

New member of IFRAO

The **Horn Heritage Organisation (HH)**, based in Somaliland, has applied for affiliation with IFRAO in late 2011. Operating in the Horn of Africa, the HH is a non-governmental, non-profit local heritage organisation working for the protection of cultural heritage, including over seventy rock art sites in Somaliland. It wishes to participate internationally in the research, protection and preservation of rock art and the sharing of information and collaboration between institutions and scholarship. The Board of Directors of this charity comprises Dr Sada Mire (Chairperson), Ugaso Kahin Bulhan (Vice Chairperson), Maxamuud Sulub Hirsi (Treasurer), Abdilahi Hussein Iimaan (Member) and Cumar Jaamac Xaaji Cilmi (Member). Horn Heritage has been established to promote the heritage of the Horn of Africa in general and that of the Somali region in particular. Very little effort has been applied to preservation of Somali cultural heritage and archaeological remains in the last century or so. The limited efforts made to preserve Somali cultural heritage in the last five decades have ultimately failed. This is evident from the ways that Somali cultural heritage and archaeological research has been pursued in colonial and postcolonial times, prior to the commencement of the civil war.

A ballot of the members of IFRAO has admitted HH to the federation in late 2012. The web site of HH can be found at <http://www.somaliheritage.org/hornheritage.php>. The IFRAO Representative of HH is Dr Sada Mire, Executive Director, Horn Heritage Organisation, Edna Adan Hospital Road, Ahmed Dhagah Area, Hargeysa, Somaliland.

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2014 congress in China

Another ballot of the members of IFRAO has determined that the 2014 rock art congress in China will be a nominated IFRAO Congress. This event is to be held in Nanning, southern China, in November 2014. Details will be made available shortly.

The International Conference on Rock Art 2012, New Delhi, India: moving forward to a new vision of rock art

Gori Tumi Echevarría López

During 6 to 12 December 2012, the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, conducted the International Symposium of Rock Art called 'Understanding rock art in context'. The event took place in the institutional locations of the IGNCA and covered a series of activities that included five days of lectures, seven special readings of continental scope, two world exhibitions of rock art, ethnographic pictorial art demonstrations and other related activities, which ended with a field trip to an archaeological site with pictograms at Bundi, Rajasthan.

The conference was opened by the Vice-President of India, Mohammad Hamid Ansari, who highlighted the cultural and institutional importance of such an event, presenting the current position of the Indian government, institutionally represented by the IGNCA, towards rock art studies. The realisation of the conference and the presence of world researchers, therefore, was a way of support, in an atmosphere of international consensus, for a more comprehensive vision of India towards this material; a vision that apparently does not depend on the state of Indian rock art studies.

This fact is in itself a major advance in the consideration of an object of much social significance, and can serve as an example for other countries where the appreciation of rock art is null or mediocre. The value of a cultural object should not depend on our level of knowledge of the same object, but is in the realisation of its historical importance. The *status quo* of rock art research in countries such as Peru, where it only just commences in a scientific manner, really shows how far we are in the understanding of our own past, and in the apprehension of this process.

In view of the above I want to comment on two aspects that I believe are still crucial for distinguishing part of the changes that can affect, globally, the quality of rock art research in the coming years. The first is the continuing survival of ethnocentrism, and the next, in part derived from the first, is the continuity of the interpretive priority in these studies.

Formally I consider that ethnocentrism is clearly the worst ideological stance to take in any humanist or scientific study. It involves the conditional valuation of any object or behaviour according to particular social standards that are deemed hierarchically positive by whoever holds them. This generates an asymmetric negative impression against

those objects or behaviours that do not correspond with this parameter. The ethnocentric premise implies, therefore, a reduced conception (psychologically uniform) of all human activities to similar behavioural ideological patterns. This consideration, from the top down, causes us to believe that we can understand any evidence of human behaviour (such as rock art), regardless of the knowledge about the temporary, social or behavioural contexts that generated such behaviour.

Although we may think that our perception is not subject to ethnocentric parameters, generally it is to the point that we cannot rationally abstract our vision of the world from the world vision of others; and given that it is an act whose ideology is socially determined, one is not always aware how much influence this cognitive action exerts when trying to understand a social world to which one does not belong. Ethnocentric bias can, therefore, be more than an ideological lock: a source for a negative attitude, or the origin of a negligent distinction, especially when underlying differences derived from different levels of social organisation (for example nomadic chiefdoms from sedentary state-society) are implied.

In rock art research the ethnocentrism is manifested in diverse ways, as for example the disrespect to the intellectual capacity of the native or local researchers in respect of their own archaeological or historical materials, especially by denying them intellectual validity. This obviously derives from the false conception that a particular specific education is the only one able to answer the challenges of research into the human past.

Another ethnocentric perspective, as I have already mentioned, considers that it is possible to understand or value the rock art simply on the basis of an individual self-perception. This posture is pretentious, in that it considers mankind from one's own conception of humanity; which clearly cannot be the same for all humans. Ethnocentrism not only judges the significance of rock art, but especially the value of rock art in self-centred considerations — for example through aesthetics.

In the sessions of the IGNA symposium I had the opportunity of witnessing this ethnocentric behaviour when, concerning the question for the need to preserve the rock art of the world, one of the attendees said he would only preserve this evidence because he regards it as 'beautiful'. This revelation (very disturbing for me) made me see that we are not yet free from judging the graphic expressions of the peoples of the world with particular culturally conditioned visions, in this case with the eyes of the European renaissance aesthetics.

I should mention, to clarify my position, that the ethnocentric parameters of European aesthetics, culturally conditioned by religious dogma, almost destroyed all the Peruvian native cultural expression because it looked ugly, horrible and pagan to it. The chroniclers of the Peruvian conquest, but especially the *extirpadores de idolatrias* (idolatriy killers) such as the infamous Francisco de Ávila or Pablo José de Arriaga, have left, with almost luxurious details, reliable testimonies of how they destroyed the temples of our gods and goddesses, such as Pachacamac, Wiracocha, Wallallo, Pariaqaqa, Chaupi Ñamca, among others, including their relics and the unique works of native 'art' that accompanied them, using European aesthetic arguments. The surviving Peruvian art was buried, hidden, or had to be exceptionally appealing to Spanish aesthetic perception.

It is important to ponder from this that, regardless of our personal aesthetic insight, susceptibility or sensitivity, we cannot, under any circumstances present our sensations as official arguments to justify the need or otherwise to save a cultural patrimony of humanity. If this is not a serious ethnocentric prejudice, what is?

But that is not all; beyond pure ethnocentric aesthetics, the renaissance concept of 'art' is so all-pervasive in our subconscious that its use has involved, for hundreds of years, so many false premises that we could feel overwhelmed to see how we have conditioned or falsified the vision of our native graphic expressions. It is worth mentioning, for example, the false premise of the contemporaneity of the motifs on a single support, the false premise of graphical integrity (complete survival of evidence) or the false premise of interpretive priority; and also the derivative problems of iconocentrism, the classification by merit (technical or formal qualities), or the culturalist typologies. None of them are directly applicable, for example, to the indigenous graphic expression of Peruvian rock art.

This perspective can probably explain in part the Indian attitude towards rock art where there is, apparently, a domain for the formal or ethnographic interpretative approach, that obviously comes with false premises and a dependency on a formalist classification and typology, which in most cases relegate from the analysis everything that cannot be quickly 'interpreted', based on their formal similarity with some existing object. This is one of the reasons why we usually observe graphics with motifs of 'recognisable' objects or 'associations' of these motifs, which facilitate the interpretative function. The lack of an argument about the time and the synchronism, beyond the spatial association (which is not an argument but a fact), indicates that the contemporaneity was assumed as an intrinsic condition — the fundamental premise — of rock art in many expositions.

Nevertheless, the New Delhi conference has also shown that the interpretative perspective is being strongly challenged by the chronological approach, which I think is of capital importance in modern rock art research; especially in countries like Peru where the belief in the 'impossibility' of dating these remains had facilitated a prevailing interpretative premise for more than one hundred years. We are confident that to pursue chronology, using scientific resources and logical arguments, will affect the interpretative orientation, relegating it completely. First, because it will necessarily mean the annulment of all the premises that control rock art perception, as the contemporaneousness of the motifs, or the validity of the 'association' in the justification of these premises. And

second, because this approach will put in evidence that most of the interpretations of rock art have been made following ethnocentric ideas of the world.

I must admit that what I am saying is not just a critical opinion about some aspects of the New Delhi conference, but also a self-reflection. The modern mythology of Peruvian rock art has been so conditioned by Eurocentric precepts since the sixteenth century that I could not have the arrogance to say that I think or see the world as my ancestors did. As a survivor of the destruction caused by Spain in Peru I have to rebuild with patience the original vision of the world in which my civilisation was formed; we have many surviving elements for that, but above all the ideological force of our thousands-years-old history, our gods and our ancestors.

The New Delhi International Conference on Rock Art has been a remarkable opportunity to glimpse some problems of rock art and the vision of the changes in its future research, but has also been the opportunity to clearly perceive that it is possible to embrace a pan-human stand, which holds the need to preserve the valuable testimony of humanity's conception of the world, which depends not on our current knowledge of this evidence; with respect for all societies and native peoples, and without any prejudice or disregard. And India can be a brilliant example of this.

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