

TRUST FOR AFRICAN ROCK ART

NEWSLETTER

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ROCK GONGS

Rock gongs are common throughout Africa, often in the form of naturally-balanced granite boulders, sometimes in association with nearby paintings or engravings and perhaps themselves decorated with cupules or even engraved images. When struck with hard objects, gongs emit ringing tones. Depending on the type of implement used as a striker and the surface area struck, a single gong can emit a variety of tones. Thus several players using different strikers (sandstone, ironstone, quartz, granite, wood or bone) on a single gong can produce a combination of tones that can form melodies.

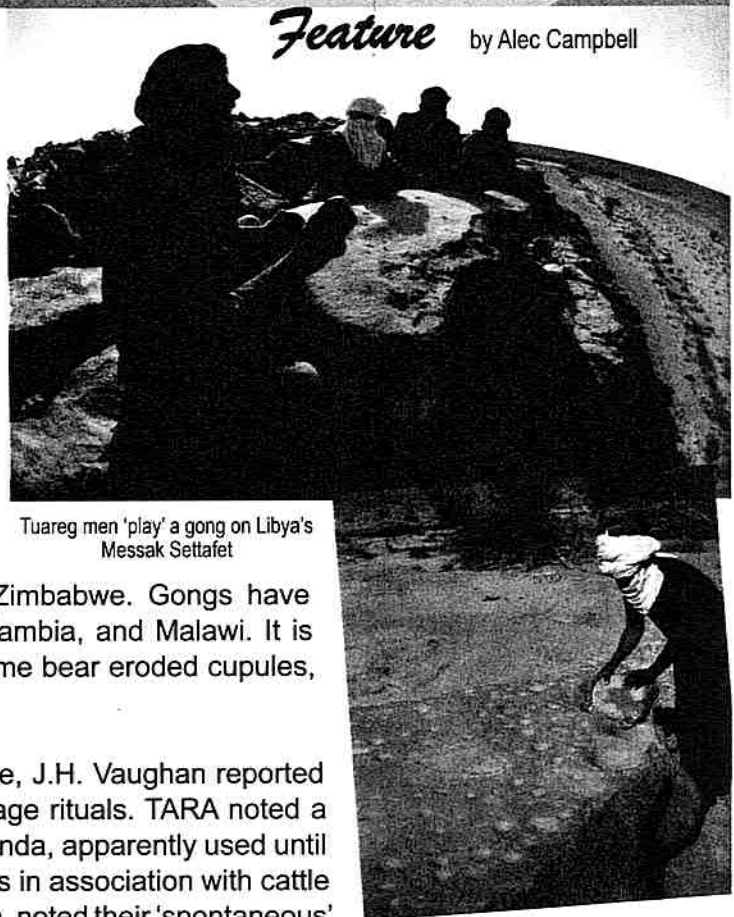
TARA has recorded rock gongs in Algeria, Niger, Libya, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe. Gongs have also been reported in Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan, Zambia, and Malawi. It is uncertain when rocks were first used as gongs, but some bear eroded cupules, suggesting use dating back to the Middle Stone Age.

A few gongs are still used by local people. For instance, J.H. Vaughan reported modern use of gongs in Northern Nigeria in pre-marriage rituals. TARA noted a gong below a rock with painted symbols in Eastern Uganda, apparently used until recently for making rain. C. Kleinitz recorded rock gongs in association with cattle engravings on granite islands in the Nubian Nile in Sudan, noted their 'spontaneous' playing by local people as she worked, and speculated on their possible past ritual associations with cattle.

In the Oued Djerat in Algeria, the recording team from TARA investigated a rock gong reported by M. Hachid, former Director of the Tassili National Park. The gong consists of a large oblong slab of supported sandstone with a number of cupules ground into its upper surface and two deeply ground depressions at one of its ends. At that time, the team was accompanied by several Tuareg one of whom is a resident of the area. The Tuaregs demonstrated how the gong is still played. As one man rolled a large stone in the deeply ground depressions the other man alternatively rolled a second large stone on top of and tapped the upper surface of the gong with a smaller stone. The resulting sounds created an undulating moaning interspersed with sharper notes that reverberated down the Oued (seasonal river).

One of the guides recounted approximately as follows: 'Our ancestors found this stone with its cupules perhaps a thousand years ago when they first settled this valley. They knew or learned how to use it and we use it to this day. The stone talks and speaks on behalf of the spirits in the rocks. It speaks mainly of today and foretells the future. It tells us about good times with abundant rains when our livestock prospers, and it warns of bad times, of raids and wars and of droughts and future hardships'. He denied being able to understand what the rock said, but pointed out that women could understand and interpret the sounds emitted and that both adult men and women play the gong.

Rock gongs, with few exceptions, occur in places with open areas where audiences, dancers and other performers could easily be accommodated. How gongs and adjacent rock art are related remains uncertain, but their frequent proximity, sound and possibly touch may be an integral element of the art's original use. Our experience in the Oued Djerat, as well as those of Brian Fagg and J.H. Vaughan in Nigeria and of Connie Kleinitz in Sudan, indicates the possibility of collecting information, at least about modern use of rock gongs, which could lead to a better understanding of their past purposes and perhaps their association with adjacent rock art.



Tuareg men 'play' a gong on Libya's Messak Settafet

Playing the 'big' gong featured on cover



Park ranger next to a gong in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park

REMOVING GRAFFITI FROM ROCK PAINTINGS IN THE DRAKENSBERG

by Janette Deacon

The Ukhahlamba Drakensberg Park in KwaZulu Natal Province, South Africa, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2000 as a 'mixed' site. This designation means that it has outstanding universal value for both its environmental and cultural qualities. The cultural values are primarily embodied in more than 400 caves and rock shelters that were decorated with rock paintings over the past few thousand years by the ancestors of the San or Bushmen. The high level of artistic skill and the detailed portrayal of themes important in their belief system are unparalleled.

The World Heritage Site is managed by the provincial department of nature conservation, Ezemvelo, and the rock art is protected and monitored by the provincial heritage resources authority, Amafa KwaZulu-Natal. The rock art is not confined to the World Heritage Site, however, and numerous other painted rock shelters are found across the border in Lesotho and in the buffer zone and surrounding areas. It is the rock art sites in these neighbouring areas that have lately been most vulnerable to damage from graffiti.

Most of the graffiti appears to be the work of young men and boys from rural Zulu communities who are employed to take cattle and goats into the mountains for grazing. They often sleep in rock shelters with their animals, or sit there during the day for shade. To pass the time, some of them use charcoal to write their names or slogans on the walls, and sometimes even to outline the rock paintings. If the charcoal graffiti is left, it can become a permanent mark as it is gradually fixed to the rock surface by a natural coating of silica.

Over the past decade, an organisation known as Bergwatch (or Mountain Watch), which operates mostly with volunteers who love the spectacular mountains, has been involved in a remarkable series of projects to raise awareness of the need for sustainable development and conservation of the Ukhahlamba/Drakensberg amongst local communities. Meridy Pfothenauer, a member of Bergwatch, has spent many hours training 20-30 men and women as Rock Art Monitors in the Amangwane Tribal Authority around Bergville (also known as the Mnweni area), which adjoins the buffer zone of the World Heritage Site. Their job is to visit sites regularly, engage with local schools and communities to inform them about the significance of the paintings, guide visitors and report any damage. One of the monitors, Muzi Msimanga, has made several short films about rock art and the ecology of the mountains to show to schools in the area.

At a meeting of community members held in March 2007 with Meridy Pfothenauer, Jeremy Hollmann from the Natal Museum and officials from Ezemvelo and Amafa, it was decided that removal of graffiti was a priority. As I have had some experience in removing charcoal graffiti from more than 40 sites in the Western Cape Province in South Africa, Jeremy invited me to demonstrate the technique and begin to train the monitors. Permits to do the work were granted by Amafa and two trips were arranged in 2007 and 2008. Celeste Rossouw from Amafa arranged funding for me to participate in the second trip.

Four of the five sites we cleaned are several kilometres from the nearest vehicle access, along steep and narrow cattle paths. We travelled in a party of 10-15 people with sleeping bags, tents, food, cameras and equipment for recording the sites and removing the graffiti, so everyone had a backpack and carried at least one piece of equipment too. Streams had to be crossed and the views from our rest stops were magnificent.



Community members removing graffiti

On arrival at a site, the first job was to assess the graffiti and decide on the best method for removal. Then we used measuring tapes to make a plan and section of the shelter on graph paper. Wide masking tape and a thick black koki pen were used to mark off the back wall of the shelter in one or two metre sections, depending on the size of the site and the density of paintings. Two people were assigned to each of the panels to record the graffiti and the paintings. Once all the panels had been recorded, photographs were taken of each panel, taking care to get the numbered masking tape labels on the far left and far right of the frame for each panel.



Before Cleaning



After Cleaning

The next step was to remove the charcoal graffiti. We used a method pioneered in Australia. A small piece of cotton wool is wound around the end of a chopstick like a large earbud. The cotton wool is dipped in de-ionized water and excess water is squeezed off. The damp cotton wool is rolled gently over the offending charcoal and it comes off easily after several applications. Care must be taken to change the cotton wool frequently, not to press hard, and to ensure that dirty water does not run down the rock face. In cases where charcoal is on top of paintings, the surface is carefully assessed and tested to make sure that no damage will be done. Sometimes the charcoal is left in place when the surface is unstable or the pigment had not bonded with the rock. Where graffiti is spread over large surfaces and no paintings are underneath, a 5 cm paintbrush with soft bristles can be used to loosen the charcoal. It is very satisfying to see the graffiti disappear, clean rock surfaces return and the paintings appear in their former beauty.

The majority of the graffiti 'artists' simply write their names, often as a group. Other than names, the graffiti subjects are typical of male interests everywhere: political slogans, giant genitalia (often detached with no accompanying body) and, less often, animals, guns, trucks, cars and aeroplanes. At one site, there were crude copies alongside original rock paintings. Paintings were outlined or 'retouched' at three of the five sites.

The African Conservation Trust, which works closely with Bergwatch, has provided funding for a rock art education course in the area this year and 20 posters about the graffiti cleaning exercise were distributed to 16 schools in the Bergville District. Muzi Msimanga has made a charming 10-minute film of our graffiti-cleaning trips. It stresses the significance of the rock art and the damage done by graffiti, and by allowing livestock to rub against painted surfaces, lighting fires and cooking close to rock paintings. He has shown the film at local community meetings and at schools, and it is being screened at the Natal Museum as well. It is only one of the ways in which the Rock Art Monitors and their local communities are making an effective contribution towards rock art conservation with a remarkably small budget but a great deal of enthusiasm. It was a pleasure working with them and we have high hopes that the Bergwatch model will be applied in other areas as well.

DABOUS AND AIR MOUNTAINS, NIGER



Heavily armed Tuareg in northern Niger

The Air Mountains of northern Niger have once again become a "no-go" area including many wonderful rock engraving sites, such as the now famous Dabous Giraffe. We understand that land-mines have been laid in these areas where TARA has spent so much time over the years recording rock engravings. One of the factors that has contributed to this state of affairs is the increase in domestic and political tension following the government's decision to open more Uranium mines in traditional Tuareg territory, with minimal consultation

or compensation. These developments have also caused environmental and health problems in this area. The situation has devastated the tourism industry in the region. The Prince Claus Fund in the Netherlands has provided support to TARA to insure security at the Dabous rock art site through their Cultural Emergency Rescue.

At the same time, our friend and colleague, Sidi Mohamed Ilies, president of the Anigourane Rock Art Association in Niger was seriously injured in a road accident near Agadez earlier this year. We wish him a speedy recovery.



Close up view of the neck and head of the big giraffe at Dabous