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Insights from the San: a Role for San Aesthetics in the Archaeology of Art

Abstract The 'shamanistic interpretation' of ancestral San rock art, as spearheaded by the archaeologist Lewis-Williams, has featured significantly in discourse on Palaeolithic and Neolithic rock art across the world. Lewis-Williams has emphasised that there is no role for aesthetics within this shamanistic interpretation. An unfortunate consequence of this assertion, is a neglect of approaching San art from a San aesthetic perspective. By drawing on detailed San ethnography I argue that San rock art cannot be understood without factoring in a San way of being, in which aspects of aesthetics including inspiration, feeling, morality, beauty and care, cannot be disentangled from the everyday life that backgrounds the making of rock art. On this basis, I argue that aesthetics provides a valuable lens for interpreting San rock art. Furthermore, on the basis of shared common human biology and subsistence strategies, I argue for the value of aesthetics as an approach to the art of other ancient hunter-gatherers.

Keywords Ethnography, aesthetics, neuroscience, rock art

Introduction

When making a case for the 'shamanistic interpretation' of ancestral San rock art, Lewis-Williams frequently asserts that 'the aesthetic approach' has no role. While it can be argued that it is entirely appropriate to avoid interpreting San art and other ancient rock art from an essentially Western aesthetic viewpoint, an unfortunate consequence of this assertion is a neglect

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of approaching San art from a San aesthetic perspective. In this chapter, I outline what this San aesthetic perspective might look like by drawing on anthropology and ethnography of the San plus recent neuroscientific work on feelings and emotions to support an argument that inspiration, feeling, morality, beauty, and other essentially aesthetic qualities, lie at the heart of 'ordinary' San life and, by implication, their artistic endeavours. By illustrating the profound links between aesthetics and hunter-gatherer ways of being in the world, I conclude that an aesthetic lens is a valuable tool for discussing San rock art. The conclusion holds broader implications for Stone Age art and the emergence of creativity and consciousness.

The anthropologist Tim Ingold and the archaeologist David Lewis-Williams have both discussed the relationship of 'art' to images made by hunter-gatherers. Both scholars affirm that depictions of hunter-gatherer peoples are not strictly speaking 'art' because 'art' is a construct from a particular Western time and place. Human beings have not, they determine, evolved with some species-defining artistic instinct that is universal and culture free (Ingold 2000, 111; Lewis-Williams 2002, 42–44; 2014). Essentially, what is considered art in the modern urban world is not the pinnacle of a primitive innate ability come to fruition in the glory of Western Civilization.

Lewis-Williams elaborates that the concept of art has its roots in European eighteenth and nineteenth century society and is linked to the emergence of aesthetics, Fine Arts, and ideas of *art pour l'art*, all of which he considers equally inappropriate lenses for the analysis of rock art. Rather than tracing aesthetic qualities in Late Stone Age San art, Lewis-Williams is variously interested in symbolic meaning, where concepts behind the art came from, and why people wanted to make images in the first place (Lewis-Williams 2014, 626). In contrast to this, Ingold explores how hunter-gatherer art making is a probing for meaning in the world, which he roots in human feeling and situates within 'a mode of active, perceptual engagement' (Ingold 2000, 23, 111–131).

Mindful of the difficulties of ethnographic analogy, I explore a position somewhere between these two by drawing on San anthropology and ethnography, coupled with insights from neuroscience. Like Lewis-Williams, I am interested in the meaning and context of San art. However, in contrast to his position, I emphasise that much can be added to current interpretation if we recognise the centrality of aesthetics in San life. Ultimately, my work edges more towards that of Ingold as I explore relationships between feelings and effective and appropriate ways of behaving. By thinking more carefully about the role of feelings in San art I not only hope to inform the reading of both ancestral San art and that of other palaeolithic contexts, but to draw attention to the critical role of feelings in the broader history of human evolution.

Of course, we must be cautious when using recent San research to inform interpretation of European Palaeolithic peoples or even Late Stone Age San ancestors. Nonetheless, the San are prominent among contemporary hunter-gatherer groups for being, rightly or wrongly, linked to accounts of human origins by both archaeologists and geneticists (Mitchell 2012). On this basis alone, taking closer scrutiny of claims made about the San in contexts of rock art and human origins seems a valuable exercise.

Extensive genetic research undertaken among the San has linked their ancestry to the emergence of *Homo sapiens* in southern Africa 260–350 kya (Schlebusch et al. 2017). In the light of finds at Border Cave, San material culture has been traced back to around 44,000 kya and recognised as "arguably the oldest instance of modern culture" (d'Errico

et al. 2012, 13218). Further still, as Wurz informally observes, 'San like' material culture is evident in finds from Klasies River Mouth stretching back possibly 120,000 years ago (Parkington and Wurz 2018). From an archaeological perspective it is hard not to be at least intrigued by the continuity between the engraved ostrich eggshells found at Diepkloof (c. 60,000 ka) among other sites, and recent San ostrich eggshell water flasks. However, a more salient argument for flagging issues of continuity lies in the recognition that many San when introduced to such ancient artefacts unhesitatingly recognise them as having been made by their ancestors. To ignore these ancestral links would be firmly out of step with current ethical and moral archaeological practice.

Southern Africa is renowned for the extent and richness of its rock art, which ranges from a few hundred years old to 30,000 years old (Rifkin et al. 2015). For at least three decades Lewis-Williams has been the lead proponent of a shamanistic interpretation of the art that has served as the major interpretative paradigm for rock art archaeologists in southern Africa. Because the shamanistic theory brings together biology, the emergence of consciousness and rock art, it has a universal hermeneutic quality. This has enabled Lewis-Williams to argue its relevance in global contexts, particularly including the European Palaeolithic (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1996). Similarly, the shamanistic theory has been adopted by other archaeologists working in very different Palaeolithic contexts, from north America to Australia (Keyser and Whitley 2006; Sales 1992). Perhaps not surprisingly, the applicability of the theory to both European and other global contexts is not uncontested (Layton 2000; Solomon 2008).

Lewis-Williams stresses that unlike contemporary art, ancient art has nothing to do with an aesthetic sensibility and an innate desire to produce beautiful things (Lewis-Williams 2002, 42). Alternatively, Proto-San art represented shamanic hallucinations which carried coded meanings. Fixing images on rocks was, he argues, all about working with shared meaning, hence, only meaningful animals were represented and there is little evidence of idiosyncratic art making. Only at an unclear point in later history did art become associated with beauty and aesthetics.

Both Ingold and Lewis-Williams recognise that concepts such as art are historically contingent but remain, nevertheless, useful, if we treat them as starting points or loose categories of enquiry rather than precise correspondences. Working out in this way from the limitations of our language categories is a common problem for historians of ideas. It is, for example, the approach adopted in a study of classical aesthetics by Destrée and Murray who observe that, although "the term "aesthetics" was not invented until the eighteenth century", this in no way limits its usefulness for exploring the ancient world (Destrée and Murray 2015, 1). Significantly, however, despite this being Lewis-Williams' position in regard to the word 'art', his overriding focus on symbolism as the key to interpreting rock images, underpinned his repeated emphasis that 'the aesthetic approach' has no role to play in the analysis (Lewis-Williams 1996, 12–21; cf. Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1994, 3; Lewis-Williams 2002, 73; Lewis-Williams 2014, 626). This position, however, had the unfortunate effect of discouraging the interpretation of San rock art from a San aesthetics perspective. In the following, I start to address this neglect by exploring the importance of aesthetics through personal ornamentation and symbolism, perfume, and the healing dance.

Scholars repeatedly polarise body adornment along the lines of 'simple' 'non-symbolic decoration', which is non 'utilitarian' and worn for 'visual effect', versus

complex 'concept-mediated symbolism' (for example, Pettitt 2011, 148–9; d'Errico and Vanhaeren 2009, 37). Time and again what is emphasised about decoration is its social role, pitched within the emergence of social identity and symbolism (typically, Zilhão 2011, 113). If one, however, interrogates why the San wear adornments, ideas of abstract symbolic social signalling must be situated within flowing energy, adornment worn to make things happen and a social world entangled in the wider environment. Body adornments are worn to work with real relational unities and flowing powers; they are not about disconnected symbolic messages or simple whims of beauty.

What I have to say of the San relates to how people all over the world feel and interact with adornment, it is essentially something used to change how people feel and act. Among the San though, notions of useful power being inherent in things, are far more front of stage than is typical in at least Western cultures. As I will show, working with this power is a part of everyday life and the practice links directly to San subsistence strategy, lifestyles, and cosmology.

Just as personal ornamentation is rarely interrogated for meaning (cf. Moro Abadía and Nowell 2015; Baysal 2019) and persistently treated as something so simple it requires little further thought, so too is perfume. Here again, San use of perfume or strong smells overlaps with those of other cultures, including 'Western' cultures, but San practices emphasise what happens around those smells. Perfumes are based on smells that change how people feel and how others feel about them. The fact that Chanel No. 5 includes the extremely strong-smelling castor sac secretions, or castoreum, of beavers, reminds us that Western perfume history, like San practices, is intrinsically bound to a biological world of scent marking and power. In San cultures what happens around smell is magnified and scent serves as both a tool and a profound explanatory mechanism for action at a distance (Low 2008). Among the San, strong smelling plant and animal parts play a key role in how San hunt, heal and work well in their community settings. San collect anal glands and other strong-smelling parts, secretions and excretions and regularly wear them and sniff them. The leader and healer Dawid Kruiper (pers. comm.), for example, sometimes wiped polecat anal glands down his face at the commencement of healing sessions to mobilise healing power. The way the San use these resources remains entangled with behaviours of territory marking, beauty and other evolutionary traits that we share with the wider natural world. The San remind us all where we come from and where we belong.

When we think of ornamentation among the San, we must think about the properties of what is being worn. Those properties may enter the wearer as power or, in a San idiom, as the 'wind' of the object. This is particularly true of ostrich eggshell body ties or parts of eland worn by babies. Equally, personal ornamentation tells others about how a person is behaving, that they are doing things as expected and in harmony with the group, that the wearer is linked to good living and proper behaviour, that they are behaving nicely and are attractive. There is, therefore, a moral dimension to personal ornamentation.

Very recently, a young Khoe lady described to me that her mother always told her to make a beautiful smile because it brings people to her. Again, we can brush this off as something we all know, but San are explicit about these ways of working in the world. San cosmology is all about working with things that make things happen

and the flow of invisible powers known by their actions. In San ontology the power of the smile sits within wider knowledge of how power moves with wind, smell and invisible arrows serving as a primary explanatory mechanism.

In what follows I emphasise that for the San, at least, there are essential links between their subsistence strategy and the way they make sense of and live in the world. Hunting, foraging, and living in small bands that must work 'nicely' (Low 2014a, 357–8) together, underpins their healing, cosmology, and everyday life. When San wear ornaments they are working with powers of beauty, attraction, and repulsion as they seek to make life predictable by pursuing balance. The idea of working nicely relates to doing everything in the right way to have the right effect, whether it be greeting a relative with spit that carries personal essence, to making a fire with the right coaxing words or knowing that you must return from a good hunt with a humble demeanour. As concern with balance, power, life's predictability, and social equanimity are so central to the San, it seems unimaginable that these concerns are not inherent one way or another in their rock art. How then should we go about exploring such diverse and inherent meanings in art and ornament? Aesthetics, I believe, is a particularly good route to begin such an inquiry.

In ways that overlap with this chapter, Iliopoulus (2020) has also recognised a need to draw aesthetics and feelings into the analysis of symbolism and early body ornamentation. In the following I do not, however, explicitly engage with this work. This is partly for reasons of simplicity and expediency, but it is more because this paper tries to focus on an ethnographically rich and body-centred approach to human origins, cognition, and art as a counterbalance to the theoretical discussion of symbolism that currently dominates discussion.

The third pole of my research that has led me to consider aesthetics is the San 'shamanic' healing dance. In my earlier work I framed the San as having 'a listening disposition', by which I meant that as hunter-gatherers, the San listen very carefully to their environment in terms of what resources or dangers are present. After participating extensively in healing dances, I realised that this same sort of listening is exactly what San apply to themselves. San listen very carefully to knowledge that comes from inside themselves (Low 2014b), whether this be feeling healing energy or arrows waking up during the dance or interpreting twitching back muscles as a sign that something might happen or recognising dreams as sources of divine knowledge. Becoming a San healer involves pursuing techniques for stimulating experiences in their body and in other San bodies to produce feeling and hence information. They dance to open themselves up to God. This enables San to see sickness, pull out sickness, put in healing power or negotiate with ancestors or God for the health of a sick person. Further still, it enables shamans to fetch rain and turn into lions, and they do all this on the basis of what they feel inside themselves.

In terms of aesthetics and rock art, these contexts of knowledge production, flow, and consumption, have considerable relevance not only to the shamanistic inspiration that underpins shamanistic painting and engraving, but to how images were physically made and how they were shared and worked with. Thinking about Lewis-Williams' critique of aesthetics provides a good framework for exploring a set of neglected themes in the topic of ancient art, including consciousness, feelings and knowledge, performance, morality, inspiration, and beauty.

Consciousness and Rationality

In the shamanistic hypothesis, neuroscience is used as a bridge to early human behaviour. Within this context Lewis-Williams directs us away from interpreting the past in terms of rationality and intelligence. What is needed, he suggests, is greater emphasis on the emergence of consciousness (Lewis-Williams 2002). I similarly use neuroscience as a way into questions of consciousness, but my starting point is different. By returning to themes of embodied cognition theory and the San (Low 2015) and research by neuroscientist Lisa Barrett (2018) on the neuroscience of emotions, I explore how biological feelings are intrinsically interwoven with social feelings. This provides a basis for understanding how San 'artists' worked with feelings. They made sense of their world and behaved in their world in ways that were simultaneously pragmatic, situated, moral and sensitive.

To begin to discuss feelings we need a basic definition that most scientists agree on, and that starting point is 'affect'. Affect consists of two qualities, 'valence' and 'arousal'. Barrett defines affect as "the general sense of feeling that you experience throughout each day" and "a fundamental aspect of consciousness". The feelings that come from inside the body are information regarding what is required to keep the body still or moving. Any movement of the body involves movement inside the body, such as changing the heart rate or glucose levels. It is changes in the internal environment of our bodies that we experience as feelings of valence and arousal. Valence is how pleasant or unpleasant we feel something is or how we just feel. Arousal is how calm or agitated we are (Barrett 2018, 66, 72–74). When we think about feeling among our ancient hunter-gatherer ancestors, valence and arousal provide as firm a footing as we can get.

Barrett simplifies her analysis of emotions by describing the brain as managing the "body budget" or managing what is required in terms of input and output for the body to function. When sensory information becomes conscious it equates to feelings and when feelings reach a certain threshold, they become emotions. When information is received by the brain it acts by stimulating the appropriate internal and gross movements of the body, be it hormone secretion or running away as fast as a person can. In order to deal quickly enough with all the information reaching the brain, the brain operates through a mechanism of prediction. If information comes in that is familiar enough the brain will cease processing new information and predict what is being sensed including "the sensory consequences of movements inside your body". The brain therefore predicts what the body experiences and it predicts to a very significant degree. The brain "generates predictions to perceive and explain everything you see hear, taste, smell and touch". When the body needs something, or the budget is unbalanced, "your affect does not instruct you how to act in any specific way, but it prompts your brain to search for explanations" (Barrett 2018, 60, 67,73).

Barrett's findings from embodied or grounded cognition theory build well on earlier conclusions of Ingold, which he linked to the ecological psychology of Gibson (1979). In grounded cognition theory, a concept is a remembered, coalesced assemblage of physiological and psychological information. A concept holds information from perception, bodily states and situated action. This understanding contrasts with standard cognition theories wherein 'representations in modal systems are transduced into amodal

systems' (Barsalou 2008, 617). For 'modalists', concepts crucially involve sensorimotor information, whilst 'amodalists' draw on computational views of the mind and envisage concepts as abstract, language-like symbols, not connected to internal affective states.

Whilst the modal/amodal dichotomy has some problems (Michel 2020), the explanatory mechanism it proposes fits well with anthropological evidence that insists that the sensual body informs our meaning-making and action in the world at the profoundest level. Archaeological discussion of human origins consistently flags the importance of abstract and symbolic thinking and particularly so when explaining the significance of personal ornamentation (Moro Abadía and Nowell 2015; d'Errico and Vanhaeren 2009; Iliopoulus 2020). But this sort of approach makes little sense in terms of San relationships with ornamentation and San evidence suggests feelings play a far more important role in high functioning behaviour than most archaeologists permit. The current archaeological position seems to reflect a now dated fashion for amodal cognitive theories. With increasing evidence that emotions play a significant role in even abstract concepts (Vergallito et al. 2019), current understandings of how the San operate in the world supports recent cognitive theories that place feeling, and not symbolism, and by association loaded Western ideas of 'rationality', at the heart of how we think and who we are.

In Ingold's arguments for perception we see further linking up of bodily states or what a person is doing to thinking. Ingold recognises that: 'what we perceive must be a direct function of how we act' and 'the kind of activity in which we are engaged, attunes us to picking up particular kinds of information' (Ingold 2000, 166).

Feelings and Knowledge

In grounded cognition theory, feelings play a fundamental role in how individuals form concepts about the world. Ingold's insights direct us to locate feeling and concept formation within particular ways of moving that generate particular perceptions. Collectively this tells us that if bands or larger groups of people share feelings about the world and move in similar learned ways, then they will also share concepts and, by implication, ideas. In a discussion of shared taste, the philosopher of aesthetics Jerrold Levinson remarks, in a supporting vein, that people from a particular background, age, sensitivity or humour are likely to find the same things 'aesthetically good' (Levinson 2017, 20). Levinson's observation provides a track from people who feel similarly and think similarly to people who share aesthetic, morally weighted, sensibilities. When we think about San rock art it is generated and consumed by people who share experiences, ways of doing things, ways of perceiving and ways of feeling. Their shared concepts cannot be disentangled from shared aesthetics – good and right ways of moving, looking and feeling that contribute to effective community living, operating within their constructed realities. San shamanism and the rock art inspired by its practices is a manifestation of, and generator of, San ways of doing and thinking and it is inextricably tied to feeling.

As part of her argument, Barrett identifies affective realism as a subset of naïve realism, or the belief that the senses provide an accurate interpretation of reality. Affective realism is when you experience affect without knowing what the cause is. In such instances the affect or feeling is likely to be treated as information about the world

(Barrett 2018, 75). A 'gut feeling' about someone is affective realism. Biologically, your gut feeling is telling you how your body is feeling not what another person is like. In affective realism the affect becomes treated by us as "a property of an object or event in the outside world, rather than as our own experience". Barrett goes on to observe that people "employ affect as information, creating affective realism, throughout daily life" She gives the examples of food being delicious or bland, paintings being beautiful or ugly and people being nice or mean (Barrett 2018, 75).

If we apply this notion of affective realism to the San shamanic dance, this suggests that San search for information by putting their body under stress and taxing their body budget. Under these conditions the brain is looking for explanations, and the feelings that people generate, such as the 'boiling' *n|om* and shifts of awareness and thought sought in Ju|'hoan healing dances, become interpreted as good information from God or the intervention of good and bad ancestors, spirit travelling or other characteristic shamanic experiences. The images that shamans represent on rock surfaces are examples of affective realism generated in shamanic practices becoming information and manifesting in culturally familiar ways. Rock paintings represent perceptions and feelings coming out of a person and being fixed onto rocks in stylized ways that carry valence and arousal. These expressions tap into shared values of meaningful, powerful, appropriate, right, good, and bad behaviour.

Becoming a San healer is all about learning how to generate particular feelings and experiences, which are then recognised as information in the context of San cosmology and beliefs. Examples of such feelings might include that of climbing up to God in the clouds or turning into a lion. Training involves working through pain and fear to open up to God's love, at which point the healer works around the group pulling out sickness, distributing healing energy, such as *n|om*, and drawing the group together. As they work healers are constantly seeking balance between bad things and good things; things that make the individual or the group well, or dysfunctional or sick. The dance is underpinned by correct ways of doing things to ensure a good outcome. Learning involves moving in the right ways to generate recognisable feelings, having singers who are strong to drive the healer on, and behaving appropriately, such as wearing the beads of a healer, using a 'fly whisk' like other healers do or whistling in the right way to open the mind to the ancestors and God. The images such healers made on rocks were feelings channelled into recognisable and culturally acceptable forms that made sense to individuals and to related groups.

Inspiration

In Lewis-Williams' critique of the aesthetic approach to rock art he emphasises that art is a social activity. His aim is to distance rock art from ideas of personal inspiration that are inherent in aesthetics of the eighteenth century and onwards. To support his point, he notes that there is little sign of idiosyncrasy in San art, the vast majority involving the same themes which were executed in similar ways. In terms of 'social activity', this is a reasonable point but unless we open things up, we are in danger of missing the key role of the individual in San social life and shamanism.

San ontology is rooted in the value of the individual. Each person is given a specific breath or 'wind' of life from God and concepts of individuality revolve around the

particular mixture of winds or gifts each person has. San contextualize the thoughts, pictures and feelings that 'just come to them' as gifts from God, and often as, 'winds'. San gifts and feelings are both substantiated as, and carried by, overlapping ideas of wind, breath, smell and by extension, words. Bad thoughts and bad words can enter another's heart. A strong smelling lady can kill an unborn child. The winds of strangers can kill. When a San shaman opens up, they are opening up to the gifts of God and are, in a very idiomatic sense, literally being 'in-spired'.[1]

Destrée and Murray observe that in classical times you could not ask "is this good art" but you could ask, "is this a good performance?" (Destrée and Murray 2015, 6). This framing seems equally relevant to the San. In classical contexts things we might consider art were performances that worked with potencies; good statuary pleased the gods and poetry was good when the rhythm had a psychagogic or soul guiding effect (Destrée and Murray 2015, 3, 8). Among the San a good healing dance is one that similarly, if it is performed well, brings in spirit, potencies, and information.

Like other hunter-gatherers, San place great store on personal knowledge gleaned from personal experience (see Gardner 1966). Among healers it is common practice to dream what remedies to use or to be given a spirit message when asleep, or in an altered state of consciousness. The message reveals why someone is sick and how to heal them. One well known example of a San lady being given such a gift of knowledge concerns Beh. Once, when alone in the bush, Beh saw a herd of giraffe running before an approaching thunderstorm and she interpreted the sounds of the hooves as a gift of a medicine song being given to her by the great god, G||aoan. Beh told her community about this song and they, recognizing the value of this gift, began to dance the Giraffe dance (Biesele 1993, 67–8). The dance consequently filtered out all over the Kalahari. Receiving a *n|om* song in this manner involves an inspirational and 'visionary element' (Biesele 1993, 69; Keeney et al. 2016, 140; Katz et al. 1997, 131).

A good example of inspiration involves a Ju|'hoan healer I met who was extremely sick. The whole time he was sick a huge bull elephant stood right near his hut. After some days his sickness passed, and the elephant left. He and his village knew that this elephant was an ancestor, and the sickness was the giving of a gift. From that time on he had *n|om* or healing potency. He became a healer. Megan Biesele affirms the value of such personal knowledge gained in personal ways, in her observation that 'the rendering of individual kerygmatic accounts into culturally shared images is a highly important process in the religious unity of Ju/'hoansi and other hunter-gatherers' (Biesele 1993, 72). Being inspired is then a very appropriate way of thinking about how the San learn.

In view of the importance San place on personal knowledge and experience it is not altogether surprising that San often say they have tried something because they 'felt like it'. Whilst in the Western world 'because I felt like it' is considered an irrational and unacceptable excuse, to be drilled out of children from an early age, among the San it is a valued justification. 'Just feeling' is to accept the gifts of God or the ancestors. In a similar way we should be careful not to play down the importance

1 'Spiration' being 'the action of breathing as a creative or life-giving function of the Deity' and spirit being 'the animating or vital principle…the breath of life' OED.com

of 'simply copying'. Many dancers and healers attribute their introduction to dancing and healing to their desire to copy others and have a go because they 'felt like it'. To recognize and act on this feeling is also to honour the gift. As Katz and his colleagues observe, copying is a "process of honouring". It entails "humility" and "a lack of personal credit" "The primacy of spiritual knowledge and guidance in the creative process is acknowledged" (Katz et al. 1997, 133). Accordingly, if copying is something that San artists did, we should not dismiss this as something simple and value free. Copying reveals the following of feelings, not empty imitation. Copying art for the San is a spiritual and respectful act of right or good behaviour.

Adherence to such right behaviour is essential when people rely so much on each other's skills and companionship. If a group breaks down through lack of skill or arguments, disharmony and death is a very real possibility. Biesele recognizes similar concerns when she highlights that San life is all about "mediating between undesirable and desirable states" (Biesele 1993, 88). A very San way of thinking about doing things desirably, in the right way, is to say, 'doing it nicely'.

Doing It Nicely

Doing things 'nicely' is an expression I repeatedly encountered when working through my interview translations of many years. I then, consequently, noticed just how frequently the word cropped up in historical ethnography and recent anthropology of the San. Taking a closer look at the diverse San contexts in which the word occurs reveals that something more than an incidental translational quirk is at play. What this seemingly innocuous word conveys is a combination of care and conscious or unconscious awareness that something is being done effectively. Doing things nicely is achieving an aim in ways that are good in a sense of behaving the right way; the way that promises the most predictable outcome. The way that actualises a code of behaviour that is passed down from the ancestors and the old people, morally sanctioned by day-to-day engagement with elders and by everyday behaviour, whether it be gathering, hunting, joking, sharing meat, playing, making tools or telling stories. Indicative of this link, Beesa Boo, a well-known Ju|'hoan translator, noted that the Ju|'hoan word ||*au* means both nicely and carefully; ||*au du ka* means 'do it nicely'.

In a well-referenced publication from 1911, Bleek's and Lloyd's, *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*, the word 'nicely' appears thirty-five times. It is used in contexts including clever children understanding nicely, stars standing nicely, a hartebeest sitting down nicely, people calling and not calling nicely, a fox avoiding a dog nicely, putting the bones of a dead animal aside nicely, springbok dividing nicely and people making huts nicely.

The anthropologist Lorna Marshall has also suggested that something significant was at play in the word 'nicely'; she commented in regard to the Eland Bull Dance:

> One woman made the sound of eland footfalls by clinking two metal ankle ornaments together. We were told that this sound not only represented eland footfalls, but would make the menstruating girl "hear nicely", so that when the girl would be asked to do something, such as to fetch water from the water hole, she would obey and respond cheerfully (Marshall 1999, 199).

Marshall's account of the dance draws us to an appreciation of how beauty lies within a person moving right, looking right and acting right. 'Hearing nicely' is a common idea and it sits within a wider context of working with the senses in a highly receptive, effective and right manner. In a similar frame, Paul Myburgh recounts in his intriguing book on his time among G|uikhwe, the importance of understanding the world by "seeing nicely" (Myburgh 2013, 61–2, 138). Katz, Biesele and St Denis (1997, 55) provide a further example in the words of a San shaman, ǂOma Djo: ' "In the morning, you may see me arriving nicely with a happy heart. You'll know that in my night travels [to check on the people] I have found everyone well" '.

Petrus Kruiper (Khoolabar), a ǂKhomani San man, provides a further example. Petrus described what to do when you wake up on a sand dune with a lion in your face: 'He stands by you and he wants to smell in your face and his beard pricks you and you must not wipe your face, you must just open your eyes nicely. He has got a long beard. When you look at the lion then he retreats, he turns and he goes'.[2] When Abraham Malgas, also ǂKhomani, said, 'come let me tell you nicely, properly', he was opening up on serious matters. When David Cisje Kgao (Ju/'hoansi) told about returning from a successful hunt he uses nicely as a shorthand for mood, community co-operation and skill, all bound together: 'If I come home I am not going to tell them directly – I say "I have used my arrow and bow and can people come and look nicely and help and look for it".

In a final example from Ou Debe (Ju/hoansi) about the 'devil wind' we are reminded of what it actually means when we speak of San having a personal relationship with the weather: 'if you see it does not respond to insult, you must talk nicely to it'. Ou Debe means that his talk must show respect, care and a little filial charm towards the dangerous whirlwind.

The point is that doing something nicely is important to the San in ways that bind right social behaviour with body use and effectivity. This can be summed up by how one should walk into a San encampment. If you come in being loud, abrasive, and arrogant; striding and very physical, covered in wealthy possessions, staring everyone in the eyes, instructing and not listening – your reception will be completely different from walking in quietly, slowly and humbly, dressed in a very everyday manner, head a little down, talking to the children and coming with a happy open heart. The latter is doing things nicely.

Doing things nicely involves a profound mingling of nature and culture as the body and attention are applied in a particular way to a situation or task. Hearing nicely and seeing nicely are not just about listening with your ears and looking with your eyes. The right sort of movement and attitude brings the right results among people who share understanding of feelings, share the facts those produce and work with affective outcomes, whether it be walking nicely, dancing and singing nicely, sitting nicely, firing a bow nicely or any other behaviour. A good way of thinking about this composite action is, 'being in the mood'. Being in the mood involves focus and application and might involve some ritualistic habits to get a person there. A writer might have their espresso at 10.30 am or a San dancer might use a flywhisk, "to provide an

2 This seems to be a characteristic of Kalahari lions. See Elizabeth Marshall (2016, 55).

aesthetically pleasing sense of balance" (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 2000, 43). The San do things to get in the mood and do things because they are in the mood, and mood has surely played a profound role in the hunter-gatherer peoples before them.

Beauty

Lewis-Williams interprets San rock art images as symbolic representations rooted in "the daily life of ordinary people" (Lewis-Williams 2014, 625) and explores how San rock art relates to social solidarity, harmony, sharing and morality within the San. Yet, questions of how rock art relate more directly to San aesthetics in everyday life and San relationships with beauty remain neglected. Admittedly it is not easy to move from observations of beauty in wider San life to assumptions of beauty in San rock art, but the wider context at least flags the importance of beauty and the cultural spaces where it figures. Turning to this wider context suggests beauty in the art might lie in the patterns of what goes with what, in what particular things are represented, like eland, snakes and beads and other qualities ranging from glistening surfaces to rounded full forms and smooth lines. As relationships with beads indicate, care and time taken also figure in appreciation of ornamentation and very probably in artistic expression. And we learn that copying is an act of respect, honouring and working nicely in the world. Similarly, the process of manifesting art from within is to channel and work nicely with ancestors and God.

Drawing on Kant, Levinson defines two types of beauty, the most common being "dependent beauty" and a second being beauty of pure patterns and forms. Dependent beauty depends on "viewing the object under a certain sort of concept". The second kind of beauty he characterizes as "abstract beauty" and suggests it comes close to Kantian "free beauty" (Levinson 2017, 24).

To understand the San requires rejecting this split and recognizing the continuity between perception of patterns, a rightness in things that go together and concepts inherent in San ontology and everyday life. Things that scholars might deem abstractions are tethered through chains of invisible connections. If we call these connections metaphorical and wish to talk of symbolism, we must remember that the San know there are real connections between such separate entities, such as an animal's track and the animal, or between an eland necklace and the powers of the eland it was made from. In contexts of San ostrich eggshell necklaces, which have played so significant a role in archaeological discussion of cognitive evolution, these cannot be understood without appreciating the role of the essence of the ostrich. It is this essence that is worked with individually and socially when ostrich eggshell necklaces are worn. To understand the beauty of ostrich eggshell necklaces requires appreciating the multitude of ways in which ostriches are known that relate to birth, strength, fertility, and healing (Low 2009). It relates to the care and time invested in making the ornamentation, the care taken in sharing such items and investing in relationships, and the care taken to look right, move right and behave nicely. Being beautiful means participation in personal and community flourishing and working with powers that engage and attract.

That concepts of the world cannot be separated from how people live is affirmed in cognitive affective realism. In Barrett's term, "believing is seeing", we feel what our brain believes. Barrett elaborates that everything you feel is based on prediction

from what you know and from your past experiences (Barrett 2018, 77–79). Being a hunter-gatherer is to feel patterns in the world that you can work with and if you work nicely with them, outcomes become as predictable as possible. When outcomes are not good you either did not listen nicely to your feelings or perhaps, the ancestors, Tricksters, or God intervened. As hunters, trackers and foragers, San persistently ask 'what is this trying to tell me?' They work with the world by searching for contingent meaningful patterns around them and inside themselves. Their realities are built from the patterns they learn to attend to. The patterns are informed by prior generations and if San work with them in the right technically, socially, and morally ascribed ways, they are patterns known to promise the best outcomes.

The promise of patterns as the answer to everything has a rich history. It is notably prominent in the cybernetic and ecological work of Gregory Bateson who proposed a conception of God as 'an immanent informational pattern that connects everything in a cybernetic pantheism' (Brier 2008, 229). In terms of neuroscience, patterns are central to how the brain processes and makes predictions about the world and, to some scientists, like Mattson, 'superior pattern processing' is "the fundamental basis of most, if not all, unique features of the human brain" (Mattson 2014, 1). Pattern recognition is, therefore, essential to who we are.

For hunter-gatherers the familiar is workable, it is right and there is a profound and meaningful satisfaction in making sense of things or finding the patterns. Unknown, unknowable, and irregular things are dangerous. When things are right, life is good. In line with our wider recognition of the revelatory character of feelings 'coming out' of a person as knowledge, at least for the San, it seems highly likely that seeing and feeling patterns and making patterns on rock surfaces held a revelatory and visionary element. Patterns were very probably intriguing to San ancestors because seeing or manifesting them through performance has something of the gift about it. Patterns arrived for ancient artists if they opened up and the intrinsic regularity and resolution of patterns would have promised safety and rightness with inseparable qualities of beauty.

Thinking about beauty in San contexts highlights profound links between San environments, cosmology, and behaviours. For the San a good life is all about the interwoven qualities of plenty and beauty. San concepts of beauty and objects of beauty are visible in a run of inter-related phenomena that 'go together', including God, rain, green vegetation, fertility, fat and meaty animals and a particularly strong link between fat eland, snakes, and fat women. In the highly gendered San world, which is to say nothing about the remarkable equality between the sexes, women are linked to fat, meat, blood, sex, cool fluids, soft rain, and foraging, in a similar way to men being linked to hunting, heat, hard rain and even long thin paths. These sorts of qualities and relationships potentially lend themselves to satisfying patterns and arrangements of images, lines, and flow in rock art.

I have previously cited the Eland Bull Dance in relation to a pubescent girl being given the gift of hearing nicely so that she obeys requests cheerfully. The dance is a gift of grace and beauty that carries promise of fat, plenty and a good life. Related ideas are found in Ju|'hoan folklore where the particular beauty of python girl, G!kon//'amdima, or "beautiful and honoured woman", is attributed to her smooth glistening skin and fatness. As Biesele observes, Hoernlé noted a similar desirability of girls becoming fat with smoothly shining skin among the Khoikhoi (Biesele 1993, 148).

In San folklore standards and norms of beauty are given currency with every storytelling. In a story of the beautiful elephant girl (related to python girl) recorded by Biesele, for instance, we are told how a grandmother:

> ground ochre and spread it on the young woman's face. She replaced her old rags with soft, new skin clothing and hung her all over with ornaments. Then the old woman tied copper rings in her granddaughter's hair the way people used to tie them long ago. She fixed her up so that she was the beautiful elephant girl again (Biesele 1993, 144).

Within San folklore beauty plays a key role in accounting for the world and describing correct behaviour. The act of creation that ushered in current time, when people separated from animals, revolved around some animals being given beautiful and desirable qualities and others ugly or difficult traits. Further still, the trickster-like figures that populate KhoeSan folklore often play with beauty in their acts of deception. As Sigrid Schmidt observes, Haiseb, a trickster figure of the Hai||om, frequently transforms himself into a beautiful maiden or repulsive crone (Schmidt cited by Guenther 1999, 105).

For the San it is inappropriate to try and tease apart beauty from what works and are right and good ways of behaving. Things that are beautiful, like jewellery and smiles, play with power, they make things happen. Katz notes for instance that beautiful singing in the healing dance attracts spirits and the right, powerful and beautiful way for a woman to behave is to "stand and quiver beautifully" (Katz 1982, 166). To make the dance work is to "create artistic beauty" because this is what has effects and brings in the *n|om* power of God (Katz et al. 1997, 126). Biesele similarly observes that the song given to the Ju|'hoan lady, Beh, was an "artistic creation" given by the great God, !Xu (Biesele 1993, 131). The song was taken up by people because "it is beautiful and because it works, it has efficacy as a trancing song" (Biesele 1986, 102).

Conclusion

In 2010, art historian Peter Stupples observed that it was time to stop "re-adapting Kant and Hegel to an appropriate present" and time to start "exploring the ground for a theory of culturally inclusive aesthetics", and he went on to highlight what such a contextualized aesthetic reading might mean. Similar to others who are rethinking aesthetics, Stupples recognises that the meaning of aesthetics has been far from consistent and stable over time, but it remains, nonetheless, possible to identify its main persistent meaning: "the way we understand, feel about, judge, appreciate and apprehend works of art". Aesthetics, Stupples affirms, concerns qualities of artworks and the disposition of the viewer and key themes at its heart often include good taste, being beautiful and what is worthy (Stupples 2010, 34–35).

In the foregoing, I have pursued a contextualized view of aesthetics that goes some way to addressing Stupples's call for a culturally inclusive aesthetics. Stupples provides examples of the sorts of information and orientations such a reconfiguring of aesthetics might throw up and much of what I have identified among the San sits well within his outline. Stupples, for instance, suggests that different meanings of beautiful might including "effective in ritual", "ordered" and "at peace" (Stupples

2010, 36). In this San example I have similarly linked beauty to things that work and correct behaviour that supports social equanimity. I have also linked this behaviour to the right ways to behave and hence drawn moral dispositions into my argument, and this again sits well with Stupples's reading. Further still, Stupples notes that "art is not so much a representation of invisible powers but a manifestation of them" (Stupples 2010, 39). I have similarly argued that among the San, performing well, being inspired, and actually making art all relate to working with divine gifts that manifest divine power but also involve an absorption with making feelings as a way of exploring the world and generating information. To this extent my findings further align with Ingold's interpretation of hunter-gatherers as people who use art to probe the world and keep relationships alive (see also e.g., Ingold 2000, 61–76, 111–131).

What Ingold has to say in relation to art is important as it pushes interpretations of art historians deep into a sensitive reading of the hunter-gatherer contexts. Yet is seems to me that neither the work of art historians nor Ingold drills deep enough into what actually lies at the nub of aesthetics – the relationship of feelings to perception, concept making, the generation of knowledge and information, body movement, moods, techniques, and wider culturally specific behaviour. And even, ultimately, the role of feelings in human consciousness. Such a broad and ambitious remit might be too much for the category, but 'aesthetics' potentially holds a key to discovering far more about who we all are than is typically recognised.

This San example indicates that beauty, attraction, identity, procreation, theories of illness, inspiration and ideas, all link to aesthetics in ways that collapse boundaries of biology and culture. In this analysis I have sort to steer around the dangers of a universalising aesthetic, but it is important to recognise that there is a distinction between aesthetics as ideology and aesthetics as situated performance rooted in a common biological humanity. I have turned to grounded cognition theory because, through ideas of valence and arousal, and the direct linking of body use to thought, situated biology provides a strong way to broaden out interpretation of art in all contexts, including those of hunter-gatherers. And when we apply this approach to hunter-gatherers, remaining mindful of their shared subsistence strategy with early humans, what is most highlighted is the entangled way in which we all belong in this world.

For archaeologists the clearest message to come out of this analysis is the need to avoid temptations of thinking of anything as simply decorative or simply operating in a symbolic sense, without recognising the need for more subtle understandings of how people fit in the world. Linking aesthetics to sensation, cognition, and consciousness, emphasises how language and symbolism might help us understand how we differ as animals. Ultimately, however, aesthetics actually emphasises how we are especially embedded in, if not preoccupied with, feeling. Far from aesthetics being just an historically contingent category of Western analysis, the term leads us closer into understanding both the everyday life of the San and, in related ways, the everyday of all of us.

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