

Footsteps, Paint & Spirit

Presentation to the SAAIA, 22 June 2026

James Seymour

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Speaker Notes

Colleagues - An adventure can be measured in kilometres, metres climbed, or hours on a trail, but an experience cannot. The key difference often lies in the guide. A great guide not only leads but helps clients understand why the landscape matters.

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Speaker Notes

Most clients forget how many kilometers they walked or the summit altitude. But they remember the stories you share, especially when the landscape comes alive through your interpretations.

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Speaker Notes

Many visitors assume that the Drakensberg received World Heritage status solely because of its spectacular scenery and natural heritage. The mountains are certainly exceptional.

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Speaker Notes

The San rock art of the Maloti-Drakensberg is internationally recognised as one of the finest concentrations of hunter-gatherer art anywhere in the world. It is one of the principal reasons the area was awarded World Heritage Site status.

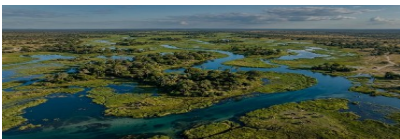
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Speaker Notes

There are over 30,000 San rock art images spread over more than 500 sites in the Maloti-Drakensberg World Heritage Site.

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Speaker Notes

The latest theory of the origin of modern man indicates that Homo Sapiens Sapiens originated in the Okavango Delta and in the border region of Zimbabwe. Our ancestors then moved out from there to the rest of the world.

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Speaker Notes

The remains of these ancient people, who were also the forebears of the San, have been dated to be more than 100,000 years old. For example,

human remains dating to more than 120,000 years ago have been found at Klasies River Mouth Caves near Jeffrey's Bay.

People often ask: Did ancient Homo Sapiens express themselves through art? Evidence from sites such as Blombos Cave in the Western Cape includes engraved pieces of ochre dating to approximately 77,000 years ago. These geometric engravings are widely regarded as evidence of symbolic behaviour and perhaps some of the earliest forms of artistic expression.

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Speaker Notes

Archaeologists believe that the San began to wander in the Drakensberg some 20,000 years ago. Rock art in the southern Drakensberg may date back approximately 8,000 years, while much of the art in the central and northern Drakensberg appears to be younger, perhaps around 3,000 years old. Some of the oldest known rock art traditions in southern Africa occur in places such as the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe, where paintings may be as old as 15,000 years and in Namibia, they are 20,000 years old..

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Speaker Notes

Aaron Mazel developed a broad dating scale for Rock art in the Drakensberg, which is based on images where techniques such as accelerator radiocarbon dating. His scale indicates that the oldest images were...

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Speaker Notes

Monochrome, and these may be thousands of years old. Bichrome—or images where white was used as well—were slightly more recent.

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Speaker Notes

He feels that the more polychrome or multi-coloured images with shading and attempts to demonstrate three dimensions are the most recent or perhaps only a few hundred years old.

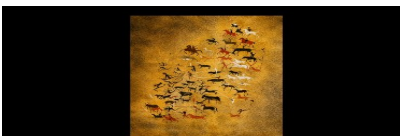
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Speaker Notes

Early San rock art theorists, such as Wilcox, believed that San Rock art should only be interpreted literally or that it was only a representation of the daily life of these communities. There are many images that can be interpreted as such. For example, this image is clearly of San fishing.

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Speaker Notes

Other theorists, such as Vinnicombe and Challis, state that much of the San Rock art reflects the significant level of cultural change, acculturation, or creolisation that the Drakensberg San experienced in

the 1800's as a result of contact and conflict with the Sotho and Nguni tribes and frontier farmers.

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Speaker Notes

[No speaker notes]

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Speaker Notes

Many people do not realise that many of the San became pastoralists, were significant stock raiders, owned guns and became excellent horsemen in the 1800's. This significant change and conflict ultimately led to their decimation. and loss of their artistic talents. However, it is wrong to assume that they were exterminated.

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Speaker Notes

They still exist. The renowned anthropologist Prins referred to them as the Secret San. The Dumas, for example, still exist in the Kamberg area. There is a wonderful YouTube series, Spirits of the Rock, that introduces the Secret San.

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Speaker Notes

Many San Rock Sites in the Northern and Central Drakensberg are sacred sites. These shelters were almost like our churches. The San regarded them as a veil between our world and the spiritual world. Shamans, or individuals with the ability to enter trances and enter the spiritual world, were the main artists at such sites. Their art was a reflection of their spiritual experiences. The San believed in animism, or the belief that most elements of the natural world have power. They believed that they needed the power of other creatures, and particularly the Eland, to enter the spiritual world. Here, they would engage with the spirits of their ancestors to deal with issues such as sickness and evil spirits. They believed that when they took on the powers of other creatures, they were transformed into Therianthropes, part human and part animal. This image clearly illustrates this. It is known as the Rosetta Stone of rock art. David Lewis Williams used it as a key to explain his theories of the spiritual meaning behind San Rock Art.

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Speaker Notes

This image is found at Battle Cave and is a clear illustration of transformation into a therianthropes.

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Speaker Notes

This is one of my favourite San Rock Art images, a troop of therianthropes at Game Pass Shelter.

Anton's Shelter in the Calfargie area also has an excellent example of an image of spiritual or ritual significance.

[illegible]

Tourists visiting San Rock Art sites in the Drakensberg must be accompanied by a registered San Rock Art Custodian, who is also a culture guide. When guiding in a wilderness area, they must also be accompanied by an adventure guide with the appropriate qualifications. However, adventure guides who operate in the Drakensberg ideally need to weave an overview of the San into their experiences. Also, there are many rock art shelters where camping is now allowed as a result of much of the rock art being faded; in such cases, guides and adventure seekers need to apply the Rock Art Site Code of Conduct.

The Guided Experience





Experiences

Paths

Spirit

In conclusion, I would like to re-emphasise the point I made at the beginning of this presentation: guides need to make an effort to connect footsteps with the paint and the spirit of a landscape to develop a memorable experience. I thank you.