

Bushman



South African Rock Art



Introduction

The African continent can be divided into four rock art zones linked to the pre-historic hunter-gatherer communities roaming in those areas. Rock art in these areas differ, but are similar with regards to colors and techniques used. The Sahara northern Africa zone shows hippo, crocodiles, giraffe, elephant, lion, ostrich and first bovids plus mixed creatures half human half animal. Twa rock art in central Africa is dominated by schematic motifs found at over 3,000 sites. The Sandawe rock art is found in eastern Africa and consists of human and animal images.

San or Bushman Rock Art

But in this article we will focus on the rock art in Southern Africa, which is found in South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho and Zimbabwe. It was created by three groups: bushman, Khoekhoe herders and Bantu tribe men. The so-called bushman rock art is the most prominent and older as the others.

The oldest rock paintings were found 1969 at "Apollo 11" rock shelter in Namibia close to the South African border and are about 27,000 years old. Very interesting is the fact that these painted stones were found buried in a ground deposit.

The oldest engravings were discovered at Blombos Shelter. Rock art in Southern Africa is divided into three techniques used: only paintings, only engravings and mix of both.

With over 40 different species the northern Limpopo area offers the most diverse rock art choice of animal depictions. As we can see above and below some of the panels are really large compositions spanning several meter.

Areal Division

Paintings are found in the coastal areas forming a half-moon shape along the Atlantic and Indian Ocean. And engravings were created further inland parallel to the painting areas. The area with a mix of both is situated in the central part of the half-moon shaped engraving area.

But in Namibia these three areas are like small corridors running from north to south. More precisely paintings are found in the following regions: coastal Namibia, Cape zone, southern Mountains, Mpumalanga, Swaziland and Waterberg. Engravings are situated in the following regions: Namibia, Northern Cape Province, western Botswana, Tsodilo Hills in northern Botswana and all over Zimbabwe. Both paintings and engravings were created in the following regions: central Namibia, North West and Gauteng Province, southern Botswana.



Rock Art Details

Images served bushman for spiritual purposes and are predominantly linked to their common practice of trance dances explained in detail further on. The

respective depictions were created after a successful hunt killing animals, this was celebrated also with shamanic dances. Engravings were either pecked, incised or scraped whereby darker patina on the rock surfaces was removed to create the images. All animal depictions were painted with great care due to their importance and beliefs.

Different to many other rock art depictions worldwide hunting scenes did not play any significance in bushman rock art. Their depictions are only focused on trance dances. In each region images had a dominant animal: eland in Drakensberg, kudu in northern Limpopo and Zimbabwe, hartebeest in Waterberg and springbuck in Brandberg in Namibia. Typically the animals depicted express action, emotions, aggression, protection, femaleness, caring, beauty and most importantly spiritual powers.

Bushman Rituals & Beliefs

Bushman lived in an egalitarian community with strong beliefs in rituals and their impact on day to day life. They believed in two orders of existence, human and animal. Therefore their rock art images are closely linked to their beliefs and regular time spent in the spirit world. Most important is the bushman creation story called the "branding of animals".

This name giving is interesting as bushman were not herders, but this name might result from difficult translation. Animals were created by transformation of humans. The few bushman who survived into modern days still believe that oryx or gemsbuck and wildebeest people do exist.

Bushman Dances

Trance dances played a central role in bushman culture, it was their primary expression of religion. Dances were performed to get in contact with gods via animals and were also used for problem solving of all kinds, healing injuries and illnesses as well as the important skill of rain making. After killing an animal bushman went through certain rituals and dances to cleanse themselves. It is no surprise that half of the men and one third of the women had shamanic powers.

Normally the whole bushman family or clan participated in community dances and several members entered the spirit world. Dances started in the evening with women singing and clapping monotonously and different songs including specific animals with special powers were used.

The group moved around the fire for hours at night



until they finally fall into trance. Dancers were adorned with decorated headgear and carried sticks and fly whisks. These items were all made from those animals with specific powers and were used to increase their spiritual effect. The next day bushman dancers exchanged their different experiences.

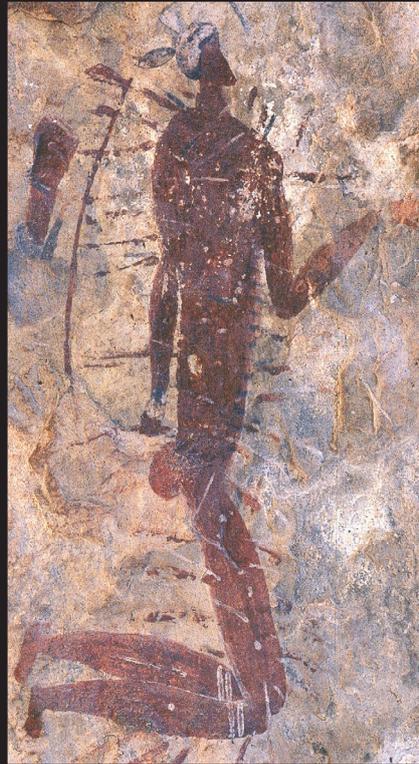
Entering the Spirit World

Bushman often imitated specific animal behavior in their dances. The animals played a central role in trance dances as shamans had to transform into animals to enter the spirit world. Red and great meat animals possessed the most spiritual powers.

When shamans after hours of monotonous dancing finally reached the state of trance, they started to bend their upper body ninety degrees forward and balance themselves on two sticks they were holding in their hands. This indicated they have now entered the spirit world.

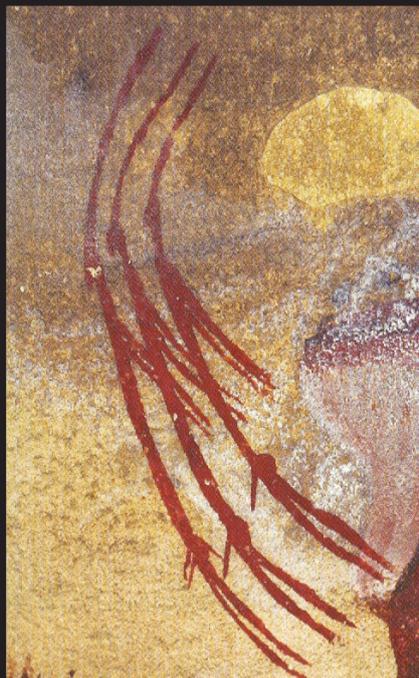
This is exactly one of the motifs often found in rock art images. Depictions with their arms spread out and partly raised behind their backs is another symbol of moving in the spirit world. And zigzag arms and fish symbolize the underwater drifting feeling shaman reported to have experienced in the spirit world.

Because water like rain was a very important part in their spiritual beliefs, but was not painted as medium at all, it was simply symbolized by fish and other water animal images. Imagine water was a metaphor for the underwater spirit world, as the sparse water had strong healing powers. In comparison horizontal shaman figure depictions with feathered wings plus birds around indicate they are flying to "God's village" in the



sky.

And a bleeding nose is also a sign of entering the spirit world. Shaman blood was smeared over their cheeks by other clan members. Or bodies of ill members were shown as elongated images. This was the result of shamans describing their painful trance feelings when entering the spirit world their bodies being stretched out.



Another symbol of entering the spirit world were figures decorated with white necks, because the pain starts in the abdomen, moves up the spine and then exploded in their heads. In addition several long lines on their heads are as well a symbol of having entered the spirit world, indicating their soul left them and entered the spirit world.

Trance Dance Details

In the healing dance process shamans absorb the illness themselves through touching the ill clan member and then get rid of it by shaking it off, coughing or sneezing it out. For example dots on the shaman body are symbolic for healing dances, as well as depictions of long hair representing the strengths of a lion.

Most shaman dress up for trance dances as animals into which they want to transform themselves when entering the spirit world. Therefore we see many anthropomorphic figures or "animal people" depicted as full animal or with part human and part animal body.

The most powerful animals used for this purpose were eland, lion, leopard and elephant, but there were also the "bird people".

Trance Dance Equipment

Interestingly female aprons were also used by male shamans for healing or rain dances. Fly whisks were also part of shaman tools, but only used for healing dances. In addition different animal skins and headgear was frequently worn by shaman during dances, because the power of the respective animal were then transferred to the shaman.

Arrows for example are a symbol of spiritual power, they are hold in most images as a bundle, but



bushman would never do that in real life, because their arrows were all prepared with poison. Therefore they were carried carefully in a leather quiver. Please note that animal or human figures depicted with multiple arrow piercings do not symbolize a hunting scene, but indicated the spiritual power given to them through those arrows.

“Red Meat” Animals

For those reasons the San bushman preferred to eat red meat animals. These are listed below with their specific meaning and powers.

Eland: in bushman belief the most powerful animal of all, it has healing, protecting and rain making powers. Further they believe that killing an eland can change weather. It is also linked to child birth and often depicted to leap from cracks in the rock as sign to leave or enter the spirit world. They are often shown as polychromatic images. Please note that the use here of fading color contours is unique in worldwide rock art technique.

Kudu: is the second most important animal and linked to hunting, child birth, rain making, healing, warding off evil spirits and fending off lion attacks. It is seen as sexually ambivalent

and used in both female and male rituals with a strong fertility connotation. Kudu images are found as both mono and polychromatic paintings.

Giraffe: is a very strong spiritual and powerful animal and thought to be female. It also has rain making powers and is associated with death.

Gemsbuck or Oryx: is associated with rain making and often used by shamans. Bushman still believe that people with gemsbuck head do exist, therefore they are not hunted.

Hartebeest: has rain making powers, but little else is known about other attributes.



Tsessebe: also has rain making powers, because it moves like zebra and wildebeest with the rain to greener grass.

Rhebuck: important “tame the game” dance performed for successful hunting. Its animal parts are used for head dresses including its ears. It is also linked to rain making.

Impala: being one of the most prevalent animals in the African bush little is known about its powers, only that it is linked to healing.

Zebra: believed to have the best rain making powers, because never found further than eight kilometers away from the next water source. It is also used for girl initiation rituals.

Other Animals

“Great meat” animals are roan and sable antelope. Both have backwards bent horns and are represented only in a few rock art depictions. Little is known about their powers. These animals were also eaten by bushman.

“White meat” animals are all carnivores. Bushman avoided to eat white meat animals. But carnivores were often depicted with shaman and flying arrows

indicating shaman ability to control evil powers. Lion images are wide spread, but have a low percentage in total image numbers. Bushman believed shaman have the heart of a lion, so they are not afraid to enter the spirit world. Therefore a lion depiction might represent a transformed shaman, because in some depictions lions bleed from the nose or have horns and angry lion depictions represent evil shamans.



depictions have been found.

For example eland, kudu, giraffe, gemsbuck or oryx, rhebuck, zebra, tsessebe, wildebeest, hartebeest were all weather changing animals. Wildebeest is not a frequent rock art image and bushman still believe that people with wildebeest head do exist, therefore they

are not hunted.

Other “white meat” animals depicted in rock art are leopard, hyena, wild dog, mongoose, monitor lizard and jackal.

“Black meat” animals are bat eared fox and warthog. The latter is not a frequent image in bushman rock art and is associated with death, because it lived in borrows. It is not surprising that ostrich introduced bushman to dances, because of its courtship dancing, both male and female depictions can be seen. Ostrich is also linked to fire.

Rain Making Animals

They play a metaphoric role and are linked to the making and controlling of rain. Those animals could be both male and female, same as rain clouds and

rain itself. Good rain is female, heavy disastrous rain is male in bushman belief.

A shaman needs to capture rain animal under water, but he needs permission from the water people or spirits for this purpose. Thereafter the shaman will harness the rain animal and lead it across the sky and milk or slaughter it to produce rain at the location where needed.

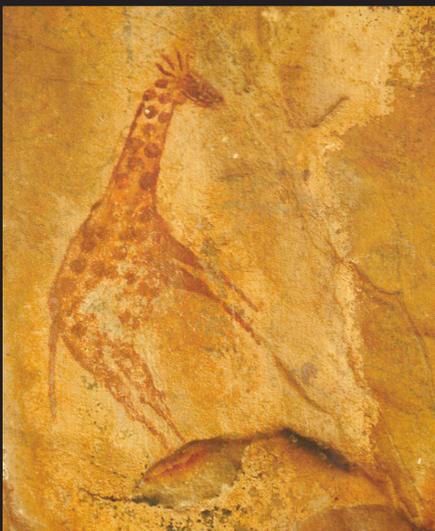
He used aromatic herbs to keep the animal calm during the process. Please note that arrows shot at rain animals do not represent a hunt, but are signs of increased power of rain making and control. Rain animals are depicted most in rain areas, because rain control was of major importance, in dry areas like the Kalahari Desert only few

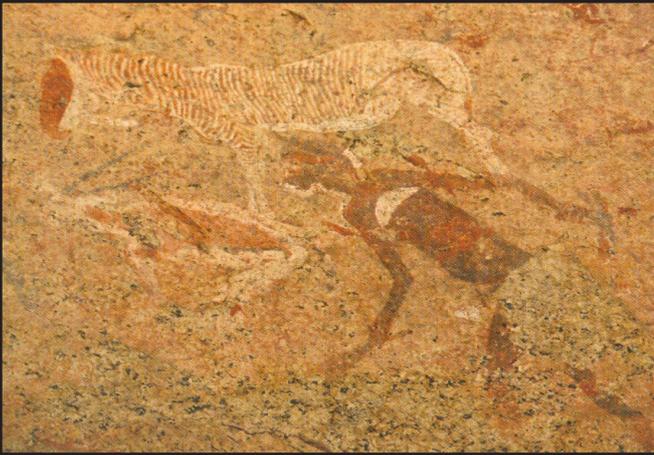
Human Linked Animals

The ant bear played a central role in bushman mythology. They believed to have a human soul and attributes, as they have good meat quality with high fat content. Their fat was used to rub over shaman body to protect him.

The baboon was also believed to have a human soul and attributes with positive connotations only. Not all shaman could transform into a baboon, only the most powerful shaman could achieve this. It is believed to have magical powers and was not eaten, as it might be a transformed shaman.

The elephant is also believed to





have a human soul and attributes. It is one of the most powerful animals in bushman beliefs with an ideal ability of parenting of their young. In addition there is the myth of the "girl elephant" representing beauty and fertility.

Fantasy Animals

Various forms of fantasy animals with mixed attributes of two or more animals do exist, believed to increase their powers, like eland with large teeth and claws plus mane and lion tail.

These images were found at Nomansland near Maclear or at Matobo in southwest Zimbabwe. Snakes are seen as powerful, as they live underground and are believed to be in contact with the spirit world. As on the left they are often depicted with mixed attributes like horned heads indicating a shaman's transformation during trance dance.

Other Rock Art Motives

Y shapes are most prominent in the Northern Limpopo Province and are found on isolated panels over and under other motives and sometimes painted in a row. But their meaning is unclear. Often oval dots are depicted left and right of the upper arms. The Y shape resembles a stylized antelope head and horns, but this is an assumption only.

Loin Cloth

Another important motif is the loin cloth. It is interesting to know that each bushman group has its own preference of animal skin used for its loin cloth. Steen buck, duiker, impala, spring buck are most common antelope skins used.

Bushman believe that a loin cloth can make a man run faster, because the animal's power and speed will pass over to its wearer. Therefore their loin

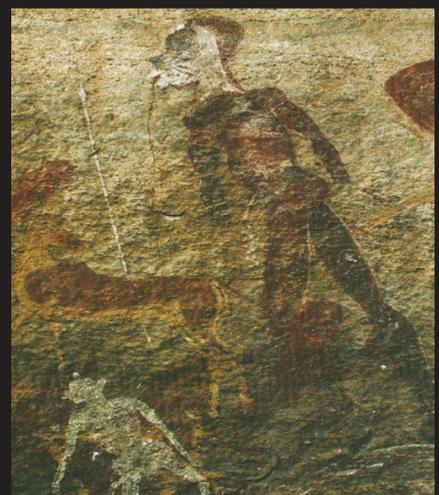
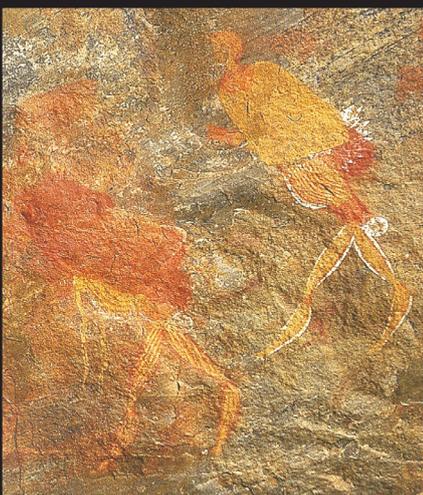
cloth was well kept in order and cleaned. It is no surprise that it was also linked to a man's virility and sexuality.

Aprons

Animal skins worn by women to cover their buttocks are called aprons. For the back the entire skin was used with legs attached and steenbuck was the preferred animal skin for this purpose.

Aprons also indicate the social status, so girls used small aprons and larger aprons were worn during puberty.

After marriage a new apron with different design and shape was used by women. Interestingly a male shaman could also wear a woman's apron, but these were used specifically for important healing and rain dances. Bushman believed this would increase their healing powers and ability to make rain..



Digging Sticks

They were women tools to dig up roots and termite mounds. And they were also used by shaman to communicate with the dead. The hole in the weight stone is believed to be the door way into the spirit world lying beneath the surface. This shows how practical bushman thinking was.

Color Production

Producing the necessary color was a complex process. Ochre for example was heated and grinded, then mixed with fresh eland blood as surface bonding agent.

Red color was made from ochre, hematite or ferric oxide. It was the longest lasting color of all used for rock art paintings. Brown and yellow was also produced from different forms of ochre.

White color was made from silica, china clay and gypsum and black was mixed with soot, specularite and manganese, but seldom with charcoal.

As binding agents for the different rock surfaces the following was used: blood, fat, urine, egg white and certain plant saps. Bushman painted with fine brushes made from bird feathers or animal hair struck into the ends of tiny reeds.

Spiritual Powers Sold

Bushmen were respected by Bantu herders, because of their extraordinary spiritual powers. They used their services frequently and specifically their important rain making abilities. This is documented in the bushman rock art by

depictions of single shaman figures, possibly because a single shaman could do the job in their belief and Bantu herders did not want to pay the entire group.

It has been established that single shaman depictions are younger in age, compared to the typical communal group dance images bushman created earlier.

Bushman Innovations

One can see the bushman as primitive hunters and gatherers. But this is not entirely true. They developed a life style to survive in the most arid desert and savanna conditions.

Here we list some of their innovations they introduced into Southern Africa. Bushman started rock art paintings and engravings and developed the preservation of organic materials like leather and wood. They used bow and arrows as a new hunting weapon and the bored stones as digging weights.

Using grooved stones to sharpen tools and fixing stone blades with

mastic to handles was also their idea. In addition they polished bone tools and produced jewelry like beads, pendants and bones.

Ostrich eggshell was useful as flakes and drink containers, so were tortoiseshell as bowls.

No surprise they went fishing with nets and sinkers. Finally they were the first in the area to start formal burials with graves.

South Africa Key Sites

Bushman's Kloof Wilderness Reserve in Cederberg Mountains close to the town of Clanwilliam in Western Cape Province is the most densely painted rock art area with 130 sites. Motives found here: shaman bending forward appearing to be antelope like, women with digging sticks, type of nets only found here.

Mountain Pastures close to Uniondale in Eastern Cape Province. Motives found here: shaman with hunting bags, finger dots, eland traces, animal rising out of a crack, zigzag images, unique bird image outline with red dots found at Bird overhang site.

Martindell near Rhodes in Eastern Cape Province is one of the best preserved sites with striking colors. Other rock art sites close by are Buttermeade and Chamisso. Motives found here: eland hunt with dogs and rhebuck images.

Game Pass Shelter in the Drakensberg Mountains in KwaZulu-Natal Province. Here the famous "Rosetta Stone" a 25 meter long panel with astonishing images was found and therefore





it is seen as the most significant site in Southern Africa. First described rock art site in 1915.

Other sites close by are Giant's Castle, Battle Cave and Junction rock shelter. Motives found here: shaman figures standing behind eland, therianthrope shaman images as they transformed in trance dance into an animal in the spirit world. Shaman holding the tail of a dying animal, a group of shaman and again therianthropes and running humans.

Schaapplaats close to Clarence and the Golden Gate National Park in Orange Free State Province. Motives found here: dancing figures, eland, baboon, rhebuck, pointing shaman and the so-called "Phoenician" images proved to be therianthrope.

Wildebeest Kuil a 15 minute drive from Kimberly in Northern

Cape Province has over 600 engravings and is an important rain site. It is situated in a !Xun and Khwe area.

Other close by site is Driekops Eiland (57 km) with many geometric images. Motives found here: rhino, eland, elephant, human, spectacular site with different images all found in the open and not under rock shelters.

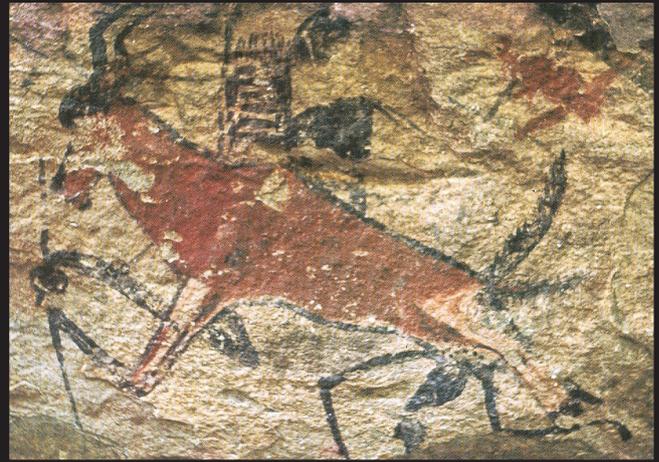
Thaba Sione is situated 60 km from Mmabatho in North West Province it is a site with a small hill with dolerite boulders with over 450 engravings. Motives found here: giraffe, eland, rhinoceros,

human and geometric signs. Main motives are those of rhinos, some are mixed creatures of shaman and rhino. Interestingly rhinos came here to rub their skin and polished the engraving. Therefore it is believed to be an important rainmaking ritual site, which is still used today by local Tswana speaking residents.

Bosworth near Klerksdorp in North West Province. On the farm over 600 engravings from bushman and Khoekhoe can be seen. Motives found here: attacking rhino and elephant, human figures, ostrich, flying birds, various geometric signs, pre-historic stone tools were also found at this site believed to be over one million years of age.

Bongani Mountain Lodge close to Nelspruit in Mpumalanga Province is a granite mountain area with various archaeological sites including Stone





and Iron Age settlements plus mining pits. There are 250 rock art sites and therefore it is one of the most dense rock art areas. Motives found here: shaman with vapor trails behind them at Vapor Trail Site, rare depiction of rain antelope at rock shelter, apron, large eland bull and nested U-shapes.

Kaoxa Shelter near Machete in Northern Limpopo Province is a large rock shelter situated in a sandstone outcrop belt close to Mapungubwe archaeological site, which was the largest kingdom in southern Africa dated 1,300 AD with over 200 well preserved images of 15 different animal species and remarkable compositions of motives. It is the only site with locust images. Motives found here: various different human figures, giraffe, kudu, mongoose, hyena, lion, hippo, tsessebe, wildebeest, rhino, impala, gemsbuck and Y-shapes.

Other sites are Cinyati Cave and Loskop in Natal as well as Maseru in Orange Free State and Palma Farm in Gauteng.

Botswana Key Sites

Tsodilo Hills in Western Kalahari in Northern Botswana is situated 50 km from Sepupa.

Bushman called these hills the “mountains of God” and the “rock that whispers”. The site has ten square kilometers with four hills called “Male” (400 meters), “Female” (300 meters), “Child” (40 meters) plus small unnamed rocks. There are over 500 sites with 4,500 paintings representing 85% of all Botswana rock art. So it is worthwhile to visit. Motives found here: shaman, lion, eland, gemsbuck, cattle and whale! plus an enormous engraved snake possibly a python.

Namibia Key Sites

Twyfelfontein in Damaraland in North West Namibia is an exquisite and astonishing site with over 2,000 engravings. Motives found here: giraffe, lion, wildebeest, kudu, small antelope, zebra, white rhino, warthog, flamingo, ostrich, geometric signs plus many animal traces.

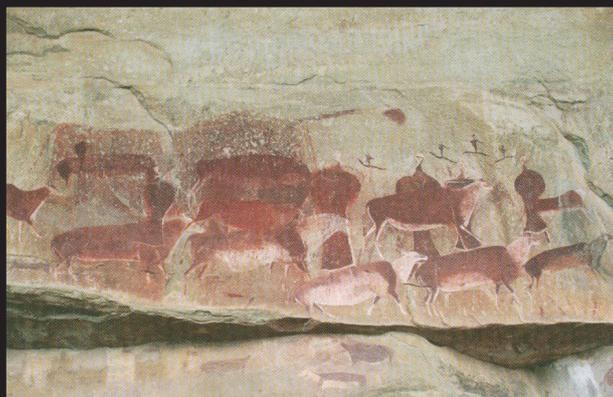
Brandberg also in Damaraland

in the Namib Desert in North West Namibia is with 1,800 meters the highest mountain in Namibia. There are 900 sites with over 43,000 images both paintings and engravings, plus 120 archaeological sites. Again a very worthwhile site visiting on your next Namibia trip. Motives found here: “white lady” is actually a male figure with white legs, shaman, zebra and gemsbuck.

Other sites in Namibia are Great Spitzkojes and Quthing in Basutoland.

Zimbabwe Key Sites

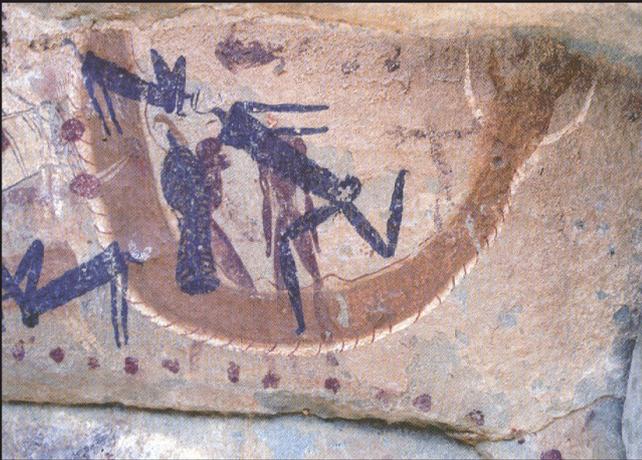
We list here only the most important sites such as: Macheke, Murewa, Mutoko Cave (see picture in this article), Goromanzi, Rusawi and Inoro in Marandellas, Massimbura (see picture in this article) and Makumbe in Chinamore, Matobo Hills (see picture in this article), Fishervall in Rusape and Makonwe close to Harare.



Conclusion

Many rock art sites worldwide have certain similarities in compositions and motives. Nearly all have animals and human beings as focus as well as dances.

But Bushman rock art



is quite different to the themes at other rock art sites, because their focus is mainly on trance dances and rain making. Due to its isolation we also find a very different style of rock art in Australia.

Looking at the age of Bushman rock art it is interesting to note, that Southern Africa was the "cradle of humankind" approximately 3.5 million years ago, but its rock art is rather young compared to other sites worldwide.

Today this area close to Johannesburg is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Typical are the elongated human images resulting from the trance dance experiences und the very varied mixed human-animal figures. But on the other hand animal images are depicted very realistic.

Leo Frobenius

Leo Frobenius (1873-1938) a German ethnologist undertook over twenty expeditions in the 1910' to 1930' into Africa, Australia and New Guinea. He and his artist team copied the extensive rock art panels on huge sheets and colored them as they saw them in situ.

One hundred years later they represent a rare and most important documentation, as many images and colors have faded over time and were damaged by the elements and also vandalised at times.

Therefore you see on these large pictures the joint lines of the sheets. Some of these we could only show next to each other as separate takes as they are huge panels of over twenty meters long and up to four meters high.

The Frobenius Institute has the largest historic collection of rock art images with over 5,000 of these beautiful colored huge sheets, which unfortunately are seldom shown in an exposition like 2016 in Berlin.

Thanks

We thank the Frobenius Institute and T Forssman & L Gutteridge for using some of their pictures

Reading

Tim Forssman & Lee Gutteridge, *Bushman Rock Art, an interpretive guide, Southbound* 2012. ISBN975-1-920143-55-8

Karl-Heinz Kohl, Richard Kuba, Helene Ivanoff, *Kunst der Vorzeit, Felsbilder aus der Sammlung Frobenius, Berlin exhibition catalogue, Prestel, 2016, ISBN 978-3-7913-5503-0 and 978-3-7913-6645-6*

Weblinks

<https://www.wits.ac.za/science/schools/geography-archaeology-and-environmental-studies/research/rock-art-research-institute/about-rock-art/>

