

Ancient Indian religious astronomy in the stone ruins of Komatiland, South Africa

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1. Religion and astronomy

The further back in history we go, the closer a relationship between astronomy and religion we find. Astronomy was man's first response to the inevitable question that *Homo Sapiens* must have asked himself whenever he scanned the beautiful land around with all its floral and faunal life, or whenever he turned his eyes towards the infinite sky of the day and of the night. Very early, though we do not know how early, he found the answer, which he called Kaḍavuḷ, Eloh(im), Teva (Deva), Qamata or, simply and much later, God. This God, very early, assumed the four dimensions of the ordinary earthlings and the fifth one set him apart from and above all of his creation. The Dravidian people of India were among the earliest people to have realized this. In their thinking, the first four dimensions made him 'immanent' in all things and creatures, including Mankind, the fifth one made him to 'transcend' the mind of all beings. Ancient Dravidian seers, holy men and religious thinkers appropriately called him *Kaḍavuḷ* using the true Dravidian (Caldwell 1974, p 581) compound name consisting of *Kaṭa*, meaning 'to transcend' and *uḷ* meaning 'immanent' (Dhavamony 1971, p 30, p 109; Burrow & Emeneau 1961, p79). The God of this nature has no likeness to anything familiar to the humans and no temples have ever been built to *Kaḍavuḷ*. Yet, *Tolkāppiyānar* mentions this God in his

Tolkāppiyānar, which is one of the earliest (5th c. BC?) extant pieces of Tamil literature (Dhavamony 1971, p 109; Subrahmanian 1980, p 26, p 31, p 366).

The most mysterious acts of this God are performed in the sphere of heavenly bodies, and ancient Dravidian attempts to comprehend these workings laid the foundation to their cosmologically based religion. In time, this religion – presently known as Śaivism – became the root of what we know as Hinduism. Unable to see and imagine the form of this God, the ancient Dravidians satisfied themselves with a practically applicable scheme or schemes that reflected the essentials of his workings, as far as they understood them. This they did by co-ordinating all his acts in the quarters of space defined by two horizontal and one vertical axis, and by aligning the vase line with the East-West trajectory of the equinoctial sun. This arrangement made the cardinal directions functional in a religious sense. The fourth dimension, the time, put the whole system in action. In time, this understanding of *Kaḍavuḷ* became the basic plan of most if not all Dravidian and Indian temples.

2. In Africa

In Africa south of the Sahara, God, as presented in literature, has a rather primitive image. Apart from providing the daily needs of the people and keeping them at a safe distance from the dead, not much is expected from him. Astronomy is definitely not his forte. Taking this image for granted, African archaeology expects to find no temples of any significance dedicated to that God and automatically treats all stone structures, of which there are thousands throughout southern Africa, as having been built to serve a simple utilitarian purpose: most frequently designating them as cattle kraals (see for instance Maggs 1976, Mason 1962, Hall 1987). The purpose of this paper is to show how misguided this approach is, and to reveal the rich and true meaning of the ancient structures. This is done not by arguing with the

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proponents of the orthodox archaeology, but by exposing the real, astronomical content of one of the many stone structures of Komatiland (Eastern Transvaal, Swaziland, northern Zululand).

In my undertaking I am encouraged by the answer a Quena¹ (Hottentot) man gave to the Danish missionary Ziegenbalg in the early 1700s, when he was asked “whether he believ’d there was a God”. The Quena man “nimblely replied, ‘Let him who believes there is no God, look upwards and downwards and round about him; and then let him continue in his Opinion of he dares.’” (Kolben 1731, volume 1, p 139) This answer leaves no doubt that the Cape Quena, like the ancient Dravidians,

“perceived God as occupying the entire sphere of creation; that God was not a single person residing somewhere in the sky; that he was everywhere and manifested himself in all natural phenomena. In other words, the Quena had a cosmological understanding of God. This understanding is reflected in the forms of their worship.” (Hromnik 1990)

The Full Moon, the New Moon, and the Sun were the main visible appearances of the God worshipped by the Quena, and they referred to them by the names borrowed from the Dravidian and Sanskritic languages of India. The Moon they called “*Cha*” or “*K’Cha*”, from the Indian *Chan* or *Chandra*, and the Sun they called “*Surrie*” or “*Sore*”, from the Indian

1: Quena is the historical name for the people of southern Africa commonly known as Hottentots, as opposed to Kung (Bushmen). The Quena formed several tribes, each speaking a language or dialect of the same language family. They possessed a more advanced culture in terms of political and social organisation, local and long-distance trade, food production, housing, building in stone, livestock keeping, metal and pottery making, smoking of bhang (dagga) and other substances, artefacts made and used, etc. Their genetic makeup also differs from that of the Kung in that it displays an admixture of foreign and extra-African (mainly Asian) elements. The artificial name Khoikhoi, favoured by the orthodox academia, is historically not evidenced and phonologically as well as grammatically unacceptable. The people in question referred to themselves as Quena. See Thom 1958, Hromnik 1988 and Nienaber 1989.

Suriyan (Grevenbroek 1933). They worshipped this God in many different ways, but most of all by dancing. Watching them in Table Valley (Cape Town) in April 1691, Dampier described the ritual as follows:

“At the New and [especially] Full Moon [night] ... both Men and Women and Children [were] Dancing very oddly on the Green Grass by their Houses. They traced two [sic] and fro promiscuously, often clapping their hands and singing aloud. Their faces were sometimes to the East, sometimes to the West.”

Sometimes they faced the Moon and then again they turned away from its shining face. And they “continued their Mirth till the Moon went down.” (Dampier 1691)

By turning their faces East and West and up and down, the Quena dancers acknowledged a certain order in God’s creation, an order which rested on the quartering of the universe by the cardinal directions. This awareness is all cosmologically based religions, especially those of India, finds its reflection in the external and internal organization and in the architecture of temples and shrines. One such temple has been discovered in Komatiland.

3. Komatiland

Komatiland encompasses a long stretch of land between the Indian Ocean and KaHlamaba (Drakensberg), from the Limpopo in the north to St Lucia in the south. Evidence indicates that it is a gold region which had been exploited since at least the beginning of our era by Indian – among them Komati – traders, who gave it their professional name. We hear about Komatiland for the first time in 1589, when the coast of Africa south of Delagoa Bay was fast becoming the graveyard of many Portuguese ships. In that year, a carrack, the *São Thomé*, heavily laden with pepper and other goods, sailed from Cochin, South India, and sank off the coast of modern Zululand. Ninety eight survivors ran their long-boat ashore somewhere near Cape St Lucia and marched north towards Delagoa Bay, where they hoped to board one of the Portuguese trading vessels from Sofala. They travelled through a land which had been known to the mariners of the Indian Ocean as *Terra dos Fumos*, i.e. the land governed by Kings and chiefs whose title of office was *Fumo*, (Couto 1589; Faria y Sousa 1666) meaning ‘king’, ‘priest’, ‘chief’,

'wealth', 'husband', 'godly power', 'member of royal family', etc. in various languages of southern and eastern Africa.

The meanings are also the attributes of the Dravidian (South Indian) rulers known as *Pumān(s)* and there are many reasons (though beyond the scope of this paper) for believing that the original *Fumos* of Africa were in fact the *Pumāns* of South India, or, at least, traders from India who married into the local African communities, established their own kingdoms or chiefdoms, and styled themselves *Pumāns*. As in India, *fuma* means 'wealth' and *fumi* designates a rich man in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. The entire hinterland of Delagoa Bay was known as the Land of Fumos and the harbour itself was referred to as Ka Mfumo or Ka Mphumo, i.e. at the Fumo (Van Warmelo 1944). The symbol of chiefly office was a spear, also called *fumo* in local languages.

From the people along the way, the shipwrecked Portuguese learnt that the 'indigenous Cafres' called this land '*Terra dos Macomates*', the Land of the Komati People or, simply, Komatiland, and that this country was ruled by a mysterious king, Viragune, about whom more may have been said but nothing else was recorded (Couto 1589, Bryant 1929). The Komati were the traders and money-lenders of Dravidian South India, particularly of the Telugu country, who belonged to the subcaste of the same name. They belonged to the merchant caste of *Vaisyas* or *Chettis*, but the early Portuguese settlers in India often called them Brahman merchants (Trancoso 1616). The Komati maintained commercial houses in the harbours of Goa, Cochin, Madras, Masulipatam etc., and in the trading centres in the interior. These peaceful but artful merchants (Risley 1960) financed and participated in the Indian trade with Africa. Some of them became *rajās*, or rulers of their countries. One of them, Peda Komati Vema, ruled the country of Kondavidu (Sastri 1976) in 1420, when one of the few Indian ships specifically mentioned in the records sailed to eastern Africa and rounded Cape Diab (the Cape of Two Waters, later known as Cape of Good Hope) (Fra Mauro 1459).

A quick look at the geological map of this large area reveals a striking coincidence between the historical Komatiland and the gold producing regions of south-eastern Africa, indicating in no uncertain terms that the presence of gold and access to the sea define the territory of Komatiland. This area also

contains hundreds of abandoned stone structures (called *litaku* by the 18th century Sotho people), with the highest concentration in the region between the Komati and the Sabe (Sabie) rivers (Ziervogel 1954). But before proceeding with the exposition of the structure that was discovered only in September 1994, it is useful to recall some fundamentals about the ancient quest for gold.

4. Southern Africa: the land of gold

With the discovery of gold, ancient man moved from the age of stone to the age of metals, a transition which occurred somewhere between India and Mesopotamia. The importance of gold in Indian culture from the earliest times cannot be overestimated because, as Sage Suta in the *Siva-Purāna* puts it, "Even a barren woman gets a good son making gifts of gold" to God (Anon. 1970). Man's search for gold caused Africa to enter the age of history. Not surprisingly, southern Africa, the world's greatest repository of gold, caught the attention of Indian prospectors and traders at least as early as the 1st millennium BC, if not earlier. The Buddhist literature of India refers to Africa's gold trade in pre-Buddhist times, i.e. at least as early as the 6th century BC, and the ocean crossing is matter-of-factly mentioned in Tiruvalluvar's Sangam work (c. 3 - 1 century BC) *Tirukkural* (Tiruvalluvar 1978). The regularity of this trade was assured by the Monsoon winds that blow unfailingly, alternating their direction, every six months between India and Africa. The early prospectors left evidence of their search not only in the form of alluvial diggings, reef workings and ore processing plants, but also in agricultural terraces and religious structures built of dry stone. Since 1983, these structures have been the subject of my study, in which task I was very effectively assisted by Mr Van Niekerk, who has an archaeological training.

5. Suikerbosfontein in Komatiland

The stone structures (*litaku*) considered in this paper are located on the farm Suikerbosfontein (owned by Mr J C van Niekerk and Dr Ockie van Niekerk), on the southern side of the upper Komati River, in the district of Carolina. The area of Suikerbosfontein drains into the Komati River, the main commercial artery of the ancient gold-producing region of Komatiland. This region was prospected and traded during the 1st and early 2nd millennium AD by

Dravidian goldseekers (Hromník 1991). Reference to this is found in a Jain work from the beginning of the first millennium AD, *Jñātā Dharmā*, which describes Indian ships sailing to a distant land called Kāliyadvīpa. That this land was in Africa is quite certain because one of the animals seen, and eventually brought to India by the travelling merchants, was a striped horse or zebra. Kāliyadvīpa, meaning 'Black Land', seems to be a fitting name for Africa where a majority of the population had a tawny or dark complexion. In Kāliyadvīpa "the merchants found gold and silver mines, diamonds and other precious stones ... The merchants loaded their ships with gold and precious stones and sailing with the southerly wind they returned to the port and then offered presents to its ruler Kanakaketu." (Chandra 1977)

Evidence of the presence of Dravidian traders at a very early time is ever present in the languages of Komatiland. Not surprisingly, the Kung (Bushmen²) – who at the beginning of this trade were the only inhabitants of southern Africa – call a 'leather armband' *horo* but an armband made of metal is called *!komadzi horo*, i.e. Komati armband. Their Kung word for 'metal' itself is *!komadzi*. The primitive ancestors of the Komati were hunters and expert archers, who called their arrows *ambu* and *kanai*. Once again, we find these Dravidian words in the Kung words *ndamba* and *//ana* for 'arrow'. That Indo-Kung contact did not remain on the level of trading in armbands and arrows is indicated by the occurrence of the Dravidian *án kuri* for 'penis' in the Kung words *!anas* and *!hu:ru* for the same organ of procreation. And procreate they did, indeed, giving birth to the mixed Quena (Hottentot) population, which was non-existent prior to the arrival of Indians around *Anno Domini*. It was the Quena who occupied the upper Komati valley until after the arrival of the Portuguese, sharing the area in more recent centuries with the mixed Sotho-Pedi.

2: The name Bushmen is too broad and often misunderstood; San is offensive; Kung is specific and authentic, therefore most acceptable. See Hromník 1990 and Lee 1979.

3: A Dravidian (Kan.) word *suri* = 'a wise or learned man,' used in Quena languages. See Kolben p 88.

Gold was found in the Komati valley and copper deposits were detected in the immediate vicinity of Suikerbosfontein. Throughout this region, ancient prospectors and trades, along with the emerging Quena and, later, with Bantu-speakers, constructed numerous shrines, temples and other places of worship – some of them visible along the recently opened hiking trail. Only a few more than a dozen stone ruins at Suikerbosfontein have been investigated to date.

6. The Chariot

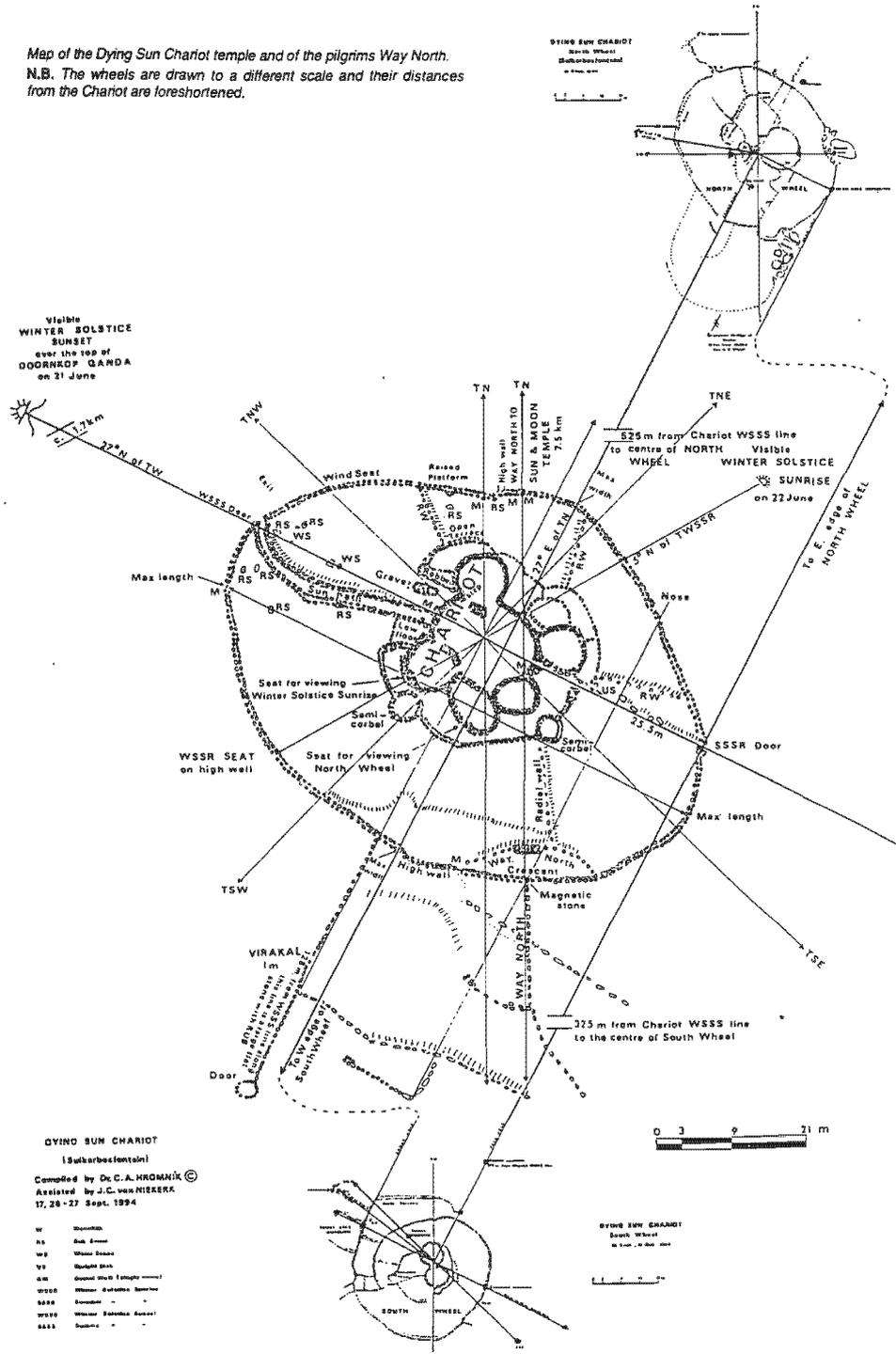
The most interesting of the *litaku* along the trail is the Dying Sun Chariot temple (see illustration on the following page), so named because of its shape and function. The temple consists of the shield-shaped body of the chariot and two wheel-like compartments attached symmetrically to each side. Several auxiliary structures are attached to the chariot from the outside. The well-preserved body of the chariot can be mounted through a narrow door on the eastern side. Its front arch, marked by an upright stone built into the wall inside, aims at the *Qanda* (egg-shaped summit) of Doornkop (hill), where the dying sun of the winter solstice sets at about 16:50 on June 21 (Figure 1). On the outer side of the arch begins a narrow passage which pierces the outer enclosure on the winter solstice sunset line thereby indicating the way of the dying sun's demise. Clearly this chariot is celestial rather than terrestrial.

7. The time is up when the sun is gone

The chariot, the celestial car of the sun god (*Suriyan*) is a representation of time. Cyclical year-end festivities were celebrated annually in this temple. Worshipers gathered here to give thanks for the bounty received in the past year and prayed for the return of the dying sun without which there would have been no new planting season or harvest. Offerings of mineral tints, fruit, vegetables, grains, nuts, etc. were ground to a paste on rubbing spots on outcrops and on loose stones, which can be seen on both sides of the Sun's path passage in the western part of the temple's enclosure.

These spots attest to the faith of the ancient worshippers. Their trust that their prayers would be answered and the sun would return is indicated by a seat in the left wheel compartment of the chariot. A priest (called *suri*³) sitting on this seat and looking over the altar (charioteer's rest post) that separates

Map of the Dying Sun Chariot temple and of the pilgrims Way North.
 N.B. The wheels are drawn to a different scale and their distances from the Chariot are foreshortened.



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him from the main body of the chariot, faced the high cliffs in the north-east where the sun would rise of the morning of June 22. His line of vision runs over a well built 'nose' or projection on the outer side of the right (northern) wall of the chariot. Here the lines of several cosmic alignments intersect.

8. The Celestial Wheel

The chariot's celestial nature is further indicated by its two lunar wheels, located on parallel axles at right angles to the shaft. Representing only the two phases of the moon – the rising full moon (north) and the setting new moon (south) – they stand for the single wheel of Suriyan's chariot. The North Wheel can be seen under the cliffs across the stream. Its axle runs over the 'nose' towards the large flat seat of the officiating *suri* in the southern cell just outside the chariot, and continues to the western edge of the South Wheel. The South Wheel is hidden beyond a low ridge, but its axle intersects the shaft of the chariot precisely at the eastern entrance to the chariot's enclosure and continues to the eastern edge of the North Wheel. The arrangement of the wheel(s) reflects certain lunar connections which are too complex to be explained here.

9. The Way North

A third important line that passes over the 'nose' is the axis of a 10¼km long Pilgrims' Way North. It leads from the Penance Triangle in the south (a short distance south of Rooikrans Camp) to the Sun and Moon temple on the mountain in the north – named so because of its shape, but nothing else can presently be said about it because it has been studied so far only cursorily. It goes via the chariot – breaking to allow for worship and sacrifice – and via the sacred pool in the river, the name of which has unfortunately been lost. Several small shrines, each reflecting different aspects of the pilgrims' devotion, line the Way North towards the heaven of final liberation, believed to be located in the North (Varma & Varma 1985, Knappert 1991). This Way, in a way, re-enacts the age-old Indian pilgrimage way, the *Devayāna* of *Prasna Upanishad*, (Varma & Varma 1985, p68) from the South to Kailasam in the north, and to other *tirthas* (places of pilgrimage) in the Himalayas and elsewhere (Kramrisch 1946).

The Penance Triangle (*Tapas Mukonam*) at the southern extreme of the Way North was built sym-

metrically on the SE (Agni)–NW (Vayu) axis. It contains a hermit's cell, hidden under the boulders from which a narrow crevice path leads to a flat rock table where the inmate performed penance (*tapas*, heat). Sitting in the middle of the south-eastern side of the triangle, the ascetic (*tapasi*) automatically faced the flame-shaped boulder placed in the north-west corner, thus exposing himself to the purgatorial influence of the North-West (wind) and the Agni (fire) influence of the South-East.

Exiting through the best walled North Gate, the Way North led the pilgrim to a precinct at the site of Rooikrans Camp (construction of a hiker's camp deformed this site to such extent that nothing can be said about its shape and possible historical meaning). Thence to a complex at the large vertical slab, planted in a crevice on top of a high sandstone crag exactly on the true south-north line. A sizeable complex of *litaku* next to it on the eastern side holds a considerable promise for future investigation. In this portion the Way North follows a deep, natural passage between high crags and leads to a north-oriented meditation seat under a rock overhang that looks like the mouth of a serpent. The presence of a Naga cult was most probably present, but there is little else to support it at this stage of investigation. Next, the Moon's (*Chandra's*) blessings were invoked on a well-built, north-east oriented megalithic terrace, which offers a wide and beautiful view of the Chandra quarter. The ceremonial use of this shrine needs to be determined. Its function seems to be linked with the north-east flowing ravine just below. A path over a series of terraces leads to a dramatic crevice waterfall, which gave reason for establishing another naturally sheltered meditation seat. The Way North path emerges from a deep ravine through a narrow purgatory crevice, in which the floor has been modified for the purpose. The overall purpose of the religious features in the vicinity of the ravine seems to have been purificatory. From the waterfall ravine to the Dying Sun Chariot the path is marked by two (perhaps more) artificial stone markers. One may have been used as a wayside offering stone (*balipidam*).

Shortly before reaching the Chariot on the eastern side, the Way North turns into a wide cleared passage, demarcated by two lines of small and large boulders, leaving an opening towards the Chariot, and continues in a northerly direction towards the main, perennial, river of the area. The wide path of



Figure 1. Watched by a group of SAPPI foresters, the Chariot of the Dying Sun has reached its final destination: it is the 21st of June, the year's end in the southern hemisphere. Photograph by C A Hromnik, 1994 June 21.

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the Way North between the Dying Sun Chariot and the stream suggests that a purifying bath in the sacred pool in the river was an important part of the ritual. Had the name of this pool or of the river survived, it may well have referred to the purificatory ritual bathing, which takes place on the new-moon days of the first full months after the winter and summer solstices respectively. These festive new-moon days are known as *Āṭi amāvāsai* (Skt. *amāvāsyā*) in July-August and *Tai amāvāsai* in January-February. In South-India, this pilgrimage is said to be more popular than any other *Tivyadēsayāttirai* (pilgrimage) to the sacred waters (Clothey 1982). Many other stations along the Way North need to be studied and explained. Eventually, the Way North climbs up the high escarpment and, passing through the Sun and Moon temple, leads by means of a stone passage and a few steps to the natural amphitheatre, where an offertory heap of stones marks the end of the journey. Apart from these purely symbolic structures and designs, this area, commanding a magnificent view southwards, is devoid of any other practical structures. Obviously, the place was deemed sacred.

10. The challenge of the heritage

The astronomical, religious and other intellectual content of the Dying Sun Chariot and of the Way North indicates that the whole complex most probably dates to the first millennium AD. Nothing more precise can be said at the present time. No physical or chemical tests to ascertain the age of the monument have yet been made, but the striking absence of any recent, Bantu-speaking people-related artefacts in the area tends to support the suggested period of construction and use. From the design of the Chariot we know that it was used ceremonially at least once a year, at the winter solstice. Its more frequent use is not precluded, but the observable wear on stones and structures argues for a light, sporadic use. How many people performed the ritual pilgrimage along the Way North will never be known, but we know that it would have been done at least once a year, at the first *tithi* (1/15th part of the lunar fortnight) of *Āṭi amāvāsai* in July-August.

Many features remain unclear and many questions need to be answered, but the monuments as a whole shines brightly on the veld of southern Africa, pro-

claiming the undeniable message that historically, culturally and religiously speaking, Africa is in fact Indo-Africa. (Hromník 1981) Here the cultures of Africa and India mixed and produced numerous monuments of this nature. It is our duty to study and preserve these relics of the ancient times.

This is a preliminary report which does not intend to be exhaustive, yet it is hoped that it will alert scholars to the fact that through the ancient Indian quest for gold, southern Africa was drawn into the religious and scientific sphere of Asia in general, and of India in particular, long before the time of Portuguese exploration. This discovery should alter the archaeologists attitude towards the material remains that come under their spade. It also is a reminder that Indian diaspora in southern Africa is at least 2,000 years old, and that there is an ancient affinity between the cultures of the Quena and the Dravidians. The Dying Sun Chariot, with its associated structures and the impressive Way North, will be the subject of a continuous study. Many features which at present are less than clear or even totally ignored will come under further scrutiny. This exposure is intended to attract and provoke critical comment which can only benefit my future research.

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