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The Rock Art of Kondoa District, Tanzania: Approaches Toward Understanding Authorship and Meaning

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Abstract

The Kondoa rock paintings sites are situated in Kondoa District, located in Central Tanzania. These sites were collectively declared National Monuments by the Antiquities Act of Tanzania, enacted in 1964 and its amendments of 1979. In July 2006, the World Heritage Committee inscribed the Kondoa rock paintings as World Heritage Sites, acknowledging that local people continue to use the sites for traditional ceremonies.

Research on Kondoa rock painting was begun in the 1920s by colonial administration staff and continued by local scholars in the 1970s. These two groups have divided the rock paintings according to style and pigments. Red pigment was considered older while white was considered younger, signifying a recent date. Researchers have failed to establish clearly which among the four ethnic groups who have existed in Kondoa District produced the rock paintings. Some scholars have managed to connect some Sandawe beliefs to some of the paintings. Yet, various methods and many styles of the art suggest that the Kondoa rock paintings have multiple authorships. The Sandawe cannot be the only authors of all paintings.

Using a multi-stranded approach that includes the history of the area, the location and distribution of the rock painting sites, oral traditions from local people and published materials, and statistical analysis, this thesis establishes the existence of three rock painting traditions. It then determines the authorship of each tradition and suggests approaches towards understanding the symbolic meaning of the paintings. The study points out that without a clear understanding of the cultural sequence and who made which rock paintings no understanding of meaning can be achieved.