



## PREHISTORIC ART AND MUSEOLOGY: THE CASE OF THE LIVINGSTONE MUSEUM, ZAMBIA

PERRICE NKOMBWE\*

### ABSTRACT

*Prehistoric art is widely spread in Zambia in areas with appropriate rock surfaces. Rock art is an important element of the traditional culture of Zambia, representing successive chapters in the country's human history.*

*This paper will attempt to give a brief description of the nature of the rock art spread across Zambia, in particular the two regions in Zambia where rock art is remarkably abundant: the Northern and Eastern Provinces.*

*In order to share the Livingstone Museum's approach to prehistoric art and museology, the paper will highlight ways in which the Livingstone Museum has risen to the challenge of making Prehistoric Art an appreciated component of Zambia's heritage. The paper will give an ethnographic view of living cultures towards rock art and also explain why modern traditional communities living in the vicinity of rock art sites view them as sacred. Additionally, the paper will highlight similarities between symbolic elements used in some initiation ceremonies on the one hand and the symbolism of rock art on the other.*

*Finally, the paper will discuss the roles played by the different institutions in prehistoric rock art management and information dissemination.*

### RIASSUNTO

L'arte preistorica è ampiamente diffusa in Zambia, nelle zone dove si trovano superfici rocciose appropriate. L'arte rupestre è un elemento importante della cultura tradizionale dello Zambia, e rappresenta in successione i capitoli della storia umana del Paese.

Questo intervento cercherà di descrivere brevemente la natura dell'arte rupestre diffusa in Zambia, in particolare quella delle due regioni dove si trova con maggiore abbondanza: le Province Settentrionali e Orientali.

Per condividere l'approccio all'arte preistorica e alla museologia del Livingstone Museum, sottolineeremo i modi con cui il museo ha intrapreso la sfida del fare dell'arte preistorica una componente apprezzata del patrimonio dello Zambia. L'intervento darà uno sguardo etnografico sulle culture vive in contatto con l'arte rupestre e spiegherà anche perché le comunità tradizionali attuali che vivono nei pressi di siti di arte rupestre li considerino sacri. Inoltre, sottolineeremo le somiglianze tra elementi simbolici usati in alcuni riti d'iniziazione da una parte e il simbolismo dell'arte rupestre dall'altra. In fine, tratteremo dei ruoli svolti dai diversi istituti nella gestione dell'arte rupestre preistorica e nella diffusione delle informazioni.

### RESUME

*L'art préhistorique est amplement répandu en Zambie, dans les zones où on trouve des surfaces rocheuses appropriées. L'art rupestre représente un élément important dans la culture traditionnelle zambienne, et constitue en succession les chapitres de l'histoire humaine du Pays.*

*Cette communication essayera de décrire brièvement la nature de l'art rupestre répandu en Zambie, en particulier ce des deux régions où on le trouve plus abondamment : les Provinces du Nord et Est.*

*Au fin de partager l'approche à l'art préhistorique et à la muséologie du Livingstone Museum, nous soulignerons les façons selon lesquelles le musée a entrepris le défi de faire de l'art préhistorique un composant apprécié du patrimoine zambien. La communication donnera un regard ethnographique sur les cultures vivantes en liaison avec l'art rupestre et expliquera aussi pourquoi les communautés traditionnelles d'aujourd'hui qui habitent près des sites d'art rupestre les considèrent sacrés. En outre, nous soulignerons les ressemblances entre les éléments symboliques utilisés pendant des rites d'initiation d'une côté et le symbolisme de l'art rupestre de l'autre.*

*Enfin, nous traiterons des rôles joués par les différents instituts dans la gestion de l'art rupestre préhistorique et dans la diffusion des informations.*

---

\* Perrice Nkombwe  
Assistant Keeper of Archaeology, Livingstone Museum, Zambia

## INTRODUCTION

Prehistoric art is widely spread in Zambia in areas with suitable rock surfaces, providing the country with a rich rock art heritage. Rock art is one of the oldest forms of artistic expression that has survived into modern times. As a form of expression, therefore, rock art provides an understanding of the history of prehistoric communities and the cultures that produced it. It is an important element of the traditional culture of Zambia, representing successive chapters in the country's human history.

## ZAMBIAN PREHISTORIC ROCK ART

Zambian rock art takes two distinct forms: pictographs (paintings or drawings on rock surfaces) and petroglyphs (engravings carved into a rock surface).<sup>1</sup> Pictographs are much more abundant than petroglyphs. Pictographs are found on rock surfaces that are protected from direct weathering. Most of the pictographs, therefore, are found in rock shelters, where there is sufficient overhang for the back wall or sides to be protected.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, petroglyphs are scanty and found both on walls of rock shelters and on boulders or rock slabs in the open air. Recent rock art research has shown that Zambian rock art falls into four main traditions namely; The Red Animal Tradition, The Red Geometry Tradition, The White Spread-eagled Tradition and the White Zoomorph Tradition. Further studies have shown that Zambian rock art divides into two artistic periods: an earlier period of the two red traditions and a later period of the two white traditions.<sup>3</sup> Archaeological investigations correlate the earlier period to the Late Stone Age and the later to the Early Iron Age. However, it has been noted that the later artistic tradition only occurs in Eastern Province. Therefore, Eastern province is an important region for the study of Zambia's prehistory in general and prehistoric art in particular.

While rock art is found in many regions of Zambia, it is mainly concentrated in the Eastern and Northern provinces. However, despite the fact that a number of rock art researches have been conducted in Zambia since the 1930s, only about 300 sites were recorded for the whole country prior to the 1992 discoveries around Kasama in Northern Province. In 1992, Benjamin Smith, a PhD student from Cambridge University in collaboration with the National Heritage Conservation Commission of Zambia, (NHCC) carried out archaeological investigations around the Kasama rock outcrops revealing over 700 rock art sites in the area. The pictographs of Kasama, are regarded as the largest concentration of Rock Art in Sub-Saharan Africa with a total of over a thousand paintings recorded. These discoveries have called for proposals to have Kasama's Mwela rock art site listed as a World heritage site.

## MWELA ROCK ART SITE

Mwela rock art site is situated in Kasama District in the Northern Province of Zambia. Kasama, the Provincial Administrative capital is approximately 852 km from Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia. The rock art site is approximately 5km from Kasama Central Business District. Prehistoric art has been known to exist in Kasama by the local people from the time they settled there around the seventeenth century. Official reports about the existence of this art were made in the 1950s. However it was not until 1964 that Mwela rock outcrop was declared a national heritage site having been surveyed and found to abound in prehistoric art.

Following this declaration, extensive field surveys to identify and document more prehistoric art have been conducted by professional archaeologists and researchers from within and outside the country. These extensive studies have not been confined to Mwela rock outcrop only, but have been extended to include the adjacent rocky outcrops of Mwankole, Sumina, Mulundu, Changa-Mwibwe, Fwambo and Lwimbo. The abundance of prehistoric art in these sites led to their being incorporated into the Mwela rock art site. As such, Mwela rock art site currently covers an area of approximately 100km<sup>2</sup> comprising seven main rock outcrops. Apart from the Lwimbo rock outcrop that is located on the South-western part of Kasama, the rest are on the Northern part of the town. The finds of the 1992 archaeological investigations were used to publish a book adding to the scanty record on prehistoric art in Zambia. To make the new discoveries known to a wider audience,

1 Smith B.W. *Zambia's Ancient Rock Art: The Paintings of Kasama*. Livingstone: National Heritage Conservation Commission of Zambia, 1997, p.11.

2

Clark J.D., "The Rock Paintings of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland," in Summers R(ed). *Prehistoric Rock Art of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland*. Salisbury: National Publications Trust. 1959, p.166.

3

Smith B. W., *Zambia's Ancient Rock Art: The Paintings of Kasama*. p.17.



a traveling exhibition with colorful pictures of the discovered art was developed. The Livingstone Museum was one of the institutions where this exhibition was presented, thus fulfilling its mandate of disseminating research findings to the general public.

#### THE LIVINGSTONE MUSEUM AND PREHISTORIC ART

Since its inception in the 1930s, the Livingstone Museum has been at the centre of acquiring, conserving, researching, communicating and exhibiting tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment in Zambia, for the purpose of education, study and enjoyment. In carrying out its functions, the Livingstone Museum, being the largest and oldest museum in the country, has endeavoured to present a holistic cultural development of the country from prehistoric times to the present. This has been illustrated by the archaeology exhibition in which Zambia's transition from the Stone Age to the Iron Age is the focus. Within this span, prehistoric art has been discerned. The exhibition depicts, with clear illustrations, the appearance of different art traditions at different prehistoric times in a manner that relationships between past and present societies can be discerned. It has been noted that often, museum visitors are amused merely by the art itself and pay little attention to the meaning of the art. However, visitors familiar with local Zambian traditions associated with the symbolism of the exhibited prehistoric art are quick to identify it and relate it to a particular ritual, although some times with dismay at the lack of respect for tradition by the exhibitor as some of the art are not meant for public displays. This case becomes even clearer in the ethnography gallery of the Livingstone museum where some Zambian rites of passage and the associated rituals together with their accompanying teaching aids are exhibited. Some of the teaching aids are made with some form of symbolism somewhat similar to those of the symbolism of the prehistoric art.

#### PREHISTORIC ART AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Although the production of rock art has ceased in Zambia, the existing rock art has a profound bearing on the people living around rock art sites. While communities living near prehistoric art sites view rock art differently, generally, they do attach a lot of importance to the art. Chaingo and Thandwe caves in Eastern Zambia are examples of rock art sites that are considered sacred due to their function to the local people called the Chewa. The rock paintings of these rock shelters are associated with the Iron Age people of Zambia believed to have been the ancestors of the present Chewa people who could have carried out this practice as an inheritance from their ancestors.

It is believed that in the olden days the Chewa and Nsenga people of Eastern Province made use of rock art sites when carrying out rituals associated with initiation ceremonies for girls and boys. Today, the Chewa and Nsenga people practice a form of art that is seen to be directly related to the prehistoric art of the Iron Age people. However, in recent times, rock art sites in most parts of Zambia have virtually been abandoned by the local people leaving them to the care of national conservation institutions. This near abandonment of rock art sites has been attributed by the local people to the fact that the sites' sacredness has been seen to be slowly losing potency due to continuous interferences by foreign people and the general failure to observe norms attached to the sites. One such traditionally abandoned site is the Chifubwa rock shelter near Solwezi in North Western province which was previously used as a site for initiating young boys from the Royal family into the world of royalty. Today, this practice is no longer done at this site.

The case of Senior Chief Mwamba and his Bemba subjects living around Mwela rock art site is different. While, they do not claim to be connected to the art, the Bemba of Senior Chief Mwamba acknowledge the presence of the art and attach a lot of spiritual value to the site. Some of the local people believe that the art was the work of the spirits while others attribute the art to the people who lived in the area long before the Bemba settled there. The latter, most likely based on oral traditions is supported by archaeological investigations.

The Bemba believe that their ancestral spirits reside in the caves within the rock outcrop. As such the Mwela rock outcrop is perceived as a sacred site. A shrine and a ritual hut in which offerings are left for the spirit exist at Mwankole. According to Bemba traditions, the ancestral spirits are responsible for good rains, harvest and healing of certain diseases. It is believed that these benefits can only be enjoyed if the spirits are appeased by the local communities. However, in recent times the local people claim that the spirits have become inactive due to numerous human interferences such as: urban encroachment, developmental projects, opening of these sites to tourism, research projects and conservation measures carried on the site.

#### PREHISTORIC ART MANAGEMENT AND TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANSHIP

Prehistoric art sites are managed by a statutory body, the National Heritage Conservation Commission (NHCC) of Zambia. NHCC works in collaboration with The National Museums Board (NMB) of Zambia, a statutory body charged with the responsibility of managing and developing national museums. NHCC is responsible for the preservation of heritage on site while NMB through its museums is responsible, among other things, for preserving movable heritage, for future reference and research and publicising site findings through exhibitions. It is in the museums that prehistoric art heritage can be accessed by a wider audience as most sites are located in far flung areas unlikely to be visited by many.

In planning for the protection and management of most resources, the National Heritage Conservation Commission Act is often complimented by other pieces of legislation. These include the local Government Act; Town and Country Planning Act, Wildlife Act and the Tourism Act. This is so because in some cases conflicting interests among stakeholders do occur.

Although the National Heritage Conservation Commission Act does not clearly define the role of the local communities either in research or management of archaeological sites, the act allows the Commission to negotiate for appropriate ways to manage heritage effectively. Thus, in the recent past, there has been a realization that local people could play a cardinal role in heritage management. <sup>4</sup> This has seen the setting up of a management committee involving local people in the management of Mwela rock art site. The local people embraced this development as they have a stake in the site. The committee works to create awareness among the local people on the benefits of sustainable use of the site and to explore ways in which the site can be made more beneficial to the local communities.

#### CHALLENGES OF PREHISTORIC ART MANAGEMENT IN ZAMBIA.

Rock art management strategies have not always yielded desired results as opposing forces continue to work against them. These relate to both natural and human factors. Since little can be done to counter natural factors, much more can be done to address human factors as these hinge on behavioural, economic and legal matters.

Mwela Rock art site provides a good example in illustrating how the lack of adherence to the law and economic hardships have continued to posed threats to rock art. The whole Mwela rock outcrop had for long time been treated as a sacred site and no one had the courage to do anything that would disturb the spirits in there. The situation however, changed when in the early 1970s, Chinese Company began quarrying for stones needed in the construction of Tanzania – Zambia Railway (TAZARA) line. Since then, the local community realised the short-term economic value of the stones. Despite this realisation, however, major destruction of the site through stone and sand quarrying began sometime in the early 1990s when the economic hardships that accompanied the privatization of industries began to bite.

As a result, this place, which was once highly revered by the local community, is now seen as a resource reserve available for harvest. Thus, it can be said that sometimes government authorities do not attach a lot of value to heritage sites especially if major developmental projects are envisaged.

Other challenges are summarized below:

Lack of conservation awareness among members of the local communities makes it difficult for them to contribute to the preservation of sites.

Lack of involvement of the local people in the management of the art makes them feel alienated from the site and leads to indiscriminate ways of benefiting from the sites.

Village Settlements with the accompanying population growth and demand for land use continue to encroach on the sites as there are no clear boundaries demarcating sites.

Rock surfaces bearing the art are continuously being defaced through graffiti distorting the art. This is a very big challenge as corrective measures applied do not usually yield desired results.

Most of the sites are in remote areas where infrastructure is less developed making it difficult for the sites to benefit from tourism and thus benefit the local people.

---

<sup>4</sup> Zambia National Commission for UNESCO. *Annual Report 2008*. Lusaka: GRZ and UNESCO.2008, p.49.



#### REFERENCES

- Clark, J. D. "The Rock Paintings of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland", in Summers, R. (Ed). Prehistoric Rock Art of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Salisbury: National Publications Trust, 1959.
- Lishiko, B. B. The Politics of Production of Archaeological Knowledge: A Case of the Later Stone Age Rock Art Paintings of Kasama, Northern Zambia, MA Dissertation in Public and Visual History, University of the Western Cape, 2003. Unpublished.
- National Heritage Conservation Commission, (NHCC). Baseline Study Report for Mwela Rock Art site, 2003. Unpublished.
- National Heritage Conservation Commission, (NHCC). Draft Management Plan for Mwela Rock Art site, 2003. Unpublished.
- Phillipson, D. W. Prehistoric Rock Paintings and Engravings of Zambia: Exhibition Catalogue. Livingstone: Livingstone Museum, Zambia National Monuments Commission, 1972.
- Phillipson, D. W. The Prehistory of Eastern Zambia. Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1976.
- Smith, B. W. Zambia's Ancient Rock Art: The Paintings of Kasama. Livingstone: National Heritage Conservation Commission, 1997.
- Summers, R.(ed). Prehistoric Rock Art of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Salisbury: National Publications Trust, 1959. Zambia National Commission for UNESCO. Annual Report, 2008. Lusaka: GRZ.