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Shared Symbols, Different Symbolism? Blending Gender Categories in Northern Sotho Initiation Rock Art, Makgabeng, South Africa

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Abstract

This article explores the cultural significance of initiation rites among the Northern Sotho in South Africa, with a particular focus on the blending of symbolic gender motifs in rock art. Scholars on Northern Sotho rock art have associated initiation with specific genders. A close analysis of Northern Sotho rock art, together with a nuanced reading of ethnographic material on initiation rites, shows that a motif may be a mnemonic device in initiation but communicate a symbolism unique to either group. In my research, I observed that rock art sites have imagery that can be argued to be symbolic for both males and females, often juxtaposed or superimposed on the same panels. I refer to this as a form of blending of gender categories, possible during rites of transition. Thus I suggest that the symbolism for gender could resonate or change depending on who was using the site. Based on this, I suggest that such rock art sites should be categorized as initiation sites without specific gendered coding. This article contends that while gender boundaries exist in Northern Sotho culture, initiation rites often create a fluidity that challenges and probably blends these categories, as reflected in the rock art.

Keywords: rock art; initiation; gender blending; boundaries; Northern Sotho

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About the author

Catherine Namono is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Her focus is on understanding the rock art in eastern and southern Africa, in particular, and the world comparatively. She considers approaches that include ritual consciousness and perceptions of landscape of past and present communities towards meaning in the rock art. Catherine is passionate about heritage conservation and consumption, and about the inclusion of public/alternative local voices in these processes and production of knowledge.

Introduction

Northern Sotho speakers (hereafter the Northern Sotho) of the Ntu language group are found on the Makgabeng Plateau,[1] located between the Soutpansberg and Waterberg mountains in Limpopo Province, South Africa (see Figure 1). The Northern Sotho have communal rites of passage described by scholars as initiation 'schools' for males and females, undertaken whilst secluded from each other and from the rest of the community (Franz 1929; Krige and Krige [1943] 1980; Mönnig 1967; Hammond-Tooke 1981). This seclusion has led to a male-female dichotomy reading of the rock art sites (Namono and Eastwood 2005; Moodley 2008, 2017). Thus, these sites and associated imagery are separately described as male/female (boys/girls) initiation sites. I am cognisant that rock art images are symbolic; many are polysemous and hence their context (the rock face) focuses the associations of the symbols (Lewis-Williams 1981, 1998, 2001), allowing for alternative understandings of rock art. Several scholars have broadly examined gender relations in rock art, especially those linked to initiation rites and gendered images or symbols highlighting the polysemous character of rock art (e.g. Stevenson 2000; Parkington 2002; Hays-Gilpin 2004; Namono and Eastwood 2005; Smith 2005; Zubieta 2006; Eastwood and Eastwood 2006; Wadley 2013; Moodley 2017; Namono and van Schalkwyk 2020; Shipley 2020; Parkington and Paterson 2021; Green 2022; Zubieta 2022). Drawing on the polysemous character of rock art, I reflect on rock art sites described as male/female (boys/girls) and identified by the local Northern Sotho as being used during initiation rites, and rethink a possibility for shared symbols with varied symbolism in a context of ritual.

Northern Sotho rock art is, like other rock art traditions of Ntu language speakers in southern Africa, broadly linked to fertility, puberty, or 'coming-of-age' rites for males and females (Prins and Hall 1994, 172; Namono 2004, 98; Namono and Eastwood 2005; Zubieta 2006; Moodley 2008). In the Makgabeng, although the subject matter may hold specific symbolism and meaning for men and women, close observation at several sites indicates a co-occurrence of images argued to be relevant for either category. I have previously argued (Namono 2004; Namono and Eastwood 2005) that this rock art is linked to female initiation, based on the dominant subject matter and symbolism resonating therein for females. However, I also noted that there were a few images associated with male initiation on the same panel (Namono 2004, 98). This co-occurrence leads to the probability that males and females used the same sites at different times, and that male/female initiation symbols resonate for both, in different ways and with similar or different meanings.

I thus sought to investigate whether this co-occurrence of gender imagery, which I refer to as the blending of gender symbols or 'gender blending', practically describes this incidence at initiation sites on the Makgabeng Plateau. Thus, I tabulated all of the 355 Northern Sotho sites documented by Edward Eastwood and Jonas Tlouamma through field surveys in the Makgabeng (Eastwood and van Schalkwyk 2001; Eastwood 2002; Eastwood and van Schalkwyk 2002; Eastwood and Tlouamma 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). I listed depictions of imagery associated with female or male initiation and colonial intrusion. 52 percent of the sites have imagery attributed to male initiation, 30 percent linked to female initiation, and 18 percent linked to colonial intrusion. I examined the site panels for co-occurrences of gender imagery and established that 46 percent of the sites exhibit both female and male initiation on the same panel surfaces; 32 percent of the sites have images linked to all three themes at the same site; 20 percent have imagery associated with male initiation and colonial intrusion and 2 percent female initiation and colonial intrusion co-occurring at a site.

[1] 'Ntu' is preferred instead of 'Bantu' in contemporary decolonial South African linguistics.

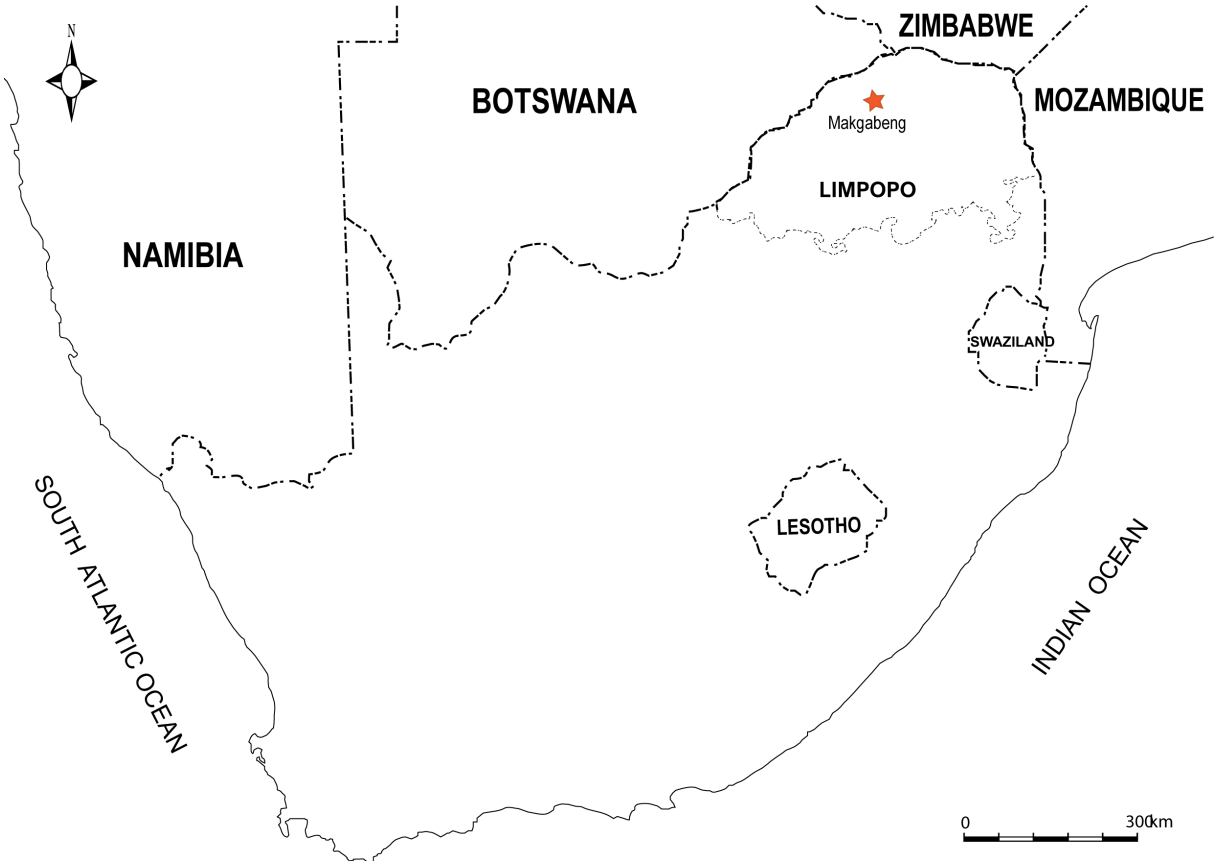

Figure 1: Map of South Africa locating the Makgabeng. © Catherine Namono

This implies that all Northern Sotho rock art sites have imagery associated with initiation. Subsequently, I focused on the sites with co-occurrences of imagery, or what I refer to as blended gender symbols. I also examined images at sites on the South African Rock Art digital archive (www.sarada.co.za) and scanned digital/printed photographs of some of these sites, documented by Edward Eastwood in 2005. These findings frame and expand the supposition of shared symbols and shared usage of sites, and challenge the gendering of initiation sites based on a male-female dichotomy.

Gender, a concept in this article and one of the many facets of one's identity, may be referred to as a person's self-identification and the identification of others with a specific category, based on culturally perceived sexual difference (Díaz-Andreu 2005). As a social construct, gender may encompass a wide range of characteristics or cultural values ascribed to sex categories (Hays-Gilpin and Whitley 1998, 3), but is not necessarily determined by biological sex. Gender can be affirmed, fluid, and variant across cultures and over time. According to Butler (1990), sex, like gender, is also socially constructed. Sexual identities are defined by choice of sexual partner (Díaz-Andreu 2005). In this article, I confine myself to the broad Northern Sotho male/female gender categories, aware that ritually sometimes, a male or female may be ascribed another gender category. For example, I recall a personal experience when my twin brother went through *imbalu* (male circumcision among the Gisu of Uganda); I was stood with and by him. If we were not twins, he would have endured the rite alone. Thus although I am a female culturally, I am ritually and symbolically

'male' – gender blended. It is highly probable that during Northern Sotho initiation, similar ritual gender blending may occur.

Therefore, it is also probable that whilst Northern Sotho initiation rites are performed separately in space and/or time for males and females, shared symbols depicted in the rock art may symbolize one thing to males, and the same or a very different thing to females. Shared symbols may have different meanings and symbolisms for each gender. Drawing on ethnographic accounts of initiation, in this article I will argue that, as part of initiation, male/female gender constructs are blurred, and sometimes blended, as part of the rites. This blending and blurring of subject matter is evident at rock art sites. I make specific reference to images known as *kôma*, geometric shapes and animal imagery in the rock art, to illustrate the blending of gender categories and the sharing of symbols.

Kôma – an institution

Kôma is a mystery to outsiders (Matobo et al. 2009). For the Northern Sotho, *kôma* is the sacred central mystery and institution of initiation (Boshier 1972, 206; Prins and Hall 1994, 171; Prins and Woodhouse 1996, 80; Smith 1997, 13; Hall and Smith 2000; Eastwood and van Schalkwyk 2001; Mitchell 2002, 342; Smith and van Schalkwyk 2002; Moodley 2004; Namono 2004; van Schalkwyk and Smith 2004). *Kôma* embodies the rites, secrets, mysteries, and symbols at the core of initiation. *Kôma* is an 'androgynous being', a ritual agent that transcends 'traditional' Northern Sotho social, cultural, and political boundaries; it is a fluid agent, like initiates, genderless in transition. Initiates are neither boys nor girls (a category they are leaving), nor men or women (a category they are becoming). Rather, they are in a liminal inferior state, and hence males are referred to as *maqai* in Sotho, *masobôrô* in Northern Sotho, *legwane*, *lepodi*, or *bojale* in Setswana, and *mathisa* in Southern Sotho (Mekoa and Moeketsi 2020, 15–16). Females are referred to as *mathumaša or masobôrô* in Northern Sotho (Franz 1929, 4; Mönnig 1967, 126). Turner (1967) has argued that in states of liminality, initiates are "betwixt and between" social statuses, removed from their usual roles and social structures, and are in a state of ambiguity. This is what *kôma* encapsulates.

Kôma – in the rock art

In rock art, scholars describe the *kôma* image in the following ways: a zoomorph or saurian motif, a merger between lizard and crocodile motifs (Prins and Hall 1994, 17); a schematized human associated with monitor lizards (Mitchell 2002, 342); rituals of puberty and rainmaking depicted in the rock art of many Ntu language speakers (Prins and Hall 1994; Smith 2006, 79); a 'spread-eagle' design, due to a close resemblance to stretched animal hide (Smith 1997, 13; Smith 2006, 80); or a crocodile and phallic symbol representing the concerns of men and a means through which initiates recognize and acknowledge transition to manhood (Moodley 2008, 2017). I prefer the term 'spread-eagle', as it suggests posture rather than a category of animal or human. These images are characterized by a central vertical line and two horizontal lines that cut across this vertical at the upper and lower ends (Figure 2). In some instances, the vertical line is elongated (Figure 2a) and in others it is extremely short (Figures 2e to 2g). These horizontal lines have extensions that form right angles with an upward or downward vertical line. These vertical and horizontal lines are of a relatively even thickness in almost all images. Variations also include three distal central extensions instead of one (Figure 2h,) dots or smudges around the spread-eagle shape, or dots forming the spread-eagle shape, referred to as *Komana mpedi* (Figure 2j). The frequency of these depictions in various ways in the rock art, at both male and female initiation sites, suggests that this image is significant to the Northern Sotho (Moodley 2004, 30; Namono 2004; Namono and Eastwood 2005; Moodley 2017).

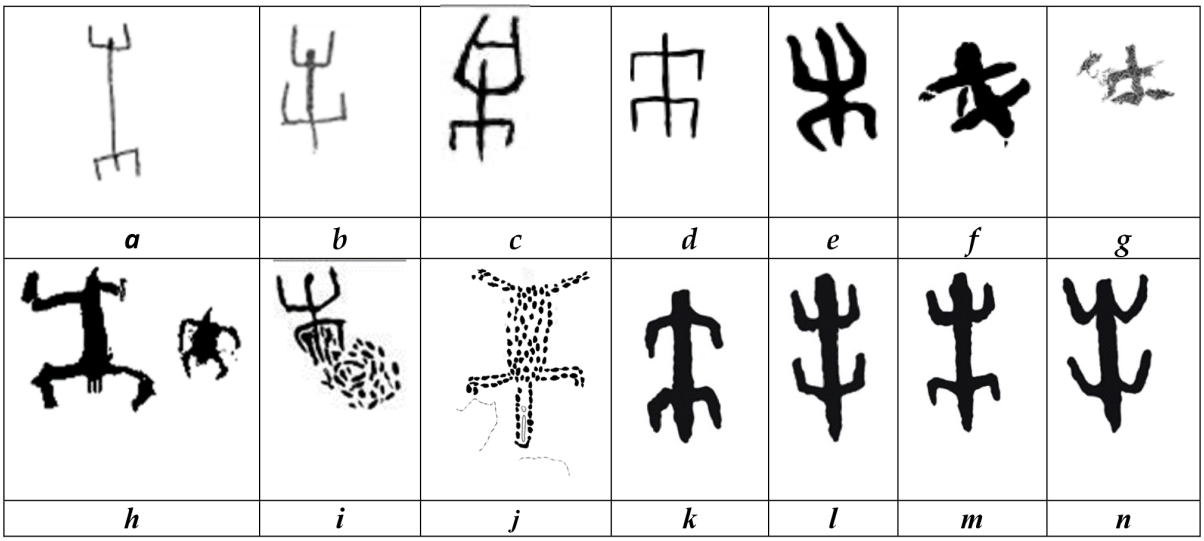

Figure 2: *Kôma* variations (Images a-j adopted from Namono 2004; k -n from Moodley 2017, Figure 4)

Figures 2a to 2j show the variations in *kôma* depictions in the rock art sites argued to be linked to female initiation (Namono 2004). Figures 2k to 2m show depictions argued to be linked to male initiation (Moodley 2017, Figure 4). Moodley (2017, 15) suggests that *kôma* is a communicative symbol that exists in an embodied non-material or spiritual presence or form. I contend that rock art depictions referred to as *kôma* should be described as 'ancestral beings' of initiation (Eastwood and Tlouamma 2003a; Namono 2004, 84).

Northern Sotho rock art

Northern Sotho rock art is predominantly finger-painted in a thick white, occasionally red, and black pigment. This colour triad is mainly associated with farmer rituals to do with ancestors and initiation. Researchers divide the rock art into two – an earlier and a later period. The subject matter of the rock art from the early period (argued to have been made prior to colonial intrusion) includes wild animals such as elephant, zebra, lion, rhino, kudu, hyena, hippo, and giraffe, and is argued to be linked to male initiation (Hall and Smith 2000; Eastwood and van Schalkwyk 2001; Smith and van Schalkwyk 2002; Moodley 2004; van Schalkwyk and Smith 2004) (Figure 3a). Y geometric forms and patterns, ethnographically argued to depict aprons (Namono 2004; Namono and Eastwood 2005; Eastwood and Eastwood 2006), are endowed with symbolism and secrets associated with female coming-of-age rites (Namono 2004, 98; Namono and Eastwood 2005) (Figure 3b). The late 19th and early 20th century rock art subject matter of colonial intrusion is often juxtaposed with these; or, where two images are placed close together, superpositioned, where at least part of an image lies over another to form a relative chronological sequence (Gunn et al. 2022, 1); or superimpositioned – where images are substantially (rather than partially) overlain by other subject matter (Lewis-Williams 1974, 101; Gunn et al. 2022, 2) aligned to initiation (Figure 3c). Such placement may be unintended, spontaneous, or deliberate, and overlain placements have been used to establish regional sequences and to support propositions of relative chronologies in rock art research. The Northern Sotho rock art is relatively rather than directly dated based on overlain imagery and subject matter.

Figure 3: Northern Sotho rock art

Figure 3a: Depictions of animals largely argued to be attributed to male initiation.

(Image: ©www.sarada.co.za RARI-RSA-BOE08; reprinted with permission)

Figure 3b: Depictions of geometric shapes and spread-eagle designs largely argued to be attributed to female initiation.

(Image: ©www.sarada.co.za RARI-RSA-TOO74; reprinted with permission)

Figure 3c: Depictions of humans with hands 'akimbo', trains and wagons largely argued to be attributed to male initiation.

(Image: ©www.sarada.co.za RARI-RSA-BOE16; reprinted with permission)

However, I cannot determine whether or not initiation rock art ceased to be made during the colonial intrusion, based on instances of image juxtapositioning. I focus here only on initiation rock art that is predominantly located at large, concealed, remote or secluded shelters on the Makgabeng Plateau. Indigenous knowledge holders who are involved as instructors during initiation, and elders who have been through initiation on the Makgabeng, acknowledge that these sites were/are *kôma*, initiation places, hence the rock art is linked to *kôma*. Whilst these initiation rites are still practised in the Makgabeng and surrounding areas, the painting tradition has ceased and the rites have changed over time.

Initiation rites

Cultural rites of passage such as initiation formally induct individuals into the norms and traditions of a particular community or society. Initiation rites can be formal ceremonies or informal socialization processes, occurring in a variety of cultural contexts. Occasionally, initiation is a public performance and a display of strength and bravery, as with male circumcision, known as *imbalu*, among the Gisu of Uganda (see Khanakwa 2016, 2019). In other communities, such as the Dogon of Mali or the Hananwa of South Africa, initiation rites are secluded from the public and shrouded in mystery and secrecy. While I acknowledge that these rituals are constantly changing over time, in terms of operation and significance, they are generally believed to promote social cohesion and individual respect, and to transmit cultural values (Wantsusi 2011; Khamalwa and Placid 2018). Initiation is also believed to shape one's identity and to provide a sense of belonging within a larger social group (Bell 1997). Through initiation, individuals are introduced to the society's cultural values and to a framework for understanding their roles as adults (Vincent 2008). This can be particularly important in societies where cultural and gender identity are closely tied to social status (Schroeder et al. 2022).

Initiation is argued to reinforce, renew, and redefine the gendered cultural categories of man/woman within the communities where it is practised. Whilst inequalities or restrictions associated with these categories, concepts, or distinctions may be challenged (see for example Katide 2017, 25–29), gendered behaviour is shaped by societal expectations of individuals. Scholars such as Victor Turner (1967), Clifford Geertz ([1973] 2000), and Catherine Bell (1997) have had a significant impact on our understanding of rites of passage such as initiation. Turner (1967), drawing on van Gennep (1960), argued that it is during the liminal stage of rites of passage, when an individual is neither fully part of their old status nor fully integrated into their new one, that potential transformation and change occur. Geertz ([1973] 2000), in his analysis of cultural rites of passage as a form of cultural performance, argued that as a symbolic system they reflect and reinforce societal meanings and values; they shape individual identities and reinforce social structures. Similarly, Bell (1997) argued that cultural systems shape and give meaning to rites of passage like initiation that serve to reinforce social norms and values. These scholars recognize the importance of understanding the cultural and historical contexts in which rites of passage are performed; they perceive these rites as a way of creating and reinforcing shared cultural meanings and values, but also as a transformative experience in terms of personal growth and in promoting social change. Therefore, during rites such as initiation, a sense of a shared identity and belonging that transcends individual differences is created. These rich and nuanced understandings of initiation frame my current engagement with Northern Sotho rock art and associated initiation rites.

Northern Sotho initiation

Northern Sotho initiation is a sacred institution bonded in secrecy (Roberts and Winter 1915; Namono 2004; Moodley 2008). From pre-colonial times to the early 20th century, three initiation rites existed for males – *bodika*, *bogwêra*, and *komana* – which were spread over a number of years (Harries 1909). The two rites that existed for females – *kgôpa* and *bjale* – were conducted in a shorter time. *Kgôpa* (meaning a giant land snail, which only appears when it rains and whose shell is a fertility symbol) was private and marked a girls' physical maturation at the onset of their first menstruation, known as *bona ngwedi* ('to see the moon'); each girl reaches this stage at different times. According to Mönnig (1967, 125), initiates were secluded for three to four days; while Hammond-Tooke (1981, 55) states that seclusion was from a week to a month, during which the female was subjected to collective trials known as giving birth to the *kôma*, testing her endurance and ending with being ritually bathed in a river (Hammond-Tooke 1981, 55; van Schalkwyk 2002). *Bodika* – derived from the verb *go dika*, 'to encircle, or surround or join in attacking' (Mönnig 1967, 117) – was where males were circumcised. Both *kgôpa* and *bodika* socialize females and males respectively as adults. *Bjale* was contemporaneous with *bogwêra* ('friendship') derived from *gwêra* ('to make friends') (Pitje 1950, 119), and consisted largely of masked males dancing in the female courtyard towards the end of *bjale*. *Bogwêra* socialized males as men, preparing them for marriage and leadership. *Bjale* socialized females to recognise their change of status from child to adult, to woman and the desired status of 'mother' (Mönnig 1967, 125; Hammond-Tooke 1981, 55; Whitelaw 1994/95; Namono 2004, 59). *Komana* was for men (Krige and Krige [1943] 1980, 123–126) and associated with rainmaking. Since rainmaking rituals are no longer practised, *Komana* is no longer done.

My field enquires in 2022, and the current literature, show that Pedi/Northern Sotho male initiation includes merged aspects of *bodika* and *bogwêra* in a much-changed format, now referred to as *kôma ya banna*; female initiation, previously known as *bjale*, is now known as *kôma ya basadi* (Mokwana 2009). Changes have been influenced by hygiene concerns around HIV/Aids and the recent Covid-19 challenges, Western education, and religions such as Christianity and other global persuasions. Now, male and female initiates spend only a month away in seclusion, compared to a yearlong absence; instead, emphasis is placed on age-sets/regiments and grouping according to social status gained by birth, reinforcing the position of initiates within the social structure of the group. Keletso Gaone Setlhabi (2014, 467) states that, in the past, *bjale* (or *bojale*) was a transition from puberty to *womanhood* (emphasis mine), but at present it is a transition from a pre-regimental to regimental status. During initiation, as in similar female rites among other African societies, emphasis is placed on the creation of a hierarchical society of women through which respect and submission can be learned (Setlhabi 2014, 469). *Bjale* has also been argued to be a way of showing the important roles and position of 'woman' in family life and society (Rasing 2021, 56). Male initiates receive cultural instruction relating to the roles and responsibilities of being a 'man' (Vincent 2008). As was practised before and as persists today, initiated members of the same initiation school assume new individual names by which they are known for life (Harries 1929). Female and male initiations mark transitions equipping each to accept the responsibilities and roles that come with socio-cultural and politico-jural adulthood. Whilst initiation persists in the Makgabeng, some parents have lost confidence in the traditional custom of circumcision.

For the Northern Sotho, whilst there are separate ceremonies for males and females, I note that some characteristics of these

ceremonies are shared, enabling the creation or transmissions of values relating to male/female participation. For example, rather than making direct reference to sexual matters, euphemisms for coitus, such as making fire or pounding flour, are used to link human sexuality to the management of modes of livelihood. Water and deep pools in initiation are metaphors for those who have wide and deep knowledge and experience (Lekgothoane and van Warmelo 1938, 209). References are made to animal symbolism in both male and female initiation rites (see Moodley 2017; Zubieta 2022).

These instances show that the male and female genders complement each other to 'attain' the new social/cultural categories intended by initiation. Thus, it is necessary for gender categories ascribed to rituals like initiation to be fluid or blended. Northern Sotho initiation may not only provide an inclusive and consistent credo of Northern Sotho values and beliefs, but it is probably also an expression of Northern Sotho thought. Mnemonic devices such as role-playing and rock art imagery are used to transmit the essences of social and moral knowledge to initiates (see Zubieta 2022). I suggest that the gender blending enacted during *bjale* and *bogwêra* is reflected in the Northern Sotho rock art associated with initiation. Although rock art associated with initiation is no longer being made on the Makgabeng or elsewhere in the surrounding areas, an analysis of the selected sites illustrates the point in this article.

Shared symbols in the rock art

All rock art is gendered by those who make, use, or consume it (Dowson 2001; Hays-Gilpin 2012). When we look at how gender is depicted in rock art, gender is ascribed based on recognisable features, sex attributes, and mannerisms. Where these are not featured, a nuanced understanding of the makers of, and motivations for, the rock art may suggest a gendered ascription to rock art. Often, images are depicted superpositioned, superimposed, or juxtaposed with other images that may be similar or varied. I use the term blending to consider relationships of co-occurrence of similar images, superpositioned, juxtapositioned, and/or superimposed and associated with Northern Sotho male/female initiation. To contextualize the rock art sites, I drew on recent research in the 2000s (Namono 2004; Namono and Eastwood 2005), on Moodley (2004, 2008), and on my continuous interaction with the Makgabeng community, especially in attending the reception when the initiated returned home in June 2022. During rites of passage, initiates need not be designated male/female when 'becoming' adults, and can ritually transition between genders, as reflected in the rock art. Male symbols resonate with females, and vice-versa. Male symbols may symbolize maleness for females and female symbols may symbolize femininity for males. Symbols are meaningful only in terms of their relationship to other symbols in a panel or pattern (Douglas [1970/73] 2003), such that gendered imagery in rock art within a blended context is only meaningful in relation to other images on the panel or within a specific range of sites. Thus, a useful symbol or analytical category to explain shared, diverse symbolism in rock art is *kôma*.

Kôma – a shared symbol

As an ancestral being, *kôma* represents an ancestral presence during initiation, given that, in Northern Sotho thought, ancestors are actively present in their day-to-day affairs and ensure the success of initiation. Ancestors are non-gendered. In the rock art, looking at the variations of *kôma* in Figure 2, we can observe that Figures 2a and 2m, 2b and 2l, 2d and 2k, and 2b and 2n are the same. This lends itself to the proposition that the same imagery was used in male and female initiation rites, but the symbolism and meaning of it may differ or may be the same. Figure 2c, referred to as

naka tsha kôma 'horns of the *kôma*', resonates with male initiation, although it is depicted amongst images associated with female rites. *Kôma* has no features or markers of 'gender' that are culturally constructed and specific (Hays-Gilpin 2004, 15). *Kôma* may represent male-female symbolism central to Northern Sotho thought in initiation rites that emphasize procreation and fertility.

In Figure 2h, the two *kôma* images have three protrusions that may suggest female genitalia and a practise of 'lengthening the labia', known as *kwêba*, done during *bjale* and believed to ensure conception and individual moral responsibility to one's ancestors for the continuity of lineage. Today, *kwêba* is no longer practised. Alternatively, these depictions could represent the potency of male genitalia; masculinity is a focus of initiation. Often, animal parts such as the baboon's penis are believed to be powerful and are a valuable medicine in initiation (Lekgothoane and van Warmelo 1938). Uninitiated males, whilst formally masculine, are also considered substantively feminine (the labia minora is associated with the foreskin of males) and circumcision serves to render males definitively masculine – unambiguously male (Mekoa and Moeketsi 2020). For females, during *bjale*, initiates receive three small cuts on the inside left thigh, stressing feminine characteristics (Mekoa and Moeketsi 2020; Namono 2004). In Figure 2i, the *kôma* probably references menstruation or childbirth. In everyday circumstances Northern Sotho women do not expose their bodies or mention these practices in public. *Kôma* in rock art are ritually potent androgynous or non-gendered 'ancestors', depicted with both female and male genitals, and therein lies their potency.

In Figure 4a, there are depictions of animals aligned to male initiation. To the left of this cluster of animals is an enclosed geometric shape with red and white dust slightly superimposed over the animals. These dots are argued to be associated with female initiation. The dots are superimposed on the animal imagery indicating that they were applied after the animals were painted; after the males used the site, the females used it. In Figure 4b, a very similar shape with black and white dots is depicted with *kôma* images, all argued to be associated with female initiation. As Figure 2 has shown, *kôma* is a non-gendered image and so both these sites have mixed symbolism relevant for both male and female initiation.

In Figure 5a, *Kôma* imagery is depicted with other 'male' and 'female' imagery: images like circles, rectangles, triangles, dots, and animals. Large circular images are believed to symbolize the moon, associated with the 'moon dance' that occurs at the start of *bjale*. Solid white circles symbolize a fertile woman (Eastwood and Tlouamma 2003a) and the monthly fertility cycle, a menstrual cycle that is synonymous with the lunar monthly cycle. *Kôma* is also associated with solid circular shapes and grids. The circular shapes symbolize the moon and the monthly menstrual cycle of females, emphasizing the ideology of procreation, more aligned to female initiation. Animal symbols are used as mnemonic devices to express human behaviour in both male and female rites of passage.

In Northern Sotho thought, the mystical state of *go fisa* 'to be hot' also refers to initiates in transition, who must be cooled (Hammond-Tooke 1981, 112–121). The 'hot-cold' duality relates to danger and sterility, and healing and fertility (Kuper 1982, 19-20). The colours white and black are both 'cold'. White relates to ancestors, semen, milk, and fertilising properties; black neutralises and relates to purification (Kuper 1982, 19–20). The colour red is 'hot' and relates to life, danger, and blood (Kuper 1982, 19–20). Menstrual blood is 'hot' and can cause death and sterility of men or crops (Hammond-Tooke 1981); it is also associated with individuals born into a new life cycle (van Schalkwyk 2002, 75), like initiates. One of the ways ritually 'hot' initiates are 'cooled' down is through exposure to animals described as *setla* 'like whiteness' (Namono 2004, 91).

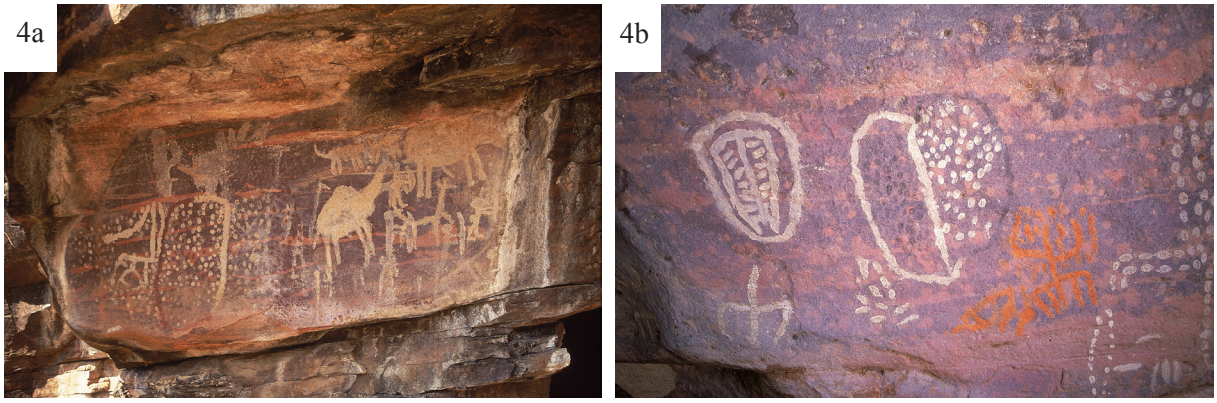

Figure 4: Images associated with male and female initiation are superimposed and juxtaposed. (Image: © www.sarada.co.za RARI-RSA-BOE8_6 & TOO74_18; reprinted with permission)

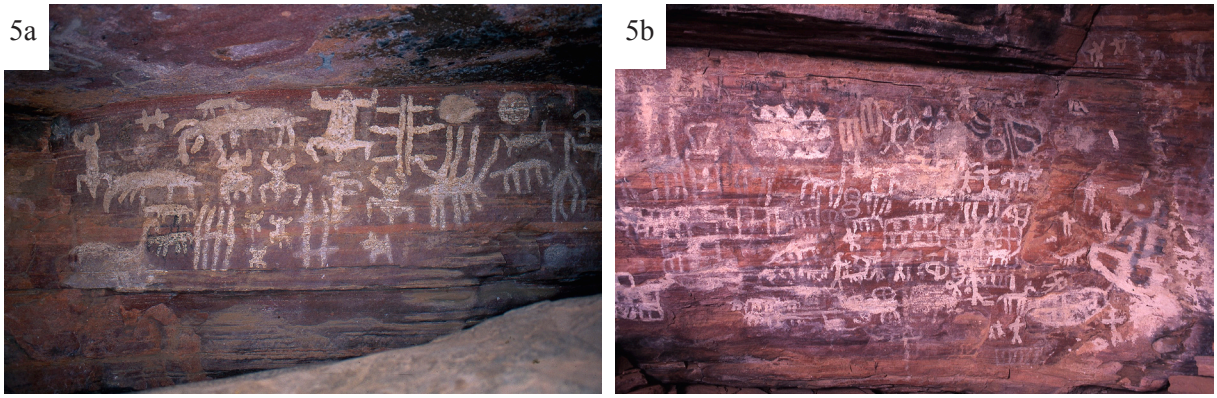

Figure 5: Images associated with male and female initiation are superimposed and juxtaposed. (Image: © www.sarada.co.za RARI-RSA-millstream 44 & Eastwood LNG40; reprinted with permission)

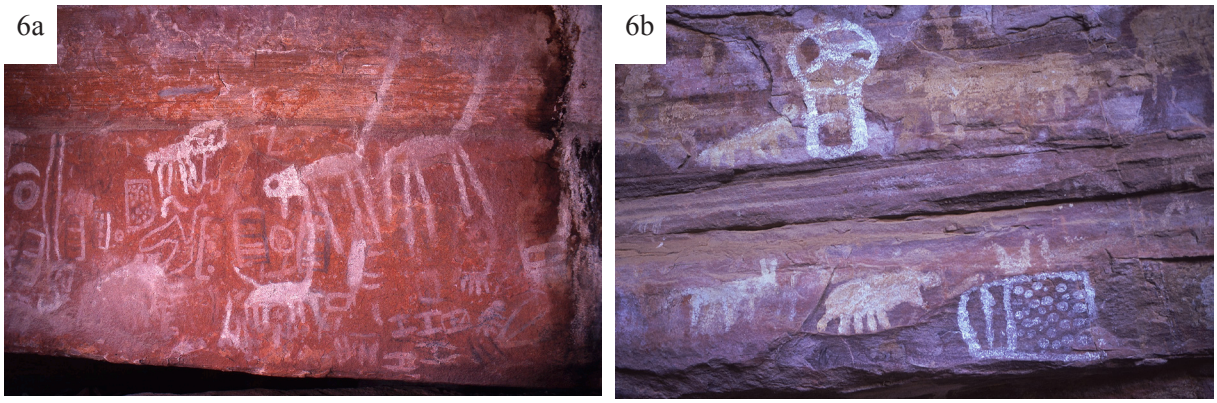

Figure 6: Images associated with male and female initiation are superimposed and juxtaposed. (Image: © www.sarada.co.za RARA-EEC-RSA-LNG10_2 &BOE 4_74; reprinted with permission)

Animals, such as giraffe, zebra, hyena, leopard, that manifest 'hot/cold' and black/white duality are used in male/female initiation ceremonies (Nettleton 2002; Namono 2004, 91). Thus both male and female initiates relate to animals in the rock art. Among the Northern Sotho, animals were praised in poems, especially the porcupine, zebra, and wild pig, which are clan totems (Lekgothoane and van Warmelo 1938, 207). The Mothšadbe clan found amongst groups such as the Hananwa has zebra as its totem (Namono 2004, 76). Thus, some depictions in the rock art may be clan totems of both female and male initiates. Figure 5b has a *kôma* outline shape filled with dots blended with other *kôma*, illustrating a mixing of male-female symbolic imagery.

In Figure 6a, there are *kôma* of varying types, some of which may be associated with both male and female initiation, but there are also geometric shapes which are categorized as female initiation rock art that make it difficult to clearly define the gendered use of this site. In Figure 6b, the geometric shapes are bolder and appear to be more recent, whilst the animal depictions appear to be older.

The rock art depictions indicate that specific male and female gender images are shared initiation symbols. Whether the symbolism is the same is difficult to know given the secret knowledge associated with these rites. However, what is clear is that the symbolization was relevant or did not negate use of the site by either male or female groups. Consistency of depiction of *kôma*, even if of varying types, suggests that the specific cultural elements from which it emerges derive from a similar cognitive system, as the practice of initiation drew on common symbols probably associated with shared gender values. *Kôma* depictions in the rock art forms a repeated code of cultural symbols of past and probably (to some degree) present shared gender concepts. Shared symbols, such as language, are culturally derived. Rock art associated with initiation communicates gender symbolism from an emic perspective. *Kôma*, as one of several symbols within the Northern Sotho rock art iconography, is a locus for cross-gender or shared gender communication.

Gender blending

Kôma and the other gender-specific imagery illustrate the polysemy of symbols. Rock art has more than one association for the people who made and used it – the shapes are polysemous (Lewis-Williams 1981). Often symbols may have focused polysemy, where the symbolism of the shape derives from contextual associations (Lewis-Williams 1981), as illustrated with *kôma* in association with geometric shapes and animal imagery. Although initiation has changed and its ritual significance has slightly shifted, given that beliefs alter over time and symbols may acquire new or different meanings, the core symbolism is retained. Rock art images like *kôma* serve as a mnemonic device in the memorization of cultural knowledge (Zubieta 2022) and the communication of sacred mysteries. Androgynous representations, such as *kôma* in rock art, may be perceived as a connection to the child-adult transformation, starting with a sexless neutral gender. Due to ancestral provenance, ritual meanings are said to be elusive and secret, because meaning reposes with ancestors and is therefore complex (Cohen 1994, 61). These complex meanings are conveyed by participation and mnemonic devices. According to Turner (1967), life force, the power for all that is good in the world, associated with fertility and recreation in the natural (and human) world, is invoked in androgynous imagery – it is a shared power that both males/females must possess.

All the rock art sites discussed in this article show the gender-blending of subject matter associated with male or female initiation rites, and it is highly likely to be present in the sites excluded in the analysis. This blending of gender categories of imagery leads to the proposition that during initiation, gender

identities are fluid, with a shared imagery symbolism and cultural or ethnic identity. After all, identities are always hybrid and fluid, and not always contiguous (Meskell and Joyce 2003). Where an individual is positioned marginally in a culture, their identity may be a fragmented slippery and mutating state of being (Meskell and Joyce 2003). Thus, initiation affirms one's sense of belonging to a group through esoteric knowledge and appreciation of one's heritage, especially when individuals are amenable to transformation. What one group (male/female) has in common establishes a sense of belonging, as a Northern Sotho adult; where one group differs from the other this provides a sense of uniqueness, distinctiveness, a unique social identity – Northern Sothoness (cf. Brewer 1991). Paradoxically, this sense of identity may lead to an exaggeration of gender differences (Brewer 1991).

Northern Sotho initiation rock art indicates that depositional contexts were ritually significant for collective consumption (cf. Lewis-Williams 1998, 2001). I therefore suggest that, whereas male/female initiation schools are physically implemented separately, the symbolism of sacred mysteries/knowledge may be shared and/or appropriated for the values espoused during rites of passage. Differences in imagery for male/female initiation may not be as distinct as scholars suggest, and the use of gender categories to define initiation rock art sites should embrace a nuanced understanding of shared symbolisms within initiation expressed through blended symbols such as *kôma*. Traditional Northern Sotho social structures are dynamic yet bounded by clear rules of appropriate behaviour for men and women.

Initiation on the Makgabeng remains bound by secrecy. Various explanations are given to motivate its values. For example, in April 2022 I was informed that male initiation prepares young males for good health and marriage (Jeff Raseruthe, personal communication, 2022). On the other hand, some of the initiated do not openly acknowledge initiation, perhaps due to 'shame or fear' of enrolment in a traditional practice, now frowned upon. For example, when I asked an elder if she had been to *kôma* she responded in the negative; yet the community identify her with one of her names, given during initiation. However, she might also have given this negative response to protect the sanctity of initiation. The secret knowledge of initiation is powerful and exclusionary. Secrecy serves to establish boundaries (Barth 1969) between those 'in the know' and those excluded from the secret knowledge (de Jong 2004). Initiation rites are often pregnant with sexual symbolism; yet sexual intercourse is implicated metaphorically. Metaphorical symbolism is inherent in the blended male/female symbols and shared symbolism associated with fertility and regeneration. The secrecy of these shared symbols endorses a symbolic relationship between initiated Northern Sotho males/females and distinguishes insiders (initiated with societal knowledge) from outsiders (the uninitiated).

Conclusion

Rethinking time and gender by exploring alternative frameworks to understanding initiation rock art in the Makgabeng, this article has attempted to unveil a nuanced understanding of the symbolisms expressed through shared imagery and experiences that have shaped Northern Sotho coming of age rites of passage over time. All Northern Sotho rock art sites have imagery associated with initiation. Many of these sites have imagery described as male/female gender symbols. Many of these symbols are polysemous, lending themselves to shared symbolism. Rethinking the male-female dichotomy of Northern Sotho rock art sites and their context, I have shown that the differences in imagery for male/female initiation may not be as distinct as scholars suggest; I have argued for a nuanced understanding of shared symbolism within initiation, expressed through blended symbols.

Cognisance of the centrality of gender in Northern Sotho society is essential to dismantling rigid gender interpretations of the rock art associated with males and females. By shedding light on the diverse meanings of *kôma* I highlight the agency and resilience of the Northern Sotho in the context of the legacies of colonization and globalization for African cultures. It is through this rethinking of gender symbolisms that we can better understand the dynamics of power, gender, and secret knowledge production in Northern Sotho society. Young males/females on the Makgabeng currently express themselves outside the traditionally defined gendered categories. For example, females wear trousers, once only worn by men, especially based on Western culture. This fluidity in gender expression challenges traditional gender boundaries, allowing for greater expression of individual identity, as opposed to the collective identity espoused in initiation. *Kôma* in rock art has shown that gender blending and fluidity has always been part of Northern Sotho society, openly flaunted – but understood only by those in the closed initiated circle of men and women.

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