

**Traditional Custodianship of Rock Art Sites in Central Mozambique: a case study from Manica District.**

**Albino Jopela**

Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, Eduardo Mondlane University, P.O.Box 257, Maputo, Mozambique, E-mail: [albino.jopela@uem.mz](mailto:albino.jopela@uem.mz)

**Abstract**

In Mozambique, as in other parts of Africa, since pre-colonial times, traditional management systems were used in order to help to preserve places with cultural significance such as rock art sites. Some rock art sites in central Mozambique, are perceived as powerful places for communication with the ancestors. Therefore, they are traditionally managed by local communities. A recent investigation undertaken at the rock art sites of Chinhamapere Hill in the Manica province of Central Mozambique helps to support this discussion. This is centred on the traditional custodianship of archaeological sites as a strategy for managing cultural heritage.

Em Moçambique, assim como em outras partes do continente Africano, os sistemas tradicionais de gestão do património tem ajudado, desde o período pré-colonial, a preservar locais com significado cultural, como é o caso de sítios com pinturas rupestres. Na região centro de Moçambique algumas estações com pinturas rupestres são concebidas como poderosos locais de interação entre as comunidades locais e o mundo dos espíritos ancestrais. Por essa razão, estes locais são tradicionalmente conservados pelas comunidades viventes. A presente discussão é baseada na recente pesquisa levada a cabo na estação de Chinhamapere no Distrito de Manica, na Província de Manica. A mesma é centrada na custódia tradicional de estações arqueológicas como estratégia para a gestão do património cultural.

## **Introduction**

There are arguably more than 50 000 rock art sites in southern Africa (Deacon 2002). Despite this rich heritage, only a few hundred rock art sites are known and documented in Mozambique. These few hundred sites must be effectively managed. Heritage management can currently be defined as “all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance, caring not only for the cultural heritage values of the site but also the surrounding environment” (Pearson & Sullivan 1995:9). Effective management of cultural heritage is a vital tool for conservation of rock art for future generations (Abungo 2006).

In Mozambique, as well as other parts of Africa, since the pre-colonial period traditional management systems, enforced through cultural, religious and belief systems as well as community leaders, were in place to maintain respect for survival of sacred places such as rock art sites (Mumma 2005; Ndoro 2006). The role of local communities in the active use of and engagement with sacred rock art sites through ritual practice has been observed in southern Africa, in places like Domboshava and Silozwane in Zimbabwe (Pwiti & Mvenge 1996; Taruvinga & Ndoro 2003), Tsodilo Hills in Botswana (Thebe 2006), Kondoa-Irangi in Tanzania (Kessey 1995; Loubser 2006; Bwasiri 2008), as well as Chongoni in Malawi (Thebe 2006; Ndoro 2006).

With colonization modern heritage management which includes identification, documentation and protective legislation of heritage resources was introduced throughout the African continent (Ndoro & Pwiti 1999; Taruvinga 2007). Consequently, in post-independence period modern heritage organizations inherited rigid colonial polices that do not recognized the importance of traditional ways of protecting heritage places (Maradze 2003). In fact, issues concerning traditional management systems of cultural sites were largely overlooked and not integrated in the post-colonial legal heritage framework of most African countries including Mozambique (Ndoro & Pwiti 2005).

## **Problem**

The dilemma associated with managing archaeological sites imbued with sacred values has been discussed from different perspectives by a number of scholars over the last decades (Taruvunga 1995; Pwiti & Mvenge 1996; Ndoro & Pwiti 1999; Maradze 2003; Ndoro 2003, 2005). On one hand, modern heritage managers criticize the damage done to the site as result of traditional uses of heritage resources, such as the splashing of beer onto rock paintings (Pwiti et al. 2007). And on the other hand, the limited resources and capacities of state-based heritage organizations and the way they operate currently (based on modern heritage management systems), led scholars and heritage practitioners to recognize that modern management systems, on their own, are incapable of ensuring the effective and sustainable management of immovable heritage, be it a rock art site or another place of cultural significance (Mumma 2003; Ndoro 2003). Despite the efforts of the heritage organizations to effectively manage rock art sites, very few sites have actually benefited from modern heritage management approaches.

There is, on the other side, a growing awareness that many communities in southern Africa have always had traditional management systems to maintain, respect and ensure the survival of cultural sites (Pwiti & Mvenge 1996; Ndoro & Pwiti 1999; Saetersdal 2004; Ndoro 2005). It has been also suggested that because some rock art sites within cultural landscape are perceived as powerful places for communication with the ancestors, some of these sites are used for ceremonies such as rain making. Examples of such sites include the Chinhamapere rock art site in Manica district (Saetersdal 2004; Jopela 2006). Thus a pertinent question regarding to heritage management in the country is whether traditional management systems have anything to offer for the effective and sustainable management of heritage places such as rock art sites. This paper looks at the local communities' attitudes towards Chinhamapere rock art site, located in the Manica district, central Mozambique.

### **Rock art site background**

My research area lies within the District of Manica, centred on the castle-kopje of Chinhamapere in the Manica Valley, north-western side of Serra Vumba. The Vumba Mountains lie on the border between Mozambique and Zimbabwe covering an area of approximately 200 km<sup>2</sup>. The mountain ranges of the Eastern Zimbabwe Escarpment are divided by the modern border into the present Manica province in west-central Mozambique and Manicaland Province of Zimbabwe. Lying mostly within Zimbabwe, the only mountain of this range that lies in Mozambican territory is the Serra Vumba with almost 1650m (Nhamo et al. 2007).



Fig. 1 Map showing the research area discussed in this paper

The mountainous landscape of this part of the Vumba Mountains region is strewn with granite whaleback hills and kopjes with broken, castle-like summits. Hidden beneath those large granite boulders, natural caves and dry shelters abound, creating conditions known to be favourable for the production and preservation of rock art (Saetersdal 2004). Chinhamapere, a very prominent Hill on a foothill of the Serra Vumba, is a classic example of such scenario. The site is characterized by steep hillsides covered with larger and smaller granite boulders piled on top of each other and large boulders on the top. The large trees on the top together with the dense ticked and low brush vegetation are considered to be the sacred part of the Hill.



Fig. 2. Chinhamapere Hill.

The main site of the Chinhamapere Hill, which is of special interest for this study, is Chinhamapere I: a large rock art panel situated just beneath the top of the Hill. The site comprises classical San rock art with emphasis on monochrome images in various shapes of ochre-red. Images of animal and anthropomorphs are numerous. Similar sites are found in the adjacent Zimbabwe, where Kudu is the dominant animal depicted (Nhamo et al. 2007). As well as the Kudu at Chinhamapere humans seem to be depicted as part of scenes rather than as individual figures. Scenes include individuals in floating postures and humans with limbs in impossible positions (Saetersdal 2004). In South African rock art such scenes have been interpreted as shamanistic expressions of trance and trance

experiences (Lewis-Williams 2004). According to Saetersdal (2004:75), the multi-layered panels with superimposed images depict a wide range of subject matter and this indicates that the place had held ritual quality in pre-historic times and had been re-used several times.

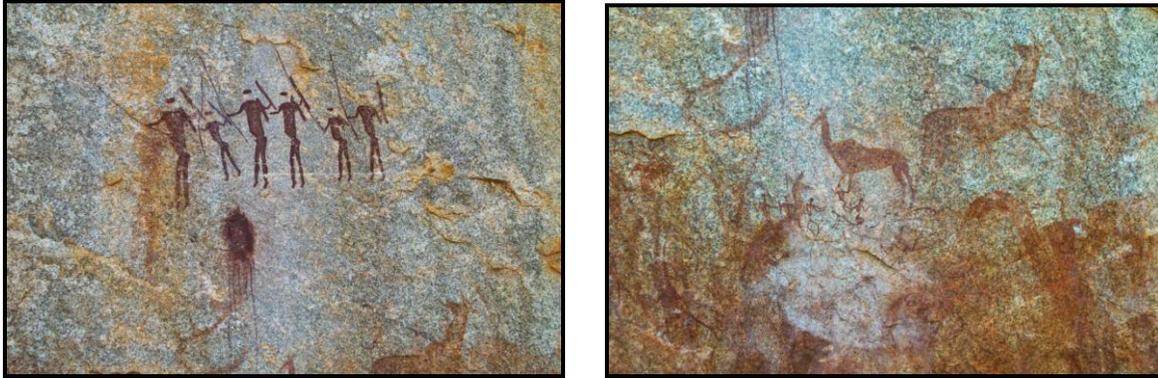


Fig. 3 Chinhamapere I rock art panel.

The Chinhamapere Hill and its vicinity are exceptionally rich in archaeological sites. In the Hill there is also Chinhamapere II, a rock shelter with five distinct rock art panels and San rock art associated with Later Stone Age and Iron Age archaeological remains. Chinhamapere IV is a rock shelter containing faded rock art and Later Iron Age tool-weapons hidden on a large shelf in the shelter (Saetersdal 2004:24). Surrounding all three hunter-gatherer rock art sites on Chinhamapere Hill is fairly dense savannah woodland. The woodland is seen as an integral part of the rock art sites: together they are perceived as the Chinhamapere sacred landscape, a scarce and valued resource used for traditional ceremonies (Jopela 2006).

According to Oliveira (1971) the rock art site of Chinhamapere was discovered in 1946 by the engineer Pires de Carvalho. Several studies of the rock art at Chinhamapere were undertaken during the colonial times mostly by non professional archaeologists (Santos Júnior 1940; Carvalho 1946; Guereiro 1965; Felgueiras 1965). The authorship of the rock art was attributed to the *Bosquimanos* or *San* people, the indigenous Southern African people who lived by hunting and gathering. Based on the studies done in Southern Africa the rock art of Chinhamapere was dated to 8000 years (Oliveira 1962, 1971).

In Mozambique as in other parts of Africa, rock art conservation strategies have tried to address issues of protection of rock art sites from natural and human damage (Santos Júnior 1940; Felgueiras 1965; Mazel 1982; Deacon 1997; Taruvinga & Ndoró 2003). From the early 1940s researchers carrying out archaeological work in Mozambique indicated that natural forces and human activities were the main threats for the conservation of rock art sites (Carvalho 1947; Alberto 1951). Some scholars suggested that an effective management of rock art sites could be best achieved through execution of engineering works (such as the fencing and caging of sites), guided by archaeologists and also through the adoption of a strong cultural legislation (Santos Júnior 1940:475). Despite these recommendations for the conservation of rock art sites, rock art management was not a priority within heritage management policy during the colonial period.

The correlation of factors such as the civil war, which made field research and management very difficult, as well as the reduced number of archaeologists in the country, contributed for the reduced number of publications related to the investigation and conservation of rock art sites in the post-independent period (Macamo 2006). Notable exceptions are the publications of Ricardo Texeira Duarte and Maria da Luz Duarte about the five most beautiful rock art sites in Mozambique with emphasis for Chinhamapere (Duarte 1979, 1992; Duarte & Duarte da Luz 1988).

In 1997 Tore Saetersdal started a research program at Chinhamapere Hill and other surrounding archaeological sites in Manica district. The excavation carried out at Chinhamapere II rock shelter in Manica District, revealed a typical Later Stone Age (LSA) assemblage and provided C14 dates of 2630 BP (Saetersdal 2004:86). Although these dates do not provide direct dates for the rock art itself, they provide the probable context in which the art was made (Nhamo et al. 2007). Recently NORAD founded a rock art research project and cultural heritage management program conducted by Tore Saetersdal between 2002 and 2005 in the provinces of Manica and Tete, in central Mozambique (Macamo & Saetersdal 2004; Saetersdal 2004). Within the NORAD project a Management Plan for Chinhamapere rock art site was prepared (DNPC 2003).

### **Traditional activities at Chinhamapere Hill**

In Manica people speak either Manyika Shona or N'Dau, which is also a Shona dialect. As in many African societies, the ancestral spirits of the Shona-speaking population play an important role in Shona life (Rita-Ferreira 1958; Beach 1980). In Manica it is believed that ancestral spirits live in some places in the earth as well in the water. Therefore some places of the natural landscape such as water springs, streams, forests, mountains or even rock shelters (some of them with paintings) are perceived as places of great spiritual power (Artur 2003; Saetersdal 2004). In the communities of Manica, as well as other regions of Mozambique, some trees are used as places to perform traditional ceremonies that consist in most of the cases in the deposit of local tobacco and traditional beer as gift for the ancestral spirits (Artur 2003; Macamo 2003).

Similarly it is believed that some forests (sections of it) as well as rock shelters were used as cemeteries because some leaders were buried there. Therefore these places are considered places of interaction with the ancestral spirits (Saetersdal 2004; Nhamo 2005). Some of these places are conceived as places where the ancestral spirits rest, therefore appropriated whenever the community needs to interact (through spirit mediums) with the ancestral spirits (Katsamudanga 2003). The belief in ancestral spirits that can be found in different sacred places across the landscape led the community to leave in harmony with the local customs.

Although there are some places in the Manica district that are considered sacred such as the *Madzimbabwe* (stone walling structure in the area of Chinhambudzi) where ancient leaders were buried, or even the *Pandzai*, a small pool on top of the hill Serra Vumba, Chinhamapere Hill stands as one of the best-known rock art site and sacred place in the countryside of Manica district. Chinhamapere Hill is conceived by many living Manica Shona speakers as a place of “Kings” or a place of the “spirits”. The name means “The Mountain of Lepra” and the Hill was used in historic times as a Leper colony. The sickness is considered among the Shona speaking society the disease of “Kings” and people that did get the disease were looked upon as “special” (Saetersdal 2004). According to the

informants interviewed, it is mostly believed by the local community that Chinhamapere was a healing place for those that suffer from the disease. Some people believe it is the lepers who produced the paintings, while others believe it was their ancestors (Jopela 2006).

The holiness of Chinhamapere is also because the rock art site figures prominently in local rain making ceremonies - *Kudhira Nvura* (Macamo & Saetersdal 2004; Jopela 2006). Rain making ceremonies at rock art sites (sometimes, but not necessarily implying, direct contact with the art) constitute a widespread and continuous practice among different Bantu-speaking societies in southern Africa (Ndoro 2006). In general the ritual takes place immediately before rain season begins' (around October). All the houses under the local chief (*Samutandha*) contribute something (usually meal) for the rite. The whole contribution is taken by the Samutandha with some elderly women, previously selected, to the chiefs' house. The female spirit medium, Mrs Mbuya Gondo, leads the preparation of the rite. A beer made from meal brews for three weeks and *sadza* is also prepared for the ritual. At Chinhamapere the rain making ritual starts early morning when the elders gather at the ritual rock at the foot of Chinhamapere Hill. After a beer is brewing and chants to the ancestors present, beer will be passed around among elders (Saetersdal 2004).



Fig. 4 Rain making ritual somewhere around Chinhamapere (Courtesy Tore Saetersdal)

At the chief's house the villagers will gather and await the return of the elders from the bush and the subsequent feast. The elders drink the beer from the ceremonial pot and the

spiritual medium starts to communicate with the ancestors while beer is sprayed into the rock surface. The spiritual medium stands up and starts to dance while all the time attempting to get in touch with the spirits through chanting and shouting. Gradually she will work herself into a trance-like state. At one point her chanting reaches high pitch, her dancing stops, as does the drums and she abruptly turns around and runs down to the water hole three meters away and spit beer into the water. This will be repeated many times accompanied by high pitch screaming and chanting while she spits rapidly into water. The whole sequence is then repeated several times, each ending with her spiting into the water (Saetersdal 2004).

Beer is then poured into a small, round pot without decoration and carried uphill to the rock paintings of Chinhamapere site. The beer is places in front the painted panel and the spirit medium kneel also in front of the panel. Starting to pray she addresses her ancestral spirits. She will pray for rain and good harvest, she will also ask for good health in the local community and may mention families or individuals that are having a particular difficult time. She will also ask for controlled rain, not too much too soon and not too little too late. The elders remain at the site for the period needed for her to get through to the ancestors. They then sit and discuss the answers before turning to the chief homestead for the ritual feast (Saetersdal 2004).

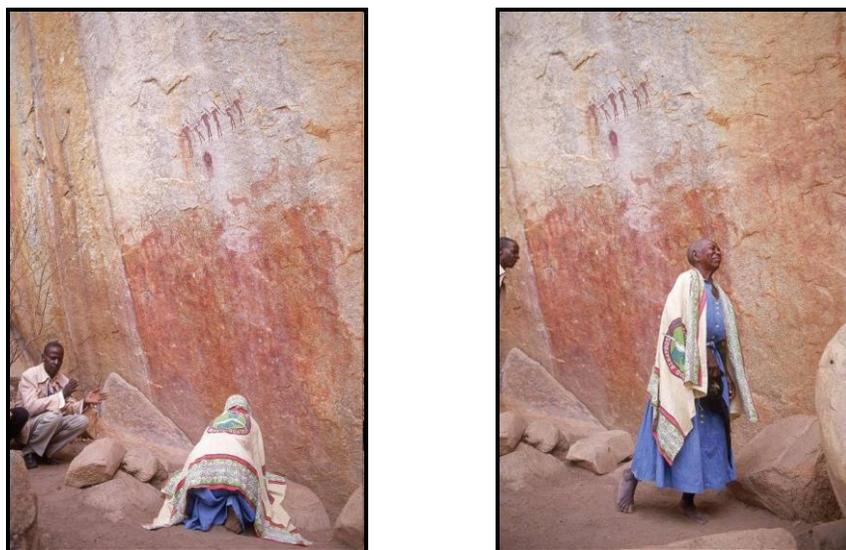


Fig. 5 Rain making ritual at Chinhamapere I rock art site (Courtesy SARADA)

Many people acknowledge the importance of rainmaking ritual in Manica. According to local chief the rites are performed for the protection of the community against disease, draughts, floods and plagues. Therefore, rites such as the rain making are very important for the maintenance of the social order among the community, as they control the rain, harvest, health and fortune. Without them the society is put at risk (Macamo e Saetersdal, 2004). Rituals such the rain making that take place, at some stage, at a rock art site, apart from maintaining the social order of the community, they also constitute means to express transmit and, to some extent, ‘perpetuate’ elements of the whole belief systems of the Shona-speaking communities of Manica (Jopela 2006).

These current Shona inhabitants of the Manica Province have no correlation of the traditions of the Later Stone Age hunter-gatherers (San or Bosquimanos) who once lived in the area (Saetersdal 2004; Nhamo et al. 2007). However, the present communities know about the existence of the rock art in the hills. According to the oral tradition, local chiefs were buried in sacred rock shelters (some of them with rock art) in the hills and mountains throughout the Vumba area (Nhamo 2005). Although the authentic authors of the art, the hunter-gatherers groups, no longer exist in the area, it is highly probably that the site has been actively used for hundred of years by the local Shona-speaking communities (Macamo & Saetersdal 2004). However it is difficult, on the other hand, to ascertain the historical depth of these traditions.

### **Implications towards rock art conservation**

The identity of present and past societies is often closely associated with specific locations and structures in the landscape, mainly for religious and spiritual beliefs (Mupira 2003). As suggested by Munjeri (2003), society is the tangible dimension underpinned by intangible components such as values and norms – *intangible cultural heritage*. Intangible heritage may also include oral traditions and expressions, social practices (rituals, ceremonies), knowledge and practices about nature and the universe (UNESCO 2003). This heritage can occur anywhere, on natural features like, mountain or kopjes, geological formations, forest or man-made structures such as rock paintings.

Intangible heritage constitutes a knowledge that is groomed within people and shapes the way community members relate to the physical environment, universe and the spiritual world. Therefore, politics, subsistence strategies and other day-to-day activities function within this network of ideas, belief, rules and norms of society (Katsamudanga 2003). Intangible values are regulated and transmitted through taboos on age, sex and even gender restrictions. These restrictions are inculcated into society as secrets and myths by elders' members of the society and spirit mediums. These myths, taboos, ceremonies and other measures are effective in ensuring the survival of heritage places, which represent point of communication with the ancestral world (Ndoro 2006). It is within the wider frame of values and norms that the cultural heritage of Chinhamapere benefits from a traditional custodianship.

Traditional custodianship is here conceived as all mechanisms and actions that are guided by custom and belief systems, that are carried out by local communities, and that aim for the continuous use and preservation of a heritage place and its surrounding environment, including the preservation of its symbolic and cosmological significance (Jopela 2006). Indeed, the respect that emanates from places such as Chinhamapere derives also from the fact that the place is integrated in one of the stages of an important ritual for the community. The hunter-gatherer paintings provide a connection in time between the past represented by the paintings on the rock surface (panel) and the present that is taking place outside the shelter. The site is seen as an important meeting place between the current society and the ancestral world and the art is seen as signs of the ancestors (Saetersdal 2004; Macamo & Saetersdal 2004). It then appears that Chinhamapere benefits from local community custodianship since the site is perceived as place of dialogue with the ancestors as they show images through the rock wall.

As pointed out earlier, traditional management systems are enforced through cultural, social, religious and ethical belief systems as well as community leaders. Since certain behaviour is supposed to be observed at cultural sites, local chiefs are responsible for monitoring the activities and behaviour at such places, making sure that locals abide the

rules (Maradze 2003; Mumma 2005). There are several examples that throughout the African continent traditional structures have safeguarded values and physical integrity of cultural sites such as rock art sites (Pwiti & Mvenge 1996; Taruvinga 1995). In the Manica district the traditional structure includes all individuals that ostentate the local traditional political power such as the supreme traditional chief (*Mambo*), the chief of groups of villages (*Sabukos*) and the village chief (*Samutandhas*) as well as individuals that hold spiritual power such as the spiritual medium (*Swikirus*) and traditional healers. The traditional political structure is responsible for the management of the resources, transmission of the customary laws and other aspects of the community daily life (Artur 2003; Katsamudanga 2003). The traditional authority benefit from a great legitimacy among the members of the communities due its capacity to solve conflicts as well as interact with the ancestral world.

Though the traditional leadership has gone through different stages regarding to its recognition by the formal State, it is appear that the traditional leaders of Manica were always perceived by the local communities as the legitimate authority. Therefore, the present traditional structure in Manica composed by the Mambo, Sabukos, Samuthandas, Swikiros and other element testifies, to certain extent, the survival of the traditional systems that are also responsible for the survival of cultural and sacred places in the landscape. At Chinhamapere the management of the site is assured by custodian Mrs Mbuya Gondo.

Since Mrs Gondo is Swikiro (spiritual medium) of the area as well as a recognized traditional healer, she benefits from a great prestige within the local community. Indeed, she is the one who represents Mambo Chirara in his duty of controlling the activities of the local communities' towards the sacred places. All the visitors to Chinhamapere are directed to Mbuya Gondo since she is the one with the ability to perform small rituals in order to get the permission from the ancestral spirits to climb up the mountain to visit the site. However, whenever this 80 years old lady is unavailable to guide visitors to the site another member from the community is empowered to do so.

The custodianship of Chinhamapere is highly facilitated through spiritual medium that controls all the activities related to the site as well as the surrounding landscape. For instance, one of the custodian tasks is to contribute for the maintenance of the sacred forest sensitizing the community that trees are not supposed to be cut downs in the hill. Although social and political factors such as the civil war that contributed for population movements have, to certain extent, affected negatively the integrity of the hill, the traditional structure has been able to ensure the survival of the sacred forest that stand still on top of the kopje. In fact, Saetersdal (2004) suggests that, with few exceptions, the absence of human destructions (graffiti) at rock art sites in the area shows that communities have some sort of respect for these archaeological remains.

## **Conclusions**

My discussion of traditional custodianship of rock art sites at Manica district highlighted that because Chinamapere rock art site sits within a sacred landscape it is perceived by the local communities as a powerful place for communication with the ancestors, therefore the site is used for ceremonies such as rain making. This setting provides the context through which the site benefits from a traditional management system or *traditional custodianship* from the local communities. It then appears that the cosmology of the Shona-speaking people of Manica generally stresses the need to respect sacred sites of environmentally important features like rock shelters some with rock art. Therefore, the use and of Chinhamapere landscape is sustained by a wider frame of religious belief system that defines the codes, roles, obligations and behavioural patterns of the community towards the space and the resources. And because local traditions and spiritual beliefs are extended to man-made features in the environment such as the rock art site in the Chinhamapere Hill, it is obviously within the wider frame of values and norms that the cultural heritage of Chinhamapere is locally and traditionally used and managed by the local communities.

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