

An Eye for the Cycle of Life: Exploring Rock Art in the Khomas Region

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Keywords: Rock art; Khomas Region; Harmonie; panels/panoramas; shamans/shamanistic; Holocene; Nauzerus; Naukluft; Noab.

Abstract

Rock art sites in the Khomas Region can best be understood if located within a landscape-based approach as Kinahan (2020) compellingly argues. Such an approach has the advantage of connecting primary resource sites with evidence of scattered occupation of secondary resource sites, mediated by social relations that determine access to these resources.

Many rock art sites are in mountainous terrain, for the Region is named after the Nama *lomas* (mountain) (Grünert, 2000:30) which, with an average height of almost 2,000m, acted as natural retreats for hunter-gatherers competing with herders and farmers for resources. Most rock art sites are located in relative proximity to water. Even so, some sites are far from river courses and water – several kilometres in fact. Despite an overall similarity of paintings across the region, no two sites have quite the same set of images. For this reason, it is important to explore the relationships between the art, social life, landscape and its resources, hence the title of this article.

The legibility¹ of the paintings is a matter of disagreement among researchers. For some analysts, much of the imagery is literal: humans and animals have recognizable represented morphologies: bags, bows, breasts, buttocks, penises and young. Their assumption is that the image-maker wanted the viewer to recognize his or her subject matter. This is what the Zimbabwean archaeologist Peter Garlake (1995) calls '*the principle of legibility*'.

¹ The term 'legibility' refers to the clarity of visibility, overall legibility and outline of an image and derives from the work of Peter Garlake (1995) *The Hunter's Vision - The Prehistoric Art of Zimbabwe*. University of Washington Press, Seattle, p. 21.

This legibility may, however, not be enough in itself. A second level has to be attempted to understand how the image-makers think. Rock art affords insights into hunter-gatherer spiritual life. While not every archaeologist agrees, there is a sizeable body of historical ethnography that argues that some of the art is shamanic (Dawson, 1988; Lewis-Williams, 1981, 2002, 2019). Kinahan (2020:14), however, usefully warns against the ‘ahistorical reliance on the authority of ethnographic sources’. A further problem is that ethnography tends to present hunter-gatherers in a rather essentialist way as if they are static and unchanging.

Introduction

Paintings of human figures are relatively easy to recognize. Normally, these figures can be sexed – male and female. Based primarily on our ability to recognize either breasts or a penis in such figures, moreover, the association, equipment and physical proportions of human figures is a useful dimension of the art. At many sites in the Khomas Region, human figures are shown in processions and particular settings forming a panel such as dances, other social occasions such as rituals and significant social events. Often images of humans carry a set of equipment which may be repeated from figure to figure. Equipment can range widely: bows, arrows, quivers sticks, and bags for collecting food, decorative items including headdresses, knee straps and dancing rattles. The images of humans reflect features present in the rock art in the rest of the country.

As is the case in many rock art panels elsewhere in the country, figures are sometimes juxtaposed or superimposed. This makes the interpretation of such panels more complex, for it is difficult to decide if it was an intentional composition or not. The viewer can look at the orientation of specific images, their placement in a panel, their compositions and if there are clear juxtapositions.

Some paintings are neither clearly humans nor animals, but *therianthropes* – human-animal transformations or conflated fantasy animals (Forssman & Gutteridge, 2012: 50). In Khomas, historical images that can be related to specific historical events are rare, although these may exist.

The bulk of the images are rendered at centimetre scale, most falling between 10 and 30-40 centimetres in maximum dimension. As in the rock paintings in other parts of the country, the paintings are predominantly rendered in ochreous colours: reds, oranges, and yellows derived from the weathered oxides or hydroxide of iron. All oxides, hydroxides and dioxides used in paintings are inorganic materials not suitable for radiocarbon C-14 dating, whereas charcoal is potentially datable (Lenssen-Erz & Erz, 2000: 90-91).

Based on my fieldwork of many different rock art sites in the Region, most individual images are rendered in monochrome, painted in a single colour, usually red or shades of red. There are a number of bio-chromes, paintings with two colours and significantly fewer polychromes, images rendered in more than two colours.

While there is undoubtedly a relationship between rock art and water, such a relationship is far from being uniform, as springs are often far-and-wide between and run-off water from occasional rainfall gathers in open rocky pools, or disappears beneath the sand of ephemeral rivers such as the !Khuseb and Gaub rivers (Kinahan, 2005: 120). Kinahan (2005 and 2020) shows that Holocene archaeological sites, especially those dating to within the last 5 000 years, during which human responses to the aridity of the Namib developed distinctive features (Kinahan, 2005: 120).

Later Stone Age (LSA) culture is characterized by specialized microlithic assemblages that persisted until the colonial era of the late 19th and 20th centuries among the last surviving hunter-gatherer communities. Microlithic assemblages for various rock shelter excavations in the Namib are mostly related to light-weight hunting equipment such as the bow and composite arrow (Richter, 1984 and Wendt, 1972).

Extensive field research over four decades in the Namib and adjacent Khomas Highlands, shows that hunter-gatherer subsistence was centripetal to reliable water sources, and this in turn, determined the pattern of land use of the nomadic pastoral economy that dominated the desert and its fringes during the last two millennia (Kinahan, 2005: 120-121; Kinahan, 2020:111) Rock art sites are broadly found along the escarpment watershed, with a higher concentration west of the escarpment zone.

In the case of the Daurês/Brandberg Mountain in the Erongo Region, intensive and repeated occupation of the higher elevations only began approximately 5,000 years B.P. (Kinahan, 1984; 2001). Through groundbreaking research, Kinahan has shown that although rock-shelter sites near reliable water sources were used in the early Holocene, later Holocene settlement took place near “highly localized water sources” (Kinahan, 2005:121).

In the Hungorob drainage in the Daures/Brandberg, Kinahan (2005:121-123) argues that the proceeds of hunting “very closely reflect the relative abundance of the most common species, rock dassie (*Procavia capensis*), klipspringer (*Oreotragus oreotragus*) and Jameson’s red rock rabbit (*Pronolagus randensis*). The rock art is mainly devoted to human figures, but it includes different animals, with medium and large antelope of the desert plains and dry river valleys predominant among these”.

In the case of more than the 200 rock art sites that I have visited in the Khomas Region, a broadly similar pattern of rock art images occur, with images of many different animals, among these: Springbok (*Antidorcas marsupialis*), greater Kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*), giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis*), Gemsbok (*Oryx gazelle*), Zebra (*Equus hartmannae*), elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) and Black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*). Birds, felines, reptiles and baboons are numerically less important, even if there are a few sites with brilliant paintings of birds (*Neu-Heusis*) and feline (*Krumneck*) (du Pisani, 2020:13-43). Clearly, the rock art is not a comprehensive reflection of local fauna.

Comprehensive and innovative research by Kinahan (2005:123, 2020) shows that ritual healing was greatly intensified when resources were strained before the summer rains, or in times of extended drought. In this finding, Kinahan also draws on the important ethnographic research of Barnard (1992) and Lee (1979) to further substantiate his finding.

Before discussing specific rock art panels at two farms in the Khomas Region, it is worth repeating that the Region had/has specific areas of seasonal occupation – what Kinahan (2005,2020) calls ‘a density-dependent system’ – based on the availability of water and food resources. The rock art needs to be understood within such a social system and political-economy.

Harmonie

The farm *Harmonie* No. 376 of 3,790ha is some 95km to the west of Windhoek, off the C-28 gravel road and has been in the ownership of the Jacobs family for decades. *Harmonie* nestles in the heart of the Khomas Highlands with its undulating hills that form the escarpment between the coastal plain and central, inland plateau. The surface-water area on the farm is dry for most of the year. The network of ephemeral rivers carry water only for short periods after a heavy rainfall – there is little groundwater on the farm and the water table is deep. Considered within a landscape-perspective, the site is located close to a secondary and not a primary resource area. On the surface, there is little archaeological evidence of extended habitation.

On average, the geological record dates back some 750 million years, while the so-called *Damara Mountain Building* age, occurred approximately 650 million years ago. The peneplain of the Khomas Hochland comprises mostly of mica-schist and quartz (Grunert, 2000:31).

The actual rock art site is not spectacular and comprises of an overhang of mica-schist that measures 5m 30cm in length. Approximately 800m upstream from the site, there is evidence of an earlier spring in an ephemeral rivulet that provides some seepage during good rains. There are also a few rock pools that provide water for a short period, mostly to Baboon (*Papio ursinus*), Zebra, Greater Kudu, Rock hyrax (*Procavia capensis*), Porcupine (*Hystrix africaeaustralis*) and Steenbok (*Raphicerus campestris*). This may well provide one of the keys in the landscape that explains the images and panel that depict rain and possibly a rain-making ceremony.

Based on historical ethnography of the nineteenth century, the trance experience involved rain-making and the control of antelope. Those skilled in these practices were known respectively as *!khwa-ka !gi:ten* and *Opwaiten-ka !gi:ten* (Lewis-Williams, 1981:77). In addition to dances, rain-making and antelope control constituted symbolic action intended to sustain the material basis for human life – the environment and hence economic viability of the hunter-gatherers. The San shamans’ symbolic and social work was thus believed to have a triple impact:

First, on human relationships, secondly, on sustaining people’s relationships with the environment and finally, on people’s relationship with the spirit realm (Lewis-Williams, 2020:35).



Figure 1: Photo: André du Pisani

Figure 1 shows an image of rain at the site. The painting of rain drops that resembles digits in parts stretches for all but 2m50cm and is located across a fairly smooth surface with a few cracks transecting it. These cracks may suggest a dividing line between the physical and the spiritual world.

Of particular interest is the placing of two human figures that may represent shamans. The biggest of these is 19cm high and the other, 17cm. These two prominent figures are surrounded by smaller figures of between 8 and 10cm in height. At least one of these figures is painted in a sitting position within a circle of other figures.

Figure 2 on the next page, shows what may be a shaman surrounded by several other smaller human figures.

The monochrome figures are rendered in considerable detail, with an emphasis on their arm and leg muscles and ornamentation such as what appears to be straps, skins and cloak-like garments, items suggestive of ritual attire (du Pisani, 21/05/2020, unpublished field notes, see also: Lewis-Williams & Dowson, 1989). Most of the human figures have been painted without heads or with small heads covered by headdresses.

Paintings of rain are also found at several other farms in the Region, such as *Koireb 1* in the Rehoboth district, *Hornkranz*, *Hornkranz South*, and *Omandumba West* near the Erongo Mountains in the Erongo region. Piet van Rooyen wrote an admirable article on



Figure 2: Photo: André du Pisani

rain, rain-making and rain animals based on a site at his farm *Hornkranz South* (Van Rooyen, 2015: 135-150).

Kinahan's argument (2020:124) that the rock art "formed a fundamental and necessary part of the ritual activity" is most useful, since "the rock art of rain-making was executed as part of the process of rain-making, not afterwards as a record of the event" seems to ring true in this case as well. Moreover, rain-making as we know from the ethnographic and historical record, and as argued by Kinahan (2020), formed a significant component of the relationship between hunter-gatherers and other communities of pastoralists and farmers who engaged shamans for the explicit purpose of making rain.

Having briefly considered some of the rock art at the farm *Harmonie*, the focus now shifts to an extraordinary rich site that is located at farm *Noab* at *Remhoogte* in the *Naukluft* Mountains.

The fountains of Noab

Farm *Noab* 10 nestles along the impressive *Remhoogte* pass amidst complex geological formations of about 600 million years old sediments of *Schwartzkalk* belonging to the Nama Group. Similar formations are found at the *Zaris* Mountains further to the SW, while the upper sections of the mountain are composed of dolomites of the *Naukluft* Nappe

Complex, part of the Damara Sequence. The lower sections of the pass have prominent folding structures – the result of geological processes over millennia. The pass traverses a deep valley incision landscape, caused by tectonic activity. This fault line runs along the *Noab* River with its many springs, from which the farm takes its name. The *Noab* River is a tributary of the *Tsondab* River.

The rock overhang where the paintings are, overlooks the valley of the *Noab* River and comprises of dolerite; an igneous rock that consists of calcium-rich plagioclase feldspar-mostly augite – with quartz, magnetite and olivine. The roof and back wall of the overhang show streaks of calcite (CaCO₃); a carbonate rock that is almost transparent with a vitreous lustre. Calcite forms in sedimentary rocks, in caves in limestone areas, in mineral veins and around hot springs. Some of the paintings are partly covered by such calcite veins.

Noab is adjacent to the farm *Nauzerus* 11, famous for a magnificent hunting scene of a Black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*). The panel at *Noab* contains an equally impressive monochrome painting of a Black rhinoceros. This painting is 19cm long and shows a number of similarities with that at *Nauzerus*. Both paintings are distinguishable by their two horns, large bodies and short tails. In both paintings, the head is held horizontally, slightly upwards. Both heads are depicted as being shorter than their necks.

In San rock art, rhinos are implicated in the transformation of shamans and rain-making tasks. Not only are rhinos great meat animals, but are also considered as one of the rain animals (Forssman & Gutteridge, 2012: 183-184). The painting of a rhino is located 1m 32cm from the floor of the overhang and occupies a central position within the panorama, making it easily evident within the panel of paintings.

Not denying the beauty and importance of the rhino painting, arguably, the most significant painting appears to the left of the rhino. It is of a line drawing of a human figure; 16cm in height that appears to wear an animal cap that resembles the head of a baboon. The image has been rendered in bi-chrome and shows the figure carrying a stick, a bag, displaying an ornamented penis and wearing other decorative items such as knee-straps. The figure may represent a shaman engaging in rain-making (du Pisani, 30/12/20: 12-14).

The panel also includes two clearly-recognizable images of clouds with rain falling from them. The smaller of the two paintings is 16cm across and the biggest 22cm. Painted in red ochre, these two paintings provide the part of the context of the panel and have been painted above the other images that include smaller animals and humans.

Paintings of baboons (*Papio ursinus*) are rare in Namibian rock art. Based on research by Challis, cited in Estes (1992:510), baboons have been highly regarded by hunter-gatherers for their ability to raid crops and escape unharmed. Among the raiders, the San were renowned for their ability to harness the potency of certain animals, including baboons, during ritual dances. In the Maloti-Drakensberg in South Africa, there are paintings that show dancing groups changing into baboons and horses. The creolized raiders seemingly believed they could appropriate, in ritual, the protective powers of the baboons and thus remain unharmed on mounted raids into adjacent settler farms (Estes, 1992: 510).



Figure 3 shows the image of a Shaman. Photo: André du Pisani



Figure 4 shows the image of the Black rhino. Photo: André du Pisani

Baboons, it has been argued, retained their human-like qualities like elephants and ant bears. San refer to baboons as “the people who sit upon their heel”. The Nharo San do not consider the baboon a meat animal or predator – the two categories into which animals fall according to their beliefs – because they are closely related to humans (Mitchell & Smith, 2009).

Conclusion

The rock art discussed in this article falls within the *Later Stone Age* (LSA). The LSA began around 20,000 years ago and was still in existence in recent history when Namibia was colonized by Europeans in the late nineteenth century and after. The San tools during this time were characteristically small and comprised of scrapers, segments, adze, awls and earthenware pottery. Hunting and gathering constituted the mode of political-economy, with people primarily subsisting off mammals, reptiles, fish, birds and a wide variety of vegetation.

The distribution of the rock art sites underlines the importance of primary and secondary resource site. In the case of Harmonie, water was mostly available during the rainy season when the local spring and rock pools supplied water to the hunter-gatherers and animals alike. There is little evidence of longer periods of settlement and one may conclude that the site was used for fairly short periods in time, determined by the availability of water and food.

The site at Noab overlooks the Noab River incision that supports a wide range of mammal fauna, with hyrax, rock hare, kudu and Hartmann Zebra as its principal herbivores. The ravine has several springs that attract zebra and plains antelope, snakes, flocks of Namaqua sandgrouse (*Pterocles namaqua*), Rock pigeons (*Columba guinea*), Swainson's spurfowl (*Pteristes swainsonii*), Helmeted guineafowl (*Numida meleagris*) and raptors to drink. The intensity of occupation in the Noab mountains is apparent from a clear view over the base of the River and the surrounding landscape and provides protection against the elements.

A few of the well-preserved paintings may date to less than 300 years B.P., while others may be older. All fall within the *Later Stone Age* (LSA) and may be between 300 to 2500 years old. This is based on the tool industry evident in the site and various reports by travelers and missionaries, among them, James Edward Alexander (1838, 1997 facsimile reprint), Francis Galton (1889) and the missionary Schmelen who visited the Rooibank along the Khuseb River in 1825 (cited by Moritz, 2020:58) that mention the presence of hunter-gatherers in the nineteenth century in the Naukluft and its environs.

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the support given to me and the interest in my work by Mr Mike Jacobs of Harmonie, Mrs Caroline Buhrman of Nauzerus, Mr Jan Buhrman of Noab, Emeritus Professor Piet van Rooyen of Gamsberg 23/3, Mr Robin Hurt of Great Gamsberg and Mount Barry, Dr Beatrice H. Sandelowski, Dr John Kinahan, Dr Alma Nankela, Prof. Dr Peter Breunig of the University of Frankfurt, Prof. Dr Tilman Lenssen-Erz of the University of Köln and Prof. Emeritus David Lewis-Williams in the University of the Witwatersrand.

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JOURNAL 68

Namibia Scientific Society / Namibia Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft
Windhoek, Namibia 2021

ISSN: 1018-7677 ISBN: 978-99945-76-74-6