The Rock Art of southern Africa

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Define the region
Southern African interpretations of RA
Regional variations
Critique Euro centric approaches to interpretation of RA
“Post Colonial Approach”
Research been stimulated by my work in the region
Toured southern African sites to learn about rock art protection and interpretation
Physical setting of southern Africa

- Southern Africa has more rock art sites than any other region in the world
- Over 7,500 sites
- Recorded in Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, Swaziland and Lesotho
- Botswana—Tsodilo Hills (WHS)
  - Matsieng
- South Africa—Drakensburg (WHS)
  - Blombos Cave
- Namibia—Appollo 11 Cave
- Brandberg
- Zimbabwe—Matopo Hills (WHS)
Social, Political and Economic

- Democratically ruled
- Stable economies and political environment
- Highest GDP in Africa
- Thus, southern Africa is one of tourists’ major destinations
Who were the Painters?

- Most of the RA is associated with the LSA
- The content and date of RA is strongly associated with San and the Khoi San populations
- San have left a legacy of their religious belief by recording their paintings and engravings
- San thought to be the continent’s surviving race.
Types of Rock Art

- Rock Art can be divided into two categories
- Paintings—more numbered and widely distributed
- Occur primarily in caves, rock areas in open sites and high rainfall areas
- With exception of Namibia and Botswana
- Rock Engravings—petroglyphs tend to be common in the interior of southern Africa
- Kalahari generally has no rock art because there are no mountains but Tsodilo Hills in Northwestern Botswana is an exceptional and important area
Content of Rock Art in southern Africa

- Broadly similar because it includes:
- Human figures
- Animal figures
- Supernatural figures
- Variation in terms of technique and style
- In certain areas, certain colors are dominant
- Principal colors: red, white, brown, black and yellow
Paintings in terms of technique:

- **Monochrome**—single color
- **Bichrome**—two colors
- **Polychrome**—variety of color use
- **Shaded polychrome technique**
Engravings Techniques:

- Pecked
- Incised
- Scraped
Three main approaches to interpretation of RA

- Aesthetic
- Narrative
- Metaphoric

Different approaches have been important at different times and stages
Aesthetic Approach

1. Aesthetic—one of the earliest approaches
   - Highly selective
   - Concerned with quality and appeal—art for art’s sake?
   - Life of a hunter gathers was a happy life—Gives image of the Garden of Eden
   - Wrong ideology—blames bad and historical life with the arrival of the Bantu Agriculturalists
Narrative Approach

- Followed the aesthetic approach
- Associated with the first quantification of art
- Documents all art in the area—not selective
- The major argument of this approach is that RA is that art is a pictorial record of the LSA way of life
- But art is not a straightforward narrative
Metaphoric Approach

- Metaphoric
- This approach has become popular over the last 25 years
- The basic argument is that art is symbolic
- In order to understand art we have to understand graphic representation of metaphors
- The approach closely linked to the works of Lewis Williams
- Argues that RA is closely associated with people experience while undergoing trance
Lewis Williams’ basic information

- Modern San trance experiences
- 19th century historical accounts of San trance
- Results of modern neuropsychological research on trance. They recorded different levels of altered state of consciousness.
- The stages of trance—what happens when people undergo trance according to Lewis Williams
- Discussion of search for symbols: southern African metaphors for trance
- Shamans, trance and healing
Search for Symbols: southern African metaphors for trance

1. Underwater
2. Arrows of sickness
3. Blending of human and animal forms
4. Eland
5. Clapping (activates potency, sending dancers into trance)
6. Trancer’s spirit thought to leave the body through a “hole” in the top of the head
7. Bleeding from nose
8. Pointing a powerful gesture
9. Dancing posture, bending forward as N/um “boils”
10. Shamans hold their arms back to receive n/um into their bodies
11. Flywhisks only used at trance dances
Regional variation implies different painters in the region. Does the fact that we see different depictions mean we are dealing with the same themes? Do they communicate the same common meaning? It's possible that different kinds of rock art have different dates. It's difficult to date rock art. There have been attempts to date rock art in using techniques that remove the pigments but different sediments can contaminate the pigment.
Dating RA

- Rock art is the hardest archaeological material to date.
- It is very difficult to date the art itself.
- To date Rock art, we have to compare remains found in the stratigraphy.
- In some cases, drawings can give us appropriate date, e.g., ox wagons, mounted horseman, sailing ships and women wearing shirts.
- All these were drawn with the arrival of Europeans/ contact period.
Africa

- The oldest Rock Art comes from Apollo 11 Cave in Namibia.
- The slap in this cave was found in association with MSA and ash dating to 27,500-25,500 BP.
- The next oldest paintings are on large pebbles that have been found Blombos Cave, in south western Cape, South Africa dating to 80,000 BP.
- Site has a number of classic LSA artifacts associated with RA.
- We have fragments of engraving associated LSA stratigraphy.
The Drakensburg Mountains

- Drakensburg is extremely rich in RA
- 6,000 sites at with 35,000 individual images
- The eland is particularly common
- Human figures are common in the area—where the sex of man can be distinguished, man outnumber women by 2:1
- It is painted with clear and more tentative details than any other animal
- Wilder beasts are very uncommon in the Drakensburg area
Matopo area in Zimbabwe

- We find that animals out number human figures
- The giraffe is the commonest animals as opposed to eland in the Drakensburg. No ratios of males to females have been made
- Matopo
Brandberg, Namibia
Tsodilo Mountains

- The mountains of Tsodilo rise majestically from the surrounding Kalahari.
- At 1395 meters, making them Botswana’s highest point and a sacred landmark that has been attracting people to trade.
- These mountains have been referred to as hills, a misnomer which does little justice to their imposing presence.
Tsodilo RA

- Over 4500 paintings have been painted at 400 sites
- Density of RA is one of the highest in the world
- Most of the RA dates to 850 and 1100 AD
- Consents of red and white paintings
- Red older than white
- Geometric designs common
- Animal and human figures
- Other animal depicted is giraffe, eland, rhino, zebra and cattle
- And even a whale!
- Engravings—circular boat shaped grooves
Is Tsodilo Art distinctive?

- RA distinctive because of open panels
- Art not hidden in placement compared to Matopo or Drakensburg
- These paintings were finger painted and made with pigments from red pigment from red hematite (red), charcoal and calcrete (white)
- Possibly mixed with animal fat, blood and narrow, egg white, honey or urine
Why was Tsodilo Nominated a WHS?

- **Spiritual**: Healing waters, offering and prayer sites, creation sites, rainmaking places, and continuing pilgrimages by people of several religious denominations
- **Aesthetics**: Natural beauty and isolation
- **It has at least two rock art traditions**
- **Scientific**: Results of archaeological, rock art, geological, seismic, geological, zoological, botanical, palaeo-environmental and anthropological research
- **Historical**: 100 000 years of human occupation from Middle Stone age to the Iron Age and mining, as well as oral histories of the villages from 1850s to the present day
- **Traditions**: Rainmaking and healing are still practiced and local communities have strong ties with the hills
Eurocentric Views regarding RA

- In his famous story of the Lost World of the Kalahari, which documents his famous expedition into the Kalahari in search of the Bushmen, Laurens van der Post, when he saw the hills for the first time, wrote:

- They look like the rocks of Moses struck on the rocks to let water for the Israelites... I will lift my eyes into the hills from hence come my help. All the time I was at the Slippery Hills I had that feeling that I was in a great and ancient temple. Indeed from the moment I first saw them rising suddenly out of the flat plain... I had the same upsurge of emotion that the psalmist cries out loud: I will lift up mine eyes into the hills, from where cometh my help (Van der Post 1958: 80).
Euro centric view

- The white Lady rock art Shelter, Brandenburg, Namibia
The rock art is essentially religious in nature

- Eland paintings “vandalized”
- Is it a violation of the monuments and relics Act?
Conclusions

- The interpretation of Rock Art is the most controversial issue
- RA a fragile heritage
- Highly vulnerable to damage caused by people
- Touching the paintings damages the paintings
- Graffiti
- Pollution, fires, dust can damage the paintings
- RA—amazing, because of its authenticity and integrity