

Decoding Messages from the Distant Past



An authority on Namibian rock art visits Botswana's Tsodilo World Heritage Site, where Ju!hoansi San trackers from Namibia and Ju!hoansi rock art guides from Tsodilo discuss the meaning and symbolism of rock paintings there

By Phillip Segadika

In most African traditional cosmologies, specific mountains and landscapes are the abodes of ancestral spirits. These locations also have their priests and spirit mediums who give oracles to disentangle the coded messages of the ancestors.

This past March, the Tsodilo World Heritage Site was visited by world renowned authority on Namibian rock art, Professor Tilman Lensen-Erz. He was accompanied by three San trackers from Tsumkwe, Namibia, who speak the same Ju!hoansi language of the San at Tsodilo.

Tilman's excursion was covered by four media personalities: two German journalists, an illustrator and a London-based photographer. The professor took advantage of the visit to guide the ongoing fieldwork of Ms. Stella Basinyi, a Motswana archaeologist studying – under Tilman and others in Germany – for a doctorate in rock art and heritage studies.

The visit became somewhat epic in that it entailed the premier of a documentary at the Tsodilo *kgotla* (traditional village meeting place and tribal court). In the film, Tilman, other respected names in the world of rock art and the three Namibian San trackers visited selected cave art sites in southern France; and, armed with their animal tracking and hunting skills,

assisted archaeologists to interpret cave paintings of animals and fossilised animal spoor there.

The German-Namibia team was given a tour of Tsodilo's Rhino Trail by registered San guides Xontae Xhao and Tsetsana Xexae, from Tsodilo village.

The scene was set and the results mind-blowing. A professor of rock art and two complementary groups of San – one knowledgeable in rock art guiding, the other skilled in hunting and animal tracking – discussing the ancient art of Tsodilo.

Tilman and team would ask probing, and sometimes seemingly silly, questions on the portrayed behaviour and posture details of the animals depicted in the rock paintings. Others would keep quiet, drinking from the river of time and experience, listening to the various explanations as to the meaning of individual paintings – and even entire panels.

Sometimes we would wait for up to 20 minutes, as the two San groups discussed, and occasionally, it seemed, argued their respective interpretations. Only when the matter was settled would Xexae (from Tsodilo) translate their intermittent clicks into English. Typical of researchers on a guided tour, we wanted to know what the arguments and contrasting versions were.

My favourite rock art panel during this visit was not Rhino



Giraffe and other animals as depicted on Panel 15, Rhino Trail, Tsodilo Hills (photo: M. Erz).



ABOVE: **Tsodilo guide Xontae Xhao says a prayer at Dama, near the Male Hill (photo: P. Segadika).**

INSET: **The group discusses the meaning and symbolism of Tsodilo's rock paintings (photo: P. Segadika).**

PREVIOUS PAGE: **The iconic Rhino paintings, most evocative of Tsodilo rock art (photo: P. Segadika/National Museum).**

Panel, with its large, almost silhouette, depictions of rhino. Neither was it the concealed, but well known, 'Dancing Penis' at Panel 8, on the Female Hill plateau. Nor was it the lonesome but beautiful zebra paintings further on Cliff Trail, where leopards are sometimes spotted. This time it was Panel 15, on Rhino Trail, that won the day, not so much for its lofty position – its top margins up to six metres above ground – but rather its fascinating paintings.

To the layman and even some specialists, Panel 15 is merely a depiction of some giraffes – situated west and looking east, in the company of rhinos and an eland; another group of paintings – situated east – includes lion, a hyena and another giraffe in an awkward, death position.

For Xontae, however, Panel 15 was more than just isolated paintings, but rather a depiction of a typical scene when the law of Nature is at full play. He regarded the painting as a snapshot in the middle chapter of a continuing but fast-paced action story, demonstrating sudden attack, fear, gnashing of teeth, breaking of spinal vertebrae, spilling of blood and heart-wrenching levels of adrenaline – as other animals flee.

In fact, Xontae maintained that Panel 15 is an anti-climax following high action, possibly in the late afternoon, in which the lions, having just pounced on giraffes and mauling one, had to ward off and kill a hyena that wanted a part of their spoil. The giraffes looking east, according to Xontae, were just about to turn around and walk further away from danger, having just fled there when their cousin was attacked.

For the guides, the crack on the wall is no coincidence, but completes the scene; without it,

the painting would have no rivulet. Of course, said Xontae, what rock art specialists describe only as a geometric pattern is, in fact, the sun. It's not high on the panel because it depicts sunset!

Panel 15 is therefore about animal behaviour, ecology, landscape, survival and the food cycle. According to Xontae, the lion, having warded off the hyena, is just about to have a meal. The less presumptuous scavengers will follow the scent of dead meat, to enjoy the food, in the gathering darkness.

Continuing the story beyond what is seen, Xontae's explanation was therefore not only about what we see, but also about what happened before and what will happen next. In his interpretation, rock art therefore takes the form of telegraphic notes and pointers to story-tellers, which also would have been the case for his ancestors who created the art.

I was captivated by an argument that ensued between Xontae and the Namibian trackers. The trackers said that, from their experience, the position of the eland's tail and the pulling of the forelegs forward suggest that the eland was about to sleep. The guides and the trackers argued over this puzzle of apparent slumber in the face of danger. The argument went on, until Xontae recalled a Jul'hoansi proverb: "*Nglo ka a !xu kuma, a xhase se o ka a a !ele se o ka angore qwa.*" (written as heard), which translates to: "The eyes of the eland are in the ears."

After more animated discussions, and more nodding in agreement, the argument was brought to conclusion; all agreed that the artist was showing the eland's apparent slumber pose to depict its complete concentration. How else would rock art specialists know this, if Xontae wasn't around to explain?



As we began to leave Panel 15, Xontae stopped us; he wanted to tell us something about a nearby Paper bark tree (*Commiphora African*); this tree acts as a host to beetles whose larvae serve as poison for the San's hunting arrows. He gave a brief, extemporaneous lecture on handling the deadly larvae.

It must be kept away from children, eyes and open wounds. We soon came to realise that the lesson on poisoned arrows was related to Panel 15, which has paintings of a spear and an arrow.

We continued to climb, reaching the Female Hill's legendary van der Post panel, which commands a superlative view over the surrounding wilderness. One of the three Namibian trackers, also named Xhao and clearly overwhelmed, commented on the pre-eminent spirituality of Tsodilo.

"In the Tsumkwe area, the water holes are our *ngore*, as they connect us to the distant history of our ancestors. But Tsodilo is a special *ngore* where the rock paintings connect us to our ancestors' skills, dreams, stories and prayers." (*Ngore* refers to a place, especially one that was used by the ancestors).

Driving back to the community-run Tsodilo campsite, built through the Diamond Trust Fund, I felt grateful to have partaken in the fascinating discussions and interactions of such a renowned academic and the indigenous knowledge gurus from Botswana and Namibia.

The experience came as a confirmation that we need to take time to listen to these experts in their own right – to break the coded messages of the past, learn from them, and bring them into the future. **P**

Phillip Segadika is coordinator of the Tsodilo Rock Art Conservation project, sponsored by the Africa World Heritage Fund (AWHF), South Africa. All interpretation and opinions are his and do not reflect the views of any organisation he is affiliated with.



ABOVE: **Professor Tilman-Lensen Erz (right) with Phillip Segadika at Tsodilo's famous van der Post panel (photo: Y. Urano).**

TOP: **Women wash clothes near the Male Hill (photo: Y. Urano).**