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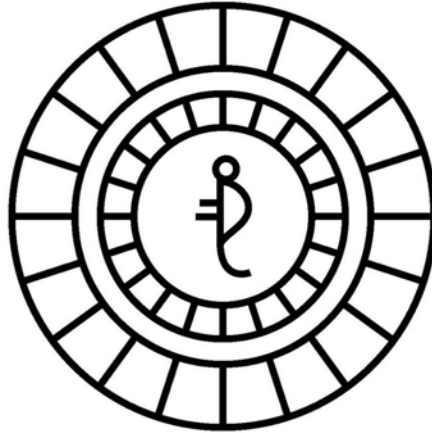
ORBIS AFRICA

REPORT/ISSUES No. 1-2

Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz

ANGOLA'S ROCK ART

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INTRODUCTION

This research report delves into the cultural and historical significance of rock art in northern Angola, focusing on three primary sites: Tadi dia Lombo, Tadi dia Muingu, and Lovo (Nsenzele). These sites offer valuable insights into the artistic, social, and spiritual practices of the communities that created them. By analyzing rock art and its context, this project aims to contribute to understanding Angola's rich cultural heritage and its relevance to contemporary society.

Throughout northwestern Angola, hundreds of archaeological sites lie scattered, adorned with thousands of enigmatic symbols painted into caves and shelters, and engraved onto rocky outcrops and boulders. These symbols encompass a diverse range of simple designs, including geometric, anthropomorphic, and zoomorphic shapes. Some symbols are strikingly visible in breathtaking landscapes, while others are concealed within historic stone structures or burial mounds. These designs date back over two and a half millennia, created by both the ancient inhabitants of this region and its current inhabitants.

Over the past two years, the fieldwork team from Orbis Africa Advanced Research Center has developed a novel approach to deciphering and

comprehending the original purpose of these competing visual elements that form part of the archaeological landscape.

In recent decades, the Orbis Africa Advanced Research Center team has made significant strides in the discovery and documentation of rock art in northern and southern Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This growing interest has led to a remarkable surge in the number of carved stones documented in the past two years, with a quadruple increase in the number of sites and depictions. This remarkable progress has garnered attention from professional archaeologists and African art historians based in European institutions.

The search for Angola's Rock Art (OAARC) has attracted professional archaeologists and academics seeking new recording technologies like photogrammetry and laser scanning. These technologies could bring new attention to the search and reveal the latest information about when and how rock art was used.

The survival of OAARC hangs in the balance due to political landscapes and environmental challenges. Human and natural threats have caused the deterioration of many rock art panels. Creating an accurate record of all rock art is crucial for researching, protecting, and managing this fading connection to our historic past.

The Angola's Rock Art (OAARC) website and database, hosted at <https://orbisafrika.org/orbisafrika/orbisafrika/welcome.html>, marks a significant step towards this goal. A trained team of locals has been gathering information for the pilot project since 1999 as part of the northern Angolan Rock Art Project, sponsored by the Tanner-Opperman Endowed Chair in African Art at Indiana University and The Watch Hill Foundation in the United Kingdom.

The Orbis Africa organization incorporated and built upon the research goals of the Schools of Anthropology and Archeology at Oxford University and the Art History department at Indiana University. The database's geographical coverage is limited to research conducted in Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Namibia, and South Africa. The effective methods from the initial project were used to gather information that will guide management decisions aimed at balancing access and education with the conservation and protection of this fragile resource.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Martínez-Ruiz earned his B.A. from the University of Havana in 1994 and his Ph.D. from Yale University in 2004. He is an art historian with expertise in African and Caribbean artistic, visual, and religious practices, whose work challenges traditional disciplinary boundaries and examines the varied understandings of—and engagement with—‘art’ and ‘visual culture’.

Following professorships at Havana’s High Institute of Art from 1993-1997, the Rhode Island School of Design from 2002-2004, and Stanford University from 2004-2013, Martínez-Ruiz joined the University of Cape Town, where he served as the head of the Art History and Discourse of Art Department from 2013-2017. He was the 2017-2018 recipient of the Leverhulme Visiting Professorship, hosted by Oxford’s School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies, and a Senior Fellow at St. Anthony’s College and Trinity College.

His books include *Kongo Graphic Writing and Other Narratives of the Sign* (Temple University Press, 2013; El Colegio de México, 2012), *Faisal Abdu’Allah: On the Art of Dislocation* (Atlantic Center of Modern Art Press, 2012), and *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds* (Yale University Press, 2007),

for which he received the College Art Association Alfred H. Barr Award. In 2024, he published *The African in the Making of Cuban Art* with Diasporic Africa Press.

In addition to his research and teaching, Martínez-Ruiz is an active curator whose shows have explored issues of visual communication, dislocation, and hybridity in the work of contemporary artists across the African diaspora. He also serves as an editor for the *Cuban Studies Magazine* and *Harvard’s Transition Magazine*, and was a researcher for *Pacific Standard Time AL* at the Getty Foundation and the Museum of Latin American Art, Los Angeles, California, from 2014-2016. He received the Mark Cluster Mamolen Fellowship at the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, Harvard University, in 2020-2021 and has been a senior research fellow there from 2021 to the present. He was the recipient of the Creative Capital Award, NYC, in 2022 and, with Professor Alejandro de la Fuente, co-curated “El Pasado Mío/My Own Past: Afrodescendant Contributions to Cuban Art” at the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African & African American Art at the Hutchins Center in September 2022.





What is Rock Art in Northern Angola?

People use the term “rock art” to describe prehistoric or historic carvings cut into the surface of rocks or painted on cave and shelter walls. This art is found across Africa and other regions, depicting human figures, animals, and objects such as weapons, boats, or houses. Unlike any other place in Africa, abstract representations dominated Northern Angola’s rock art scene, making it exceptional. The simple cosmogram mark is the most prevalent symbol worldwide in ancient rock engravings.

Three primary contexts in northwestern Angola contain historic rock art.

1. Researchers describe outcrops and earth-fast boulders as “landscape” or “open-air” rock art.
2. Monumental structures, known as “funerary art,” are associated with pre-colonial structures.
3. Medium-sized stones, including those used

in in-house tobacco grading and interior design, are also used in the informal economy. Water surrounds a single stone platform, creating protective lagoons from the river current that serve as stations for purification baths and spiritual cleansing in societies like Kimpasi, Lembo, and Mdembo. Additionally, these stones act as anchors for drying and eliminating the poison from the initial harvest of cassava plants.

Some carved stones and paintings may have undergone multiple reuses, starting as part of an outcropping rock before being quarried for a stone circle or cairn and ultimately being used as building material. Orbis Africa researchers have recorded around 5,000 carved surfaces or “panels” in northwestern Angola, and new examples are almost certainly awaiting discovery every year. It’s known that many more examples exist in southern Angola.

Motifs and 'Styles'



The most prevalent design element in rock art is the simple cup-mark—a circular hollow, typically between 3 and 10 centimeters in diameter and around 2 to 5 millimeters deep. In northern Angola, these cup marks often merge to form intricate motifs, such as

the “cup-and-ring” or “multiple concentric rings.” Other less common motifs include pregnant women, firearms, animals, human processions, hunting scenes, stars, comets, and abstract designs like penannular (incomplete rings), spirals, “keyholes,” and “rosettes.” By skillfully combining these motifs in diverse ways, artists create unique panels. Researchers have identified two primary “traditions” of rock art in Central and Eastern African nations: Zambia, Malawi, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique.



The art of “stone tomb structures” is closely associated with Ziambi (cemetery) and is well-documented in Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These structures are characterized by the use of stone slabs to form a regular surface around rectangles, serving as a protective barrier that demarcates the burial site.

Triangular dimensions, suggest the presence of

designs such as chevrons, triangles, and lozenges. These designs cover the entire available surface, and artists arrange them in regular, geometric, and symmetrical patterns. The “cup-and-ring,” triangle, rectangle, and diamond shape art is more prevalent in northern Angola and primarily employs curvilinear motifs, including simple cups, grooves, rings, and variations. These carvings can be found in various locations, such as outcrops, boulders, cliffs, and rocks.



Petroglyphs, shelters, and caves are associated with initiatory societies, scattered stones (nsenzele), and standing stones. These structures are mostly found in remote locations within the rainforest, and their designs may also incorporate natural features like fissures. Initiatory societies attribute these structures’ “fluid” design and place them in open areas.

The carvings were created using metal and stone tools. “Mfinda a Ntuta” marks are still visible on panels documented in 2000. The size of these marks varies, ranging from less than 4 cm to 8 cm in diameter, suggesting the use of different tools. It is believed that designs were likely mapped out before being pecked, although rock art excavation sites have never yielded examples of “hammer-stones” or “peckers.” In some instances, indigenous artists created long grooves by pecking a series of small cups in a line and joining them together.

The motifs discovered during excavations at the Tadi dia Lombo and Tadi dia Mpungi rock art sites in 2023 and 2024, which included several zoomorphic representations and handprints of red ochre, show no evidence of being colored.



How old is it?

Dating rock art precisely poses a significant challenge. The similarity between rock art representations and 'handprints' in Central Africa suggests early human settlement around 2,500 years ago, following migration from the Northwest. These similarities align with the San



people's painting techniques and figurative vocabulary. However, some researchers argue that all painting styles are recent, undermining the undisputed earlier rock art of populations during the Iron and Bronze Ages, approximately 5,000 years ago. They also identify cup marks and more complex motifs with human migration and settlement from 2,500 years ago to the early 20th century, including funerary architecture.

Researchers have identified over 80% of the studied motifs in other Central African rock art research areas as superimpositions, where one motif overlays an earlier one. While these superimpositions provide information about the relative age of each motif, they cannot determine the absolute age. Another method to determine the relative age of carvings is to examine representations of technologies, such as weapons like firearms, knives, swords, bows, and arrows, and cosmological observations, like constellations, shooting stars, and comets, which are evident in Lovo.

The relationship between the 'funerary tomb' and 'cup-and-ring' traditions exemplifies the elements that characterize rock art sites associated with initiatory societies like Kimpasi, Lembo, and Ndembo. There is a significant overlap with 'tomb' motifs in other rock painting sites, such as those in shelters and caves. Conversely, geometric designs of passage tombs often accompany simple cups and 'cup-and-ring' motifs. The 'cup-

and-ring' tradition in Central Africa appears to have emerged between 8,000 and 7,500 years ago, while 'funerary mounds' art occurred between 1,000 and 800 years ago. However, it is unlikely that rock art in the region was a uniform phenomenon; the various practices likely had different lifespans in different areas, with some motifs being more widespread or persistent than others.



Excavating rock art

Through ongoing archaeological investigations around rock art panels in northern Angola and southern Democratic Republic of the Congo, we've significantly revised our understanding of rock art's purpose. These investigations have revealed substantial activity associated with certain carved rocks and clusters of rock art panels. However, excavations haven't uncovered mud and cobble pavements abutting carved panels or substantial quantities of scattered stone tools, which are notably absent. These missing features hinder a clear connection with pits containing burnt animal and human bones, along with other charred remains. Determining the chronological relationship between these features and the carvings necessitates carbon-14 dating, but the visual evidence, such as an extensive sequence of symbols, suggests a more intricate relationship between signs and symbols or between abstract signs and pictographic representation. Based on this evidence, rock art likely played a role in activities involving initiatory societies and religious rituals that included animal sacrifice, feasting, and offerings.

Connections

One approach to understanding Angolan rock art has been to examine similarities in style between the rock art traditions of Central Africa. Some believe that the tradition may have originated from human migration approximately 2,500 years ago. However, this theory fails to account for the extensive distribution of rock art spanning up to 500 miles from the Atlantic Ocean. It also does not explain the relative lack of comparative studies of rock art related to human migration. Therefore, it is uncertain whether Kongo rock art developed in isolation or was influenced by the diffusion of ideas or directly brought by migrating communities. There is limited evidence to suggest where such ideas or people may have reimagined previous visual vocabularies to create the original visual language.





The Meaning of Rock Art

Interpreting prehistoric art as “information” is problematic. Most researchers acknowledge the impenetrable nature of the “meaning” embedded within Angola’s Kongo area rock art. The societies that created the carvings employed distinct communication and symbolic systems, diverging from the Kongo society’s contemporary practices. Nevertheless, the limited range of symbols and their repeated use across the landscape suggest a shared vocabulary, implying that the symbols or their combinations held specific meanings for the individuals who crafted them.

Regional Variations

Regional variations further complicate the situation, with clusters exhibiting differences in the motifs used, the form of “canvas” chosen, and the placement of rock art in the landscape. In the eastern regions of northern Angola, spirals occur more frequently than in the west, and in certain areas, only cup marks are present. Rock art exists throughout the interior of all other countries in Central Africa, at both low and high altitudes,

from sea level upwards. In more commonly visited areas, people can see complex designs on the interior and outcrops of the rainforest at higher elevations. In contrast, cup marks are found lower down the valleys, near riverbanks and large rocks.

These variations suggest that the positioning and choice of motifs are specific to certain Kongo-related cultures. The emerging picture is complex, with many subtle differences within and between regions. Factors such as geology, survival, and the incomplete nature of the record add further layers of uncertainty. Despite these challenges, a few archaeologists have proposed theories or suggestions that may help unravel the meanings of rock art. The enduring practice of carving rocks over a significant period suggests that the symbols held enduring significance. Their power and meaning undoubtedly strengthened for the people who lived among them as the society evolved from a nomadic community to a sedentary, segmented, and hierarchical one that eventually outgrew the need for them. However, these are just initial steps, and further research is necessary to fully comprehend the meanings of rock art.



The search for meaning

Most carvings in northern Angola, which Orbis Africa has been researching since 1999, are found on outcrops in villages and remote rain-forest areas. These intricately decorated stones and wall paintings, found in shelters and caves, lack significant archaeological context. However, carving serves as a permanent expression of a profound connection between the carvers and the landscape—a testament to the transformation of ‘space’ into ‘place.’ The selection of stones and their strategic placement within the landscape offer valuable insights into the role of rock art in the prehistoric world and its enduring relevance in contemporary times.

Defining Territory?

Striking natural features like forests, unusual boulder formations, shelters, caves, and rivers have historically played a crucial role in Kongo culture’s spiritual connection to the landscape. These features serve as venues for shared social events and personal experiences such as initiation and rites of passage, fostering a sense of belonging and connection to specific places. Rock art serves as a permanent record of groups’ attachment to unique locations in their land, documenting historical events like wars and social displacements.

Rock art, a significant component of northern Angola’s cultural heritage, has been severely neglected due to the absence of dedicated internet forums and websites. Consequently, it has become both intellectually and physically inaccessible to a large portion of the population. To preserve this cultural legacy for future generations, it is imperative to implement recording, conservation, and management strategies.

Angolan Heritage and the Orbis Africa Rock Art Website

Since 1999, Orbis Africa has been developing a strategy for managing and understanding rock art in northern Angola. This strategy involves creating a database and establishing the Orbis Africa Advanced Research Center (OAARC) at

Stanford University in 2004, led by Professor Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz. The OAARC serves as a pilot project to develop a standardized recording strategy and a rock art archive that can be publicly accessible online. In 1999, they recruited over sixty local volunteers to help develop a recording method that could be rolled out nationally. This method enables the collection of standardized baseline data in all regions of the country, which can then be added to the database.

What should we record?

The surface record should encompass natural features like fissures, which can be integral to the overall design and enhance the significance of the rock art. Other aspects of the rock, such as its shape, color, texture, orientation, and the pattern of water flow over its surface, may also be crucial.

The record also needs to consider the broader context of each panel. In many rock art locations, time has significantly altered the prehistoric context. Stone, an essential resource, has become a dynamic element of the landscape due to human interference. Whether intentionally or not, people have incorporated carved stones into various structures, including burial monuments, standing stones, field clearance cairns, field boundaries, stone walls, hill fort superstructures, buildings, millstones, and even milestones.

Exploring and documenting the physical and cultural contexts of rock art can help us understand how its significance and value have evolved over time. Recording benchmark data on the condition of carvings is also essential to monitor decay and identify the causes and rate of surface loss. By recording the condition, we can prioritize the carvings most at risk and emphasize the importance of effectively deploying conservation and management resources in these areas.

How Should We Record Rock Art?

Since Angolan rock art encompasses both representational and non-representational styles, and its meaning remains elusive, our records will inevitably be subjective. Therefore, recording techniques must strive to minimize or eliminate

subjective interpretation by the recorder, irrespective of their experience, to achieve a faithful representation. Additionally, extensive oral research will be conducted on the current community to explore ways to derive meaning from rock art, including the connection between oral history, proverbs, and symbolic representation.

The recording methods employed for rock art depend on the intended use, the rock art itself (including the panel and its location), and its vulnerability. The recorded information should address a diverse range of questions that various users may have about it. Those responsible for caring for rock art require a precise, detailed, and measurable record of its condition and surroundings. Researchers seek a comprehensive range of information on the content and context of the rock art. Interested public members desire a clear and accurate record of the rock art's location and visual appearance. A broader audience, including schoolchildren, seeks a visually captivating and engaging record that stimulates their imagination and fosters learning.



Recording Rock Art: The Angolan Rock Art Project Process

The recording method developed by Orbis Africa volunteers combines visual techniques, site surveys, and mapping, along with textual recording. Below, we outline the recommended techniques, and a new database will provide further details.

Preliminary Survey:

We conducted a thorough walkover survey of each site and its surroundings, leaving no stone unturned to establish the physical and cultural context of the carvings and identify all rock art panels in the vicinity. For sites with multiple rock art panels, our researchers created an overview sketch that depicted the spatial relationship between rock art panels, topography, and archaeological features, supported by annotated digital photographs.

Textual Recording:

Our research team members completed standardized drawings in situ and filled out a recording form at one of the five sites in Lovo archaeological places in Madimba and Lukingu-I near Mbanza Kongo. This form included a written description of the rock art and its context.

Photography:

Photography, a crucial part of our recording process, is an inexpensive and non-specialist technique that makes it accessible to anyone. A variety of images were captured, capturing the carvings and their surroundings at the time of capture.

What is Rock Art in Northern Angola?

Rock art, a term used to describe prehistoric or historic carvings carved into the surface of rocks or painted on cave and shelter walls, is prevalent across the African continent. The designs encompass human figures, animals, and objects such as weapons, boats, and houses. Notably, Northern Angola stands out with its exceptional rock art scene, dominated by abstract representations.

Historic rock art in northwestern Angola manifests in three distinct situations. Outcrops and earth-fast boulders serve as the primary locations for this art, characterized as 'landscape' or 'open-air' rock art. Another category, known as 'funerary art,' is associated with monumental structures dating back to the pre-colonial era. Remaining smaller stones, often without a clear prehistoric context, have occasionally been repurposed in modern structures, earning them the label 'transitory' or 'initiatory' art.

Some carved stones and paintings have been integrated into the natural environment of the outcrops near riverbanks and forests. They may have originated as outcropping rocks, been quarried for stone circles or cairns, and later repurposed as construction materials after multiple reuses. The Orbis Africa research team has documented approximately 5,000 carved surfaces or 'panels' in Northwestern Angola alone. It is evident that many more examples likely await discovery, as it is known that numerous sites in Southern Angola contain rock art dating back to around 7,650 years ago.

The primary objectives of this research include documenting and analyzing the rock art at Tadi Dia Lombo, Tadi Dia Muingu, and Lovo. Additionally, it aims to investigate the historical and cultural context of these rock art sites, exploring their significance in shaping the communities' social and religious practices.

Furthermore, the research seeks to understand the role of rock art in transmitting cultural knowledge and identity.

Methods and Work Plan

The research project will involve fieldwork at three sites to document the rock art. This will include photography, sketches, and detailed descriptions. Interviews with local community members and elders will provide valuable insights into the historical and cultural context of the rock art. The analysis will focus on the symbolism, techniques, and materials used in the rock art and its significance to the communities' social and spiritual practices.

Competencies, Skills, and Access

The research team, with its extensive experience in the study of African art and cultural heritage, is uniquely positioned for this project. The team members are fluent in the local languages and have established strong relationships with local communities and research institutions. This ensures that the research is conducted with utmost respect and understanding. The team's interdisciplinary approach, combining art history, anthropology, and archaeology, will benefit the project.

Final Product and Dissemination

This research will culminate in a comprehensive monograph that documents and analyzes the rock art at Tadi dia Lombo, Tadi dia Muingu, and Lovo (Nsenzele). Scholars in the fields of African art, cultural heritage, and anthropology will find the monograph interesting. We will share the research findings with the local communities and relevant cultural institutions to support the preservation and promotion of Angola's cultural heritage.

Summary of Three Case Studies (2023-2024)

Case Study No. 1: Tadi dia Lombo

Tadi dia Lombo, situated near the village of Nzau-Evwa, stands as an exceptional example of rock art, renowned for its unique use of pigments. The site boasts well-preserved images in vibrant red and black hues, including three handprints that hold deep symbolic significance. These handprints serve as a testament to the community's profound connection to their ancestors and the spiritual realm. Within their founding myth, the community integrates the cave into their narrative, viewing it as a sanctuary during times of conflict. This case study delves into the documentation and analysis of rock art, shedding light on its profound impact on the community's historical narrative and cultural practices.

Case Study No. 2: Tadi dia Muingu

Tadi dia Muingu, nestled within the commune of Tuku, holds geological significance as a boundary marker and a repository of historical importance. Oral traditions suggest that this site once formed

part of an ancient urban settlement, serving as a refuge during times of war. The rock art at Tadi dia Muingu is characterized by the unique natural barriers created by the Kongo Yasika and Nkasa plants. This case study aims to document and explore the significance of rock art within the community's historical narrative, oral traditions, and cultural practices.

Case Study No. 3: Lovo-I

Lovo-I, situated in the Madimba region, stands as one of Angola's most prominent archaeological and rock art sites. It holds immense historical and cultural significance, contributing to the overall character of Kongo culture. This site has witnessed pivotal historical events, including the revolt led by Alvaro Buta and the national independence movement. This case study delves into the documentation and analysis of rock art, unraveling its profound impact on the community's historical narrative and cultural practices.

Case Study No. 1: Tadi dia Lombo

Tadi dia Lombo, a cave painting near the village of Nzau-Evwa, stands out as an exceptional example of rock art due to its unique use of pigments. The rock painting site is situated within the Tadi dia Mbombe massif, comprising over twelve caves and rock shelters. Notably, Tadi dia Lombo is the sole cave or shelter that houses rock art, while there are two other caves that contain funerary remains.

In 2002, I had the privilege of visiting this site for the first time with the late Blaise Matondo Ngo Vungi and Pedro Gabriel, the municipal administrator of Mbanza Congo. However, conducting investigations outside the provincial capital posed significant challenges due to the ongoing civil war in Angola. Foreigners encounter opposition when attempting to explore archaeological sites of cultural significance.

In 2023, I was fortunate enough to explore two caves thanks to Pedro Joaquin and Domingo Mpanzu Zacaría. They graciously shared the history behind the Tadi dia Lombo cave and its profound connection to the founding myth of the village of Nzau-Evwa.

One of the most striking features of Tadi dia Lombo is the presence of a painting that stands out from the rest of the region. This well-preserved painting is characterized by its use of two distinct colors: red and black. Unlike most cave paintings in the Zaire province of Angola, which are engraved on stone surfaces, Tadi dia Lombo features a red painting of three handprints on the wall. The creators of this painting used tools or even their own fingers to create these images.

The significance of Tadi dia Lombo extends beyond its artistic value. It originates from the Kikongo term “gialuka,” which signifies migration. However, in the context of this cave painting, it carries a specific connotation of purposeless migration. This massif is home to several caves where over a hundred human remains rest. The community’s founding history is deeply intertwined with these caves, which served as temporary shelters during times of attacks by Portuguese colonial forces, invasions by neighboring rival groups, and brutal attacks by FAPLA government forces, FNLA, and UNITA rebel groups during the civil war.



Figure 1 provides a visual reference to the site. Photograph: Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, 2023.



Throughout history, the community has viewed caves as a refuge, and the painting symbolizes a grave to represent its profound significance in the community's past. The panel begins with the direct fingerprint of three red hands, signifying the beginning of a transformative journey that leads to the next world and the transformation of life into an ancestral existence. The number three holds historical importance here, as it represents the cave's enduring significance as the community's refuge. At an unspecified historical moment, the cave captured the community and recreated all the epic narratives of their past.

Symbols of the community's power are evident within the various halls of this cave. Three distinct rooms characterize the cave's layout. One room, located at the far right, serves as a water storage pool. Another room, situated at the end of the left side, functions as the primary bedroom for the community chief and his family. The significance of the number three in these rooms can be linked to fundamental narratives of the Kongo culture, particularly within a specific village. These narratives often involve a ritual involving three cooking stones placed under the nsanda tree and the burial of a piece of iron nearby, towards the northeast of the nsanda tree.

The story of the three talking stones serves as a metaphor for the creation of a community, em-

phasizing the family as the cornerstone of this endeavor. The three stones holding the cooking pot represent the establishment of the family and the actions necessary for building a prosperous community. Visual references to this narrative can be found in Figures 3, 4, and 5 (details 7, 8, and 9). Figure 3 depicts a mother carrying a box on her head, symbolizing the family's sustenance and vitality. This box is believed to represent the cosmogram of Tova, Yowa, or Dikenga, representing the essence of life. Figure 8 shows a child, symbolizing the continuation of life even after death. Figure 9 depicts an adult male in the telema position, conveying respect, honor, and attention to the spirit. The trumpet (mpungi) being played in Figure 6 and 7 is interpreted as a three-dimensional artwork, while Figure 8 presents it as a functional musical instrument.

Detail number 3, which aligns with the zig-zag pattern below corresponding to the family unit, signifies the imminent arrival of the deceased's village. This zig-zag design represents Simbi, a divine force.

Figure 2: The three hands rest on the left side of the cave's interior wall. The first iconic motif appears in red pigment on the rock art panel. It comprises twelve clusters of symbols and pictograms. Photograph: Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, 2023.

It can also be interpreted as the manifestation of water's power or the realization of Nzambi a Mpungu (God)'s attributes through water. In this context, this type of manifestation is associated with protecting the family and is one manifestation of God's vitality. Refer to Figure 5, detail No. 10, for visual reference. Simbi kia Maza, associated with water, serves as a significant conduit of traditional power.

The presence of a snake in its natural habitat symbolizes wisdom and spiritual authority. The cognitive significance of the zig-zag motif is comparable to that of red handprints and the concept of a person descending into a cave. This cave serves as the entrance to the realm of the dead, where individuals embark on a journey to find their way out and are reborn. To achieve this, they must confront the darkness and merge with the abundance of the other world. On the left side of the painting, near the cave entrance, there are three hands, emphasizing the funerary nature of the artwork. These three red hands represent the physical transformation into the spiritual realm, with red symbolizing the Kongo cosmogony, transition, ceremonial power, maturity, and renewal of life.

On the right, a photograph of a traditional trumpet called Mpungi is displayed at the Royal Museum of the Congo in Mbanza Congo, Angola. Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz captured the photo on June 8, 2023. One can interpret this painting by observing two transitions when examining the phenomenological viewpoint. The first passage takes us from the outside world to the depths of a cave, which serves as a cemetery. These two spaces, one filled with light and the other of darkness, are crucial to understanding the funerary purpose of this artwork. Under the three handprints, the second element of the painting represents the shift from light to darkness, depicting the cave and its narrow entrance; the first motif highlights a live cave experience. The second motif on the wall represents the cave itself.

A significant element painted with a funerary theme is venturing into the cave, a symbolic interplay between clarity and obscurity. To comprehend the entire meaning of the artwork—the

Kongo cosmogony, black connections to life, or the beginning of life—one must achieve spiritual enlightenment to venture into the cave. The journey from the exterior to the interior is undertaken by the individuals portrayed in this painting. The artist creates the images using black pigment, and the three handprints in red symbolize the shift from a physical to a spiritual state and the activation of powers given during this transformation.

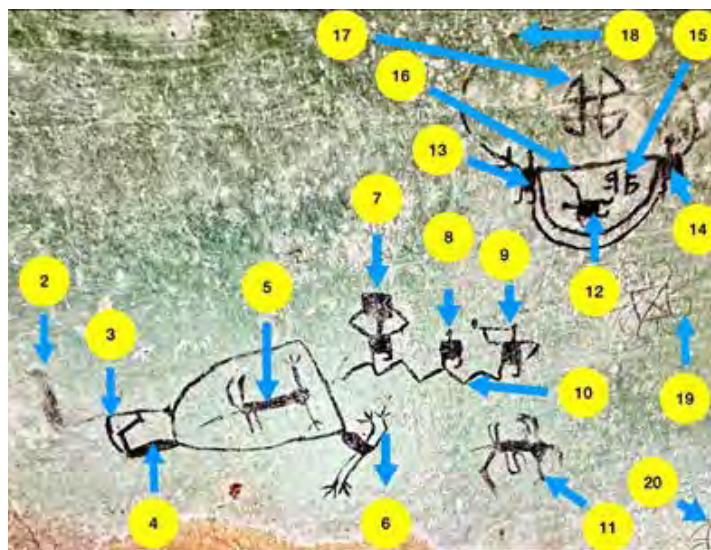


Figure 3: On the lower left, the image displays the first iconic narratives, which consist of twelve elements, including four ideograms and seven pictograms. The second iconic narrative, found in the upper right corner, comprises seven components, including four ideograms and three pictograms. An isolated symbol at the far right of the composition represents a floral motif used as the base of the Towa cosmogram, symbolizing the village rebuilt in the realm of the dead. Photograph: Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, 2023.

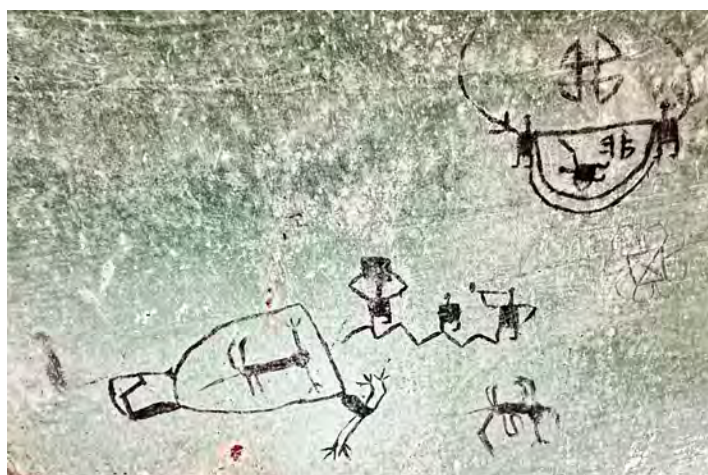


Figure 4: Detailed view of the left panel. Graphic: Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, November 1, 2023.



Figures 5, 6, and 7: On the left, a decorated bell crafted by a skilled artist from Solongo culture in the 19th century is depicted. This traditional bell portrays a mother caring for her child while balancing a box on her head. It was part of the Dandoy collection in Brussels until the mid-1990s and is now housed in Marc Leo Felix's collection in Belgium. Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz captured the photograph on November 8, 2023.

Case Study No. 2: Tadi dia Muingu

Tuku, a small commune situated approximately 16 kilometers from Mbanza Congo on the national road to Luanda, possesses its own land and natural resources, which is a customary practice in Kongo society. A geological formation known as a rocky massif, called Tadi dia Muingu and Tadi dia Mpungi, serves as a crucial marker for the northern boundaries of the community. Its name translates to “boundary marker” in Kikongo. This rocky formation stretches for over a kilometer and stands at an impressive height of around four hundred and fifty meters.

Oral history provides diverse accounts of the significance of this site. Different versions of the stories emerge based on the synchronization of the oral history collection. Interviews conducted fifteen years ago suggest that Tadi dia Mpungi was once part of an ancient urban settlement that was concealed atop the mountain. Oral history further details that due to the numerous caves and hidden paths known only to the local community, they would seek refuge in this challenging terrain during times of war or incursions by rebel groups.

The close connection between this ancient settlement and the caves, including Tadi dia Mpungi

and Tadi dia Sanza, is further evidenced by the presence of numerous human remains.

This summer, a group of elders known as banka-ka, the family head called nfumu a nkanda, and the local community came together to reveal that Tadi dia Mpungi is part of a series of urban sites that originated from the first settlement on a mountain range located northwest of the commune (vata). This mountain range extends all the way to the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo. Many believe that the ancient capital of the Kingdom of Congo was situated near the community. From a distance, the plain can easily identify this mountain range at its peak, although a thorough archaeological investigation is still needed to confirm this. Today’s traditional authorities support the existence of these historical sites and recognize their immense archaeological and historical significance. The elders and local authorities confirm that the current commune of Tuku was established over a century ago due to a territorial dispute with the original commune atop the rocky mountain known as Tadi dia Mpungi. This dispute led the inhabitants of Tuku to relocate their commune to its current location, right next to the colonial road constructed by Portuguese colonial authorities in 1933. Please refer to Figure 8 for a visual representation.



Figure 8: Hand-drawn map illustrating the commune of Tuku and two archaeological sites: Tadi dia Muingu and Tadi dia Mpungi, as of summer 2023. Illustration: Sousa Pedro Rodrigues.

Both oral accounts emphasize the site's archaeological wealth, which is crucial in revealing historical events like migrations, urban development, and wars. They also highlight the cultural significance of emblematic sites like the cemetery, river, forest, and cave, which are associated with manifestations of vital forces known as "isimbi." Analyzing rock paintings allows us to portray intricate relationships and environmental interactions.

Tadi dia Mpungi is situated in a rock shelter, as depicted in Figure 9. However, this shelter is inaccessible due to the presence of a plant called "Kongo Yasika." This plant, which invaded the area around the year 1999 and grew to over two meters tall, plays a significant role in the shelter's inaccessibility. It thrives in dry conditions and requires minimal water to survive, making it highly resilient. The Kongo Yasika plant forms a protective barrier by mixing with a wild bean known as "Nkasa." The fruit of Nkasa reacts to even the slightest touch, releasing particles called "mankundia" that can cause painful burns and irritation of the skin for up to two days. Interestingly, the rock formation in front of the painted panel resembles a balcony, suggesting that the painting overlooks the entire landscape. For a

visual representation, refer to Figures 10 and 11.

In this text, it's challenging to fully explain the intricate method for deciphering rock art associated with Kongo culture in this region. However, a simplified version of the technique is relevant, as this report aims to pique interest in comprehending the archaeological site's complexity and elucidating its three fundamental principles.

The initial ritual involves the granting of permission to enter the land by the community chief (nfumu a vata), the primary land-owning family (nfumu a nsanda), the family head (nfumu a nsanda), and the elders (bankaka). The second religious representation focuses on awakening the ancestors, who are believed to intercede and assist visitors in matters of vital forces known as Isimbi. This ritual involves songs, traditional drinks (nsamba), and traditional medicine (bilongo). During this stage, it becomes evident that multiple Isimbi associated with fire, maintenance, water, and trees were invoked to revitalize the painting for the final cognitive process. The elders and the village chief of Tuku provided oral accounts to interpret the rock art panels among the Bakongo in northern Angola.

Figure 9: View of Tadi dia Mpungi massif in the background. Photography: Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, 2023. **Figure 10:** A view of the left panel of the Tadi dia Mpungi rock art site. Photograph: Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, 2023. **Figure 11:** See the natural barrier created by the Kongo Yasika and Nkasa (wild bean) plants. Photograph: Bárbaro MartínezRuiz, 2023.





Both oral accounts emphasize the site's archaeological wealth, which is crucial in revealing historical events like migrations, urban development, and wars. They also highlight the cultural significance of emblematic sites like the cemetery, river, forest, and cave, which are also known as "isimbi." Analyzing rock paintings allows us to portray intricate relationships and environmental interactions.

This approach is groundbreaking in the study of rock art as graphic writing. The challenge in understanding Kongo rock art lies in the fact that earlier research neglected local perspectives and failed to contextualize the significance of graphic elements, metaphorical signs, and their relationship with the Kikongo language. However, the Bakongo people play a pivotal role in explaining the nature of the representation, as each graphic sign embodies concepts, phonetics, and articulated oral narratives.

Kongo's cognitive practice encompasses two distinct forms of knowledge acquisition: *dimbu* (digital description as a painted or engraved sign) and *sinsu* (mental realization of meaning through empirical means). Over two decades, the Bakongo community provided clear indications of the meaning associated with rock art panels and shared their mental world to better comprehend the cultural implications of most rock art sites.

The reading offered here serves as a literary figure that highlights the critical principles of Kongo culture represented through symbolic language. The panel's reading is synthesized in its phonetic equivalent as a *mambu*, not as a literal translation of independent symbols, but rather as a result of symbolic reasoning involving the complementation of groups of symbols that constitute independent units in relation to a central symbol that serves as the subject of all narrative or circumstantial action being discussed, described, or addressed.

This fundamental symbolic element, anthropomorphically shaped, is determined to have three meanings: God, Simbi, or a Human. For instance, consider the example of a lyric:

"Nkumbu ame Simbi kia Mpungi.
Ngizilu a mbote ye kiabomte kieno yiluvene.
Ngizidi muna kisonga yo kituka.
O lusobo yi be diatanga ye vonza.
O mono yi Simbi ngizidi ovava muna ku tanina.
Kiaki yi fu kiame."

"My name is Simbi kia Mpungi.
I welcome you and greet you.
I came to update and strengthen.
The transition is inherently dangerous.
My name is Simbi, and I am here to protect you.
It is tradition."

Case Study No. 3: Lovo

Lovo-I, one of Angola's most significant archaeological and rock art sites, is situated in the Madimba locality. Known for its historical and cultural importance, Lovo-I plays a vital role in shaping the overall character of Kongo culture. It has witnessed pivotal historical events over the past 150 years, from Alvaro Buta's revolt in 1913 to the birth of the national independence movement in the 1950s, which marked Angola's struggle against Portuguese colonial rule.

In the Kikongo language, "Lovo" translates to "gesture of thanks" or "gratitude." However, this gesture carries a deeper meaning beyond its literal interpretation. Lovo-I serves as a gateway to understanding historical and cultural narratives. The site boasts 28 petroglyphs, with 95 percent of them exhibiting evidence of rock art. These petroglyphs, waiting to be deciphered, offer a unique glimpse into the cultural richness of the Kongo people.

To reach Lovo-I, visitors must first encounter the commune leader of Madimba. The site is located approximately 44 kilometers from Mbanza Kongo, with coordinates (-6 32' 19.34" S and 14 21' 48.49" E). Lovo-I comprises scattered petroglyphs, known in Kikongo as "Nsenzele" (outcrops or flat areas with scattered stones spanning approximately 200 square meters). The largest petroglyph measures 64 meters by 1.2 meters.

Notably, the stone used for this petroglyph is now buried, but it was visible in the past. At various

parts of the petroglyph, clear signs of organic deposits, ranging from 48 cm to 57 cm deep, indicate that the stone was once above ground. The sediments suggest that the stone was exposed to the elements. Figure 12 provides visual representations of petroglyphs No. 3, 5, and 7 at Lovo-I. These petroglyphs offer valuable insights into the site's rich history and cultural significance.

A Zumbu, a site of profound spiritual significance within the Kongo culture, is defined by three elements: a river, a forest, and a traditional cemetery. While not all rock art sites are Kizumbu, a Zumbu always possesses these three elements. It serves as a historical site associated with migrations of peoples before the Portuguese arrived in 1482.

A Zumbu can be seen as an ultimate destination, offering ideal conditions for settlement and embodying the spiritual significance of its natural elements. It is a place where the spiritual and physical worlds intersect, facilitating the performance of rituals integral to Kongo culture, such

as Ndembo, Lembo, and Kimpasi. Additionally, it serves as a training center for educational institutions, providing training for specialists in traditional affairs and knowledge (zinganga), commune chiefs (Mfumu a Nsanda), circumcision rituals (Yoto), and funerary rites (Luziku).

The monumental character of the archaeological site is evident in the extensive proliferation of narratives conveyed through the use of sequences of symbols. These symbols suggest manipulating a symbolic language characterized by combining at least three symbols in groupings of multiple symbols, up to over twenty symbols in a sequence. This technique implies applying repetition logics to form meanings using various types of representations, including ideograms, pictograms, and abstract signs, as well as independent symbols detached from groupings.

The initial approach to Lovo-I paralleled three cultural aspects of Kongo culture. First, the washing of bodies known as “nsungilu,” is part of the

Figure 12: Views of Petroglyphs No. 3, 5, and 7, Lovo-I. Photograph: Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, 2023.



funerary rights. Second, the tombs employ a unique representation technique. Stones attached to the tombs make them appear to rise from the ground, creating a vertical effect using stone blades. These stones are used to delimit the tombs' (yitumba) perimeter and mark the positions of bodies and the gender of the deceased relative to the cardinal points. Third, Lovo-I involved redefining and highlighting the forest's extraordinary spiritual character, considering its use as a hunting ground and agricultural station.



Figure 13: Detail from a traditional cemetery (Ziami) at Kimbanza village, Madimba. Photograph: Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, 2024.



Figure 14-18: Details showing damages from Lukingu-I and Lovo-IV located in Mbanza Kongo and Madimba municipalities. Photograph: Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, 2024.



During the excavation and cleaning of Lovo-I, many petroglyphs showed significant surface damage from erosion, flooding, and reckless burning of nearby plants for sugarcane and other crop cultivation. We can also note several examples of vandalism, such as incisions on the drawings with community members' names and the intensive partitioning of sections of the petroglyphs. This damage suggests a mixed relationship between the local communities and the site, leading to its neglect or damage due to many community members' lack of awareness of the existing engravings, their symbolic language, and their cultural significance. See Figures 15-20.

The research on the rock art sites of Tadi dia Lombo, Tadi dia Muingu, and Lovo (Nsenzele) holds immense significance for several reasons. It offers a unique opportunity to document and analyze the artistic expressions of the communities that created these remarkable works, providing valuable insights into their social, cultural, and spiritual practices. The rock art serves as a tangible link to the past, enabling us to comprehend the historical context and profound significance of these sites within the broader tapestry of Angolan and African heritage.

This research contributes significantly to the preservation and promotion of Angola's cultural heritage. By documenting and analyzing these rock art sites, we can raise awareness of their importance and advocate for their protection. This is particularly crucial in regions that have endured conflict and instability, where cultural heritage sites are often at risk of damage or destruction.

The interdisciplinary approach employed in this research, which combines art history, anthropology, and archaeology, allows for a comprehensive understanding of rock art and its significance. By incorporating local knowledge and oral histories, the analysis becomes enriched and inclusive of the perspectives of the communities that created and continue to cherish these sites.

This research has far-reaching implications for studying African art and cultural heritage. It challenges conventional narratives and highlights the

complexity and diversity of African artistic traditions. By exploring the connections between rock art, cultural identity, and historical memory, this research contributes to ongoing debates about the role of art in shaping and reflecting social and cultural identities.

In conclusion, the study of the rock art at Tadi dia Lombo, Tadi dia Muingu, and Lovo is essential for understanding these sites' cultural and historical significance. It contributes to the preservation and promotion of Angola's rich cultural heritage, providing valuable insights into the artistic and cultural practices of the past and enriching the broader field of African art and cultural studies.

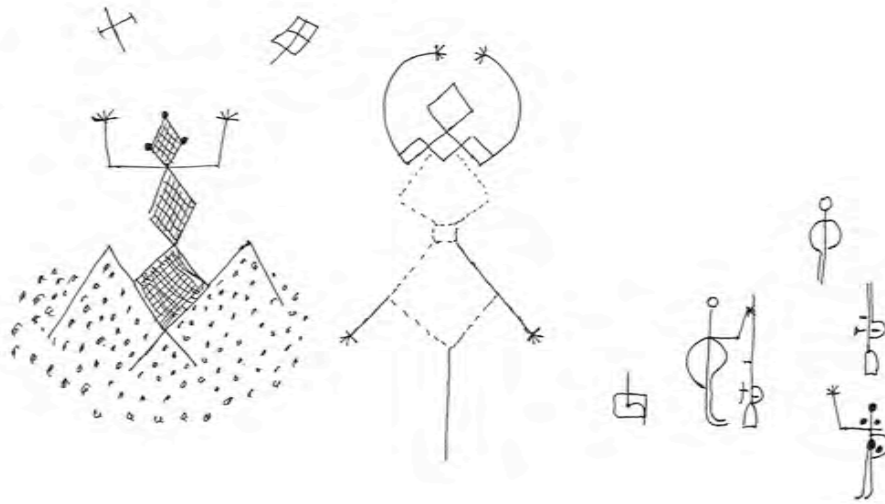
Appendix

Lovo-I

Detailed documentation or a report, including drawings in situ by Sousa Pedro Rodrigues and photographs by Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, will be available in 2025. These documents provide a comprehensive overview of nine stones with petroglyphs, captured during multiple visits to the site, with the most recent one in August 2024.

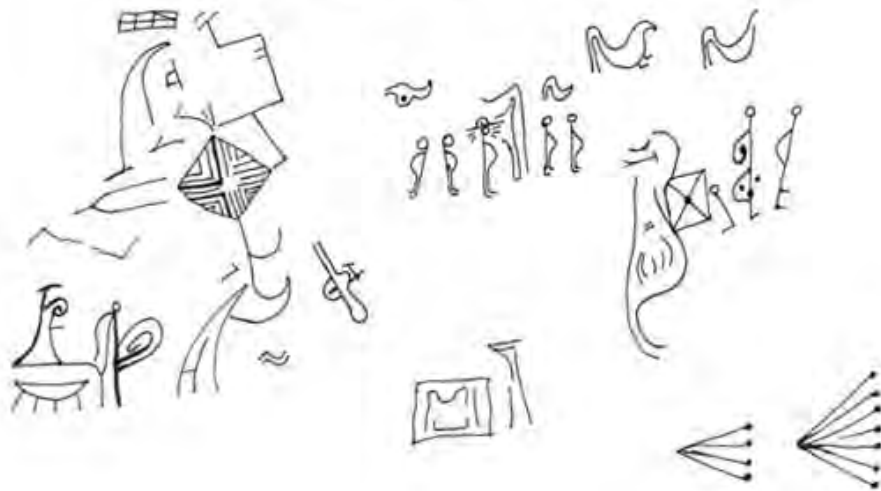
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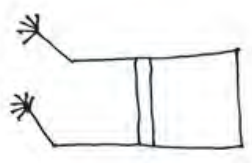
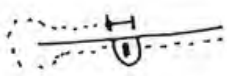
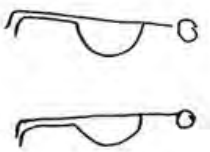
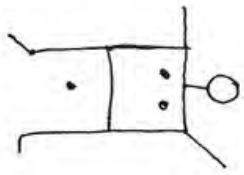
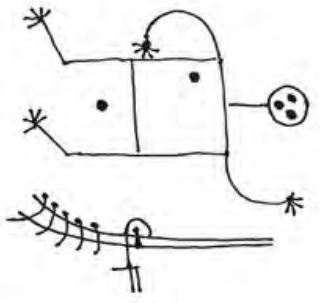
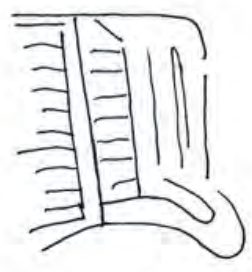


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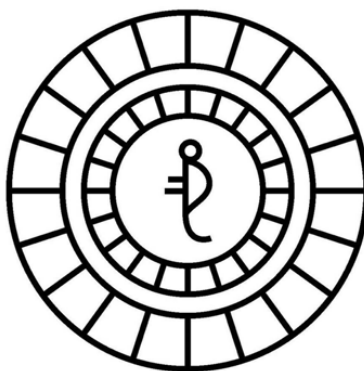












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