

TECHNOLOGIES OF REPRESENTATION

**DRAWING CREEPY PLACES: REPRESENTING LIMINAL RITUAL SPACES OF
KURUMAN, SOUTH AFRICA**

DR SECHABA MAAPE

**SAFE SPACE: WAR, RISK, AND GLOBAL HAZARDS
IN HENRY DREYFUSS' HANDBOOKS.**

DIANA CRISTOBAL OLAVE

Dr. Sechaba Maape is an architect and senior lecturer at the Wits School of Architecture and Planning. After completing his Masters in Architecture (Professional) he earned a PhD in architecture. His thesis explored people/place relationships, and ritual and climate change adaptation among pre-historic indigenous communities in Kuruman in the Northern Cape Province. His research enquiries led him to engage archaeological and paleontological material in depth. In his research, Dr Maape has always investigated the manner in which people survived change and variability, especially environmental change. His main finding—that rituals played a significant role in fostering psychological, social, and thus ecological adaptation—directed him to engage modern ritual spaces in South Africa towards deepening our understanding of the role of these practices and places in modern society.



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ABSTRACT

Ritual sites have been studied and discussed by scholars in the disciplines of architecture, anthropology and archaeology. Within these disciplines, these spaces are typically represented using Western objective and scientific methods of representation including cut plans and sections, as well as laser scans. Using three ritual sites in the Kuruman area of South Africa as case studies, the paper argues that modern methods of representation have the potential to strip away the value of these spaces for those who use them for their spiritual and ritual purposes. The paper explores forms of representations that engage ritual spaces towards revealing their value for local practitioners who still use them, as well as humanity at large. The paper concludes by discussing the need for better understanding these spaces in relation to our contemporary global crises, and the role of representation of these spaces towards deeper forms of habitation.

INTRODUCTION

Kuruman is my home, and my people have inhabited its landscape for thousands of years.¹ It's beautiful, large, and wild landscapes have always held meaning for us, and continue to do so even today. It is characterised by great flat savanna bush veld, gentle hills, and a towering, massive, crisp blue sky. It is a magical landscape, sometimes harsh with heat, and in the wet seasons, precious water collects in pans and water holes, and falls down the ridges of rock shelters and caves. Water, earth, sky, rock shelters, and caves characterise the vitality and flux of this animated landscape.² This vitality of life was always sensed by my people, and through engaging particular spaces in the landscape we found ways of connecting. In this way we could be sensitive to the changes in our landscape, adapt, and make meaning.³

Today, contemporary society faces numerous complex challenges like issues of environmental collapse. Through studying my people in the past and in the present, I have discovered that we have faced environmental crises before, and ritual practices were part of the way we responded and built resilience. These practices mobilize brain chemicals in ways that makes rituals the methods of creating psychological adaptation and inducing dissolution of past behaviour as a response to environmental flux.⁴ Ritual spaces are one of the tools that aid in the dissolution of the self.⁵ Such spaces have been studied by researchers and scholars, and the methods of analysis and mapping of these spaces and their subsequent representations, particularly in fields like architecture and archaeology, have primarily taken the form of objective methods and techniques.⁶ The result of these forms of representation, other than being useful research resources, is that they do not always include other forms of value of these spaces, particularly their value as tools of dissolution.

I will be discussing three ritual sites in the Kuruman area of the Northern Cape in South Africa which have gained considerable attention from researchers, one having been scanned using 3D laser scanning.⁷ My argument is that these scans fail to engage the still-existing cultural value of the sites. I will be discussing field work findings that demonstrate the spatial and

correlative ritual value of such spaces, particularly their link to emotionally charged narratives, and argue through an interpretation of ritual framed within cultural neurophenomenology that through these emotionally charged narratives, along with the form, quality, and locations of these spaces, the sites are rendered conducive for ritual purposes. In addition I will present exploratory drawings that are ways of engaging these sites and highlight their cultural value.

RITUALS—THE CULTURAL NEUROPHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Cultural neurophenomenology is the study of cultural practices, such as rituals, using a collation of data sets from anthropology, neuroscience, and the phenomenological traditions.⁸ It claims that the cross-cultural experiences cited in anthropological texts are a reflection of our embodied selves with a particular brain, while at the same time not reducing such experiences to mere brain activity.⁹ Neuroscientist Walter Freeman argues that rituals are in fact processes by which people adapt to new circumstances through the mobilisation of brain chemicals that facilitate dissolution and psychological change:

The biological techniques of inducing dissolution are well known. *Individuals separate themselves or are isolated from their normal social surroundings and support systems.* They engage in or are subject to severe exercises ... and the induction of powerful emotional states of love, hate, *fear* or anger [my emphasis].¹⁰

This description of ritual, particularly life crisis rituals, corroborates with many anthropological interpretations.¹¹ A key component of the process is the mobilisation of specific brain chemicals through the induction of various physiological and psychological states as in rhythmic clapping, chanting, and singing. Neuroscientists, through a number of studies and using various methods, conclude that these cultural practices, with the aid of the mobilisation of brain chemicals such as oxytocin, have the ability to do two things: create new bonds between people, and re-frame one's perceptions of the world and themselves.¹²

This process reframes one's boundaries of self, as in the assimilation of the self and a particular belief, a group, a set of circumstances, or a place. Previously held beliefs and biases become recalibrated, in many instances through an ordeal—what is commonly and unfortunately known as “brain washing”—and room is made for new sets of beliefs and perceptions. These rituals require specific conditions, and as seen in the above quote, one such condition is spatial. Being isolated, and in other cases being secluded in a dark, quiet cave or a remote forest tied to lifelong fearful myths, becomes the ideal set of circumstances for the induction of the appropriate psychological states, allowing for the possibility of change to occur.

Change and transformation are at the heart of these practices. This may be antithetical to most Western cultural norms and practices, especially the coercion of change in an individual's behaviour through fear, but many indigenous cultures across the world appreciate and continue to practice such rituals and understand them to be wisdom. This is no different in the context of my home; understanding fear as a way of reframing one's behaviour is intimately tied to respect and a process of maturation that sets up a human to ultimately and appropriately relate with life, and especially the natural world, with reverence.

This interpretation of ritual processes is crucial for my argument, and as we will see below, is demonstrable in cultural, artistic and spatial practices of indigenous communities in the context of Kuruman.

RITUALS SITES IN THE KURUMAN AREA

A dominant belief in Kuruman is that of a mythical snake; from a very young age, people in the community are told stories about this snake. It is known for causing numerous environmental calamities in the community, natural forces, lost people, and other tragic situations. It is strange in form and character, travels along underwater rivers and channels, is known to shape-shift and trick its victims, and is especially associated with “taking” people to specific places, especially water bodies and caves.¹³ Caves and water bodies in general, and specific caves known to be the dwelling place of the snake, are seen by some in the community as frightening, to such an extent that people sometimes

avoid crossing a stream, or entering a particular space.

Logobate Cave

These spaces, as much as they are dreaded, are precisely where teenage initiation and other ritual practices are performed. Logobate Cave, located on the fringe of Logobate village just north of Kuruman town, is a site for teenage female initiation and other forms of supplication. The cave is separated from the village by a river. The river is associated with the death of a young pair of twins who were taken by the snake, drowned and killed in the river, a narrative known throughout Logobate and told to many in their formative years. Having reached puberty, girls begin their secret initiation rites at a dwelling in the village, and are then taken to a proximal distance from the cave where they continue their ritual practices, including singing and dancing. The ritual requires the young girls to cross the river to the cave.¹⁴ In this way, crossing a deeply embedded form of psychological priming that has been successfully instilled through conditioning, in the form of the narratives of the snake, makes the river and the cave a mythical boundary that needs to be crossed, thus allowing the initiate to successfully survive the snake as a mark of being an adult.

Ga-Mohana rock shelters

Another ritual site is Ga-Mohana rock shelters, located at a remote hill away from the nearest settlement. There are no signs or directions indicating the exact location of the ritual sites. They are made deliberately obscure and difficult to find. They are also associated with the snake, and similar to Logobate, are the place where the snake takes its victims once it has snatched them. There are two rock shelters: a main rock shelter where there are visible signs of ritual practice, and a second rock shelter that has rock paintings likely linked to early herder/hunter-gatherers, as well as rock gongs and rock engravings on large dolomitic rocks that all have evidence of contemporary ritual activity.¹⁵

The rock engravings have snake-like motifs on them, and are located specifically at an area of the site that collects water during wet seasons. This site has also been associated with male initiation rituals. Similar

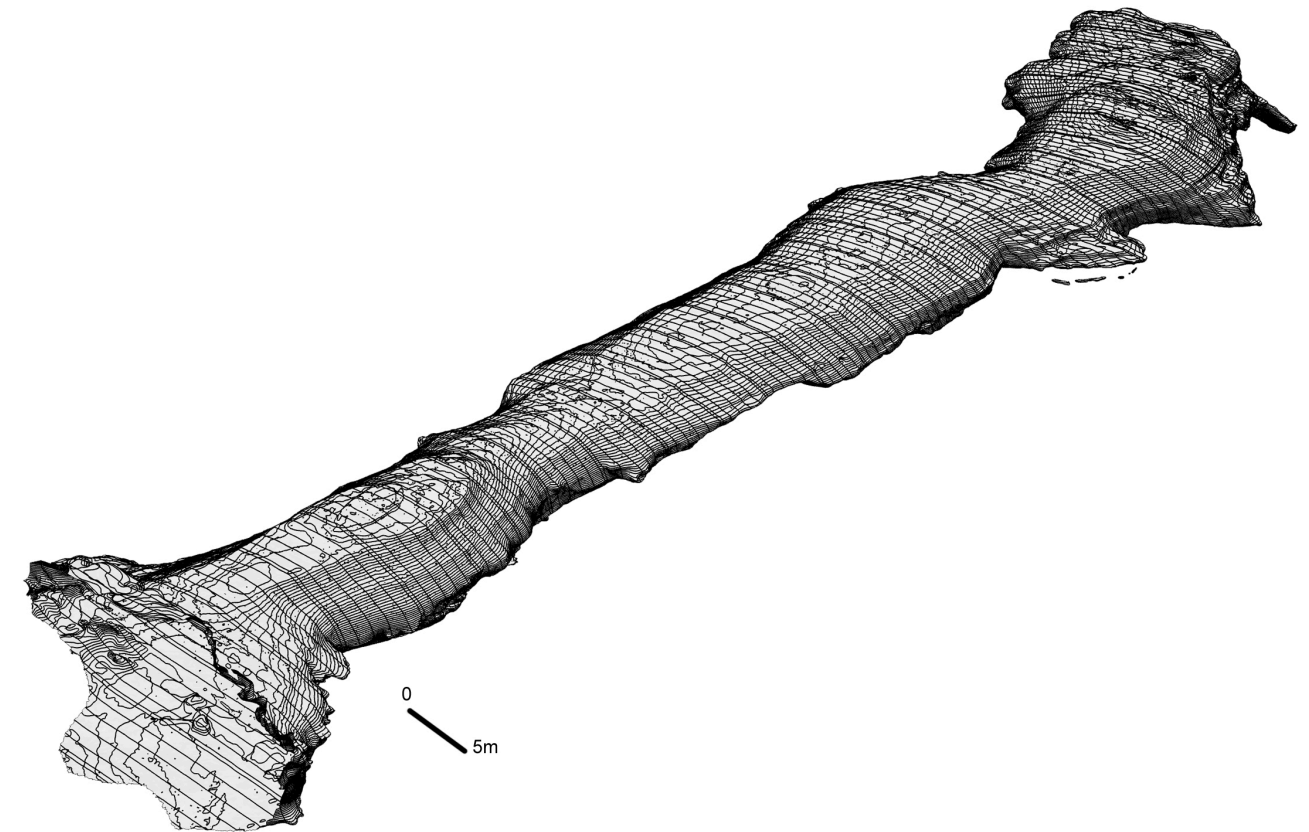


Figure 1: 3D scan: Zamani Project, Wonderwerk Cave. Courtesy: School of Architecture, planning and geomatics UCT, 2009

to Logobate, initiates also have to cross mythical boundaries associated with the snake, such as water bodies or entrances into the actual rock shelter. Again, this means that initiates are required to face a life-long, established fear as part of their ritual process. Recently Ga-Mohana has become a research site. There have been significant archaeological and Palaeolithic findings at both the small and large shelters.¹⁶ This has raised concerns regarding the manner in which both value the space, namely how ritual and research value will co-exist.

CHALLENGE OF REPRESENTING RITUAL SPACES

Wonderwerk Cave

These types of concerns are most prevalent in the third case, the Wonderwerk Cave. This particular cave has been extensively researched, primarily due

to its archaeological value.¹⁷ Although there has been some acknowledgement of its ritual value, very little has been explored in this regard. The cave is located about 40km away from Kuruman, near a water hole. It is a deep cave, about 140m horizontally into a hill. A consequence of its form is that the cave, particularly at the back, is extremely dark and quiet. Another key feature of the cave is its rock paintings, highly enigmatic images, some of known creatures and others of abstract shapes all layered and in some places fading and vague. Both the cave and the sinkhole are known to be places where the snake resides.¹⁸ One story about the snake in relation to this particular cave is that once having “taken” its victims, it transports them to Chicago and engages them in endless sinning, then brings the person back so that they subsequently die and spend eternity in hell.¹⁹ Therefore, albeit minimal, there are still associations of cultural value with the space.

This site was scanned in 2009 using “3D laser survey combined with conventional survey, photogrammetry and 3D modelling.”²⁰ (Figure1) The project of scanning the cave was primarily focused on the “most important components of the site” and the scan was seen as an “integral part of the ongoing research.”²¹ However, there is no evidence in the method pointing to an appreciation of the ritual value of the site, perhaps through the inclusion of local ritual practitioners and following particular cultural protocols in the methodology, or even the subsequent representation. For instance, the scans expose the entire cave and represent it as an empty space.²² Given the discussion above regarding the presence of the snake at this site, presenting the site as an empty space with no evidence of the snake means that those who depend on the fear of the space as part of the ritual process are presented with an impotent site. The location and structure of the cave is also not concealed, which may undermine its potency as a mysterious and frightening space.

The snake is known to be able to access this cave and all the other caves in the area through a series of underground tunnels, which is perhaps how it could transport its victim to Chicago to sin. In the 3D scanned representation, the cave merely ends, which is of course what in fact happens, but in exposing this, the representation undermines its mythical potential. Finally, and most importantly, the cave is a naturally and extremely dark, quiet space. For anyone potentially visiting the cave for its ritual qualities, this darkness and quietude would be invaluable, because it is in the darkness where the snake resides. The darkness makes the existence of the snake a possibility because one cannot see or affirm the snake’s presence. However, in the laser scan, the cave is completely illuminated (which is similar to how the cave is illuminated by large flood lights during tours), a representation of the cave that totally negates its ritual and experiential quality.

Therefore, the laser scan of the Wonderwerk Cave presents a challenge and exposes the preconceptions of what is of value for both the researchers scanning the cave and those engaged in the ongoing archaeological research. The exposing of the cave, and the total survey of it, are reminiscent of the colonial and enlightenment project of “discovery” and conquest.²³ In this way, the cave scans have revealed and exposed the so-called

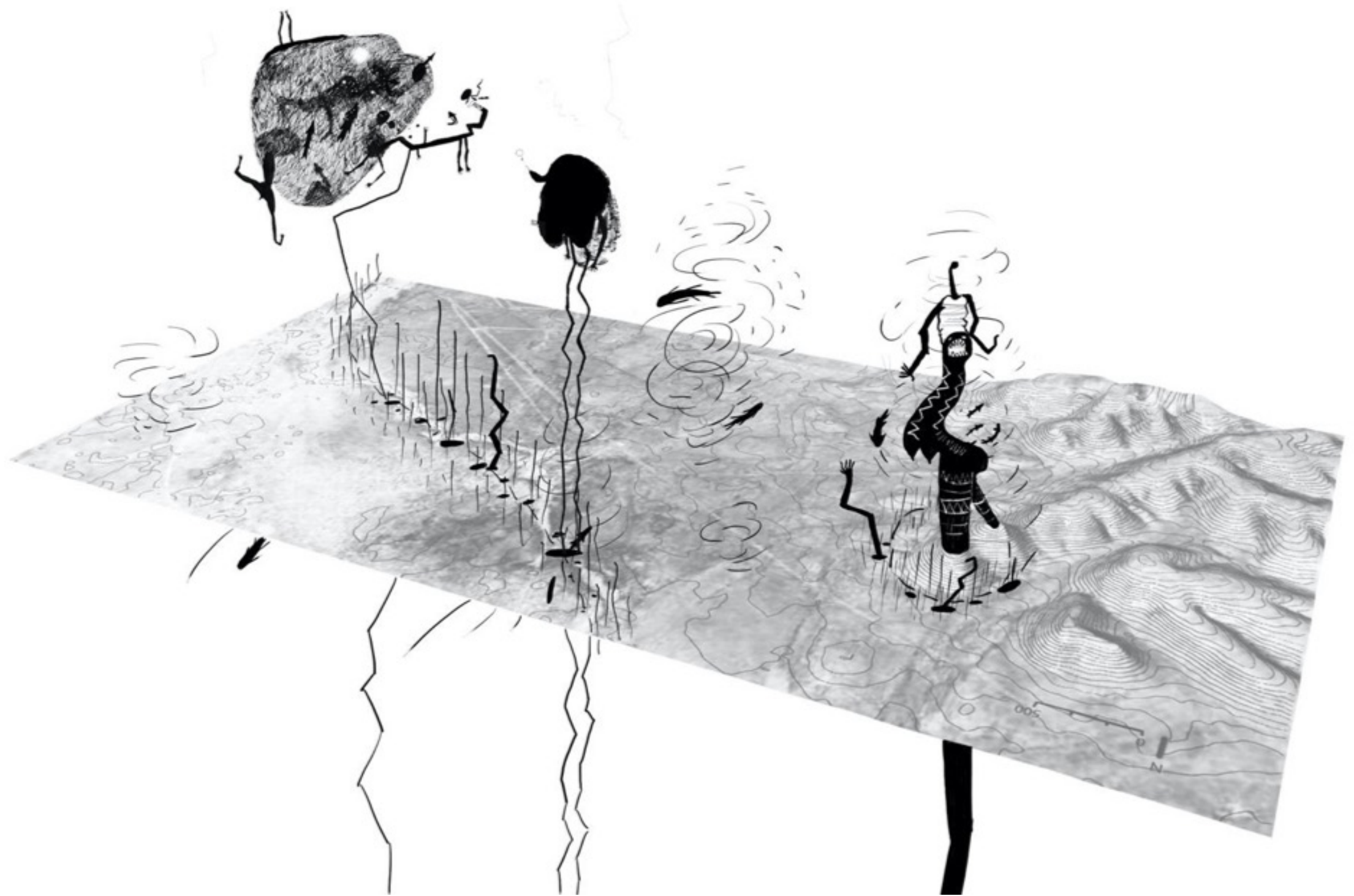


Figure 2: Mythological rendering of Kuruman. Courtesy: Drawing by author, 2020

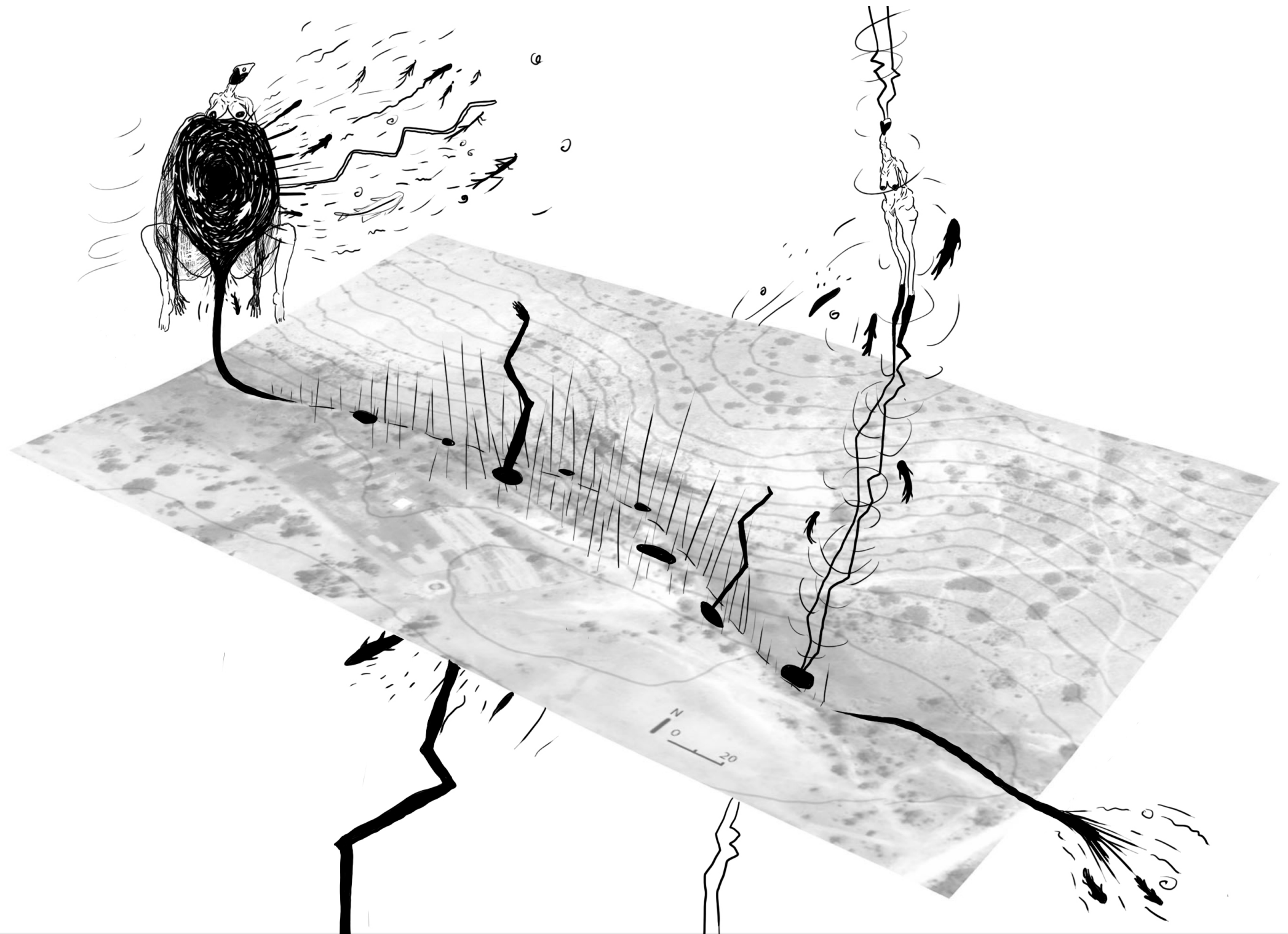


Figure 3: Mythological rendering of Logobate ritual site. Courtesy: Drawing by author, 2020

objective truth about the cave, which seems to be the appropriate and valued manner of engaging the site, exposing many significant archaeological and paleontological findings. The uncovering or discovering of the cave merely exposes what is there, shining a light on the darkness of ignorance. However, the one very objective element of the cave, which is by far its most prevalent spatial quality—its darkness—has not been captured in the representations at all. This same darkness is indeed what makes the cave ambivalent, and thus allows for the possibility of the snake. The darkness and seclusion make the cave valuable for those using it for its ritual purposes, which is in stark contrast to the project of illuminating the cave.²⁴ Thus, the project of representing objectively the “true” form of the cave immediately conceals it, while on the other hand, the ambivalent shape-shifting snake is a much closer representation of the darkness, which thus ironically illuminates it.²⁵

RE-MYSTIFYING OR UN-DEMISTIFYING THE LANDSCAPE

Through an exploratory method of drawing, in which the landscape was rendered to include mythical representations of the snake, I have begun exploring possibilities of opening up avenues to entrench, in some cases, and reinstate in others, the cultural value of the various ritual sites in Kuruman. The method was to create drawings on 3D terrains of the actual ritual sites, both to re/mystify and make potent these spaces.

The base of the drawings, a toggled 3D terrain, was created using Google Sketchup. Various other software were explored, including 3D Photoshop, Rhino, Revit and AutoCAD. Most of this software is used for architectural design and representation, but none of them could adequately respond to the cultural need of including mythical elements within the landscape. The base drawings were overlaid with images of the snake and other mythical symbols derived from the narrative collected from fieldwork, as well as inspired by pre-colonial indigenous African art from the numerous Southern African ritual rock art sites, including those discussed above. In addition, the drawings were also derived from my own personal emotions linked to

my life experience, having been told since childhood about the snake. Although this was, to a degree, idiosyncratic and subjective, it also took into account the intersubjective, collective experience of the people of Kuruman. These drawings were hand-drawn using a stylus pen on a tablet, then collaging it using Photoshop software with the toggled 3D terrain base map.

The drawings therefore include the ambivalent and fluid snake, not as a mere metaphor but as a representation of a real being that influences and facilitates the potential for a response to mutability. At the same time, the drawings represent the nature of these sites for those who value them as frightening spaces, and attempt to capture their equally ambivalent, liminal quality because in fact, ontologically speaking, the living and vital landscape *is* the snake. (Figure 2, 3, 4)

CONCLUSION

The tragedy of the forms of representation of these spaces is that they conceal their true value. Rituals are fundamental in aiding the human psyche to adapt to a mutable and contingent world. Through various tools, including high levels of excitation induced by emotions such as fear or love, and the subsequent mobilisation of brain chemicals that create the potential for meaning-creation, the reconstruction or dissolution of the self, and unlearning, humans thus have the potential to adapt to change. In today's world more than ever before, it is no doubt a fundamental practice to be reacquainted with. ■

ENDNOTES

1. This is in reference to long-term hominin habitation in this context
2. As in related to an animistic worldview, the worldview of many of my people in Kuruman
3. Sechaba Maape, "Architecture for resilience: dialogues with place in the indigenous communities of Kuruman during the Holocene period" (PhD dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand Johannesburg, 2016)
4. Walter Freeman, *Societies of Brains: a study in the neuroscience of hate and love, Volume 2*. (New York: Psychology Press, 2014)
5. Thomas Barrie, *The Sacred in-between - The mediating roles of architecture*,

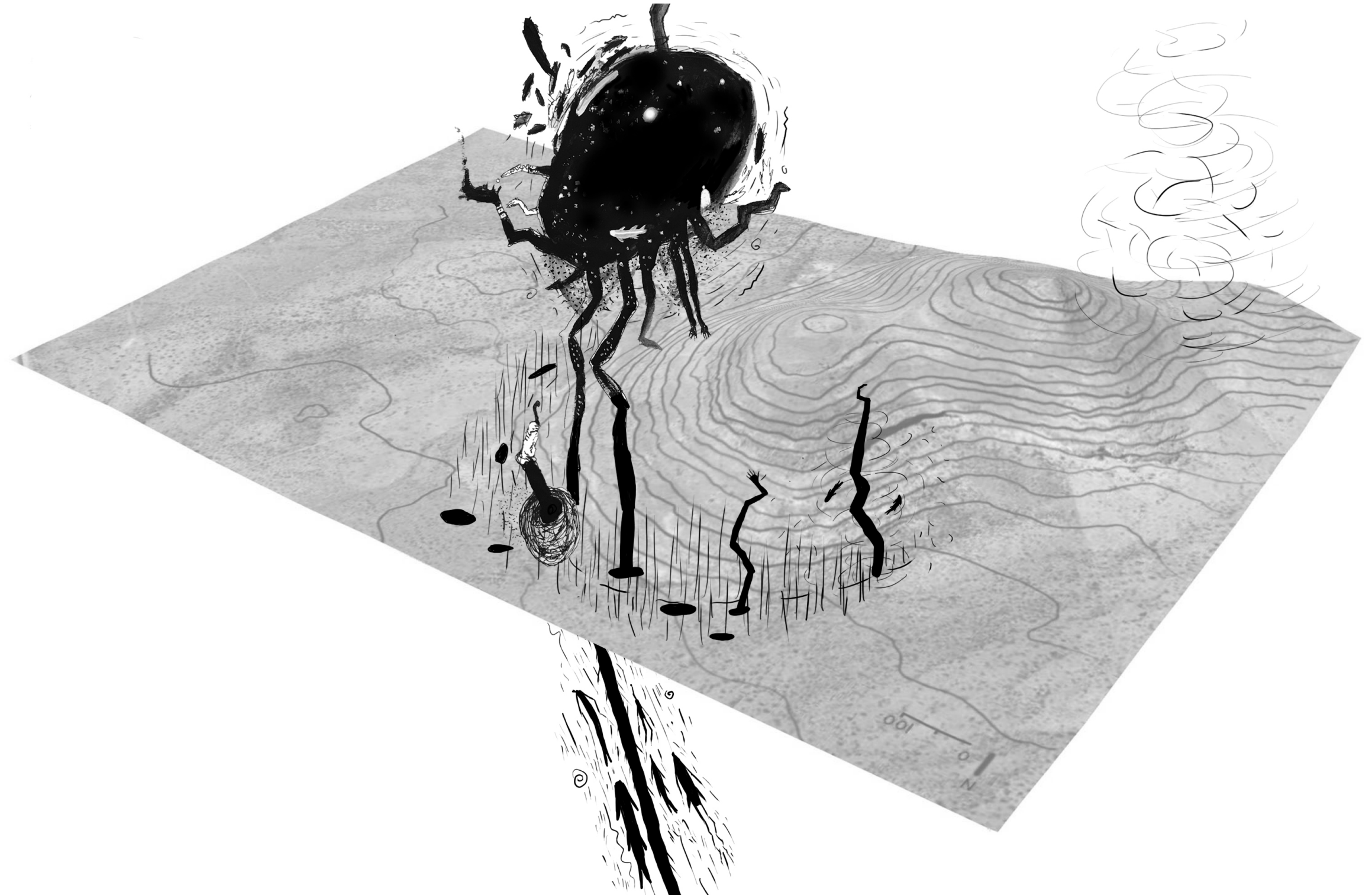


Figure 4: Mythological rendering of Ga-Mohana. Courtesy: Drawing by author, 2020

Volumne 1. (Abington: Routledge, 2010.)

6. Francis, Ching, Mark Jarzombek and Vikramaditya Prakash, *A Global History of Architecture, Volume 3.* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2017.)

7. Heinz Ruther et al. "Laser scanning for conservation and research of African cultural heritage sites: the case study of Wonderwerk Cave, South Africa." *Journal of Archaeological Science* 36 (September 2009) : 1848, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0305440309001344>

8. Jennifer Dornan, "Beyond Belief: Religious Experience, Ritual, and Cultural Neuro-phenomenology in the Interpretation of Past Religious Systems." *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 1, no.14 (April 2004): 28, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/cambridge-archaeological-journal/article/beyond-belief-religious-experience-ritual-and-cultural-neurophenomenology-in-the-interpretation-of-past-religious-systems/4F139D5DE377F8305FF86164AC618FD8>

9. Evan Thompson, "Life and mind: From autopoiesis to neurophenomenology. A tribute to Francisco Varela." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 3 (December 2004): 382 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/B:PHEN.0000048936.73339.dd>

10. Walter Freeman, "Neurodynamic models of the brain" *Nueropsychopharmacology* 28, (June 2003) 54-63, <https://www.nature.com/articles/1300147>

11. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969)

12. See Freeman above and d'Aquili, E. & Newberg, "The neuropsychological basis of religions, or why God won't go away". *Zygon* 33 (2) June 1998) 187-201, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/0591-2385.00140>

13. Ansie Hoff, "The Water Snake of the KhoeKhoen and /Xam" *South African Archaeological Society* 52, no.165 (June 1997): 21-37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3888973.pdf?seq=1>

14. Based on the secrecy of the initiation rituals in this context, it is not always possible, or perhaps even ethical, to extract exact details about the ritual processes. This has resulted in me making inferences based on information gathered in the field, observations, as well as reports of rites by other researchers in similar contexts.

15. For more detailed studies on archaeology at this site see, David Morris, L Pinto and J Louw "A dolomite rock gong at Ga-Mohana, a ritual site in the Kuruman Hills" *The Digging Stick* 35, no.2 (2018), 7-8. R Steel, "Kuruman rock engravings." *The Digging Stick* 5, no.1 (1988), 3-4, https://www.archaeology.org.za/sites/default/files/attachments/publications/2015/12/31/vol_5_no_1.pdf

16. Jayne Wilkins et al, "Fabric Analysis and Chronology at Ga-Mohana Hill North Rockshelter, Southern Kalahari Basin: Evidence for In Situ, Stratified Middle and Later Stone Age Deposits" *Journal of Paleo Archaeology* (March 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41982-020-00050-9>

17. A number of studies have been conducted related to the cave, see <http://www.wonderwerkcave.com/wonderwerk.html>

18. Michael Chazan and Liora Horwitz, "Milestones in the development of symbolic behaviour: a case study from Wonderwerk Cave, South Africa." *Debates in World Archaeology* 41, no.4 (December 2009): 521-539, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00438240903374506>

19. Michael Chazan, Personal conversation, December 2017

20. Heinz Ruther et al, "Laser scanning for conservation and research of African cultural heritage sites: the case study of Wonderwerk Cave, South Africa." *Journal*

of Archaeological Science 36 (September 2009) : 1848.

21. Ibid.

22. For images of 3D scans see <https://www.zamaniproject.org/site-south-africa-wonderwerk-cave.html>

23. Mary Nooter "Secrecy: African Art that conceals and reveals." *African Arts* 26, no.1 (January 1993): 55,56, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3337109?seq=1>

24. Ibid. 56

25. For more on the politics of hidden landscapes see Manuel Shvartzberg Carrió's paper "Theorizing Decolonial Modernity: Towards an Architectural History of Jurisdictional Technics" in this edition of *Dialectic*.

26. This may also be determined by my own skills or choice of software; however, one can be confident that the makers of these software packages did not consider culturally determined uses.