Themes in the prehistoric art of Zimbabwe

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Study of the rock paintings of South Africa has been transformed in the last ten years by the work of Lewis-Williams. He sees all southern African Stone Age paintings as the product of San artists and all San societies as sharing common basic beliefs. In a series of publications, he has shown that much of the art is rooted in those beliefs, which are recorded in studies of the southern San in the 19th century and in more recent work on the !Kung. The validity of this approach is demonstrated in interpretations of many complex and hitherto puzzling panels of Drakensberg paintings (Lewis-Williams, 1981a).

Central to all San societies are beliefs in a supernatural potency, power or energy acquired and cultivated by men and women in every community and usually activated by communal dancing (Marshall, 1969; Katz, 1982). Trance is induced in those with active potency. They may then cure, travel out of their bodies, and control game animals or the weather!Kung curing dances are those most fully and clearly described. Dancing takes place in camp, round a fire with a chorus of singing and clapping women. The dancers may wear rattles and caps with animal ears and carry fly-whisks or sticks, with which they support themselves as they bend forward in the typical dancing posture. As trance approaches, the dancer may sweat profusely, bleed from the nose and feel the hair rising. The energy activated during trance is a powerful and possibly violent force. It is located in the stomach region before it ‘becomes hot’ and ‘boils over’. Once activated, it can cause a dancer to leap and somersault. As dancers enter trance they are supported, led from the circle and massaged as they sit or lie down. They cure by rubbing the patient, often with their sweat or blood, taking the sickness into their own bodies and then casting it out violently. Energy passes from curer to patient during curing.

Trance is a fearful experience seen as a form of dying. It is also compared to drowning, being underwater, flying or feeling stretched out and attenuated. Trancers hallucinate and see visions, initially probably of geometric shapes and lines and, in deeper trance, of strange creatures with both human and animal attributes. Trancers’ spirits may leave their bodies through the tops of their heads and travel.

Many South African paintings seem to be straightforward, realistic illustrations of dancing and trancing though none appear to illustrate the process of curing (Lewis-Williams, 1981a and 1983a). There are figures sitting and clapping or bent forward in dance, wearing eared caps and carrying whisks. Others bleed from the nose and hold their hands to their faces or heads, sweat or have hair standing on end. Some adopt the
crouched posture with their arms held rigidly behind them that the San use as they enter trance. Figures leap and somersault as some San do when potency possesses them. There are paintings of zig-zag lines, ‘ladders’, ‘grids’ and strange semi-human, semi-animal figures like those seen in hallucinations. There are attenuated and flying figures that reproduce the sensations of trance. The potency energised in trance may be represented by lines fringed with dots or flecks and dashes of paint (Lewis-Williams, 1981b).

The San use animals as metaphors, particularly the dying eland, whose staggering gait, bristling hair, nose blee ding and sweating suggest and provide an obvious and dramatic metaphor for entering trance. They appear as trance metaphors in myth, ritual and painting (Lewis-Williams, 1981a). Trancers whose potency is so violent and uncontrolled as to be malign are believed to take the form of lions. Many Drakensberg paintings of felines have been interpreted in terms of such beliefs (Lewis-Williams, 1985).

Many South African paintings certainly seem to be about aspects of trance. Lewis-Williams argues that such interpretations are correct because they accord with San beliefs, they relate the art to other areas of San culture, they explain a greater number and greater diversity of images than earlier speculation and the interpretations have greater heuristic potential than others and are capable of generating new interpretations (1985: 49–50).

Like many prehistorians before him, Lewis-Williams has warned of the dangers of the undisciplined use of analogy in interpreting the art: of taking isolated elements in the art and matching them against isolated aspects of San practices, myths or beliefs in games of ethnographic snap (Lewis-Williams, 1983b: 7). It is equally dangerous to take widespread and generalised features of the art and interpret them in a restricted sense as aspects of trance only because they sometimes occur associated with trance. Such arguments are as illogical as: ‘Trancers have legs; therefore all paintings of people with legs represent trancers.’

The faults and weaknesses of undisciplined interpretation are exemplified in a recent study of Zimbabwean paintings (Fig. 1) (Huffman, 1983). This is not based on

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*Figure 1* Location map.
examination of the paintings themselves but on a published selection of an artist’s interpretations, made many years ago to illustrate the artist’s interests in burial practices, the supernatural, fertility and magic: a profoundly unsatisfactory sample (Goodall, 1959). Reproductions are misread (e.g. in Huffman’s Fig. 2, the pigment used for the lower limbs has disappeared, a common feature of this type of painting, giving a false impression of rigidity to the limbs and false postures). Figures with ‘erect hair’, ‘arrows protruding from the head’, ‘infibulated penises’ or squatting are asserted to be in trance because trancers squat, feel their hair standing on end, consider bees as a source of potency and bee-stings as like the pricks of arrows. ‘Infibulated penises’ are a sign of trance because they ‘occur with trance figures in the Drakensberg’. In fact, vertical lines rising from the head, inverted triangles on the head, a line drawn across the penis and squatting figures are all extremely common features in Zimbabwean art and by no means limited to paintings whose other associations suggest trance.

![Figure 2 An attenuated recumbent figure with an oval area of the body unpainted and a similar oval shape painted beside him. Gwangwadza, Murewa district. The quartered circle is 2 cm across.](image)

Figures with open mouths are said to be trancers because one or two have rigid arms or hold their heads while people entering trance are said to gasp for air. These unusual images actually include a specific and complex range of elements which demand much more precise interpretation than this.

The puzzling and widespread set of abstract designs based on clusters of rectangular and oval shapes are taken to be attempts at realistic representation and considered to look most like some aspects of bees’ nests or honeycombs. The stippling often found with them then becomes bees and the occasional grids of lines associated with rare South
African examples of these designs become honey-hunters’ ladders (Pager, 1973). Metaphors for trance are extended to include snakes, because San believe medicine men may travel underground and because sloughed snake skins seem to Huffman an apt metaphor for the rebirth experienced by trancers at the end of trance. Paintings of sheep are suggested as another trance metaphor because they are ‘anomalously fat’, like eland, and their fat could also have been a source of potency. Upside-down crocodiles are interpreted as trance metaphors because they suggest death and being underwater, two of the ways that the San describe the experience of trance. A set of distinctive female figures, with wavy lines coming from between their legs, are associated with trance because some have stippling-bees-nearby and others have ‘trance figures dancing on’ or ‘attached to’ the lines. The lines are taken literally as attempts to represent a liquid issuing from female genitalia. This provokes discussion on the possible potency of menstrual blood and amniotic fluid.

Even within the convincing framework that Lewis-Williams has given to the interpretation of the paintings of southern Africa, mistakes are possible. Most of the possible sources of error are illustrated here. A biased sample is used. Paintings are misread. Universal or general features are interpreted in a narrow and particularist sense. Images are divorced from their contexts and associations. Only an arbitrary selection of elements within particular images is examined. Interpretations are based on isolated and distant analogies. Others are based on the author’s own sense of what things like snakes or crocodiles or sheep fat suggest to him. Although it is accepted that the art includes a widespread use of symbol and metaphor, the assumption remains that all paintings attempt realistic representation so that stippling, abstract oval designs and wavy lines are seen as bees, honeycombs or menstrual blood.

Similar doubts can be expressed about recent extensions of trance metaphors to include fish, birds, winged figures and baboons or to see fly whisks, bags or bows as generally representing the equipment of dancers or game-shamans.

It is useful to take Lewis-Williams’ beliefs that all ‘the art is ‘essentially’, ‘predominantly’ or very possibly ‘entirely’ . . . associated with the activities of medicine-men’, ‘overwhelmingly concerned . . . with the work of medicine men’ and ‘principally symbolic and hallucinatory’ (1985: 47; 1986: 172; Lewis-Williams and Loubser, 1986: 281) and see how far this is true of Zimbabwe.

This assumes that the Zimbabwean art is part of the same tradition as the South African art. This is legitimate. There are a great many basic similarities in location, materials, techniques, subject matter, perceptions and canons, rules and conventions of representation. There are also differences: in the relative emphasis given to different animals, in the many more trees and plants painted in Zimbabwe, in the large and complex abstract designs found in the north, in clothing and in many idiosyncracies of style. In the north it is also noticeable how few direct illustrations there are of trance-related scenes compared to the Drakensberg. There are very few figures sweating, bleeding from the nose or holding their faces or with long lines emerging from the top of the head or spine. There are none of the crouched creatures, with animal heads and feathered arms held rigidly behind them, that are characteristic trance figures in the Drakensberg. There are few sweating, bleeding, staggering or dying animals and, as has often been remarked, very few eland.
Although no systematic comparisons have been made, it also looks as if the Zimbabwean art is richer, more varied, more complex and more abundant. It may also be significantly older. Rare paintings of sheep and their herders indicate that paintings were being done as late as the last few centuries BC when sheep were first introduced to the country (Walker, 1983). It is unlikely that many paintings are much later. The art was not influenced by the communities of settled farmers and villages that developed in the region in the last two thousand years. Settled communities had become so numerous, powerful and pervasive by a thousand years ago that, if painting had still been practised, it would certainly have been obviously and deeply affected. There are absolutely no paintings of historical subjects as there are in the south.

At present it is only possible to give an impression of Zimbabwe’s art. Systematic examination, recording and analysis is impossible. There are probably tens of thousands of sites of which only a tiny fraction, probably less than 10%, are even noted in the most rudimentary fashion in the official records, let alone located, described or recorded. The paintings on a great many of these sites are so densely superimposed that the separate images, let alone their details, can only be identified through the close and prolonged study that the discipline of tracing demands. Quantification on any lesser examination is certainly misleading.

The art is almost exclusively one of outline. Within this set of conventions, many problems of representation are encountered. It is particularly difficult to show one element in front of another within the outline (the people lying on skins in Fig. 3 are a unique and triumphant exception). Men, in their role as hunters, are the dominant stereotype in the art. They are shown without clothing. They carry bows and arrows and a bag slung high on their shoulders, containing arrows and a fly whisk. Quivers are rare. Arrows are usually shown with, at most, a slightly thickened end. Women were painted much less often. They wear tasselled aprons over the buttocks. Often a front apron was worn also. Occasionally women also wear capes and adorn their arms and legs with tassels. They carry unweighted sticks. Both men and women may be shown alone or with others of the same sex. Men adopt exaggerated postures, gestures and actions. Women stand or walk. Only extremely rarely is anyone shown engaged in any specific activity.

Men and women are often shown together in family groups and in camps of several families. Many of the men recline and hold their heads (not faces) in one or both hands. Weapons and equipment, including a variety of bags, are laid out or hung on sticks beside them — the comforting concrete reality of material possessions. Associated with these domestic groups are occasional scenes of love-making: couples lying close together and occasionally embracing, often with a child between them — painted as a diminutive adult and unusually thin and aethereal, seeming to be a representation of a concept, consequence or effect rather than an actual person (Fig. 3). Much more commonly associated with camp scenes are paintings of dances. These are recognisable by their location in a camp, by the lines of people, either men or women, in identical postures, generally leaning forward with their arms bent, one raised and one lowered. For dances, men attached short tufts (Fig. 2) or animal tails to their waists at the back — the latter is borne out in San ethnography. There is no sign of any of the musical instruments like bows or resonators recorded in the ethnographies. Only one painting is known in which sets of small rattles have been tied to the arms. Many figures, however, do have a single
spherical object with a handle in their hands or attached to their shoulders or necks (Fig. 4). These seem to be rattles. Superficially, there is nothing in the bulk of these paintings to suggest that they are not straightforward descriptive records.

Numerous details suggest otherwise. These consist of standardised additions to the body, all of which seem to represent emissions or emanations from it. Several are attached to the head. Fine vertical lines, not very long, may rise evenly across the whole crown (Fig. 3). They can be divided into two by a central parting (Fig. 5). Literalists see these as ‘erect hair’ or as sets of arrows tucked in a fillet round the forehead ready for instant use. Neither reading is tenable. No San had hair of this length. The lines are not limited to hunters, to hunting scenes or even to men. Other figures have curved lines falling from the back of the head and ending in a ‘page boy’ cut. In others, similar lines curve forward and cover the face. Others have a single large triangle set, apex down, in the crown of the head. Others have several small triangles across the top of the head, in which the triangles can become more tufts that splay out from a short stem, rather like tulip-shaped flowers. More than one of these sets of head additions can occur on a single figure.

Many men have pairs of lenticular shapes attached to or emerging from their chests. The same shapes can also be attached to the shoulder (Fig. 5) or held in the hand. Many men and women have thick straight lines coming out of their bodies. Others have zig-zag lines extending from their hands — the ‘whips’ and ‘serpents’ of the literalists. The
Figure 4 Two female figures with grossly distended stomachs, holding oval and leaf-shaped objects. One has rattles attached to an arm. Gurure, Mutoko district.

Figure 5 Men, probably engaged in an elephant hunt, by the same artist as Figure 3. Cairnsmore, Mazowe district.
commonest emission is a thin line that always ends in a deep crescentic or tulip shape that comes from the penis of many male figures (Fig. 2). The line may be a thin sinuous tendril or thick, bent and with a bifurcated end. It can occur on hunters or reclining figures and even on men whose penis also has a vertical bar across it (perhaps the commonest body addition, the ‘infibulation’ of those who favour literal interpretations of the paintings).

These details clearly represent standardised signs that must once have been universally understood within the culture. They are specific, different, widespread and divorced from realistic illustration. Each must signify a different specific phenomenon. Very probably, given the main thrust of San beliefs, they may have signified different forms of power, potency, sickness, spirit-travel, spirit-control or trance. Beyond this it is difficult to go at present. They cannot be taken as variants of a single generalised metaphor for a generalised state of trance.

There may have been many subtle, personal and idiosyncratic ways of illustrating trance. Fig. 3 is a particularly skilled painting of great delicacy of detail, clarity and assurance. The male figures on the right are apparently an energetic group of hunters, juxtaposed and superimposed on a group of figures lying on skins. The hunters have a set of almost unique features, known only at one other site: the marks of a single artist or a very limited school. Their upper arms are thickened into a circular shape; the knees and ankles are thinned and lengthened; the torso is lengthened and curved; a narrow unpainted line extends down the front or back of the torso; the navel is emphasised; the buttocks are carefully rounded and the profile of the face is indicated. One crouched figure, bottom right, has no upper body; a single line extends from his waist. This figure is not incomplete or faded, but a deliberate and complete image.

This panel shows what seems to be a unique concern for human anatomy, for the representation of muscle and bone. There is possibly more to it. The knotting and bunching of muscles and the stretching and attenuation of bones and limbs are characteristic symptoms of trance. Here the circles on the biceps, the narrow, long, bony leg joints and the stretched torsos seem to illustrate precisely these sensations. The narrow blank lines up the body coincide with the path along which the San believe that potency rises in trance. The crouched figure with no upper body would then represent a figure in complete trance from which the spirit (the head and hands) has departed. Such deliberately incomplete bodies without heads or arms are indeed a widespread minor and generally unnoticed feature of Zimbabwe’s art.

One of the very few paintings with the same idiosyncratic circles on the biceps is shown in Fig. 5. These figures do not have the exposed knee and ankle bones or the line down the torso. One figure holds his head and has tufts at the base of his spine: the distinctive costume of dancers in the paintings. Many figures have lines from their heads. Three figures have lenticular shapes attached to their shoulders; one has a longer ‘pennant’. One figure is again shown deliberately incomplete, without lower legs or arms. Five of the hunters have curious necks divided into three. This can be explained as the swelling of the arteries pumping blood that the San associate with the boiling over and rising of energy: further illustration of trance symptoms. Three figures hold staffs with crescent or tulip ends.

The scene is part of a much larger one. To the right are more figures like those
illustrated, shooting flights of arrows, probably aimed at and piercing a very large animal in the centre of the panel, now obliterated. The scene thus combines elements of dance, trance and hunting.

Straightforward illustrations of trance would show one or two supine male figures, each attended by one or two people, in a camp and close to a dance. There is indeed a large number of paintings of men falling forward or supine, often with smaller paintings of one or two women beside them (Fig. 2). They generally have tendrils emerging from the penis and elongated stick-like limbs reminiscent of the attenuation of trance.

Occasionally these men are surrounded by several small hunters aiming arrows at them. Some are pierced by so many of these arrows that they resemble pincushions (Fig. 6). The shooting of arrows into a person is a common metaphor for the giving of energy to a trancer by his teacher and for the activation of that energy.

These men have a lot in common with the rare hunting scenes in the art, of which Fig. 5 is probably a part and Fig. 7 is a further example. These almost all represent the wounding of large animals, usually elephant but occasionally rhino, hippo, buffalo, lions or curious creatures with heavy bodies, short legs and lop ears. These paintings usually exaggerate enormously the difference in size between the men and the animals. Several of the hunters gesture in fear and alarm, flee and fall. The arrows used in these hunts often have most elaborate heads, often shaped like a crescent or tulip — the motif associated with additions to the head or penis. When the arrow heads are simple, some of the participants in the hunt carry staffs with elaborate tulip heads (Fig. 5). It is impossible to envisage that these scenes illustrate actual practices or incidents. The animals are not the usual prey. They are improbably large and dangerous and they also are too difficult to despatch with arrows alone. The heads of the arrows are too complex to be made of wood and stone and too unwieldy to travel far or efficiently. It seems obvious that these scenes are not literal illustrations. The parallels between them and those that show the

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Figure 6 Recumbent figures, one pierced by many arrows. Three hunters aim elaborate arrows at him. An oval design is enclosed within a lenticular shape. Manemba, Mutoko district.
piercing of recumbent men are sufficient to suggest that they are two transformations of the same concept, trance, using different metaphors.

Large recumbent male figures occasionally have an oval shape beside or attached to them. In a well known painting, Diana’s Vow (Goodall, 1959: pl. 56; Lewis-Williams, 1983a: pl. 27), the oval is attached to the small of the back and covered with regular lines of white dots, as is the figure itself. Beside this figure, another recumbent figure is almost obliterated by ovals. In a similar painting (Fig. 2), the recumbent man has a blank, unpainted area in his stomach. An oval of the same shape as the blank area is painted beside his back. If the recumbent figures are trancers, the ovals presumably also have some connection with trance.

Oval designs are the dominant abstract motif in Zimbabwe’s art and have attracted a lot of speculation. Amongst the more popular interpretations is Frobenius’ (1931) that they represent landscapes, dominated by granite boulders. The current one (Pager, 1973) that they represent bees’ nests is generally accepted (Huffman, 1983: 51; Lewis-Williams, 1983b: 6). All interpretations have assumed that the designs are attempts at realistic representation, even though every suggested likeness looks pretty far-fetched and tenuous. They have all concerned themselves with the appearance of some of the designs, not with the variations that occur in them or the contexts and associations in which they are found.

The typical design has a dark rectangular core covered in regular lines of white dots and with light semicircular caps at both ends of the rectangle. Lines of up to twenty adjoining ovals are known. They may be horizontal or vertical. They may be enclosed in a circle. Where this occurs the ovals may be curved and narrowed at their ends to fit better within the circle. Others are enclosed in lenticular shapes that appear to sprout at one end so that they look like tubers, with an oval at the core of the plant (Fig. 6).
Some oval designs have no associated images. Many of the largest have complex scenes painted over them. In one case it is a single large camp scene of women and children. Often it is a great variety of diverse human and animal figures. Sometimes the integration of more and more oval motifs with increasingly complex panels of figures shows how the two themes grew together. Only elephants are used in the same way as the background and ambience of scenes so diverse that they seem to encompass the whole of life.

More specific associations show small creatures standing on or emerging from the ovals or looking round them. Trees may also be attached to them. In one case the ovals are placed between the legs of one of the large lop-eared creatures, 'trapping' it (Goodall, 1959: pl. 8). In one case a man stands beside a complex oval design and his bulky, misshapen, multi-coloured body takes the shape of the oval design and seems to start to transform into it (1959: pl. 55). In another painting, a single vertical ovoid forms the entire body of a man, with only rudimentary arms and head, stocky legs and a tulip penis attached to it (Fig. 8). Ovals attached to trance figures have already been described. In a few cases, stippled lines of dots and dashes emerge from groups of ovals and spread across a painted panel.

It is possible to provide a single encompassing explanation for the variety of forms, details, contexts and associations of the oval designs and relate this to San ethnography, if the oval designs are seen as abstract symbols of concepts about potency.

What, in San belief, does potency do? Are these attributes represented in the Zimbabwe art? It fills the body (ovoid designs with human appendages, Fig. 8). It is present in trance (the ovals attached to supine male trancers, Fig. 2). It is present in some plants (the tuber-like designs with an oval at their core, Fig. 6). It can be used to control animals and people (the figures attached to or 'trapped' amongst the ovals). It is noticably absent from some animals (some paintings of buck have deep indentations or voids in the stomach area that cannot satisfactorily be explained in terms of fugitive colours). Potency is the central concept of the supernatural among the San and pervades

Figure 8 A typical oval shape, given legs and rudimentary arms and head. Lake McIlwaine, Harare district.
all of life and its activities (the many instances of oval designs that form a background to or an addition to scenes of what seem to be everyday life). Above all, the activation of potency is a communal act achieved through communal dancing and used by the whole community for the benefit of all. This essential aspect is conveyed very powerfully in the paintings by the massed ovals of the most complex designs. Above all, belief in the presence and power of potency is the background and ambience of San spiritual life. This is given expression in the art by the many complex sets of images entirely painted on, encompassed and surrounded by designs of ovoids.

In one cave, Zombepata, there are several variations on the oval design. In two cases the ovals are enclosed in circles that have serrated exteriors, with spikes or triangles sticking out from them. The spaces between the ovals and the circles are filled with small white motifs that look like conventionalised arrowheads. Some of these emerge from a gap in the enclosing circle. In several simpler variants, the ovals themselves are omitted and the arrowheads within the serrated circles are replaced by stippled dashes. These also emerge from a gap in the circle and stream across the cave wall. Those who see the ovals as beehives take the Zombepata arrowheads and stippling to represent bees (Pager, 1973). Earlier authors have produced good reasons to suppose that if the arrowheads are an attempt at realistic representation, it is of birds rather than bees (Petie, 1974: 3; Cooke, 1969). Certainly where there are paintings of insects elsewhere they are realistic and identifiable and those of bees are quite unlike these shapes (Garlake, 1987: Fig. 1).

It is possible to interpret all the elements in the remarkable Zombepata paintings in terms of potency and its release. They match all current !Kung metaphors for potency in a most striking way (Katz, 1982). !Kung potency resides in the stomach. When it is first acquired, a master of num fires arrows into the stomach area, which feel like ‘a lot of thorns sticking out of the stomach’. Activated by dancing, potency heats up, ‘becomes vapour’, enters every part of the body and is felt as a ‘tingling’ or ‘pointed something’, until you feel that you ‘burst open like a ripe pod’.

All these metaphors are represented in the Zombepata paintings. The ovals are surrounded by circles (the stomach) with serrated exteriors (the arrows that feel like thorns sticking out of the stomach). Stippling streams out of the circles (as potency ‘boils over’ and you ‘burst open’). In its most detailed form the stippling looks like points or arrowheads (as it feels like a ‘pointed something’ when it becomes active). These painted parallels to the recorded experiences of potency and its release seem sufficiently close and comprehensive to give conviction to the suggestion that the oval designs symbolise an abstract concept of potency.

From this analysis we also have a meaning suggested for the stippling that emerges from ovoid designs, surrounds many scenes, streams across many panels or forms lines linking different images. The stippling represents released potency, potency no longer fully controlled by a trancer, potency reverting from man to nature, ‘natural uncontrolled potency’ in contrast to ‘culturally controlled potency’, creating a dichotomy between the two most important manifestations of potency. This interpretation seems to fit many scenes and explain the commonest, if not the most striking, of the purely abstract motifs in the art.

The presence of potency is probably represented in another and much more obvious and
realistic way in a series of figures with grossly distended stomachs: the seat of a potency so plentiful and powerful in these figures that it entirely distorts them (Fig. 4). Most of these figures hold rattles in their hands or have them strapped to their shoulders. This identifies them firmly as dancers and places them in the context that activates potency. Almost all have thick lines coming from their arms, probably representing a release of potency. The figures may also hold long thin crescents or the lenticular shapes already noted in other contexts. Some have unusually long muzzles and animal ears. The most striking have long parallel lines coming from between their legs.

In at least one case the lines surround and entangle human figures drawn before and by another hand. Human figures may be attached to these lines. They are distinctive for they hold the lines firmly but otherwise ‘float’, their bodies raised and their legs bent tightly under them. These figures can also be seen clutching stippling that has been formed into ladder-like patterns, supporting the connection of stippling with potency (Fig. 9).

The same ‘floating’ figures are also attached to lines that seem to be strung between poles or trees in two adjacent scenes, dubbed ‘people crossing rope bridges’ by a literalist (Goodall, 1959: pl. 49). Both these scenes have snakes beside them. The snakes have the long muzzles and large ears of many obese figures. Such ‘animal-headed snakes’ are a rare but recurrent and striking feature of Zimbabwe’s art. The largest and most detailed such snake has many small human figures (and a few possible baboons and small buck) standing on its back, which undulates in a way that looks very like the zig-zag streams. So, with their zig-zag undulations and ‘animal heads’ with ears and muzzles, some snakes encapsulate the most significant attributes of the obese figures.
The representation of swollen stomachs as sources of potency forces a reassessment of many figures that seem to be straightforward representations of women gatherers ‘with large tasselled bags slung at their waists’. A line of 18 female dancers (Fig. 10) emerging from a camp with aprons, rattles and lenticular shapes on their shoulders and carrying short sticks have such ‘bags’ but in this context the bags look much more like swollen stomachs with lines (or streams of potency?) emanating from them.

*Figure 10* A line of women dancers, wearing aprons and carrying short sticks, with rattles attached to their shoulders or necks. Some have tasselled bags or lines emerging from swollen stomachs. Chikupu, Bindura district.

This paper has not examined paintings of animals. There is not space to do so except to mention that in paintings where the fugitive white pigment is preserved, many animals at many different sites have details and decorations in white added to them which have not been described before. A relationship between animals and humans is made explicit in paintings where animals are given sharply delineated white stripes across their knees and fetlocks, often with a white rectangle on the hooves and, in some cases, stripes across the neck and the lower body. These correspond exactly with the stripes painted on people to indicate bead necklaces, girdles, bracelets and anklets. This decoration has been recorded on kudu, reedbuck, warthogs, elephants, buffaloes and crocodiles (Garlake, 1987). Possibly every species and the majority of animal paintings were once decorated in this way. These embellishments bring the natural animal world into the realms of human culture clearly and explicitly and make it quite clear that some, and perhaps all, animals were seen to share some characteristics with people or to have some human aspects.

Three things may emerge from this review of some of the distinctive elements in Zimbabwe’s art. Firstly, many complex and previously enigmatic scenes can be interpreted in terms of trance and potency even though they have little resemblance to South African paintings. Secondly, there can be a shift away from establishing images of generalised trance to trying to identify representations of specific forms of trance power or potency. The San conceive of potency in different ways, good and bad, benign and controlled or dangerous and uncontrolled, some used to cure, others to control animals or to bring rain. Within this framework it may prove possible to identify the types and functions of the different forms of potency represented in the Zimbabwe paintings, from the contexts and associations of particular types of images: the bloated dancer, the abstract oval pattern, the recumbent man, the wounded elephant, the crescent or tulip, the streams of stippling, the various forms of head ornaments and bodily discharges. This process will be helped if, thirdly, we distinguish metaphors, the basis of all recent
interpretations, from more abstract symbols and recognise that both are present in the art. We should finally stop trying to find literal or even metaphoric interpretations for all we see and accept that the artists were capable of conceiving abstract concepts and making them real in the art not only through realistic illustrations of metaphors but also through more abstract symbols. It is unnecessary always to try to interpret all motifs in representational terms, be it of bees, beehives, menstrual blood, amniotic fluid, honey, fat or hallucinations. It is restricting; it diminishes the art and it is probably wrong.

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References


**Abstract**

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**Themes in the prehistoric art of Zimbabwe**

This impressionist survey of the rock art of Zimbabwe is set within a framework of San beliefs about dance, trance, trancers and their potency. It follows on the work of J. D. Lewis-Williams in South Africa and seeks to extend his approach, using the Zimbabwean art. Among the major themes or motifs interpreted within this framework are large recumbent male figures, obese dancing figures, abstract oval designs, stippled areas and various representations of emanations from the human body.