



The Hand of Masitise: Exploring the Life of a Painter through Two Rock Art Sites in Southern Lesotho

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Abstract. By the early twentieth century in the mountain highlands of what is now Lesotho, few if any Bushmen (San, Baroa) lived as hunter-gatherers in independent communities. In 1932, Masitise, a Phuthi man, created some 'Bushman paintings' on the veranda wall of the British Residency in Quthing for Marion How, wife of the District Commissioner. The majority of the imagery refers to a battle scene between two Bushman chiefs, Soai and Mphaki. Other imagery includes eland, a snake and an imaginary figure Masitise described as a 'mythical beast'. Similar imagery occurs in a rock shelter half a kilometre from the Residency, reportedly painted in 1929. We use digital enhancement and visual analysis to deepen understanding of the stylistic and iconographical similarities, and to argue that the two sets of figures may have been products of the same hand. This small body of work provides a glimpse into the life of Masitise. Taking inspiration from the Bushman tradition and finding his way in a new world order, Masitise combined realism and ambiguity in a distinctive expression, establishing a unique position for himself as an artist crossing boundaries and working 'in-between'. His Residency painting makes a powerful political statement about social tensions in early twentieth-century Basutoland in a provocative portrayal of local history.

Keywords: Masitise, Basutoland (Lesotho), Baphuthi, Quthing (Moyeni), nineteenth-/twentieth-century Bushman rock art, authorship, portrait

Introduction

Rock art made by the Bushmen¹ can be found across southern Africa (South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Eswatini), with the earliest dated rock paintings in the region being almost 30,000 years old (Wendt 1976). This long artistic tradition came to an end with the marginalisation, displacement, and ultimately demise of independent hunter-gatherer communities in these pictured landscapes. During its terminal phase, the art was typically seen by outsiders as little more than

decoration or at most historical records (e.g. Casalis 1889: 162; Stow 1905: 38, 122; Battiss 1948: 66–67), and there were few attempts to find out who the painters were and the motivation and meaning behind the art. This paper explores the life and work of Masitise, one of the rare instances of a named artist.

The two explanations conventionally considered by researchers to provide emic perspectives on the art are one account from the Maloti-Drakensberg in 1873 (Orpen 1874) and a set of remarks on copies of paintings in the 1870s (Bleek 1874; Bank 2006: ch 12). In 1873, the colonial official Joseph Millerd Orpen stood in front of rock paintings in Basutoland (today Lesotho) with a young Bushman man, Qing. Although not a painter himself, Qing grew up at a time when paintings were still being made and was familiar with the art. His explanations, heavy with metaphors, were not easily understood at the time, but have since formed one of the cornerstones of the understanding of Bushman rock art (see McGranaghan *et al.* 2013: 138 for further references). This work, together with that of Bleek and Lloyd (e.g. 1911) and a deeper understanding of the Bushman worldview from the Kalahari ethnography, shows that the rock paintings were an essentially religious art (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1981).

Today there is broad consensus amongst southern African rock art researchers that Bushman rock paintings were closely linked to shamanistic beliefs, rituals, and experiences (for a definition of the shamanistic

¹ Some scholars prefer the term San, but both San and Bushman have historically carried pejorative associations, and are broad terms that don't reflect the specific language spoken by a particular group or what term they may have preferred for themselves, neither of which is establishable in this case because of the disappearance of hunter-gatherer lifeways and languages. In this paper, we use the term 'Bushman' to refer to 'speakers of a variant of what linguists call the !Ui language group who lived partly as hunter-gatherers ... in the nineteenth century' in the Maloti-Drakensberg (Wright *et al.* 2016: 3), with some presence into the twentieth century (Jolly 2024: 21), and 'hunter-gatherers' when speaking of earlier periods. Our use of Bushman is intended solely as a high-level descriptive term, stripped of its past negative connotations. We recognise that historically documented Bushmen are not 'living fossils' of the Stone Age and that projecting the term uncritically into deep time is problematic (see Gordon 1984; Pargeter *et al.* 2016).

explanation see Lewis-Williams 1998: 87). Within this framework, the images represent concentrations of supernatural power and are connected to experiences in altered states of consciousness and related to the most important Bushman ritual, the trance dance (Lewis-Williams 1998; cf. Wadley and Laue 2025). There remains some debate surrounding the definition, essentialness, and overarching nature of 'shamanism', and within it the trance dance, but the consensus, along with its challenges and refinements, form part of a broad and progressive ontological turn within rock art research globally (Whitley 2021).

Among the emic perspectives that are largely absent in southern African rock art research are those of artists themselves. There are vague references to specific rock art painters in several early publications (e.g. Stow 1905: 200, 230; Moszeik 1910: 29; Dornan 1925: 188–189; see Rudner 1982: 5–8 for a comprehensive survey), but only three for which we have names and direct historical evidence—Lindiso, Mapote and

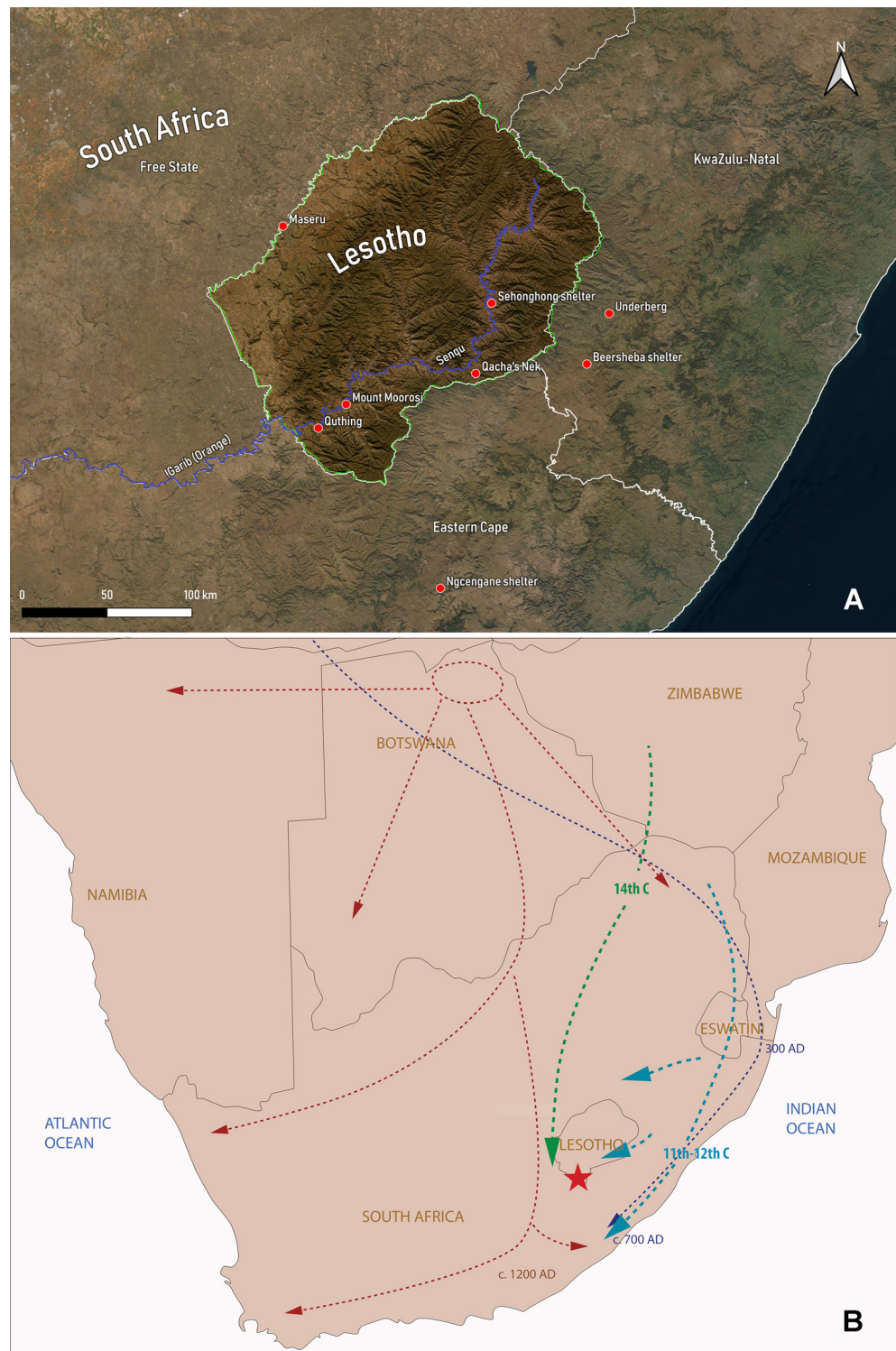


Figure 1. A: satellite imagery showing the mountainous terrain of the Maloti-Drakensberg region at the eastern edge of the central southern Africa plateau (the edge of the high escarpment forms the eastern border between Lesotho and South Africa). B: diagrammatic sketch of the spread of different groups and lifeways in and around what is today Lesotho. Up until 2000 years ago, the only inhabitants were the ancestors of the Bushmen who lived a hunter-gatherer way of life. Red lines suggest the possible (debated) routes of herder groups with fat-tailed sheep. The dark blue line sketches the movement into the sub-continent of Bantu-speaking farmers from central Africa with domesticated crops, iron working, pottery, cattle and sheep, moving south at a similar time, but tending to stick to the coastal lowlands of what is today KwaZulu-Natal. The green and light blue lines indicate further migrations just under 1000 years ago of Iron Age Bantu-speaking farmers from two broad language groups: Sotho-Tswana and Nguni. The green line traces the Sotho-Tswana, who moved into the eastern, lower-lying areas of Lesotho by about 1700 CE. The light blue line indicates the Nguni, who moved along the east coast moving into the Drakensberg foothills by about 1300 CE. Map (2025) by Ghilraen Laue (based on Gavin Whitelaw, pers. comm. June 2025).

Masitise—all active in the terminal phase of this long artistic tradition. Interviews in the 1980s with Lindiso's daughter identified him as the painter of images in Ngcengane Shelter in the Tsolo District of the Eastern Cape, South Africa (Jolly 1986; Lewis-Williams 1986; Prins 1994; Blundell 2004: 117, this volume; see Jolly 2024: 21 for further references; Fig. 1A).

The evidence for both Mapote and Masitise was gathered by Marion Walsham How² in Basutoland in the 1930s. Although both artists are described by How as being Baphuthi, it is clear from their work that they had knowledge of the Bushman painting tradition. In 1930, while How and her husband were posted at Qacha's Nek, she commissioned Mapote to paint on two stones. Mapote is described as the son of an Mpondomise woman and Moorosi, a Phuthi chief (How 1962: 31, 33), whose polity was located in the Quthing area in the mid-nineteenth century (Fig. 1A). Mapote carried memories from his childhood of painting with his 'half-Bush stepbrothers' at one end of a cave while the 'true' Bushmen painted at the other (How 1962: 33). How (1962: 32–38) gives detailed notes on his background, and his painting methods and materials, and this testimony has been discussed and explored by a number of researchers (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1981, 1995; Jolly 1995, 2024; Jenkins 2019: 53–54; King et al. 2021; Bonneau et al. 2022: 185; Lahaye 2023: 72–73). How (1962: 41–42) also mentions another artist, Masitise, who came to her and offered to make 'Bushman paintings'. Masitise is mentioned only briefly, which is perhaps why his contribution has received far less scholarly attention (but see Jolly 2024). While How devoted more space to Mapote, we know very little about his interpretation of his own paintings. Only one small painting of six figures survives, and the only explanation How recorded was that he painted an eland because 'the Bushmen of that part of the country were of the eland' (How 1962: 38). By contrast, the body of work that can be attributed to Masitise is far more extensive, and How also recorded a few comments he made about his own work. This paper brings Masitise to the foreground by combining the meagre historical references with a close analysis of his paintings, to deepen our understanding of his life, beliefs, and the social world in which he lived.

Area and history

Our story opens in 1929, in the Maloti-Drakensberg in the town of Quthing in southern Basutoland (Lesotho today). The Maloti-Drakensberg is a mountain massif straddling the border between present-day Lesotho and South Africa, part of the larger Drakensberg range that extends along the eastern edge of the central plateau of southern Africa (Fig. 1A). Lesotho,

known as the mountain kingdom, is landlocked by South Africa, with its lowest point at 1400m above sea level and peaking at 3482m.

Around the modern town of Quthing, also known as Moyeni (c. 1750 m asl), the terrain is marked by steep, boulder-strewn slopes, where open grasslands give way to stands of trees—many of them introduced species such as blue wattle (*Acacia dealbata*) (King 2019: 39). The landscape features numerous flat-topped mountains, along with plateaux, peaks and river valleys containing rock shelters that range from shallow overhangs to deep recesses. It is within these shelters that the rock art is found. Fertile, moist soils occur in valley bottoms, though these small plots are quickly exhausted compared to the more extensive lowland fields (Showers 2005: 13–14). In the early nineteenth century, the area was home to eland, blue and black wildebeest, blesbok, springbok, hippopotamus, leopard, and quagga, but these species had largely vanished by the mid- to late nineteenth century (Grab and Nash 2022).

For millennia, and until recently, the Maloti-Drakensberg mountains were solely the domain of hunter-gatherer communities, ancestors of the Bushmen. These groups adapted to the demanding highland environment, exploiting the seasonal movements of game, living in rock shelters and open-air sites, and creating one of the richest concentrations of rock art in the world. Produced over at least the last 3000 years in the Maloti-Drakensberg area (Bonneau et al. 2017), this art does not record daily events in the manner of a chronicle. Rather, it provides insights into the beliefs, cosmologies, and ritual practices of its makers.

Around 2000 years ago, a suite of domesticates began to appear in southern Africa: sheep, goats, cattle, sorghum, and millet, along with herding and farming ways of life (Maggs 1994; Whitelaw 1994; Mitchell 2002: 227–232, 259–262; Whitelaw and Mazel 2023). Archaeological evidence suggests that the highlands received these innovations in waves—objects, animals, and technologies reaching them through exchange networks long before the arrival of settled farming communities (Fig. 1B). From a continental perspective these innovations moved relatively late into southern Africa, and the lands of the Maloti-Drakensberg figured among the 'last of the last' (King 2019: 40).

This layering of communities and practices set the stage for complex patterns of contact. Rather than seeing this solely as a story of 'conquest' or displacement, more recent scholarship emphasises hybridity and mutual incorporation (e.g. Challis 2012, 2014; McGranaghan 2015; Challis and Sinclair-Thomson 2022). Mark McGranaghan (2015) argues that hunter-gatherer encounters with livestock and their human keepers were often understood cosmologically, distinguishing between 'nice' and antisocial beings rather than simply categorising the new against the familiar. Similarly, Sam Challis (2012, 2014) cautions against portraying the Maloti-Drakensberg as merely

² Marion Walsham How, wife of Basutoland administrator Lt.-Col. Douglas Walsham How and granddaughter of the famed missionary Rev. David-Frédéric Ellenberger has been described as an "an amateur archaeologist and historian" (King et al. 2021: 138).

a 'contact zone' between hunters and herders, as this risks reducing cultural dynamics to purely economic differences. Instead, contact often took the form of re-contextualisation, in which material goods, animals, and practices were woven into existing frameworks of meaning (Prins 1994; Hammond-Tooke 1998; King 2019: 47).

This perspective resonates with the archaeological record: while the lowlands were better suited to crop agriculture and later to the agropastoralist homesteads that by the seventeenth century would be recognised as Basotho settlements, the highlands remained the preserve of more mobile groups, practising hunting, gathering and seasonal transhumance, communities that were capable of adapting, innovating, and selectively incorporating domestic technologies into their lifeways (King 2019: 48). Rock art from this period reflects such entanglements, with depictions that appear to engage with livestock, farming groups, and new social realities, filtered through hunter-gatherer worldviews (e.g. Challis 2008; Challis and Sinclair-Thomson 2022).

By the nineteenth century, the region was undergoing dramatic political change. The consolidation of the Basotho nation under Moshoeshoe in the early 1800s brought formerly independent groups into new alignments. Oral histories collected by Orpen and the missionary David-Frédéric Ellenberger suggest that Moorosi, chief of the Baphuthi, and his father Mokuoane, became subordinate to Moshoeshoe around this time, their authority recognised in territories south of the Senqu river (King 2019: 125). Unlike the elaborate 'Great Places' of more northerly chiefs, Moorosi's settlements were less monumental, often temporary and shifting in character, leading outsiders to alternately describe his people as a 'banditti' rather than a fully-fledged chiefdom (King 2019: 107).

Colonial pressures compounded tensions. In 1871, the Treaty of Aliwal North fixed Basutoland's boundaries under Cape colonial authority. Colonial officials often viewed the rugged highlands as 'empty' land to be filled to discourage fugitives, squatters, and vagrants. Moshoeshoe and Moorosi both resisted this framing (King 2019: 48). On New Year's Eve 1878, Moorosi's followers attacked the Quthing District magistracy, sparking what became known as Moorosi's War. The conflict dragged on for eight months, involving both British and allied Basotho forces. When Moorosi's mountain stronghold was finally stormed in 1879, the surviving men were imprisoned in Cape Town, while women and children were forced into domestic service in the Cape Colony. Some escaped through the southern Maloti-Drakensberg into what would later be called Nomansland, the Transkei, and other areas being engulfed into the Cape Colony as it pushed eastwards through frontier warfare (now part of the Eastern Cape province of South Africa). Moorosi himself was killed in the battle; his decapitation by British soldiers and the attempted transport of his head

to Britain underscored the violence of the encounter (see Atmore 1970 for more details on the Moorosi rebellion). This marked the end of the Baphuthi as a political force in the nineteenth century.

By 1929, Basutoland was a British Colony. Very few, if any, Bushmen still practised an independent hunter-gatherer way of life, and many lived under the protection of, or had married into, Basotho or Phuthi groups. Several Phuthi chiefs, including Moorosi, had close ties with Bushman (known in Sesotho as Baroa) groups (Jolly 1996; King 2019). The Baphuthi,³ who lived mainly in the southern part of Lesotho, fell under Sotho leadership, as they had done since the defeat of Moorosi in 1879 (Atmore 1970). The descendants of Moorosi were gradually demoted until they seldom occupied positions above that of 'junior headman' (Ashton 1967: 202). This legacy followed through to more recent times as the Baphuthi have continued to struggle for political visibility (King 2019: 238; Shah et al. 2022). It was only in August 2025 that the constitution of Lesotho was amended and isiPhuthi was added as one of the official languages of the country (Lesotho 2025: 1477).

Masitise and the Residency paintings

How (1962: 41) recorded that in 1932, 'a Mophuthi, called Masitise, came to do some "Bushman paintings"' on one of the outer walls of the British Residency at Quthing, where How was living with her husband at the time. On the front wall under the veranda, Masitise painted a battle between Soai and Mphaki—described by How as 'two of the great Bushman chiefs of the second half of the nineteenth century'—as well as 'a weird-looking object which he said was a mythical beast that could destroy people' (How 1962: 41–42). How gives little context to Masitise's arrival at the Residency, and doesn't record any details of the process. In her unpublished notes she writes 'I do not remember what pigments he used, they must have been the same as Mapote used or I would have noted the difference' (quoted in King et al. 2021: 144). She simply remarked that he 'offered' to put paintings on the wall, and was left to work quietly in the far corner of the veranda. When she returned, she realised he intended to extend the battle scene along the entire front of the house, and '[n]ot knowing what the Government reaction might be', she 'assured him that he had already done all that was required and thanked him for his excellent work' (1962: 41).

In 2019, we visited the Residency in Upper Moyeni and recorded the paintings, which, after nearly 90 years, were still remarkably well-preserved. The

³ Phuthi is an Nguni language with a heavy Sotho influence (Mzamane 1948: 2) and has been described as a Sotho-Nguni hybrid (Donnelly 1999: 99). We use Baphuthi (Mophuthi, singular) for Phuthi language speakers (following for example Ellenberger & McGregor 1912 and How 1962; but see King 2014: 334–335; Shah et al. 2022: 94).



Figure 2. The former British Residency at Quthing (ARAL 626), with the rock paintings in two areas—one to the left of the window, including the group with snake, and one to the right, including the ‘battle scene’—along the lateral veranda wall of the house. Photographs (2019) and photo-collage (2025) by Anton Coetzee.

house is a sandstone-and-corrugated-iron structure, occupied by the Lesotho National Security Service at the time of our visit. A veranda wraps around two sides of the house, and the paintings are located on the lateral wall in two clusters, one to the left, and one to the right, of a window, with other remnants of paint on the surrounding sandstone blocks (Fig. 2).

The cluster to the left of the window, which Pieter Jolly (2024: 20) describes as generally more imaginary in character, includes a snake with two human figures, one standing and one apparently astride a horse- or antelope-like figure; below are eland and other antelope; two human figures running at each other with shields; a hybrid baboon-like figure; and a faded horse-and-rider.

In the cluster to the right of the window, two of

the painted blocks look like they were scraped/scratched before painting, possibly as a way to prepare the surface. The figures are more smudged in this area, suggesting the absence of an effective binding medium but perhaps also that the surface treatment created a more porous canvas. The main composition here is the battle scene, appearing narrative in its arrangement, depicting two groups of differently armed and adorned figures facing each other in attack. To the right of the battle scene is a therianthrope, and a number of other eland and indeterminate antelope figures, including several very faded figures.

With regard to the battle scene, Masitise explained that Soai had once travelled from Basutoland to East Griqualand, where he encountered a small party of British soldiers. Their leader ‘carried a stick on the end of which was a white flag and this he was waving about’; the Bushmen killed the soldiers, and Soai took the leader’s uniform

and the white flag, believing it to be the insignia of command (How 1962: 41). On his return to Basutoland, Soai fought a battle with another Bushman leader, Mphaki. Soai rode into this conflict on horseback, wearing the British uniform and wielding the white flag (How 1962: 42). Masitise’s choice to depict these two particular figures in conflict raises the question of how he knew of these events, and whether he knew Soai and Mphaki personally, as they may have still been alive when he was born.

In a nearby rock shelter

Our 2019 fieldwork in the Quthing area was guided in part by a longer-term project revisiting a large archive of early recordings of rock art produced by the German Frobenius expedition to southern Afri-

ca (1928–30) (Wintjes 2012, 2013). Three of the artists employed by Frobenius, Elisabeth Mannsfeld, Agnes Schulz and Maria Weyersberg, travelled to different parts of the Maloti-Drakensberg, including a short stay in the Quthing area in 1929 during which they recorded six sites (Frobenius and Mannsfeld 1930: 136, 138). One of these was a small rock shelter on the ridge just below the Residency, overlooking the Kho'Khobe valley (Frobenius 1962 (II): Tafel 115). At the time of their visit, Masitise hadn't yet painted at the Residency and the Hows had not yet been posted there; we don't know if they ever met the Germans during their travels in Basutoland, but one wonders about the possible links within this network of early rock art researchers.

Another set of records guiding us was the documentation produced in the 1970s and 1980s by Lucas Smits's Analysis of Rock Art in Lesotho (ARAL) project (e.g. Smits 1973, 1983), which led us to another rock shelter site further along the same ridge at the mouth of the Kho'Khobe valley and overlooking Lower Moyeni (Fig. 3A).

This site lies about half a kilometre from the Residency. It is a medium-sized rock shelter showing traces of seasonal use, including evidence of animal keeping such as fencing, walling, and rock abrasion. The painted imagery occurs across three adjoining panels, separated by natural seams and steps in the rock (Fig. 3B, C). The left-hand-most panel includes a group with a snake, human figures and baboon-like figures; the central panel includes horses with riders, a horse and other human figures and eland; the right-hand panel features two eland, one above the other. We were immediately struck by the similarities of these paintings, in terms of both subject matter and style, to those at the Residency. A question formed in our minds about whether these images were also painted by Masitise.

In 1931, Dr Frederick G. Cawston published a



Figure 3. The rock shelter half a kilometre from the Residency (ARAL 629), which looks out over the mouth of the Kho'Khobe valley towards Lower Moyeni. It is still used by shepherds, as can be seen from the fencing and dung. Photographs (2019) and photo-mosaic (2025) by Anton Coetzee. The lower image has been enhanced using a combination of DStretch and other enhancement techniques.

brief note on rock paintings at Quthing, including a photograph of part of the painted panel from this rock shelter (Fig. 4). He wrote that the imagery had been made 'two years ago, [by] an old Mosotho'⁴ who

⁴ Cawston was a medical doctor based in Durban, Natal, specialising in tropical diseases (In memoriam 1949). We do not know what brought him to Quthing in the late 1920s or how he gathered this information. 'Mosotho' in the narrow sense indicates a Sotho-speaking person, but may also refer to any inhabitant of Basutoland.

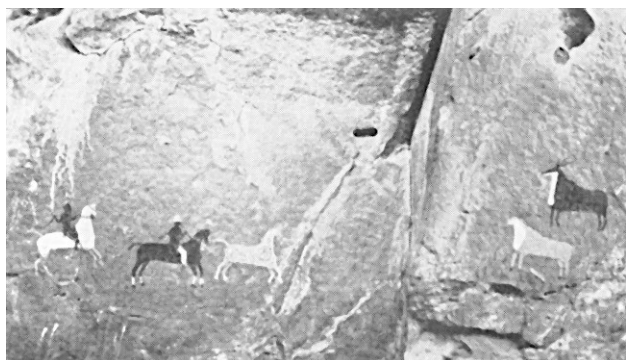


Figure 4. Photograph of a rock panel 'painted two years ago, [by] an old Mosotho' (Cawston 1931: plate facing p. 471).

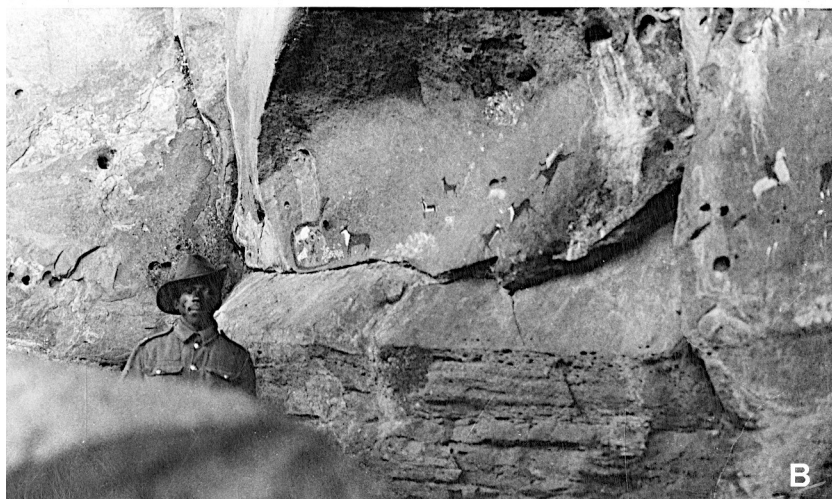
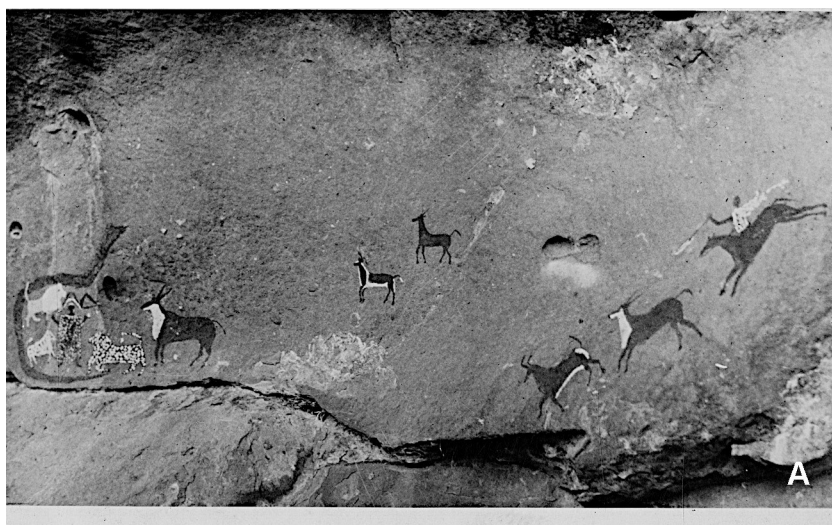


Figure 5. Photographs of the nearby rock shelter in a photo album that belonged to Denys H. Bowden. The date of the images is unknown, but the level of preservation leads us to believe it dates to a time relatively close to when the images were painted, possibly the 1930s (KwaZulu-Natal Museum photographic collection, accession numbers PA0001-67-1 and PA0001-67-2).

'made a very fair imitation of [Bushman] work ... on a ledge of rock only about five minutes' walk from the Quthing cemetery where pictures of elands, elephants

and buffaloes were once visible' (1931: 471). In the photograph, the imagery looks freshly painted, and two years prior would date it to 1929.

Two photographs in a photo album in the KwaZulu-Natal Museum archives, probably taken by Denys H. Bowden (Fig. 5), open another intriguing view onto this painted panel. Bowden was an inspector of mines in what was then the Natal Province of South Africa. He travelled extensively across the region and amassed a large collection of ethnographic objects and visual documents, mostly from around 1930 to 1960. The exact dates and circumstances of these photographs are unknown, but the clarity of the imagery appears similar to the Cawston photograph (although there is only one overlapping figure between them).

The wider view of the panel in the Bowden photographs reveals the presence of numerous details that have since disappeared, including dots and other details in white. The man standing in front of the painted panel is suggestive (Fig. 5B). Bowden frequently photographed items of material culture in context, alongside the people who made, owned or used them, and it is tempting to imagine that this photograph captures the artist Masitise himself posing in front of the panel he had recently painted.

Our impression that this art was made by the same hand as the painter at the Residency was reinforced by our recent discovery of a drawing of several figures (reconfigured into a new composition) by James Walton titled, *Masitise's painting of animals on a rock at Moyeni* (Fig. 6A), and corroborated by Pieter Jolly (1994: 110; 2024: 19, n2), who knew Walton personally. The drawing is undated, but Walton worked in Lesotho between 1947 and 1960, close enough in time for the memory of Masitise to persist. Walton was familiar with the painted imagery at the Residency; he also produced a copy of the battle scene, as well as the stone that Mapote painted for How in 1930 (How 1962: 37 + frontispiece/endpaper; Fig. 6B). Yet it is also possible that, like us, he simply inferred Masitise's authorship based on stylistic similarities.

Comparative visual analysis

Both the Residency paintings and those of the nearby rock shelter are broadly similar to the more commonly found 'traditional' Bushman rock art seen in the Quthing area (Fig. 7) and the wider Maloti-Drakensberg, but also differ

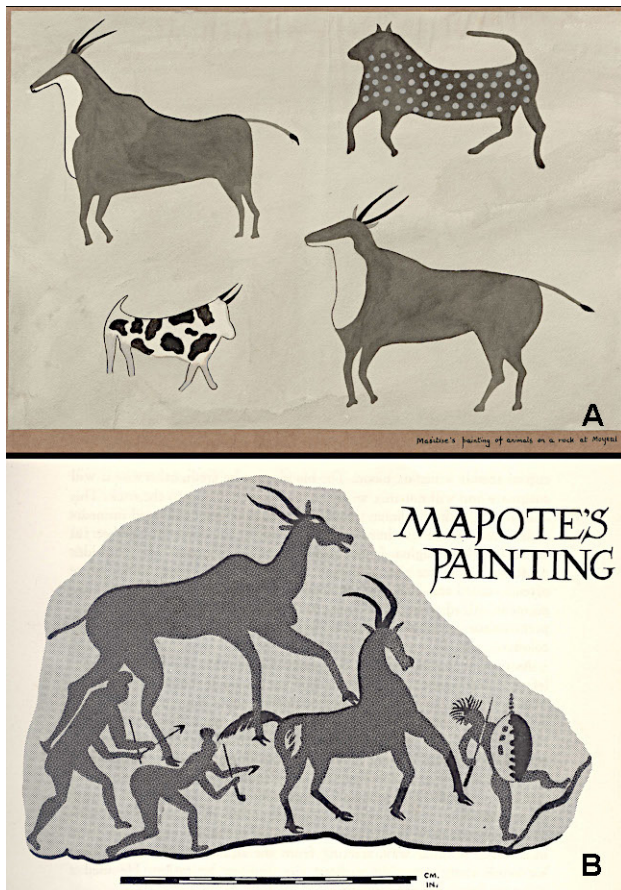


Figure 6. A: Drawing (undated) by James Walton titled, Masitise's painting of animals on a rock at Moyeni (retrieved from the James Walton Collection, Stellenbosch University, SUNDigital Collections, <https://digital.lib.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.2/598>). B: Walton's drawing of Mapote's painted stone published in How (1962: 37).

in several respects. The ARAL recorders also noted the 'San' ('Bushman') authorship with a question mark (ARAL 1984/85).⁵ We do not conduct a comprehensive visual analysis here, but meander across the sites/panels to consider this question of context and authorship, and pull out the most prominent linking elements that support the idea of one artist. We start with the general setting followed by single figures and move to a discussion of groups/compositions.

Setting

The most obvious difference between the two sites is that one is a rock shelter and the other is a house (Figs 3 and 4). A house as a site for 'Bushman' rock art is, as far as we can ascertain, unique, and How's account suggests that Masitise created these paintings of his own accord, and that she simply gave him the space to do so. Cawston describes the painting in the rock shelter as an 'imitation', and commented that

⁵ The team numbered this rock shelter ARAL 629; ARAL 626 is the Residency and ARAL 627 is the site also recorded by the Frobenius expedition.



Figure 7. Two sites in the Quthing area show more typical 'traditional' Bushman paintings, illustrative of the type of art seen in the wider Maloti-Drakensberg region. A: from a site around 4km south-east of the Kho'Khobe valley (ARAL 631), shaded polychrome eland with long white horns superimposed on earlier white and red figures. Following the eland is a bichrome human figure shown in side-profile. In the bottom right corner are two seated figures with horned headdresses. B: From a site around 5km west of the Kho'Khobe valley (ARAL 624), three bichrome eland in red and white. Above the eland are a white and a yellow horse, both with riders painted in red. Photographs (2019) by Anton Coetzee.

most Basotho would by then never have seen live eland themselves, and so 'cannot be expected to appreciate the life likeness of the Bushmen's pictures' (1931: 471). One wonders about the different performative contexts of the production of this imagery between the two sites—on a building forming part of the colonial administration, in the presence of How, and in a rock shelter, in front of an unknown audience, perhaps in a more secluded mode, perhaps in different painting episodes (see Witelson 2023 for a comprehensive discussion of performance theory and its relevance to rock art).

The different settings have also contributed to different degrees of preservation: the 'canvas' is the same kind of stone in both cases, as sandstone was quarried to build the Residency (and a common building material used across the region), but the painted

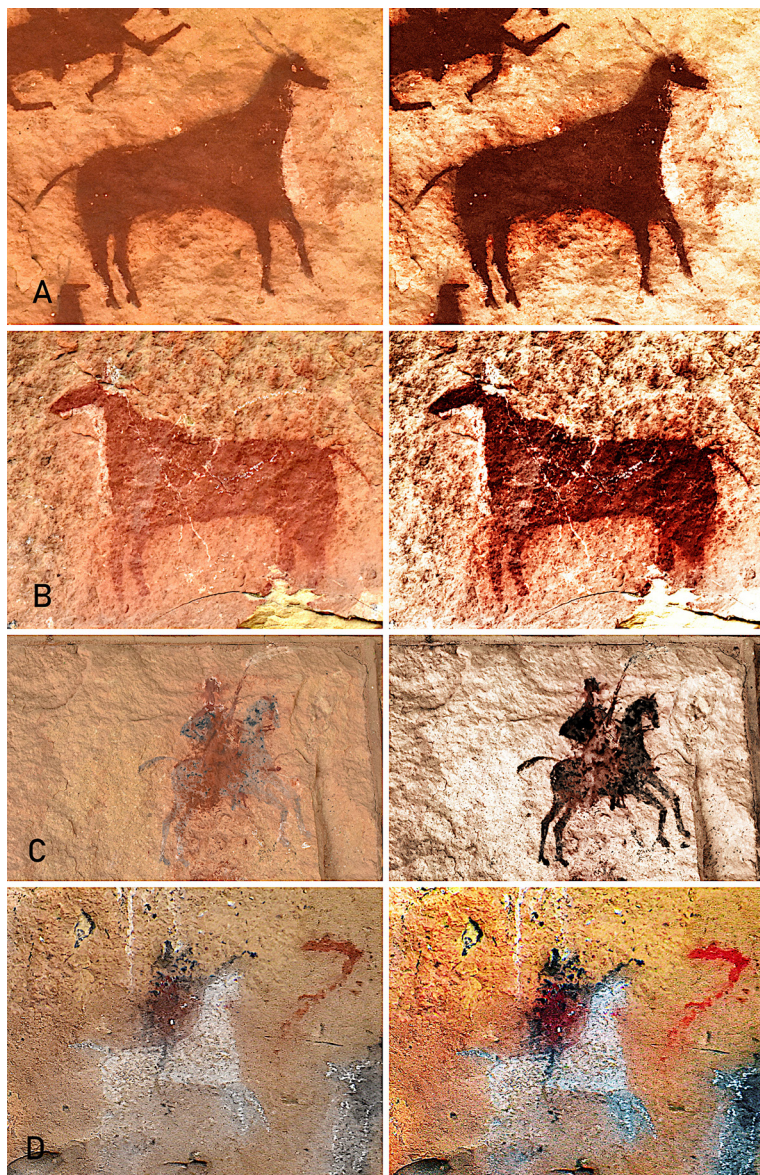


Figure 8. Comparison of eland motifs at the Residency (A) and in the rock shelter (B). Comparison of horseman motifs at the Residency (C) and in the rock shelter (D). Images on the right are enhanced using DStretch and other enhancement techniques to make the details clearer. Photographs and enhancements by Anton Coetzee (2019/2025).

imagery on the covered veranda wall of the house is generally better preserved, whereas the shelter is more exposed to the elements, and continues to be used by shepherds, which impacts directly on the art. The imagery appearing so clear in the 1931 photograph is today highly faded from rubbing and secondary imagery. Some of the figures painted at the Residency may have been smudged from the deliberate application of water—the ARAL report (1984/85: 1) notes that they photographed the imagery dry because they observed that pigment has a tendency to run, suggesting the absence of an effective binding medium (in common with other examples of later paintings, e.g. Solomon 1996: 294); it was indeed fairly common practice by

professional recorders, even into the 1980s, to apply water to enhance the colourfulness of the imagery.

Eland

The first motif common to both sites is the eland, of which there are at least five at the Residency and at least three in the shelter. The eland is one of the most frequently depicted motifs across the regional body of art and a supremely important animal to the Bushmen (Vinnicombe 1976; Lewis-Williams 1988a, 1998; Ndlovu 2009, among others), no longer commonly encountered in the wild by the late nineteenth century (Grab and Nash 2022: 93). Eland occur alongside a number of eland-like/indeterminate antelope. The horns, tail and overall shape of these eland, as well as the other antelope depictions, are similar across both sites (Fig. 8A, B), but different from the more common bichrome and shaded polychrome eland in the wider area (Fig. 7). They are also quite different to the eland painted in the later ‘hard-edged’ phase of rock art seen in the Stormberg and other parts of the Maloti-Drakensberg (e.g. Witelson 2022: Fig. 18).

Horsemen

A second recurring motif is the horse-with-rider, or horseman, of which there are five instances at the Residency, four featuring in the ‘battle-scene’ (discussed below), and two at the shelter (Fig. 8C, D). Within the Bushman artistic tradition this is a common motif of the colonial era (particularly prevalent in some areas). Horses and riders can be painted alongside more classical motifs (Fig. 7B) but appear more frequently as part of a distinctive later tradition painted in solid, flat colours (red, white, black) (e.g. Vinnicombe 1976: Fig. 15a; Challis 2016: Fig. 6). Sam Challis has argued that this later tradition was made by people who ‘were not San in the accepted twentieth-century

ethnographic sense, but were a cohesive group of individuals from multiple cultural backgrounds who chose to think of themselves as Bushmen’ (Challis 2016: 285). The horse paintings under discussion here bear some similarity to these paintings.

The people on horseback are similar across these two sites in terms of their general form and style, the shape and position of the tail, the shape of the neck, and the backline of the horse. Two horses from the Residency and one from the shelter have a distinctive red line running along the back and croup, and one horse from each site has similar two-tone legs. The riders carry different accessories and the horses have reins. As part of a suite of new arrivals on the land-

scape during the colonial era, horses have attracted much attention in recent scholarship, and shown to be far more than simply adaptations of European introductions in the Bushman context: '[t]he motif primarily used to reference interaction and to broker this shared landscape was the horse, the material signifier of the most successful societies in these conditions' (Challis and Sinclair-Thomson 2022: S102, citing Skinner 2017: 179–180).

At the Residency there is an image of a person who may be riding, or alternatively whose body may be merged with, 'an antelope-like animal whose legs, possibly human in form, are depicted in unrealistic positions' (Jolly 2024: 20) (Fig. 9A), but this figure seems, also on stylistic grounds, to fall into a separate category of motif (see below). It occurs to the left of the window, in the area featuring more 'imaginary' figures (Jolly 2024: 20), alongside the next two motifs, a hybrid creature and a large serpent.

Hybrid baboon/not baboon creature

Even with their similarities, the horse-men and eland are arguably still fairly generic, but the third motif we look to is a more distinctive hybrid creature, painted in solid white (Fig. 9A, B). Jolly (2024: 20) describes the one at the Residency as 'possibly a baboon', but the body is suggestive of horse or antelope, and the wide neck of a zebra with its rigid mane (or even a lion), and the tail is curved up and back, bent the wrong way around for a baboon (baboons are generally always painted with a downward kink in their tail as in real life, e.g. Vinnicombe 1976: 223–227). One such figure occurs at the Residency, and there are three in the shelter. The Walton copy (Fig. 6A) and Bowden photographs (Fig. 5) depict one of these figures with horns and black mottled spots that are almost cattle-like, and another as black with white spots, although the spots are no longer visible today. Even though they have deteriorated, however, they still constitute a various but recognisable and idiosyncratic hybrid motif common to both sites.

Large serpents

Another motif occurring at both sites is a large serpent (Fig. 9C, D). In both cases, the serpent has a long snout and dots/strokes/lines along its body, and is used as a framing device, encircling a cluster of figures and following a natural frame provided by the rock: the edge of the quarried block at the Residency, and a natural step in the rock face at the shelter. Snakes with long snouts, interpreted as antelope-headed snakes, are found scattered throughout the Maloti-Drakens-

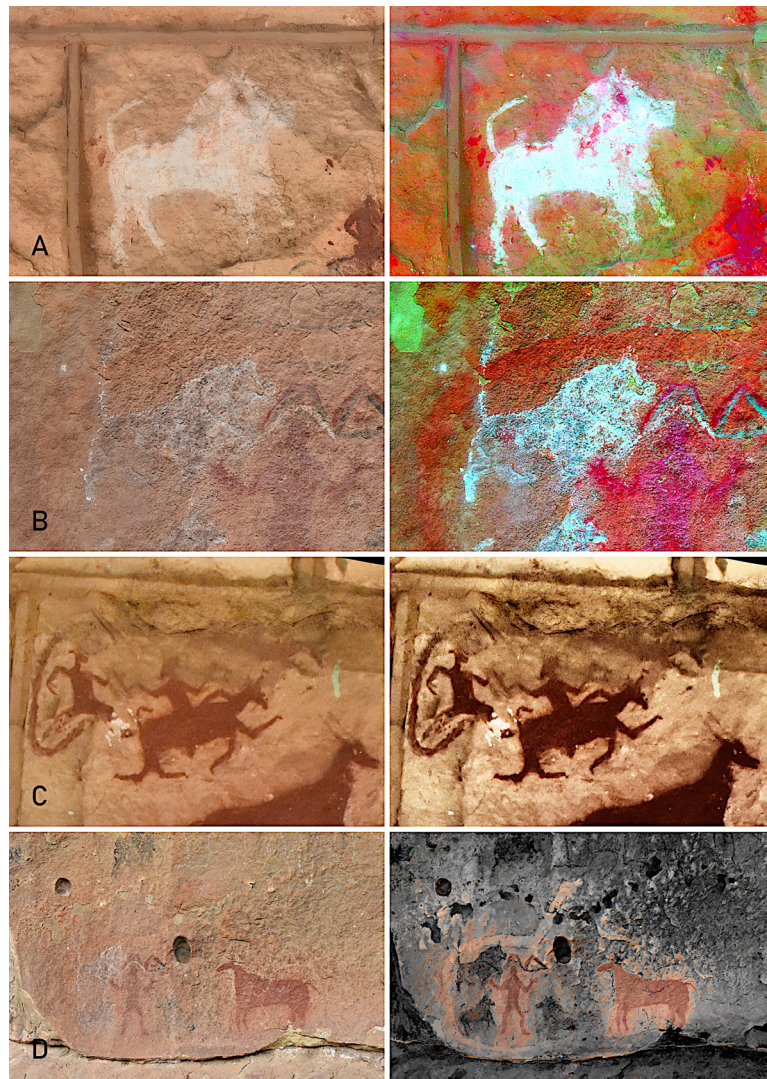


Figure 9. Comparison of the hybrid baboon/not baboon at the Residency (A) and in the rock shelter (B). Comparison of the snake-framed groups at the Residency (C) and in the rock shelter (D). Images on the right are enhanced using DStretch and other enhancement techniques to make the details clearer. Photographs and enhancements by Anton Coetzee (2019/2025).

berg (e.g. Vinnicombe 1976: 228–237; Lewis-Williams 1988b: 7; Mallen 2005), but the use of a snake motif as a framing device in this manner is, as far as we are aware, unique. Scholars have argued that many of these depictions of supernatural snakes are related to the rain and rainmaking (Vinnicombe 1976; Mallen 2005; Lewis-Williams and Challis 2011: 116–117). We align with the notion of serpent depictions as simultaneously natural and supernatural, 'mediators' between 'everyday' and 'entranced' worlds with cross-cultural valence (Sullivan and Low 2014: 218–219), and indeed snakes with entangled mythical and natural properties feature in other contexts, for example stories about goat/sheep-headed snakes: 'The Basuto believe that in the big pool at the foot of each falls lives a sacred reptile, somewhat resembling a snake, with a head like a sheep. It is the spirit of the



Figure 10. Detail of the therianthrope to the left of the battle scene'. Photographs by Anton Coetzee (2019).

waters, and is always attended by a rainbow' (Martin 1903: 16–17).

As Jolly (2024: 22) suggests, Masitise's serpent/snake paintings may be an example of such creatures serving as a common or linking visual theme in the colonial era:

If there was one mythical creature, we would expect to be painted at the very end of the painting tradition, it would probably be a serpent, a creature that resonated with the religious rites, beliefs and the myths of both the southeastern San and the southern African agro-pastoralists (including and in particular the Phuthi).

Both snake-framed groups include frontal depictions of human figures (one at the shelter and two at the Residency), which are rare across the wider corpus. These figures are strikingly similar across both sites (Fig. 9C, D), with arms stretched out to the sides and bent upwards to form shallow V-shapes.

A destructive beast

No further description of the 'mythical beast that could destroy people' is provided other than as a 'weird looking object' (How 1962: 42), so we can't establish with certainty which figure this refers to. Jolly (2024: 20) suggests it may be the human/antelope-like animal with legs in odd positions, which forms part of the snake-framed composition (Fig. 9C). We think there are other contenders, including the animal-headed snake described above, or, seeing as How mentions the 'mythical beast' in the same sentence as the battle scene (to which we return in the next section), a figure that in current terminology scholars would refer to as a therianthrope, to the right of, and apparently turned towards, this scene (Fig. 10).

This figure is tall and robust, and its body is angled diagonally in relation to an inferred horizontal plane of representation orienting most other figures across the panel, as if floating or flying. An oblique vertical perspective emphasises the breadth of its shoulders and the corpulence of its body. It is smudged and obscured by scratch marks, particularly across the middle. The lower half of the body looks human, with two legs parallel to one another; the arms are inverted in relation to each other, the right arm bent out and up and the left arm out and down. The figure's head is antelope- or horse-like. Immediately up and to the right, partly overlapping, is a small frontally depicted human figure standing with legs apart and arms stretched out to the side in an almost spread-eagled posture, holding a knobbed stick in one hand. To the right, a running figure holds a

bow and arrow aimed towards the left. This is the only place at either site where we see a bow and arrow, a classic feature of 'Bushman' art, perhaps alluding to earlier times. Below are a number of eland and indeterminate antelope with strange horns, sometimes bent at sharp angles; one of these may be the 'quadruped with cattle horns' noted by Jolly (2024: 20).

The therianthrope creature brings to mind a well-known painted panel at Beersheba, in the Underberg district of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, with a battle scene depicting men on horseback firing at each other, and a therianthrope placed as if sitting off to the side but facing the scene. This figure has been interpreted as a shaman, in the margins of the conflict, as if overseeing or influencing (Vinnicombe 1976: 25; Campbell 1986, 1987; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989: 147; Sinclair-Thomson 2020: 8–9, among others). Could this 'destroyer' be a similar presence, working on the side of one of the groups?

Battle scene

To the left of the therianthrope is the battle scene (Fig. 11), where two groups are portrayed facing each other in an orderly row formation, distinguished from one another by their material culture. Reading from the left, a single figure wearing a uniform on horseback facing right, is holding up a stick with a feather-like tuft at the top end—Soai waving the white flag (How 1962: 41). Ahead of this figure (towards the right), are four troops, depicted one above the other in a vertical stack, cloaked with animal skins and wielding fire-arms. Ahead of them are two figures without cloaks carrying sticks. One of these figures has a round protrusion on the front of his head, possibly an animal bladder such as seen in some of the later art, argued

to have been made by mixed groups of Bushmen and others, such as the Amatola (Challis 2008). Several others across this group have single feather-like extensions above their heads.

Those on the opposite side of the conflict—Mphaki's troops—carry notably fewer firearms. Of the four fighters, depicted one above the other in a vertical stack facing left, one holds a gun, while the others hold different shields—the distinctive triangular Sotho and oval Nguni types, as well as a knobkerrie (also Nguni). The lowest figure appears to be planting a spear into the groin or stomach of a body, depicted upside-down. Behind them are four horses, two with riders, one with a hat and the other with a knobbed stick. There is no obvious 'leader' on this side, and no indication in How's account of which figure represents Mphaki. The generally 'mixed' material culture may signal a Phuthi influence in addition to the turbulent entanglements of the colonial frontier.

The battle theme is absent from the lower site.

On authorship

All of the visual parallels we have sketched out between the Residency and the rock shelter, even with its narrower range of painted subject matter, make a strong case for the latter to have been produced by the same hand, that of Masitise. The use of a snake as a framing device and the hybrid baboon-like figures seem to us highly idiosyncratic, as well as more generally the almost caricatural depictive style within a particular manner of blending 'real' and 'non-real' elements.

We acknowledge that the task of establishing individual authorship is complex, and it is possible that the similarities of style and subject matter that we have identified could also arise, for example, from inter-generational learning, collaborative art-making, and the influence of convention, processes that would also need to be understood within a specific historical and cultural situation (Solomon 1996). It might be possible to examine such questions through Masitise's putative body of work, especially if further related sites could be identified, which could potentially contribute a localised perspective to the understanding of 'how the tradition of San image-making changed with colonialism, beyond the incorporation of new images, the adoption of a different palette and technological change (namely, the use of paints lacking efficient binding media)' (Solomon 1996: 294). For now, the



Figure 11. The 'battle scene', photographed at the Residency (top) (Photograph by Anton Coetzee 2019) and redrawn by James Walton in 1961 (bottom) (How 1962: frontispiece/endpaper).

analysis we conduct in this paper enables us to imagine something of Masitise's biography as a context for understanding more of his practice as an artist.

The life of Masitise

Little is recorded about Masitise beyond Marion How's statement that he was Phuthi and that, in 1932, he offered to paint 'Bushman paintings' on the wall of the Residency.

The Baphuthi are a community with a farming economy and a history of close contact with Bushman groups. IsiPhuthi is characterised as an Nguni language with heavy Sotho influence, but it has been proposed that the click consonants may have been borrowed from Bushman languages (Mzamane 1948: 11). Chiefs such as Moorosi (Phuthi) and Moshoeshoe (Basotho) were known to have Bushman wives and offered protection to some Bushman groups (Dornan 1909: 14–15). Rev. Samuel Shaw Dornan (1909: 445) noted that some Baphuthi were said to have Bushman ancestry, spoke a little of the language, and even painted, though he dismissed their work as 'vastly inferior'. Another account records the statement, 'we

Phuthi people are related to the Bushmen' (Mzamane 1948: 12). From Cawston's description of the painter as 'old', we can speculate that Masitise may have been sixty or more when he worked for How. If so, he would have lived through a period of profound change: the defeat of Moorosi in 1879, the collapse of independent Bushman lifeways, and the increasing presence of Europeans in the Quthing region.

In her book, How judged his testimony to be 'less convincing' in terms of its relevance for Bushman art than Mapote's (How 1962: 44, 46) and in her unpublished manuscript she writes that some of his statements are 'exaggerations' and do not 'ring true' (King et al. 2021: 146). Yet, a close study of Masitise's work suggests that he was at least as knowledgeable, and perhaps more experienced, than his counterpart (Jolly 2024: 21–22). It is not clear how long Masitise was left to paint while How 'attended to other things' (1962: 41), but the account gives the impression that it was not long and yet in that time he managed to paint over 30 figures. This in itself indicates an experienced artist who had painted before. Another indication of his familiarity with 'Bushman' rock art in particular, as Jolly points out, is that Masitise's art incorporated more ambiguous and metaphorical elements, whereas Mapote worked in a more strictly 'realistic' idiom (2024: 19).

Jolly (2024: 20) suggests that Masitise's imagery, and particularly the 'composite imaginary beings', could still be derived from the hallucinatory visions experienced by shamans, while conceding that the trance dance (and associated visual imaginaries) is unlikely to have been practised at this late stage, or even persist in people's memories—he suggests instead that the beings derive from southeastern Bushman mythology, passed down through the generations. Alternatively, he suggests, Bushman or closely adjacent people and their lifeways may have persisted for longer than previously thought, and at least into the 1930s, in remote areas, which seems to be corroborated by numerous independent reports. Beyond the similarity of subject matter and depictive style, the painted compositions at these two sites seem compatible with a single aesthetic vision. The varied motifs within compositions that do not resolve into a single 'narrative' fit within the broad spectrum of art ascribed to the 'Bushman' but are inflected in specific ways that we see as attributable to Masitise.

We know next to nothing about the context in which the rock shelter paintings were made, other than a possible date of 1929. Why would Masitise have chosen to paint in a rock shelter at that time? Might he have been inspired by the interest in Bushman painting of the Frobenius expedition, which copied nearby sites that same year? Was it a personal act of continuation, echoing Bushman practices of working in secluded places? The act of painting here seems more private, perhaps undertaken for himself or his immediate community.

By contrast, the Residency wall paintings of 1932 were made in a highly visible, public setting, with the permission of Marion How, wife of the District Commissioner. Here Masitise repeated familiar themes—eland, horses, horsemen, and hybrid creatures—but introduced something new: a narrative battle scene featuring two historical Bushman leaders, Soai and Mphaki, with their followers. In this work, Masitise weaves together the real and the non-real into compositions of spiritual and metaphorical meaning, together with more explicitly 'historical' depictions in the sense of the representation of specific, named figures and events.

Soai is a key figure in many stories of the last Bushman inhabitants of the Maloti-Drakensberg, and the more prominent of the two in historical accounts, yet few secure biographical details exist (see Mitchell 2010 for a discussion of what is known). Soai's name is attached to several rock shelters, including the famous site of Sehonghong in the upper Senqu valley where he is thought to have been killed in 1871 by a party likely led by a grandson of Moshoeshoe (Mitchell 2010: 157). A recurrent feature of the accounts are Soai's close links to Moorosi and his Baphuthi, among whom he is thought to have found a wife or lover (Damane and Sanders 1974: 182 cited in Jolly 1994: 68 and Mitchell 2010: 156; Aerni-Flessner et al. 2024: 45).

Less is known about Mphaki (Dornan 1909: 439; How 1962: 41). According to Rapiti Raisa, Mphaki was 'Sotho, but raised by the San' (Jolly 1994: 63). The name Mphaki, a 'Sesuto appellation' according to Dornan (1909: 439), also appears in a 'genealogy of the Mapolane' (Ellenberger and MacGregor 1912: 340–343), who figured among the earliest farming communities to settle in the western and southern foothills of the Maloti, an Nguni group of AmaZizi origins that became Sotho-ised, with links also to the Baphuthi. Moorosi, despite his close alliances with some Bushman chiefs, was reportedly raiding Bushman groups higher up the Senqu valley around 1850 (Jolly 1994: 62). It may have been in this context that Mphaki and his community were chased from their cave near Quthing in retaliation for cattle theft by a relation of Moorosi (Dornan 1909: 439; How 1962: 19). According to Dornan (1909: 439), Mphaki's band split into two following this event in the late 1830s, one of which was headed by Melikane, Soai's father in this account, suggesting a close community link between Soai and Mphaki, and that Mphaki may have been senior to Soai.

These faint biographies sketch a possible scenario where Soai and Mphaki operated in different but overlapping times, and in which their paths would certainly have crossed, as prominent members of a dwindling number of independent 'Bushman' communities in the broader region (Blundell 2004). Identities and allegiances were complex and shifting, and Bushman communities were under ever greater pressure from all other groups who were occupying

more and more land, and moving further up into the highlands. Soai appears to have been more powerful, bolstered by his links to Moorosi. After Soai's death, most surviving members of his group went to live in the Quthing area under Moorosi's protection (Ellenberger 1953: 247, cited by Jolly 1994: 69). We don't know what became of Mphaki, and we haven't come across any other mention of conflict between Soai and Mphaki, but perhaps this could be answerable through further archival research.

In Masitise's painting, Soai appears to be cast in a more heroic light because he is depicted as a specific, individuated figure at a small distance from the front-line of the battle with unique attributes, including a British uniform, spoils from his recent victory over a party of British soldiers. Perhaps Masitise was a former follower of, or related in some way to, Soai.

In viewing the two sites as part of a single artist's body of work, Masitise emerges as an artist of the 'in-between', negotiating multiple worlds: rooted in Phuthi society yet informed by Bushman traditions and possibly celebrating his own links to Soai, his art blending realism with ambiguity, and responding to new audiences and expectations. Though How gave him little recognition in her writings, Jolly (2024: 22) sees Masitise as 'one of the few people connected to the southeastern San to have made rock paintings well into the twentieth century' with an 'even stronger connection to the painting tradition than Mapote', and further, the painter of the 'only surviving rock painting of a non-realistic being', explained in words by himself. To this, we add that by painting a 'portrait' of Soai, he has also left us with the only 'Bushman' rock painting of a named historical figure.

His paintings provide a rare glimpse into the entangled worlds of early twentieth-century Quthing—a time in which hunter-gatherer lifeways had largely come to an end, but Bushman imagery and stories continued to resonate in the memories and expressions of neighbouring, related and descendant communities.

Conclusion

Although we will never know Masitise's full life story, and the possible photo of him is highly speculative, he left his mark—and, unusually, his name—through two closely contemporaneous acts of image-making. His paintings offer a rare glimpse into the complex social relations of his time. Too often, groups such as the Bushmen, Basotho, and Baphuthi are imagined as discrete and separate, yet in reality, there was far greater fluidity and interaction between them. Masitise's decision to paint not only 'Bushman' images for How on the Residency wall, but also in the more private setting of a nearby shelter, suggests that his work was not simply a way to earn money—though it is possible that How paid him in some way (Mapote was given a new pair of boots for his work; How 1962: 39). Rather, his painting appears to have been a broader practice of deeper personal signifi-

cance. The imagery he chose to create in both places spoke to his beliefs and to a world in which identities and traditions overlapped, blended, and were continually being renegotiated. Inspired by Bushman traditions and shaped by new social contexts, Masitise positioned himself as an artist whose work speaks to the interplay of different cultural groups and the transitional spaces created by these interactions. The body of knowledge left by Masitise (with Lindiso and Mapote, and possibly others), approached within their particular historical and cultural contexts, takes a place alongside the two explanations of Bushman art conventionally considered to carry 'emic' insights (Orpen 1874; Bleek 1874).

Masitise's act of painting at the Residency can also be read as a powerful political statement, in particular in his depiction of Soai placed on the wall of an official colonial government building. By volunteering to paint 'Bushman paintings' and making the choice to portray a battle between two specific Bushman leaders, that if it were an actual event would have taken place some 60+ years before, Masitise manages to convey the multiple tensions in Basutoland in the past and lingering in the present. The two opposing forces are uneven. Although Soai's group is smaller, his followers are all shown with firearms, while Mphaki's fighters have only one, perhaps alluding to asymmetrical access to weapons and local power relations. The differences in material culture between the two groups are also informative. Soai's combatants are relatively uniform in dress and the way they are armed, while those on Mphaki's side show a mix of weapons, suggesting a more 'mixed' group of people. Could this battle also reference tensions between the Baphuthi and the Basotho? Soai, historically aligned with Moorosi's Baphuthi, is shown commanding a smaller but better armed force against a numerically larger force. In a time when the Bushmen no longer lived in independent communities and were not perceived as a threat by either the Basotho or the colonial government, depicting a battle between two of their leaders could have offered a way to articulate political tensions in a manner that would not draw direct attention. Perhaps, rather than a neutral, hopeless or terminal gesture, this artwork can be seen as a carefully crafted statement that Masitise knew would remain publicly visible for some time into the future, constituting a provocative alternative vision of local history.

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