

SAN IMAGES: AN EARLY FORM OF DISTANCE EDUCATION?

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ABSTRACT

This article presents some of the already documented interpretations of San rock images. The images span many thousands of years, and archaeologists applied both scientific and ethnographic methods to understand the meaning of these images. While the meaning of these images is not certain and is still being debated, a proposition of the paper is that the images form part of the intentional teaching of the San. Additionally, the images served an educational purpose and, in many ways, mirrored some of the elements of distance education. A narrative review provides some evidence to support this argument. The images catalyse stories and are linked to known cultural narratives, still told by various San people today.

Keywords: San images, ethnography, distance education

A NOTE ABOUT TERMINOLOGY

- The terms art or images are used in the literature, but my choice is images. I also selected not to use the term painter or artist, although both occur in the literature. The reasons for these choices will follow. Another area of contention is the use of the word "Bushmen", which I consider derogatory, while even the use of the word San as a single unit is problematic. Saetersdal (2010) and Morris (2022) indicate that the umbrella term San is a colonial idea; San see themselves as members of distinct groups, e.g. !Kung or Gwi. In 1996, at the Working Group on Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa meeting, the term San was adopted by representatives of San groups. Since the term is used as an academic convention, I will use it and do not imply any negative connotations.
- "Khoe" and "Khoi" are used interchangeably to refer to the same Indigenous group of southern Africa, with "Khoe" being a more accurate representation of pronunciation and increasingly replacing the older "Khoi" (Saugestad, 2004).

INTRODUCTION

Images depicted on rock faces have been a topic of significant interest in understanding early humans from around the world (Pike, Hoffmann, Garca-Diez, Pettitt, Alcolea, Balbn, and Zilhão, 2012; Morris, 2022). The San images have been linked to the culture, customs, and habits of the San people (Lewis-Williams, 1998). However, due to colonial misinterpretation, misrepresentation, and eradication of African artefacts, the ethnography of the San people is not well known. One of the enigmatic artefacts left by the San people is the rock images around Southern Africa, most of which date back thousands of years. Another consequence of colonialism is that unique Indigenous Knowledge (IK) is on the verge of extinction (Smith, 2021). Therefore, the interpretations of these images are varied, with misinterpretation and overinterpretation being a possible

danger. For too long, research was done on the images and not the people who created them (Glasser, 2022), reiterating a colonial perspective. Vinnicombe (2010) reminds us that we cannot simply ask the people who left these images what they mean. A common theme in archaeological and art scholarly endeavours is that the images reflect the “past’s absent presence” (Shanks and Witmore, 2010: 283).

One proposed and widely accepted interpretation of the images is that “the making of San rock paintings was essentially (or principally) associated with a range of shamanistic beliefs, rituals and experiences and was situated within a tiered shamanistic cosmology and complex social relations” (Lewis-Williams, 1998: 87). In contrast, Solomon (1997) maintained that the rock images are best understood in relation to San religious beliefs and reflect both living and non-living people. Following Lewis-Williams’ (1998: 96) idea that “San painters played not only a religious but also a social role”, a wider range of interpretation is proposed. The current models for understanding San images are disputed (for example, Solomon (1997) argues for a mythological view of the images; Mguni (2015) sets out a cosmological view, while Conkey (2010) claims a semiotic view). Regardless of the conflicting views of the various interpretations of the images, they do not detract from the underlying proposition of this article. This article proposes that San images (and similar images/symbols of this period in many other countries) are a form of distance education. Moreover, possibly the earliest form of distance education.

METHODS IN THIS RESEARCH

In this study, a narrative review of the literature was followed. Narrative reviews are a non-systematic review of current literature on a specific topic (e.g. interpretation of San images) aimed at providing an overview of the trends in the knowledge base. Unlike systematic reviews, a narrative review is more flexible and interpretive, where the author summarises and contextualises findings (Greenhalgh, Thorne and Malterud, 2018). Narrative reviews are well-suited to exploring complex topics. A narrative review provides a scholarly summary together with interpretation (MacLure, 2005). This review relied on the author’s own judgment of the literature to consult to provide a nuanced understanding of San images. Since the literature is derived from a variety of scientific disciplines (e.g., art, archaeology, history), a narrative review was necessary and required that the author make the literature accessible to the reader. Although it was not possible to include all the literature from all disciplines, sufficient literature is included to form a plausible argument. All methodological choices lead to limitations, so the limitations of this study would include subjectivity and a possible incomplete coverage of all available literature.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTESTED NATURE OF SAN IMAGES

Epistemic justice

This article does not seek to perpetuate insensitivities or align with any of the current narratives, since the images are a “site of struggle between interest groups and individuals both within and without [San] communities” (Dowson, 1994: 340). Ultimately, this article seeks to undo some of the trivialisation and bias in writing about the images (Mguni, 2015). This article does not attempt to add to the interpretations of the images, but to (tentatively) understand the rationale for the images from an educational perspective. I have tried to include authentic documented voices in this article, since “this

seems to me the most honest way to solve the problem of intelligibility” (Winberg, 2021) and to attempt to serve epistemic justice. The images are viewed as complex and part of a cognitive collective of San knowledge.

Moving from archaeological to educational

To move the focus from archaeological to educational, the question is: 'What are San images?' moves to 'Why San images?' Dowson (2007: 95) suggests that the images should be recognised as the expression of intelligent people, carried out for their own reasons. Furthermore, Lewis-Williams reminds us that San rock paintings have “little in common with 'art' as Westerners know it”. Dowson (2007) specifically indicates that the images depict the engagement of San people with their world to ensure the flow of supernatural forces and not “because of some innate capacity for making art” (Dowson, 2007: 59). Ingold (1993) also argued that traditional conceptions of San images privilege form over the process of creating the images.

One of the first myths to dispel is that San images are not 'art' in a conventional understanding of art (for example, being decorative or “embroidery” (Conkey, 2010: 200), but may be considered as a form of *writing*. Solomon (1997: 10) suggests that San images should be viewed “as indigenous historical and temporal texts”. McLeary (2016: 29) indicates that the Crow Indians “identified all rock art as a form of writing”. Using Saussure’s (1998) seminal linguistic ideas of signifiers, signifieds, and signs, images are signifiers, just as words are signifiers in writing. Signifying images are the physical images on the rocks. The signified is the meaning denoted by the signifier. The signifier can denote a range of ideas and meanings and is open to interpretation. Both the signifier and signified form a sign. A sign is a unit of meaning used for communication. If the San images are viewed semiotically, a new range of interpretations becomes possible. Importantly, we move away from images depicting an event or object towards a range of abstract ideas, elevating the significance of the images. Notably, when the images are viewed as signs, symbols or icons, they “not only elicit feelings, but also produce new knowledge” (Eco, 1976: 274). Klassen (1995: 41), in a thesis titled with the term “writing-on-stone”, specifically indicates that Crow rock images are a form of communication, but not completely like writing, since the linguistic structures arise from the “broader culturally, spatial and environmental contexts of the representation”.

Another assumption is that if there is a writer, then there should be a reader. Conkey (2010) and Solomon (1997b) include the viewer (or reader) in their discussions of San images. The semiotic view raises the intellectual value of the images. Davis (1984: 7, emphasis added) underscores that “graphic presentation is a mode of knowledge” and that the images are the “material site of one’s thought about one’s knowledge of the world”. This suggests that the images serve as a two-way communication system with the sender and receiver not necessarily present at the same time. For Lewis-Williams (2013: 79):

“contrary to a commonly held belief, meaning is created every time someone looks at an image: it is contingent and not single and immutable. Meaning comes from the mind of the viewer, as well as from the mind of the maker of an image”.

Therefore, the intentional instructional nature of the images is assumed.

Solomon (1997b) highlights that the people and animals in the images were drawn mainly from a lateral perspective (that is, side view) and not a front view (see Figure 1). Presenting the images in this way enables the author/iconographer to create movement in the images. If movement is an integral aspect of San images (as argued by Solomon 1997b from the work of Ingold, 1993 and Skotnes, 1994), then the viewer is a fundamental part of San images. If we account for the role of the viewer when the image was created, then the intentional educational aspect is intrinsically assumed. If the case can be made that San images were intrinsically educational, then exploring the nature of their distance educational premise can follow.

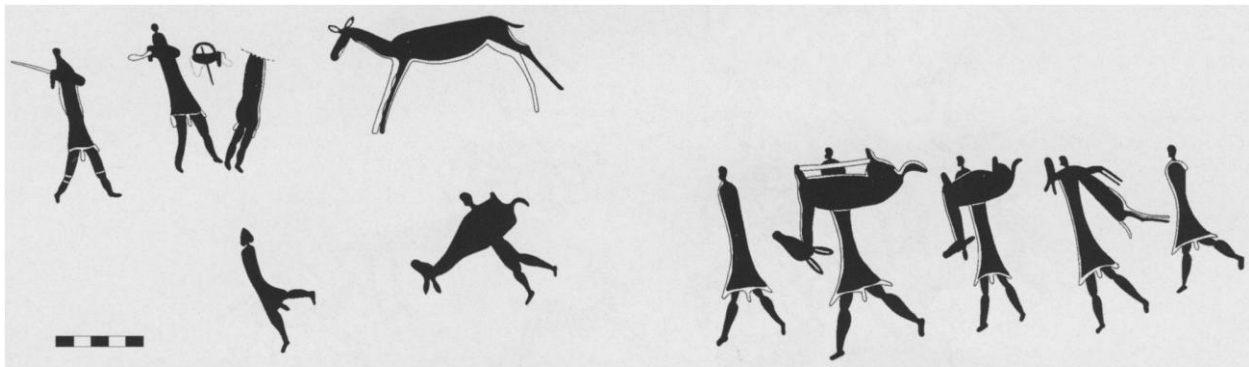


Figure: 1: Procession of kaross-clad people carrying small antelope. Giant's Castle – Main Caves. KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (Dowson, 2007: 53).

Conkey (2010: 208) adds that the images are not simply a recording of “some static reality” but are part of a semiotic process that produces new knowledge. Viewing the images semiotically means that we move away from fixing a meaning on the images to 'galvanise' it, moving away from the idea that images only record knowledge, but also that images produce new knowledge (Conkey, 2010). Vinnicombe (2010) reflects that there is a “dialogue between them [the images] and me”, while Conkey (2010) refers to Barthes' (1972) conceptualisation that the reader of visual imagery not only sees the world differently but creates a new world through viewing the images.

Lewis-Williams (1985) reminds us that we must attempt to understand San images as part of San concepts, beliefs, and rituals. From the aboriginal perspective, the idea that the images are a tool for education is well documented (May, Wesley, Goldhahn, Lamilami and Taçon, 2021). The educational intention of rock images appears to be contiguous. Conkey (2010: 200) adds to the call to reposition the images from “the origins of art” to rich archaeological artefacts that must be “taken on their own varying and historical contextual terms”. Limiting the images to 'art' leads to viewing the elephant from a narrow perspective. Dederen and Mokakabye (2018) presented 11 alternative interpretations of San images for the shamanistic model, alluding to the complex, multifaceted nature of these images.

Knowledge transmission in rock images

Understanding “education” from a non-Western perspective requires a suspension of the behaviourist and individualistic ideas commonly associated with Western ideas of education. Traditional San education was characterised by “an oral tradition although there were important writings such as the rock art” (Van Wyk, 2014: 18). In research conducted on cave images in Argentina. Villanueva, Sepulveda, Carcamo-Vega, Cherkinsky, de Porrás and Barberena (2024: 1) assume that the images may have been used to pass along information between the image maker and communities, as well as future generations, providing “solid site-scale evidence [through carbon dating] on intergenerational transmission of knowledge”. These scholars add that the images are part of a human strategy to construct social networks between dispersed groups. For Conkey (2010: 209), we are viewing how “people of the past sustained their own ‘humanity’ by [...] generating new and further knowledge”.

Mahlongo (2001), a leader of the !Xun community, indicates that modern-day San artists interpret the existence of their communities and act as historians, saying that they are “the minute takers of our lives”, while Winberg (2001) indicates that the modern San images “derive their particular themes and symbols from the traditional knowledge they received from their parents”. Muhinda (in Winberg 2001: 7), a modern-day San artist, affirms that the images are what she sees in her mind. Muhinda (in Winberg 2001: 7) adds, “We draw so that our children can know this too”. Valdez-Tullett (2022) proposes that the continuous re-use of the iconography suggests that the symbols were relevant enough to be re-displayed.

Whitley (2022: 33, emphasis added) proposes that “rock art sites and panels were commonly used for prayer, meditation, curing *and education* after they were made [...] they thus helped inculcate collective memory and group identity”. Furthermore, Villanueva et al. (2024) postulate that the images served as large-scale safety nets, storing information rooted in collective memory and ensuring its preservation beyond oral means, while Valdez-Tullett (2022) affirms that the rock images are an active element of cultural transmission and a form of intentional teaching.

Significant Places

Traditional knowledge tends to accumulate in previously occupied places that become “persistent places” (Schlanger, 1992), “significant places” (Maseko, 2020: 57) or *genius loci* (spirit/sense of place). Tilley (1994) explains that for the Crow Indigenous North Americans, places have meanings that create a sense of attachment. These persistent places seem to attract the return of later communities (Haas and Kuhn, 2019; Maseko, 2020). It remains a research interest why temporally separated iconographers and communities returned to the same sites over time (Maseko, 2020). It is proposed that these are places where people “experience a sense of continuity with the past” (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 1993: 233). Rusch (2024) argued that revisiting persistent places allows cultural knowledge to be transmitted from generation to generation. Significant places have become important areas for collective activities (social, cultural, educational) for many generations, eventually becoming cultural keystone places (Rick, Braje, Graham, Easterday, Hofman, Holguin, Mychajliw, Reeder-Myers and Reynolds,

2022). Keyser and Klasen (2001) explain that aboriginal people were able to tap into the power of sacred places through rituals, ceremonies, and rock images.

Rusch (2024) indicated that at the site called Kurukop (Northern Cape, South Africa), there is evidence of engravings spanning many thousands of years, indicating the return of the San and Khoe to this specific place. Rusch's research team found that, when measuring the echoes produced at the various etchings and petroglyphs, they fell within an *echo zone*. Rusch (2024) linked these findings to a /Xam narrative that Echo is the daughter of Mountain and Wind, and these are entangled in San and Khoe hunting and healing practices. Wind would only speak to people through his daughter, Echo.

Verbal descriptions of the images

Dowson (1993) spoke out at the colonial interpretations of San images and called for old outsider versions of the San (based on historical sources with long-recognised ideological biases) to be discarded. At times, researchers and scholars of San images were able to talk to San people themselves. Orpen (1874) asked a San man (Qing) about the images they found in shelters in Lesotho. Qing was able to relate the meaning of formling images (such as a man with a buck head) by saying they are "men who had died and now lived in rivers and were spoilt at the same time as the elands and by the dances which you have seen [in] paintings." (Orpen, 1874: 2). This shows that 'modern' San were able to interpret and understand the images that may be confusing to others. The time between the images and Qing spans hundreds to thousands of years. Bleek (1874) showed the same images to Dia!kwain and confirmed Qing's interpretation of the images. Solomon (1997) recounts similar instances where modern San can tell stories that relate to the images drawn many years earlier. Morris (2022: 247) shows how modern story elements parallel those that were documented in the 1880s "with [an] astonishing degree of continuity". In the book *Stories that float from afar*, Lewis-Williams (2000) compiled a series of narrated stories captured by Wilhelm Bleek in the late 19th century on the ancestral folklore of the San of Southern Africa. These stories provide a glimpse into the thoughts, myths, and beliefs of the San, while their narration gives an authentic interpretation of some of the rock images.

Interpreting the images independently of context may be one of the problems in this field. Scholars who have included the stories, poems, and folklore when trying to understand the images have managed to attain a much deeper and holistic interpretation of the images. Smith (2010: 356) attests to the multidisciplinary approach to understanding the images: "It is the mix of local oral histories, local written histories, local archaeological evidence and other sources that has proven most effective when used in combination with rock art for reconstructing San histories".

San temporal vs. spatial dimensions

Unfortunately, Western perspectives seep into much of indigenous research. Smith (2021), a Maori researcher, mentions that even concepts of time and space are not unproblematic in indigenous research. Smith (2021) explains that in many Indigenous languages there are often no clear distinctions between time and space, or these languages have the same word for both time and space. Solomon (1997b) explains the

San understanding and experience of time and space. People living in the past (e.g., people no longer living) and people living in the present exist at the same time but not in the same space, while a Western understanding is that there is both spatial and temporal separation. McCleary (2016) focused on Crow Indian rock images and related that for the Crow people, important events are recalled because of their location in place, not in time. The Crow Indians also use the same prefix (ala), which means place and time simultaneously.

For the San, people in the past and the present are only spatially separated. This explains the idea that spirits can travel between the two “worlds”. This gave rise to another explanation for the images on the rock faces. Mguni (2015) clearly articulates that the iconographer’s intention was to communicate symbolism and that the metaphorical links between the forms and aspects of San belief and spirituality are significant (Mguni, 2015). Mguni’s (2015), Solomon’s (1997) and Lewis-Williams’ (1998) works help to move away from the trivialised understanding that the images were a depiction of daily life, to a deeper, more complex understanding of the images. The epistemic depth of the images underscores the proposition of the article that education may be part of the rationale for San images. If we subscribe to Conkey’s (2010) notion that images are palimpsests (artefacts written on an older version), then they depict a trajectory that spans time, and the trajectory may have an intentional educational element.

DISTANCE EDUCATION

Definition of distance in distance education

It is agreed that the lack of definition in distance education creates challenges in discussing the field (Keegan, 1980; King, Young, Drivere-Richmond and Schrader, 2001; Biccard and Makgato-Khunou, 2021). For the purposes of this study, the term is used to denote a separation of teacher and student (Holmberg, 1977). The separation is both geographical and temporal, or where teaching takes place apart from the learning (Moore, 1973). Peters (1973) extends the definition of distance education to include the type of media that makes learning possible with the separation of teacher and student. Peters proposed that distance education, as a form of indirect teaching, is made possible by media such as correspondence, printed materials, audiovisual material, radio, television, and computers.

Garrison (1985) sets out that correspondence education (as the first of three generations of distance education) used the technology available at the time, i.e., postal services for teaching. Considering the technologies available to San people or ancient Indigenous people all over the world, the ‘correspondence’ took place through the images painted on the rock faces. I propose that ancient images can be considered as a form of distance education, and can be considered a seminomadic education, where the images were in a static environment (significant places) while people moved to the various sites to learn cultural knowledge and heritage.

Peters (1973) maintained that the relationship between teachers and learners is pivotal in distance education definitions. Similarly, the educational relationship between the image makers and the image viewers in San communities was controlled by the

affordances of how, when, and why the images were created. For Peters (1973: 104), “there is little distinction between teacher and taught; they are both participating in the shared experience of exploring a common world”, which is a parallel sentiment in terms of the understanding and interpretation of San images.

Keegan (1980) elaborates on the nature of distance education. He indicates that in traditional education, a teacher teaches, while in distance education, the institution teaches (courses are presented as a collaboration between academics, consultants, and information and communication technology departments). Echoing this idea that in San cultures, the community and the survival of the community were imperative, and as such, images on rock faces could be seen as institutional teaching. Villanueva et al. (2024) present evidence on intergenerational transmission of knowledge in Argentinian cave images. Therefore, it is not a great inductive leap to assume the same of South African rock images. Technological media (e.g. postal, online) unite the teacher and the learner and carry educational content (Keegan, 1980). Technological media can also denote rock images.

Two terms are used to typify the main ‘forms’ of distance education, namely, synchronous teaching and learning and asynchronous teaching and learning (Watts, 2016). Although both take place at a distance, synchronous distance education means that the teacher and student are connected at the same time (Zeng and Luo, 2024), usually via technological means, e.g., a Zoom meeting or Microsoft Teams call. Asynchronous distance teaching and learning imply a time separation in the teaching, e.g., the teacher uploads a video for students to view on their own or discussion boards are used where students read and respond in their own time. While synchronous learning provides real-time engagement, asynchronous learning allows flexibility, and both are important for distance learning (Zeng and Luo, 2024).

The San images may link to both synchronous and asynchronous forms of distance education. The images were likely created and then became part of the enculturation practices of the San, while we also know that the images were visited by groups of people many years after their creation. We also know that the images' sites are often extremely significant. Modern San recognise motifs that were written on rock walls many thousands of years ago, while folklore and cultural narratives that have been documented from San communities have links to the images (Lewis-Williams, 2000).

In the next section, some conceptual links between San images and distance education are proposed.

Conceptual links between San images and distance education

To synthesise the links described above, Table 1 highlights some of the possible conceptual overlaps between San images and distance education. The table is not exhaustive, and other similarities may exist.

Table 1: Possible conceptual overlaps between San images and distance education

San images	Distance Education
Artefacts are images used to convey cultural phenomena that span many thousands of years.	Artefacts are physical or digital artefacts of teaching and learning
Knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer, image viewer creates new knowledge	Knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer through constructivist ideas (i.e. the learner actively constructs own knowledge through experiences and reflection)
Access to cultural resources is open.	Open educational resources and open access are common in distance education spaces
Images form part of collective memory.	Knowledge is kept in open repositories.
Knowledge is disseminated through stories, songs, dances, and images.	Varied communication channels, e.g. email, video, and discussion boards
Space/temporality conceptions Images used during the time of their creation and many years later	Synchronous and asynchronous forms of distance education overlap in what is usually considered a blended approach. There is no specific benefit for either form.
Images can be seen to have a teaching presence, a cognitive presence, and a social presence.	The community of inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000) proposes that successful online distance education should have teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence.
Images are part of a human strategy to construct social networks across dispersed groups. “Meanings, memories and beliefs become ingrained in this network of interactions carried out by individuals” (Valdez-Tullett, 2022: 117).	The notion of ‘connectivism’ (Siemens, 2004) in distance education refers to how learning occurs through connected networks.
Significant places, such as those that are visited, and images are created and re-created many thousands of years apart	Connected learning spaces, such as online places where students can connect with their instructor and peers

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The study may encourage scholars to reconsider the roots of distance education and consider older societies in the education narrative. In some ways, the study challenges Western dominance of educational development, something we need to continually question. The study may provide inspiration for modern educational design, considering a more image-based communication approach.

CONCLUSIONS

This article investigated the possibilities of a distance education element for San images. Villanueva et al. (2024: 11) see the recurrence of images in the same places as “key to build cumulative cultural repertoires linking human groups across space and time”.

Although I accept that the interpretations presented “can best be understood in the intellectual climates of opinion” (Conkey, 2010: 200), I need to be careful of both misinterpretation and overinterpretation by linking the images to education and distance education specifically. “We will never see through the minds of a people now gone, even with our fortune in having a rock art that links us to them” (Smith, 2010: 356).

Although the transmission of cultural knowledge will have an educational aspect and is a foundational educational principle, the link between San images and distance education may be speculative. Furthermore, it cannot be said that the San images perfectly match the ideals and workings of distance education. However, several parallels (as demonstrated in Table 1) make the idea plausible. More importantly, an underlying rationale of this study is to contribute to the imperative of epistemic justice and to position IK with greater authority.

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