

6. Sorcerers of the Dead



The paintings on the tail of this aircraft are a tribute to the founder of rock art studies George Stow. Stow was a medical student-drop-out-turned-geologist who had come to the Eastern Cape in South Africa from England in the 1840s. In the course of searching the landscape for fossils and composing poetry about the miraculous nature of creation (and later mapping the geology of a vast tract of land between the Orange and Vaal Rivers) Stow became obsessed with the rock art of the country and the scattered bands of Bushmen who still survived colonial expansion. After serving with British forces in the Seventh Frontier War, Stow left Port Elizabeth and travelled into the interior. Against great odds and with a zealous passion Stow copied paintings at several hundred rock art sites, carrying his paintings across thousands of miles of countryside. His was the earliest systematic study of rock art in southern Africa. He identified what he thought to be the key themes in the art, writing:

The paintings are not only of different degrees of excellence – but are also of different kinds. Some may have a mythological character but others are certainly historical paintings – and not only represent some particular events but also are, from the marked character and diversity of figure, intended for portraits of various individuals belonging to the several tribes. These are generally representations of battles – huntings and dances – in which the Bushmen are represented wearing the different disguises they are known to adopt on such occasions but which to European eyes when they see representations of men enveloped in skins with Buck's or Bird's heads or with tails of iguanas and other animals fastened round their waists, make them believe they must have a mythological, or fabulous meaning – instead of representing the manners and customs of the Bushmen as they really were.

Stow recorded interviews with remaining Bushman individuals who had escaped the carnage of the frontier wars and the commandos that had been established in the 18th and 19th centuries to exterminate them. He visited massacre sites and wrote with a painful passion about the tragic fate of the Bushmen and their way of life:

Many caves are to be found in this mountainous region, several of them of immense size ... There is every evidence that at one time densely populated centres were sprinkled throughout the whole of these mountain glens ... But if the extent and number of the caves and paintings contained in them make known the numerous clans which once occupied these picturesque glens, and the surprising degree of excellence at which some of their leading artists arrived, so also do these spots proclaim in an equally unmistakable manner the tragic fate which befell their former inhabitants; they tell us but too plainly of the infernal storm of lead which was poured in upon them by their vindictive and remorseless pursuers.

Stow also copied the engravings of the northern Cape making rubbings of some these. He referred to these and the paintings of other regions as

the "title deeds" of the San and an indication of their right to the land. He saw their long battle against the invading British, Dutch and various African herders and farmers as a patriotic struggle to defend their home and country, and their actions in defence of their hunting grounds as acts of great heroism. He understood their paintings to reflect not only this valiant resistance but also to reveal a way of life depicted with brilliance and imaginative genius.

In these tail paintings we see buck, snake-like coils, hippo and transformed human figures. They are suggestive of the night dances around the campfire once performed by San all over southern Africa, where the dancer collapsed into a state of trance, and he or she would take on the identity of the eland or other antelope, feeling its body, its hair standing on end; or the lion, feeling cornered in a hunt. Similarly in an otherworldly life, the dead would inhabit the body of an owl or a jackal that lurked around the campfire, and visit the sleeping form of a loved one. Rain sorcerers would capture the rainbull, kill it and drag its body over the land, its blood attracting water and bringing rain to the dry country. Or the dancer's blood shed from his nose and the sweat from his body would be rubbed on the sick as a healing ritual. Sorcerers and particularly the sorcerers of the underworld, would inhabit waterholes, and their transformed bodies, surrounded by fish and watersnakes are most particularly suggested in these images.