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Chongoni Rock Art Area

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Introduction

The Chongoni rock art area was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2006. The area lies at the southernmost tip of Malaŵi's central plain, an area also known as the Ngoni Highlands. It contains 127 declared rock painting sites, about one site per km², making it one of the richest concentrations of rock art in central Africa. The Highlands are scattered with hills, many having gneiss rock outcrops with natural shelters and overhangs as well as large boulders with protected surfaces. It is on these rocks that the painting sites are found (Figs. 1–5).

Key Issues/Current Debates/Future Directions/Examples

Early Studies

The existence of paintings in this area has been known since the 1920s when Margaret Metcalfe (1956) reported sites on Mphunzi, Chigwenembe, and Mlanda mountains. Further details were reported by Desmond Clark in 1959 as part of his general synthesis of Zambian and Malaŵian rock art. In 1978 N. E. Lindgren and Matthew Schoffeels published an inventory of 61 rock art sites, the total then known in Malaŵi. Of these sites, 35 lay within the Chongoni rock art area. This brought about a broad recognition that Chongoni was the most important rock art region within Malaŵi. Lindgren and Schoffeels set out a basic sequence for the art, dividing it into an earlier phase of geometric designs made by hunter-gatherers and a later phase of white finger

Chongoni Rock Art Area,

Fig. 1 View of Mphunzi mountain, one of the major public rock art areas within Chongoni Rock Art World Heritage Site



Chongoni Rock Art Area, Fig. 2 Red geometric tradition art: made by hunter-gatherers; note the fine *white dots* over the *red finger lines*

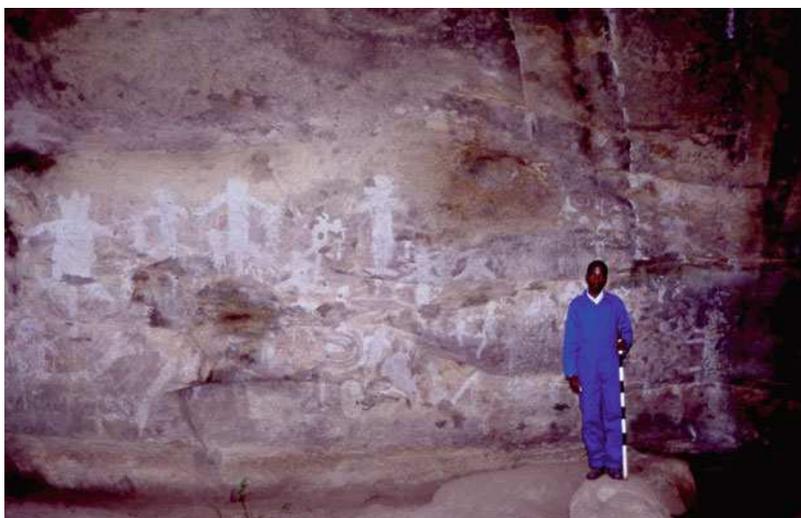
paintings made by Chewa-speaking farmers. Emmanuel Anati worked in the area in 1986, evaluating the area on behalf of UNESCO for potential World Heritage Site listing. As part of this work, an updated inventory of known rock art sites was produced and a substantial number of sites were visited. This inventory listed 117 known painting sites, 61 of which were within the Chongoni rock art area. Yusuf Juwayeyi subsequently published more detailed information on a selection of sites and helped to confirm the stylistic sequence (Juwayeyi & Phiri 1992).

The Chongoni rock art area was comprehensively surveyed in 1995 as part of a doctoral research project by Benjamin Smith. It was at this time that the total number of sites in the area was raised to 127, as listed in the UNESCO nomination. Some areas on the larger mountains are densely vegetated and proved hard to survey, so the actual number of rock art sites in the area could be as many as 150. Smith confirmed the findings of early researchers that the art separated into distinctive hunter-gatherer and farmer traditions (Smith 1997). He identified four traditions of rock art from these two periods (Smith 1997, 2005a, b, 2006): the red animal tradition, red geometric tradition, white spread-eagled

Chongoni Rock Art Area, Fig. 3 White zoomorphic tradition art: made as part of nyau secret society rituals by Chewā language speakers



Chongoni Rock Art Area, Fig. 4 White spread-eagled tradition images from Chentcherere 2 rockshelter. This image was taken in the early 1990s before a series of tragic graffiti incidents

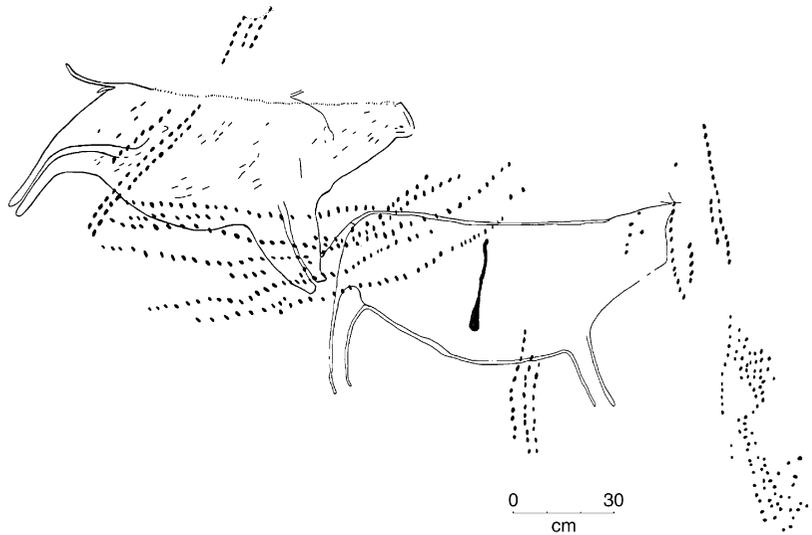


tradition, and white zoomorphic tradition. The exact chronology of each tradition remains unknown, but their approximate age ranges can be determined from their cultural associations. Hunter-gatherers survived in this part of Malaŵi into the 1800s (Crader 1984), and it seems likely that the hunter-gatherer traditions continued up until this time. The cool, misty climate of the area is not conducive to long-term rock art preservation and so while rock art has undoubtedly been painted in Chongoni over many millennia, most of the surviving art will be centuries rather than

millennia old. The farmer rock art is linked by its distribution and ritual associations to Chewā-speaking groups who have only inhabited this area during the last one thousand years. The making of farmer rock art continued as recently as the 1950s (Zubieta 2006).

Current Understandings of Chongoni Rock Art

The hunter-gatherer art of this area is dominated by finger painted geometric designs typical of the red geometric tradition (Smith 1997). Geometric

Chongoni Rock Art Area,**Fig. 5** Red animal tradition images from Chentcherere 1 rockshelter

tradition art was originally termed “schematic art” by Desmond Clark and it is spread across most of central Africa. Typical designs include concentric circles, rayed circles, sausage shapes, and internally linear divided stretched circle forms. These designs are almost always in red, and where well preserved, there is sometimes a white fill and/or white microdots between or over the red lines. Alongside these geometric tradition images is a small scatter of sites with finger dots and highly styled animal paintings, usually quadrupeds with vastly inflated bellies. The animal tradition images are generally found separated from the geometric art, either in neighboring sites or in separated parts of the same site. Within central Africa there is a ratio of about ten geometric tradition sites for each animal tradition site, but in Chongoni the proportion of animal sites is even lower. The existence of two hunter-gatherer rock art traditions is explained in terms of a gender division, with the animal tradition being the art of men and the geometric tradition being the art of women (Smith 1997).

The former hunter-gatherers of Chongoni are remembered in a range of historically recorded oral traditions by the names BaTwa and Akafula (Rangeley 1963). While there are many traditions of their coming into conflict with farmer groups, archaeological evidence from Chongoni also points to localized symbiotic relationships with

farmers (Crader 1984). The Malaŵian BaTwa are argued to have been closely related to modern-day Pygmy groups in terms of their culture and traditions (Smith 2005b, 2006; and see Namono 2010). Studies that have interpreted this art in terms of ongoing intangible heritage values associated with the sites combined with the application of Pygmy ethnographies have suggested that, while the ritual context and production of each of the two art traditions was separated, the symbolism underlying both traditions revolves around rainmaking, fertility, and social well-being (Prins & Hall 1994; Smith 1997, 2005b; Namono 2011, 2012).

The two more recent farmer traditions are of special importance because they comprise of one of the major concentrations of farmer rock art in sub-Saharan Africa. These traditions only occur in Chongoni and a small section of adjoining parts of Mozambique and Zambia. The farmer arts, as typical of all sub-Saharan African farmer arts, are finger painted and dominantly in white. The white spread-eagled tradition has been linked to a Chewā ritual ceremony called *chinamwali* (Smith 1997, 2005a; Zubieta 2006). *Chinamwali* is a girls’group initiation ceremony held at puberty. The art played a mnemonic role in the teaching of the young girl initiates (Smith 2005a; Zubieta 2012). While the art is no longer made today, some of its symbolism is still understood

and still utilized, away from the rockshelters, by women in modern-day ceremonies (Zubieta 2006, 2012). The other farmer rock art tradition, the white zoomorphic tradition, depicts spirit characters from the Chewāmen's secret society: *nyau* (Lindgren & Schoffeleers 1978; Smith 1997, 2005a). *Nyau* art was made during the time that the society was suppressed during the Ngoni wars, the early missions, and the colonial government (Smith 2001). The art served to train *nyau* initiates in the secret *nyau* terms and in the meanings of the large *nyau* spirit characters that dance at almost all major Chewā social occasions. Today the art is no longer made; indeed, it is no longer needed because the suppression of *nyau* has ended and so *nyau* teaching now happens in its original context (usually the graveyard).

Current Management of Chongoni

The Chongoni World Heritage Site is managed by the Malawian National Department of Antiquities. Many of the sites are within the Chongoni Forest Reserve and so they also enjoy protection from forestry staff. Some sites are preserved in their original forest setting although much of the area is now under nonindigenous commercial pine forest. A rock art tourism welcome center was under construction in the forestry area during 2013. This center will house displays and offices for dedicated Antiquities management staff. The major sites open to the public include Chentcherere (excavated by Desmond Clark), Nthulu, Mphunzi, and Namzeze. In the absence of on-site management until 2013, there have been serious conservation problems, with dozens of sites severely damaged by fires and graffiti during the 2000s. In 2012, a US-based professional conservator, Claire Dean, worked at the major public sites removing graffiti. Chentcherere was returned to something close to its original glory. It is hoped that the new government management framework for the area will be able to ensure that the sites are more actively protected and conserved in the decades to come.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Clark, John Desmond](#)
- ▶ [Rock Art Sites: Management and Conservation](#)
- ▶ [Sacred Traditions and “Art” in Hunter-Gatherer Contexts](#)

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