METAPHORIC PILGRIMAGE:
TOWARDS RECONSTRUCTING PUBLIC ROCK ART SITES

BLUNDELL Geoffrey, Johannesburg, South Africa

A very important, but often overlooked, aspect of contemporary archaeology is the presentation of the past to the public. All too often archaeologists leave the responsibility of presenting the past to television companies, popular journals and museum personnel. While these people usually understand their respective fields well, they are not always familiar with the subtle ideological aspects of presenting the past. In many cases this unfamiliarity leads to the reproduction of stereotypes. There is an urgent need, therefore, for archaeologists and, in particular, rock art researchers to become more involved in presenting the past to the public.

Such involvement is particularly required at rock art sites open to the public. In South Africa there is a desperate shortage of public sites and those that are open to visitation are, often, inadequate. In this paper, I demonstrate how archaeologists can contribute to presenting the past by critically discussing the predicament of South Africa's public rock art sites. I argue three points in relation to these sites: First, I argue that current approaches to South African public rock art sites are problematic. Secondly, I argue for a reconceptualisation of public rock art sites. Finally, I demonstrate the applicability of this new approach in terms of design and structure.

Current Approaches

Educated guesses place the number of known South African rock art sites at over fifteen thousand. Despite the vast quantity of sites, there are exceptionally few that are open to the public. Those sites that are open to the public are problematic, largely because it is difficult to conceptualise adequately how to present rock art to the public. Faced with the lack of an adequate conceptual approach, constructors of such sites have fallen back on familiar Western metaphors and conceptions. While they are not mutually exclusive - in reality all sites manifest aspects of both - we may identify two current approaches to South African public rock art sites that rely on familiar Western conceptions: the minimalist approach and the metaphor-of-museum approach.

The minimalist approach

Public rock art sites in this category have little or nothing in the way of interpretative material or facilities. Sometimes only a protective fence is placed around the site. A central assumption of this approach is that the art should be left as pristine as possible - it should be left in its original setting with little or no mediatory structures.

As an example, I cite a recent project funded by the Department of Environment Affairs. A survey of rock art in the Cederberg Wilderness Area was conducted with the aim of identifying sites to which the public would be allowed access. At the end of the survey, a decision was taken that only certain sites be opened to the public and that, in keeping with the wilderness concept, no interpretative structures would be placed at the sites. Only a

pamphlet was to be made available on request. The decision not to turn any of the sites into interpretative centres was based on the questionable assumption that the art should be allowed to speak for itself. Unfortunately, by leaving sites unmediated, we run the risk of reproducing long-standing, widely-held pejorative conceptions of the San as being part of the 'wilderness'. In this view, the San are seen as living close to nature, and are thus closer to animals than to people; they are therefore not fully cultural in the Western sense of the term. The historical depth of these connotations and their firm entrenchment in the South African consciousness will override any statement in a publicly available pamphlet. By associating the art closely with nature, no matter how sensitively, it and by extension its makers will always be seen as less than cultural.

Another, though less extreme, manifestation of the minimalist approach may be found at the well-known public rock art site of Tandjesberg in the Free State. Situated on private land, the site at Tandjesberg is well managed and protected by a fence. A boardwalk has been placed on the archaeological deposit to prevent the destruction of the stratigraphy as well as the stirring up of dust which can adhere to the paintings and damage them. Copies of images from the shelter have been placed on lecterns along this boardwalk. All this is laudable but, while these copies allow the visitor to identify the various paintings more readily, the absence of any interpretative text is problematic. The redrawn images, and ultimately the actual paintings themselves, become icons that float free in the visitors' consciousness, around which pejorative associations become attached.

The minimalist approach, then, does not challenge or alter people's conceptions of rock art and, since many people come to a site with 'cultural baggage' that is overstuffed with negative images of the San and their art, this approach reinforces pejorative ideas simply by not challenging them.

The metaphor-of-museum approach

Whereas the minimalist approach conceptualised public rock art sites as part of nature, the metaphor-of-museum approach tends to conceive sites as essentially Western institutions. Possibly South Africa's best-known public rock art site, Main Caves in the Giant's Castle Nature Reserve, is a striking example of this approach. Main Caves is explicitly constructed as a 'site museum': display cabinets containing excavated material from the shelter are present as well as a diorama of casts representing San people. There is also a long audio-tape commentary to which visitors are required to listen. There are at least three problems with the museum approach as exemplified at Main Caves.

First, the art tends to be overshadowed by the display cabinets and casts. The audio-tape commentary, for example, does not portray the art enthusiastically but, instead, emphasizes the preeminence of the display. The problem is clearly illustrated by the following extract: "On your way to it [the display cabinets], have a look at the many paintings on the big rock that provides such an attractive **backdrop to the display**" (emphasis added).

A second and more serious problem is that the museum approach treats the paintings as if they were museum objects. The images become like isolated pots or headrests in widely separated display cabinets. Very little attempt is made to demonstrate connections between images in the site or linking them to similar images in South African rock art as a whole. In this sense, the images, like museum objects, stand as metonyms for the culture that produced

them. The site becomes little more than a museum containing a myriad of decontextualised objects.

The third and final problem of the museum approach that I consider here is authoritarianism. Importantly, a distinction must be made between 'authoritarian' and 'authoritative'. By 'authoritative' I mean well informed and well researched; 'authoritarian', on the other hand, means dictatorial and implies the assumption of imperial status and the right to dictate views without supporting evidence. Authority is, inescapably, part of any presentation and representation, and, in the alternative approach I offer later in this paper, I cannot escape being authoritative myself. Nevertheless, I do believe it is possible to escape being authoritarian, something which the metaphor of museum approach does not manage to do. The authoritarian nature of this approach is seen in such aspects as the placing of National Monument plaques (although this no longer happens) at sites and the prominent display of the legal consequences of any sort of vandalism.

In a less obvious manner, the interpretative material that is presented in this approach often has a didactic and authoritarian quality. At a site known as Bushman's Restaurant in the Western Cape Province, for example, interpretative material in the form of a photocopied article entitled *Die San: lewe, geloof en kuns* by David Lewis-Williams has been placed on a noticeboard. The fact that this article does not concern any of the images at the site in question and its considerable length and small typeface, make it inappropriate for the site. The use of a paper written by an academic, albeit for a popular audience, as well as the placement of the article on a noticeboard, which requires the reader to look up (at certain times of the day into the sun) and not down as at a lectern, imparts a didactic quality to the presentation of this interpretative material.

The authoritarian tone of such displays, with no guard present at the site is an open invitation to vandals, and this is in fact what happened at Bushman's Restaurant: the display was destroyed and the paintings damaged. It must be pointed out, however, that, since I visited this site in October 1994, it has been altered and graffiti have been removed. I have not seen these alterations. Nevertheless, the site as it was in October 1994 exemplified the failure of the didactic nature of the metaphor of museum approach.

The didactic quality of the presentation, the isolated treatment of images like museum objects, and the relegation of the art to a backdrop make the metaphor of museum a particularly flawed approach to rock art sites. If South Africa's public rock art sites are to play a more significant role in the country's burgeoning tourist industry and if we want the sites to 'educate' people about the art, then we need a new and more thorough conceptual approach.

Reconceptualising public rock art sites

If we are to avoid the mistakes of the minimalist and museum-as-metaphor approaches, we need an approach to public rock art sites that treats them as *sui generis*. I suggest two conditions that will satisfy such an approach. First, the approach must in some way, if at all possible, derive from an indigenous use of the site. Secondly, the approach must be relevant to current socio-political conditions in South Africa. I deal with each of these points in turn.

An approach based on original use

There is little information on the indigenous use of rock art sites in South Africa. The available information, however, suggests that the sites were used for deeply religious purposes. By now it is well accepted that the paintings and engravings were considered to be supernaturally powerful by the San (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1990, Yates and Manhire 1991). Not only were the paintings considered spiritually potent, but the actual sites where the images were made were seen to be powerful (Deacon 1988; Ouzman 1992). The power of the sites, at least in parts of southern Africa, appears to have been exploited on a seasonal basis. In the Natal Drakensberg, for example, evidence suggests that the San painted and used the sites in the summer and migrated to the Natal midlands in winter where there are few paintings (Carter 1970; Vinnicombe 1976).

In addition, although there is a lacuna in the ethnographic evidence on vision quest amongst the San, the fact that such experiences are well documented amongst the majority of shamanic cultures strongly suggests that certain rock art sites were places where spiritual insights and power were obtained. The conception of images and sites as supernaturally powerful, the seasonal journey to these powerful sites and probable use of sites for spiritual experiences are characteristic of what Victor and Edith Turner describe as the 'pilgrimage process' (Turner & Turner 1978).

Pilgrimages, according to the Turners, are a near universal feature of human societies, including shamanic ones, and, the evidence to which I have referred suggests that the San possibly made what may be called pilgrimages to rock art sites. An approach, then, that wishes to treat public rock art sites from the perspective of indigenous use would do well to approach them from the perspective of pilgrimage.

An approach that considers current socio-political conditions in South Africa

The second condition I suggested that would satisfy an approach to public rock art sites as *sui generis* would be an approach that is relevant to current socio-political conditions in South Africa. In recent years, there has been an awakening affinity in South African public consciousness to images of the San and their rock art. Images of the San and/or their rock art, for example, appear in commercials for companies such as Telkom, the SABC, and Spoornet. These companies tend to be nationally owned or are in the process of becoming fully privatised. Companies being privatised have needed new identities to accompany their new status, as in the case of South African Railways becoming Spoornet, and those that have remained state-controlled are trying to construct a new image that is more appropriate to the present-day, democratic South Africa. The San and their art provide ideal, (supposedly) politically neutral, symbols for new identities.

Indeed, a belief in the political neutrality of San art has led to rock art images being placed on the Olympic flag and valuable minted coins commemorating the World Rugby Cup. The San and their art are thus, for the first time in South African history, becoming incorporated on a large scale into the production of a unitary and national identity. An approach that takes current socio-political conditions into consideration must therefore take into account the inclusion of the art into a new national identity.

Importantly, Turner's work on pilgrimage points to the profound role that pilgrimage plays in identity-formation. According to Turner, pilgrims pass through three major phases, in van Gennep's famous formulation these are: rites of separation, rites of liminality, and rites of incorporation. The passing of the pilgrim through these three phases constitutes the 'pilgrimage process', a process which fundamentally alters identity.

During the separation phase, pilgrims are distinguished from their normal social surroundings through ritual. In the incorporation phase pilgrims undergo rites to resituate them within their daily social life. It is during the liminal phase, however, when pilgrims are isolated from 'normal' society, that the alteration of identity is particularly pronounced. The isolation of pilgrims during this phase allows them to operate in an environment that is free from 'symbolic clutter'. The number of symbols experienced in everyday life is minimised and particular symbols become focal points of the pilgrimage. These focal symbols are situated at the shrine - the destination of the pilgrims. At the shrine, pilgrims experience hunger, loss of sleep and rigorously performs rituals. The hardships, liminality, and lack of symbol-clutter allow the focal symbols at the shrine to impinge on the pilgrims as they never have before and thus produce an identity-altering experience.

Pilgrimage, then, offers an approach that treats public rock art sites as *sui generis* because it satisfies the two conditions that I stipulated, that of being derived from an indigenous use of the site and that of being relevant to current socio-political conditions in South Africa. If we are to reconstruct South African public rock art sites it will be useful if we approach them from the perspective of pilgrimage. I do not, of course, suggest establishing actual pilgrimages to public rock art sites, but rather taking from pilgrimage that which is effective in identity-transformation and replicating those features at public rock art sites. For this reason, and so as to avoid confusion, I use the notion of 'metaphoric pilgrimage' when dealing with public rock art sites.

Metaphoric pilgrimage: design and structure
Establishing a metaphoric pilgrimage at a public rock art site requires replicating the 'pilgrimage process'. In effect, this means that the site must be designed and constructed in such a way that the visitor passes through phases of separation, liminality, and reincorporation. In actual pilgrimages, these phases are marked by rituals. In metaphoric pilgrimages, we need to devise rituals or reformulate familiar conventions in a manner that turns them into rituals. I deal with possible ways of establishing the three phases of the pilgrimage process at public rock art sites in two sections. First, I consider the separation and reincorporation phases together, and then I look at the liminal phase.

The separation and reincorporation elements of metaphoric pilgrimage
An effective way of establishing a separation between the visitor and the general public is through the use of a visitor centre. Common in American national parks, visitor centres have not yet been widely used in South Africa. Positioning these centres at public rock art sites would be critical. All visitors to the site would have to pass through the visitor centre when entering and leaving the site. In keeping with the principle of progress through the site, a separate entrance and exit should be established so that visitors do not return the same way that they entered and hence feel that they are retreating on their own tracks. In addition, the entrance section should contain very few amenities, certainly no coffee shops or curio stores, and the whole layout should be designed to facilitate an efficient progression of people rather

than a directionless and open forum where people can drift around at will.

Furthermore, a short orientation video of a few minutes should be shown. An orientation video is desirable because, unlike real pilgrims, visitors to public rock art sites are not familiar with the significance of the symbols that they will encounter at the site itself; the video should therefore introduce aspects of San symbolism to visitors. The video would also serve to create symbolic distance between the visitor and the outside world because the length of the video would create a time-gap between the visitors' arrival and their ensuing visit to the rock art. As a final act of separation, visitors should be given a tag to hang around their necks that identifies them as visitors to the site. The tag would serve to mark visitors off as separate from daily social life.

On the visitors' return to the visitor centre, the tags could be placed in a box as the first symbolic act of reincorporation. The coffee shops and curio stores should be placed in this section of the visitor centre as they are familiar aspects of daily social life and thus symbolise the reincorporation of the visitors into the general public.

The liminal phase

The liminal phase begins outside the visitor centre at the start of the path that leads to the rock art. In keeping with the principles of the pilgrimage process, the nature of this path should be elliptical; visitors should not return to the visitor centre by way of the same path along which they journeyed to the site. Lecterns along this path should be easily understood and cumulative in their impact. Those lecterns on the path leading from the visitor centre to the site should emphasize the separation of the visitor from daily social life and raise expectations of what is to be seen at the site. Along the return path, the lecterns should emphasize the reincorporation of the visitor into daily social life. Again, this gives the visitor a sense of a progression through the site.

The symbols that visitors encounter at public rock art sites are, of course, the paintings and engravings. In terms of the model, the area where these images are found is the pilgrimage 'shrine'. It is before these images that visitors' identities are altered. It is here that they come face to face with the objects - the art - of their identity. In actual pilgrimages, pilgrims perform certain rituals around the objects at a shrine. Metaphoric pilgrimage needs to replicate this. One way of doing this would be to get the visitor to be more active in viewing the art; bending, kneeling, stretching, lying down or even climbing a staircase to view particular images, for example, would accomplish this task. Various possibilities suggest themselves; suffice to say that, in this short paper, I am interested in principles and not specifics, and the principle is to turn visitors from passive viewers into active participants in viewing the art.

Conclusion

I have argued that South Africa's public rock art sites are in a predicament and that a new conceptual approach to them is needed. Such an approach, I contend, may be found in the notion of metaphoric pilgrimage. Metaphoric pilgrimage attempts to replicate the pilgrimage process at public rock art sites and is, importantly, a strategy, not gospel, that is flexible enough to be applicable at numerous public rock art sites. Metaphoric pilgrimage is, as I have briefly demonstrated, not merely an idealistic and theoretical abstraction; it translates effectively into practical measures.

As archaeology approaches the twenty-first century, there is a growing isolation of the discipline from the broader public. Archaeological knowledge is manipulated and distorted by various parties and the discipline has little power to correct or challenge these misinterpretations. Developing conceptual approaches, like that of metaphoric pilgrimage, to presenting the past offers one way of giving archaeologists more control over public consumption of archaeological knowledge.

References

Blundell, G. 1995. **The politics of public rock art: a comparative critique of rock art sites open to the public in South Africa and the United States of America**. Master of Arts dissertation submitted to the Department of Archaeology, University of the Witwatersrand.

Carter, P.L. 1970. Late Stone Age exploitation patterns in southern Natal. **South African Archaeological Bulletin** 45: 5-16.

Deacon, J. 1988. The power of a place in understanding southern San rock engravings. **World Archaeology** 20: 129-140.

Deacon, J. 1993. Management guidelines for rock art sites in nature conservation areas ad forestry reserves in the western Cape. **Report submitted to Cape Nature Conservation and Museums Department**

Lewis-Williams, J.D. and T.A. Dowson. 1990. Through the veil: San rock paintings and the rock face. **South African Archaeological Bulletin** 45:5-16.

Ouzman, S. 1993. **Thaba Sione: place of the rhinoceros**. Honours dissertation submitted to the Department of Archaeology, University of the Witwatersrand.

Turner, V and E. Turner. 1978. **Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture: anthropological perspectives**. New York: Columbia University Press.

van Gennep, A. 1908. **The rites of passage**. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Vinnicombe, P. 1976. **People of the Eland: rock paintings of the Drakensberg Bushmen as a reflection of their life and thought**. Pietermaritzburg: Natal University Press.

Yates, R. and A. Manhire. 1991. Shamanism and rock paintings: aspects of the use of rock art in south-western Cape, South Africa. **South African Archaeological Bulletin 46: 3-11.**