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Source: *The South African Archaeological Bulletin*, Vol. 13, No. 50 (Jun., 1958), pp. 75-77

Published by: South African Archaeological Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3886904>

Accessed: 30-11-2025 20:25 UTC

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VENERATED ROCK GONGS AND THE PRESENCE OF ROCK SLIDES IN SOUTHERN RHODESIA

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Historical Monuments Commission of Southern Rhodesia

When I first read about the occurrence of rock gongs in Nigeria¹ I had the fleeting thought that in Southern Rhodesia there are many ringing rocks in our granite areas, but, so far as I then knew, there was no evidence to connect any of them with traditional use as drums or gongs. When rock slides were added to the picture² I again thought of our granite hills, where the practice of sliding down smooth rock slopes is universal among young Africans, and perhaps among young Europeans. Since then a certain amount of evidence has turned up which points to a supernatural significance being attributed to certain rocks which possess resonant properties. In view of Professor Goodwin's recent paper³ mentioning that rock gongs have been reported from Southern Rhodesia, the following notes may be of interest:

The Nyamandhlovu Gong

My first intimation that such phenomena existed was an article published in *Nada* by Mbunjwa, son of Chief Tategulu.⁴ Mbunjwa describes a granite slab known as *Ilitshelendaba*⁵ in the Nyamandhlovu district, some 30 miles (48 km.) west of Bulawayo. Formerly all travellers used to visit this rock which is near an old track, and strike it with a stone in two places. The first place produced a high metallic note, the second a deep sound like a drum. The latter was said to be the answer of the spirit, according to the clearness of the sound so would the journey be fortunate or otherwise. A coloured man destroyed

one-half of the slab by making a big fire against it; strangely enough this man died shortly afterwards. Since the fire only the high note can be heard, but even now people still visit the stone and place small offerings, such as cloth, beads, money or twigs on one end of it. I recently visited the spot and saw these offerings. My guide and I added our quota. The slab is like any other chance piece of granite, it lies on its side on the ground, and is about 4 ft. (120 cm.) in



FIG. 2.

Rock gong within a few miles of Khami Ruins. The African is striking the gong.



FIG. 1.

Painted rock close to rock gong, few miles from Khami Ruins. Faded red.

length. When examined carefully it is clear that one edge has received considerable battering. Two oval hammerstones of dolerite lay on the surface of the slab. I was able to obtain a rather poor metallic note rather like that produced by a blacksmith on an anvil. In fact the resemblance of this stone to the kind of anvil used by old Bantu smiths was striking, particularly as the surface of the slab showed signs of use, possibly the result of impact.

A Second Gong

Before visiting the stone just described, but after reading about it, I received information from an old man named Zana (one of Chief Tategulu's people who had lived in youth not far from the Khami Ruins), that there was a rock which gave out a sound like a bell within a few miles of the ruins. I immediately asked to be lead to the place. The old man, who claimed to have been born before the death of Mzilikazi, was of fine physique and quite capable of

walking the several miles necessary after abandoning our vehicle. We walked through flat, thinly bushed country with a few small rocky hills dotted here and there, eventually arriving at a group of jumbled granite slabs of considerable size. These formed the walls and roof of a rough shelter. On a large boulder flanking the entrance were a number of paintings in red (fig. 1). One elongated slab was supported at an angle of about 40°, its upper extremity upholding one of the rocks on the summit (fig. 2). By climbing on to the lower rocks it was possible to note signs of impact on the end of this slab. When tapped with a geological hammer a note like that of a church bell was produced. Nearly as good a result was obtained by using a stone. Some variation in tone was possible, depending on where one struck. In the photograph an African is shown striking the end of the slab. It was also noticeable that the rock upon which he is standing was battered in one place on the edge, but this stone will not ring when struck. No offerings were to be seen, but, as the place has been on European land for a long period, this is not surprising. According to Zana this place was also visited by travellers. The two sites are approximately 20 miles (32 km.) apart, the first described being on the western bank of the Gwaai River, while the other is on the direct line towards Bulawayo.

So far as I have been able to discover, no other occurrences of the kind are known in the area. In both instances the spirit invoked is the same, i.e. the Mlimo, the old raingod of the Makalanga.

Rock Slide

In the Chibi district last year I came across a rock slide still in use, on Chamakwangwadza hill near the Lundi River. This is within a few yards of a cave containing exfoliated slabs of granite covered with hundreds of small hollows, mainly confined to near the edges. The latter *may* have been caused by

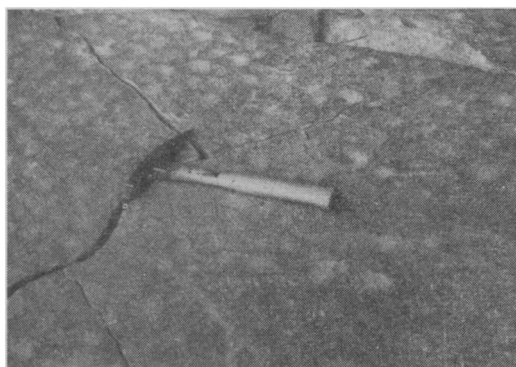


FIG. 3.

Pitted exfoliated slab in the cave, Chamakwangwadza hill, near the Lundi River, Chibi.

tapping the slabs as drums. If so, this was certainly very long ago, as the hollows are glazed over with a thick patina. The slabs at present do not ring, but some produce a metallic clang. Some are broken (fig. 3) and are therefore mute. There is no evidence to connect these pitted slabs with the rock slides. Paintings almost certainly existed within the cave at one time, but the cave walls show signs of considerable exfoliation, probably due to fires which have burned in the cave. There was clear evidence that the cave has been occupied by Later Stone Age people, people belonging to the Rhodesian Iron Age A complex,



FIG. 4.

Rock slide, Chamakwangwadza hill, near the Lundi River, Chibi.

and recent Bantu. The rock slide is one of the steepest and longest I have seen. The photograph (fig. 4) does not do it justice. It leads from the hill summit to near its foot. On the summit there are the remains of an old kraal which, on the evidence of the pottery and glass beads, is certainly of some antiquity. This slide is still being used by local youths, probably when herding cattle. They get some of the branches from the *munanzwa* bush (*Pozolzia hypoleuca*). These are soft, fibrous and slimy, and act as a lubricant between the posterior of the youth and the granite. This basic method is usual but the type of bush employed varies with the locality.

I was told by Matururi, son of Mazorodzi (the latter skinned alive by the impis of Mzilikazi) who is a tribal historian of the Vamari tribe (Chibi's people), that he had seen many places where sliding had taken place long ago by people unknown to him. He said that formerly grown-up people took part in the practice, but he knew of no ceremonial or ritual significance attached to sliding, he regarded it as play only.

This same man also stated that people used to play on rocks as they would a drum. As Chibi's people seem to have arrived in their present home from Mtoko during the first few decades of the last century,

the people referred to as unknown were, perhaps, Makaranga driven out by Chibi.

The evidence from Chibi is, therefore, at present inconclusive, but, taken in conjunction with the two proved examples of rock gongs from the Khami-Nyamandhlovu area, it is distinctly suggestive. Whether or not rock slides are in any way connected with rock gongs or drums in our territory is a question which may be difficult if not impossible to answer in these days of rapid change, but is worth looking into.

On reading over Bernard Fagg's first paper¹ I note that he remarks on a possible connection between rock gongs and the introduction of iron working. I have previously mentioned that the slab near the Gwaai River reminded me of a stone anvil. It is worth adding that I was informed that fowls were sometimes sacrificed on this slab, but this is no longer done

Other Examples

In Mashonaland there is also definite evidence of the existence of ringing rocks, although, so far as I am aware, no evidence of traditional use has been obtained as yet. My colleague, Mr. Anthony Witty, has reported an example from the Chinamora Reserve which shows clear signs of impact, moreover the name, Ngomakarira,⁶ is confirmatory. In the finely painted cave known as Makumbi in the same district, there is a place where the acoustics produce an echoing effect. The floor of the cave at this point is exfoliated, and a loud musical drumming can be produced by tapping on the floor. There is evidence that such drumming has taken place more than once, but it is not certain whether this may not be entirely due to the activities of local African youths who admit to this practice.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Fagg, B. E. B. 1956. 'The Discovery of Multiple Rock Gongs in Nigeria.' *Man*, vol. LVI, art. 23.
- ² Fagg, B. E. B. 1957. 'Rock Gongs and Rock Slides.' *Man*, vol. LVII, art. 32.
- ³ Goodwin, A. J. H. 1957. 'Rock Gongs, Chutes, Paintings and Fertility.' *S. Af. Arch. Bull.*, vol. XII, no. 45.
- ⁴ Mbunjwa. 1956. 'Ilitshelendaba.' *Nada*, no. 33, Salisbury.
- ⁵ *Ilitshelendaba*, literally, the Rock of Discussion.
- ⁶ Ngomokarira: *ngoma* is a drum, *rira* is to sound or to sing. The *-ka-* is obscure, possibly an Anglicization of a verbal tense infix. (Ed.)

REVIEWS

Heyerdahl, Thor. *Aku-Aku: the Secret of Easter Island*. Allen & Unwin, London, 1958. 21s.

Set with a foreground of Heyerdahl, a middle-distance of Easter Island images, and a vague background of archaeologists condemned to almost nameless hard labour, this is a really interesting book. Neither good archaeology nor good popular science, it is still good Heyerdahl. Much that he has given us here was known before; the methods of transporting and erecting the figures have never been in doubt except to mystery-mongers; they recur again and again from Stonehenge to Japan.

The existence of so many fantastic figurines kept immured in secret caves and the curiously contrasting stone statues with attenuated figures do appear to be new. The rock-carvings of Orongo, the south-western point of Easter Island, were described by Lavachery of Brussels in 1934, and much else is 'old news'. The truly striking sketch made by Hodges in 1774, on Cook's second voyage, would have made clear what is verbally retold here over a number of pages. The important Franco-Belgian expedition of 1934-5 under Lavachery and Métraux published their findings from 1935 to 1957, the final English translation appearing in New York in 1957, following French and Mexican editions. Métraux gives a fairly conclusive explanation of the Easter Island writing as a system of mnemonics, reminding a bard of the consecutive verses of traditional songs, but having no true verbal or phonetic meaning.

However, in spite of the vagueness regarding extensive excavations and forest clearing on other

islands, this is an exciting and worthwhile book, published at a low price and garishly illustrated with 40 plates in colour-photography. A.J.H.G.

De Lact, Sigfried, J. *Archaeology and its Problems*. Phoenix, London, 1957. 21s.

This excellent book on archaeological method has now been translated into English by Ruth Daniel, while a foreword has been added by Glyn Daniel. The whole is divided into six sections: I—The ground and its record; II—Archaeological reconnaissance; III—Archaeological excavation; IV—Problems of dating; V and VI—Problems of interpretation—limitations and possibilities.

The whole provides a most useful compendium on field research and deduction, a book essential to every responsible amateur and to reference libraries. The only slight drawback is the use of a small type, but it is clear and has helped to reduce the cost of a most useful and handy book.

DISTRIBUTION MAPS

SAMAB (organ of the South African Museums Association), Vol. 6, 1957, nos. 12 and 13, contains two important articles on the mapping of prehistoric sites. The one, by Dr. G. J. Fock, gives transparencies showing the known distributions of Earlier, Middle and Later Stone Age sites and painted or engraved sites in South West Africa. The other is by Dr. J. Desmond Clark on some of the principles involved, stressing the importance of such a study covering southern Africa and urging that action be initiated.