The “crocodile men” of Harare: Diversity in Zimbabwean Rock Art Themes.

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Abstract

It is believed that rock art sites in Zimbabwe might exceed 10,000 and most of these are generally believed to have been executed by hunting and gathering communities who populated the subregion before the coming of Bantu communities around 2,000 years ago. The most popular current interpretation of the art is based on ethnographic material from present day hunter-gatherers in the sub-region especially those from the Kalahari region and the 19th century San communities from Northern Cape Province of South Africa. This approach has afforded researchers a chance to examine the meanings rather than the aesthetics of the rock art but it also led to overgeneralizations of both the meaning and character of the art in the subregion. Although most hunter-gatherer groups have similar core traits in their culture, they also have other distinct values, beliefs and issues that they addressed through their art forms. This paper aims to explore the motif variability in Zimbabwean hunter-gatherer rock art by analyzing occurrence of a particular theme that has been dubbed “crocodile men”. This motif is found only in and around the city of Harare. The diversity is explored in the hope that the differences in motifs might allude to different or confined social meanings of the rock art.
A few changes that have been factored into this presentation so it differs slightly from the one that was presented at the SAfA 2008 conference. The following are some of them:

- Other ways in which rock art from Harare differs from other areas in Zimbabwe were removed. This was because people who talked to me after the presentation showed that they were interested in more information about the crocodile men.
- Therefore there are more illustrations of these images here, some of them close-ups so individuals can see the features clearer.
The Rock art of Harare…

• There are more than 200 rock art sites in and around Harare.
• The rock art is share similarities in style of depiction and some motifs with the rest of Mashonaland.
• For example, the rock art has a lot of vegetation depictions and elephants that are fewer in other part of the country such as Masvingo, Matabeleland and Manicaland.
• However, it shares other common motifs with these other areas, for example the presence of “formulings” and the high frequency of kudu depictions is generally similar across the country.
A map showing the regional areas mentioned in this presentation.
Rock art of Harare

- Generally, the rock art of Harare shares the monochromatic character with art from parts of Zimbabwe. It is usually found in red, brown and yellow with a few incidences of white outlines or body decorations.
- However there are some pockets in Zimbabwe that have polychrome imagery with a lot of white paintings in them, for example the art from Chivi and Zaka from Masvingo province.
- The rock art from Harare and the surrounding areas differs to other areas with some unique features that include the style of depicting elephants and a higher frequency of birds.
- But, the most distinctive feature is the occurrence of what has been termed the “crocodile men” which this presentation will concentrate on.
What is the crocodile motif?

- The term comes from Goodall’s definition (1959) when she noted the following features of this motif:
  - Most of the images display reptiles (crocodile-like) and human traits
  - The typical character is a rounded body features, thick neck and a gaping reptilian mouth (*although sometimes the mouth is closed*)
  - Limps are very fleshy but have no feet or hands only stumps
  - Usually have two “teeth” coming from their lower jaw
  - Most have male genitals (*most exaggerated*) but very few are female characteristics are noted, current only one image can be said to be female because of possible breasts
  - They do not have tails.
Are they crocodile men?

- Most people have questioned whether these are really crocodile features.
- Garlake (1995) avoided the term and referred to the images as “fearsome creatures”.
- However there is no question that the features are reptilian although tails are not depicted.
- Some of the images are more reptilian than others (see slide 10 as opposed to slide 15).
- Others have argued that the gaping mouths might not be “mouths” but spaces that were painted with white painting that has washed off just like the famous hook heads from Western Cape Province.
- However with these images there is no sign of white painting and most of the images are very well preserved such that the white would have been evident (refer to images original photographs are illustrated here!)
...Are they crocodile men?

- The fact that they have some “teeth” coming of their mouth shows that there was no other features depicted.
- There are also similarities in the depictions of the head features on these images and head depictions of crocodiles at other sites in Zimbabwe (see images from Garlake 1995).
- I believe these images are showing conflations of human and crocodiles (on some images reptile features). These images might be resulting from some belief about the relationship between crocodiles (reptiles) and human beings within the hunting and gathering community that lived around the Harare area.
- The conflation is also dominated by male figures so the belief might have been associated with masculine characteristics.
- This belief must not have been widespread since other communities elsewhere they did not depict such images.
Crocodile features???
…But it may be not

This depiction may show that the “teeth” coming out of the mouths my not be restricted to the “crocodilish” or reptilian character since they are also present on this animal.

Image from Goodall (1959)
Distribution of sites with the crocodile men motif

- The motif has been reported primarily around Harare and Lake Chivero (about 30km west of Harare).
- However Goodall (1959) note a few sites Marondera (about 70km east of Harare).
- The following maps show this distribution in relation to other rock art sites in Harare and Zimbabwe in general.
Images from the eastern side of “crocodile men” type site.
Images from the western side of “crocodile men” type site.
Images from a site near Lake Chivero.
A real crocodile image associated with crocodile men from Lake Chivero, near Harare.
Image with limps typical of the crocodile men from Chadcombe suburb, Harare.
Implications on variation

• The fact that the crocodile men motif is confined to Harare and the surrounding areas shows that it could have been addressing specific issues that were particular to the group of community that resided around this area.

• If this is the case then, the variation in themes across southern Africa should be researched in greater detail to reflect on the differing meaning of the art to particular communities of hunter-gatherers.

• I believe there is also need to use the available ethnography as a way of researching how variability might have been structured within these communities since there is so much variation in the present day hunter-gatherer communities.

• There is need for further research in the variations in the rock art of Zimbabwe and Southern Africa. I believe accounting for these variations will enrich and take us beyond our current understanding of the art.

• Garlake (1995): the “crocodile-men” style was probably a regional school of artists. However this assertion is difficult to establish. But even if this was the case, it means that these artists were using the art to address or express specific regional issues.

• The major problem with these conclusion is that there is no way of establishing a secure chronology of the art.
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