



Rituals and sacred places of the Sandawe people (Kondoa region, Tanzania) in the past and the present

Maciej Grzelczyk

Institute for the Study of Religions, Jagiellonian University,
Kraków, Poland
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań
email: maciej_100@interia.eu

Summary - Research of Sandawe and their still practiced rituals give the opportunity to try to dig into the past by using the present. For example, *simbo* ritual is one of the most important elements of ritual life of the described population, which has a correlation with the ritual of South Africa. While *iyari* gives the opportunity to look at the religious world of Sandawe for metaphors and hidden meanings. In turn, the positions of the rock art are the example of understanding of the space as a sacred place, due to the fact of their “appointing” by the ancestors. All these aspects reflect the importance of the exploration of religion and culture of Sandawe population, which is one of the few examples that might be defined as “truly living archeology”.

Keywords: anthropology / rituals / sacred places / Sandawe / Tanzania

Riassunto - Lo studio della cultura e dei rituali Sandawe offre la rara possibilità di approcciare il passato attraverso il presente. Ad esempio, il rituale detto “*simbo*” segna un momento fondamentale nella vita di questa popolazione e ha relazioni con altri rituali del Sud Africa. Mentre “*iyari*” offre l’opportunità di guardare al mondo religioso di Sandawe per metafore e significati nascosti. Anche la distribuzione dell’arte rupestre è un esempio di determinazione dello spazio come luogo sacro, in ragione della determinazione di tale sacralità da parte degli antenati. Tutti questi aspetti riflettono l’importanza della esplorazione della religione e della cultura Sandawe, uno dei pochi popoli che potrebbero essere definiti “archeologia vivente”.

Parole chiave: antropologia / rituali / luoghi sacri / Sandawe / Tanzania.

INTRODUCTION

The main aspect of this article is Sandawe population of the central part of Tanzania. They live now on the area called Usandawe, which stretches from the village of Kwa Mtoro to Farkwa and Sanzawa, and their current population is estimated at several thousand. But let’s go back about 35,000-55,000 years. Then there was the genetic separation of the hunter-gatherers populations living in central Tanzania. Some of them emigrated to South Africa, while the remaining part, was separated from one another about 14,000 years ago, thus creating two groups: Hadza (population focusing around Lake Eyasi, approx. 1,500 people) and Sandawe (Tishkoff *et al.* 2007). In addition to the genetic connection between the Sandawe and Khoisan peoples of the southern part of the continent, there are also language similarities that manifest themselves in these populations’ use of languages belonging to the groups of click languages (Steetman 2012: 4).

Another possible connection are the cultural and religious similarities. This is an element that cannot be confirmed by genetic or linguistic testing, and for its evaluation interdisciplinary dimension of work is necessary. We can try to do this by means of archaeological, religious and ethnological research. All these studies allow to get the most complete picture of Sandawe and their correlation with the South African Bushmen. The most important element of this research,



which allows to look at past beliefs of Sandawe, is rock art created in the past by the population. Thanks to the study, we can look at the considered topic from the perspective of archeology and at the same time ethnology and ethnology of religion, because many of the rock shelters with paintings are still used in traditional ceremonies, and an analysis of some of the rituals can be used in the interpretation of images left on the walls of the shelters. We can also refer interpretation models developed in relation to bushmen art and religion to paintings of Sandawe. For example, the ritual of *simbó*, is similar to a n/um ritual of taking power, practiced by people from South Africa. The subject of *simbó* will be further described later in the text.

DEFINITIONS

A “sacred place” in this article should be understood as a place, that due to its characteristics or purpose, plays an important role in the religious life of the Sandawe population. In the case of the people (as well as other tribal cultures) we cannot distinguish a clear distinction between the world of the sacred and the profane. These are two mutually interlocking parts, between which a boundary appears more or less obviously, depending on the situation (e.g. The type of ritual or ceremony). Determination of the place, behavior, objects or other elements of the culture as sacred, does not exclude the possibility of perceiving them as profane and vice versa. Another important element needing clarification for the purpose of this text is the concept of ritual. I decide a description of “ritual” made by Anthony Wallace will be enough, who claimed that „the ritual is religion in action; it is the cutting edge of the tool” (Wallace 1966: 102). This definition determines, in turn, an attempt to clarify the “religion”, by which I mean “named in a general sense relationship between a person and superhuman power, in which he believes and from which he feels dependent” (Tiele 2013: 99).

AN OUTLINE OF THE ISSUES OF PAINTINGS OF KONDOA

The oldest examples of rock art of Kondoa are connected with gathering-hunting communities, and Sandawe were one of these groups. They created the red paintings, in which the main subjects were animals and human figures. Determination of the beginning of the creation of paintings is difficult to define. One of the archaeological evidences suggesting the oldest possible age is the treated sample of ochre from the position Kisese II, which dates back to 27,000 years (Inskeep 1962).

The Kondoa rock art was not created exclusively by Sandawe. These paintings were also created by the Bantu population, to which the so-called white painting is attributed (characterized by geometric signs), common on the Kandaga position. They were archeologically studied by Fidelis Masao and on the basis of taken samples and subjected to the C14 dating, it was concluded that the paintings were created not later than 200 years ago (Masao 1976: 47).

On the walls of rock shelters of Kondoa there were also created black paintings. They are connected with afar and nilotic people, and their main theme is portrayed in a characteristic way images of cattle. The last example of the creation of rock art in the area Kondoa, was documented by Eric This Raa in 1960, who witnessed the creation of paintings by a member of the Sandawe population (Ten Raa 1971: 44)

ROCK SHELTERS AND RITUALS

Rock Shelters are strongly semantically marked in faith and culture of the local population. Sandawe have eight basic myths, which explain the origin of the world and man. All of them have a repeating relationship, namely the existence of the rock shelter (or alternatively the baobab tree) as a symbol of the womb from which life has emerged. From them *Barase*, who is the greatest of the gods, brought out the woman, the man and all animals (Ten Raa 2010: 313-347).

The hills of the Usandawe are full of shelters without paintings, and in most places with rock art there exists superimposition, or overlapping layers of paintings. Why did not their creators select shelters, where it would be “easier” to do the images, just put them on the already existing? The paintings which Sandawe met in shelters were associated with the ancestors, and thus the validity of the site was maintained. This finding is justified also by talks I have with local residents, as well as by the research undertaken by Bagshawe and Ten Raa. Interviewees claimed that each of the clans which consists of several families, considered one of rock shelters as particularly important and goes there to celebrate, among others, ritual invoking the rain.

For current Sandawe, in most observed cases, the “sanctity” of the place with rock art is manifested by the fact that the paintings clearly are associated with the ancestors, which in turn determines the importance of a rock shelter and at the same time makes it necessary to treat them with due reverence and maintain appropriate standards. To go to the shelter with rock art, it is necessary to bring a local sage. This person is respected by the local community, is considered to be an expert in history, and guide in matters of belief and health. The “Sage” several tens of meters in front of the shelter, alone enters it to perform the ritual, in which he pours rock surface with water, thus giving a drink to ancestors and says the appropriate formulas, asking them to allow coming people to see the paintings. The local community believes that without paying a request to the ancestors, the paintings can be invisible to the naked eye or in pictures. Only after the celebration of the ritual, visitors to the position are allowed to see the paintings.

The ritual practiced in the Kolo position is worth a mention. It is carried out with the paintings, which are considered to be made by the population of hunter-gatherers-Sandawe. The area around the position is now inhabited by other peoples who adapted some rock shelters with rock art to perform their rituals and permanently introduced them into their own rites. The ritual performed in the front of Kolo paintings is associated with healing and communication with the ancestors. In the course of the ritual a black sheep, goat or chicken is slaughtered and the rock is poured with water and beer, prepared a few days before the ritual (Bwasiri 2008: 50-51). This example forces us to reflect on the protection of rock art and respect of religious rites performed by the local community. To achieve the most optimal solutions one should undertake discussions with the inhabitants of the surrounding villages. The researchers, in collaboration with representatives of the state authorities should act as a partner, not as a person ordering and prohibiting certain behaviors. Both Sandawe and Warangi have every right to express their faith in the form of practicing the rituals. To paraphrase the definition of ritual by Wallace mentioned at the beginning, one may ask: what is the use of a tool that cannot be used for cutting? So, in order to “benefit” from their religion, Sandawe or Warangi must be able to perform rituals. Consensus can be achieved by explaining the local people importance of maintaining certain precautions and their connectivity with the “signs of ancestors.” Based on my own experience I can say that the local community of Sandawe is open to any suggestions concerning the protection of paintings and apply them with understanding.

RITUALS OF CURRENT SANDAWE AND THEIR CONNECTION WITH THE PAST

Another example is one of the most important elements of ritual life of Sandawe. I refer to *simbó* ritual. Its name derives from the word *simba*, which means lion in Swahili. Although the language has appeared in central Tanzania in recent centuries, it is likely that the origins of that ritual should be searched much earlier, and its present name is caused by linking it with the “lion”, by the newcomers who speak a new language. Features of *simbó* have a number of similarities to the n / um ritual of taking power, practiced by the population of the Bushmen of South Africa. It might cause one of the arguments in favor of cultural-religious similarities between the Sandawe and the Khoisan peoples, whose representatives in the n / um power ritual



entered the states of trance and then “were changed into lions” (Lewis-Williams 1971: 101). According to my conversations Sandawe do not associate now *simbó* with lions, but this does not exclude the functioning of such correlation in the past, when these animals have occurred in Usandawe. Bagshawe in an article in 1923, wrote that among Sandawe there are those, who have the power of a lion, and it may change into it (Bagshawe 1925: 329). One of the scenes from the position of Kolo was interpreted by a representative of Sandawe as a representation of the described ritual.

Simbó does not have specific dates of the performance and it is performed when the “need arises”, a local shaman-sage deems it necessary to perform *simbó*. This can also be caused by the deterioration of the health of a person suffering from *simbó*. *Simbó* in nature is in fact polisemantic and in addition to defining the ritual, it refers to the name of the dance, the disease and the spirit of which can manifest good or evil powers. Some of Sandawe describe *simbó* as a kind of disease passed on from father to son, which causes, among others, that “the patient may sit in the fire, but does not feel any pain”. Participants often paint charcoal lines under the eyes, which is to protect them from the evil spirit. Both men and women can participate in this ritual (except from those in the visible pregnancy and during menstrual bleeding). Due to the fact that part of the Sandawe are Muslims, the ritual is not performed during Ramadan.

About two weeks before the scheduled performance of *simbó*, preparation begins. During this time, choya is prepared, alcohol based on honey and hibiscus leaves, which is consumed during the rite described. On *simbó* day, participants come to the shaman hut, and consume choya. In the past, méraa may have been added to it - plant with hallucinogenic properties. Van de Kimmenade described that women sprinkle the participants of the ritual with beer using twigs of *méraa* (van de Kimmenade 1936: 413). Cottage is inhabited only by a shaman, and there are hide there, under the skin of a goat, the stones symbolizing the ancestors (*kisango*). They are dug during the dance, which takes place in a place called *matongo*. The participants after a visit to the cottage go to this place, where intoxicated with choya, they contact with the ancestors, and only if they manage to dig up stones it can be concluded that *simbó* should be terminated. Once the stones disappear from goat skin, this is a signal that you preparations for the next *simbó* should be made.

Iyari is also still practiced ritual, and analysis of its symbolism allows for an attempt to decode the rock paintings. It is related to the birth of the twins and invoking the rain. Research conducted by Imogene Lim revealed its close correlation with nature and the power of its impact (Lim 2010). Residents of the Usandawe area during interviews with local people conducted by the researcher mentioned above, often described *iyari* as a rite protecting the twins and their parents against lightning (Lim 2010: 104). This correlation is linked to the understanding of atmospheric phenomena, which is the lightning and the possibility of separation of the birth of twins, which is unique compared to normal birth of one child. In *iyari* we can also find the symbolism of the womb, which in this case is the house of twins, which begins the ritual. After completion of rituals in the home, the ritual is transferred to the *leba* tree, which is assigned to each of the children born, there also a dance takes place. After its completion Bambara nuts are put on earth, and they are then gather by women using only their mouths. Under this tree also occurs burning of the bearing mother of twins after the birth. During the ritual a goat is killed there and its entrails are smeared on a *leba* tree (Lim 2010:108). I mentioned also that described ritual is associated with invoking of the rain. This is due to the fact that lightning in the culture Sandawe stand in opposition to the rain, without which the land is not able to produce crops. So, *iyari* is about protecting both the twins and their parents, as well as the ground against the lack of crops, which symbolize fertility.

The analysis of colors used in *iyari*, can be also translated into symbols of rock art. In many parts of the ritual we find the use of the black color. It is associated with rain clouds. The killed sheep, costumes of participants, as well as soot, which marks the twins and their parents are black. The red color is a symbol of fertility, by associating it with menstrual blood and the blood of the mother, and it is associated with rain and rainbows. White, in turn, is a symbol of milk and male sperm, also associated with fertility and we see it among others, in the form of millet slung during the procession to the leba tree (Lim 2010: 110-111). White color is the symbol of the pure heaven that will not bring the rain, so that when the rains are too strong and destroy crops, a white animal is slaughtered (Ten Raa 1969: 28). All these colors (black, white, red) are also visible on wooden plates symbolizing the twins, which are used in *iyari*. So we see that the use of colors in the above described ritual is not accidental, and each of them has a hidden meaning that we can bring to the sphere of fertility. Thus, we have the ability to extrapolate these findings to the importance of colors used to perform rock paintings, which, as previously mentioned, were created in rock shelters, perceived as a symbol of the womb. These arrangements should apply to positions, that today are associated with the ritual of invoking the rain and the paintings visible there are also connected with it.

CONCLUSION

The art which is the subject of this text still hides many secrets, that with the passage of time one will be able to unravel. One has to take all necessary steps to preserve these rock paintings, as well as focus on preservation and documentation of the culture of the Sandawe population.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The article is the part of the project founded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education in Poland (grant No 0123/DIA/2014/43).

Bibliography

- BAGSHAWE, F. (1925). The Peoples of the Happy Valley (East Africa): The Aboriginal Races of Kondoia Irangi. Part III (Continued). In *Journal of the Royal African Society* 24 (96): 328-347.
- INSKEEP, Ray (1962). The age of the Kondoia rock paintings in the light of recent excavations at Kisele II rock shelter, In *Musee Royale de l'Afrique Centrale Annales Serie*, Tervuren 40: 249-256.
- LEWIS-WILLIAMS, David (1987). Beyond Style and Portrait: A Comparison of Tanzanian and Southern African Rock Art. In VOSEN, R.; KEUTHMANN, K. (eds), *Contemporary Studies on Khoisan* 2, Hamburg, Helmut Buske Verlag.
- LIM, Imogene (2010). Archaeology, ethnography and rock art: a modern-day study from Tanzania. In BLUNDELL G.; CHIPPINDALE C.; SMITH B. (eds), *Seeing and Knowing: Understanding Rock Art With and Without Ethnography*, Johannesburg, Wits University Press: 99-115.
- MASAO, Fidelis (1976). *The Later Stone Age and the Rock Paintings of Central Tanzania*, PhD Thesis, University of Dar es Saalam.
- STEEMAN, Sander (2012). *A grammar of Sandawe. A Khoisan language of Tanzania*, Phd Thesis, Leiden University.
- TEN RAA, Eric (1971). Dead Art and Living Society: A Study of Rockpaintings in a Social Context. In *Mankind* 8: 42-58.
- TEN RAA, Eric (2001). The Genealogical Method in the Analysis of Myth, and a Structural Model. In BEIDELMAN T., *General and Theoretical: The Translation of Culture: Essays to E. E. Evans-Pritchard*, Routledge London: 313-347.



- TEN RAA, Eric (1969). The Moon as a Symbol of Life and Fertility in Sandawe Thought. In *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 39: 24-53.
- TIELE, Cornelis; SÖDERBLOM, Nathan (1931). *Kompendium der Religionsgeschichte*, Berlin.
- TISHKOFF, Sarah; GONDER, Mary *et al.* (2007). History of Click-Speaking Populations of Africa Inferred from mtDNA and Y Chromosome Genetic Variation. In *Molecular Biology and Evolution* 24 (10): 2180-2195.
- VAN DE KIMMENADE, Martin (1936). Les Sandawe (Territoire du Tanganyika, Afrique). In *Anthropos* 31: 395-416.
- WALLACE, Anthony (1966). *Religion: An Anthropological View*. New York, Random House.