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New Twa Art Discovery in north west Tanzania

There are estimated 1000 rock art sites in Tanzania and around 4 different styles of art from different periods. The best known rock art area, which probably includes some of the oldest art, is in the Kondoa-Irangi area which was inscribed in 2006 on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The World Heritage site /area has over 200 individual sites and the broader Kondoa area must have far more. There are also lesser known sites in the north west and south west of Tanzania as well as in the south east near the Mozambique border, and in the north east near Mt Kilimanjaro. One of the traditions found in Tanzania, as well as in neighboring Uganda and Kenya, is red geometric art made by Twa hunter-gatherers (Batwa). Some red, infilled animal paintings are also ascribed to the Twa.

About 8 years ago TARA, the Nairobi-based Trust for African Rock Art, received an email with information on rock paintings in a concession area south west of the Serengeti National Park, only about 120 km as the crow flies from Lake Victoria. The message referred to the place as a Masai painting site and attached a photograph which appeared to show a combination of geometric and animal paintings. The geometric paintings appeared reminiscent of similar patterns in paintings and engravings recorded elsewhere in East Africa and referred to there as Twa art.

Owing to the remoteness of the site, the first opportunity TARA had to visit and record it was in August 2011 when the late Alec Campbell and I received an invitation from Tanganyika Gametracker Safaris to



Fig. 1. Aerial view of the granite outcrop, Kijashu. The site is located close to the centre of this image between the boulders

Fig. 2. Boulders next to the site (ground level)



visit the Maswa area on our way back from a recording trip to the World Heritage Site at Kondoa. Gametrackers were extremely helpful and supportive to our party.

The site is located in a massive granite outcrop known locally as Kijashu (Fig. 1) on one side of a huge boulder on the south western side of the outcrop, sheltered by trees (Figs 2 & 3). The painted panel, measuring about 22 sq m, is on a large sloping face on the boulder. Much of this face is covered with red and orange paintings, the latter superimposing the former. The older

red paintings consist mainly of concentric circles similar to paintings recorded by TARA in western Kenya (Campbell et al. 2007), eastern Uganda (Posnanski 1967; Campbell & Coulson 2001) and to engravings in northern Kenya (Campbell & Coulson, 1998 & 2001) but also include paintings of cattle (bulls facing right) and multiple elongated, schematic (human) stick figures, apparently in the same pigment.(Fig. 4).

Superimposed over the darker red paintings are large numbers of lighter orange paintings (Fig. 5) including more circles,

Fig. 3. Scene at the site with rock paintings visible left of centre. Alec Campbell can be seen sketching the paintings





Fig. 4. Wide-angle view of the whole site with Alec Campbell standing on the left

concentric circles, other geometrics and many more orange elongated stick figures as well as giraffes (about 20), all facing right, on the left side of the site (Fig. 6). In addition to these animals are at least 5 cows or bulls facing right. It is clear from the superimposition that the oldest paintings are the concentric circles. Some Twa art is believed to be well over 1000 years old although to TARA's knowledge no East Afri-

Fig. 5. Red/dark orange concentric circles superimposed by more recent and elongated stick figures and 2 dark red cows centre



can paintings have been successfully dated. (Fig. 7). Immediately below the main panel we recorded what looked like a grave (Figs 8 & 4).

About 200 elongated stick figures, (Fig. 9), are reminiscent of similar elongated schematic figures in Zimbabwe in the Matobo Hills World Heritage Site where they were described as "avimorphs" (Fig. 10). While

Fig. 6. Close-up of yellow/orange giraffes (9) facing right from top left section of the whole panel. We counted a total of 20 giraffe on the whole panel





Fig. 7. Close up showing concentric circles superimposed by vertical elongated stick figures. The bright orange paintings appear to be the most recent. Note the sun-ray fringe around the concentric circles



Fig. 10. Zimbabwe (San) paintings at a Matobo Hills World Heritage site shows elongated stick figures, for comparison in upper part of picture. Here they have been called "avimorphs"



Fig. 11. Concentric circle paintings on an island on Lake Victoria (Kenya). Sites here were used for rain making rituals until the 1980's by the local people.



Fig. 8. Close up of what could be a grave (yet to be excavated) at base of main panel

these are two other similar figures about 20 cms tall, all in darker red pigment.

It is our opinion that the animals and elongated stick figures which superimpose the concentric circles are from a different/ later tradition, even though some of the stick figures are a similar color to the circles. I believe that the geometric paintings were probably made by Batwa hunter gatherers but that the elongated stick figures as well as the cattle and giraffe paintings are from a later (pastoral) tradition.

most of the stick figures at Kijashu are elongated, some as tall as 1.2 m, there is a line of 16 much smaller but otherwise similar stick figures in the upper part of the central panel which are about 15 cms high. Close to

While similar sets of concentric circles with sunburst radiations have been recorded in many parts of east Africa (Fig. 11- Kwitone) the elongated stick figures are rare. In fact, we have seen only one other

Fig. 9. Detail showing medium size, red stick figures with a yellow giraffe top left



Fig. 12. Old photo of stick figures at an unknown site in south west Kenya, taken in colonial times



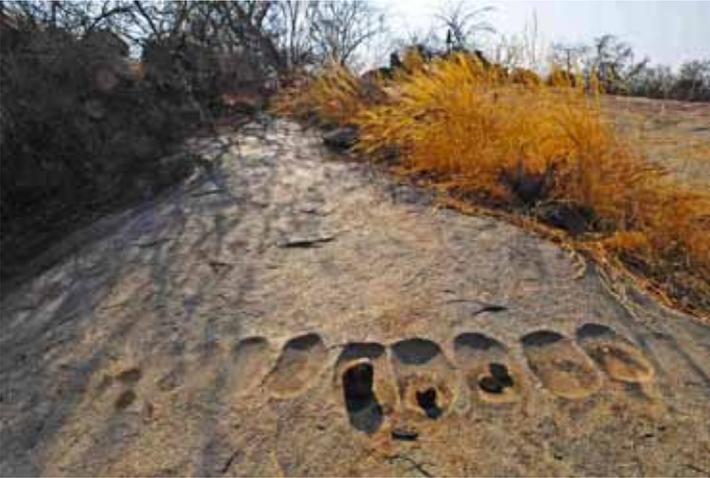


Fig. 13. Line of 9 hollows ground into a granite slab at Kuna River Tanzania about 10 kms from the painting site. 10 cm scale bar

instance of these to date. This was about a year ago when we received an email from a woman who had lived as child in Kenya in colonial times and wrote attaching a scanned photo she had found amongst her late father's possessions. It showed some orange paintings in a rock shelter in South Nyanza District as she recalled. Although the exact location of the site is not known and the photo is old, the same orange elongated figures recorded at Kijashu could be seen, but without the concentric circles. Parts of South Nyanza are less than 300 kms from Kijashu (Fig. 12).

While visiting Kijashu we were also taken to see some remarkable grinding hollows in the granite rocks near the Kuna River bed. At the first site there was a line of 9 large hollows, some fairly eroded, and at the second site a straight line of 22 beautifully carved hollows on a long oval expanse of granite (Figs 13 & 14). I do not however believe that there was any relationship between these grinding hollows and the Kijashu paintings which are located at least 10km apart.

We believe that a lot of the hunter-gatherer geometric art in east and central Africa, which typically involves concentric circles and other geometric patterns such as dumbbells, and non-domesticated animals

as well in some areas such as Zambia (Smith 1997), was made by Pygmy hunter gatherers, ancient ancestors of the present-day (Twa) forest people. The hunter-gatherers were displaced from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and parts of Zambia and Malawi after about 2500 years ago when Iron Age farmers settled in the region. Today there are Twa forest people living close to the Ugandan border in Rwanda and in the Rwenzori area of eastern Congo. Examples of hunter-gatherer geometric rock art are found over a vast area stretching from Malawi and Mozambique in the south east and Angola in the south west, to East and central Africa across to Gabon and Mauritania in the north west. It is not however possible to say how much of this art can be ascribed specifically to the Twa. The name Twa is a Bantu name for foragers and hunter gatherers and is still specially applied to Pygmies and sometimes in southern Africa to Bushmen.

Although the present-day Twa do not have a tradition of rock art, the symbolism in their belief system is reflected in the paintings elsewhere (Namono 2010). Ugandan rock art specialist Dr Catherine Namono, now working at the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, has made a major contribution to the interpre-



Fig. 14. Part of a line of 22 hollows ground into a long oval granite slab, Kuna River, Tanzania

tation of the hunter-gatherer geometric rock paintings by careful analysis of Pygmy ethnography, including studies of the Twa. She has made a convincing case for ways in which Pygmy groups experienced their cosmos and demonstrates the associations of geometric patterns in rock art with those in Pygmy thought and what they might symbolise. In particular, phallic and womb shapes symbolise fecundity, regeneration and potency of the forest and the male-female juxtaposition of procreative powers (Namono 2010, 2012).

All photos by David Coulson.

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