

Article

Women in Palaeoart and the Afterlives of Symbols: An Essay in Worldview Externalisation

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Abstract

Women-centred motifs in African rock art form part of the most persistent symbolic repertoire of early cosmologies. Despite their prominence, these figures have received limited sustained analysis. Examination of their contexts reveals four recurrent logics—care, regeneration, boundary mediation, and the social encoding of voice—that structure social and ritual life. A comparative case from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* shows these logics rearticulated in the narrative of Celie’s self-awakening, demonstrating the afterlives of symbolic forms. This perspective clarifies the role of female imagery as a structuring element of cosmology and offers a heuristic for integrating rock-art studies with broader cross-temporal analysis.

Keywords: palaeoart; worldview externalisation; symbolic logics; afterlives

1. Introduction

Across Africa, depictions of maternity and nurture, initiation and menstruation, ritual agency, singing and dancing, and women’s gatherings recur in rock-art corpora. These images are well recorded, yet their structuring role has received less sustained theorisation than typological description and site-bounded reporting (Bahn 2010; Bednarik 2003). Recent studies demonstrate that female-centred scenes participate in ordering social life and transmitting knowledge, not merely in embellishing surfaces (Eastwood 2005; Moustafa 2023; Namono 2023; Zubieta 2016). The present article develops a comparative language for that role by treating rock art as worldview externalisation: a medium through which cosmology and regulation are made durable and visible.

Two theoretical anchors frame the analysis. First, palaeoart is approached as a form of external symbolic storage that scaffolds collective cognition and social learning (Bednarik 2013; Donald 1991). Second, this externalisation is situated within broader theories of symbolism, ritual, and cultural world-making (Cassirer 1944; Eliade 1959; Geertz 1973). Together, these perspectives support reading rock art as a medium through which cosmology and regulation are made durable and visible; the theoretical framework is developed further in Section 2.

While women and gender have long been recognised in rock-art studies, they are often treated in site-specific or descriptive terms rather than as part of a broader theoretical framework. As a result, their role in structuring social and symbolic systems remains under-synthesised. At the same time, existing studies demonstrate the centrality of women’s roles in rock art across diverse contexts. San materials from the Central Limpopo Basin relate female imagery to life-course transition and instruction (Eastwood 2005; Lewis-Williams 2004), while Chewa evidence



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from Chongoni documents women's authorship and ritual use of images in initiation practices (Zubieta 2016). Work at Makgabeng further shows that similar motifs can carry context-specific meanings across initiation settings (Namono 2023), and recent surveys in Egypt's Western Desert expand the archaeological record of female representations (Moustafa 2023). Together, these strands point to the need for a more systematic and theoretically integrated analytic vocabulary. Across the selected African materials, four recurring symbolic logics emerge with particular clarity: care, regeneration, boundary mediation, and the social encoding of voice. These logics provide the conceptual vocabulary through which the case studies are later synthesised.

Methodological limits are explicit. Similarity does not entail descent, cross-temporal comparison must avoid collapsing historical distance, and inferences remain constrained by context, taphonomy, and replicable patterning (Bednarik 2003; Bahn 2010). Exogram theory guides interpretation but does not license unlimited projection; it directs attention to how durable traces may store procedures for seeing, valuing, and acting (Bednarik 2013; Donald 1991).

Three research questions follow. First, how can women's motifs in rock art be analysed as durable symbolic logics—ongoing modes of worldview externalisation—rather than as relics of a concluded past? Second, what interpretive gains arise from modelling these motifs as exograms that scaffold social memory and learning, instead of as iconographic “subjects” detached from practice? Third, how might be carefully chosen cross-modal comparanda identify afterlives of symbols—re-articulations of persistent configurations—without presuming linear transmission?

To probe durability without claiming descent, a brief modern comparator is introduced: Celie's self-awakening in *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. The comparison is heuristic rather than genealogical, intended to test whether similar symbolic procedures can be recognised across different media and historical frames (Walker 2022).

The contribution is twofold. Conceptually, the article offers a vocabulary for analysing women-centred imagery as structurally generative rather than merely descriptive. Methodologically, it develops a comparative framework grounded in exogram theory for tracing how symbolic procedures persist, recompose, and become legible across media under controlled inferential limits.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Worldview Externalisation

Rock art is treated here as worldview externalisation: durable, public media through which communities stabilise cosmology and choreograph participation. Religion and symbolism are understood as collective representations, symbolic forms, and cultural systems that organise experience and motivate conduct; ritual periodically marks and renews thresholds in space and time (Cassirer 1944; Durkheim [1912] 1915; Eliade 1959; Geertz 1973).

2.2. Exograms and Material Semiotic Orchestration

Externalisation acquires mechanism in exogram theory. In this context, exograms refer to durable external symbolic traces—such as images, marks, and material arrangements—that store and stabilise information outside the individual mind (Donald 1991; Malafouris 2013). Communities deposit procedures and knowledge in durable traces that scaffold memory and learning; external media belong to the cognitive ecology of action. In this study, exogram theory provides a framework for treating rock art as storing and organising procedural knowledge, rather than merely representing symbolic content. This implies that meaning is not carried by isolated signs but by orchestration—how marks,

surfaces, and access routes are composed to script approach, viewing, address, and response (Lewis-Williams 2015). Superimposition exposes sequence; adjacency couples roles and resources; orientation governs address; pathway, vantage, and acoustics shape what is revealed, when, and to whom. These features render rock art a procedural medium rather than a pictorial archive. This perspective is related to, but distinct from, approaches that treat art as a form of social agency, such as Gell's (1998) theory of art as a system of action. Whereas such approaches emphasise the relational and agentive effects of artworks, the present study focuses on how visual forms store and organise procedural knowledge across time.

2.3. Procedural Operators as Analytic Units

The basic unit of analysis is the procedural operator: a repeatable instruction encoded jointly by composition and place that can be learned, rehearsed, and redeployed. Five diagnostic dimensions guide identification across corpora. First, ordered superimposition indicates staging and transition. Second, adjacency and orientation signal role coupling and lines of address. Third, pathway, vantage, and acoustic affordances script approach, revelation, and assembly. Fourth, repetition and rhythm stabilise memory by recombining figure–posture–object triads across panels. Fifth, audience formation is marked where spatial layout and facing produce witness, call–response, or authorised speech. Claims rise with convergent patterning across these dimensions and fall with counter-patterning or silence in the record (Bednarik 2014; Lewis-Williams 2015; Wobst 1977).

2.4. Afterlives Across Media

Durability over long spans need not imply lineage. Forms persist by re-activation: procedures are recomposed under new conjunctures rather than transmitted intact (Didi-Huberman 2002, 2017). Cultural-memory theory distinguishes communicative from cultural strata and explains persistence as selective re-contextualisation for present concerns (Assmann 2008, 2011). Exogram theory and material-engagement accounts clarify why re-activation is possible: once procedures are externalised in durable media, they enter the cognitive ecology, shaping how experience is encoded and retrieved (Donald 1991; Malafouris 2013; Bednarik 2014). Because rock art provided some of the earliest exograms of cosmology and temporality—cycles, thresholds, and sacred address—its procedural forms left mnemonic scaffolds for imagining order and time. In Eliade's terms, such scaffolds sustain "sacred time" by periodic reactualisation (Eliade 1959). Analyses of altered states and passage imagery in San materials illustrate how imagery can stabilise experiences of cosmos and transition (Lewis-Williams 2015). Such cases are exemplary rather than unique: the point is that once externalised, cosmological procedures leave scaffolds that can be re-activated in diverse settings. In this sense, an "afterlife" is not mere survival of motifs but re-articulation of deep-seated operators that continue to shape cultural imagination. Cross-media recognition rests on function and sequence, not on image identity: comparable organisation of attention, passage, address, and sanction; comparable ordering of preparation, transition, and licensed speech; explicit cues to look, gather, gesture, and move. Comparison sharpens recognition of procedures; it does not establish descent.

2.5. Scope, Guardrails, and Portability

Inference is bounded by context. Claims are constrained by taphonomy, spatial relations, and replicable patterning; multiple independent indicators weigh more than single motifs (Bahn 2010; Bednarik 2003). Documentation must therefore register not only motifs but also superimposition order, adjacencies, sight-lines, approach paths, acoustic niches, and audience geometry (Lewis-Williams 2015).

The framework is deliberately abstract, designed as a portable analytic instrument defined independently of region or period. Its force lies in application: the next section applies it to selected African corpora to inductively derive candidate operators from published records, before a controlled comparison explores their re-articulation in a modern narrative.

3. Women-Centred Symbolic Logics in Palaeoart

3.1. Analytical Procedure

The framework outlined in Section 2 is applied here to four African corpora—Makgabeng (Northern Sotho initiation imagery), Chongoni (Cheŵa girls' initiation), Central Limpopo (San panels with female imagery), and Chufu (Egyptian Western Desert)—using five diagnostics: superimposition (1), adjacency and orientation (2), path-vantage (3), repetition and iteration (4), and audience formation (5). The analysis is based on published panel documentation and associated archaeological interpretations, which are here re-analysed through a consistent set of analytical diagnostics, with claims restricted to published records. Four of these spatial relations are schematically illustrated in Figure 1 for clarity. Figures 2–5 then provide openly licensed rock-art examples that illustrate how these four spatial relations can be visually identified in rock-art imagery. These examples are used as diagnostic illustrations rather than corpus-specific evidence. Repetition/iteration and audience formation are not included in the figures, as they operate at the level of patterning and interaction rather than discrete spatial relations within a single configuration. The full R/D/A analysis underlying these diagnostics, as well as the corpus-specific published sources and page/figure references, is presented separately in the Supplementary Materials (Supplementary S1 and S2).

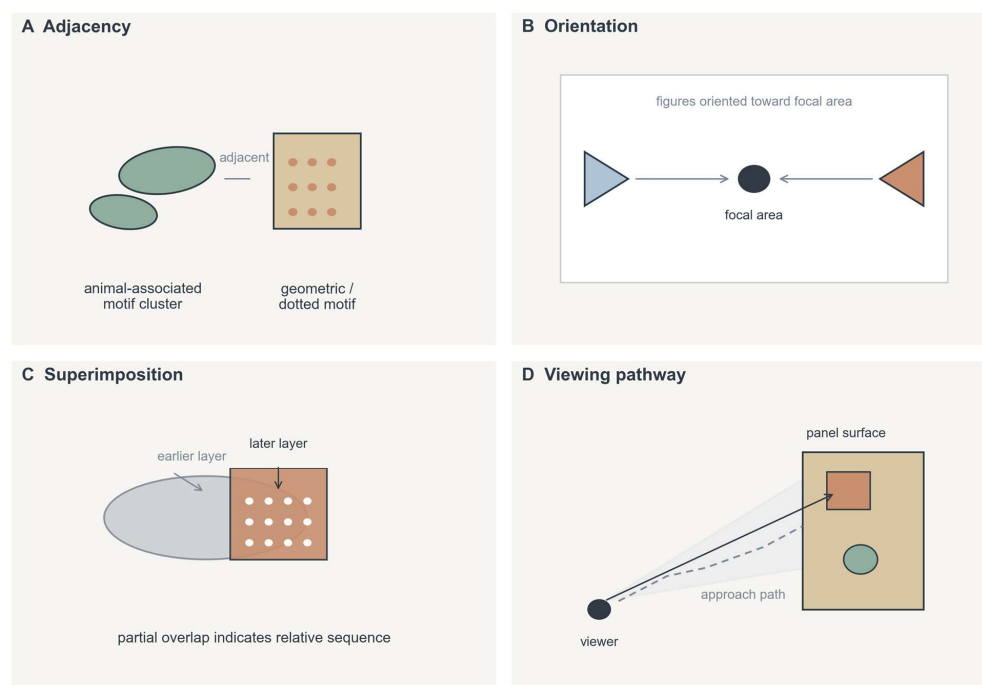


Figure 1. Schematic diagrams illustrating four spatial relations discussed in the text: adjacency, orientation, superimposition, and viewing pathway/path-vantage. Diagrams are interpretive abstractions rather than reconstructions.

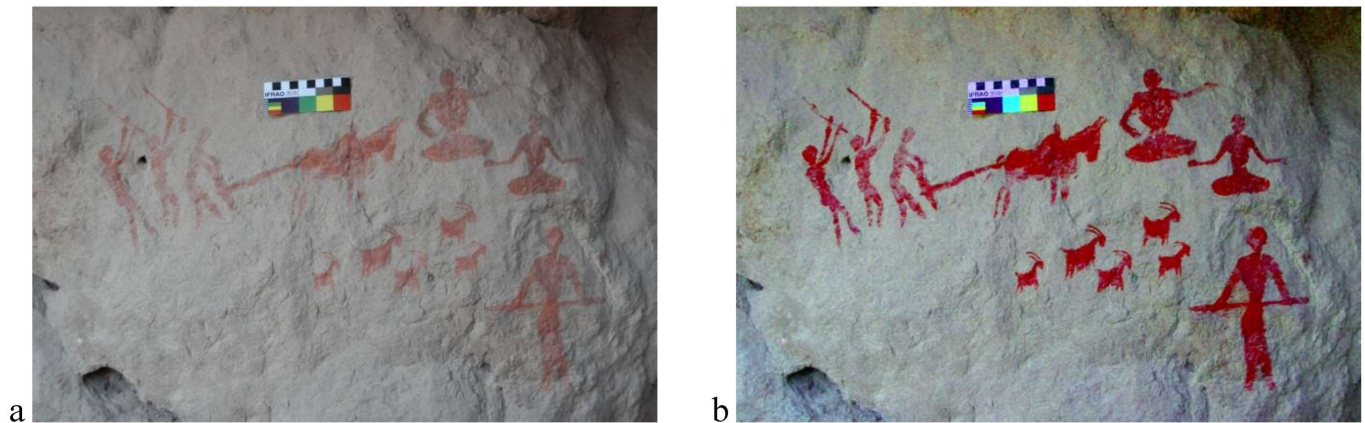


Figure 2. A ploughing scene with ibexes at Kuh-e-Donbeh: original photograph (a) and DStretch-enhanced version (b). The panel illustrates adjacency as the visible grouping of motifs on the same rock surface. Adapted from Karimi (2014, Figure 21), CC BY 3.0.

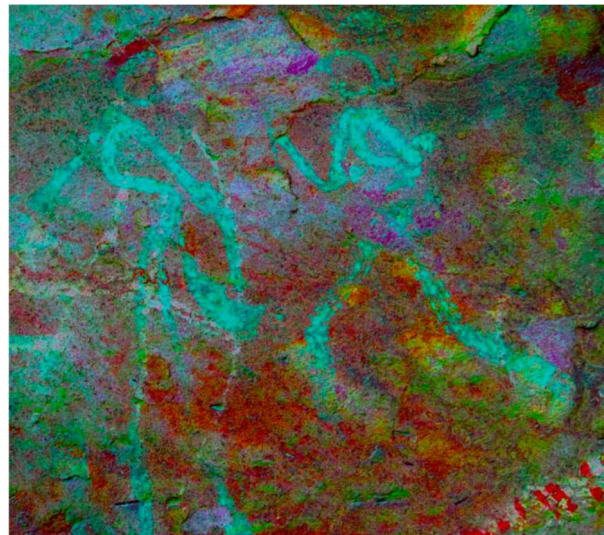


Figure 3. Two green figures at Kathotiya face each other with open mouths, illustrating orientation as facing and directional relation between motifs. Adapted from Pathak (2025, Figure 15b), CC BY 4.0; original image enhanced with D-Stretch-yrld.

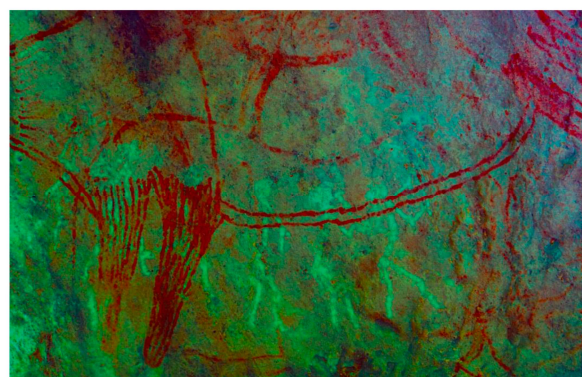


Figure 4. A large pregnant female bison at Kathotiya is superimposed over seven faint green dancers, illustrating superimposition as visible layering between motifs. Adapted from Pathak (2025, Figure 16), CC BY 4.0; original image enhanced with D-Stretch-lre.



Figure 5. Noe Shelter, Monfragüe, a small cavity/crack-type site that requires a specific bodily position to see the paintings, illustrates path-vantage as the relation between shelter form, viewing position, and image visibility. Adapted from Collado Giraldo (2016, Figure 5), CC BY 4.0.

3.2. Makgabeng (Northern Sotho)—Women as Custodians of Thresholds and Renewal

At Makgabeng, initiation imagery is not incidental decoration but anchored in women's authority. Superimposition (1) shows male- and female-coded motifs layered on the same rock faces across generations. This is not simple accumulation: elder women oversee repainting as a threshold script, so that each new cohort enters through an inherited surface rather than a blank slate (Namono 2023; Louw 2016). Adjacency and orientation (2) tie female figures to animals and geometric forms at liminal edges. Their positioning suggests a structured pairing: novices learn to read bodies and symbols together, with elder women guiding how proximity marks permissible relations (Namono 2023; Moodley 2008). Path-vantage (3) is controlled by secluded shelters and timed approaches. These regulate who may see or hear, and at what moment. The arrangement produces authorised voice, as women decide when novices may listen, repeat or respond (Lewis-Williams 2015). Repetition and iteration (4) appear in the cyclic return to the same panels for each cohort. The cycle itself enacts regeneration: elder women reactivate stored procedures, renewing order while affirming their role as custodians of continuity (Namono 2023). Audience formation (5) is explicit: novices, instructors and outsiders are separated, with elder women licensing admission and correction. Speech and gesture are not free but regulated by women's ritual authority, ensuring that cosmology is passed on through disciplined address (Namono 2023). Figures 6–10 show the relevant rock-art imagery discussed in this section.

3.3. Chongoni (Cheŵa)—Female Instruction, Voice Licensing, Continuity of Care

Women structure initiation practice at Chongoni through both imagery and ritual pedagogy. Superimposition (1) is less frequent than at Makgabeng, but records show that ceremonies returned cyclically to the same shelters; painted motifs were renewed across generations as part of mwambo, sustaining continuity through time (Zubieta 2006, 2016). Adjacency and orientation (2) organise animal figures, geometric shapes, and human postures into teaching devices. Elder women, the namkungwi, are documented guiding novices by pointing to these proximities, linking posture and pairing to lessons on menstruation, sexuality, and childbirth (Zubieta 2016). Path-vantage (3) is carefully managed: secluded shelters, restricted entrances, and ritual timing determine who may see and hear; women instructors regulate entry and direct spoken instruction, producing licensed voice (Smith 2014; Zubieta 2016; UNESCO 2006). Repetition and iteration (4) are integral: the same imagery and gestures are used in each cohort, enabling memory

training and reinforcing embodied lessons. Audience formation (5) is explicit—novices, elder women, and occasional male figures occupy distinct roles. Women’s ritual authority is central, as they correct mistakes, allocate speech, and ensure the care of initiates during instruction (Zubieta 2016; Smith 2014). Figures 11–16 show the relevant rock-art imagery discussed in this section.

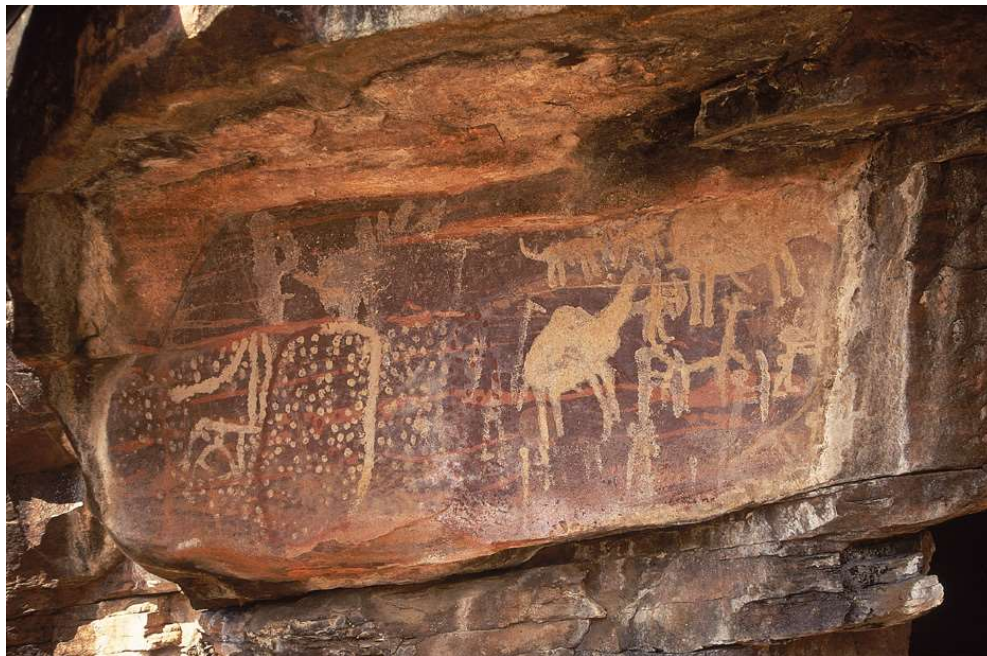


Figure 6. Superimposition at Makgabeng. Male- and female-coded initiation imagery appears on the same rock surface (Namono 2023).



Figure 7. Superimposition at Makgabeng. A female-associated Northern Sotho apron is layered over an indeterminate San image (Louw 2016).



Figure 8. Adjacency at Makgabeng. Kôma imagery appears alongside animals, dots, and geometric forms in a shared initiation panel (Namono 2023).

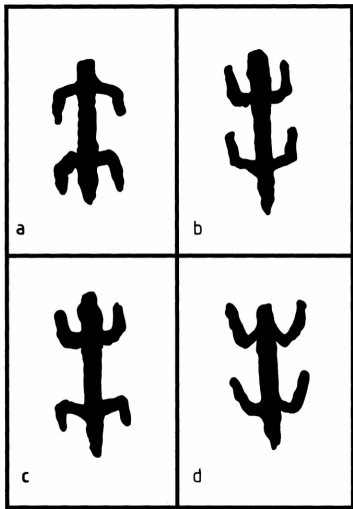


Figure 9. Orientation at Makgabeng. Kôma motifs show differing limb orientations within Northern Sotho initiation imagery: (a) limbs facing downward; (b) limbs facing upward; (c) upper and lower limbs facing opposite directions; (d) limbs forming a V-shape and W-shape arrangement (Moodley 2008).

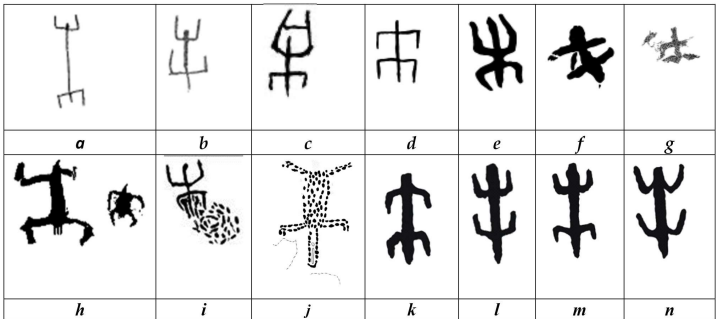


Figure 10. Repetition and iteration at Makgabeng. Recurrent kôma forms appear across male and female initiation contexts: (a–j) variations linked to female initiation; (k–n) variations linked to male initiation (Namono 2023).

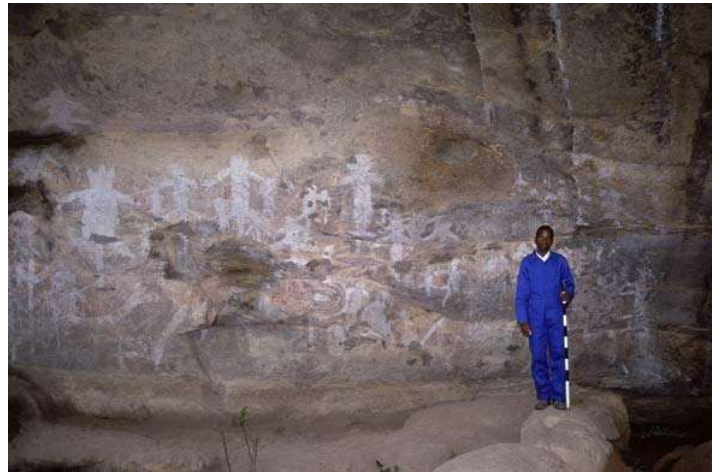


Figure 11. Superimposition at Chongoni (Cheŵa). White spread-eagled motifs overlap on the same shelter panel associated with Chinamwali instruction (Zubieta 2006).

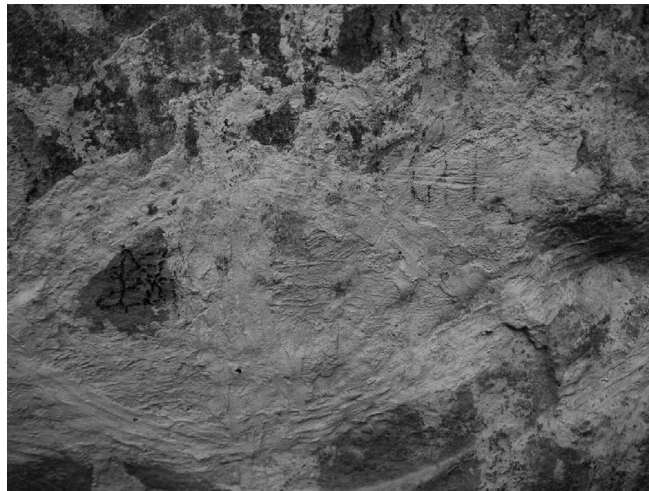


Figure 12. Superimposition at Chongoni (Cheŵa). Later Chinamwali motifs cover earlier images, indicating repainting and continued ceremonial use (Zubieta 2016).

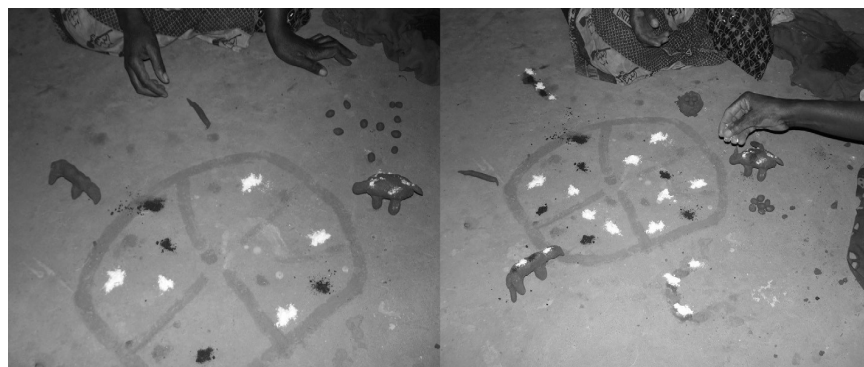


Figure 13. Adjacency at Chongoni (Cheŵa). Animal figures, geometric forms, and dotted motifs are arranged as vilengo teaching devices used in Chinamwali instruction (Zubieta 2016).



Figure 14. Orientation at Chongoni (Cheŵa). Redrawn white spread-eagled motifs display oriented bodies and protruding limbs within Chinamwali rock-art imagery (Zubieta 2016).

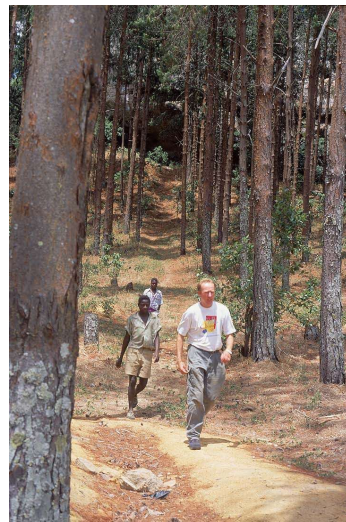


Figure 15. Path-vantage at Chongoni (Cheŵa). A shaded forest path leads to the rock-art sites, situating Chinamwali shelters within a controlled landscape setting (UNESCO 2006).



Figure 16. Repetition at Chongoni (Cheŵa). Vilengo dots are touched in sequence and imitated by initiates, turning repeated gestures into Chinamwali memory training (Zubieta 2016).

3.4. Central Limpopo (San)—Patterned Proximities and Taught Care

In the Central Limpopo Basin, female imagery highlights how care is taught and rehearsed. Superimposition (1) is sparsely recorded, with limited evidence for layering

across cohorts. Adjacency and orientation (2), however, are marked: women are consistently paired with novices or children, containers, and holding or teaching postures at focal surfaces. These proximities stabilise roles of nurture and transmission. Path-vantage (3) is less explicit, but the positioning of figures in shelters suggests selective visibility. Repetition and iteration (4) recur as the same proximities appear across multiple panels, operating as mnemonic scaffolds. Audience formation (5) is inferred from posture and placement, where elder women's centrality indicates their role as custodians of access and instruction. Here, women act as guardians of attention and provisioning. The imagery not only depicts mother-child relations but encodes care as a taught capacity, oriented toward community survival and continuity. In this sense, female figures externalise social memory of nurture as a symbolic operator, extending beyond iconography into the procedural training of future generations (Eastwood 2005). Figure 17 shows the relevant rock-art imagery discussed in this section.

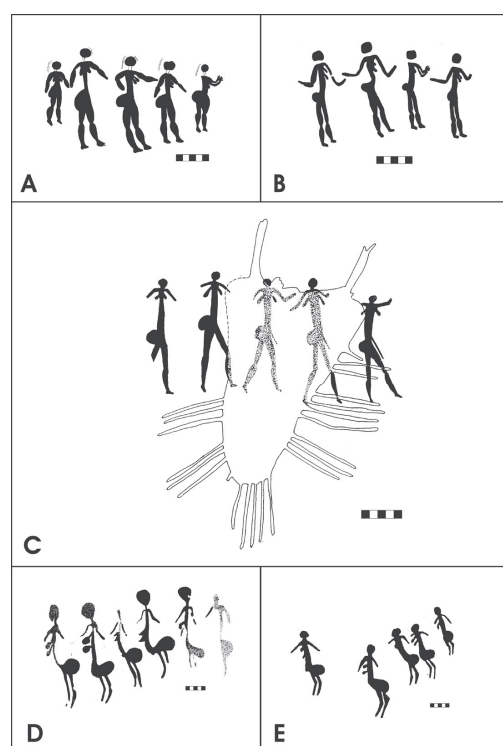


Figure 17. Adjacency, orientation, and repetition in Central Limpopo (San). Women and girls recur in rows and shared directions across multiple panels, marking repeated processional groupings linked to girls' puberty rites: (A–C) adult women depicted in naturalistic style; (B,D,E) girls identifiable by small, high-set breasts included within groups of women. (Eastwood 2005).

3.5. Chufu (Egyptian Western Desert)—Typology Now, Procedure Emerging

At Chufu, relevant documentation is still at an early stage, but some women-centred patterns are visible. The record is strongest in adjacency and orientation (2), where women are catalogued alongside animals and geometric signs in recurring combinations, and in repetition and iteration (4), which reports motif frequencies across loci, indicating reuse of a limited repertoire. Targeted documentation is still needed for superimposition (1) at single-face scale, for path-vantage (3), and for audience formation (5) to clarify procedural use (Moustafa 2023). Figures 18–20 show the relevant rock-art imagery discussed in this section.



Figure 18. Adjacency and orientation in Chufu (Egyptian Western Desert). Female figures are depicted alongside oryx antelopes (Moustafa 2023).

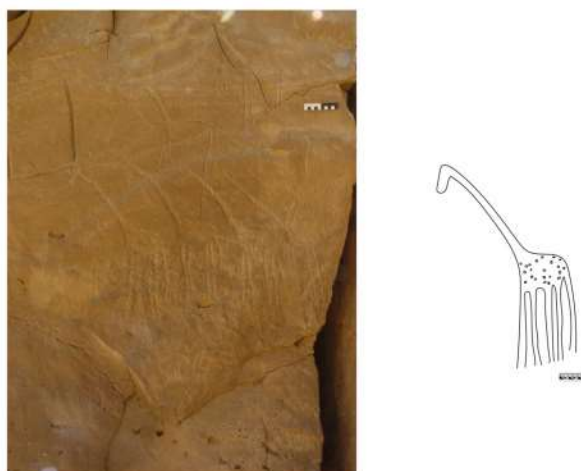


Figure 19. Adjacency and orientation in Chufu (Egyptian Western Desert). Female figures are depicted alongside giraffes (Moustafa 2023).



Figure 20. Adjacency in Chufu (Egyptian Western Desert). Meandering lines are recorded in proximity to female figures (Moustafa 2023).

3.6. Assessing Evidence Clarity: R/D/A Criteria

To evaluate clarity, each diagnostic is judged by three documentary aspects: R (recurrence) across independent reports; D (detail) of context (e.g., layering, access/visibility geometry, role markers); A (anchoring) in explicit initiation/teaching. Score = R + D + A (0–5), based solely on published evidence. The results are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. R/D/A scores for diagnostics across corpora.

Diagnostic Corpus	(1) Superimposition	(2) Adjacency and Orientation	(3) Path-Vantage	(4) Repetition and Iteration	(5) Audience Formation
Makgabeng	5	4	4	4	4
Chongoni	1	3	5	5	5
Central Limpopo	1	4	1	4	2
Chufu	1	2	0	1	0

For synthesis, we retain only the top signal per diagnostic; if there is no 5 but two 4s, both are retained. The resulting set is: superimposition (1) = Makgabeng-5; adjacency and orientation (2a) = Makgabeng-4 and (2b) = Central Limpopo-4; path-vantage (3) = Chongoni-5; repetition and iteration (4) = Chongoni-5; audience formation (5) = Chongoni-5. At Chufu, adjacency (2) and repetition (4) are present but do not reach the synthesis threshold; superimposition (1), path-vantage (3), and audience (5) remain to be documented.

3.7. Synthesis: From Diagnostics to Women-Centred Symbolic Logics

Four operators summarise how female imagery does cultural work across these corpora: boundary mediation, authorised voice, regeneration, care. They are not themes but procedures that materialise order.

First, boundary mediation. Layered threshold superimposition (1) keeps prior passages visible. Edge-focused couplings adjacency and orientation (2a) position human, animal and geometric figures at liminal borders, showing who must cross where, while role proximities adjacency and orientation (2b) fix body-to-body relations in teaching contexts. Together with controlled approach and visibility path-vantage (3), these arrangements stage passage rather than leaving it diffuse. A passage is thus staged rather than merely undergone. Women hold the gate: admitting novices, overseeing their transition, and validating completion (Eastwood 2005; Lewis-Williams 2015; Namono 2023).

Second, authorised voice. Positional relations adjacency and orientation (2a/2b) establish speaker–addressee geometry; timed visibility path-vantage (3) turns hearing into permission; formal role separation audience formation (5) assigns who addresses, who listens, and who may correct. Voice becomes a licensed resource. Under women’s custodianship, words bind, instruction counts, and correction carries authority (Namono 2023; Zubieta 2016).

Third, regeneration. Cohort cycling and media substitution show that continuity attaches to sequence. Repeated enactment (repetition and iteration (4)) preserves ordered teaching across generations; role renewal audience formation (5) reproduces the instructional body. Even when the medium shifts, the procedure persists. Women curate timing and succession, converting biological reproduction into social renewal (Zubieta 2016).

Finally, care. Adjacency and orientation (2b) emphasises bodily proximities—women beside novices, containers and holding postures—that train attentiveness and nurture. When joined with repetition and iteration (4), such proximities stabilise protection and provisioning. Even edge placements adjacency and orientation (2a), though more liminal, also feed into this logic by marking where care must be extended across thresholds. Care is not sentiment but capacity: taught in public, remembered on stone, enacted as a form of potency that sustains persons and order (Eastwood 2005; Zubieta 2016).

Taken together, these operators form a portable grammar. Read as worldview externalisations and exograms, the panels do not decorate cosmology; they produce it, by teaching how thresholds are crossed, who may speak, how order is renewed, and what counts as care—under women’s ritual authority.

4. Modern Resonances: Celie's Self-Awakening in *The Color Purple*

This section reads *The Color Purple* as a heuristic comparator that clarifies the methodological scope of the framework by making its procedural operators legible in a different medium. The claim is not genealogical descent from African rock art, but afterlives of symbolic procedures: logics first externalised on rock reappear as exograms in narrative form (Bednarik 2014; Donald 1991). In terms of worldview externalisation, media change while function persists: culturally shared operations are stored, taught and reactivated across substrates—stone, voice, text (Cassirer 1944; Durkheim [1912] 1915; Geertz 1973). “Afterlife” here follows cultural-memory and *Nachleben* usage: re-articulation without linear transmission (Assmann 2011; Didi-Huberman 2002, 2017). In methodological terms, the comparison helps specify what is being interpreted archaeologically: not the persistence of motifs as such, but the recurrence of relational and procedural organisation across contexts.

Celie's opening predicament installs a strict boundary of address—“You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy.” (Walker 2022, p. 3)—which protects survival by narrowing speech to a vertical, private channel. When violence arrives, she “make[s] [her]self wood. . . Celie, you a tree” (Walker 2022, p. 30), a bodily tactic that hardens edges so a passage can be endured and later reversed. These scenes map boundary mediation: limits are drawn, crossed and redrawn under women's guidance. As relations with Shug and Nettie thicken, the addressee shifts from God to living interlocutors; what counted as a threshold becomes a managed transition. In the framework's terms, a limen is staged rather than suffered (Eliade 1959).

Authorisation of voice follows from that re-staging. Rock-art instruction makes speech a licensed resource through spatial and temporal allocation; Celie's letters do the same by reconfiguring audience and timing. The epistolary form begins as prayer, then becomes conversation; legitimacy accumulates as social address expands. The final salutation—“Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.” (Walker 2022, p. 290)—widens who may hear and be heard. Voice is not mere expression but socially coded permission, an allocation of who speaks, who listens, who may correct—precisely the communicative structuring that exograms scaffold in ritual settings (Donald 1991; Wobst 1977).

Continuity in the novel is secured through patterned re-enactment rather than re-set. Letters recur as disciplined practice; relations broken by coercion are repaired by iteration—retrieval of children, reunion with a sister, the piecing-together of a home. Regeneration thus attaches to sequence: repetition preserves order across time even when the medium of relation shifts (letters to God → to kin → to the world). This mirrors the cross-media stability of procedures documented for palaeoart—continuities that persist when substrates change because what is stored is a “how”, not a “what” (Bednarik 2014; Malafouris 2013). Celie's work turns coerced reproduction and domestic labour into communal renewal, reframing reproduction as the maintenance of a social world.

Care in Walker's narrative is taught as capacity, not sentiment. Shug's admonition—“I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple . . . and don't notice it.” (Walker 2022, p. 196)—recasts attention as devotion: to notice is to honour, and honouring trains action. Celie learns to place bodies and obligations so that protection, provisioning and recognition can occur; she also learns to refuse placements that encode harm. Sewing, gardening, hosting and listening become modalities of potency: practices that make persons and sustain order. Read as exograms, these practices are memory devices that stabilise “how to care” in public, repeatable form (Assmann 2011; Donald 1991).

In all, Celie's self-awakening activates the same four operators identified in women-centred palaeoart—boundary mediation, authorised voice, regeneration, care—without presuming a line of descent. The novel clarifies what “afterlives of symbols” means in

procedural terms: externalised logics travel as reusable operations for making worlds, not as fixed motifs. Rock faces and letters are different media of the same cultural work: staging thresholds, licensing address, maintaining sequence and training attention under women's authority.

5. Comparative Discussion: Afterlives of Symbols

Read together, the rock-art dossiers and Celie's epistolary arc show continuity of procedures, not motifs. What persists is a way of organising passage, speech, renewal and care that is externalised in different media and relearned in new situations. This is what "afterlives of symbols" denotes here: procedural reactivation across substrates, without implying lineage or essence (Assmann 2011; Bednarik 2014; Didi-Huberman 2002; Donald 1991).

The bridge is worldview externalisation. In material form, southern African panels stage thresholds, permission and repetition on the rock face; elder women curate access, timing and correction (Eastwood 2005; Lewis-Williams 2015; Namono 2023; Zubieta 2006, 2016). In textual form, *The Color Purple* sequences the same operations in letters that move from private prayer to communal address, licensing voice and restaging boundaries (Walker 2022). In social form, both corpora show care as taught capacity: bodies and obligations are placed so protection, provisioning and recognition can occur; practices are made public and repeatable (Geertz 1973; Malafouris 2013). Media shift, function holds: what travels is a how, not a what (Bednarik 2014; Donald 1991).

This framing also clarifies method. Treating female imagery as "decorative" loses the very engines of cultural continuity. Panels operate as procedural archives—exogrammatic "how-to" stores that choreograph limen-crossing, licensed address, cohort renewal and oriented care (Bednarik 2014; Donald 1991). Texts can do the same work when they stabilise who may speak, who may witness, what must be repeated and where care is due. Neither corpus requires descent from the other; both instantiate women's procedural authority as the means by which worlds are made again.

Implications for palaeoart follow. First, description should foreground orchestration: face-level superimposition sequences; edge vs interior adjacencies; approach/visibility geometry; patterned reuse; and audience formation relative to women's custodianship (Eastwood 2005; Namono 2023; Zubieta 2016). Where such data are thin, interpretation should stop at iconography; where orchestration is clear, procedural readings are warranted. Second, comparison should be cross-modal and non-genealogical: rock, text and practice can be aligned by shared operators rather than by presumed transmission (Assmann 2011; Didi-Huberman 2002). Third, theory should centre symbolic logics—not as themes, but as portable operators that reproduce social order under women's guidance.

The broader claim is simple. Across deep time and into the present, women's authority is not ancillary to cosmology; it generates the conditions of cultural survival by licensing passage, allocating voice, renewing sequence and training care. Rock faces and letters are different instruments of the same work. To recognise their afterlives is to give these operators their proper place at the core of palaeoart theory—and to acknowledge the long, public labour by which women keep worlds in motion.

6. Conclusions

Across the dossiers considered, women's imagery in African rock art resolves into durable symbolic logics. Panels do more than portray figures: they stage thresholds, allocate voice, structure continuity, and teach care in public, repeatable ways—ongoing externalisations of a worldview. Significance therefore resides in operations rather than

motifs, answering the question of how such imagery can be read as living logics rather than relics.

Viewing panels as exograms clarifies the interpretive gain. Superimposition sequences, edge-focused adjacencies, managed approach and vantage, patterned reuse, and audience formation together store “how-to” knowledge that later cohorts can reactivate. With the sequence as the tractable unit, interpretation becomes cumulative and testable: documentation can target orchestration—face-level layering, edge/interior contrasts, approach and visibility/acoustics, recurrence, and role rosters—rather than stop at iconographic inventory. This addresses what is gained by shifting from “subjects” to externalised procedures.

A third finding concerns afterlives of symbols. When these operations reappear in other media and practices, what persists is not a transmitted image but a way of making practice that can be reassembled without presuming descent. This is the comparative value of the approach: it detects re-articulation of persistent configurations across substrates while remaining agnostic about lineage. In this sense, afterlives are procedural, not genealogical.

Methodologically, the contribution is a symbolic-semiotic framework for palaeoart that is portable beyond region, period, or subject. The African cases provide the clearest demonstration and prominently register women’s custodianship; the framework itself is not bounded by them. Any corpus that preserves orchestration can be analysed with the same pipeline: diagnostics → candidate operators → tests of reactivation across media and practices. Elsewhere, different operators may emerge; the method is designed to let them surface from evidence rather than from expectation. To keep claims disciplined, an evidential RDA standard (recurrence, detail, anchoring) makes documentation strength explicit; it does not replace interpretation, but it separates data quality from inferential reach and helps resist convenient narratives.

Two practical paths follow. First, field and curation protocols can be tuned to capture procedure—panel-scale superimposition chains, edge/interior placements, approach routes and vantage, patterned reuse through time, and explicit records of who may see, speak and correct—so that diagnostics and operators can be derived replicably. Second, synthesis can test portability with carefully chosen comparanda in other domains (ritual, craft, caregiving), used strictly as heuristics to refine operator definitions and to guard against overreach.

What is finally at stake is larger than any one corpus. Palaeoart is among the earliest human technologies for binding time: a way to project organising logics into durable media so they outlast the moment of their making. Read through externalisation and exograms, ancient art becomes legible as a civic archive of symbolic constellations—reusable procedures for composing order, continuity and value. By formalising how such constellations can be detected, graded and compared, this essay points to a general programme for the study of symbolic life: comparative semiotics grounded in material evidence, conservative in inference, and capable of tracing how communities make worlds that endure.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/arts15070153/s1>, Supplementary S1. R/D/A Clarity Standard. Supplementary S2. R/D/A Breakdowns.

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