

# Animated motifs: A Systematic Analysis of Dance Scenes in the Rock Art of the Zimbabwean Plateau

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## Abstract

Dance is an activity intimately connected to music and sound. It has a social significance that extends well beyond mere entertainment, although does not exclude it. In this article, we aim to focus on dance in the archaeological record of southern Africa. This study specifically examines dance scenes depicted in rock art on the Zimbabwean plateau, with a focus on their iconography and social significance. The study follows the criteria established by Garfinkel and Díaz-Andreu et al. for recognising dance scenes in iconographic representations. These criteria serve as a reference point for reviewing information from ethnographic sources about dance in southern Africa. After describing the dance scenes published so far, the study cross-references the types of dances revealed in the rock art of the study area with the information from the ethnographic sources. The findings highlight the prominence of ritual dances, often gendered and involving altered states of consciousness, as central themes in the rock art. While this research provides a preliminary framework based on existing literature, it underscores the need for further fieldwork to uncover additional sites and explore the relationship between dance scenes and their surrounding landscapes.

## Keywords

Rock art – Dance – Zimbabwe – Southern Africa – Zimbabwe – Ethnography

## 1 Introduction

Dance is defined as “human behaviour comprising purposeful, intentionally rhythmical and culturally patterned sequences of non-verbal body movements. Distinct from ordinary motor activities, this motion (in time, in space, and with effort) has an inherent and ‘aesthetic’ value and sym-

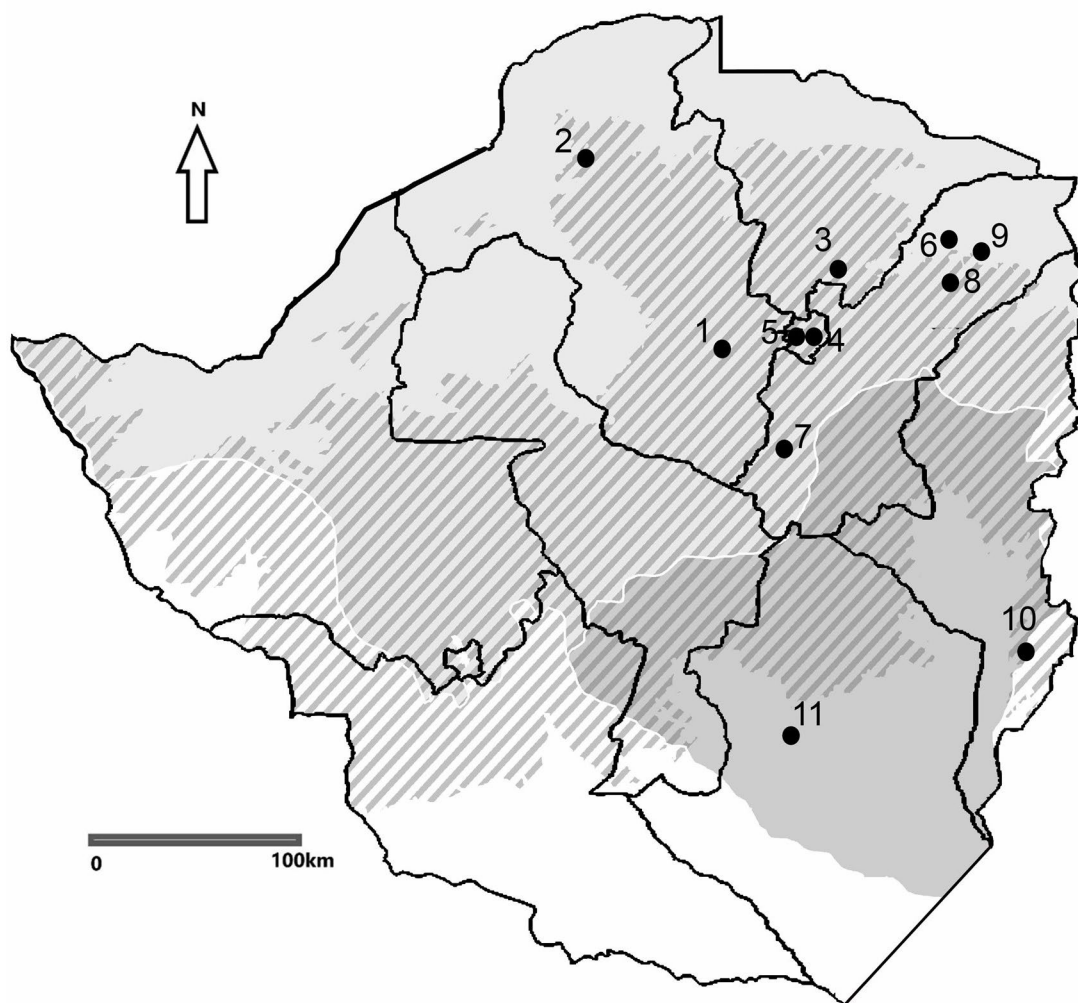


Figure 1: Map of Zimbabwe indicating the rock art sites described in the article. The striped area represents the Zimbabwean plateau, with the lighter shaded area corresponding to the Zambezi River basin and the darker shaded area indicating the Save River basin. The blank area refers to the Limpopo basin. The rock art sites are spread across five provinces in Zimbabwe: Mashonaland West: 1. Chivero, 2. Makonde; Mashonaland Central: 3. Chikupu; Harare: 4. Epworth, 5. Glen Norah; Mashonaland East: 6. Charewa, 7. Chivhu, 8. Mucheka, 9. Mutoko; Manicaland: 10. Chipinge; Masvingo: 11. Mudadi. Image: M. Díaz-Andreu and J. Kumbani.

bolic potential”.<sup>1</sup> In most cultures, dance is combined with music, another patterned action in time. Both are considered signalling systems.<sup>2</sup> Dance is social behaviour, performed individually or, more often, by groups, extending beyond mere entertainment. Dance is regarded as universal among preindustrial societies.<sup>3</sup> This article explores painted rock art scenes depicting dances on the Zimbabwean Plateau, primarily in the Zambezi and Save river basins (Figure 1). This desktop-based research focuses on published dances, examining whether dance categories from ethnographic sources appear in the art, as southern African rock art interpretations often rely on ethnography. The dances are presented through original photographs and tracings. We do not claim these are the only dance scenes in Zimbabwe; further fieldwork may reveal more.

<sup>1</sup> On the definition of dance see Hanna 2010: 180.

<sup>2</sup> Hagen and Bryant 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Garfinkel 1998; Garfinkel 2018; Dunbar 2012; Lewis 2013.

Research into dance has a long history in disciplines like art history and archaeology. Unfortunately, reconstructing dance in archaeology is difficult due to limited sources. Methods include analysing data from written sources and graphic representations of dances.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Zimbabwe, there is a lack of sources that identify dances in material culture frescoes, sculptures, figurines, or pottery but, as this article will explore, there is evidence of dances in rock art scenes. In southern Africa, the type of rock art in which the dancing scenes are depicted can be dated from the second millennium BP.<sup>5</sup> However, depending on the area, paintings continued to be produced until relatively recently. For example, in the Limpopo-Shashe Confluence Area farmers were making rock art around the 1910s. The missionary and anthropologist, Samuel Shaw Dornan, explained that:

“The Masarwas of the Sansokwe River still continue to paint, according to their own statements to me. There were at least quite lately three painters amongst this branch of the tribe, Nshimane, Boiyii and Chiyaii.”<sup>6</sup>

There have been some proposals from archaeologists about the potential acoustic properties of the sites, which may have been ideal places at which to perform dances. Sven Ouzman suggested paying attention to the non-visual aspects of rock art, like sound.<sup>7</sup> Other works were done in Klipbak I, in Didima and in the Kamberg and Giants’ Castle areas.<sup>8</sup>

Dances in southern African rock art were documented decades ago. George Stow reproduced dancing scenes from the Eastern Cape and Free State,<sup>9</sup> and Henri Breuil<sup>10</sup> described small figures as dancers at Namibia’s White “Lady” site, later suggesting the central figure and others in the Drakensberg depicted dancing. Later, Cranmer Cooke alluded to dances at Epworth and Bushman Point in Zimbabwe.<sup>11</sup> From around the 1980s it became common for authors to refer to dance scenes mainly from Zimbabwe and South Africa.<sup>12</sup> Some of the scenes from South Africa were included in a general discussion of dance scenes in archaeology by Yosef Garfinkel. However, some of his proposals were disputed by David Lewis-Williams, sparking some debate. For instance, Garfinkel mentioned that, “The case of the Bushmen of South Africa shows that there is no direct correlation between the importance of dance in daily life and the importance of the dance motif

<sup>4</sup> For a background in dance studies and methodology see Garfinkel 1998; Garfinkel 2010.

<sup>5</sup> For examples of scientific dating of San rock art in southern Africa see Lombard et al. 2012, Bonneau et al. 2012; Bonneau et al. 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Dornan (1917: 49) explains the making of rock art in Limpopo Province of South Africa around the 1900s.

<sup>7</sup> Ouzman (2001: 237) was looking at the relationship of art and sound.

<sup>8</sup> Acoustic studies in South Africa have been undertaken at Klipbak 1, Northwest Province (Rifkin 2009), Didima, KwaZulu Natal Province (Mazel 2011) and Kamberg and Giant Castle areas (Santos da Rosa et al. 2025).

<sup>9</sup> Dorothea Bleek published Stow’s rock art copies, which included depictions of art from the Eastern Cape and Free State Provinces in South Africa. Among these recordings are representations of dances.

<sup>10</sup> About Breuil in Africa see Hurel 2011 and Le Quellec 2010. The so-called White “Lady” is actually a male figure. Breuil’s identification of individuals dancing may have been influenced by his knowledge of Spanish Levantine rock art, where dance scenes had already been identified.

<sup>11</sup> Cooke (1974: 24) mentions dances in Epworth and Bushman Point close to lake Chivero.

<sup>12</sup> For Zimbabwe, cf. Garlake 1987a, 1995; Huffman 1983; Nhamo 2012; for South Africa, cf. Lewis-Williams 1981; Lewis-Williams 1998; Lewis-Williams 2013; Eastwood 1999; Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004; Vinnicombe 1976.

in the symbolic expression of the same communities...”.<sup>13</sup> In response David Lewis-Williams commented that Garfinkel was wrong to assume that dance was less represented in the Drakensberg Mountains. He also indicated that when Megan Bieseles speaks about the frequent metaphors of the trance dance found in the San Ju’hoan folklore, one could see what he calls ‘nuggets’, i.e. key parts of the myth that are not fully explained (or, in our case, painted) because knowledge about them is taken for granted.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Lewis-Williams argued that the panels do not display bounded compositions, but rather “open-ended networks of meaning” intertwined in what he calls a fragmentary mode of composition. More recently, Eastwood and Eastwood identified many girls’ initiation dances depicted in the central Limpopo area whereas Parkington and Paterson have recognised the representation of male initiation events in the dance scenes of the rock art sites in the Western Cape.<sup>15</sup>

Many scenes in rock art are ambiguous and, as an intangible practice, there is a greater possibility of the meaning of dance scenes being unclear. That is why we have approached this current research with the conviction that some basic standards are needed to accept particular groups of figures as dance scenes based on well-established arguments. Here we are following the criteria established in 2021<sup>16</sup> (Table 1) following proposals first devised by Yosef Garfinkel (1998).<sup>17</sup> After reviewing ethnographic sources about dance among the San in Southern Africa, we describe all published rock art sites with dance scenes in the Zimbabwean plateau that fulfil the established criteria. Exceptions to this are Cairnsmore, near Darwendale, where Roger Summers mentioned that there were two dancing figures painted in white.<sup>18</sup> In our opinion, however, there is nothing to indicate that Summers’ interpretation was correct. He also saw a row of seated women at Carolina Farm (now Chivero 4) and he identified them as participating in a seated dance, but we have found no ethnographic information about such a dance.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, identifying dance in rock art is complicated. Finally, Nhamo mentions some dancing figures at Nyakamupata 1.<sup>20</sup> However, as

<sup>13</sup> Garfinkel 1998: 209.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis-Williams (2016: 43, 62) refers to Bieseles (1993) who discusses some trance metaphors mentioned in ethnography and their relationships to the rock art.

<sup>15</sup> Eastwood and Eastwood 2006; Parkington and Paterson 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Santos da Rosa et al 2021; Díaz-Andreu et al. 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Since 1998 Garfinkel (1998: 209–210) has extensively written on the representation of dance scenes on ceramic and rock art located in the Near East and Europe. He never systematized the criteria he was using, but mentioned dynamism in the body posture of the characters, synchrony in their gestures, a certain uniformity in the direction of their movements, and regular spacing between individuals to express rhythm. Santos et al. (2021), then working for the ERC Artsoundscapes project, systematized Garfinkel’s criteria for interpreting dance scenes, distinguishing between essential and commonly observed elements. This framework was further elucidated in a table presented by the same authors of this article in 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Summers (1959: 44, Fig. 18) provides a painting from Cairnsmore in Zimbabwe which he identifies as a dance scene, but his reproduction does not convince to be regarded as such. At any rate, the photo in his book is of a too bad quality to be reproduced in this article.

<sup>19</sup> Summers (1959: 47, Fig. 19) provides an image of the seated women, which Nhamo (2012: 309, Plate 133a) reproduces in her dissertation.

<sup>20</sup> Nyakamupata site is located in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe near Nyanga and is said to have dance depictions. It is mentioned by Nhamo (2012) in her PhD thesis.

a recording of this scene has not yet been published we have decided not to include it here. A review of unpublished dance rock art sites in the region is beyond the scope of this study.

## 2 Ethnography: a background to dancing in Southern Africa

Ethnographic accounts often highlight the significance of dance among southern African hunter-gatherer communities. Key sources include Lorna Marshall's 1950s study of the Nyae Nyae !Kung San, Namibia, and Richard Katz's 1970s research on the Ju'hoansi Kalahari Desert !Kung in Namibia and Botswana.<sup>21</sup> Bieseke, Wilhelm Bleek, and Lucy Lloyd also reference dance in their works.<sup>22</sup> Marshall observed that dances were a common activity among the San, noting:

"In our close association with the many !Kung there, we had the opportunity to observe more social interaction, such as sharing meat with a large number of people present, to see more activities that take place in an encampment, such as the making or mending of artifacts, to see more *dances* and games, to hear more music, more talk, more telling of tales..."<sup>23</sup>

Marshall described music and dance as the Bushman's greatest arts, noting their persistence even in challenging times, such as the uninterrupted dances during a drought in the Gam area.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Megan Bieseke argued that dance unified the community, promoting egalitarianism and tolerance among the hunter-gatherers, stating:

"It brings the diverse of individuals of a band into vital contact with each other in such a way that the uniqueness of each is felt as a contribution to group life rather than as a threat to it."<sup>25</sup>

### 2.1 *Types of dances according to the ethnographic sources*

The ethnographic literature on the San people identifies three main types of dances: those for enjoyment, those celebrating significant events, and ritual dances. Regarding the dances for enjoyment, the published accounts note that many dances served purely for pleasure. Marshall notes that the !Kung – men, women, or children – would dance spontaneously, tapping their feet rhythmically or imitating familiar sounds.<sup>26</sup> Children often incorporated dance into their games, while in the evenings, singing and dancing were common, sometimes accompanied by a ||gwashi.<sup>27</sup> During the day, middle-aged or teenage boys and girls danced for fun, often near pans (open spaces in

<sup>21</sup> Marshall 1969; Marshall 1976; Katz 1982.

<sup>22</sup> Bieseke (1978; 1993), Bleek (1889), and Bleek and Lloyd (1911) refer to ethnographic dances in their publications.

<sup>23</sup> This quotation from Marshall (1976: 8) emphasises various activities among the !Kung which also included dance and music.

<sup>24</sup> Marshall (1976: 77, 304) refers to music and dance as part of the arts of the Bushman, and Marshall (1969: 353) refers to the resilience of dances which were done during difficult times.

<sup>25</sup> Bieseke (1993: 77) refers to the bond caused by music and dance.

<sup>26</sup> Marshall (1976: 351) indicates how the San enjoyed making music.

<sup>27</sup> Marshall 1976: 320.

ANALYSIS CRITERIA			Relevance
GROUP 1	Dancers		
Criterion 1a	Dancers' body posture	Dynamic, with arms and/or legs flexed, arms raised, back bent or curved.	Essential
Criterion 1b	Objects or ornaments carried by the dancers	Weapons, hairstyles, headdresses, body adornments, etc.	Common
GROUP 2	Dance		
Criterion 2a	Type of dance according to the number of individuals	Individual, in pairs, circular collective or linear collective dances.	Not applicable
Criterion 2b	Dancers' gender	In collective dances, the dancers in a given group are usually of the same gender, although in some cases there may be female and male individuals but usually divided into gendered subgroups.	Essential
Criterion 2c	Type of interaction between the dancers	The dancers are usually depicted close to each other, keeping approximately equal distances, in physical contact with the other characters or without touching them.	Essential
		The individuals involved in the action must exhibit similar body postures indicating the performance of the same type of movement.	Essential
Criterion 2d	Direction of dance movement	In dances with two or more characters, the direction of the movements is usually uniform.	Common
		Individuals can dance at the same point, performing vertical movements or moving horizontally in space, with movements to the right or left (clockwise or counter-clockwise in circular dances).	Essential

Table 1: Criteria adopted to consider a scene as a dance, largely based on the analytical parameters established by Garfinkel (2003: 27–102). The last column indicates the importance of the criterion by distinguishing between those that are essential, i.e. those whose absence implies the elimination of the dance character of the scene, and those that are common, the absence of which does not necessarily imply impugning the representation of this activity: Díaz-Andreu et al. (2022, Table 1).

the desert). Women also joined girls in rhythmic dance games. Some leisure dances mimicked animals, such as the !Khomani's baboon dance, where participants imitated baboon movements, with males dancing toward females.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to dances for enjoyment, circumstantial dances also marked specific events, though they are less frequently described in the literature. For instance, Marshall<sup>29</sup> mentions old women performing a dance to praise a man who hunted an ostrich. In the Gautscha area, she observed six instances where successful hunts, especially of large animals like eland or giraffe,<sup>30</sup> inspired camp dances. The !Khomani Bushmen danced to celebrate newlywed couples.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> This description of the !Khomani Bushmen was provided by Doke (1936) cited in Barnard (1992: 89).

<sup>29</sup> Marshall 1976: 143.

<sup>30</sup> For the first example of hunting ostrich, cf. Marshall 1976: 143, for the second, cf. Marshall 1969: 355.

<sup>31</sup> Doke (1936) cited by Barnard (1992: 89) mentions the dance to celebrate newlyweds as an example of circumstantial dance.

The final major category of San dances is tied to rituals. These include the Eland Dance, performed during the first menstruation rite, and the Men's Dance, a male initiation rite known as *Tshoma* or *Choma*,<sup>32</sup> though Marshall provides little detail on the latter, as she never witnessed it.<sup>33</sup> The most prominent ritual dance was the medicine dance, also called the curing, trance, or healing dance.<sup>34</sup> Marshall describes it as a central rite that "overshadows all others." In this dance, men acted as curers, or *n/um k"xausi* – "owners" of the magical medicine, *n/um*. They entered trance states to heal and protect the community. Monthlong ceremonies involving dancing, instruction, hunting, and ritual tattooing were also held by the !Xo and western Nharo.<sup>35</sup>

Drum dance was a ritual dance performed by women. Katz mentioned that drum dances were relatively rare and some women would reach an altered state of consciousness. He explained that:

"... the main instigation for a Drum dance comes from the appearance of powerful women healer-teachers in the camp. Women experienced in the num of the Drum dance travel around to different camps, initiating dances and giving other women num. They function like a "Traveling festival," stimulating dances and the activation of num by their very presence."<sup>36</sup>

Lorna Marshall reported that during her fieldwork among the Nyae Nyae in the 1950s, she had not observed the use of drums. However, she later noted that by 1961, the instrument had been introduced and was being played by boys during her visit.<sup>37</sup>

Ritual dances also highlight themes of gender roles, age identity, and altered states of consciousness. Among the San, women played a supportive but synchronized role with men, acting as music makers who aided the *n/um k"xausi* but did not serve as curers in the medicine dance.<sup>38</sup> Children often mimicked the curing dance in their play. Altered states of consciousness were not exclusive to the medicine dance; they also occurred during *Tshoma* and special curing sessions. Nicholas England's informants noted trance experiences during these rites as well. However, we note that there is an overlap among the three dance types, and this sometimes poses a challenge when identifying dancing scenes in the rock art.

## 2.2 Dance criteria and ethnography

Ethnographic studies of the San offer valuable insights into the two major criteria for identifying dances in rock art scenes, as outlined in Table 1: the dancers themselves and the type and characteristics of the dances.

<sup>32</sup> Marshall 1969: 347; Marshall 1976: 364; Katz 1982: 51.

<sup>33</sup> Marshall (1969: 373) did not witness any male initiation dance rites, but he refers to Nicholas England's work.

<sup>34</sup> Medicine dance is referred to through various terms; for example, curing (Marshall 1976), trance (Guenther 1975), and healing (Katz 1982).

<sup>35</sup> Barnard 1992: 71.

<sup>36</sup> For a description of the Drum Dance, see Katz 1982: 164.

<sup>37</sup> Marshall (1976: 60, 364, 365) discusses the later introduction of drums among the Nyae Nyae region.

<sup>38</sup> Marshall 1976: 179.

### 2.2.1 *Criterion 1a: Dancers' body posture*

Body posture is crucial for identifying a scene as a dance. Anthropologists, including Marshall, provide detailed descriptions of these postures. For example, in the men's dance or *Tshoma*, dancers perform small, regulated foot-stamping steps with outstretched arms, avoiding wild or exaggerated movements. Marshall further notes that men dance with slightly bent knees and bodies held erect or leaning forward, bent at the hips. As she states:

"Many of the men move their bodies so little that they are like statues being carried by the dancing legs, but some give variation to the posture by swinging their torsos a little from side to side, and some when they are dancing very ardently bend forward until their torsos are at right angles to their thighs. The arms have no fixed positions. They may hang at the men's sides, or be extended at shoulder level, or be bent at the elbow."<sup>39</sup>

Girls participated in various dances, often accompanied by singing and clapping, which featured distinctive movements such as linear patterns, jumping, and twisting. One style involved the girls moving slightly forward while stamping their feet intermittently, then repeating the pattern as they moved backward. The caterpillar dance emphasized shoulder, neck, and head movements, paired with a slight outward push of the chin, repeated twice. This was followed by a small hop forward and a backward step. In the jumping dance, two girls faced each other, singing and jumping in unison.<sup>40</sup>

### 2.2.2 *Criterion 1b: Objects and ornaments carried by the dancers*

Ethnographic studies of the modern San provide abundant information on objects and ornaments used during dances. Men often danced holding giraffe, eland, or wildebeest tails, as well as fly-whisks. They typically wore breechclouts and aprons, with some adding skin caps or headbands decorated with ostrich feathers. Dancing sticks served multiple purposes: they were used as walking sticks during trance states, swung above seated women, or simply held. Women wore bands and beads, while most men adorned themselves with cocoon leg rattles, which produced rhythmic sounds that complemented foot stamping.<sup>41</sup>

The second major criterion focuses on the characteristics of the dances, including the number of participants (Criterion 2a), gender (2b), interaction between dancers (2c), and dance direction (2d, essential only in part, see Table 1).

### 2.2.3 *Criterion 2a: Number of participants*

Marshall observed individual, paired, and collective dances among the 20<sup>th</sup>-century San. Individual dances were performed solo,<sup>42</sup> while paired dances included the jumping dance, where two girls

<sup>39</sup> Marshall 1969: 363.

<sup>40</sup> Marshall (1976: 320, 330) describes various dances that were performed by girls.

<sup>41</sup> For the objects and ornaments used by modern San during dances, see Marshall 1969: 358; Marshall 1976: 129, 306, 325.

<sup>42</sup> Marshall 1976.



faced each other, held hands, and sang, and the twisting dance, also performed by pairs of girls. Male Nharo Bushman dancers also performed in pairs. Collective dances, both linear and circular, were widespread. For instance, in girls' ball dance-games, participants danced in a circle, singing and clapping as the ball was passed underhand to someone behind them. The ritual curing dance was a circular dance performed around a fire at the centre of the circle.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, linear and circular dances could occur together during the same event, as seen in the Tsi tsi gwara game-dance, which combined both styles.<sup>44</sup>

#### 2.2.4 Criterion 2b: Gender

Ethnographic sources indicate that both men and women participated in San dances, with all ages represented in some dance categories. However, certain dances were gender-exclusive. Children's games featured dances divided by gender, while adult dances like the *Tshoma* (male initiation) and the Eland Dance (first menstruation rite) were exclusive to men and women, respectively.<sup>45</sup> The male initiation dance only involved men,<sup>46</sup>

with boys' initiation kept secret from women and performed away from the camp, as noted by Barnard.<sup>47</sup> In the medicine dance, men were the primary dancers, while women sang and clapped. Occasionally, group members switched roles during the performance.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, the Eland Dance was performed exclusively by women, as illustrated in recordings identified by San women interviewed by the Eastwoods<sup>49</sup> (see Figure 2).

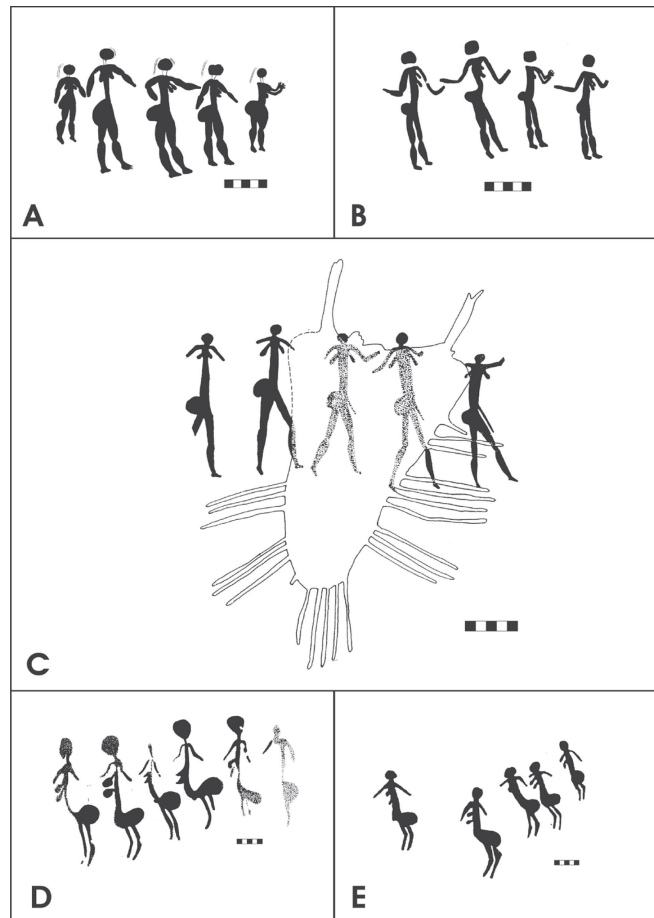


Figure 2: Images of groups of female figures similar to those shown by Edward Eastwood to San women, identified by them as representations of the Eland Dance in a region to the south of the area discussed in this article, the Central Limpopo Basin. A and B: Makgabeng Plateau. C: Soutpansberg. D and E: LSCA. Scales 50 mm. Black represents red; white represents white; the apron in C is yellow (Eastwood 2005, Fig. 3).

<sup>43</sup> Marshall 1969; Marshall 1976.

<sup>44</sup> Marshall 1976.

<sup>45</sup> Marshall 1976: 330–48.

<sup>46</sup> Marshall 1969; Parkington and Paterson 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Barnard 1992: 71.

<sup>48</sup> Katz (1982: 65–66) mentions that sometimes roles during the dance overlap as far as singing and dancing is concerned.

<sup>49</sup> For women performing Eland Dance, see Marshall 1969; Marshall 1976; Barnard 1992; Eastwood 2005; Keeney and Keeney 2013.

### 2.2.5 Criterion 2c: Dancer interaction

This criterion focuses on two key aspects of dancer interaction: 1) the distance between them, and 2) the synchronization of their movements. Katz notes that during the trance dance, men often dance close together, sometimes touching the person in front of them, with arms on shoulders or waists,<sup>50</sup> or, on another occasion, “ten persons are now dancing, bunched together, moving almost in unison.”<sup>51</sup>



Figure 3: Chivero dance: Nhamo 2012, Fig. 115a.

Marshall also discusses movement synchronization in dances, particularly in games, where boys and girls dance in unison without touching, although they remain in each other's presence, responding together to the rhythm.<sup>52</sup> However, in certain dances, such as the twisting dance, girls may touch each other. In this case, they hold hands by hooking their index fingers. In another example, a girl might lean on the back of the girl in front of her, and they may fall over together, still holding on to each other, and lie on the ground briefly.<sup>53</sup>

### 2.2.6 Criterion 2d: Direction of the dance movement

Criterion 2d examines two aspects of dance direction: the uniformity of dancers' movements and the overall direction of the dance. The uniform direction of movement is not essential for identifying a scene as a dance, though it is often present in ethnographic descriptions, such as when dancers move in unison. The direction of the dance, however, is crucial and is explicitly mentioned in the ethnographic record. Circular dances can be either clockwise or counterclockwise; for example, the *Tsi tsi gwara* game<sup>54</sup> features a counterclockwise circular movement. In the curing dance, dancers begin counterclockwise and change direction several times<sup>55</sup> throughout the performance. Additionally, some dances involve dancers moving forward, backward, or sideways, either in unison or in turns.

## 3 Dance scenes in the Zimbabwean plateau

In this section the rock art sites are described following the provincial boundaries; within each province sites are arranged in alphabetical order corresponding to the numbering of the sites on the map (Figure 1).

<sup>50</sup> Katz (1982: 64) describes how men danced close to each other in a procession.

<sup>51</sup> Katz 1982: 70.

<sup>52</sup> Marshall 1976: 320–21.

<sup>53</sup> Marshall (1976: 331) demonstrates how girls and boys were not supposed to touch each other when dancing.

<sup>54</sup> Marshall (1976: 353–54) describes direction of movement during dances.

<sup>55</sup> Marshall 1969: 262.

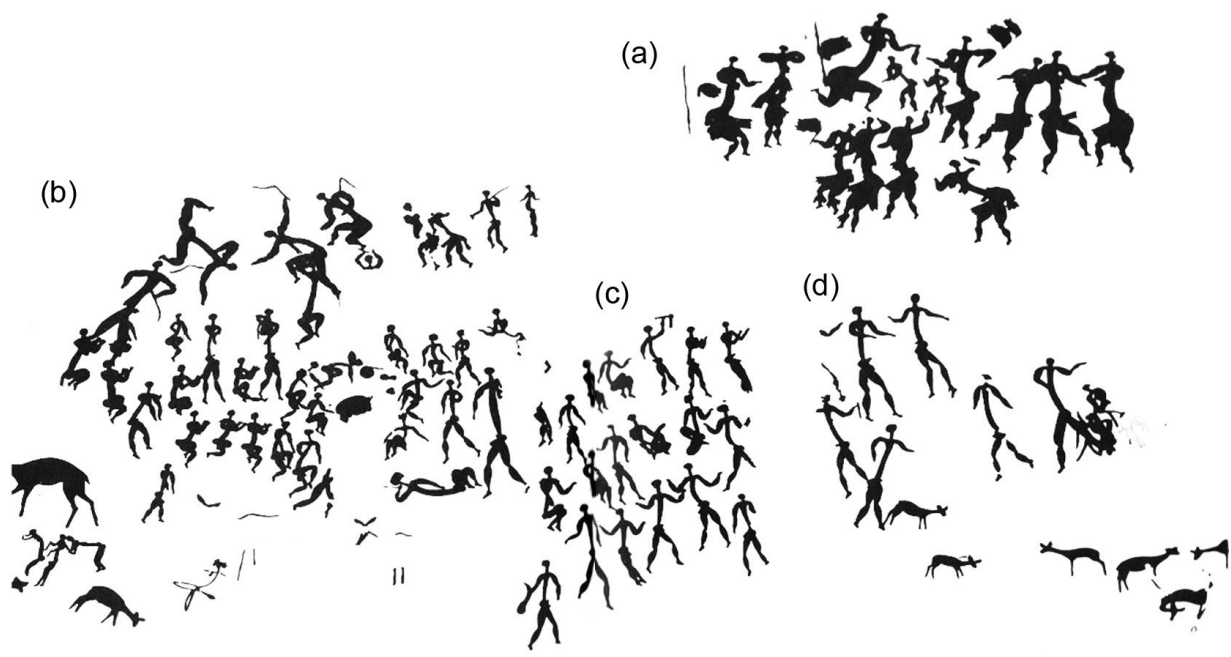


Figure 4: Makonde dance: Garlake 1995, Fig. 73.

### 3.1 Mashonaland West Province

#### 3.1.1 Chivero 4 site

At Chivero 4 near Lake Chivero, a dance scene (Figure 3) depicts five men slightly bending forward, wearing aprons, and positioned in synchrony with outstretched arms. Although Nhamo suggests these are women, they lack the usual features like breasts and extended backs.<sup>56</sup> The panel also includes animals, trees, fish, and humans,<sup>57</sup> with rattles<sup>58</sup> also reported. Below the dancers are thirteen seated, limbless humans, previously identified by Summers<sup>59</sup> as dancing women – a view we dispute, as ethnography shows seated women typically clap and sing while men dance during medicine dances. This could represent a trance dance with the figures in single file.

#### 3.1.2 Makonde

At Makonde, a scene depicts a large gathering of dancers<sup>60</sup> and antelopes (Figure 4), that can be subdivided into four sections (a, b, c, d). It is unclear if this represents one large dance or separate episodes. In the upper right (a), dancing women wear aprons, with flexed arms, bent legs, and forward-leaning postures, possibly performing a healing dance, known to draw crowds.<sup>61</sup> On the left

<sup>56</sup> Contra Nhamo (2012: 264, 386) we suggest the depicted figures are men.

<sup>57</sup> Further description of this panel is provided by Garlake (1987a: 74).

<sup>58</sup> Rattles are mentioned by Garlake (1987a: 74); still this needs to be confirmed, since none of the image reproductions provided by Garlake show such rattles.

<sup>59</sup> Summers 1959: 47.

<sup>60</sup> Garlake 1995: 66.

<sup>61</sup> Marshall (1969: 348–49) describes how people gathered in large numbers during the medicine dances.

(b), clapping women are shown below crouching, dancing males, some holding sticks, suggesting a trance or medicine dance. The lower middle section (c) features anthropomorphs with outstretched hands, clapping figures, and bent legs indicating dancing movement. In the lower right (d), a group of men with outstretched arms and bent legs also appears to be dancing.

### 3.2 *Mashonaland Central Province*

#### 3.2.1 *Chikupu*

The Chikupu caves feature two panels with dancing scenes, one painted on the roof of the northern cave.<sup>62</sup> It depicts thirty individuals, including seventeen with unusually shaped heads adorned with discs and antennae-like structures, possibly feathers used in dances. Thirteen similarly adorned figures are bent forward, closely positioned and synchronized, indicating a dance (Figure 5). Most face left in an organized pattern, except one man kneeling on one knee facing the opposite direction. Two others are outlined kneeling, and some figures wear aprons. This scene likely represents a circumstantial or ritualistic dance because of the unidentifiable paraphernalia carried by the dancers. These materials could have been carried during a circumstantial incident or could be ritual paraphernalia.



Figure 5: Dance scene at Chikupu northern cave: Garlake 1995, Fig. 76.

The second dance panel, painted at the front of the southern cave, depicts eighteen women and children dancing on its right side.<sup>63</sup> Four figures on the far right appear actively dancing, leaning slightly forward (Figure 6). Many wear spiked headgear, likely feathers used in dance regalia. Most have outstretched arms, holding short sticks or possible rattles, showing coherence in posture and direction. This suggests

<sup>62</sup> Extensively described by Garlake (1987a: 67); here, we only focus on the dancers.

<sup>63</sup> Garlake (1987a: 45) describes a scene of a women dance procession in the southern cave.





Figure 6: Dance scene at Chikupu southern cave: Garlake 1987, Fig. 66.

a ceremonial or ritual dance, likely a drum or eland dance, which are ethnographically performed exclusively by women.<sup>64</sup>

### 3.3 Harare Province

#### 3.3.1 Epworth 1, also known as Epworth Mission Farm

At Epworth, a male figure with bent knees, a bending posture, and holding a rattle is depicted wearing an animal cap and a tail (Figure 7). His posture suggests a dance. The scene also includes other humans seemingly uninvolved in the dance, along with elongated figures with animal heads or caps and seated individuals. In the bottom right, three dog-like animals are painted. This likely represents a ceremonial or trance scene.



Figure 7: Epworth dancer. Large-scale hand-painted copy of the rock art panel at Epworth Mission Farm or Epworth 1, Zimbabwe, by Elisabeth Mannsfeld (married name: Elizabeth Goodall); c. 1928–1930. Watercolour, 77 × 69.5 cm. Image courtesy of and copyright Frobenius-Institut, Frankfurt am Main; FBA-C1 01612.

#### 3.3.2 Glen Norah

At the Glen Norah site in Harare, Cooke describes a panel showing four evenly spaced men in forward-bending postures suggesting dance (Figure 8). Three have arms stretched downwards, while one has one arm stretched backward. Their postures display unanimity. They are accompanied by five figures with unusual heads and a smaller male figure to the right. Cooke interpreted the scene as a ritual dance

<sup>64</sup> Descriptions of eland and drum dances are provided, for example, by Marshall (1969; 1976) and Katz (1982).



Figure 8: Glen Norah dance. Picture by David Coulson taken in 1996. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum. © David Coulson/TARA.

or ceremony,<sup>65</sup> Huffman<sup>66</sup> suggested it depicted trance, and Garlake described it as full of potency. This likely represents a ritual dance,<sup>67</sup> possibly a *Tshoma* dance, where men perform at nearly right angles,<sup>68</sup> according to ethnographic descriptions.

### 3.4 Mashonaland East Province

#### 3.4.1 Charewa

The Charewa site, off the Harare to Mutoko main road, features a dance scene painted on the cave roof<sup>69</sup> in black and red, with red outlines (Figure 9). Twenty-one figures, including women with breasts and aprons, men, and children, are depicted in various postures such as raised bent knees, arms, recumbent, and supine positions. A smaller figure, possibly a child, is seated in the middle. This panel likely represents a circumstantial or entertainment dance involving men, women, and children, possibly a celebration, as ethnographic sources suggest men and women danced together without direct contact.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Cooke 1974: 24.

<sup>66</sup> Huffman (1983) hints that the panel may indicate trancing individuals.

<sup>67</sup> Garlake (1987b; 1990) suggested that the panel also shows a trance episode.

<sup>68</sup> Marshall (1969: 363) describes bending forward at almost right angle as a posture which was done during *Tshoma* or *Choma* dances.

<sup>69</sup> A description of the Charewa site is provided by Garlake (1987a: 8, 74).

<sup>70</sup> Examples of group dances are described by Marshall (1976) among the Nyae Nyae. She mentions that men and women could dance together but without touching each other, which is similar to the Charewa depictions.





Figure 9: Charewa site, Dance Scene 1: Garlake 1987a, Fig. 10.

Dance Scene 2 at Charewa depicts two figures in recumbent postures (Figure 10). These figures bend their upper bodies forward and backward,<sup>71</sup> adorned with bands on their arms and knees, possibly representing dancing beads known to have been worn for dances.<sup>72</sup> They have outstretched arms and bent legs, with their postures indicating coordination. The dancers are close together and facing the same direction, though there is insufficient information to determine the specific type of dance.



Figure 10: Charewa Dance Scene 2: Garlake 1987, Fig. 27.

### 3.4.2 Chivhu site

At Chivhu, a site features a two-headed snake with seven dancing therianthropes, half human and half antelope (Figure 11). The snake's heads also resemble antelope heads. Huffman interprets the panel as a trance scene.<sup>73</sup> The therianthropes have their arms stretched in different directions, indicating they are entering an altered state of consciousness during the dance.<sup>74</sup> The Bushmen spoke of transformations into animals.<sup>75</sup> The figures are sparsely painted: two at the bottom left, two in the middle, and three at the upper right. Despite

<sup>71</sup> A second dance from Charewa with two individuals is described by Garlake (1987: 19).

<sup>72</sup> Marshall (1969: 358) mentions that beads are worn as ornaments during dances and the lines on the hands, legs and abdomen from the Dance Scene 2, at Charewa may signify some beads.

<sup>73</sup> For the full description of the Chivhu site, see Huffman 1983.

<sup>74</sup> Arms backwards posture signifies a transformation into a trance realm and there are various scholars who expand on trance related postures, for example, Lewis-Williams 1981: 88; Lewis-Williams 1998; Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004; Lewis-Williams 2013; Guenther 2020: 53.

<sup>75</sup> Other stories of transformation into animals provided by the Bushman are described by Guenther (2020: 42–65).



Figure 11: Chivhu dance: Huffman 1983, Fig. 1.

some distortion, the therianthropes appear to be dancing, and three have tails. One figure on the right seems dead, possibly symbolizing trancing individuals undergoing a spiritual experience.

#### 3.4.3 *Mucheka*

The Mucheka dance scene features seven apparent males in various postures (Figure 12). Some are bent, while others stand with slightly bent knees, indicating dance postures. The figures hold objects identified by Garlake<sup>76</sup> as rattles. Six of the seven have tufts on their arms, possibly representing dancing regalia. Despite the lack of synchrony in their postures, we suggest the scene depicts dancers entering trance.



Figure 12: Mucheka dance. Photo by David Coulson taken in 1996. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum. © David Coulson/TARA.

#### 3.4.4 *Mutoko*

Garlake describes a scene from Mutoko with two crouching male dancers<sup>77</sup> (Figure 13). The dancer in front wears an apron, while the one behind seems to hold him at the waist, with two lines extending from his waistline, possibly representing an apron lifted by dance movements. Both figures have exaggerated noses and hunched backs due to their postures, and both show blood dripping from their noses, indicating a deep trance. This scene resembles one from Fetcan Bend in South Africa's Eastern Cape, where a man also has blood dripping from his nose, suggesting a similar trance experience.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Garlake 1987: 12.

<sup>77</sup> Garlake 1987: 12.

<sup>78</sup> Dripping of blood from the nose is synonymous with trance episodes. See, for example, Lewis-Williams 1981: 82; Lewis-Williams 1998: 87.



### 3.5 *Manicaland Province*

#### 3.5.1 *Chipinge*

At Chipinge,<sup>79</sup> a panel depicts seven women in single file, each wearing an apron (Figure 14). With outstretched arms, their postures do not suggest complex or ecstatic dance moves. Similar linear depictions of women in collective dances are found in the Limpopo basin of South Africa, often interpreted as women's dances linked to girls' puberty rites.<sup>80</sup> This Chipinge panel could represent a similar ritual.



Figure 13: Mutoko dance: Garlake 1995, Fig. 80.



Figure 14: Chipinge dance. Nhamo 2012, Pl. 134a.

### 3.6 *Masvingo Province*

#### 3.6.1 *Mudadi*

The Mudadi village site in Chivi district<sup>81</sup> features two panels, one facing east and the other south. The main panel is weathered, but the first panel shows images with red headbands and stripes on their legs and torso. Nine of the dancing figures, likely women with breasts (Figure 15), have arms on their waists and bent legs, moving left with uniform postures and equal spacing. This could represent a girl's puberty ceremonial dance, similar to those reported in the Limpopo basin in South Africa by Eastwood (2005).

<sup>79</sup> Nhamo 2012: 311.

<sup>80</sup> Eastwood (2005) describes the girls' initiation dances in the Limpopo Province of South Africa.

<sup>81</sup> Nhamo 2012: 179.



Figure 15: Mudadi dance: Nhamo 2012, Pl. 15a.

#### 4 Discussion

This section analyses the depiction of dances appearing in the rock art of Zimbabwe based on ethnographic accounts summarized earlier. Ethnographers emphasize the importance of music and dance among the San, reflected in the high number of sites depicting musical instruments<sup>82</sup> and dances. The literature identifies three types of dances: for enjoyment, for circumstantial events, and for rituals. This analysis assesses whether the dances identified in rock art can be categorized into these three types based on ethnographic descriptions and systematic identification. In the rock art of the Zimbabwean Plateau, most dances appear to be ritualistic, with only two possible exceptions: Chikupu northern cave and Dance Scene 1 from Charewa. At Chikupu northern cave, the dance scene may be interpreted as circumstantial; however, a ritual interpretation remains plausible due to the ambiguous nature of the paraphernalia carried by the dancers. These items lack diagnostic features, making it difficult to determine whether they were used in a specific situational context or as part of a ritual performance. Charewa Dance Scene 1 could be for entertainment or circumstantial events. For Charewa Dance Scene 2, there is insufficient information to determine the dance type. The exaggerated postures of the two dancers diverge from established ethnographic accounts, resulting in insufficient data to accurately classify the dance. Among the ritual dances, four scenes suggest figures in trance (Mucheka, Mutoko, Epworth, and Chivhu), while two others featuring women likely represent an eland or girls' puberty dance (Chipinge and Mudadi). At Glen Norah, the scene may depict a boy's puberty or *Tshoma* dance, as all the dancers

<sup>82</sup> The close relationship between dance and music is emphasised in a recently published article on musical instruments from Zimbabwe by Kumbani and Díaz-Andreu (2024).

are men in almost right-angled bending postures, as described by Marshall.<sup>83</sup> There appear to be no clear depictions of dances for enjoyment, except possibly in Charewa Dance Scene 1. However, the dancing scenes in Zimbabwean rock art require further investigation through extensive fieldwork to document and systematically analyse the dances. Our current analysis is preliminary, based on a small sample obtained from a literature review of earlier recordings of dancing scenes.

Coming to the criteria established in Table 1 and with regard to the postures of the figures making up the dance scenes (Criterion 1a), we observe that all scenes include individuals with the types of posture mentioned in the ethnographic literature, either bending, with bent legs or with outstretched arms. Concerning Criterion 1b, objects or ornaments, all those found in the rock art are also alluded to in the literature: the individuals depicted in most dance scenes are shown holding various items, including sticks, and musical instruments such as rattles, and flywhisks. They also wear head adornments featuring elements like discs and feathers. There are two sites where the dancing figures do not show any ornamentation, Glen Norah and Mudadi. This is not problematic since Criterion 1b is common, but not essential (Table 2).

Concerning the dances depicted at the rock art sites (Criterion 2, see Table 3), four elements are highlighted in Table 1: the type of dance according to the number of individuals; the dancers' gender; the type of interaction between the dancers and the direction of the dance movement. All dance types (Criterion 2b) are found at the rock art sites in the Zimbabwean plateau, although there is only one example of both an individual dance – at Epworth – and a pair dance – at Charewa Dance Scene 2. As regards Mutoko, we could perhaps identify it as an individual dancer going into trance who is accompanied by a helper. At the remaining sites the dances represented in the rock art are collective, both linear and circular. The consideration of linear dances at Chipinge and Mudadi suggests that these may represent Eland Dances, performed exclusively by women. The represented scenes can clearly be defined as linear, though at least some of the photographs of the Eland Dance show that the line of dancers followed a circular pattern.<sup>84</sup> This is because we are dealing with static images in the art and sometimes the circle may not be clearly visible or is completely absent.

In terms of gender (Criterion 2b), most dance scenes are divided along gendered lines. Ethnography similarly refers to dances along gendered lines. However, at one site, Makonde, there are examples of both genders, with only slightly more male dances represented. The only play or circumstantial dance we suggest is depicted in Charewa Dance Scene 1. It represents men, women and children participating in the same dance. Interestingly the interaction between dancers (Criterion 2c), which is considered essential in Table 1, works well with representations of individuals not in trance. But it does not match trance depictions, since consequently individuals in trance

<sup>83</sup> Marshall (1969: 363) describes *Tshoma* or *Choma* dance as having a characteristic of dancers bending their bodies sharply.

<sup>84</sup> For examples of circular dances, see Eastwood 2005: Fig. 5; for a similar arrangement in a mainly male dance, see Marshall 1969, Photo 1.

Site name	Province	Dancers' body posture (essential criterion)	Objects or ornaments (commonly found criterion)
Makonde	Mashonaland West Province	Dynamic, with arms and/or legs flexed, arms raised, back bent or curved	Sticks and flywhisks
Chikupu northern cave	Mashonaland Central Province	Bodies bent, although different postures	Heads adorned with discs, antennae-like objects protruding from head, possible tails or aprons
Chikupu southern cave	Mashonaland Central Province	Most of the figures have outstretched arms	Headgear resembling spikes, possibly feathers. Most figures hold short sticks. At least one appears to be holding a rattle
Chivero 4	Mashonaland West Province	Figures bending forward with outstretched arms	The men are wearing aprons
Glen Norah	Harare Province	Reclining postures	None
Epworth	Harare Province	Bent knees and a bending posture	The dancer is wearing an animal cap and tail and holding a stick in one hand and a rattle in the other
Mucheka	Mashonaland East Province	Some figures are shown in bending or recumbent (lying down) positions, while others are upright with slightly bent knees	Dancers are holding objects that Garlake identifies as rattles (although they may not be); tufts on the arms in six out of seven figures
Charewa Dance Scene 1	Mashonaland East Province	Arms raised, stretched downwards, bent knees	Five women have back aprons
Charewa Dance Scene 2	Mashonaland East Province	Arms stretched, legs bent, bent upper bodies	Stripes on hands, legs and abdomen
Mutoko	Mashonaland East Province	Crouching figures, bending knees	Individuals possibly wearing animal caps
Chivhu site	Mashonaland East Province	Arms stretched backwards, downwards and upwards	Three of the therianthropes are depicted with tails
Chipinge	Manicaland Province	Arms outstretched, upper bodies slightly bent forward	Wearing back aprons
Mudadi	Masvingo Province	Arms with hands at the waist, bent legs	None

Table 2: Summary of findings regarding dancers or Criteria 1 of Table 1 in connection with the essential Criterion 1a, dancers' body posture, and the common, but not essential, Criterion 1b of objects or ornaments.



Site name	Province	Criterion 2a Type of dance (N/A)	Criterion 2b Gender (E)	Criterion 3.1 Interaction (E) (i)	Criterion 3.2 Interaction (E) (2)	Criterion 4.1 Direction (C) (1)	Criterion 4.2 Direction (C) (2)
Makonde	Mashonaland West Province	Three collective circular	Male dance and female dance	Close but not touching	Similar body postures	Generally, this is the case. In some cases, the dancers face each other	Generally, this is the case
Chikupu northern cave	Mashonaland Central Province	Collective linear?	Only men	Close but not touching	Several individuals bent, but others with more upright postures	All the individuals show an organised pattern	All the individuals seem to be facing the left side
Chikupu southern cave	Mashonaland Central Province	Collective linear	Women and children	Close but not touching	Similar body postures	Uniform movement	Moving forward
Chivero 4	Mashonaland West Province	Collective linear	Men	Figures are positioned closely together	Figures exhibit similar postures	Uniform movement	Moving forward towards the left of the panel
Glen Norah	Harare Province	Collective linear	Dancers and accompanying figures are all men	Men evenly spaced	Figures exhibit similar postures	Uniform movement	Moving forward towards the left of the panel
Epworth	Harare Province	Individual	Male dancer	N/a	N/a	N/a	Moving forward towards the left of the panel
Mucheka	Mashonaland East Province	Collective circular?	Male dance	Yes	No	No	No
Charewa dance scene 1	Mashonaland East Province	Collective dance	Both women and men and are randomly mixed	Dancers are close to each other in a haphazard manner	No	No uniform movement	No
Charewa dance scene 2	Mashonaland East Province	Pair dance	Possibly men	Dancers are close to each other or almost side by side	Both figures are in similar bending postures	Uniform movement	Both are moving towards the left
Mutoko	Mashonaland East Province	Dance in pair?	N/a	The figure behind appears to be holding the other figure just above the waistline	Both figures are bending, although not quite to the same degree	Approximately uniform movement	Moving forward towards the right of the panel
Chivhu	Mashonaland East Province	Collective circular dance	Therianthropomorphic figures that appear to be half human and half antelope	No	No	No	No
Chipinge	Manicaland Province	Collective linear	Women	Dancers are close to each other maintaining the same distance between themselves	All the figures are in bending forward postures	Approximately uniform movement	All are moving towards the right
Mudadi	Masvingo Province	Collective linear	Women	Dancers very close or touching each other	Figures exhibit similar postures	Approximately uniform movement	All are moving towards the left

Table 3: Summary of findings regarding dancers or Criteria 2 of Table 1 in connection with the type of dance according to the number of individuals (Criterion 2a); dancers' gender (2b); type of interaction between the dancers (2c) and direction of the dance movement (2d).

do not interact. The possibility of having elements that would break with the rules usually followed to represent dances was not considered by either Garfinkel or Díaz-Andreu and others,<sup>85</sup> as the type of dances they were working on did not include altered states of consciousness being represented. Trance is found at four sites: Mucheka, Mukoto, Epworth and Chivhu. Interestingly, as seen above, the Charewa Dance Scene 1 interpreted above as an informal circumstantial dance, does not follow the rule either. Apart from the sites just mentioned, all other scenes show dancers at approximately similar distances from each other and with similar body postures.

The final Criterion 2d relates to the direction of the dance. When the individuals are not in trance, all the scenes follow the rules of having figures either moving towards the right or left, all seemingly moving forward.

## 5 Concluding remarks

The point of departure for analysing the dance scenes represented in the rock art of the Zimbabwean plateau are Garfinkel's criteria established for the recognition of dance scenes in iconographic representations.<sup>86</sup> They are supplemented by the work on dance scenes undertaken in the Artsoundscapes project.<sup>87</sup> These served as the point of reference for the revision of rock art scenes of dance on the basis of the information provided by the ethnographic sources about dance in southern Africa. The importance given to dance in the ethnographic literature was shared by the communities that produced the painted scenes in our study area. All the dance types mentioned by the ethnographers are represented in the rock art, with a stronger emphasis on ritual dances. Moreover, dances are generally gendered, with a slight emphasis on male dances. Our analysis has led us to argue that the criteria taken as the basis for the study need slight amendments, as there is a circumstance previous authors had not considered: trance. Dances that include trance states do not conform to the rules because trance is a condition that affects perception and thus competences that are essential for dance, e.g., controlling the body, being able to synchronise with others, keeping a regular distance from them, and following pre-established rules. We further suggest certain depictions that have been previously identified as dance may not be dance, hence more careful considerations are necessary for identifying dance in the rock art.

What are the next research steps? This study is based on a literature review and therefore its results are preliminary. Further surveys in the area will certainly not only confirm the scenes published in this article but also disclose new sites and new scenes that may enrich the view presented here. Moreover, we further aim at exploring whether there is a relationship between the location of sites with dance scenes and the landscape in which they are located, i.e. whether the selection of the places for producing these scenes followed specific parameters.

<sup>85</sup> The systematic criteria used here did not consider trance, for example, see Garfinkel 2003 and Díaz-Andreu et al. 2022. This is a loophole but the other factors it considers for identification of dance seem to be useful.

<sup>86</sup> The approach of dance studies in archaeology was first introduced by Garfinkel, see e.g. Garfinkel 1998; Garfinkel 2010.

<sup>87</sup> Including Santos da Rosa et al. 2021 and Díaz-Andreu et al. 2022.

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