



Rock art, the art of tracking, and cybertracking: Demystifying the “Bushmen” in the information age

Keyan G. Tomaselli

To cite this article: Keyan G. Tomaselli (2001) Rock art, the art of tracking, and cybertracking: Demystifying the “Bushmen” in the information age, *Visual Anthropology*, 14:1, 77-82, DOI: [10.1080/08949468.2001.9966818](https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2001.9966818)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2001.9966818>



Published online: 17 May 2010.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 89



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 4 View citing articles [↗](#)

Rock Art, the Art of Tracking, and Cybertracking: Demystifying the “Bushmen” in the Information Age

Louis Liebenberg. *A Field Guide to the Animal Tracks of Southern Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1990; 320 pp., photographs, illustrations, maps, diagrams, index.

Louis Liebenberg. *A Concise Guide to Animal Tracks of Southern Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1992; 104 pp., photographs, sketches, maps.

Louis Liebenberg. *The Art of Tracking: The Origins of Science*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1995; 192 pp., drawings, index.

J. D. Lewis-Williams. *Discovering Southern African Rock Art*, Cape Town: David Philip, 2000; 102 pp., photos, graphics, sketched reproductions, index.

Academic research which has focused on San rock art has been largely couched historically within an interpretive framework. This set of approaches offers the Western readers of coffee-table books a conceptual bridge between the past and the present in making sense of rock art [Jeursen 1995]. Popular appropriations of San rock art imagery and of contemporary San individuals via advertising, cinema and TV, have tended to endorse this Western commonsense perspective. While more recent academic work does not in and of itself locate living Bushmen in the “past”, this temporal consignment does tend to underpin the basic assumption of commercialised media depictions, as well as the framework for the encounter between cultural-tourists and the inhabitants of cultural-villages in the Kalahari.

The books listed above, and those mentioned below, significantly are aimed mainly at lay readers, tourists, and those with a less than academic knowledge of the field of anthropology. For this reason alone they are important, as the popular encounter with the “Bushmen” is usually the defining media-shaped one in terms of Western stereotypes. Academic studies are rarely able systematically to undo the damage done by early anthropological and archaeological theories of evolutionism. David Philip’s books are quite different than the coffee table series published by another South African publisher, Struik, of Pretoria. These are lavishly illustrated with photographs, and offer through the work of photographer Anthony

Bannister [*The Bushmen*, 1991] and Peter Magubane [*Vanishing Cultures*, 1999], a much more “traditional” photographic perspective of the Bushmen as cultural isolates. Where Struik’s books are available at South African airport bookstores and the Central News Agency national chain, Philip’s books are found in locations less accessible to travelers.

Lewis-Williams’s book, *Discovering Southern African Rock Art* [2000] traces the story behind San rock art research, how it started, its failures and successes. It deals with some of the debates on method, interpretation and context. This in itself is unusual as the more ubiquitous coffee-table books on rock art rarely engage their readers in academic debates, disputes and differences of approach. Chapters in Lewis-Williams deal with how rock art was discovered through history, in relation to the Western need for such knowledge. This introductory section is then followed by a series of chapters offering different though linked ways of interpreting San images: the esthetic, narrative, and interpretive approaches.

Interpretive approaches are examined by Lewis-Williams in terms of: (a) San beliefs, and (b) neuropsychology. The latter approach was developed once it was realised that rock art is an indication of shamanistic practices and rituals, particularly during trance states. Rock art, like any modern media, is now understood to elicit multiple meanings from those looking at and decoding them. These meanings distinguish encoders from decoders, themselves located in specific histories and contexts, whether relating to the San themselves or later Western viewers and scholars who “discovered” this art. The shamanistic perspective thus reveals to scholars something about the “breadth, subtlety and interrelatedness of San thought” [83]. The turn to the study of rock art via shamanism has also reduced the distance between scholars and the San artists who made, and the San people who interacted with, rock art. The interpretive approaches are the most enddistanced from the San themselves [84]. Identifying commonalities of style was the emphasis of the textual approaches, while the more recent understandings now acknowledge idiosyncratic creations via interrelationships between individual rock artists and the shamanistic descriptions they are visualising. One archaeologist, Ann Solomon [1995], has recently also introduced a gender perspective into the debates on rock art. A final chapter in Lewis-Williams’s book, “Fragile Heritage”, is an appeal to tourists, researchers and others not to destroy rock art through, for example, wetting rock paintings to bring out their color. Lewis-Williams pleads that rock art should be “seen and preserved as a sacred memorial to a lost people” destroyed by Western expansion [97].

If rock art can be cast by academics as a memorial to previous generations of San artists, tracking is an activity that continues into the present. Not only is tracking much less studied and debated in the scholarly literature, but the San skills in this activity have also been appropriated by military, security and conservation agencies in combating communism, stock theft and poaching, (not necessarily in that order). Louis Liebenberg’s latest book, *The Art of Tracking: The Origins of Science* [1995], discusses San techniques of tracking and hunting, and develops a theory of tracking based on his own experience. As an anthropology of hunting, visualised to some extent in the 1996 film of the same title, *The Art of Tracking*, the book spans a variety of fields in providing guidelines on tracking techniques: paleoanthropology, ethnology and archaeology, through which Liebenberg provides

the physical attributes of track recognition. Ted Chamberlin [2000], currently working with San in the Northern Cape, argues that tracking is the equivalent of reading, that one must read between the lines, and assess the animal-derived genres and style, signs in the sand complicated by seasons and other environmental considerations. Chamberlin then develops a tentative theory of tracking as reading after Liebenberg [1990], who argues that in reading animal disturbances of the environment "intermittent attention" requires a constant refocussing between minute detail of the track and the whole pattern of the environment.

Tracking and hunting, of course, have been the pre-eminent emphasis of films on the San, starting with John Marshall's *The Hunters* [1958] through the Discovery Channel's *Hunters of the Kalahari* [1995] to Craig Foster's *The Great Dance: a Hunter's Story* [2000]. Marshall emphasized the mystical nature of tracking and hunting, as does Foster's video: "Tracking is like dancing, because your body is happy and you are talking to God", says !Nqate Xqamxebe, whose words narrate the program.

Marshall's voice-over in *The Hunters* [1958] states that the hunter had to "think his way to the giraffe". The San narrators say something similar in *The Great Dance*, and take it further: "Tracking is Dancing" and dancing, as all anthropologists know, embodies ontological significance. Charlie Handley, a zoologist at the Smithsonian Institution, who accompanied the Marshalls on the 1952 expedition, commented that the San:

could actually think like the animal enough so that they soon knew what its strategy was, where it was going. And they did not follow track to track to track. They would take short-cuts and intersect the trail again where they figured it was going to come. They literally charted when they were tracking; they were not just plodding along looking at tracks—I really had a hard time keeping up. They showed me how to track and how to recognize individual tracks, but I never got beyond the track to track to track stage. [Handley, interview, Feb. 26th, 1997, with Keyan Tomaselli and John P. Homiak, Smithsonian Institution]

The importance of Liebenberg's book, and Handley's comments above, is their insistence that tracking is a learned skill. It is not a genetic trait, it is not a mystical culturally-derived attribute, as the South African Defence Force suggested in their attempts during the late 1980s to legitimate enlistment of "Bushmen" as "trackers" in their war conducted against Communist Angola. Tracking, according to Liebenberg, is the "oldest science". *The Great Dance*, however, revisits the hunting hypothesis which has as its corollary the notion that tracking is an inborn skill, one existentially integrated with culture, ontology and religion. The way that Foster's video is shot, too, draws on both cinema and rock art esthetics. The esthetic is almost a postmodern cinema, with references to an arrow almost arrested in space in slow motion *Prince of Thieves* style, through swirling shots of a wizened old hunter and stop-motion photography of cloud formations. The rock art esthetic occurs in the opening shot and some others, where they seem to reference the stylised still esthetic of grainy appearance.

The "oldest science" has now been linked with computer technology into a "new science" by Liebenberg. This has resulted in the Cybertracker Field Computer which integrates "traditional knowledge", derived from expertise built over generations, "with state-of-the-art computer science" [www.cybertracker.co.za/

index]. Whatever Liebenberg intended from his invention, it is significant that a CNN report on the gadget still reported on contemporary San hunters and trackers as living in the "past": "The environmental inventor [Liebenberg] thinks the cybertracker can ensure the preservation of prehistorical Kalahari tracking techniques by giving them a vital role to play in the modern scientific age" [CNN.com, March 12, 1999].

The hand-held Palm Pilot can be used even by a-literates who can record very complex information by selecting icons on screens and following a path through a sequence of screens. Fieldnotes can be added and the Palm Pilot customised, and data saved onto an integrated Global Positioning System, whence it can be transferred to a PC, or directly from the Palm Pilot if the GPS option is not included. Map data are incorporated into the software, and the data can also be displayed in tables structured chronologically, alphabetically or numerically for a chosen field.

Media reports on the Cybertracker, for example, that "Ancient tracking takes a modern twist" [CNN.com], play into the myth of the two kinds of science discussed in my articles on the San [Tomaselli 1999a, 1999b]. The Cybertracker is an example of an electronic invention where "science" meets "priest-craft". This is a language of conservation which is embedded in the mystique of indigenous knowledge and evoked for developmental and scientific purposes. The mystical animist identification in the film, *The Art of Tracking* [1996], of the hunter's strategy, "in my imagination, I become the animal I am stalking", is a recurring one in film, video and TV programs on San hunters. This cosmology, in effect, separates the pragmatics of the logic of something, in this instance, hunting, from the material reality in which the hunter and prey share a kind of interspecies world. It assumes that there is a "spirit" reality that hunter and prey share but from which "alienated" or "demystified" Modern Social Man is excluded; (remember, Modern Social Woman still has her "Intuition" and is thus exempt from exclusion, here).

Aside from reproducing, if in anti-scientific terms, the Cartesian duality between the material and the mental-cum-spiritual, such media representations run the risk of reproducing the politically charged concept of the "noble savage". The concept does not necessarily strike any chords with CNN's international mass audience, but it clearly has resonances for those whose interests depend on maintaining anti-democratic (*i.e.* "savage") social orders. It is significant perhaps that Liebenberg's book, *The Art of Tracking*, is listed in the publisher's 1998/99 Academic Catalogue under "Natural History" [28]. The recent acrimony engendered by the location of San exhibits and dioramas in South Africa's Natural History museums, then, seems not to have been understood by the publisher [Douglas and Law 1997; Jackson and Robins 1999]. Thus, aside from drastically misrepresenting the way the San actually come to acquire and develop their tracking skills, these media provide justifications for any number of fundamentalist ethnic, religious and other factions. That Lewis-Williams's book, the *Concise Guide* [1992] and Townley Johnson's *Major Rock Paintings of Southern Africa* [1986] and the other books discussed here are listed in the 1998-99 General and Educational Catalogue under the "General" [34-35] category, gives some cause for comfort, but not much. The Cybertracker, of course, is less useful to San hunters than it is to wildlife and conservation authorities, safari companies, and tourists. The bulk of current use of the Cybertracker is by conservation authorities. I had hoped to

interview in July 2000 San game rangers on their responses to the Cybertracker, but a vehicle breakdown prevented this.

Liebenberg's latest book, *A Concise Guide to Animal Tracks of Southern Africa* [2000], is a manual of tracking, and suggests ways of identifying the tracks of different animals. Small maps of animal and reptile distribution are offered, and brief written and sketched descriptions of the *spoor* accompany the sketches and photographs. The opening two-page introduction on "Spoor Identification" provides an all-too-brief background to the general interpretation of *spoor*, though his earlier book, *A Field Guide to the Animal Tracks of Southern Africa* [1990], is a more comprehensive examination of the topic. The book under review is concerned with the more common *spoor* that tourists, animal watchers, hikers and scholars are likely to encounter in the wild. Liebenberg assumes a general readership, and makes no assumptions about the skill of the tracker, or societal differences in the nature of trackers' encounter with tracks, or motivations for hunting.

A Concise Guide does not help us to "think" our way to the animal being tracked, or hunted, but it does provide a very useful introduction to the identification of different kinds of animal tracks. In some places in Botswana hunting is still seasonally permitted. My own experience of accompanying San hunters in the Central Kalahari is that their tracking and track identification skills remain sharp, but that they use dogs, which smell out and corner the animal, where it is speared by the hunter who now follows on a donkey. The game is dispersed, remote, and hunting is controlled through quotas. Foster's film, shot in the area west of the Central Kalahari Game Park, shows hunters without dogs and donkeys, hunters running for hours after their prey. The real "thinking" on the part of San hunters, more often than not, is working out how to hunt in the off-season without the authorities learning of this activity, a point also made in Foster's video. Having established a visual and aural poetics of hunting, he startles viewers at the end of his film with the revelation that hunting has been banned in the area: "Now, the San are criminals."

Overall, the David Philip corpus of books on tracking and rock art helps to demystify commonsense perceptions held in the realm of the popular, of the cultural-tourist, and of the Western gaze at the San in general. Though aimed at the lay reader, they also hold fascinating and important insights for the serious scholar. I have included discussion of some films and videos in this book review, as there is a growing intertextuality between what is written, what is photographed, and between moving images and print media, in books, articles and on the Internet.

The use by San game rangers of the Cybertracker is certainly a boost for mapping animal locations and movement patterns in national parks. Employment is created; population management is enhanced; and indigenous knowledge is encoded into information-age technology. There is no quibble here. The continuing problem, however, lies in the way that the media report on these kinds of synergies. It remains the task of the visual anthropologist to criticize these kinds of essentialist reports which categorise people in terms of the science *vs.* priest-craft, past *vs.* present, and ancient *vs.* contemporary dichotomies.

REFERENCES

- Bannister, Anthony, and David Lewis-Williams
 1991 *The Bushmen. A Changing Way of Life*. Pretoria: Struik.
- Chamberlin, Ted
 2000 Hunting, Tracking and Reading. In *Literary Narrative and Culture*. Jens Brockmeister, David R. Olson and Min Wang, eds. London: Curzon Press (forthcoming).
- Douglas, Stuart, and Jennifer Law
 1997 Beating Around the Bush (man!): Reflections on "Miscast: Negotiating Khoisan History and Material Culture". *Visual Anthropology*, 10: 85–108.
- Jackson, Shannon, and Stephen Robins
 1999 Miscast: The Place of the Museum in Negotiating the Bushman Past and Present. *Critical Arts*, 13(1): 69–101.
- Jeursen, Belinda
 1995 Rock Art as a Bridge Between Past and Future: A Common Cultural Heritage for the New South Africa? *Critical Arts*, 9(2): 119–130.
- Johnson, Townley R.
 1986 *Major Rock Paintings of Southern Africa*. Edited by Tim Maggs. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Magubane, Peter
 1999 *Vanishing Cultures*. Pretoria: Struik.
- Solomon, Anne
 1995 Representations of the Aesthetic in San Art. *Critical Arts*, 13(2): 49–64.
- Tomaselli, Keyan
 1999a Psychospiritual Ecoscience; the Ju/'hoansi and Cultural Tourism. *Visual Anthropology*, 12(2–3): 185–196.
 1999b Textualizing the San "Past": Dancing With Development. *Visual Anthropology*, 12(2–3): 197–212.

FILMOGRAPHY

- Foster, Craig
 2000 *The Great Dance. A Hunter's Story*. 72 mins, Discovery Channel.
- Liebenberg, Louis
 1996 *The Art of Tracking*.
- Marshall, John
 1958 *The Hunters*. Watertown, Mass.: D.E.R; color, 72 minutes.

Keyan G. Tomaselli
*Graduate Programme in Cultural
 and Media Studies
 University of Natal
 Durban 4014
 South Africa*