H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter Mitchell, Benjamin Smith, eds. *The Eland's People: New Perspectives in the Rock Art of the Maloti-Drakensberg Bushmen, Essays in Memory of Patricia Vinnicombe.* Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009. Illustrations. ix + 214 pp. $60.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86814-498-3.

Reviewed by Anne Solomon
Published on H-AfrArts (August, 2014)
Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti

What's in a Name? Two Books and Thirty Years of San Rock Art Research

As anyone familiar with the literature on southern African rock art will know, the title of this volume alludes to Patricia Vinnicombe's landmark work, *People of the Eland: Rock Paintings of the Drakensberg Bushmen as a Reflection of Their Life and Thought*, published in 1976. The current volume, according to the editors, was originally conceived as an updated version of that book, integrating her updated ideas and new archaeological knowledge from excavations–a task that could not go forward following Vinnicombe's untimely death in 2003. *The Eland's People* is a collection of essays intended as a "suitable memorial" by "some of those" who have conducted research in this area since then (p. 6).

Vinnicombe's 1976 work was the product of many years of fieldwork and original research, and many hundreds of hours spent making meticulous facsimile copies of paintings. It is notable partly for its breadth. Not only did it reproduce, often for the first time, a great many paintings of the region, but it also covered the geology, archaeology, and relevant historical records pertaining to the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg-Maloti Mountains (in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and Lesotho). Of especial note was Vinnicombe's use of ethnographic sources, notably, the Bleek and Lloyd archive of /Xam myths and oral narratives and, to a lesser extent, her explicit application of a defined theoretical (albeit structural-functionalist) framework.

The 2009 book, edited by Peter Mitchell and Benjamin Smith and described as a companion volume, is a very different product. It nevertheless comprises various useful datasets for the rock art researcher. The sections within chapter 2, by Justine Olofsson and Val Ward, describing the Vinnicombe collections at the Rock Art Research Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, and the Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal) Museum, are a valuable and accessible record, as is the full list of Vinnicombe's Africa-related publications. Mitchell provides a handy essay (chapter 7) that updates the reader on archaeological excavations in the area as they pertain to understanding the temporal contexts of rock art, along with a comprehensive list of radiocarbon dates. In chapter 6, Aron Mazel similarly provides an overview of chronology. This piece is, however, perhaps over-optimistic about the antiquity of painting. Since most of the accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS) dates are on oxalate crusts underlying paint and the time lapse between crust formation and painting remains unknown, the age of the painting tradition remains an open question.[1]

In a slightly different vein, a valuable chapter by Vinnicombe comprises previously unpublished interviews from 1971 with elderly Sotho speakers from the Sehonghong area of Lesotho. This is of interest in view of the ongoing attention devoted to hunter-gatherer and farmer interactions, colonial disruptions, and the impact on cultural identities in the region, especially in the later historical period (nineteenth century). Nessa Leibhammer's consideration of Vinnicombe's facsimile copies, in the context of a wider discussion of the methods that have been used in rock art recording, makes interesting reading. It is written from the perspective of an art curator possessed of an understanding of visuality that remains regrettably underdeveloped in much southern African rock art research, as this volume in general shows. Very little of the book is about rock art as art or visual product. (Leibhammer's essay, however, curiously glosses over, in a few lines, the arguments against black-and-white tracings, highlighted by the artist Pippa Skotnes; this was the method used by Vinnicombe and long favored by the Rock Art Research Institute, but was later banned in KwaZulu-Natal because of the physical impact of tracing on the paintings themselves.[2])

Other chapters in the book are less satisfactory,

largely because the topics have been assigned to people who have not worked directly on the materials in question and do not engage with key issues and the allied literature in sufficient depth and breadth. Lynn Meskell's efforts in chapter 3 to contextualize Vinnicombe's 1976 book as an emergent social archaeology seem to me to overstate the case, no doubt in the spirit of paying homage. Vinnicombe's discussions of physical characteristics, body ornamentation, and the like hardly add up to "the kind of social archaeology of the body that we have only recently seen emerge in the discipline." It is also amusing for me to read Meskell's accompanying claim here that the "sexual body" and "treatment of bodily fluids" have "only recently been addressed in mainstream archaeological theorizing (Meskell and Joyce 2003)" (p. 39).[3] Clearly Meskell is unaware of or has chosen to ignore the fact that these were central topics in my work between 1987 and 1995, and have been touched on by other writers as well.[4]

Interestingly, David Whitley's concluding chapter, "Re-reading People of the Eland," comes to a diametrically opposite and, I believe, more apt conclusion than Meskell's piece regarding Vinnicombe's theoretical achievements. He suggests instead that Vinnicombe was "unable to escape" her links to British anthropological thought, specifically functionalism (p. 197). In this respect, Whitley approvingly cites David Lewis-Williams: "'all roads lead to social solidarity"'; yet Lewis-Williams's own work long proposed that art, as a by-product of trance and shamanism, functioned to resolve social tensions and affirm social cohesion. For Whitley, Vinnicombe's contribution was her "archaeological rediscovery of culture as cognition" (p. 196)–a view clearly derived from his own interest in cognitive approaches to rock art, but one that seems to forget that the work of André Leroi-Gourhan (*Préhistoire de l'art occidental* (1965) and Annette Laming-Emperaire *La signification de l'art rupestre paléolithique* (1962) over a decade earlier was about nothing if not cognition and mind.

Perhaps the least satisfactory chapter in the volume is chapter 5 by David Pearce, Catherine Namono, and Lara Mallen, which, according to its title, purports to consider meaning and "changes in the interpretative process in San rock art studies" (p. 61). "Meaning" is variously conflated with iconography, method, and historical change, and the subtext of the chapter seems to be how Lewis-Williams in particular has overcome the problems that were manifest in earlier work, including Vinnicombe's. These writers are apparently not familiar with theories of meaning in general, and visual meanings in particular, even when these matters have been raised relative to San art.[5] It is also a pity that the chapter on Nguni interactions with the San (Gavin Whitelaw, chapter 8), however interesting, was produced by an Iron Age archaeologist and not a rock art researcher, such as Frans Prins or Pieter Jolly, both of whom have done substantial research in this area. Also notable is the failure to adequately contextualize Vinnicombe's work relative to other key publications of the era, particularly those by Harald Pager: his monumental *Ndedema* (1971) and *Stone Age Myth and Magic* (1975), which in many ways covered similar ground to that traversed by Vinnicombe.

Such omissions, and failure to engage adequately and sometimes respectfully with pertinent work on the art of the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg-Maloti region, beyond the circle of the Rock Art Research Institute and its close allies and supporters of trance readings of rock art, are serious failings. (I write, of course, as one who believes that those readings are fatally flawed.) For example, though no one has done more to highlight the problematic issues around copies of rock paintings than Skotnes, her key 1994 essay is not referenced in the relevant chapter by Leibhammer, who opens her chapter with a later quote from Lewis-Williams, dating to 1996, on the importance of copies. Nor is Skotnes's exhibition and accompanying 218-page volume (*Unconquerable Spirit: George Stow's History Paintings of the San* [2008]) on George Stow's copies of rock paintings referenced. The tendency throughout is for the authors to cite one another; those who are critical of the shamanistic hypothesis receive short shrift. This self-referentiality and intolerance of diverse perspectives is a severe shortcoming of the volume. Indeed the volume sometimes reads as if Vinnicombe's work is a "prequel" to that of Lewis-Williams and the putative discovery of shamanism. Furthermore, the collection does not always clearly demonstrate what is new about the perspectives mentioned in the volume's subtitle.

In terms of design and production, the volume has plusses and minuses. Perhaps a hardback, and a less "text-book"-like flavor, would have constituted a better tribute, but possibly costs were prohibitive. The volume is profusely illustrated, with some previously unpublished material, but also some redundant graphics (notably, a full page map–figure 7.6–emblazoned in a large font with the names of four researchers, denoting the areas they have worked). In terms of the text, the decision to include "boxes" works better in some places than others. Boxes 9 and 10 on conservation seem superfluous to the volume's theme. There are also copyediting and proofing errors. For example, in the table of contents, chapter 2 is entitled "Patricia Vinnicombe: A Memoir,"

with the authors listed as Peter Mitchell and Ben Smith. In fact the memoir is by Lewis-Williams.

The back cover matter expresses the hope that the volume "will provide a richer appreciation of the importance of Pat's original work, as well as allowing readers an overview of current understandings of Drakensberg rock art." In the former it largely, if not entirely, succeeds, and as such deserves a place on the bookshelves of those researching south African rock art.

Notes

[1]. Aron Mazel and Alan Watchman, "Dating Rock Paintings in the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg and the Biggarsberg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa," *Southern African Humanities* 15 (2003): 59-73.

[2]. Pippa Skotnes, "The Visual as a Site of Meaning: San Parietal Painting and the Experience of Modern Art," in *Contested Images: Diversity in Southern African Rock Art Research*, ed. Thomas A. Dowson and J. David Lewis-Williams (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), 315-329.

[3]. Lynn Meskell and Rosemary Joyce, *Embodied Lives: Figuring Ancient Maya and Egyptian Experience* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[4]. Anne Solomon, "Gender, Representation and Power in San Ethnography and Rock Art," *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 11 (1992): 291-329; and Anne Solomon, "'Mythic Women': A Study in Variability in San Art," in *Contested Images*, 331-371.

[5]. Whitney Davis, "The Study of Rock Art in Africa," in *A History of African Archaeology*, ed. Peter Robertshaw (London: James Currey, 1990), 271-295; Whitney Davis, *Replications: Archaeology, Art History, and Psychoanalysis* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Anne Solomon, "Meanings, Models, and Minds: A Reply to Lewis-Williams," *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 54 (1999): 51-60; Pippa Skotnes, "The Visual as a Site of Meaning"; and Pippa Skotnes, "The Thin Black Line: Diversity in the Paintings of the Southern San and the Bleek and Lloyd Collection," *Voices from the Past: /Xam Bushmen and the Bleek and Lloyd Collection*, ed. Janette Deacon and Thomas Dowson (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1996), 234-244.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Anne Solomon. Review of Mitchell, Peter; Smith, Benjamin, eds., *The Eland's People: New Perspectives in the Rock Art of the Maloti-Drakensberg Bushmen, Essays in Memory of Patricia Vinnicombe.* H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. August, 2014.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37543

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.