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# GIRLS' INITIATION ROCK ART IN SOUTH-CENTRAL AFRICA: WOMEN'S VOICES

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**Abstract:** *The White Spread-eagled painted tradition from South-central Africa has been linked to girls' initiation ceremonies and more specifically to Chinamwali of the Chew̄a people; a link that I verified in my masters research. This is a rock art that talks about women concerns and views of the world.*

*The tradition of painting in rock shelters for girls' initiation ceremonies is no longer performed. Nevertheless the tradition is not forgotten. There is still knowledge of the use of some shelters in central Malaŵi in the past as places that embraced some part of the Chinamwali. However, the ceremony has changed in the last five decades and the relationship with the paintings in a few years will be completely forgotten. This paper seeks to capture and record some of the last memories of the old uses and meanings of the rock art.*

**Keywords:** *Rock art, Initiation, South-central Africa*

**Résumé:** *La tradition de peinture rupestre White Spread-eagled d'Afrique Centrale méridionale a été reliée aux cérémonies d'initiation des filles et plus particulièrement au Chinamwali des Chew̄a; un lien que j'ai confirmé durant mes travaux de master. Il s'agit d'un art rupestre qui parle des préoccupations des femmes et de leur vision du monde.*

*La peinture des abris-sous-roche pour les cérémonies d'initiation des filles n'est plus pratiquée. Néanmoins, cette tradition n'est pas oubliée. Au Malaŵi central, on se souvient encore de l'utilisation par le passé de certains abris pour pratiquer des parties du Chinamwali. Cependant la cérémonie a changé durant ces cinq dernières décennies et la relation avec les peintures sera complètement perdue dans quelques années. Cet article cherche à capturer et consigner les derniers souvenirs des anciennes utilisations et significations de cet art rupestre.*

**Mots-clés:** *Art rupestre, Initiation, Afrique Centrale méridionale*

In this paper I want to draw your attention to what we know in the present of the rock art linked to the farming people in a region that comprises the eastern part of Zambia, central Malaŵi and the northwestern portion of Mozambique. Various people have done research in this area (Clark 1959a, 1959b; Phillipson 1972, 1976; Metcalfe 1956; Rangeley 1949; Schoffeleers 1985; Lindgren & Schoffeleers 1978; Juwayeyi & Phiri 1992; Smith 1995, 1997, 2001) and after four decades, two traditions of farming rock art have been recognized. Smith (1997) named them the White Zoomorphic Tradition and the White Spread-eagled Tradition.

Even though these painting traditions have now ceased, it has been accepted by different scholars that these later white traditions were made by ancestors of people we know in the present as Chew̄a (Clark 1959a, 1959b; Chaplin 1962; Phillipson 1972, 1976; Lindgren & Schoffeleers 1978; Juwayeyi & Phiri 1992; Smith 1995, 1997, 2001). This matrilineal group arrived in the area towards the end of the first millennium A.D., bringing a new way of life, different ceremonies and a different kind of artistic expression to the one of the hunter-gatherers who originally inhabited this region.

The first of the two traditions the White Zoomorphic, is executed by finger-painting and comprises stylised animal forms and human figures in white pigment and charcoal (see Figure 18.1).

The paintings have been related to Chew̄a men and their closed association: *Nyau*. The depictions represent masked

people and basketwork figures, which still appear during *Nyau* rites of passage and ceremonies (Phillipson 1976, 1977; Mgomzulu 1978; Lindgren & Schoffeleers 1978; Juwayeyi & Phiri 1992; Yoshida 1992; Smith 1997, 2001).

*Nyau* has two sets of performers, the animal structures and the masked dancers. All the structures represent wild animals and they are symbolic representations of powerful entities that play as guardians of the ancestral customs.

The second tradition, the White Spread-eagled tradition is also finger painted mostly in white. This tradition is characterized most prominently by a figure that has been termed the spread-eagled design. This figure resembles a stretched hide seen from above.

The central body of these motifs generally runs vertically, often with various protrusions from its head. It is also very common to find the spread-eagled design's body covered with dots. In Dedza District, central Malawi, the dots are usually black, whereas in eastern Zambia white dots are sometimes used to fill-in the body (Clark 1973; Smith 1995, 1997; Zubieta 2006). The spread-eagled designs have been found in massive superimpositioned sequences covering the rock surface in some shelters. This design is almost always accompanied by snake-like motifs and other geometric designs such as circles and lines of dots (see Figure 18.2).

David Phillipson (1976) suggested since the 1970s that the White Spread-eagled tradition was related to girls'



Fig. 18.1. Paintings in Namzeze Shelter, Malaŵi (Photo: Leslie Zubieta)



Fig. 18.2. Spread-eagled design in Mphunzi, Malaŵi (Photo: Leslie Zubieta)

initiation ceremonies. More recently it has been linked specifically to the girl's initiation of the Chewa people: *Chinamwali* (Smith 1995, 1997; Zubieta 2006).

However, Phillipson's suggestion was difficult to confirm because of the limited information he managed to collect on the subject when he was excavating in Eastern Zambia. People refused to give him detailed information about the links between the paintings and girls' initiation. Some-

thing similar happened around the same time (1972) to Desmond Clark when he was excavating Mwana wa Chentcherere II in central Malaŵi: people were not keen to share any detailed information with the outsiders (Clark 1973).

Indeed, amongst the Chewa matrilineal society the *Chinamwali* ceremony is perhaps the most important ritual of all. Just like the men's *Nyau*, the *Chinamwali* is a

restricted ceremony. Only women can attend and learn its secrets and thus women are banned to disclose the secret aspects of the ceremony with non-initiates.

In the mid 1990s, Smith's doctoral thesis on the rock art of central Malaŵi and eastern Zambia was perhaps the beginning of the quest to explain the relation between the paintings and *Chinamwali* ceremony. However, there was an obstacle; Smith as a male researcher was also banned from knowing the teachings of *Chinamwali*. For the same reason, thirty years ago, Phillipson and Clark did not get information on the subject either. Women refuse to talk to men about their ritual teachings because they have been told they will die if they share this information; most especially with men.

Although some of the general steps of the ceremony have already been published (Hodgson 1933; Rangeley 1949; Winterbottom & Lancaster 1965; Van Breugel 2001); most details in this paper come from my fieldwork in Malaŵi. In accordance with the wishes of the Cheŵa women, I will present only some aspects of the initiation ceremony, which I was allowed to attend and participate in.

*Chinamwali* is the initiation ceremony that all Cheŵa girls must attend to graduate from childhood to womanhood. Girls usually between the ages of 10 and 13 go through initiation when they just have had their first menstrual period. The Cheŵa community waits until there is a large number of girls in order to optimize resources and efforts.

The girls are secluded in a place call the *tsimba*, a hut in which the teacher or *namkunwgi* instructs them in the secrets of the tradition: the *mwambo*. The initiate learns songs and dances in order to help remember the teachings. She has a tutor responsible for looking after her progress: her *phungu*. The second special place where the teaching takes place is the *mtengo*, literally meaning a tree. In both places, the girls are not allowed to be seen or to speak to anyone who is not an initiated woman.

Once the seclusion is over, the initiate will be ready for one of the most important parts of the ceremony, the *Chingondo*. The initiate will wear a clay figurine on her head, used as a symbol that unifies all the teachings and experiences of the initiation (Zubieta 2006).

After the *Chingondo* the girls are taken to a river and their head, arm pit and pubic hair is shaved. The hair is thrown away as a symbol of the transition from girlhood to womanhood. The initiate is dressed in new clothes and is given a new name. The old name will never be spoken again. When the girls return to the village, the *Nyau* masks are waiting for the procession and the big dance begins: the *gule wamkulu*. At the last stage of the ceremony, the initiate will be walked back to her home surrounded by women who shout with joy. Her body is usually covered with white and black dots.

*Chinamwali* is the most important experience in the life of a Cheŵa woman. If one of the girls does not attend the initiation, it is believed that she will not be fertile, and she will not know the important rules of behaviour. She can put everyone at risk of *mdulo*, 'the causing of illness in oneself or another person by indulging in sexual intercourse at prohibited times, or, more rarely, by abstaining therefrom when it is prescribed' (Hodgson 1933:129).

How, though, were the ceremony and the paintings connected? In the early 1990s, Kenji Yoshida's anthropological research in eastern Zambia revealed that some Cheŵa women used to make clay figurines on the ground called *vilengo* to instruct initiates in different lessons (Yoshida 1992). The figurines on the ground resembled animals seen from above (see Figure 18.3).

It is important not only to emphasize the resemblance of these figures to the paintings, specifically the spread-eagled designs, but also to understand their ritual use. According to Yoshida (1992), the tutors made the girls dance and sing around the clay figures. They were used as mnemonic devices to ensure that the girls did not forget what they were taught.

The use of mnemonic devices by the Cheŵa and neighbouring groups for initiation purposes, such as the Nsenga, suggests strongly the use of mnemonic devices for instruction purposes in girls' initiation rituals by the Cheŵa in the past.

After I attended *Chinamwali*, some Cheŵa women in central Malaŵi were able to tell me the meanings of three of the paintings in the panel at Mwana wa Chentcherere II rock shelter. The information that the women still remember was passed to them via oral tradition.

The meaning of the three images was closely related to the ceremony. The first painting was meant to represent when the tutor takes the initiate to the river. The underlying meaning of the second one was a baboon, which is regarded by the Cheŵa as an animal whose sexual behaviour resembles that of a human, especially a man. Women are taught when to run away from them, because it is believed by the Cheŵa that male baboons used to have sexual intercourse with Cheŵa women (Morris 2000a). The third figure of the panel was said to represent a dance that takes place during *Chinamwali*.

Just like *tsimba* and the *mtengo*, it is probable that in the past the girls were taken to rock shelters which were secluded from non-initiate eyes to learn the teachings of *Chinamwali*. There, the teacher painted a figure or repainted others on the rock face and used them as mnemonic devices. As in the present, only the initiates could have access to the meanings of such figures. This condition thus creates an especially difficult challenge to interpret the meanings of this rock art as the paintings were only understood by initiated women. Nevertheless, I

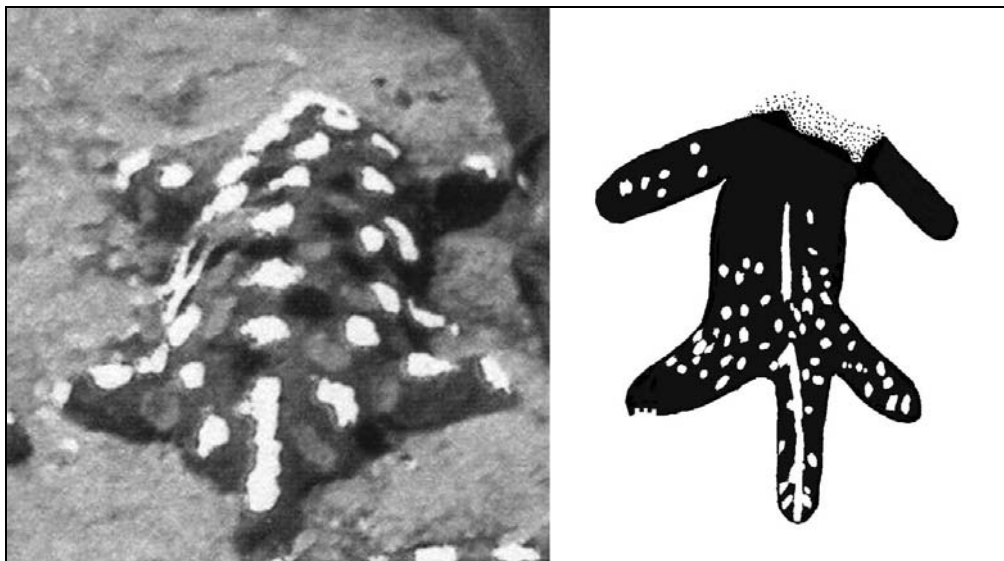


Fig. 18.3. Similarities between the paintings and the *vilengo* (left a close up of a *vilengo* from Yoshida (1993: fig.14) and right taken from Zubieta's (2006: appendix) redrawing)

think that there are ways to get to its interpretation, such as with the assistance of ethnography.

I do not presume a radical uniformity of the past and present cultural forms, but I do want to stress the important role that the oral traditions and indigenous knowledge of south-central Africa have for the interpretation of the rock art in this area.

Thus, in order to understand some of the meanings of the figures; I have employed recent social and cultural analyses of the human body, becoming known under the name "body theory" (Turner 1996; Synott 1993; Yates 1993; Meskell 1999). This approach has assisted me to construct a theoretical framework that specifically has contributed to the way we understand gender concerns and animal symbolism in the White Spread-eagled Tradition (Zubieta 2006).

However, body concerns are specially related to the academic study of gender and this is not restricted only to feminism. Gender centres on the social construction of masculinity and femininity and the social values invested in the sexual difference between women and men (Gilchrist 1991). Gender becomes then a dynamic cultural construction; and as such it is then culturally specific.

As *gender* I refer in this study to a set of roles that are constructed, both at the individual level and at a cultural level through the recognition of the body functions and body behaviour. Gender roles in this sense are the set of tasks that a human being fills within society based on social expectations deeply rooted in stereotypes of how a person of a particular sex should act, think or feel.

However, the body does not only relate to the physical features of it; it is more than just flesh and bones: it deals

with profound psychological issues in which identity and sexuality are involved (Yates 1993; Meskell 1999). The main contribution of this approach for rock art studies is to start realizing that the specific perception of the body is also reflected in the way this is represented in the art.

In particular for this study, where the paintings are strongly linked to the living culture, the meanings of these representations can be explored by understanding the body perceptions of the Cheŵa people.

In Cheŵa thought a woman's body is imagined by the use of metaphors. Sometimes these are used to talk about the female organs in a veiled way (Father Boucher pers. comm. December 16, 2003). Metaphors are models to understand the world that operate not only in language but also in thought and action (Stevenson 1995). Some of the animal bodies represented in the paintings, I posit, were used in the White Spread-eagled tradition as metaphors for the human body and human body behaviour (Zubieta In Press).

The Cheŵa cosmology of the body provides some important insights on how the ecological setting is interrelated with the body schemas. According to Kaspin (1996) the conceptions of the body are based on agricultural metaphors. However, I will further argue that animal symbolism is important to understand fully the perception of the body for Cheŵa people.

The Cheŵa perceptions of, and metaphors relating to the animal world have been mainly studied by Brian Morris (1995, 2000a, 2000b), Kenji Yoshida (1992) and Schoffeleers and Roscoe (1985). My analysis of Cheŵa representation of the body and its relation to the animal world draws largely upon their work.

Animals, it should be noted, are present in Cheŵa creation myths, folk tales and proverbs. The Cheŵa consider certain animals — specifically baboons, hyenas, and dogs (Morris 2000b) — to be representative of powerful human sexual passions (*chilakolako*). Bodily representations then make use of these animals. Perhaps each painting, or groups of them, was related to songs that helped the initiate to remember specific instructions. For example, when the women pointed out the baboon to me in Mwana wa Chentcherere II they sang a secret song that was related to such a figure.

I argue that animal metaphors are and probably were used in the past as a means of keeping secret certain teachings and contain veiled messages that only the initiates comprehend and memorize. Women employed certain animal bodies not only to represent men and women's behaviour, but as an expression of the relation between women and men in the social, economic, political and ideological structures of Cheŵa society. Moreover, the themes of the White Spread-eagled tradition are related then, in a veiled way, to gender perceptions of sex, fertility and sexuality and thus to the most intimate women's secrets and the voice of many generations of women who all went through a life time experience: *Chinamwali*.

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