Tracing a West African Past: Rock Art Recording in Sub-Saharan Mali

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During March and April 2000 a field campaign took place which marked the beginning of an extended study of rock art in the Upper and Middle Niger regions of Mali. It was also a rare attempt to record a geographically-defined body of rock art in sub-Saharan West Africa using a modern recording methodology. Although rock art in the study regions was first reported in the early 20th century (Desplagnes 1907), it has remained widely unknown until today. When rock art is mentioned in publications, often only a short description of a selection of motifs is given and little information can be gained on complete rock art panels, or motif and site attributes (e.g. Jaeger 1953). The motifs described include zoned geometric forms, as well as indeterminate anthropomorphs and zoomorphs. These differ in their formal attributes from much of Saharan rock art to the North. In recent research the existence of a number of stylistic groups in the rock art of the Upper Niger region has been proposed, which are assumed to range from "Neolithic" to recent date (Huyssecom 1990; Huyssecom and Mayor 1991/92). Rock art in this study region is often thought to have been produced in connection with initiation rites, such as circumcision (e.g. Huyssecom and Marchi 1997). However, claims as to the relative and absolute chronology of rock art in the Upper Niger region of Mali and as to the existence of distinct rock art styles and their function are based on a very small data set as well as on questionable definitions of style. This field project, as part of a broader comparative study of motifs in the rock art of the Upper and Middle Niger regions of Mali, was aimed at providing much needed data by recording rock art sites in the south-west of the country.

Fieldwork objectives
The objective of this first field campaign was the identification and documentation of rock art sites in the Parc National de la Boucle du Baoulé and the Reserve de Fina, both within the Arrondissement de Sebekoro, Cercle de Kita, in the Upper Niger region of Mali. Ten rock art sites had been reported previously from the study region (Togola et al. 1995), of which two, Fanfannyégéné I and II had already been recorded (Huyssecom 1990; Huyssecom et al. 1996). This fieldwork season focused at recording the eight remaining sites and on identifying and recording additional sites, in order to reach a more accurate understanding of the rock art corpus in this region.

Recording methodology
The recording process aimed at the precise documentation of rock art at the sites, and of its archaeological and topographical context. All artificial traces on the rock surfaces were recorded photographically on colour slide film and through direct tracing on transparent plastic sheets. Natural features of the rock walls, such as cracks and fissures, were documented as well in order to be able to evaluate any relationship between these and artificial traces. The location of the motifs on the rock surface was recorded (height, orientation, visibility, etc.), as well as the techniques of
manufacture employed. The colour of the paint used in the production of pictographs was established using Munsell Soil Colour Charts. The sites themselves were measured and site plans drawn, the rock type identified and the properties of the rock surfaces described (inclination, smoothness of surface, rock colour, etc.). Additionally, local oral traditions regarding rock art sites were documented. Furthermore, archaeological surveys were conducted around all sites, and surface finds collected (ceramics, lithics, ground stones, etc.). Because of the inaccessibility of many parts of the study region the identification of new rock art sites relied on information provided by local hunters, who are most familiar with the terrain and its cultural features.

**Preliminary results**

Ten rock art sites, rock shelters and caves, have been recorded using the above methodologies. These include all localities mentioned in Togola et al. (1995) as well as two hitherto unknown sites. Additionally, the two sites previously recorded by Huyscom in the Baoulé National Park, Fanfannyégéné I and Fanfannyégéné II were revisited and photographically re-recorded. In the case of Fanfannyégéné I, it was noted that a considerable number of pictographs and petroglyphs present at the site had not been mentioned in the respective publications (e.g. Huyscom 1990).

While previous publications gave the impression that rock art in the study region is characterised by sets of homogenous motifs, it now seems that a considerable degree of variation exists in the rock art in and around the Baoulé National Park. The recorded sites differ in their properties, such as their size, orientation and topographical location, as well as in the number, form, size, and location of artificial marks present. While motifs at some sites are comparable to those previously published, others have not been recorded before (Fig. 1). Notably, a large number of (presently) unique marks were distinguished on the rock surfaces. A range of additive and subtractive techniques were used in the creation of rock art, such as painting, drawing and stencilling in the case of pictographs, and abrading, incising and pecking in the case of petroglyphs. Red paint was the most common substance used in pictographs, followed by whitish and grey paints, as well as black. In some instances, evidence for the re-touching of pictographs has been recorded. Frequent superimpositions give an indication as to the relative chronology of rock art at the sites. Judging from ceramics, lithics and ground stones found on the floors of rock art sites, some localities were repeatedly used from the Ceramic Late Stone Age until the recent past (e.g. Fanfannyégéné Siguíifié), while others seem to have been visited only occasionally during a more restricted period of time (e.g. Niantela I). At present it has not been established how rock art relates to these periods of site use.

Local oral traditions point to recent (re-)uses of rock art sites. Some of the sites today function as resting places for hunters. Several sites were said by local people to have been utilised as refuge sites during wars and other disputes of the past three centuries. It was asserted by our informants that the rock art was already there at this time and that they or their ancestors were not its producers. Consequently, the makers of the pictographs and petroglyphs remain unknown, as do the significance of the motifs.

The people presently living close to rock art sites actively supported this research project. Local hunters and elders have shown us the existence of further rock art
sites. It is planned to record these in a second field season (December 2000/January 2001).

Figure 1 Pictographs at the site of Fanfannyégèné Siguifré. Section of Panel C showing (among others) zoned circular and rectangular motifs, and a presently unique mark in the centre (tracing by C. Kleinitz).

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References


