



Towards a Biographical Perspective on Samburu Lmurran Warrior Rock Art, Kenya

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Abstract. Rock art research looks in multiple directions. It is often seen as situated between archaeology and anthropology. Archaeology provides the tools and frameworks to categorise and analyse rock art across time and space, while anthropology—especially when supported by informed, emic perspectives—offers rare but invaluable insights into the meaning and creation of these visual expressions. Globally, opportunities to engage directly with rock art artists within living traditions remain exceptional. Our collaborative community-led project, *Making Rock Art Today: Encounters with Practising Samburu Rock Art Painters* (2025–2027), presents a rare opportunity of this kind. We work closely with several Samburu Lmurran (bachelor warrior) artists, who continue to create both pictographs (paintings) and petroglyphs (engravings). Their firsthand accounts allow us to explore how a biographical approach can enrich traditional formal and contextual analyses of rock art. This article focuses on one artist, Loingeru Leparsore, and his memories of creating rock paintings in three rock shelters located within walking distance of Ngurunit village in Samburu County, northern Kenya.

Keywords: Rock art, Samburu, biographical rock art, Lmurran warrior institution, Kenya

Introduction

Like Janus, rock art research encompasses a multitude of facets, often described as caught between archaeology and anthropology (e.g., David and McNiven 2019; Malmer 1981; Taçon and Chippindale 1998). The former discipline provides methods and theories for classifying and analysing rock art across space and time. On the other hand, the rare instances in which we can explore these visual expressions through an anthropological lens and informed sources must be considered essential for interpreting the significance of this visual media.

In reality and through academic praxis, these two ways to perceive the rock art phenomena have been intertwined throughout its research history; from the cradle of rock art research in the 1700s (Goldhahn 2018) and 1800s (Goldhahn 2022; Hampson et al. 2022), through the formation of the functionalistic sympathetic magic theory in the early 1900s (i.e., Reinach 1903, see Almgren 1934; Breuil and Obermaier 1935), the new archaeology (Malmer 1981) and structuralism (Leroi-Gourhan 1965; Nordbladh 1978) of the 1960s and 1970s, the start of the post-colonial momentum (Lewis-Williams 1981; Taçon 1989; Vinnicombe 1976), neuro-psychological approaches to altered states of consciousness and shamanism (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988), the post-processual umbrella (Bradley 1997; Tilley 1991), engendered perspectives (Gero and Conkey 1991; Hays-Gilpin 2004), to the 21st Century and the ontological turn (e.g., Abadía and Porr 2021; Goldhahn 2019).

A commonality across these perceptions of rock art is that studies of individual artists are rare and often overlooked in our efforts to uncover the meanings and significance of rock art in past and present lifeworlds (see May and Goldhahn, this volume). In the three-year community-led research project, 'Making Rock Art Today: Encounters with Practising Samburu Rock Art Painters' (2025–2027), we have the privilege to reflect on these issues through the unique opportunity of consulting and working with Samburu Lmurran warrior artists about past and ongoing practices of creating rock art, both in the form of pictographs (paintings) and petroglyphs (engravings).

In this article, we employ the terms 'art' and 'artists' as heuristic tools, fully aware of their Eurocentric connotations (Price 1989). In doing so, we follow Waldock (2016), who employed these concepts not to define them rigidly, but rather to situate rock art within the social lives and practices of its creators. More specifically, we explore how the Lmurran rock art offers a path to reveal how a biographical perspective can advance more standard formal and informed methods in analysing rock art.

Our research project comprises a diverse team of collaborators, including national and international academics, who work alongside literate and nonliterate Samburu community participants and past and present Lmurran artists. For clarity of communication, we write in the third person, with Samburu perspectives given as quotes.



Figure 1. Map of Africa, Kenya, Samburu County, and a Google Maps capture of the Ngurunit area, showing known rock art sites and the sites discussed where Loingeru Leparsore painted, marked. Ngurunit is located in Samburu's north-east corner, at the border with Marsabit County. Figure by JG.

The Samburu and the Lmurrans (warriors)

The Samburu are a semi-nomadic pastoralist society in northern Kenya (Figure 1), speaking a Nilotic language closely related to that of the Ilchamus and Maasai (Spencer 1965). Their current name derives from *Sampurr*, meaning 'a big skin bag' used for carrying meat and honey. Following oral history, the Samburu are believed to have originated in South Sudan or western Ethiopia, migrating to their current area several centuries ago (Labarakwe 2006: 99). Other scholars suggest that they originated from the Baringo area, south of Lake Turkana, in the early 19th century (cf. Holtzman 2009; Pavitt 1991; Simpson Jr and Waweru 2021). Based on our understanding of this matter, derived from oral history and from being Samburu (Labarakwe and Lemoosa), the Samburu identity and the current Lmurrans warrior institution were established between 1820 and 1860 after people had settled in the areas around Mount Kulal, Mount Ng'iro, the Ndoto Mountains, and Marsabit (see Labarakwe 2006; Lemoosa 1998).

While the Samburu are increasingly influenced by modern lifeways, including missions, education, mobile phones, and changing livelihoods (e.g., Sortland 2017), their cultural norms, values, and social institutions remain strong. In the northern part of

Samburu, close relationships and intermarriage with the Cushitic-speaking Rendille are common (Spencer 1973), although the Samburu numerically and linguistically dominate. Education is expanding, with more children completing primary and secondary schooling, and a growing number attending university; however, family and community ties as well as culturally grounded values and ceremonies remain vital.

Samburu society, which is organised into nine clans and sub-clans, has often been described as patriarchal and gerontocratic (Spencer 1965), with elder men wielding economic, social, political, and religious authority. Gender roles were traditionally well defined: men were responsible

for herding and protecting livestock, and the size of one's domestic herd was used to measure and signal wealth. Polygamy was and is widespread; men often have multiple wives. Women typically marry young, between ages 12 and 16, often with much older men. They earn respect primarily through childbirth, motherhood, and their role as food providers (e.g., Holtzman 2009; Straight 2007). That said, women's roles in domestic tasks are diverse, including caring for children, collecting water and firewood, and constructing the family's mobile huts and fenced living area, called *manyata*. They are responsible for running the household, and one of their key tasks is to train calves, produce dairy products, and care for livestock, including goats. Traditionally, female circumcision coincided with marriage and marked a significant rite of passage (Labarakwe 2006). Since 2011, this custom has been forbidden by Kenyan authorities, although it is still practised among the Samburu. After marriage, a woman's status changes with the birth of her first child, when her first son is initiated into warriorhood, and when her youngest son ceases to be a Lmurrani (Straight 2007).

Males' life stages are elaborate and complex. Initiation into Lmurrans warriorhood only occurs every twelfth to fifteenth year and lasts the same duration.

It comprises six major ceremonial stages that lead a person from childhood to become a junior elder (Spencer 1965; Marmone 2020). The first and most significant is *Lmuget le nkweni*, or the Ceremony of Birds/Arrows, in which boys are circumcised and undergo a two-month seclusion in the bush, learning life skills, crafting arrows, hunting birds, and preparing food. This initiation marks their entry into Lmurrani status of 'bachelor warriors' (Holtzman 2009). From now on, they are no longer permitted to eat with their mothers or other women and are expected to live semi-independently, caring for and protecting livestock, especially during the dry seasons. The warrior dwells in secluded rock shelters, which serve as sites of rest, feasting, dancing, and, sometimes, the creation of rock art.

Each group of Lmurrani warriors is named and divided into generational age sets, each adopting a specific style of ornamentation. These age sets also serve as cultural time markers, typically spanning twelve to fifteen years. The present age set, initiated in 2019/2020, is called *Lkiseku* (Figure 2). Previous age sets are known through oral history and are tentatively dated back to the 17th Century (Table 1).

The time a warrior spends as a Lmurrani includes additional Lmuget ceremonies. The second and third ceremonies, the *Le Watanta* Ceremony of Roasting Sticks and the *Le Sikiya* Ceremony of Scent, purify the young warriors and reaffirm the authority of the elders. Smoke from burning specific plants cleanse the warriors of their uncircumcised past (Marmone 2020: 3). The fourth, the *Le Nkarna* Ceremony of the Name, is a large graduation feast in which the warrior age set receives its name, and hundreds of cattle are slaughtered (Spencer 1965: 88). During the *Le Lainjoni* Ceremony of the Bull, the Lmurrani discard some warrior insignia and adopt new adornments such as brass earrings. Many Lmurrani marry at this stage, with family and livestock remaining key symbols of status, wealth, and cultural identity. The final rite, the *Lo Kule o Mbené* Ceremony of Milk and Leaves, marks the transition to Junior Eldership, which is transformed into Fire-Stick Elders after a similar period of twelve to fifteen years. Men belonging to this age set are responsible for teaching and

Name of Lmurrani Age Set Group	Estimated Calendar Years
Lkiseku	2019–(2034)
Lkichami/Lmetili	2002/2005–2019
Lmooli	1990–2005
Lkuroro	1976–1990
Lkichili	1961–1976
Lkimaniki	1948–1961
Lmekurri	1936–1948
Lkileku	1922/1923–1936
Lmericho	1912–1922/1923
Lterito	1893–1912
Lmarikon	1879–1893
Ltarigrig	1865–1879
Lkiteku	1851–1865
Lkipiku	1837–1851
Lkipayang	1823–1837
Lpetaa	1809–1823
Lkurukwa	1795–1809
Lmeishopo	1781–1795
Lpepet	1767–1781
Lnger-Ejon	1753–1767
Lsakanya	1739–1753
Lchingeo	1724–1739
Lwantaro	1709–1724
Lkivalash	1694–1709

Table 1. A tentative list of the names of Lmurrani Age Set Groups and their estimated extension in time through calendar years. Source: Goldhahn et al. 2021; Straight 2007.

Figure 2. The present Lmurrani *Lkiseku* age set of warriors on their way to the Noolkineji rock shelter on Leparsore Hill in the Ndoto Mountains. In the background, we hint at the outskirts of the Ngurunit settlement. Photograph: Ebbe Westergren.



mentoring the current cohort of warriors. After serving for another age set, they became Senior Elders. These respected leaders hold religious authority and mediate community decisions through consensus (see Holtzman 2009; Labarakwe 2006; Marmone 2020; Spencer 1965; Straight 2007 for further details).

Lmurran Rock Art Through Formal and Informed Analyses

East African rock paintings have been classified as belonging to hunter-gatherer, pastoralist, or farming traditions. Hunter-gatherer art can be loosely divided into the finger-painted Central African geometric tradition and the brush-painted human and animal forms associated with East African click-speaking groups. The daubed, mostly white geometric art of Kondoa is thought to be the work of Bantu language speakers (Smith 2013). A smaller percentage of the rock art can be attributed to several different pastoralist traditions: highly stylised depictions of long and short horned cattle found in Ethiopia and Kenya; the finger-painted, stylized cattle in and around Lake Victoria attributed to Nilotes; and thirdly, the red or white geometric/object shapes, and stylised representational forms linked to the meat-feasting practices of Maa speakers (e.g., Namono 2010a, 2010b; Smith 2013; Waldock 2016). It is the latter grouping with which Samburu rock art is thought to be most closely aligned (Chamberlain 2006).

Even though it is easy to find many studies uncovering captivating aspects of Samburu communities, from general cultural-historical and anthropological syntheses (Holtzman 1995; Pavitt 1991; Spencer 1965, 1973), to studies of their engendered lifeworld (Straight 2007), their diviners known as *laibon* (Fratkin 2012), livestock trading and herding (Konaka 2001; Stiles 1983), the economic and symbolic meaning of their visual culture (Khasandi 2014; Nyambura et al. 2013; Straight 2002), food culture (Holtzman 2009), music and its relation to life-course rituals (Marmone 2020), and more, very few studies have explored their ongoing Lmurran rock art tradition.

Natasha Chamberlain presents a notable exception. In 2006, she published an article based on her fieldwork in the southwest part of Samburu County. Chamberlain conducted an extensive survey and recorded a previously undocumented body of rock art, including 365 figures across 21 shelters (Chamberlain 2006: 142). The imagery primarily consisted of pictographs in red, black, and white pigment, along with an engraved Boa gaming board. Chamberlain linked the artworks to specific Lmurran age sets, noting that some motifs included dates like '1945', '1974', and '1990', which she thought corresponded with major initiation ceremonies (i.e., Lkimaniki, Lkuroro, and Lmooli, cf. Table 1). According to her local guides, these age sets could also be identified by the unique styles used in the paintings (Chamberlain 2006: 143).

Following an etic approach and formal analyses, Chamberlain categorised the motifs into human

figures, symbolic human features (e.g. headdresses), livestock, handprints, thumbprints, circles, linear and cross designs, texts, dates, and cattle brand marks. The study presented a normative-etic analysis of the assemblage, particularly its relation to cattle branding, rock-shelter use, and shifting social and cultural contexts (Chamberlain 2006: 140, cf. Gramly 1975). She concluded that the Samburu maintain a distinct and vibrant rock art tradition that symbolically records significant events, including initiation rites and successful raids (Chamberlain 2006: 156). While her work offered valuable insights into the content and context of Samburu rock art, it lacked an emic perspective that explores how this artistic practice relates to the cultural identity or lived experiences of the Lmurran warrior and the Samburu. It ended in a formal morphological and typological classification of the rock art images.

In an earlier work by part of our current research team, we elaborated on Chamberlain's insights by incorporating an emic understanding of the Lmurran rock art (Goldhahn et al. 2021). We did this by conducting cultural interviews with a handful of past warriors, which enabled us to contextualise and explore their lifeworld, and the significance of rock art made during *loikar*, i.e., Lmurran meat feasts, when the warriors consume large quantities of meat to 'fatten up'—an expression best translated to English as 'getting strength and power' or 'getting strong and healthy'—and beautify themselves (e.g., Holtzman 2009). Interviews with five former warriors from four age sets confirmed that painting was a familiar and cherished activity during *loikar*, when artworks depicting anthropomorphic figures—frequently dancing—as well as livestock and wild animals, such as elephants, lions, and Cape buffalo, were created. According to the interviewees, these images were made to commemorate historical events and animal encounters. The rock art was mainly created for pleasure, they explained; it was a pastime and part of both personal and collective memory practices during *loikar*.

The elders we interviewed stated that the artists received no formal training; instead, they learned by observing earlier artworks in the shelters and adapting their style accordingly. This explains the stylistic continuity across generations of age sets, as well as innovations such as the inclusion of names or dates in newer works (cf. Chamberlain 2006). While older artworks might be retouched, older paintings were rarely copied, as each age set sought to express its distinct identity and ornament style (Figure 2). The elders also explained that rivalries between artists and age sets were common. Younger warriors tended to be more active artists, while older ones focused on food preparation during *loikar*. As Senior Elder Loloibor underlined, 'food is the most important' (quoted in Goldhahn et al. 2021: 236).

Our interviews and article highlighted how rock art is embedded in the broader ongoing Lmurran lifeworld—expressing identity, experience, memory

practices, and the aesthetics of warriorhood (Goldhahn et al. 2021). Through these interviews, we began to identify past and present artists who created rock art, thereby enabling us to explore their artworks from a biographical perspective. To date, we have met and talked to twenty-one Samburu rock artists over the past years, conducted forty-five cultural interviews, and documented Lmurran rock art in twenty-two rock shelters. One of the artists was Loingeru Leparsore. By generously sharing parts of his life story and time as a warrior with us, we learnt more about the practice of Lmurran rock art and how it can be understood through a biographical lens.

Loingeru Leparsore

Loingeru Leparsore is a locally renowned storyteller who was born c. 1951 in Arsim village in the Ndoto mountains in northern Kenya, where he also grew up (Figure 3). He traces his father's lineage to the Ltorrobo, Samburu hunter-gatherer groups who lived in rock shelters in the mountains and subsisted primarily through hunting, employing spears, bows, and arrows, as well as setting traps to catch game. Like the Samburu herders, they practised polygamy; men typically had two to three wives, resulting in extended family groups of up to twenty individuals.

Loingeru remembers his great-grandfather Nkaakeli Leparsore of Lmarikon age set (1880–1893), his grandfather Napono Leparsore of Lmiricho age set (1912–1922/1923), and his father, Lekateiya Leparsore of Lmekurri age set (1936–1948). He recalls his grandfather Napono recounting past tensions between the Ltorrobo hunters and the Lmurran warrior herders over the use of rock shelters. Despite such disputes, the Lmurran herders generally avoided direct conflict, fearing the Ltorrobo hunters and seeking alternative shelter instead. During colonial times, Samburu hunting and herding communities shared the practice of the Lmurran warriorhood institution, but the Ltorrobo maintained some distinctive ceremonial traditions that set them apart.

Loingeru's grandfather Napono, a member of the Lmiricho age set (1912–1922/1923), was the first in his family to come to the Ngurunit area (see Figure 1), mainly for hunting Cape buffalo. During the ensuing Lkileku age set (1922/1923–1936), some Ltorrobo families left their rock-shelter homes in the highlands and established themselves in semi-permanent villages on the plains, bringing them into closer interaction with the Samburu herders. Loingeru's father, Lekateiya, belonged to the Lmekurri (1936–1948) age set. He was initiated and served as a warrior, camping at the Noongosowani rock shelter (see below).

After his warriorhood, Lekateiya married Nkiloten Leturra, and soon after, she gave birth to Loingeru. Growing up in the Arsim area, he and his family still primarily depended on hunting wild animals and gathering wild fruits, plants, and honey, but they also kept a small number of livestock. Over time, they



Figure 3. Loingeru Leparsore. Photograph by Ebbe Westergren.

relocated to the Ngurunit area, where they lived in rock shelters before joining the rest of the Samburu community and establishing their manyata in the Ngurunit village. Lekateiya encouraged his son to pursue formal education, and Loingeru completed one to two years at Ngurunit Primary School in the 1960s, but then he left. At that time, the local environment was still rich in wildlife, including elephants, giraffes, ostriches, zebras, Cape buffaloes, rhinoceroses, gazelles, and more. They hunted rhinoceroses but did not eat ostriches. Dangerous predators such as lions, hyenas, and leopards were common. However, these conditions changed during Loingeru's time as a Lmurrani.

Loingeru was initiated as a Lmurrani in 1976 into the Lkuroro age set (1976–1990). He was then c. 25 years old and one of the elder warriors of his cohort. As such, he was often responsible for protecting livestock herds and occasionally led cattle raids against neighbouring groups. The Lkuroro era is remembered as a period of danger. Shifta armed groups from Somalia frequently entered the Samburu County to poach ivory, rhinoceroses' horns, and the skins of lions and leopards, which resulted in decreasing numbers of wildlife. These confrontations persisted throughout the 1980s until the Kenyan Wildlife Service, a national organisation responsible for protecting and conserving wildlife, eventually succeeded in driving the Shifta out of the region.

After serving as a warrior for about fifteen years, Loingeru Leparsore became a Junior Elder and married. His first wife is Ndonguni Leerte. They sired thirteen children, and today they live in Ngurunit. His second wife is Ntirision Leparsanti, and they have six

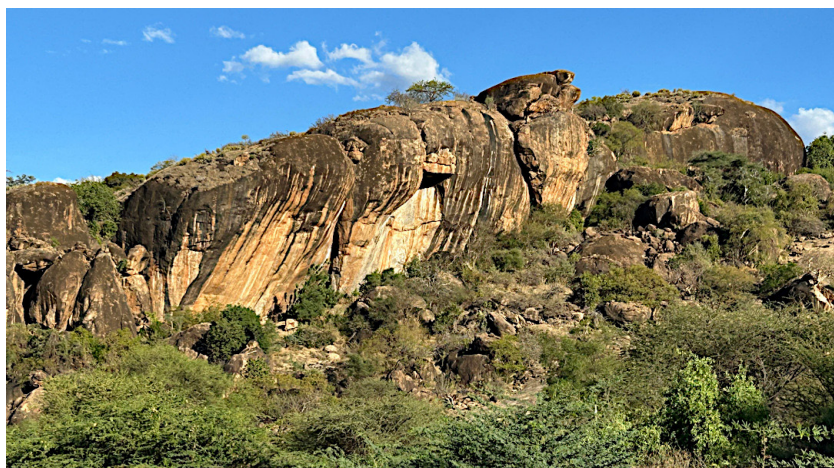


Figure 4. *Leparsore Hill, with Noongosowani rock shelter on the slopes and Noolkineji rock shelter on the top right. View from Ngurunit village. Photograph by Joakim Goldhahn.*

children together who live in Illaut. The third wife is Ntirisen Lemongi, and they sired six children together; they live in South Horr. His fourth wife is Mariamu Baltor; they have seven children together and live in Laisamis. The total number of the Leparsore's children is thirty-two, and together with his wives and himself, the family comprises thirty-seven members. Loingeru has served as a home guard in the region and, for some time, as a police officer.

Making rock art

Throughout his youth, Loingeru gained insight into the Samburu way of life. He developed a deep knowledge of the traditions from his father and grandfather. His love for the Samburu culture enabled him to quickly learn traditional songs and tales of the past, which he often shared with his fellow warriors by singing songs and telling stories while camping, feasting, and resting in the rock shelters. Making rock art was part of the pastime. There was no formal training to become an artist, but Loingeru said that his inspiration came in part from observing members of the preceding Lkichili (1961–1976) age set creating rock art.

During his warriorhood, Loingeru recalls creating rock art in five rock shelters, most of which are within a one- to three-hour walk of today's Ngurunit village (Figure 1). We visited these shelters in Loingeru's company, where he shared vivid memories of creating the artworks and discussed their meanings with us. The interviews were conducted in Samburu next to the paintings in May 2023 by Ebbe Westergren, with Steven Longoida Labarakwe, a Samburu Senior Elder, as support and translator. Westergren later transcribed these interviews. Muchemi Njeru, Jackson Labarakwe, a Samburu Junior Elder, Peter Skoglund, and Joakim Goldhahn also assisted with the interviews. For clarity and continuity, we have edited the interviews and present them in our own wording and using the third-person tense. Quotes are Loingeru's wordings, translated here by Steven Labarakwe. After this manu-

script was completed, Goldhahn met with Loingeru to review its content so he could correct and approve our presentation of his stories and wording. David Leamaglio and Muchemi Njeru conducted the translation during this check.

In this article, we focus on three sites; due to space constraints, we present these interviews chronologically, concerning the rock shelters where the artwork is found, from Loingeru's earliest paintings to some of his later works. Thereafter, we summarise our findings and discuss the biographical significance of his rock art.

The Noongosowani Rock Shelter

This rock shelter is situated on the slopes of Leparsore Hill, named after the Leparsore family, on the eastern side of the Ndoto Mountains, approximately 30 minutes from Ngurunit village centre. The rock shelter holds deep personal and familial significance for Loingeru, as it has served as his family's home. The shelter was named Noongosowani, meaning 'buffalo place', by his grandfather Naponono when he arrived here in the 1910s. He used the shelter as a base for hunting Cape buffalo and other wildlife. It was also in this rock shelter that Loingeru's father, Lekateiya, stayed after his initiation into the Lmurran status. Continuing this lineage of attachment, Noongosowani became the first shelter where Loingeru created rock art after his initiation into the Lkuroro age set in 1976.

Loingeru arrived at the shelter, two years after initiation, in June 1978, at the onset of the dry season. He remembers it well because it coincided with the death of President Jomo Kenyatta (22nd August 1978). He remained there for approximately one year, accompanied by a group of Lmurran. Initially, only four individuals—all brothers from the same family—occupied the shelter, with Loingeru serving as their leader. Occasionally, they hosted visitors, but only male family members were invited to these gatherings.

At the time, large herds of Cape buffalo—sometimes numbering up to one hundred—frequented the nearby Ngurunit River. Their abundance and predictable movements made them relatively easy to hunt. The warriors, well-acquainted with the terrain and the habits of the local animals, would track the buffalo herds and anticipate their arrival at the water source. The typical strategy involved selecting a large, fat beast and driving it toward a group of waiting warriors, who would spear it. Although this method was effective, it was not without danger. On one occasion, Loingeru was gored in the hip by a buffalo; he still bears the scar and demonstrated the injury to us. In other instances, buffalo were driven off cliffs to their deaths.

During their year at Noongosowani, the group

killed eleven Cape buffalo, seven of which were brought down by Loingeru. Given the size and weight of the animals, they were slaughtered on-site. The butchering took about two hours, and the meat was transported back to the shelter. There, it was processed using iron knives and cut into pieces. Eating a large buffalo or a large cow could take days or even weeks. It usually followed a three-stage process. First, some meat was placed on a wooden frame, often described as a 'table', over an open fire and roasted (see Figure 13). Subsequently, some of the fresh meat was used to prepare a soup, mixed with specific herbs and tubers in a clay pot. Lastly, some meat was dried for up to a week using long sticks leaning against the rock wall or hooks hanging from it. The dried meat was usually cooked into a soup. For longer-term storage, the Lmurran repurposed relief food bags or buffalo stomachs to hold smaller parts of meat, fat, and water, preserving the food for up to a month.

Meat preparation and preservation presented several challenges. Predators such as leopards and wild dogs posed a constant threat, especially at night. The Lmurran attempted to deter them by building fences, blocking gaps between boulders with stones, fires, and by throwing rocks to scare them away. On top of a rock on one side of the shelter (see Figure 5), leopards occasionally appeared and waited for an opportunity to seize the meat. Despite all precautions, meat was occasionally stolen overnight. Nevertheless, Loingeru described feasting on buffalo meat as a celebratory event, a gathering that brought the warrior group together.

Following such meat feasts, at a *loikar* place, Loingeru sometimes created rock paintings. His pigments were primarily natural red ochre from Mount Kulal, a two- to three-day walk from Ngurunit, mixed with animal fat and blood. The more blood and fat added, the darker the red, which can even appear close to black. For black pigment, he used a mixture of charcoal and blood, while animal fat served as white pigment. He carried a small shoulder bag containing red ochre, which he also used to beautify himself, particularly his body and hair, and he mixed the pigments with animal fat rendered into oil in a metal tin container. Loingeru told our team that he did not recall seeing any pre-existing rock art in the Noogosowani shelter prior to his paintings.

When we visited the site with Loingeru in 2023, numerous signs of historical and more recent occupation were still visible: fresh branches, remnants of past and recent fires, two wooden stirring sticks, thick



Figure 5. The letters that Loingeru Leparsore painted in the lower part of Noogosowani rock shelter, with some of the features mentioned in the text, are visible. Photographs by Ebbe Westergren and Joakim Goldhahn.

layers of cow dung, pieces of clay pots of different designs or ages, and a couple of wooden pillows. One of these pillows Loingeru had used during his time in the shelter. The pillow still bore traces of red ochre from the pigment Loingeru used to decorate his long hair. At the far lower end of the shelter, a dry-stone wall constructed by the Lmurran once served to deter wild animals (Figure 5).

In the lower part of the shelter, Loingeru wrote the letters 'WETLE 0' rendered in red ochre on the wall (Figure 5). The warriors used this area for meal preparation, rest, and sleep. Loingeru described and demonstrated how he lay on the ground, his head resting on his wooden pillow, while painting the letters. Using red ochre from his hair, he applied it with his index finger to create the characters on the wall. He explained that the letters held no specific meaning. Instead, they were the playful result of his early schooling at Ngurunit Primary School. He used the letter to demonstrate for his fellow warriors some of what he had learnt (cf. May et al. 2021). He enjoyed telling them about the school. Traces of his activity remain on the rock face, including faint smudges and stains from his fingers and smudged red areas from the ochre on his hair and body (Figure 5).

Other paintings by Loingeru are found further up in the shelter. This area was first used for resting and sleeping when the group arrived. However, as the rainy season set in, the Lmurran were forced to move to the lower, drier parts of the shelter, where the letter painting is located. Several paintings in this part of the shelter are positioned high on the rock face, beyond easy reach. To create them, Loingeru, with help from the other warriors, constructed a wooden platform from sticks and branches, which was accessed via a



Figure 6. Loingeru Leparsore is pointing out some of his paintings from the higher part of the Noongosowani rock shelter. At his feet lay parts of the platform mentioned in the main text. Photographs by Joakim Goldhahn.

long stick used as a ladder (Figure 6). The structure took a whole day to build and, according to Loingeru, was ‘very comfortable, like a bed’ (translated here). This effort was deliberate: the elevation was meant to protect the paintings from accidental erasure. ‘This was my home,’ he told us. ‘I wanted to decorate my home’ (translated here). He also expressed a desire to leave a visible mark of his presence.

These high-placed paintings include two main sets of motifs. The first he made depicts a Lmurrani armed with a spear and facing a buffalo, which is now barely discernible. These images, he explained, represent him and could be considered a biographical account of one of the many buffalo he brought down while staying at the Noongosowani shelter.

Beneath this scene, to the left, are four circles with interior lines forming geometric patterns. The rightmost circle is faint and partially eroded. To the left of these are three similar circles without internal markings (Figure 6). Loingeru explained the seven circles as depictions of meat portions arranged on a wooden frame, referred to as a ‘table’, that was placed over a fire. The circles with lines represent meat cut into portions. The use of red pigment indicates raw meat, while black pigment signifies roasted meat. The three unlined circles represent whole, uncut portions of meat. He was uncertain about the significance of the stripes around the outer edges.

Above these circles, Loingeru painted six elon-

gated lines and a curved line. These are up to two metres long and approximately six centimetres wide on the wall. The four darker lines on the right represent sticks used for roasting meat. The two red lines on the left indicate sticks used to hang meat to dry (Figure 6). Such sticks could be up to seven metres long, he explained. Adjacent to these are curved lines, which Loingeru described as sticks used to twist and hang meat for drying. Beneath the set of circles and lines is a faded image of another buffalo, also killed and commemorated by Loingeru.

The paintings in the upper part of the shelter were created over a short time span—two days, according to Loingeru. He worked for about an hour each day. On the first day, he painted himself and the buffalo, as well as the cut-up meat (represented by circles). On the second day, he added

the roasting sticks and another circle. The sequence of images can thus be interpreted as a narrative progression: from hunting to roasting to drying the meat.

Similar motifs—circles and linear elements—appear elsewhere in the rock shelter. Loingeru stated that he did not recall seeing these during his Lmurrani period, suggesting that later warrior-artists may have drawn inspiration from his original works.

The Soitnauno Rock Shelter

The second rock shelter where Loingeru created rock art is located on the opposite side of Ngurunit village, at the base of a hill (Figure 1). Several local names are used for that shelter. *Gille* refers to the nearby river; *Soitnauno* translates to ‘standing rock’; and *Lamanira* denotes a nearby tree. The paintings are located on various sides of a prominent outcrop measuring approximately 20 by 10 metres in diameter and rising to a height of approximately 8 to 10 metres (Figure 7). Loingeru painted at this site on four separate occasions during his residence there. His paintings are arranged across four panels on the two opposing faces of the outcrop. In this account, we refer to the site as Soitnauno, following the name commonly associated with the outcrop bearing the artworks.

Loingeru arrived at Soitnauno sometime after his stay at the Noongosowani shelter, during the short rains in April, likely in the early to mid-1980s, accompanied by two other Lmurrani. Upon arrival,

they brought with them a large, black, big-horned bull, gifted by Loingeru's father. They slaughtered the animal, roasted and cooked it, and feasted on its meat. Shortly thereafter, three other warriors joined them, and the group remained at the shelter for approximately six to seven months. The site was partly chosen for its proximity to the Gille River, a crucial water source that attracted wildlife such as Cape buffalo, rhinoceroses, and elephants. Additionally, the Lmurren used the river to water the livestock; each family was responsible for its livestock. At this time, the Kenyan Wildlife Service had not yet established a strong presence in the region, and armed and dangerous Shifta occasionally made the area insecure.

During their stay, the warriors primarily subsisted on buffalo meat, which was readily available and easily acquired. Loingeru recounted that they had killed and consumed a total of eight Cape buffalo while staying in this shelter. At a big fireplace in the most sheltered part of the site (Figure 7), Loingeru pointed out the remnants of a pot he accidentally broke during a fall, a loss he described as significant. The pot was made and decorated by a woman in the village. Loingeru reenacted how the accident occurred. This area was frequently used for meat preparation, resting, and sleeping, particularly during cold nights or rainy days. It also served to guard the dried meat, which was hung on long sticks leaning against the wall, from scavengers.

During his time at Soitnauno, Loingeru created several rock paintings, all of which are biographical, reflecting specific episodes from his time at the shelter. Most of the paintings were made on the large rock walls on the sides opposite to the resting place. On one face of the outcrop, he painted a black bull that his father had gifted him, as well as a lion and an elephant he had observed at the nearby water point, disturbing them (Figure 8). He mentioned that elephants were too large to hunt. These wild animals were rendered in red ochre pigment in the morning hours after spotting them. According to Loingeru, the paintings were intended as a message to passing Samburu women, signalling that the Lmurren were brave protectors against dangerous wildlife. Later that same day, he painted five human figures representing five of the six warriors staying at the shelter. He positioned these depicted warriors approximately three metres from the rock panel, observed them, and painted them on the rock in a single session lasting about 30 minutes.

The figure on the far right is a self-portrait. The two Lmurren in the middle are elder warriors of the age sets, Ltilira Lekulaa (right) and Ltua Lesilamba (left), while the warriors on the far left are two younger ones; Letitilan Leparsore (right) and Eungai Leparsore (left), two younger brothers of Loingeru. These



Figure 7. The Soitnauno rock shelter. Loingeru Leparsore's rock paintings are found in the low shelter in the centre (Figure 9) and on the left side of the boulder behind the tree (Figure 8). Photograph by Joakim Goldhahn.



Figure 8. Some of the mentioned carvings and paintings from panel 1 in the Soitnauno shelter, above in 2020, and below, in 2024. Photographs by Ebbe Westergren and Joakim Goldhahn.

figures were painted using a mixture of charcoal and red ochre to produce black pigment. When one of our team members visited the shelter in March 2020 (Westergren), these images were still clearly visible. However, during our return visit in May 2023 to conduct interviews with Loingeru, the charcoal had washed out due to heavy torrential rain, leaving only the red



Figure 9. Loingeru Leparsore's paintings from the second panel at the Soitnauno shelter (see Figure 7). The one below shows Loingeru after he had 'fatten up', i.e. regained his strength and power. Photographs by Ebbe Westergren and Joakim Goldhahn.

ochre, which shifted the overall colour from black to reddish tones. A year later, they had almost vanished (Figure 8). To the left of these figures, Loingeru had rubbed his finger on the rock wall, leaving behind a distinct horizontal red line.

In 2020, we documented a painted black bull above the elephant figure. This was the black big-horned bull mentioned, brought to Soitnauno upon the war-

riors' arrival. Unfortunately, this painting has since been lost (Figure 8), likely due to recent episodes of torrential rain.

Additional paintings were created not far from this first painting, but on another side of the outcrop (Figure 9). Loingeru recounted a day when a fat bull was grazing near the shelter. In response, he painted the bull, three warriors, and an elephant he had seen that day. These artworks were produced near the end of their stay, after approximately five months at the site. He painted two warriors in the morning, followed by the bull and a warrior with a round body in the afternoon. As he described and demonstrated to our team, he lay on the ground to execute these paintings, using red ochre from his hair and applying it with his index finger. One of the figures, with the pronounced round body shape, represents himself after having 'fatted up.' He explained: 'This is a way to show I am fat and fatter than you. You have not fattened like me. Look at me, I have fattened' (translated here, read ...to show I have strength and power, that I am stronger and healthier than you..., etc.). The other Lmurrani depicted are Ltitilan Leparsore and Ltua Lesilamba, both of whom were present when the paintings were made. As in previous instances, the depiction of the elephant reinforced the warrior status and bravery in the eyes of Samburu women.

Loingeru also described three additional paintings he had made at this shelter that are no longer visible: a camel, a rhinoceros, and a cow. These artworks appear to have been lost to natural weathering processes.

It is important to note that several other artworks exist at Soitnauno. We have documented three additional paintings: human figures and a camel; three rock carvings depicting a large and a smaller elephant, as well as a camel. One of the paintings was made by Loingeru's younger brother, Letitilan Leparsore. His painting, executed in black pigment, portrays a Lmurrani and was created during the same stay at Soitnauno. The large carving of an elephant with a long trunk is located next to Loingeru's painting of a bull, lion, elephant, and five warriors (Figure 8). The other carvings of an elephant and a camel are made close to Loingeru's painting of a single elephant (Figure 9). Loingeru cannot recall these carvings, and they are likely recent. Shallow carvings are not visible for many years, especially when made on the shelter's exposed side, as in this case. For instance, the carvings were clearly distinguishable during our 2020 visit but were barely visible in 2023 and at later visits.



Figure 10. The Noolkineji rock shelter, the He-Goat shelter. Photograph by J. Goldhahn.

The Noolkineji Rock Shelter

The final rock shelter visited, where Loingeru created rock art in the mid-1980s, is *Noolkineji*, meaning ‘he-goats place’ (Figures 1, 2, 10). This spacious natural cave, close to the top of Leparsore Hill, exhibits abundant evidence of both earlier and more recent use. It continues to be occupied periodically by members of the current age set, Lkiseku (Table 1). In the innermost section of the shelter lies a bone midden containing the remains of large prey animals. This is also the sleeping area for the Lmurrani. During our field visit, Loingeru and other local stakeholders identified bones from buffalo, giraffes, and cattle (Figure 11). Notably, no rhinoceros remains were present, as Loingeru explained that their bones are too heavy to transport.

Loingeru renamed the cave Noolkineji after an episode that happened here. He and six other warriors sought refuge here after stealing three he-goats from the Rendille community. These raids continued during their stay, resulting in the theft of approximately twenty he-goats from their neighbours. The rock paintings Loingeru created at Noolkineji in the mid-1980s, i.e., after his stays at Noongosowani and Soitnauno shelters, partially reflect this inter-community feud. Another reason for seeking refuge in Noolkineji was the increasing pressure from the Kenyan Wildlife Service, which was pursuing the warriors for illegal hunting in the surrounding mountains. At the time, northern Kenya was experiencing acute socio-environmental stress, including the aftermath of severe droughts, demographic growth, and widespread poaching by the Shifta, which significantly reduced wildlife populations. Noolkineji provided an ideal hideout: it is situated near a mountain summit with expansive views of the landscape (cf. Figure 1), yet it remains discreetly tucked away and shaded (Figure 10). This made the shelter cool, comfortable, and well-suited for extended habitation. The Lmurrani stayed here for approximately six months.

The rock paintings Loingeru created in this shelter are all deeply biographical. Among them are depictions of a Lmurrani, a he-goat, and cut buffalo meat presented as six squares (Figure 12). Loingeru explained that one of his peers, Lketuran Jackson Leparsore, was injured by a charging buffalo. Although the buffalo was successfully killed, the group needed to provide soft and nutritious food for their wounded fellow, so they decided to steal some he-goats from the Rendille (see Holtzman 2009: 98, 103, 258, who argues that lean goat meat is often chosen and consumed when people are ill), an event Loingeru felt was worth



Figure 11. Part of the bone-midden in the Noolkineji shelter. Photograph by Goldhahn.



Figure 12. Loingeru Leparsore and his paintings from the Noolkineji rock shelter. Photograph by Ebbe Westergren.

commemorating.

Loingeru demonstrated how he had sat while painting on the ceiling using red ochre (Figure 12). The painted Lmurrani represents himself; next to him lies the slaughtered goat, clearly identifiable by its four cut-off legs and head. Two adjacent humps in the image symbolise portions of meat removed from the goat. Loingeru is depicted pointing his left hand toward the squares of buffalo meat below while holding a piece of goat meat in his right hand. The lean goat meat was reserved for Lketuran's recovery, while the other warriors consumed the tougher buffalo meat. The six squares illustrate how buffalo meat was rationed over a six-day period. The sequence begins at the bottom right with the first day, followed by a gap, then days two and three to the left, and days four



Figure 13. A 2023 *loikar* meat feast in the Noolkineji rock shelter by the present Lmurren Lkiseku age set of warriors. Note the wooden 'table' frame used for roasting he-goats. Photograph by Ebbe Westergren.

through six along the top (Figure 12). This system of spatial arrangement on the rock wall directly mirrored how Loingeru had laid out the meat on the ground in front of him. As he explained, he painted what he saw. Below this composition is another figure of a Lmurren, painted in red ochre, also created on the day of the goat's slaughter. Again, it depicts Loingeru as a warrior, when he had long hair.

There are several other paintings in the shelter, created with red and white pigment, which Loingeru says were not made by him. Most of them are probably created later. In 2023 and 2024, the current Lkiseku age set produced both paintings and carvings in the rock shelter, as documented by our team.

Discussion

One of the most compelling aspects of our Samburu rock art project lies in its unique biographical potential. Unlike many other rock art traditions, in which artists' identities are irretrievably lost to time, the Samburu context offers rare opportunities to engage directly with artists across different age sets. This opens new avenues for understanding how personal experiences, social roles, and cultural knowledge are expressed and negotiated through visual media—an area we aim to explore further as our project progresses.

Our on-site interviews with Loingeru Leparsore, a member of the Lkuroro age set and rock art maker, demonstrate the value of combining and extending

both formal archaeological methods and more informed ethnographic (etic and emic) approaches by foregrounding the lived experiences and biographies of contemporary Samburu artists. Rather than viewing rock art as anonymous or purely symbolic and merely classifying and arranging motifs into typological and chronological frameworks, this study offers a grounded, narrative-rich perspective on its production, meanings, and contexts within Samburu Lmurren lifeworld.

Without hearing the explanations of Loingeru Leparsore alongside his paintings, it is very difficult, and sometimes impossible, to understand what they represent and what they mean. Meeting and listening to the painter himself open worlds of deeper understanding of the rock art.

Initial field observations and analyses indicate that creating rock art among Samburu Lmurren is a relatively rare but significant practice. Loingeru stated that he painted at five shelters over fifteen years, indicating that rock painting occurs, on average, once every three years. During his time in the shelters, which lasted from a few months to a year, he painted for only two to three days, further emphasising that rock art was created only rarely. Moreover, the relationship to initiation ceremonies, which was suggested by Chamberlain's study, cannot be sustained. Loingeru made his first painting two years after his initiation. Instead, we find a close connection to *loikar*, meat feasts (Figure 13), something that was already hinted at in our first

interviews with several Samburu Elders and former warriors (Goldhahn et al. 2021).

Surprisingly, we observe considerable variation in the preservation of artworks, even among those created on the same day or within a few days, with some images already faded or lost (Figures 8, 9). This underscores the importance of immediate documentation and long-term engagement with living artists.

From our interviews with Loingeru, we also find that the Lmurran rock art is a strictly biographical practice. His paintings recall moments of bravery, abundance, conflict, healing, and celebration, functioning not as abstract symbols or reflections of Samburu cosmology or mythology, but as lived biographical memories painted onto rock walls. It is, maybe foremost, a clear case of social positioning. For example, rather than anonymous human figures, which all look alike, most painted warriors on the rock wall are identified as subjects, named persons, who stayed at the shelter when Loingeru chose to commemorate an event in the form of some rock paintings. Without the artist describing the intention behind his paintings, these individuals would remain anonymous.

Moreover, these shelters are not merely passive canvases, but active sites of residence, memory, performance, and social positioning. Loingeru explicitly sought to decorate his shelter as 'his home,' and the deliberate placement, sequencing, and composition of images—such as elevated motifs on stick platforms or carefully rendered buffalo meat portions—underscore the intentionality behind these artistic biographical acts. It is also clear from our interviews with Loingeru that the paintings serve as an extension of his social persona, a form of social positioning aimed primarily at his peers. *He is the artist. He is the one who has 'fattened up' and regained more strength and power than the others!*

Furthermore, Lmurran artists learn to paint by observing and responding to earlier artworks. Loingeru was inspired by watching the age set before him, drawing upon their encoded visual language to express his own experiences, warrior status, identity, and persona. This process fosters both stylistic continuity and creative innovation. For instance, his incorporation of school-learned writing (i.e. WETLE 0, see Figure 5) reflects a dynamic blending of tradition and modernity—another biographical element that anchors rock art within lived histories (cf. May et al. 2021). Lmurran paintings are rarely copied or intended to express symbolic or mythological narratives; instead, each artist and age set leaves its distinct visual legacy.

This artistic practice is also deeply social. It is embedded in the pleasures and competitions of meat feasts, *loikar*, serving as a medium for self-expression, beautification, and social positioning (Figure 13). Hair, for instance, becomes a key visual motif in some artworks, referencing Lmurran identity: warriors grow their hair long as a marker of status, only to shave it during initiation and retirement. Making rock art is a strictly gendered practice; no females are allowed

into the rock shelters, but female figures—i.e. girlfriends—are sometimes depicted, so they still play a prominent role in the stories embodied in the paintings, highlighting the gendered dimensions of artistic practice and memory.

Aesthetic values are central to this community of practice, even when they are not immediately visible in the images themselves. Listening to the artists' own words opens an understanding of cultural logics and values that are not directly accessible through visual analysis alone. The act of painting, the choice of motifs, and the interplay of tradition and innovation all contribute to the cultural significance of these images—even when the Samburu themselves downplay their importance and regard them as a pastime. As Layton (2001: 312) notes, even art that is not cosmological or ritual in nature conveys social identity and embodies profound cultural values.

From an outsider's perspective, Samburu rock art is both compelling and globally significant. Yet, the challenge lies in resisting the temptation to universalise or decontextualise this art. By embedding rock art analysis within individual and community biographies, our project challenges the dominant models of typology, chronology, and abstraction common in etic archaeological rock art studies. For the future, we hope that long-term, respectful collaboration with artists like Loingeru Leparsore will allow us to restore authorship, intention, and voice to the makers of rock art, and open new interpretive avenues for understanding the motivations, emotions, material practices and biographical accounts that underpin it.

Conclusion

Loingeru Leparsore's shared memory of rock art making remains a testament to the living Lmurran tradition and lifeways, a unique ongoing cultural heritage practice among Samburu communities of northern Kenya. His deep-rooted cultural knowledge and broad environmental understanding make him stand out as a highly knowledgeable individual who can confidently serve as a resource to his community and, importantly, contribute significantly to our current Samburu rock art project.

Our research affirms that biographical perspectives are not only possible in rock art studies—they are essential when living traditions and local knowledge systems are accessible. Loingeru Leparsore's narrative highlights how rock art is embedded in the Lmurran biographical cycles of initiation, identity-making, conflict, and care. His work reveals that rock art is not obsolete or a relic of Samburu's past but an evolving and meaningful practice that expresses both individual creativity and collective memory in the present.

The preliminary findings from our Samburu project also highlight the broader importance of community-led and person-centred approaches in archaeology, anthropology, and cultural heritage research. They demonstrate how rock art functions as both personal

expression and social commentary—in this case—unfolding an aesthetic and embodied practice shaped by the dynamics of Lmurran lifeworld. By engaging directly with the artists, especially across different age sets, we not only deepen our understanding of rock art's cultural role but also challenge disciplinary conventions that have too often silenced the voices of its creators.

A biographical turn in rock art research, grounded in lived experience and long-term community-led collaborations, promises to make enduring contributions to debates about authorship, agency, and meaning in rock art studies, and beyond.

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Conflict of interest

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