

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Lower Congo Rock Art Revisited

Geoffroy Heimlich

Centre de Recherches en Archéologie et Patrimoine

Université Libre de Bruxelles

Centre d'Études des Mondes Africains

Université de Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne

E-mail: geoffroy.heimlich@ulb.ac.be

Introduction

This research focuses on the rock art of Lower Congo, the western most region of the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo¹. The PanAfrican Congress on Prehistory, which took place in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) in 1959, revealed this artwork which was then largely unknown to the specialists of the time. Thanks to information from missionaries², Georges Mortelmans and Roger Monteyne discovered numerous new rock art sites, which they attributed to the protohistoric period contemporary with the ancient Kongo kingdom, while they were preparing an expedition in Lower Congo. From this field research, they singled out one area for its concentration of rock art: the Lovo Massif, studied by Paul Raymaekers and Brother Hendrik van Moorsel in 1962, then by Pierre de Maret in 1972 and 1973.

As part of a research program on the Kongo kingdom carried out by Pierre de Maret, three archaeological field studies were undertaken in Lower Congo in 2007, 2008 and 2010 with logistical support from the Compagnie Sucrière de Kwilu-Ngongo and in collaboration with the Institute of the National Museums of Congo (Heimlich 2010).

Situation of the Lovo Massif

The rock art is concentrated in a region that stretches from Kinshasa to the Atlantic coast and from northern Angola to southern Congo-Brazzaville (de Maret 1982). One rock art zone is particularly rich: Lovo, studied specifically in the course of my doctoral research (Figure 1). Presently inhabited by the Ndibu³, one of the Kongo sub-groups, it was situated north of the ancient Kongo kingdom.

Hundreds of limestone outcrops with carved surfaces, punctuated by numerous caves and rocky overhangs, rise up over an area of about 400 square kilometers⁴ (Figure 2). Many are decorated with black, red, or sometimes ochreous paintings. Engravings are found on walls and on boulders in the open air. There one can see in geometric forms (crosses, circles, quadrilaterals) images of objects (e.g., shields, swords), and sometimes zoomorphs (lizard-like shapes, antelopes) or simple anthropomorphs.

Analysis of ceramics discovered during the investigations of Georges Mortelmans, completed later by Pierre de Maret's surveys, allows one to outline the archeological sequence of the Lower Congo (de Maret 1972). This outline is based in distinguishing several pottery groups. The most ancient, the Ngovo group, found in association with polished tools, suggests the appearance of sedentary populations around the last two centuries BC (Lv 1471) (de Maret 1986), that is to say, in the Stone to Metal Age. The Early Iron Age has not been dated prior to the second century AD (Lv 1470). It can be related to the Kay Ladio group (de Maret 1972). Not until the last five centuries of our era, can other groups of Lower Congo ceramics be recognized in association with the Kongo kingdom. Their dispersion could bear witness to the commercial and political entities of the time (de Maret 2005).

Although it was possible later to set forth more precisely the chronological framework sketched out by Georges Mortelmans, rock art had not been a subject of thorough investigation since the field research of Pierre de Maret in 1973.

Research Objectives and Methods

For the present systematic study of this rock art, the following orientations and priorities were established:

To produce the most complete possible inventory of the Lovo Massif. For each site studied, a plan indicates the location of the rock art. The rock art will be recorded by means of digital tracings from digital photos. In collaboration with the Royal Museum for Central Africa (MRAC), this documentation will be integrated into a GIS-type data base;

To determine the sequence of styles, and to define the areas where they are found in order to throw new light on the human occupation of Lower Congo;

Figure 1: Situation of Lovo. Map based on Google Maps (DAO Geoffroy Heimlich).



Figure 2: Tadi dia Kimeza, Lumbi (Photo Geoffroy Heimlich, 2010).



To date the rock art by establishing a chronostylistic framework by using the super impositions combined with direct dating. The physical and chemical analyses of pigment samples at the Center for Research and Restoration of the Museums of France, will thus allow study of the techniques of making the pictorial materials with a possibility of directly dating paintings made with charcoal, which until now has not been done in this region;

To correlate rock art and the archeological sequence. Could rock art be connected to some of the ceramic groups already recognized, or to more ancient groups e.g., from the Late Stone Age? If not, could it be related to the celebrated Kongo kingdom? Examining this hypothesis will require some excavations;

To determine the relationships between rock art and the Kongo kingdom. Are there stylistic links

Figure 3: Tadi dia Nkamba, Lovo (Photo Geoffroy Heimlich 2008).



Figure 4: Tadi dia Fuakumbi, Mbanza Nkula (Photo Geoffroy Heimlich, 2008).



between rock art and other forms of Kongo regional art (e.g., textiles, ceramics, sculptures, carvings)? On this basis, could one establish a visual corpus with a view to interpreting the principal characteristics of Kongo themes?;

To discover whether these sites are still visited today for religious or ceremonial reasons and whether a special traditional usage is perpetuated there. Could these rock art sites be linked to initiation rituals (*kimpassi*), religious ceremonies (Mbenza), or the practice of sorcery (*kindoki* and *nkisi*)^{5?};

To envisage in the Lovo zone, a pilot initiative to place this rock art on the UNESCO list of World Heritage sites as the Congolese authorities have wished for a long time.

Preliminary Results and Perspectives

Documentary research at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, and in religious congregations in Belgium, identified about seventy rock art sites in the Lovo Massif and its surroundings. In the course

Figure 5: Tadi dia Ndimbankondo, Mbanza Matadi (Photo Geoffroy Heimlich, 2010).



of fieldwork, 45 sites in that zone were prospected, of which 38 had not yet been indexed (Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6). This is explained by the terrain's difficult access and isolation, even without taking into account numerous territorial rivalries.

The very promising potential of the Lovo Massif, as evidenced by the Tadi dia Ndimbankondo outcrops (Mbanza Matadi), was evaluated. Five hundred and sixty-five images (the great majority being red paintings) were recorded at five previously undiscovered sites, whereas the preceding study by Paul Raymaekers and Brother Hendrik van Moorsel had inventoried 682 rock images in 52 sites (Raymaekers and van Moorsel 1964).

The Cave Art of Tadi dia Tovo: Kongo Rock Art of Christian Form?

In the Lovo Massif, rock art sites are found in the open air as well as in caves. The previously un-

published cave of Tadi dia Tovo (Lovo) opens up at the top of the outcrop. It runs through the entire outcrop. The designs are located in the first room, where they are largely obliterated, and in the upper gallery, where access is very difficult. In 2010 black pigment samples were harvested from the upper gallery to date the charcoal drawings directly. These analyses are being carried out at the present time.

George Mortelmans thought he saw in certain themes, a clear influence of Christian iconography, including Latin crosses, crosses of the Knights Templar or of the Order of Christ, and stylized crucifixes (Figure 7). During his explorations, Father Joseph De Munck, for his part, discovered ancient cemeteries containing tombstones decorated with Christian-influenced designs (notably Latin crosses and Maltese crosses), which were sometimes associated with designs that he defines as "Bantu", throughout the region (De Munck 1960). According to Father Joseph De Munck and Georges Mortelmans, this

Figure 6: M'Bubulu, Nkula (Photo Geoffroy Heimlich, 2008).



Figure 7: Ntadi Ntadi, Kanka (Photo Geoffroy Heimlich, 2008).



would constitute evidence of Christian influence in the region during the 16th and 17th centuries.

However, extensive studies of some American anthropologists and art historians, including Robert Farris Thompson and Wyatt MacGaffey, as well as Cécile Fromont, have revealed the richness of the Kongo signs (Fromont 2008; MacGaffey 1986; Thompson et al. 1981). Basing his argument on the interpretation of Kongo scholar Andele Fu-Kiau kia Bunseki-Lumanisa's description of the system of northern Kongo cosmology (Fu-Kiau kia Bunseki-Lumanisa, 1969), Robert Farris Thompson and Wyatt MacGaffey thought they could explain some Kongo signs (the cross in particular), claiming it to be centuries old and relating it to cosmological ideas. Cécile Fromont outlines the formal characteristics of cruciform themes in Kongo art relying on documents written in the 17th and 18th centuries, and on contemporary Kongo artistic practices. She perceives the same organizing principle, the cross drawn inside a diamond shape, which she defines as the "Kongo cross" (Fromont 2008.) In a nutshell, it is the consensus of a variety of scholars who have studied these motifs, that a Christian explanation is not enough.

Complementary to the study of rock art, an analysis of the iconography of ancient tombstones could open new avenues of research. The study of

these tombstones, linked to the study of cemeteries in caves and their associated art, perhaps would lead to confirmation of this syncretic hypothesis.

The Rock Art of Tadi dia Fuakumbi: Cult of the Ancestors and the Water Spirits?

Near Mbanza Nkula, an ancient village and its cemetery, in a riverbed that dries up during the dry season, several hundred engravings show a rich stylistic sequence that extends over a distance of more than 50 meters. The local chief, Bernard Divangambuta, says he inherited this art from his grandfather. He was the only one performing rituals to access the site by providing offerings to the ancestors, named *nkulu* and *nkita*, and to the water spirits, *simbi*, in the form of some palm wine, kola nuts, *luzibu* nuts and *tondo* medicinal mushrooms (*Pleurotus tuberregium*). Each of these ingredients is used in rituals to establish a connection or a mediation between the ancestors and oneself. Also he indicated that the water spirits, *simbi*, are engraved at Tadi dia Fuakumbi. Could this be a contemporary usage, or a case of re-use?

Another aspect is the living tradition of engraved stones that was observed in the region

during the 1950's by Father Joseph De Munck and Brother Hendrik van Moorsel. This would be an interesting complement to the study of rock art in the open air that was discovered in these same villages⁶ (De Munck and van Moorsel 1961). More investigations of oral traditions could be undertaken to place rock art within the framework of current mythology.

Archaeological Test Pit in the Decorated Shelter of Mbanza Mбота

On the Mbanza Mбота outcrops, (Nkula), a test pit at the base of a decorated wall led to the discovery of painted fragments that correlated to the ornamentation on the wall in an archaeological layer 40 centimeters thick. However, the deposit was thin, little differentiated, and much disturbed by a mixture of stone artifacts and pottery on the same levels⁷. It seemed that this was either a new industry, to which rock art could be related, or the result of mixed deposits (de Maret et al. 1977). Some test pits carried out by Pierre de Maret in 1973, generated dates from the second millennium AD, and were associated with pottery and stone artifacts. For Pierre de Maret, all of these dates must be regarded with caution (de Maret 1990.) There may have been problems of disturbance and contamination, especially for the sample taken at a shallow depth in the rock shelters. Furthermore, he does not believe that a Late Stone Age could have continued in the Kongo kingdom up until two hundred years ago (de Maret et al. 1977). This brings us face to face with two difficulties: one related to the stratigraphy, and the other to the terminology of archaeological industries.

The Lovo Massif, a Legacy in Danger

This largely unknown heritage is today imperiled by numerous limestone mining projects. Some major sites of rock art have been destroyed already. The sad symbol of this is the Mbafu cave, which was published in detail in the Proceedings of the Fourth PanAfrican Congress on Prehistory (Mortelmans and Monteyne 1962) and the subject of a site visit. An Italian company mined limestone there from the 1980's until recently. Other rock art sites in the Lovo Massif are in danger at the present time. Discussions are underway for a new limestone mining project on a rock art outcrop. From a legislative point of view, other important legal voids can be

noted, particularly concerning preventative archaeology and cultural heritage management. It will be useful to call the attention of the population and decision-makers to the importance of this legacy.

Acknowledgements

Field research for this project was made possible by logistical support from the Compagnie Sucrière de Kwilu-Ngongo. I am grateful to Olivier Lippens, Eric van Eeckhout and Philippe Jacquemin. I received financial assistance from the French Institute of South Africa (IFAS). My field work was undertaken with the support of, and in close collaboration with, the Institute of the National Museums of Congo, the Center for Research and Restoration of the Museums of France, the Royal Museum for Central Africa, as well as the UNESCO Center for the World Heritage and the UNESCO office in Kinshasa. I thank all those who assisted us from these institutions. In the field, my heartiest thanks go to Clément Mambu Nsangathi of the Institute of the National Museums of Congo. I must note special gratitude to the people of Lovo, Nkula and Mbanza Nkula villages.

Footnotes

1. This is the subject of my doctoral dissertation, which is in progress, and advised by Pierre de Maret (Université Libre de Bruxelles) and Jean-Loïc Le Quellec (Université de Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne).
2. Father Joseph De Munck, initiator of this research in 1952.
3. This term is used as a simple starting point, knowing that it does not appear to designate a group that is differentiated by ethnicity, clan, or customs. It is a sobriquet given by the other Kongo after the railroad was built in 1890, to people speaking a dialect considered funny (notwithstanding its great similarity to that spoken in Mbanza-Kongo, the capital of the ancient Kongo kingdom). Paradoxically, the Ndibu also are considered the conservators of the traditions of the ancient Kongo kingdom (Boone 1973).
4. Several villages surround the principal outcrops (Lumbi, Lovo, Nkula, Mbanza Matadi, Paza Ngubi, Paza Ngengo, Kingoyanokwa).

5. Even if the Kongo are not necessarily the heirs of these works of art, interesting clues can exist in their oral traditions and in the manner in which these artworks are perceived or have been re-appropriated.
6. Unfortunately we learned this information only upon our return from the 2008 mission.
7. These items are currently being studied.

Bibliography

Boone, O.

- 1973 *Carte ethnique de la République du Zaïre. Quart sud-ouest*. Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale (collection Annales Sciences Humaines).

Cahen, D. and P. de Maret

- 1974 Recherches archéologiques récentes en République du Zaïre. *Forum Université Libre de Bruxelles* 39: 33-37.

Fromont, C.

- 2008 *Under the Sign of the Cross in the Kingdom of Kongo: Shaping Images and Molding Faith in Early Modern Central Africa*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Harvard University.

Fu-Kiau kia Bunseki-Lumanisa, A.

- 1969 *N'kôngo ye nza yakun'zungidila. Nza-Kôngo (Le Mukongo et le monde qui l'entourait. Cosmogonie-Kôngo)*. Kinshasa: Office National de la Recherche et du Développement.

Heimlich, G

- 2010 *Un archéologue au Congo*, a web-documentary produced with Le Monde.fr and ARTE Radio.com: www.lemonde.fr/congo

Le Quellec, J.-L.

- 2004 *Rock Art in Africa. Mythology and Legend*. Paris: Flammarion.

MacGaffey, W.

- 1986 *Religion and Society in Central Africa: the BaKongo of Lower Zaire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Maret, P. de

- 1972 *Étude d'une collection de céramiques protohistoriques du Bas-Zaïre*. Mémoire de Licence, Université Libre de Bruxelles.

- 1982 Rock art. In F. Van Noten, editor, *The Archaeology of Central Africa*. Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, pp. 97-99.

- 1986 The Ngovo Group: an Industry With Polished Stone Tools and Pottery in Lower Zaïre. *The African Archaeological Review* 4: 103-133.

- 1990 Le "Néolithique" et l'âge du fer ancien dans le sud-ouest de l'Afrique Centrale. In R. Lanfranchi and D. Schwartz, editors, *Paysages quaternaires de l'Afrique Centrale Atlantique*. Paris: ORSTOM (collection *Didactiques*), pp. 447-457.

- 2005 From Pottery Groups to Ethnic Groups in Central Africa. In A. Stahl, editor, *African Archaeology: A Critical Introduction*. Malden & Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 420-440.

Maret, P. de, F. van Noten and D. Cahen.

- 1977 Radiocarbon Dates from West Central Africa: a Synthesis. *The Journal of African History* 18: 481-505.

Mortelmans, G.

- 1962 Archéologie des grottes Dimba et Ngovo (région de Thysville, Bas-Congo). In G. Mortelmans and J. Nenquin, editors, *Actes du IV^e Congrès panafricain de préhistoire et de l'étude du quaternaire, Léopoldville 1959*. Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, pp. 407-425.

Mortelmans, G. and R. Monteyne

- 1962 La grotte peinte de Mbafu, témoignage iconographique de la première évangélisation du Bas-Congo. In G. Mortelmans and J. Nenquin, editors, *Actes du IV^e Congrès panafricain de préhistoire et de l'étude du quaternaire, Léopoldville 1959*. Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, pp. 457-485.

Munck, J. De

- 1960 Les grottes et les roches gravées du Bas-Kongo. *Ngonge Kongo : Carnet d'Histoire et de Littérature* 3: sp.

Munck, J. De and H. van Moorsel

- 1961 Un rapport destiné à la Commission pour le classement des sites, monuments et meubles de facture indigène (suite et fin). *Ngonge : Carnets de Sciences Humaines* 10: sp.

Raymaekers, P. and H. van Moorsel

- 1964 *Lovo, contribution à l'étude de la protohistoire de l'Ouest Centrafricain*. Léopoldville: Édition de l'Université de Léopoldville.

Thompson, R.F., J. Cornet and National Gallery of Art (U.S.)

- 1981 *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds*. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art.