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## A Site-Oriented Approach to Rock Art: A Case Study from Usandawe, Kondoa District

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### Abstract

A site-oriented approach to rock art considers and evaluates variables (individually and grouped) in a step-wise progression of analysis. In this way, the nature of the relationship between variables is revealed. Both physical and social attributes are emphasized in order to illustrate the relationship between rockpaintings and site, site and landscape, and landscape and the people. In this case study, the ethnography of the people is important in evaluating and understanding the nature of painting at many sites. For the Sandawe, I argue that the importance of the place is primary and the painting is secondary as a marker of the site's significance. The meaning and potency of the place is reproduced through ritual activity, that is, the meaning is in the doing (= process), not in the object (= the painted figure). I propose that rock art research should focus on the site rather than the painting itself because the site (rockshelter) is the locus where object and action come together in a culturally meaningful way.

In the study of rock art, one can choose to attempt to answer the question of "what do the paintings mean" or "why do they paint." By asking the latter, the emphasis shifts from the interpretation of the painting to the study of the artifact (the site) with its context and associations. An answer to the latter question also answers the first, but without the ambiguity involved in defining figures that have been transformed by the vagaries of the environment.

If the image (= painted figure) is an act of visual communication, then its message is dependent on our understanding of the knowledge of possibilities or the knowledge of social customs and conventions (GOMBRICH 1982: 140). The emphasis here is on the possibilities because each, in a sense, is a hypothesis. Ethnography is, thus, a means of informing our analysis of rock painting since it limits the possibilities of archaeological interpretations that lead to credible approximations of the past (GOULD 1990: 92). It permits seeing the direct linkages between behaviour and the resultant material residue.

The Sandawe people of central Tanzania (Kondoa District, Dodoma Region; see Fig. 1) provided me with the means to see and understand these linkages in my analysis of the area's rock art. They have/had a painting tradition and continue to have specific beliefs and associations with rockshelters. I use the past and present tense in this statement because I have not been able to determine with any certainty the presence of this tradition today. TEN RAA (1971) appears to be the last person to have documented painting on a rock – by a hunter some thirty-odd years ago. But, the

Sandawe do continue to paint in one other activity – iyari, the dance of twin births. I will return to this topic since iyari is important to my understanding the relationship between the Sandawe and the landscape with reference to specific sites.

For the Sandawe, the hills and rocks of Usandawe continue to be of importance. In the past, as noted by early administrators, the Sandawe would "disappear", and, even today, the Sandawe are known to retreat into the hills during times of trouble. Activities in the hills are not limited to the secular, they are also places to propitiate gods and ancestors.

Rock art, as suggested by studies throughout the world, has been associated with hunter-gatherers. Much of the research originates from southern Africa and this case study from Tanzania offers data of a comparative nature to consider. The Sandawe share similarities to the hunter-gatherers of southern Africa – not only in subsistence, but also linguistically and physiognomically. The Sandawe are former hunter-gatherers whose mixed economy retains aspects of this past lifeway. Hunting is not as important these days as it was in former days, although some men continue to hunt regularly as individuals and as a group. The Sandawe are also Khoisan or click-speakers among mainly Bantu-speaking neighbours which lends credence to the notion that they were among the autochthonous hunter-gatherer groups who once occupied all of eastern and southern Africa.

The fact that these rockpainting areas were/are occupied by hunter-gatherers led researchers in the past to conclude that the figures were the re-



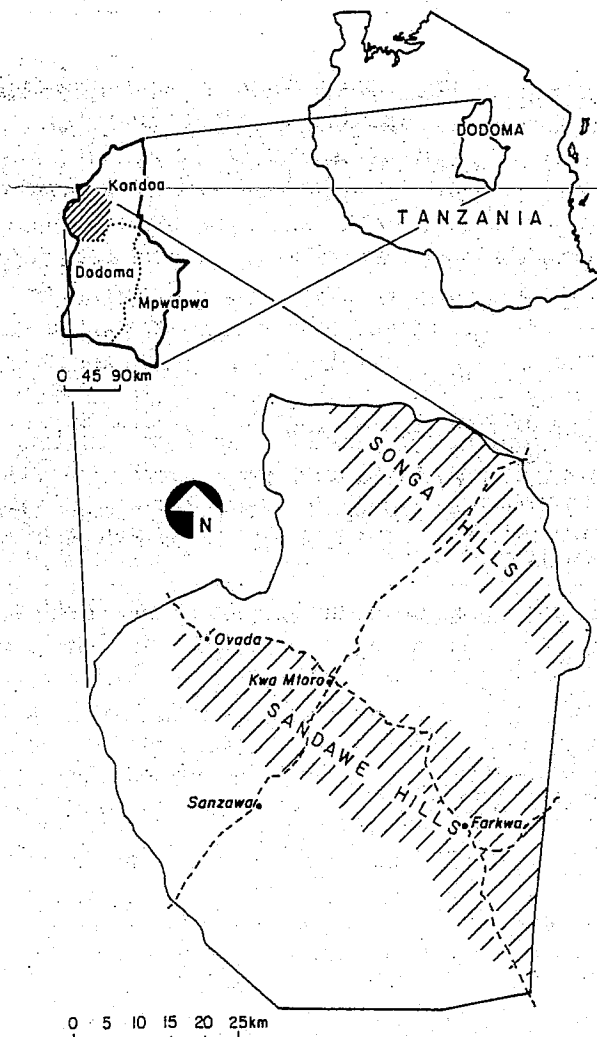


Fig. 1: Location of Usandawe, Kondoa District.

sult of hunting magic. It is possible that some of the paintings were, but I am also of the opinion that multiple activities occurred in these same rockshelters. This conclusion is based on a site-oriented approach which examines both the physical and social contexts of a site.

By structuring native meanings within a non-native framework, I have shifted the focus of rock art study from the painting itself to the site. Prior to this last decade, there had been a tendency towards description and typologies in rock art. Descriptive terms are often value-laden reflections of cultural idiosyncrasies and the use of aesthetic attributes contributed to the subjective nature of explanation in rock art studies. In this case, such an "analysis" provided an interpretation of l'art pour l'art (= innatism), that is, painting executed for the pure pleasure of the artist(s) and the reciprocal pleasure of the viewer (WILLCOX 1963).

Some of the art we see in the shelters may be art

for art's sake with no deeper meaning than amusement. Within our own culture, there are certainly examples of this. As many a college instructor can attest, their students' notebooks are frequently filled with drawings on the covers and along the sides of lecture notes. And what does all this visual imagery mean? Probably nothing more than bored students amusing themselves. The context in which art is produced provides more meaning than the product alone. In isolation, art can easily be overinterpreted.

The description and documentation of rock art sites are important aspects of building a body of data, but by considering rockshelter sites, in general, patterns of relationships are revealed that otherwise would remain hidden. We need to look beyond the site to understand it within the context of the landscape at large, that is, the relationship between the Sandawe and their environment. Ethnography informs this analysis by examining the motivating factors of the cultural belief system in producing the art. In other words, the native perspective has been sought. The impetus for this type of rock art research has come from South Africa under the aegis of J.D. LEWIS-WILLIAMS.

Although indigenous meanings are now sought, the majority of sub-Saharan rock art research has focused on the paintings themselves (LEWIS-WILLIAMS 1981; MASAO 1982). DEACON'S (1988) study in South Africa is the exception. She suggests that there is power in the place and this is what attracted and localized the rock art. I also argue that the importance of the place is primary and that painting is secondary. This shift in focus from painted figure(s) to site affects the methodological framework for analysis. Rather than examining the relationship between the figures of a painted image, in a site-oriented approach, the influence of the cultural belief system is sought in the relationships between painting and site, site and landscape, and landscape and Sandawe. Only by understanding the contexts, these various relationships which led to the production of painting, can meaning be derived. Interpretation (meaning) is not based solely on the image.

A site-oriented approach, as its name implies, focusses on the site. Why should researchers study the site rather than centering on the paintings? In Usandawe, the landscape is studded with inselbergs that form rockshelters. There are many more shelters without painting than with it, which suggests that choice was involved; of the 105 rockshelters located, thirty-three contained paintings. Also, as noted by other researchers (CONKEY 1987: 423; LEROI-GOURHAN 1982), the number of figures and the pigments used required a certain amount of preparation. Pigments were prepared and rockshelter sites selected; thus, painting was a purposeful action.



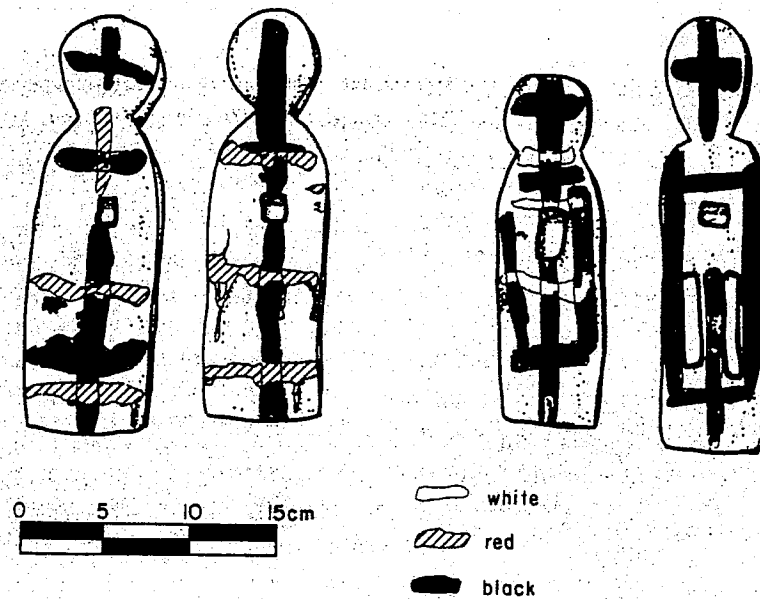


Fig. 2: Twin boards belonging to one family of two sets of twins. The ones on the left are for identical twins, female, born in 1987, and on the right are fraternal twins, female and male, born in 1979. The paint on the actual boards is faded compared to these representations.

The site of our enquiry is the rockshelter. I suggest that we view a rockshelter as an artifact – a natural object that has been altered and used by a particular society. Since every artifact has a number of physical attributes, painting is one variable to consider for a rockshelter. This shift in perspective contextualizes painting within its domain of the rockshelter. As with any artifact, it becomes meaningful within a cultural context.

By considering the site as artifact, we must also acknowledge the possible transformations and modifications that have occurred by natural and cultural forces, including those affected by historical circumstances (SCHIFFER 1987). These transformations can have an effect on whether a site is located or not. Supporting ethnographic data on contemporary rockshelter use indicate that sites can be missed because they have become “invisible” to the archaeologist’s eyes, that is, no archaeological signatures are apparent on the ground surface. For example, without the commentary of informants, four sites would not have been associated with contemporary usage and one would not have been recognized as a site under any category of use. The physical attributes of a rockshelter are also affected by the vagaries of the environment – from weathering/erosion to the site’s reuse. In some cases, paintings have become illegible because of staining by rainwater runoff or blackened from the use of a hearth.

Because of the encompassing nature of employing a site-oriented approach, the implications of

internal influences (in the Tanzania case: population migration, and Independence) as possibly affecting the culture also need to be considered. DEACON in her South African research acknowledges that “the metaphors [in the pan-San cognitive system] may have changed through time with successive generations” (1988: 137). Sandawe culture has adapted to the times; certain ritual practices have accommodated or been altered by the influences of religion (Christian and Muslim) and by the use of new technology (electronic equipment and machinery). For example, if there are Muslims participating in a sacrifice, the animal is no longer smothered to death; it is slaughtered according to Islamic law by cutting its throat. In the past, the use of a knife was prohibited by certain ritual activity. Although Sandawe culture shows flexibility in its ability to adapt to introduced cultural and material responses, the essence of their belief system remains intact. A site-oriented approach permits this kind of analysis of the social/cultural factors, as well as the physical ones.

I have elaborated elsewhere the details of both physical and cultural attributes used in my analysis (see LIM 1992: 122ff), so I will only list the variables here. The physical characteristics are: (1) elevation; (2) type of shelter: overhang, straight-faces, cave; (3) entrance/exposure; (4) distance to nearest water; (5) location of site: 1, base; 2, gully or saddle of hill; 3, intermediate; 4, top; and (6) accessibility to top of shelter. The cultural attributes are as follows: (1) grinding stone: 1, lower; 2, up-



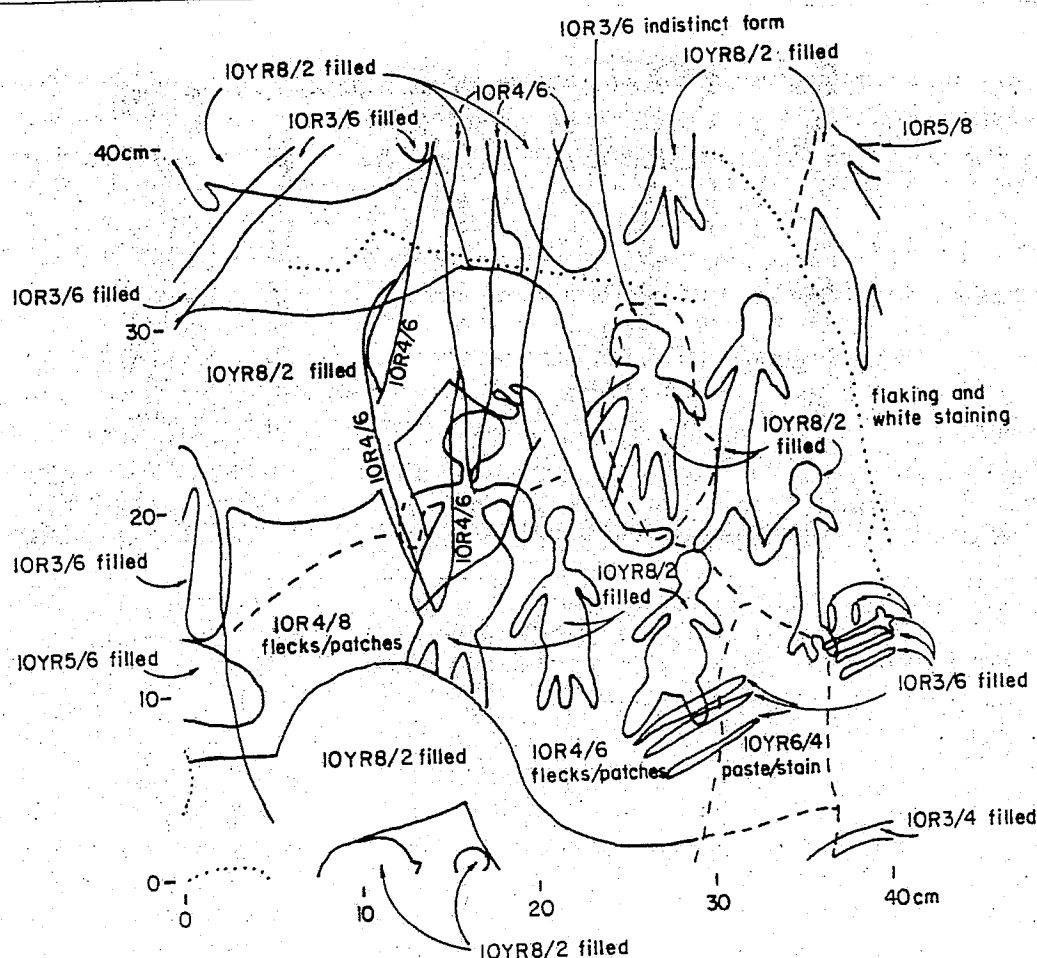


Fig. 3: Mural painting example. Section (40 x 40 cm) of painting at Beseto 1. Colour variations are designated by the Munsell Soil Color notation. IOR3/4: dusky red, IOR3/6: dark red, IOR4/6: red, IOR4/8: red, IOR5/8: red, ..... : spall/spall line, IOYR5/6: yellowish brown, IOYR6/4: light yellowish brown, IOYR8/2: white.

per, (2) hearth: 1, stones; 2, ash; (3) structure; (4) artifacts: 0, other; 1, slag/iron pieces; 2, sherds; 3, lithics; (5) rockpainting(s): 1, present; 2, with graffiti; 3, only graffiti; (6) other cultural associations: 1, rain/clan sacrifice; 2, haba; 3, medicine; 4, N/ini; 5, ninga; and (7) human disturbance.

The ethnography of contemporary rockshelter use permits one to better interpret and assess the archaeological signatures and the nature of site location – for example, the importance of location to water. In an area of extreme rain variability that is subject to regular periods of drought and famine, rain (= water) is of the greatest importance for the continuation of life. Water continues to be the main factor in decision-making by settlers today (NEWMAN 1969) in an increasingly drying environment. Contemporary rockshelter use illustrates this desire to be near water sources which is true for the rockpainting sites in this study, as well. As noted by informants, water is obtained from loca-

tions typically no further than one-half hour away, and during the rainy season, it is often close at hand having been collected in hollows of rocks and the exposed bedrock. This seasonal aspect of immediate water availability may have influenced the choice of a rockshelter in relation to its use.

Other physical attributes similarly affect such a choice. Eight of the 105 rockshelters had slag or iron pieces indicating the site's former use as a forge. After observing an ironsmith in Usandawe, I can say that a forge site typically has a number of rocks of suitable sizes (such as anvils) for beating iron against. Even though forging may have occurred, contemporary ethnography suggests a site's multi-usage. The majority of the occupants who forged stated that their shelters were primarily used while tending their fields; forging was a secondary activity.

One other physical attribute which needs to be addressed is the orientation of a rockshelter. Con-



temporary rockshelter use suggests that "choice" of an east-west bearing has been granted more importance than warranted. In Usandawe, the direction of wind and rain is seasonal, that is, during much of the year, the wind and rain is from the east but during March and April, it is from the north. In most cases, shade is of greater concern than the warming effects of the sun since the majority of activities occur outside and the shelter is valued more as a place to get out of the sun to work or rest than to be warmed by it. The sites in this study showed a lack of preference in orientation; the largest concentration, almost 26% of the rockshelters, have multiple exposures.

These examples of contemporary rockshelter use illustrate the deficiencies of assumptions based on Western notions of space and use in relation to choice of location. Given the kinds of uses of a rockshelter, archaeological residues may be more apparent outside of the shelter area rather than within. Also, as noted by examples of forging in rockshelters, the material residue of all the activities occurring are not equally represented. Site visibility is obviously affected by this. Multiple activities are more likely than single use ones. I suggest that sites which appear to be "ideal" locations, but show no evidence as such should not be so readily dismissed. The question of why a site was not used is as intriguing as why one was used. Admittedly, there is also the consideration of archaeological remains becoming transformed and modified, sometimes even disappearing in time (SCHIFFER 1987; GORECKI 1985). Again, we archaeologists engaged in rock art studies need to shift our focus and examine the relationships between sites, as well as relationships between the paintings and the sites themselves, in order to have a better understanding of the production of painting in society.

Although my main focus is painting as one cultural variable of a rockshelter, there is another attribute to consider in our understanding of rock art. This is the grinding stone – the large lower grinding stone – found in contemporary use as well as at sites with paintings. This is not an unusual object but it is one of the few items that is viewed as gender specific. In this case, it is considered a "woman's thing". Its occurrence suggests two possible scenarios: one, through time there have been multiple occupations and uses of the rockshelter, that is, strictly as a habitation, ritual use, camp, etc., or two, the shelter has been used simultaneously for a number of purposes. Since a work party typically is organized to move a grinding stone, it is not a household item that is shifted here and there as is a container; it tends to remain intact and in place marking the locus of activity. Grinding stones are more or less permanent fixtures; as such, they can be considered "appli-

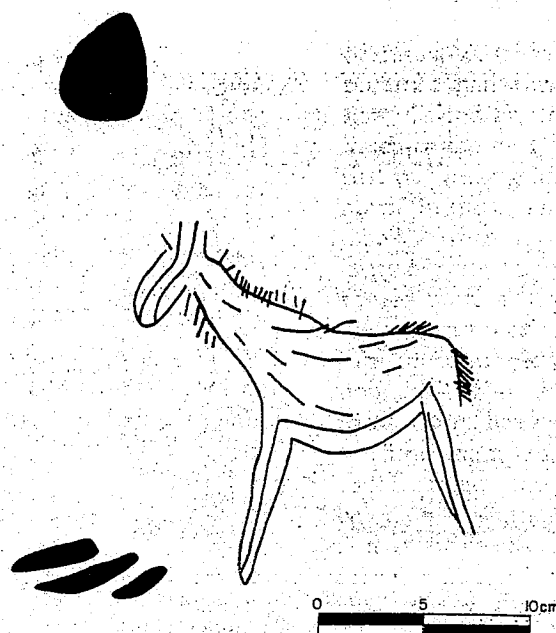


Fig. 4: Non-mural painting example – complete painting of panel at Tl'atl'akwaa 1.

ances" as one does in applying the term to those bulky and heavy specific use items found in most Western kitchens (LIM 1992: 142).

This point alone suggests that arguments need to be reconsidered about whether or not ritual activity was restricted to only male participants. If a grinding stone marks the presence and its use by a woman in present-day Usandawe, I am led to question the role women – medicine women – may have played in the art, particularly since contemporary San ethnographies have shown women in trance. If painting is shamanistic art, that is, depicting the hallucinations of trance performers, women as well as men may have been the painters. Womens' roles have been portrayed as minor, yet LEE (1967) has noted that women are the ones who choose the songs to be sung for trance and are the very ones who determine when to begin and end such songs. This implies that women were critical to trance since singing is essential to trance dance. Also, in Usandawe the women are the painters in *iyari*, the dance of twin births. They paint the participants, and they paint the carved wooden representations of the twins (Fig. 2). Besides being associated with twin births, *iyari* is also rain calling; the women (and only the women) dance *iyari* when all other means of inducing rain (by the men) have failed. In both of these cases, women have important roles in maintaining the well being of the society that the literature has not emphasized.



The paintings found within these rockshelters appear to be of two types: a rock face or wall covered with a multiple variety of figures superimposed one upon another – a palimpsest; or one with lone or singular figures with no superposition. I refer to these sites as mural (Fig. 3) and non-mural (Fig. 4), respectively. The two types of sites are suggestive of there being more than one explanation for painting. Descriptions of the actual sites have been detailed elsewhere (see LIM 1992: 216ff.).

One explanation of mural painting is ritual activity; I suggest that painting is a by-product of rain sacrifice. Much of the Sandawe belief system is intimately associated with their preoccupation with rain. The Sandawe visit specific clan hill sites to sacrifice if rain is patchy and/or light, generally, by initially going to a specific baobab tree associated with the rock/rockshelter in question. This recalls the creation myth of Matunda in which wild and domesticated animals, as well as woman, man and their two children, emerge. In another myth, Matunda lives at one rock and procreates the people of the area.

Sandawe cosmology is intertwined with the cultural construction of the land. Specific baobab and rock/rockshelters serve as loci controlling a defined area in which boundaries are marked by ritual activity. These sites are attended to only when necessary, that is, no sacrifice will occur during years of adequate rainfall. Thus, sites are repeatedly visited throughout the occupation of the area by Sandawe. Today, the Sandawe do not paint when sacrificing, but I suggest that their smearing of chyme (from the sacrificed animal) on the rocks of the rockshelter is a remnant of painting. Admittedly, this is a leap of faith on my part, but I am sufficiently aware of the external factors exerting their forces on the Sandawe belief system. Sandawe settlement has been influenced by increasing movement towards village centres, and by the Roman Catholic missions, that is, Sandawe have moved away (abandoned) from traditional clan areas and have been discouraged from practicing ritual activities. All this has had an effect on collective memory and thus, weakened the belief system. Rain ritual performed today is the essence and not necessarily the full form it once was; it nonetheless offers a plausible explanation for the palimpsest nature of mural sites.

As initially suggested by TEN RAA (1971), a socio-religious context provides a means to look beyond paintings as only pictures. The Sandawe paint in one other ritual activity – iyari, the dance of twin births. It provides an example that is widespread and actively current, unlike rock painting itself today. When twins are born, they and their parents are believed to be endangered by lightning. Thus, in order to protect them, iyari is per-

formed. By doing so, the participants (the twins and their family) recreate the process of procreation and the reproductive cycle. Depending on one's level of understanding, iyari is "a dance of twin births", "a dance to decorate oneself", "a dance to protect twins and parents against lightning", and/or "rain calling" (LIM 1992: 172-173). Iyari exemplifies the depth of meaning that can be layered in one event, revealing the subtleties of significance found in objects and action which include the landscape. Even colour becomes a defining dimension – for example, the black colour can represent darkened rain clouds in one situation, while in another situation it is the ability to hide such as "in a dark shadow" or "in the darkness of night" depending on its contextual use.

In Usandawe, the meaning and potency of the place is reproduced through ritual, that is, the meaning is in the doing (= process), not in the object (= the painted figure). For the Sandawe, rockshelters and baobabs are metaphors for the "aboriginal womb" where all life (human and animal) was created. Through ritual activity, the cultural interpretation of the landscape is reaffirmed repeatedly. If I am correct in my assertions, further investigations of rockshelters in Usandawe will reveal more mural-type paintings which are directly associated with ritual activity, in particular, rain sacrifice. There will also be fewer mural-type paintings in comparison to non-mural ones which have multiple associations. Based on this interpretation of the role of mural-painting in Sandawe society, the direction in rock art studies should not be in attempting to identify individual artists because the act of painting is the focal point – a deed to maintain the well-being of the society at large; painting is not a personal statement. Also, if one accepts the idea of the mural-painted rockshelter as "aboriginal womb", an area to explore in future research is an analysis of the pigments. The colours used at the sites are predominantly red and white which have specific meaning in iyari. I suggest that these meanings are applicable in their use at these rockshelters.

A site-oriented approach to rock art structures native meanings within a non-native framework to provide explanation. By discussing Sandawe beliefs and rain rites, the site becomes a powerful metaphor for Sandawe beliefs, a reminder of social ties to the past – strong ties that continue to be found in the present.

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