional chronicler and interpreter of these events, his business is that of a non-partisan participant? That, in

short, he has no obligation to the people without whom his career would be impossible?

Within the narrow confines of 'Africanist' professional attitude, these are 'non-academic' questions. So be it. But for the African people, at least this much is clear: the notion that to use history for a purpose is tantamount to abusing it, is a morality the future African historian will find more and more difficult to exculpate.

NOTES

[1]Cooke, C.K. Rock art of southern Africa; Cape Town, 1969; p. 5.

[2]Ibid. P. 73.

[3]A.R. Willcox: "Meanings and Motives in San rock art - The views of W.D. Hammond-Tooke and J.D. Lewis-Williams considered," in South African Archaeological Bulletin, 39: 1984; p. 53. Interestingly enough, Willcox accuses Lewis-Williams of seeking only such evidence as would confirm the efficacy of his own method, ignoring for the moment that the same applies to the very selective experiments on chimpanzees to which he refers us.

[4]J.D. Lewis-Williams: "The Economic and Social Context of Southern San rock art," Current Anthropology, vol. 23 No. 4; p. 429.

[5]Sydow, von Eckart: Die Kunst der Naturvölker und der Vorzeit; zweite Auflage, Berlin, 1925; p. 43: "Vielleicht muss man diesen Ausdruck uberhaupt verwerfen. Denn die ganze primitive Kunst ist immer einigermassen mit dem Zweckhaften, mit der Gebrauchsabsicht verbunden."

[6]Ibid: "So wird auch das rein Praktische, Zweckmässige nicht vom Asthetischen als von einem übermächtigen Instinkt beherrscht."

[7]Ibid: "Die Kunsthafte Gestaltung des Nutzgegenstandes ist durchweg der betonende Ausdruck seiner Gebrauchsfähigkeit."

[8]Lewis-Williams: Believing and Seeing, Symbolic Meanings in Southern San rock paintings, London, 1981; p. 50.

[9]Hauser, Arnold: Sozialgeschichte der Kunst und Literatur, Verlag C.H. Beck, München, 1973, pp. 3-4: "Aus welchem Anlass und zu welchem Zweck ist diese Kunst geschaffen worden? War sie der Ausdruck der Freude am Sein, die zur

Bewahrung und Wiederholung drängte? ...War sie die Fruchte der Musse oder hatte sie einen bestimmten praktischen Zweck? Haben wir in ihr ein Spielzeug oder ein Werkzeug, ein Opiat und ein Genussmittel oder eine Waffe im Kampf um den Lebensunterhalt zu erblicken?"

[10]Hauser, A.: Soziologie der Kunst; C.H. Beck, Munchen; 1974; p. 16. "Die Absonderung der produktiven Arbeit von der Magie, der vissenschaft von der Religion, des Rechts von der Sitte, der künstlerischen Invention von der blossen invokation zu magischen, animistichen und kultischen Zwecken war zweifellos ein Prozess, der sich auf den grossten Teil der Frühgeschichte der Kultur erstreckte."

[11]Thomson, George: The First Philosophers: Studies in ancient Greek society, Lawrence & Wishart; Lon., 1972; p. 47.

[12]Brentjes, Burchard: African rock art. Trans. Anthony Dent; J.M. & Sons Ltd.; London, 1969; p. 7.

[13]Ibid. P. 8.

[14]Whitney Davis: "Representation and Knowledge in prehistoric rock art of Africa," The Africa Archaeological Review, 2(1984); p. 11.

[15]J. KI-Zerbo: "African prehistoric art," General History of Africa I., UNESCO, 1981; p. 668.

[16]Ibid.

[17]KI-Zerbo: "L'art préhistorique africain," Histoire générale de l'Afrique I., Jeune Afrique / Stock / UNESCO, 1980; p. 705. Unfortunately, the English rendering of this passage is too concise to convey the full meaning of the original. The translation reads: "When it comes to explaining it properly, the main drawback is our ignorance of the society that produced it." (General History of Africa, I. p. 667.) This is of course perfectly correct; but in the original French version, the emphasis is not so much on our general ignorance of the society that produced the art, but more precisely on the social conditions of production under which it was produced. This writer does not doubt the competence of the translator(s), but the detail is essential for the central argument of this paper.

[18]KI-Zerbo: General History, op. cit. p. 670.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Lewis-Williams: "Introductory essay: science and rock art," New Approaches to Southern African rock art; Vol. 4. (June 1983); p. 10.

[21]Lewis-Williams: "The Economic and Social Context," op. cit., p. 431.

[22]Sydow: op. cit., p. 12: "Man spricht hierbei gern von der Gültigkeit von Kollektiv-Vorstellungen, - man könnte wohl ebensogut von Massenpsychologie reden, um das entscheidende Merkmal der geistigen Lage, aus der sie entspringen anzugeben."

In a related study, Ulli Beier refers to Sydow's findings, pointing out that African traditional artists were as integral to the community as a whole as their creations: "Traditional creations become common property immediately. Others take them up, change and modify them." African Poetry; London Cambridge at the University Press, 1966; p. 11.

[23]Lewis-Williams: "The Economic and Social Context," op. cit., p. 438.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Lewis-Williams: New Approaches, op. cit., p. 5.

[26]Lewis-Williams: The rock art of southern Africa, London, Cambridge University Press, 1983; p. 43.

[27]Thomson, George: Aeschylus and Athens: A study in the social origins of Drama, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1973; p. 11.

[28]Whitney Davis, op. cit., p. 9.

[29]Brentjes, B., op. cit., p. 97.

[30]KI-Zerbo, op. cit., p. 681.

[31]A Zulu song in Beier, Ulli: African Poetry, An Anthology of Traditional African poems; London, Cambridge University Press, 1966; p. 51.