

NEWS

Obituary: Patricia Vinnicombe (1932-2003)

Nineteen sixty-seven was a turning point in southern African rock art research. For decades the paintings that grace the rock shelters of southern Africa had fascinated researchers and public alike. They seemed to speak directly of a lost way of life, a closeness to Nature. But nobody knew how to get a scientific hold on them. Rock art researchers, at that time largely avocationist, knew that there was more to the art than records of daily life, but they did not know how to persuade the professionals that the images were worthy of close attention. All that frustration was about to evaporate.

Patricia Vinnicombe had grown up on the farm at West Ilsley in the Underberg district of KwaZulu-Natal. There she learned to love the countryside and the ramparts of the Drakensberg that towered above it. By 1967, she had qualified at the University of the Witwatersrand as an occupational therapist, but she was drawn back to the San images in a ridge behind her parents' farmhouse and to the many others that filled the valleys leading up to the High Berg.

Early on, she began making copies of the paintings. To do this she developed a technique using transparent polythene and tempera mixed with a detergent. But she knew that more than copies was needed. Seeking advice, she wrote to the Abbé Henri Breuil, who replied encouragingly:

Don't come to me for advice, my girl. I am an old man now, and my methods and approach are outmoded. You are young, vigorous, and energetic. . . . Develop new ideas and techniques. . . . And when you have gathered the facts, then you can make a start on interpreting the material. At this stage, nobody knows more than you do (Vinnicombe 1976:xv).

Those new ideas and techniques were soon to come. Mr BD Malan of the Historical Monuments Commission, who was supervising Pat's work, suggested that she embark on a programme of numerical analysis, and Dr CA Schoute-Vanneck of the University of Natal guided her in working out a recording programme that would be amenable to punch-card analysis. This approach was to provide a foundation for analysing the images in all their complexity.



Pat Vinnicombe working in Sehonghong cave, Lesotho. The photograph was taken by Arthur Bowland in 1971 and is now in the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) collection. Reproduced here by permission of RARI.

Thus it was in 1967 that the editor of the *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, Mr Ray Inskip, was delighted to publish the system that Pat had devised. At last researchers felt that they had something they could get their teeth into, something that would, and indeed did, transform the study of southern African rock art. Also in 1967, Pat published in the *South African Journal of Science* some preliminary results of her work and suggested that numerical techniques would provide a means of comparing the art in different regions. In the end, she recorded an astounding total of 8,478 individual images. Only those who have laboured in remote shelters can form any idea of the magnitude of the task.

Earlier, in 1961, she had married the Cambridge archaeologist Patrick Carter, who was excavating in Lesotho and, below the escarpment, in KwaZulu-Natal. Resident in Cambridge, she was awarded a Research Fellowship at Clare Hall, where she continued to analyse the data she had collected in southern Africa. She had not got very far with her project when she realised that, if she wanted to make sense of the numbers she was working with, she would have to explore records of San history, life ways and belief. The first fruit of this aspect of her work appeared in 1972, another significant year. In *Antiquity*, she published a review of three new books on San rock art. In the same year, she published, in Africa, her aptly entitled article 'Myth, motive and selection in southern

African rock art'. It was here that she began to put together San ethnography and rock art. Her emphasis was on the eland antelope, which, as her numerical analyses confirmed, was the most frequently painted subject and the one on which the artists expended most care.

All her quantitative work and insights came together in her splendid 1976 book *People of the eland: rock paintings of the Drakensberg Bushmen as a reflection of their life and thought*. Appropriately, it was published by the University of Natal Press, and the University of Cambridge awarded her a doctoral degree. Today much sought after, this book with its splendid copies took rock art research onto a new level. Its impact on researchers and public alike cannot be overestimated.

Thereafter, Pat and her son Gavin moved to Australia where, understandably enough, she became interested in that continent's rock art. She co-operated with Aboriginal people in the study of their art. Principally, though, she was concerned with Aboriginal rights, land claims and welfare. She devoted herself fully and selflessly to the interests of the people. She died suddenly at a gathering of workers concerned with Aboriginal issues.

Many of the field copies she made in the 1950s and 1960s were never redrawn. Two years ago she undertook a joint project with the Rock Art Research

Institute (RARI) at the University of the Witwatersrand to complete the task begun so long ago. She was to return to RARI in May 2003 to continue the work. When she began this project, she unpacked breathtaking copies that she had not looked at since she originally made them in the mountains. It is hoped that the necessary financial backing will be found and that the considerable task of preparing the full-colour renderings will be completed: at least some of them should be published as a memorial to her.

This outline of Pat's enormous impact on southern African rock art research would be incomplete without some comment on her as a person. All who knew her felt privileged. Her youthful decision to train as an occupational therapist speaks of her concern for humanity. She was always warm hearted and generous. In the timbered cottage in Toft, near Cambridge, as at West Ilsley, she was a welcoming and delightful hostess. Walks through Cambridgeshire fields or Drakensberg valleys were always happy and stimulating occasions. Her sudden passing leaves a gap that cannot be filled. She will be remembered for a long time not only by her many friends but also by students and others as they turn to her publications. Above all, she will be remembered as the meticulous, scholarly and innovative author of *People of the eland*.

JD Lewis-Williams

Some of Patricia Vinnicombe's important publications

Vinnicombe, P 1967. Rock painting analysis. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 22:129-141.

Vinnicombe, P 1967. The recording of rock paintings-an interim report. *South African Journal of Science* 63:282-284.

Vinnicombe, P 1972. Motivation, motive and selection in southern African rock art. *Africa* 42:192-204.

Vinnicombe, P 1972. Motivation in African rock art. *Antiquity* 46:124-133.

Vinnicombe, P 1976. *People of the eland: rock paintings of the Drakensberg Bushmen as a reflection of their life and thought*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.

Vinnicombe, P 1986. Rock art, territory and land rights. In Bieseke, M with Gordon, R & Lee, R (eds) *The past and future of Kung ethnography: critical reflections and symbolic perspectives. Essays in honour of Lorna Marshall*. Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag:275-309.

Vinnicombe, P & Mowaljarlai, D 1995. That rock is a cloud: concepts associated with rock images in the Kimberley region of Australia. In Helskog, K & Olsen, B (eds) *Perceiving rock art: social and political perspectives*. Oslo: Novus Forlag:228-246.