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The Rock Art of the Hunter-Gatherers

L'art rupestre des chasseurs-collecteurs

Focus

The Rock Art of the Hunter-Gatherers of Southern Africa

L'art rupestre des chasseurs-collecteurs d'Afrique australe

Coordinated by Léa Jobard, Carole Dudognon & Camille Bourdier

- 05 | Introduction: The Rock Art of the Hunter-Gatherers of Southern Africa
Léa Jobard, Carole Dudognon & Camille Bourdier
- 09 | Introduction : L'art rupestre des chasseurs-collecteurs d'Afrique australe
Léa Jobard, Carole Dudognon & Camille Bourdier
- 13 | Approche interdisciplinaire de la paroi ornée. Pomongwe Cave et le programme MATOBART
Camille Bourdier, Carole Dudognon, Millena Frouin, Ancila Nhamo, Todini Runganga & Stéphanie Touron
- 19 | Les sous-sols de l'art rupestre à l'abri Pomongwe (Matobo, Zimbabwe)
Guillaume Porraz, Precious Chiwara, Magnus M. Haaland, Joseph Matembo, Thubelile Mnkandla, Kelvin Machiwenyika, Todini Runganga, Chantal Tribolo, Aurore Val & Camille Bourdier
- 23 | Diversity in Late Stone Age Art in Zimbabwe. An Elemental and Mineralogical Study of Pigments (Ochre) from Pomongwe Cave, Matobo Hills, Western Zimbabwe
Jonathan Nhunzvi, Ancila Nhamo, Laure Dayet, Stéphanie Touron & Millena Frouin
- 27 | Silozwane, étude d'un palimpseste rupestre des Matobo
Carole Dudognon
- 33 | Rock Art Conservation: Floor Stabilisation at Nswatugi Rock Art Site, Matobo Hills Cultural Landscape
Senzeni Khumalo, Charity Nyathi, Kelvin Machiwenyika & Todini Runganga
- 36 | Matobo Rock Art in its Landscape. Understanding Role(s) of Rock Art in Later Stone Age Foragers Territoriality
Léa Jobard
- 42 | The Diversity of the Common. The Significance of Spatial Motif Variation in Studying Cultural Variability using Rock Art in Zimbabwe
Ancila Nhamo
- 48 | Phytanthropes. Human-Plant Conflations in the Rock Art of Zimbabwe
Stephen van den Heever

Crossed views from Southern Africa

- 53 | Matières colorantes ferrugineuses, pigments de l'art rupestre et comportements des populations Later Stone Age à Leopard Cave (Erongo, Namibie)
Guilhem Maura
- 60 | Rock Art in Mozambique: Hunter-Gatherers' Space, Symbolism, and Tools
Décio Muianga
- 64 | Le contexte performatif de l'art rupestre San
David Witelson
- 69 | Dateless substance. White Pigments in the Rock Art of Southern Africa
Alice Mullen
- 74 | La mise en tourisme des sites d'art rupestre dans le massif du Drakensberg. Bilan des recherches engagées depuis 2009
Mélanie Duval & Stéphane Hærlé

Rock Art in Mozambique

Hunter-Gatherers' Space, Symbolism, and Tools



Décio Muianga

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Mozambican prehistoric past is largely unknown to the public inside the national borders; so is the past hunter-gatherers, notably the Later Stone Age artefacts (40 000 BP to recently, 100 years ago – AD) and the associated rock art (paintings and engravings) recognized as the main material features of these populations in southern Africa. This paper concentrates on the hunter-gatherers' rock art archaeological signature in Mozambique and the relevance for the study of Later Stone Age (LSA) landscape occupation.

Hunter-gatherers in Mozambique

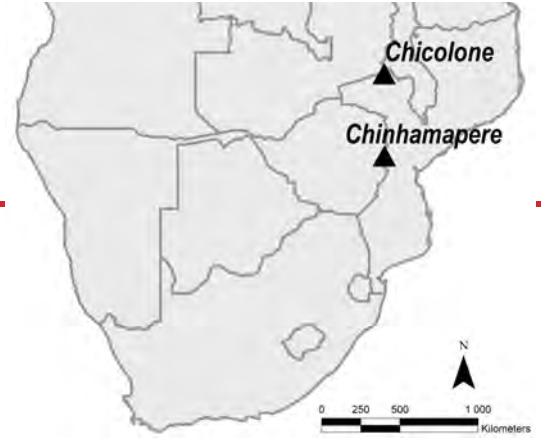
Mozambique constitutes a link between southern and eastern Africa, and forms the southern extension of the Rift Valley where the valuable and oldest archaeological and anthropological finds of the process of human evolution were discovered. Although there are more than 200 excavated sites associated with the Stone Age in Mozambique, detailed studies regarding the hunter-gatherer period are lacking (Meneses, 1988). Indeed, most archaeological researches have focused on routes of Iron Age migrations on the territory (Adamowicz, 1987; Meneses, 1995, 1999; Smith, 1995; Saetersdal, 2004; Macamo, 2006; Huffman, 2007; Muianga, 2013; Zubieta, 2016).

Mozambique has evidence of occupation by two hunter-gatherers' cultures distinguished by their material culture and rock art assemblages. From Zambia to Malawi, the LSA assemblages and rock art on both banks of the Zambezi River have distinctive characteristics that have been extensively studied over the past decades of research. South margin of the Zambezi River (Manica province in Central Mozambique – Fig. 1), Southern Africa is dominated by figurative rock art (fine-line naturalistic images), either painted or engraved.

This tradition shows regional variability in the techniques and in the repertoire of the humans and



Figure 1: Chinhapapere site, Manica District, Manica province (Photo: Décio Muianga).



animals depicted (Lewis-Williams, 1981; Garlake, 1995; Dowson, 1998; Saetersdal, 2004; Smith, 2006, 2013; Nhamo, 2007; Blundell *et al.*, 2010). It is associated with the Robberg (18 000-12 000 BP), Oakhurst (12 000-7 000 BP), Wilton (8 000-4 000 BP), and final LSA (4 000 BP-100 AD) assemblages that are rich in small scrapers, backed microlithic (especially segments, backed points, bladelets, etc.), ornaments (ostrich eggshell beads), polished bone tools, wood and shell artefacts (Deacon, 1984; Lombard *et al.*, 2012; Dusseldorp *et al.*, 2013). The Wilton technocomplex is present in different types of environments that vary from arid desert through semiarid, thornveld, bushveld, savanna, riverine woodland, and high mountains.

On the other side, the northern area of the Zambezi is characterized by geometric rock art traditions – (Clark, 1959; Phillipson, 1977; Juwayeyi, 1981; Juwayeyi & Phiri, 1992; Smith, 1997) with the prevalence of geometric forms (Fig. 2.). In central Africa, Smith distinguishes between Red Animal [male associated – animal depictions are very rare and take bizarre and varied stylised forms (the stomach of the animals is hugely exaggerated and the limbs dwarfed or omitted altogether)] and Red Geometric [female associated – comprised by various red monochrome or red and white bichrome geometric motifs were circles and concentric are very common] traditions (Smith, 1997, 2006, 2013). So far, all of the rock art found in northern Mozambique – in Tete, Nampula and Niassa provinces – conforms to the red geometric rock-art style; so does rock art in Malawi and Zambia.

Thus, fine-line tradition has been assigned to the San southern Africa hunter-gatherers' populations, whereas the red geometric traditions have been attributed to another population of hunter-gatherers' in the woodlands of south central Africa named the BaTwa.

The dominant hunter-gatherers material culture is the Nachikufan technological complex (18 000 to 9 000 BP is Nachikufan I, Nachikufan IIa and IIb are argued to date to between 9 000 and 5 000 BP, and Nachikufan III to extend from 5 000 to 100 BP), representative for south central Africa in general and especially Zambia (Clark, 1950; Miller, 1971; Musonda, 1983; Fletcher, 2010). The Zambian sequence of the microlithic industry is one of the best known in sub-Saharan Africa (Sampson, 1974;



Figure 2: a) Red geometric images from Chicolone site (CHC), Tete province; b) San Human figures CIH site – north Zambezi, Tete province (Images reproduced with permission from the archive of the Rock Art Research Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, www.sarada.co.za).

Phillipson, 1977; Fletcher, 2010). The majority of Nachikufan sites are located in rock shelters within woodlands (e.g. Muchinga Escarpment), suggesting dependence on hunting of small animals and gathering wild fruits, roots, and nuts. Residents of the Nachikufan sites used bow and arrow technology with transverse heads of stone and points of bone, stone headed knobkerries and later introduced polished stone axes as weapons (Clark, 1959; Fletcher, 2010). The large quantities of tools such as heavy and hollow scrapers, weighted digging-sticks, grindstones, pestles and spokeshaves (possibly made from polished adzes), may suggest extensive woodworking in northern and eastern Zambia (Clark, 1950; Juwayeyi, 1981; Musonda, 1983; Fletcher, 2010).

Current research

On the basis of existing research in Mozambique, the Zambezi River represented a border or frontier that separated two traditions of hunter-gatherers' rock art and also two technological complexes. Both LSA and hunter-gatherers' rock art in Mozambique are marked with regional variability and this can be explained by the difference of ecosystems and availability of raw materials. However, recent findings (Muianga, 2013) and current research yield evidence of fine-line paintings of San groups in the northern margin of the river (Fig 2.) and

instances of the Red Geometric tradition of BaTwa groups on the southern bank with elements of both rock art traditions mixed. Both hunter-gatherers' populations operated in the riverine, which can now be considered as a permeable frontier for the hunter-gatherer groups, with links or possible signs of interaction between the San and BaTwa now identified in central Mozambique. Indeed, few examples from central Mozambique demonstrate that interaction between the hunter-gatherer populations resulted in the absorption of stylistic elements in the depiction of the paintings on both sides of the river by the two groups here described. Still, these types of paintings remain rare and further investigation is needed on the topic. From a static point of view, the Zambezi River is not a classic case of a border area where a physical boundary separates two groups. The Zambezi was definitely accessible and easy to cross by both groups, but the cultural boundary was moveable and influenced the intervenient of these interactions to produce a more hybrid rock art – a matter that requires further studies.

The study of hunter-gatherers rock art and associated material culture identified in Mozambique is an effort to understand the complexities of past African minds and ancient societies that explored diverse geographical spaces and ecosystem's shaping thus the rich prehistoric cultural landscapes of the Sub Saharan section of the continent.

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