

BOTSWANA

Response to “World’s Oldest Ritual Site? The ‘Python Cave’ at Tsodilo Hills World Heritage Site, Botswana” by Lawrence H. Robbins, Alec C. Campbell, George A. Brook and Michael L. Murphy

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It has only just been brought to my attention that in the June 2007 issue of *Nyame Akuma* Robbins, Campbell, Brook and Murphy published a 5-page paper in which they express their criticism of alleged “Internet news released by Coulson” (Robbins et al. 2007:3). As I was not informed of this article and given the opportunity to respond at the time, I feel obliged to take this occasion to resolve a matter I thought had been laid to rest before the article appeared.

In their article I am accused of failing to offer linkage to data or bridging arguments, presenting weak or non-existent interpretations, neglecting to properly acknowledge previous publications, incorrectly using ethnographic analogy and basically misleading the reader (Robbins et al. 2007:2-3). If any of this material had actually been written by me, I would, of course, have entertained these considerable criticisms. However, the material criticized appears in media notorious for the inaccuracy and incompleteness of their reporting, and over which I have no control, making it a remarkable basis for this article.

Worse, the two lead authors were fully aware of the shortcomings of the media reports. Three months before their article was published, I corresponded by email with Robbins and Campbell to tell them why the Internet was awash in articles with sensationalist headlines that no archaeologist would have penned, because the fact of the matter was just that – no archaeologist had written those articles. The unreliability of the media reports was clearly stated to Robbins in the course of this correspondence.

As I explained to Robbins and Campbell in March 2007, it was an established tradition that, at the end of each field season, the University of Botswana/Tromsø Collaborative Programme for San Research hosted an open day where the archaeologists presented their latest results. The 2006 presentation was grander than usual as it marked the final season of this long-term program. The Botswana press covered the event, which focused on the ongoing analysis of the lithics from Rhino Cave, the latest finds from the 2006 test excavation and, particularly, on the night time experiment, where we documented the effects of firelight on the carved wall in the cave. To put the new results in context it was necessary to briefly outline earlier research but the event was firmly focused on ‘What is new in 2006’.

When I returned to my home institution, the University of Oslo, I was requested to give a similar open lecture, which was covered by a journalist from the Norwegian Research Council. His article contained the usual sound bites gleaned from a talk that covered the full history of use of the cave: this included recent usage, as well as evidence from the contents of the Later and Middle Stone Age deposits. Aspects of modern San mythology, the painted panel and the carved wall were all mentioned within the context of our recent findings. The journalist’s news article was translated to English and placed on a local Web page. The combined effects of Net reports from these two lectures unleashed the media frenzy that followed.

Regrettably, there is a hierarchy in internet journalism: the top reporters get the story first and the innumerable ones that follow simply change the details to make it appear as if they were there too. To cite but a few of the wilder outcomes: the fabrication that my students and I were simply wandering the hills and stumbled upon this cave, not to mention the content of supposedly ‘direct quotes’ which have me using phrases like ‘it was definitely a eureka moment’ and, my personal favourite, a supposed whispered conversation (for that reporter’s ears only) over a beer in a bar in Texas. I obviously could do nothing to steer or stop such widespread coverage and am therefore baffled as to how I am responsible for these articles being “repeated ... to the point where one would think that it is an established fact” (Robbins et al. 2007:2).

I might also add that, reading the coverage, I was instantly reminded of the danger of relying on secondary sources.

The authors have consumed a great deal of space, time and energy in refuting statements attributed to me in Internet sites. I would have expected that any consumer of such sources of information, especially those in the academic community, would have long ago developed an appropriate sense of scepticism in regard to the reliability of their reporting, not least in scientific areas.

I see no reason to waste yet more journal space by discussing in detail the misreported opinions attributed to me in the media. My opinions were initially presented at the two lectures mentioned above and will be further detailed, together with those of all my co-workers, in the forthcoming scientific article which is currently in preparation.

I look forward to reading Robbins, Campbell, Brook and Murphy's comments on the scientific article. I can only hope that they will devote an equal amount of time and energy to discussing what I actually have said about Rhino Cave as they have done to obviously unreliable media coverage that they have chosen to believe in order to write their article.

Reference

- Robbins, Lawrence H., Alec C. Campbell, George A. Brook, and Michael L. Murphy
2007 World's Oldest Ritual Site? The "Python Cave" at Tsodilo Hills World Heritage Site, Botswana. *Nyame Akuma* 67: 2-6.