Chapter Nine

South Africa: Rock Art and Reflection

September 28

In Transit: *On a Qatar Airlines flight to South Africa*

The Journey

My flight to South Africa connects through Doha, Qatar. After takeoff, I catch a glimpse of what seems to be the Saudi Arabian capital, its lights glittering like jewels against the night. I doze in short bursts until we arrive in Johannesburg. This is my second visit to the African continent; the first was to Ghana, a birthday gift from my family who know how much I love to travel. Now here I am, touching down at an airport that looks modest, especially after leaving Bangkok's butterfly-shaped design behind. I had hoped to feel a rush of emotion, but I don't . . . at least not yet.

Immigration feels endless, but eventually I meet Trevor, a tall man with dark glasses, part of the taxi service the hotel recommends. He collects my suitcases and I follow him to the parking lot. As we walk along a covered walkway open to grass and soil on one side, I seize the moment. I stop, touch the ground, and welcome myself back to Mother Africa. Only after so doing can I turn my attention to the new experience awaiting me. I hurry to catch up with Trevor.

As we drive, I notice the landscape is drier than I expected. Many trees are bare. I know it's winter here, but it's still startling.

"Trevor," I ask, "have you had winter?"

"Yes," he replies. "The grass will be green soon, and the trees will have leaves."

It's funny how certain mental pictures take hold, and how reality challenges them.

At the hotel, the staff allow me to check in early, and after a satisfying meal, I have a free day before heading to Sani Valley. So, I arrange a double tour for tomorrow: the Cultural Village and the Museum of the Cradle of Civilization, about fifty kilometers from Johannesburg.

I spend the rest of the day sleeping through my first day in South Africa.

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Reflections

It is good to be in the Motherland. I look forward to exploring more of Africa's southernmost country.

September 29

Location: *Home Suites, Johannesburg, South Africa*

The Journey

Griffiths arrives on time and we go to pick up two women who are also from the U.S. Once we pick up Karen and Carol, we head to the cultural village, where we join other tourists to learn about the different tribes in South Africa. We are entertained even as we learn about their languages and customs before they assimilated into the greater South African culture.

It's a relaxing experience as I indulge in face-painting and learn to drum by repetition before going to a cluster of cultural villages.

The "chiefs of each village" welcome us in traditional style, and we are coached to respond in the correct manner and with the correct words. One notable custom I learn is that women of one tribe had to wear a red hat when they married. They also had to keep

it on for the rest of their marriage, including while sleeping, because removing it was seen as a sign of divorce. Married women in that tribe were also distinguishable from single women by the length of their dresses, which had to be below the knees.

Another tribe was identified by the wearing of kilts and long boots. They were the first ironworkers in South Africa and also the ones who were defeated by the British. The story goes that the British tricked them by having Scotsmen wear kilts and lead the charge. The Africans thought they were women and did not fight, resulting in an ambush.

After interacting with the cultural village, we go to the Museum of Human Civilization and view exhibits about the cosmos, evolution, and the need to care for our planet. As we leave the museum, we see signs on the grass warning us about snakes. My companions and I comment on the placement of the signs.

During the drive back to our respective hotels, I share with my companions that my original plan was to drive to Sani Valley, but since coming to Johannesburg, I have changed my mind. Both Karen and Carol support my decision since I am not used to driving in South Africa.

Karen also wishes me many more adventures during the rest of my trip. I wish she does not wish me that. I think I have had enough. I return to the hotel to the very welcome words of “welcome home,” and a dinner of oxtail and mashed potatoes.

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Reflections

There is no word about my application for a visa to Pakistan. If I do not hear from them tomorrow, I will contact the embassy team in Thailand to see if they can help.

September 30

Location: *Home Suites, Johannesburg, South Africa*

The Journey

I wake up ready for my day and prepare to go to the mall, where I have a reservation to have my hair refreshed. I spend a little more time than intended but contact the hotel

to let Trevor know I will be delayed. I chose Trevor because during our drive from the airport two days ago, I have learned to appreciate his professionalism. He will not bother me with a lot of questions on the long drive to Sani Valley; he will let me sleep.

While at the salon, I check my email to see if my visa has been granted. It hasn't, so I send a message to the Pakistan Embassy in Bangkok to ask for advice once again. I don't get a response, but shortly after I leave the message, I receive an email that my visa application has been granted. I am ecstatic. Fortune has smiled on me. I notify the consulate of my success and also thank them again.

Trevor arrives ready for the journey, complete with a cooler filled with bottles of water for me. As soon as we leave Johannesburg, I spread the blanket I have borrowed from the hotel on the backseat and fall fast asleep. I wake a few times during the journey to admire the ever-stretching landscape filled with savannas and majestic mountains. Cattle graze peacefully in pastures, and as dusk comes, lights twinkle in the valleys. We stop once for a restroom break and have lunch at a restaurant attached to a gas station. It is a lovely day with bright sunshine.

As night begins to fall, I notice Trevor slowing down considerably. I sit up and realize there is thick fog all around us. We can barely see ten yards ahead. After about ten miles, the fog clears. Eventually, we arrive at the gate of the property, and luckily, the staff has waited for my arrival. I check in over the intercom and we continue the drive to the cabin.

The drive from the gate to the cabin is a complete adventure. The road narrows to about twelve feet wide, with no room for two cars to pass. On one side is a lake, and on the other, a steep valley. There is a sign that states, "Do not drive on the grass. It is slippery." My nerves are on edge, but we get to the cabin safely.

My dinner has been prepared, and it is a generous portion, so I am able to share it with Trevor before he leaves for his hotel in the village. It is very cold, and there is no central heating. I ask the attendant to light the wood stove for me before he leaves. He does so and the warm crackling fire begins to warm my body.

The cabin is beautiful, and I can tell that tomorrow I will have a wonderful view of the lake, but tonight I just want to go to bed. The warmed Jacuzzi is bubbling on the patio, but I ask the attendant to turn it off, as I plan to go right to bed and try to keep warm under the covers.



Reflections

The cottage is beautiful but cold. It is amazing to think that this part of Africa sees snow and the people need to light fires to keep warm.

October 1

Location: *Sani Valley Nature Lodges, South Africa*

The Journey

I wake before dawn and can already appreciate the lake and mountains through the bamboo shades. Science says our eyes see in spots and our brains fill in the gaps, so even with the curtain, the whole scene appears as if through dark glass. When the sun rises, the view becomes breathtaking. I feel like one of the luckiest people in the world. A picture for Facebook is a must. As soon as I post it, Facebook immediately recognizes the location and adds AI comments.

I warm up in the bathtub and consider wearing my turtleneck and warm pants, but fortunately, I decide otherwise.

At breakfast, I request simple eggs and toast. There is no non-dairy milk, and instead of deducting a point, I simply ask about it. The chef says she doesn't have any today but will find some for tomorrow. Neil, the manager, chats with fellow guests and then takes me to the tours office some fifteen minutes away to meet my mountain guide.

After minimal paperwork, my guide, Tsebo, explains that we will walk seven kilometers each way, not counting the twenty-minute walk to and from the property where the trail begins. When we arrive, he takes me to a board covered with posters. Pointing to each one, he explains that we may encounter birds, small animals, and poisonous snakes, including the dangerous puff adder.

I begin to feel afraid. "I don't want to go on this hike," I tell him. "I don't like snakes!"

Tsebo looks a little sad as he replies, "Snakes like us."

"How so?" I ask.

"They warn us if they see us. We just need to stand still and let them go their way."

I notice he carries no staff or weapon of any kind. It seems he relies entirely on knowledge and experience for protection. I pause, consider, and then make my decision: I will go on the hike. I've invested too much in this trip to not do so. But I will be careful.

We set off. As soon as we leave the property, we come across an apple someone has left for the animals.

"This is not good," says Tsebo, tossing it far from the path.

I'm not sure whether it's bad for the animals or for us, but at this point I'm committed to getting through the hike. I don't want to know.

We reach a small brook we must ford. Tsebo says the water is drinkable and fills his bottle. Then he cups his hands and drinks directly. Trusting his expertise, I try it too. The sparkling water tastes delicious.

We continue upward. To our left, eland (a type of antelope) graze peacefully on the mountainside. I look ahead and my heart skips a beat: four mature baboons stand on the next peak, directly on the beaten path they know we must take.

My mind races. *Is this why Tsebo said leaving food for animals is not good? Are they going to take our backpacks?* A TikTok video plays in my mind, the one where a monkey runs off with a woman's backpack, climbs a fence, and eats her bread and chips while chattering triumphantly. If these baboons, as big as tall children, want the egg salad sandwich in my pack, they can have it.

"Tsebo," I say, "look! There are four baboons up ahead. They seem to be waiting for us."

Indeed, they stand as if they're holding a conference . . . about us. Huddled together, dark silhouettes against the land, their calmness feels ominous.

"Don't worry about them," says Tsebo. "They will be gone before we get there."

We descend into the valley and climb toward the peak where they stood. When I finally lift my head to check their whereabouts, they are gone. The mountainside is broad, yet not a trace of them remains. Their behavior feels mysterious, but I'm not complaining. At least I don't have to sacrifice my lunch.

When we reach the spot where they stood, we find they have left us a gift: a pile of feces from all four. There is no mistaking that this was intentional. Well! If that's the worst they'll do, I'm relieved.

As we continue climbing, I tire quickly and must rest often. I always check for anything that wiggles before sitting down. Lifting my weight up the mountain is not easy, and the exertion makes me resolve to exercise more consistently when I return home.

We stop for lunch under a tree, or rather, for *Tsebo's* lunch. I can't eat my sandwich. I don't have the energy or inclination. My egg salad stays in my backpack while I survey the mountainside, though I do have enough reserves to take a selfie with Tsebo. I avoided tuna because I feared the smell might attract animals. Tsebo chose tuna and appears unconcerned. He seems to live "on the edge."

We continue upward and my energy continues to wane. Tsebo offers peanuts and bananas, which I find I can eat on the move. The snacks help. I remember that Mano in Indonesia ate the same foods on hikes, and that they seem to be the hikers' choice; quick energy and hygienic.

The climb grows harder as the temperature rises. I'm glad I didn't wear the turtleneck. Tsebo carries my backpack, then my sweater, then my headscarf as everything becomes too heavy. He is patient and diplomatic, like all the South Africans I meet. When I ask if I am his slowest client, he replies, "Everyone has different capabilities. Everyone is different."

He explains that he loves his job because he meets people with varied personalities and abilities. He tells colleagues, "If you want to complain, go on vacation and then complain."

Progress is slow. We had estimated three hours up and three hours down, but I suspect we are moving more slowly. Eventually we get to a height where shrubs and grass are the only plant life I see. The valleys, lake, and cabins seem very far away. I look down at the countryside and say with some pride, "I believe we are above the tree line by now!"

Tsebo smiles. "No, the tree line is at 2,500 meters, and we have only passed 1,000."

So much for that feeling of accomplishment.

Finally, we reach our destination and I am able to get the much-desired pictures of the rock art. I'm especially glad to obtain the shaman with upraised arms, my favorite of the entire site. But there's no time to linger or contemplate the old shamans.

"We have to be off the mountain before it gets dark," says Tsebo calmly.

He doesn't need to tell me twice. If *he* doesn't want to be on the mountain after dark, why would I? I do my best to hurry. But descending is trickier than climbing. I'm not wearing hiking boots like Tsebo, and I must protect my ankles from loose rocks. I come up with a plan: sliding down the steep slopes on my bottom. It works. We make a swift descent, record time compared to our ascent, and without any mishaps.

The late-afternoon sun is still bright when we reach the brook. We pause to drink. I allow myself the luxury of looking back at the mountains and feeling accomplished.

As we leave the property and walk the twenty-minutes back to the tour office, I notice I am no longer struggling. Tsebo explains that I was affected by the altitude. I smile, remembering his comment about the tree line.

Neil is waiting to drive me back to the lodge. The office is closed and Tsebo is disappointed that I won't receive my mountain-hiking certificate. I tell him not to worry—my pictures are my trophy. We say goodbye, and I head out with Neil.

"How was your experience?" he asks.

"Rewarding," I say, "but I will never do it again."

"You know," he says, "hiking the mountains is something I have never done."

"Don't bother now," I tell him. Unless he has a defined objective like I had, it wouldn't be worth the risk.

We turn to other topics. "Why does this lake look so odd?" I ask.

"Oh, it's an artificial lake," he says. "The valley was dammed some years ago. Now we use it for fishing and other recreational activities."

"By the way," he adds, "you know you have the cabin with the best view on the property?"

I knew it, I think. I say aloud, "Thanks for assigning me that one. The view is lovely indeed. I posted it on Facebook, so you may get a few more guests because of my post."

Back in my cabin, I slip into comfortable clothing (I don't have a swimsuit) and soak in the jacuzzi for about ninety minutes. I let the water massage my tired muscles. I reflect on the fact that I could skinny-dip if I wanted to and no one would know. The patio is private and open-air at the same time. Daylight is fading, but I can still enjoy the scenery.

All good things come to an end. Once inside, I call the kitchen to say I don't need dinner. My leftover egg salad will suffice. I go to bed and lie in the dark, letting my body recover. Someone knocks on the front door to check on me since I haven't turned on any lights, but they leave once I answer.

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Reflections

It has been a remarkably successful day. I went mountain hiking for the first time in my life. Before I came on this quest to visit ancient sites, I never would have considered such an exercise. But I can now pat myself on the back. The view was splendiferous, and I achieved my goal, certificate or not.

October 2

Location: *Sani Valley Nature Lodges, South Africa*

The Journey

This morning, I wake up in an emotional state of appreciation—appreciation for the journey I have taken and for my beautiful surroundings. I feel blessed for what I achieved in South Africa: the mountain hike experience, the shaman-inspired rock art, being pampered in beautiful surroundings, and the global journey so far. I spend about half an hour basking, savoring the experience, and giving thanks.

I can still see the mountains and lake through the bamboo blinds, although the view is not as clear as yesterday. Once I get out of bed and raise the shades, the reason becomes clear. The landscape is foggy. I am so glad I went on the hike yesterday and

happy that I took a picture of the lake and mountain scene when the sky was bright and clear.

At breakfast, I thank the staff for fulfilling their promise to make sure I can enjoy my coffee. The lodge gets the maximum score for the beautiful surroundings and their hospitality. Trevor arrives at the cabin ten minutes early, but I am ready to leave. We stop at the office, and at last I am able to meet the young woman who was communicating with me all during my trek around the globe. We chat a bit, and then Trevor and I head out for the long ride back to Johannesburg.

Since my arrival, I now know that much of the land in South Africa no longer belongs to the Indigenous people. So, on my return trip to Johannesburg, I no longer see the mountains and beautiful savannas; instead, I see fences marking properties owned by non-Indigenous South Africans, some of whom no longer live in the country. This saddens me. Indigenous South Africans have access to only about six percent of the land, and much of the land available to them is of poor quality. Colonization seems to leave similar patterns wherever it spreads—whether in the Americas or Australasia.

We arrive in Johannesburg in good time, and I say goodbye to Trevor, thanking him for his skillful driving to and from Sani Valley Lodge. The front desk clerk suggests a massage service in my room, which I schedule before leaving with an Uber to get my nails done. A call to the nail salon earlier made me understand that they would be open until seven. However, when I get to the location published on their website, they are no longer there. I have to take another Uber to their new location five miles away. I arrive shortly after 6:00 p.m. The women are all getting ready to leave because the nail salon is about to close. Fortunately, the Uber driver does not like the idea of leaving me in the area so he waits to confirm that I will receive service. Once he learns what has happened, he tells me what to do and I am able to book him for the return ride without any trouble.

At the hotel, I get a massage, have dinner, and prepare for the journey to Egypt.

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Reflections

I made it to Sani Pass and back. Trevor is an excellent driver. I pray that South Africa's remaining issue will be solved quickly.

October 3

Location: *Home Suites, Johannesburg, South Africa*

The Journey

I am in a different room from my previous stay at this hotel. As I prepare for my day, I read an email from Pakistan International Airlines. PIA has cancelled the entire return flight from Karachi to Sukkur without explanation.

Oh, Pakistan!

I am in the depths of despair!

But then I recover.

If the plane flight from Karachi to Sukkur is an hour and from Sukkur to Mohenjo-Daro by car is three hours, then I can drive the whole seven-hour distance to Mohenjo-Daro.

Alternatively, I can drive to Sukkur and have the local guide drive me to Mohenjo-Daro as planned. I do not want to take the train as a solo passenger. Sitting on a train for twelve hours, especially if the locals regard me as a curiosity, is not something I am willing to try. I also do not know how safe it is to drive.

I WhatsApp Fahd to let him know what I'm thinking. His reply is immediate.

"You can't drive," he says. "I will take you personally, starting early in the morning from Karachi."

I am ecstatic! I dance around my hotel room since no one is watching!

If I had planned for six months, I couldn't have asked for a better solution! There isn't a better way to take a tour to Mohenjo-Daro. I'm going to have a personal driver who understands local culture. I am also going to have a chance to see a large part of the countryside, starting with Karachi and going all the way to Mohenjo-Daro.

What good fortune! Thank you, Pakistan International Airlines! Thank you for cancelling my flight!

With one major hurdle out of the way, my mind naturally returns to the pictures I lost. I have a save in mind: I will go to Darwin's Museum (Down House) and take pictures of

the finches there along with pictures of Darwin's statue or statues. I am confident Down House will have both.

If Darwin's museum is too far from London, then the only choice I will have is to return to the Galápagos Islands. With the camera repaired, I will take pictures of the finches, tortoises, Darwin statues, and anything else of interest. I was considering making a dash to Pakistan in November if my visa approval was delayed. Now, since I do not need to return to Eurasia to see Mohenjo-Daro, a short trip to the Galápagos is an easy decision.

With a clear mind, I cheerfully go on the tour to Steinheim Caves outside Johannesburg. This time, Cosmos is my driver. Cosmos shares a lot of information about South Africa, wants to know about my project, and is very supportive. He says he will buy my book when it is published and we swap contact information.

At the caves, I reprise my skills of climbing and crawling through narrow openings. Everything I have done so far on this trip seems to be in preparation for the caves. However, my backpack is too heavy for me to carry, so one of two friendly guys carries it for me throughout the exercise. I am lucky that way!

Once again, the signs warning about snakes are posted after we exit, not before. I see Griffiths on my way back to find Cosmos and I wish him the best in the future.

I return to the hotel and pack my bags to head out to the airport. I say, "Goodbye" to Mike, who is asking me to return home soon.

I have to reflect on the diplomacy of the South Africans I meet. Indeed, they are remarkably diplomatic among the people I've encountered on this trip. When I attempt to take my dishes to the kitchen after seeing a South African do so, one of the kitchen staff swiftly comes up to me and says, "No, milady."

This is after they let the guy take the dishes to the kitchen without saying a word. When I attempt to run down the stairs near the elevator after the bellhop has entered the small elevator, I am gently chastened in the same fashion. "No, milady," he says.

He makes himself and suitcases take up less space and holds the door open for me. In stores and elsewhere, I am generally addressed as "Madam." Occasionally, I'm addressed as "Mama."

Now, I'm at the airport and I can appreciate its size, which I didn't notice when I entered. I see long lines of people at booths, waiting to have their bags wrapped. I only

have a few gifts in my bag, but I believe I should join the line too to protect my purchases. However, once I reach the top of the line, the bagger tells me that they are only accepting cash, which I don't have. So, I buy two padlocks instead from another booth instead. This is a new experience for me.

In the check-in line, and while I am somewhere in the middle, a woman comes and stands next to me, looking way into the distance. I think, *I must have a sign on my back or a face that says, "Come and stand next to me. I will let you in the line to shorten your wait."* I sigh inwardly.

First, the people in Guayaquil, then the woman in Australia, and now in South Africa. They have worn me down. I decide not to tell her where the line starts. As the line moves up, she moves in front of me and says, "Thank you."

Just before boarding the plane, I see a lovely brown and yellow dress in one of the boutiques. I decide to stop and buy it. This is the dress I will wear when I do a photo shoot in the Galápagos Islands for my book. It is my comfort and my insurance; a promise to myself to return. I purchase a pair of yellow fashion earrings to go with the dress, and I feel even better.

On this flight, I have paid for a row of four seats. The price was not very expensive. I can't understand how it was available for me to do so. On the plane, a woman comes and sits in the seat at the other end from me and looks way into the distance. When I look at her, she tells me I paid for only three seats. I show her my confirmation email, and she leaves. I am able to stretch out and enjoy the flight to Cairo.

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Reflections

This is my most relaxing flight after my first-class flights on LATAM Airlines. I observe that as I move from East to West around the globe, the grace and smiles of the airline stewards diminish in a gradient.

Myth/Science Reflection

The shamans of the Sani Pass region left images that offer glimpses into how they understood the world. To an untrained eye, the paintings might look like

animals, hunters, or even strange otherworldly figures, but their meanings run deeper. Scholars interpret them as expressions of Stone Age spirituality—an animistic worldview in which power resides in places, beings, and the natural world rather than in a single deity. At Sani Pass, I learned that many of the figures represent what shamans experienced in trance and then painted themselves or instructed others to paint. No single animal appears to hold greater importance than another; each is part of a wider spiritual landscape.



Figure 9.1 This scenery made me feel like I was Walking on Sunshine.



Figure 9.2 View from one of the mountains of Sani Pass.

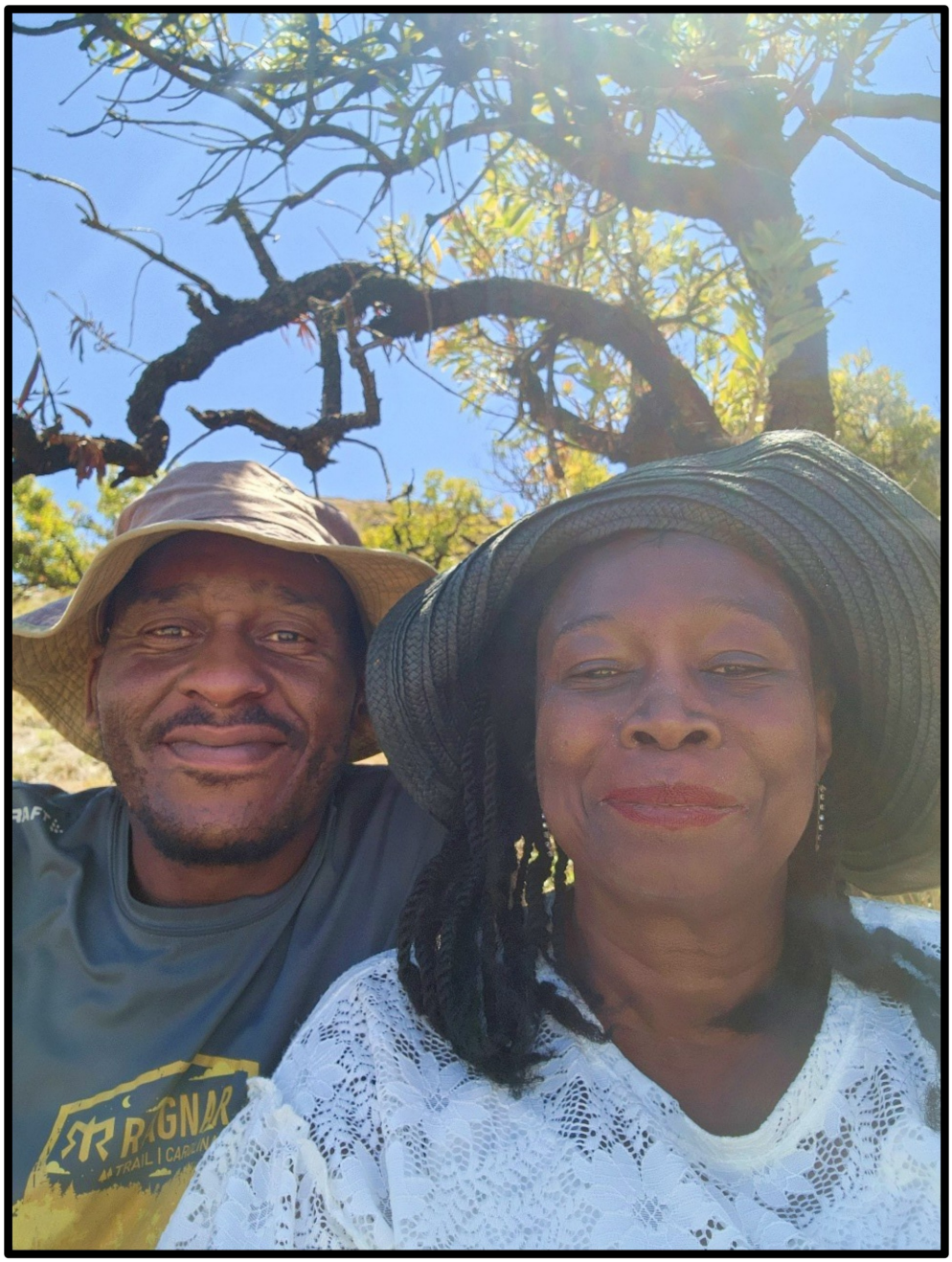


Figure 9.3. Tsebo Molefe, Sani Pass mountain guide, and me.



Figure 9.4. A San shamanic ascent scene painted in red ochre. The tall, elongated figure represents a healer in deep trance, rising toward the spirit world, while the smaller dancers below generate the ritual energy that drives the transformation. Nearby, a raised-arms figure serves as a helper or spiritual companion. This panel is one of the clearest examples of trance-based imagery in the Drakensberg–Maloti range.



Figure 9.5 *A large, shaded eland representing spiritual potency rather than naturalistic wildlife. Painted approximately 1,200–2,000 years ago.*

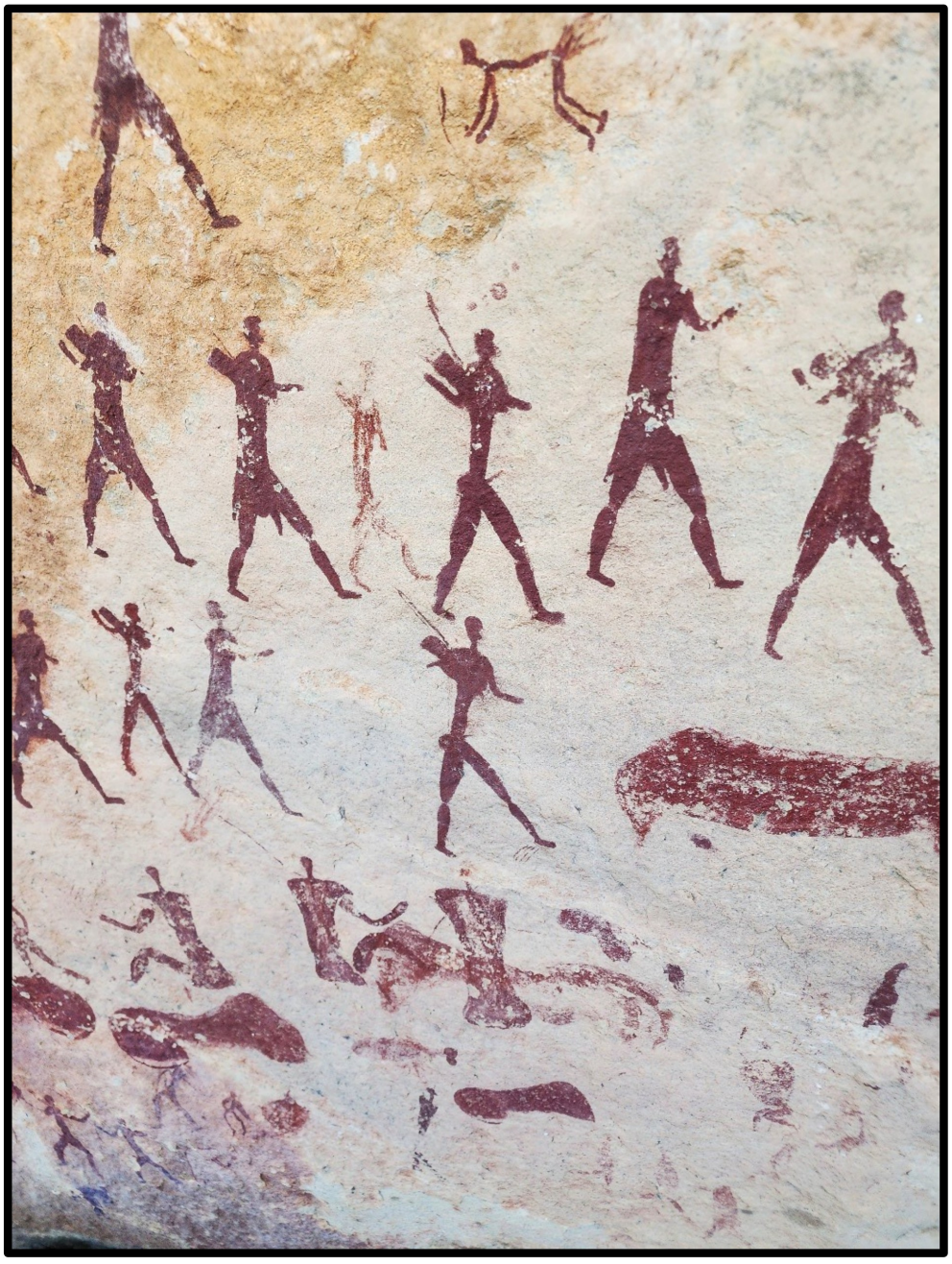


Figure 9.6 A San ritual procession painted in red ochre. The tall figures form a ceremonial line, while the bent figure above indicates a shaman entering trance. Below, collapsing, or kneeling bodies depict the physical effects of altered states. On the right, a large eland or rain-animal presides over the scene. This panel is a rare composite showing both the human ritual and its supernatural dimension.



Figure 9.7. Sani Pass, Southern Africa: A fragment of a fine-line San painting, preserved as a single curved stroke of red ochre. It may be the torso of a human or therianthropic figure, or perhaps part of a rain serpent, dating to roughly 1,200–2,000 years ago. Most of the original composition has been lost to rock spalling, leaving only this delicate remnant of ancient spiritual imagery.



Figure 9.8. Sani Pass, Southern Africa: A fine-line San painting of eland, layered in red and white ochre. The careful shading and anatomy mark them as sacred animals linked to trance and healing. Estimated at 1,400–2,000 years old, the overlapping figures hint at repeated ritual visits to this shelter over many generations.

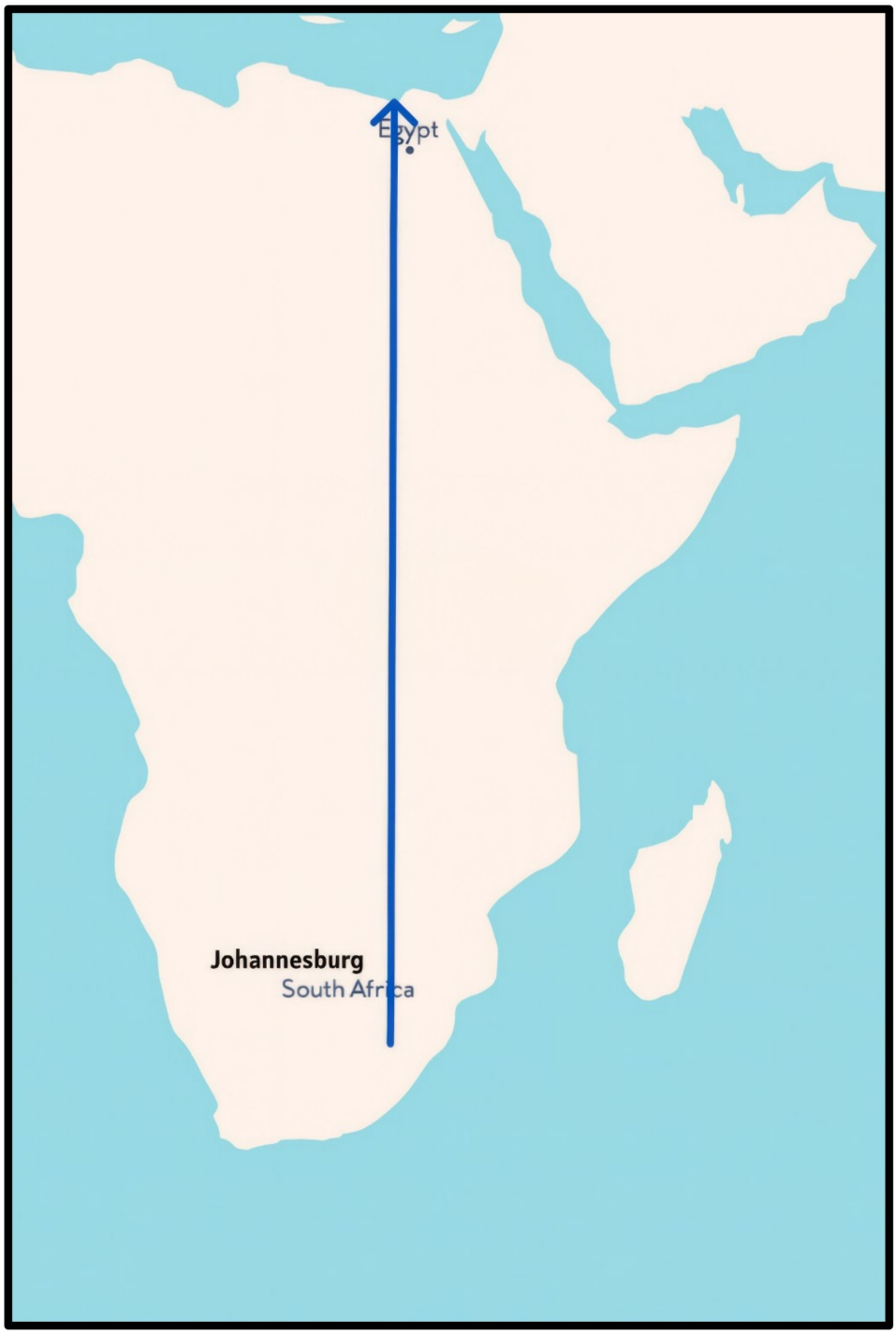


Figure 10.0. South Africa to Egypt.