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Art Beyond Sight

André du Pisani

Keywords: Rock art, Khomas Region, ethnography, storylines in rock art, imagistic mosaic of San (Bushman) myth, animals as symbols, art and landscape, rock art panels, artefacts, quarts-microliths.

Abstract

The rock art of the Khomas Region is not as well-known as that of the Erongo Region with its celebrated apex sites at the Dâures, Erongo Mountains, the Spitzkoppe, and !Ui-laes (Twyfelfontein). Historically and intellectually, there has been less of a sustained research interest in the rock art of the Khomas Region, notwithstanding the ground-breaking work of Ernst Scherz in the 1970s and late 1980s and a sprinkling of more recent articles devoted to some of the rock art sites of the Region.

This, in and of itself, is enough reason to write about the rock art of a region yet to be comprehensively documented, surveyed and researched. Over the past eighteen years the author has visited more than 320 rock art sites located on 62 farms within the boundaries of the region. Undoubtedly, there are more sites to be documented and discovered, and through this, more insights to be gained into southern African rock art. Most of the art dates from the Later Stone Age (LSA), with some a few hundred years BP (Before Present), and typical material artefacts of that period are to be found at or in close proximity to the sites. The vast majority of the paintings are rendered in ochre and show the interaction between animals and people, and scenes from daily life, with some abstract renderings as well.

The rock art of the Khomas Region needs to be considered within a wider frame of southern African rock art research. Moreover, the researcher must be aware of and sensitive to diverse theoretical and methodological approaches to rock art, while respecting an ethnographic foundation, in an attempt to derive meaning from the paintings.

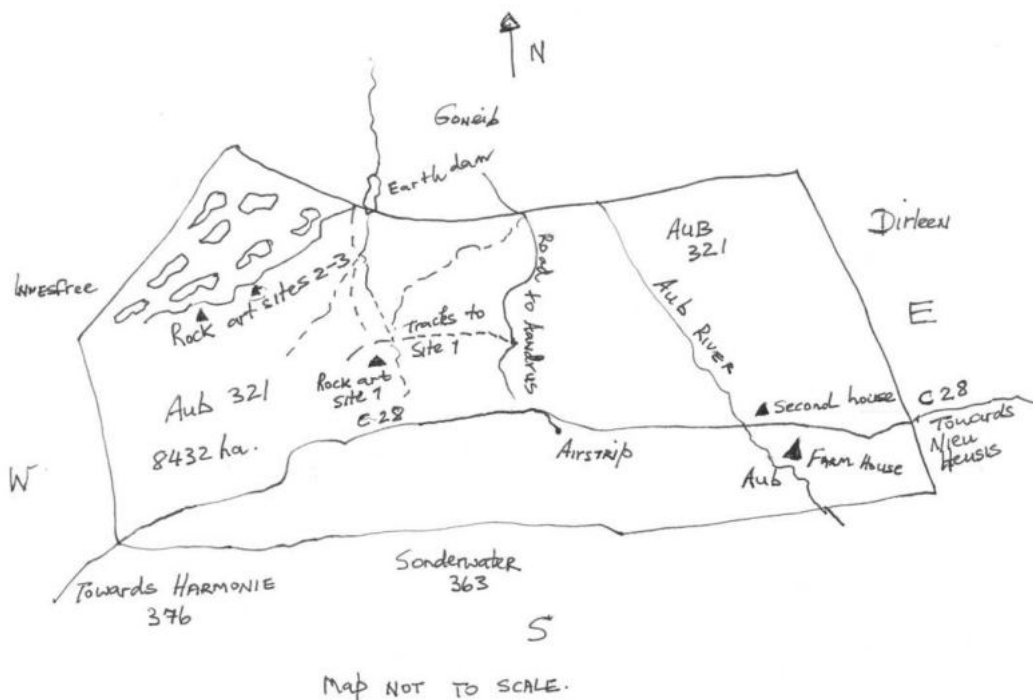
Introduction

This article is based on a field visit on 5 November 2021 to the farm Aub 321, 45°S 16°E 30' along the C-28 gravel road, some 62 kilometre west of the Capital City, Windhoek in the Khomas Region. Before it was subdivided, the farm covered an area of some 9,000 ha. It borders the farms Dirleen, Aandrus, Kariam and Sonderwater (Namibia 1:250 000 Map 2216 Windhoek, Third Edition, 1997). The article draws on earlier published work by

the author on rock art sites on several farms located within a 50km radius of Aub. As the description and analysis of the sites at Aub will show, the rock art has much in common with those on farms in the environs of the farm. Thus, a sub-regional perspective is needed to read the rock art and understand its affinity to other sites in the Region and beyond.

Aub nestles on the Khomas Hochland plateau with its undulating hills, at an altitude of 1,200 to over 2,000m above sea level. The geology comprises major rock formations collectively known as the Khomas Group, consisting mostly of schists. Soil fertility is mostly low, notwithstanding some local variation. Dominant soils are lithic leptosols, meaning the soil is thin or shallow. There are no perennial rivers in Khomas, with the Kuiseb, Swakop, and Gaub Rivers three of the most important ephemeral rivers. Median annual rainfall varies between 350 and 250mm. The biomes and vegetation are typical of highland scrubland (Mendelsohn, Jarvis, Roberts & Robertson, 2002:85, 98–9).

The author visited three rock art sites on the farm. The first looking towards the south-west comprises a mica-schist rock with an overhang that has a surface area of 200 x 50cm behind the drip line. Several rock ‘markings’, meaning marks made for a functional purpose, were found in places in which it would have been comfortable to sit at ease while executing some everyday tasks. One such rock ‘marking’ consists of a grinding hollow, oval in shape with shallow, slope-sided depressions used for ochres for paints, or for



Locality of the sites. Map: André du Pisani

grinding various foods such as bulbs and seeds; or used as a receptacle for holding egg-shell roughouts so that holes could be drilled into them to produce beads. Other artefact assemblages include small pieces of potsherds (ceramics) and quartz microliths, all part of the Later Stone Age (LSA) of the past 2000 BP (Before Present) or more recent. In this case, probably a few hundred years BP.

The first site overlooks a small rivulet with a fairly dense coverage of *Acacia erioloba* (*Vachellia erioloba*; camelthorn) and *Acacia karroo* (*Vachellia karroo*; sweet thorn). The bark and leaves of the latter are a widely-used remedy for diarrhoea and dysentery. The gum, bark and leaves have also been used as an emollient and astringent for colds, conjunctivitis and haemorrhage. The gum is used as food and is also taken for oral thrush (Van Wyk, van Oudtshoorn and Gericke, 1997:24). The vegetation indicates the presence of groundwater and the leaves of the trees were green when the author visited in November 2021.

The farm has a number of climax grasses, such as *Antheophora pubescens* (wool-grass, krulblaar), *Brachiaria nigropedata* (black-footed brachiaria), *Digitaria eriantha* (woolly finger grass), and two species of *Stipagrostis* (bushman-grass), all very nutritious for grazing by game and cattle (Müller, 1983:22).

The second and third sites are located close together higher up along a mountain slope some 4km in a northerly direction from the first (we measured the distance on the odometer of our light commercial vehicle). A secondary farm road runs along the banks and, in parts, in the bed of the river that brings down a significant volume of water when in flood. Lower down the river there is an earth dam, indicating the volume of water the river transports during the wet season. Along the seam of the mountain there is a steep ravine that has to be negotiated on foot. Along the sides of the river a variety of trees grow, mostly *Acacia* species, while a number of gnarled *Boscia albitrunca* (shepherd's tree) grow along the steep slopes of the mountain. The paintings are located on the eastern side of a prominent cubistic mica-schist with a smooth surface that can be seen from afar. It is highly likely that there will be other sites in the vicinity of these two sites, as the rock formation continues further up the slope of the mountain and provides a suitable canvas for rock art.

The second and third sites, in common with the first, have similar material artefacts, replete with pottery, ostrich eggshells, grinding stones, and a variety of small microliths. The paintings are comparable to those at the first site. Some weathering and exfoliation have taken place in all three sites as these do not afford effective protection against wind and rain and against animals that rub their bodies against the rock surface. The author found fresh owl droppings on the floor of the first site, probably from the *Otus senegalensis* (African scops-owl), which prefers acacia trees that grow along the edge of rivers and are a reliable food source.

Animals as Symbols

The careful way in which the Bushmen (San)¹ painted animals, functions as an indication of respect, and at the symbolic level “operates as a device for bringing the dichotomy between animals as esteemed ‘other’ and as hunted prey” into sharp relief. (Eastwood, 2006:110). Animals were not only dear to the hearts of the Bushmen (San), they were also believed to be especially dear to God.

In general, animals are used by the Bushmen (San) to ‘think with’, and they have often been used to express complex ideas, folklore, cosmology, myth, and social values. Although the symbolism of many animals is not self-evident, Patricia Vinnicombe (1976) and David Lewis-Williams (1981, 2004) have suggested ways to explain paintings of eland in the Drakensberg of South Africa.

The first site contains various paintings of animals, among these, an elephant and several female kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*). There are numerous paintings of kudu in the Khomas Region, as indeed throughout southern Africa in eastern Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. They are painted in different ways, but mostly have certain features in common, such as large ears, humps, long necks, and males have pronounced elongated spiralling horns. In some paintings even the animal’s stripes are shown. In some of the paintings of the region, kudus are often painted as the largest animal in the panel, for example on the farm *Rooisand* below the Gamsberg. (Forssman & Gutteridge, 2012:128; du Pisani, 2022:44). In this particular case, the female kudus are shown in procession with their heads held low and their chins forward as if they are browsing.

Just as in the case of other animals such as eland (*Taurotragus oryx*) and elephant, kudu has an affinity to mythology and cosmology among different San groups. According to San folklore, at creation the original *Ju/hoansi* decided to create supernatural power, which they used to give animals different designs. The kudu’s stripes were made using this supernatural power, which is also known as *n!om*. The kudu is one such animal linked to *n!ao*, which associates hunting and childbirth with the weather. (Forssman & Gutteridge, 2012:128). *N!ao*, which relates to the weather and *n!om*, to the spirit world, is invested at birth and is divided into two categories: rain/cold (lucky) and dry/hot. When a woman’s fluids spill on the floor or ground during childbirth, she and the baby connect and are believed to cause the weather to change. Similarly, when a hunted animal’s blood drips on the ground, the animal’s *n!ao* connects with the hunter, causing a change in the weather. The kudu is also linked to *n!om*. It is used to access the spirit world, where various tasks are performed such as healing, changing the weather, warding off evil spirits, and fending off attacks by large predators such as leopard and lion.

¹ The term ‘Bushman’ for the San people, current during the pre-colonial and colonial periods in the history of Namibia, is now regarded as derogatory. Collectively, the archaeological record of southern Africa shows that the San have occupied 50,000 or more places over the past 12,000 years (Parkington, Dlamini, 2015:77; see also Deacon & Deacon, 1999).

The Khoesan San speak a central Khoesan language. The *Hailom* of northern Namibia perform the kudu dance (Guenther, 1996). The *Khwe* groups from the Kavango regions and Botswana have a number of healing dances, one of which is the kudu medicine dance. Some Angolan *Khwe* groups have adopted the kudu dance in girls' puberty rites.

The most frequently painted animal in the central Limpopo basin of South Africa is the kudu, notably female kudu. As in the ethnography, kudu appear to be implicated in ideas about supernatural potency that shamans may harness, and also be associated by some San groups with girl's puberty rites. Thus, in San cosmology, the symbolism of kudu spans the interests of men and women and relates to at least two ritual domains. (Eastwood, 2006:111).

Notwithstanding the observations made above about kudu in the rock art of the Khomas Region, John Kinahan (2020:201, 2001:20) reminds the reader that: "Kudu are scarce in the rock art of the Namib Desert: the 815 identifiable painted motifs spread over 44 sites in the Hungorob Ravine included only fourteen kudu". Significantly, the author adds: "The scarcity of the kudu in the rock art, however, belies the ethnographically attested role of the species in women's initiation" (Kinahan, 2020:201). Estes (1991:169) identifies the female kudu as a symbol that idealized qualities of women, "in its gentle, sociable and sexually submissive nature, caring for its young until they are almost fully grown" (Quoted by Kinahan, 2020: 201).

Painted just above ground level, the procession of four female kudu is being cleansed by soft-soaking 'female rain', rain that is slow, without thunder or hurry, to emphasize the link between kudu and rain. The kudu, as with many other animals, are portrayed entering a crack or crevice in the rock wall, symbolizing their entry into or emergence from the spirit world, slipping in or out of the spiritual space that opens in the rock face.

The other significant animal at site 1, is the elephant (*Loxodonta africana*). The 40cm long painting of an elephant is rendered in ochre and placed almost at the centre of the painted surface area of some 200 x 50cm. Features that are depicted in this image of a walking elephant include an extended trunk, curved tusks, red upper and darker underparts, a short tail and thick legs that end in round feet. The dorsal line of the elephant's back is clearly visible. The elephant has been painted as an individual. Below the painting, there is a smaller ochre image of a human person.

The elephant is one of the great meat animals, among others: eland, giraffe, rhinoceros, and hippopotamus. On account of its size and power, the elephant is regarded as containing more *nlom* (potency) than most other animals. The *Julhoansi* people categorise elephant meat as red, black and white. "It has all the kinds of meat in it – eland, human – it's the father of meat" (Rust & Van der Poll, 2011:22). Elephants play an important role in San mythology and cosmology. In the literature, there are references to the 'Elephant Dance' and 'Elephant Girl' that are quintessentially feminine, beautiful, intelligent and resourceful (Eastwood, 2006: 96, 101; see also: Bieseke, 1993:22, 139–144). Elephants are adjudged to possess human qualities and are associated with femininity. Elephants are also linked to rain and rain-making. The Khomas Region has a few notable paintings of elephant, such



Image 1 shows the procession of female Kudu. Photo: André du Pisani



Figure 2: The Elephant painting. Photo: André du Pisani

as on the farm *Hornkranz South* and in the *Strodelhöhle* on the farm *Onanis* near the border with the Erongo Region (du Pisani, 2022:48; Sandelowsky, 2013:8). Other significant paintings of elephant include the over 100mm large white elephant in the Philipps Cave on the farm Ameib in the Erongo Mountains, and the elephant painting on the farm Omburo-Ost along the Ugab Terraces west of Outjo, also in the Erongo Region.

Human figures

All three sites contain various human figures that display humans engaged in different activities such as walking, running, dancing, hunting, and standing. Some of the figures are rendered in considerable detail. The size of the largest human painting is ca. 340mm. One can clearly see the aprons that they wear, the bows and arrows and sticks that they carry, not only as tools, but also as “artefacts of the mind” to paraphrase the archaeologist, Jeanette Deacon, as quoted by Forsman and Gutteridge (2012:54–5).

This researcher did not observe dots, humans bending forward (symbolic of hunted animals that bend forward before they die), dancing sticks, or humans with tails. This may indicate normal day-to-day activities that humans engage in, rather than special rituals.

At both the first and second sites there are significant paintings of humans that may depict shamans. These paintings are elongated when compared with the other paintings of



Figure 3: A human (hunter) carrying hunting equipment. Photo: André du Pisani

humans at these sites, but do not carry any tools such as bows and arrows, dancing sticks, or bags. The figures are also not bending forwards, touching people, shooting arrows, bleeding from the nose, or having white dots coming from the neck – all features of the multiple ways shamans have been depicted in San rock art. But, they do have outstretched arms, are uncharacteristically elongated, painted with prominent torsos and well-developed leg and arm muscles, and occupy a prominent place on the panels. The paintings, while not identical, share some important similarities with paintings of shamans at other sites in the Khomas Region and may possibly depict individual shamans (du Pisani, 2021a:59–70; and du Pisani, 2021b:73–85).



Figure 4: Perhaps a painting of an individual Shaman? Photo: André du Pisani

Conclusion

Rock art offers one entry point into understanding the spiritual and social world of the San. Some paintings depict daily activities and show humans performing different activities such as standing upright, walking, sitting, running, handling tools, reflexive action, and coordinated activities (Lenssen-Erz, 2000:70). Some of these activities are very specific, such as hunting and dancing, while others are more random and less-directed.

In all cases knowledge of the ethnography of the artists seems necessary for unravelling social relations and for understanding the use of technology. Some paintings are of what David Lewis-Williams calls ‘images of another world’ and ‘a cosmos in the brain’ (Lewis-Williams, 2014:143-145). Such images are about the ‘shamanistic cosmos’ with its three tiers – the Spirit World (above), Daily Life, and the Spirit Realm (below) (underground, underwater). Some paintings are also about the potency of animals and their symbolic interaction with humans within one, connected universe. The features of the line and crack are consonant with the shaman’s account of going underground. (Lewis-Williams, 2011:90).

In contradistinction to western bias for the near-exclusive power of the written word, San rock art transcends the narrowness of the written word, by providing alternative narratives that undermine the absolute command of the written word. The theological and philosophical concept of ‘hermeneutics’ comes to mind as an enquiry into human existence (du Pisani, 2022:50). The imagistic storylines in San rock art are no less compelling. The rock art of Aub provides a powerful narrative of two of the tiers of the ‘shamanic cosmos’: The Spirit World (above), and Daily Life. It is literally ‘Art beyond Sight’!

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Map

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