



## COMMUNICATION THROUGH IMAGES: WHAT THE WORD 'USE' IMPLIES IN THE ROCK ART OF CHINAMWALI, SOUTH-CENTRAL AFRICA

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**Abstract** - Communication through images: what the word 'use' implies in the rock art of Chinamwali, south-central Africa. A particular white painted tradition of south-central Africa (Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique) is explored in this paper as an active component of people's lives. Possibly it was used to communicate important secrets of girls' initiation ceremonies until the middle of the last century. The ancestors of the Chewa women decided to communicate lessons through the paintings until they stopped, but despite many challenges and external influences, women still perform their Chinamwali girls' initiation ceremonies in which they use a variety of plastic art, clay figurines that resemble in shape some of the motifs depicted in the rock art. In this paper I propose the possible ways in which the women used the paintings in the past to pass on various messages such as the knowledge of fertility and gender roles to the oncoming generations.

**Riassunto** - La comunicazione con immagini: cosa la parola "uso" implica nell'arte rupestre Chinamwali (sud-Africa centrale). Nel presente articolo verrà analizzata una particolare tradizione di pitture bianche dell'Africa centro meridionale (Zambia, Malawi e Mozambico), studiate come componente attiva della vita delle persone. Probabilmente le pitture furono usate per comunicare importanti segreti delle cerimonie di iniziazione delle ragazze che durarono fino alla metà del secolo scorso. Gli antenati delle donne Chewa decisero di comunicare attraverso i dipinti le lezioni, ma nonostante le molte sfide e le influenze esterne, le donne continuano ancora oggi a svolgere le loro cerimonie di iniziazione delle ragazze Chinamwali, in esse usano delle figurine di creta che assomigliano nelle forme alcune dei motivi raffigurati nell'arte rupestre. In questo articolo vi propongo i possibili modi in cui le donne usarono i dipinti per trasmettere diversi messaggi, quali la conoscenza della fertilità e ruoli di genere per le generazioni future.

**Résumé** - La communication à travers les images : ce que l'« emploi » des mots implique dans l'art rupestre de Chinamwali, en Afrique centre-méridionale.

Une particulière tradition de peinture en blanche de l'Afrique centre-méridionale (Zambie, Malawi et Mozambique) est analysée dans cette intervention en qualité de composant actif de la vie des gens. Jusqu'au milieu du dernier siècle, elle était probablement employée pour communiquer des importants secrets des cérémonies d'initiation des jeunes femmes. Les ancêtres des femmes Chewa décidèrent de donner des enseignements à travers les peintures. Même après que cette tradition d'apprentissage a été cessée, et malgré beaucoup de défis et d'influences extérieures, les femmes célèbrent encore aujourd'hui leur cérémonies d'initiation des filles Chinamwali, pour lesquelles elles emploient une variété d'art plastique: des figurines en argile qui rappellent pour leur forme certains motifs de l'art rupestre. Dans cette intervention, je vais faire des hypothèses sur les possibles façons dont les femmes du passé employaient les peintures pour transmettre aux générations suivantes plusieurs messages, notamment la connaissance de la fertilité et les rôles des gendres.

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### INTRODUCTION

Pondering over questions such as what people tried to communicate in the past by creating images on the rock surfaces is a fundamental quest in rock art research. Without realising it, however, we take for granted that paintings and engravings had a function: to communicate messages that people would not otherwise do verbally or by other means.

Whether there is no good reason to think otherwise, that people wanted to pass a message to their relatives or perhaps to their enemies, there is little reflection on the paradigms surrounding such conclusions. The problem we face as archeologists, on an empirical level, is that we do not know the contexts in which the images were made and used or what were the intentions behind the action of painting or engraving. Thus, we seldom have the sources, the people who made the depictions, to tell us the processes and the context in which the rock art was made and how these were used to convey their messages.

There are a few instances, however, in which oral traditions and ethnographic analogy have been a useful method to answer some of the questions that we posit. In this paper, I give an example of a case study in which it is possible to elucidate a plausible scenario of how rock paintings were used in the past to communicate specific messages for girls' initiation ceremonies.

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#### THE ROCK ART OF CHINAMWALI

The rock art of *Chinamwali* (Zubieta 2009b) is located in central Malawi, eastern Zambia and the central-western part of Mozambique (Figure 1). This rock art is characterised by a set of images, described below, more or less frequently depicted together and mainly in white colour. The most characteristic design resembles an animal's hide stretched and seen from above, known conventionally as a spread-eagle design. Thus this rock art was named the 'white spread-eagle tradition' at the end of the 1990s (Smith 1997). Although the spread-eagle designs initially resemble an animal, its form per se does not give away immediately the kind of animal that was depicted.

In brief, the spread-eagle design has various shapes and sizes: sometimes the body can be slim and sometimes fat (Figure 2). It is depicted regularly horizontally and almost never vertically. The head of the design sometimes has protrusions from the head and sometimes it has more than four limbs. White pigment is used predominantly to make this finger-painted rock art, but it is possible to find the use of black pigment to decorate the body of spread-eagle designs, but not to paint a whole new one.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the spread-eagle designs are filled in with white, but some are partially covered with dots (Clark 1973; Smith 1995; Zubieta 2006, 2009b). An interesting regional variation is that in Mozambique and Malawi, the spread-eagle designs can be covered with black dots (Figure 3) while in Zambia the body of these designs were filled in with white or were entirely made out of white dots (Figure 4).

In central Malawi, I observed that black dots can be distributed on different parts of the body, sometimes on the head and other times only on one half of the body and so on. This varied patterning in the location of the dots perhaps had a meaning, but at the moment it is difficult to give its significance. However, there are important implications about the use of dots that I discuss below.

The spread-eagle design appears regularly with other motifs such as snake-like motifs (Figure 5) and geometric forms such as circles and lines of white dots (Figure 6). I have noted that at some sites white dots emanate from the armpit of the spread-eagle design, usually from the upper limbs downwards (Zubieta 2009b: 282). At other sites spread-eagle designs are represented in association with circles with internal divisions (Phillipson 1976; Smith 1995) and representations of hoes (Figure 7) (Phillipson 1972; Zubieta 2006, 2009b).

For many years, white paintings were not thought as important as the red paintings found in the region, which I do not discuss in this paper and that are ascribed to the hunter-gatherer autochthonous populations (Clark 1959a, 1973; Lindgren and Schoffeleers 1978; Juwayeyi and Phiri 1992; Smith 1995, 1997; but see Phillipson 1972, 1976 for a different opinion). In 1956 Margaret Metcalfe published the first sketch of white paintings from Mphunzi and Chiwenembe sites, central Malawi. Although white paintings caused little interest, because they were presumed to be modern, she realized that some effort had been put in to take the white pigment to the rock shelters and, therefore, that it must have meant something to the people (Metcalfe 1956: 60).

The rock art of *Chinamwali* was attributed for the first time to girls' initiation ceremonies by reports given to David Phillipson by local Ngoni<sup>2</sup> people. They suggested that Nsenga women made the paintings at Thandwe rockshelter, eastern Zambia. Phillipson found this connection interesting because the Chewa were known to live in that region before the settling of the Nsenga who arrived with the Ngoni to settle later in the region (Phillipson 1976: 183).

Unfortunately, local men could not give more precise information on the paintings because women's issues are secret: men are not allowed to know about them. However, some of the designs were shown to the Nsenga women in Lusaka and they identified them as diagrams they used for the 'sexual introduction of female initiates' (Phillipson 1976: 183). I think this should not be surprising; furthermore, Nsenga women were able to identify them because matrilineal women use similar symbols in the region for girls' initiation ceremonies (see Apthorpe 1962 for Nsenga), not necessarily because they were the authors of these paintings.

The white paintings of the region have been linked to the ancestors of the Chewa people (Clark 1959a, 1959b; Chaplin 1962; Phillipson 1972, 1976; Lindgren and Schoffeleers 1978; Juwayeyi and Phiri 1992; Smith 1995, 1997; Zubieta 2006, 2009b) and this has been confirmed by a few strands of evidence: the archeological material shows us that this region (eastern Zambia, central Malawi and central-western Mozambique) was inhabited by the ancestors of the Chewa people. Oral traditions

1 Red pigment was used rarely by the ancestors of the Chewa for another painted tradition that I do not discuss here for lack of space (Smith 1995; Mgomozulu 1978; Zubieta 2006).

2 Ngoni people came into the area after 1835 when they first crossed the Zambezi (Lane Poole 1949; Read 1956; Linden 1971; Mgomozulu 1978).



and historical accounts confirm this conclusion. Moreover, the rock paintings cover an area almost identical to the extent of spread of the modern Chewa people. The ancestors of the Chewa migrated from the southern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, according to the oral traditions<sup>3</sup> (Marwick 1963; Phiri 1975; Newitt 1982) and arrived around the 8th century AD at the Malawian lakeshore. The Chewa are a matrilineal group that belongs to the western Bantu-language speaking branch.

It was only recently that the specific tradition of paintings that I deal with in this paper has been linked specifically to *Chinamwali*, the girls' initiation ceremony of Chewa (Smith 1995; Zubieta 2006, 2009a, 2009b). During my fieldwork in 2003, I had confirmation by some local women in central Malawi that Mwana wa Chentcherere II rock shelter was used for girl's ceremonies in the past. Moreover, I recorded the meaning of a few specific images at this shelter and for the first time this link was ethnographically recorded and published (Zubieta 2006: 94–9).

My teacher mentioned the meaning of three images at Mwana wa Chentcherere II, a site that comprises 50–60 images. One of the spread-eagle designs was said to be a baboon (Figure 8), while other two spread-eagles were said to represent when the tutor takes the initiate to wash to the river. A third spread-eagle was said to be a dance that is performed inside the hut of initiation (*tsimba*), where the instructions are secret.

My teacher, however, did not remember the meaning of every single image at the site, but the important point that I want to stress, and that I learned from the Chewa women back then in 2003, was that the meaning of the image is only given to the initiate when she goes through *Chinamwali*. Thus, although the spread-eagle designs were formally similar, in the context of initiation they were given various meanings.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in order to understand the paintings it is important to know what the ceremony comprises, even if the Chewa nowadays no longer paint rock shelters for initiation ceremonies.

Farming rock art in the region is fairly recent and perhaps one of the last painting traditions in sub-Saharan Africa. In Zambia, for example, Jim Chaplin recorded that one of the zoomorphic figures at Sakwe, a rock shelter in eastern Zambia, received a 'new coat of clayey buff paint shortly before his visit in 1958' (Phillipson 1976: 186); however, Chaplin was not present when this painting was made.

Rock art is no longer made in the present, but an important element allows us to discuss the possible meanings and uses of these rock paintings in the past: the material culture of initiation. Although we have early reports of clay figures reported in the area for initiation ceremonies (Lancaster 1934; Winterbottom and Lancaster 1965), it was only in the 1990s that Kenji Yoshida (1992, 1993) published a photograph of spread-eagle design clay reliefs moulded on the floor and decorated with red, black and white dots. Similar designs, even nowadays, are still moulded out of clay and used in modern ceremonies throughout the Chewa realm (Zubieta 2009b).

Taking into consideration the limitations (e.g. change) of using an ethnographic approach, I propose that it is through the understanding of the uses of the present material culture that is possible to gain some understanding of how this rock art was made and used in the recent past (Zubieta 2009b). Rock art was made as part of a specific context, girls' initiation, and this allows us to think of rock art in a dynamic way. Thus, rock art images become not just something static embedded in the walls of the rock shelters, but also something that was used for a specific purpose. The word 'use' really implies not only the function of the paintings for the initiation ceremonies per se but also the interaction of the images and the people who made them and used them, as I explain below.

The use of clay figurines and wall paintings in initiation schools is a well-known practice in south-central Africa. They are used to instruct the initiates in secrets and traditions (Cory 1956). Today there is no certainty that the Chewa employ paintings during the *Chinamwali* girls' initiation ceremony; however, the formal similarities between the rock paintings and the material culture employed in this ceremony have led researchers to establish some possible uses of and meanings for this rock art tradition (Phillipson 1976; Lindgren and Schoffeleers 1978; Prins and Hall 1994; Smith 1995, 1997; Zubieta 2006, 2009a, 2009b). Material culture plays a crucial role as mnemonic devices in the learning process during the girls' initiation (Smith 1997; Zubieta 2006, 2009b).

The use of clay reliefs is little known among the Chewa (but see Yoshida 1992, 1993; Zubieta 2009b). Most of the literature vaguely describes such material culture and gives as a fact their role as mnemonic devices (Lancaster 1934; Winterbottom and Lancaster 1965; Yoshida 1992; Smith 1995), but no detailed explanation has been given of what they represent and how they function.

3 There is another version that states that their ancestors came from East Africa in the area of the Great Lakes (Schoffeleers 1992; Phiri 1975).

4 I have dealt with the meanings of the spread-eagle design through the use of the body theory and ethnographic analogy elsewhere and this will not be discussed here at length (Zubieta 2006, 2009a).

Sharing some of the meanings of the material culture, from my fieldwork in eastern Zambia and central Malawi, is not possible because of the secret and sacred aspect of this material culture (Zubieta 2009b), but I present the aspects I feel are pertinent to this paper and which I have been allowed by the Chewa women after my own initiation. The teacher of initiation (*namkungwi*), with the help of the tutors (*aphungu*), is the only one capable of creating the objects used during the initiation. Women consider this important because not everyone has the knowledge to make objects for initiation.

During the ceremony the objects indeed are shown to the young girls, but this is what is important: the objects do not stay statically on the ground just to admire but they have to be pointed at by the initiate after they have been instructed, and at other times the girl has to memorise certain aspects of songs that involve such objects. On other occasions, the girls have to dance around them. Thus, objects are accompanied by songs, dances and music throughout the ceremony with the purpose of giving the initiates specific instructions. This lively and dynamic way of instruction allows the initiates to memorise specific things.

In *Chinamwali* the teachings are dictated through the *mwambo*; these are rules that become a deep part of a woman's life. Some of these objects are covered with dots, and each colour has a meaning. Dots are important for instruction purposes as they also appear on the body of the initiate (Yoshida 1993) and as I pointed out previously, some of the paintings are also covered with dots. It is possible to think that these dots also had a teaching purpose (Zubieta 2009b).

The Chewa women explained me that the girl receives different instructions depending on the moment that she is going through in her life; in other words, they use the same object to indicate various teachings in different stages of a woman's life: 'it is not the same to instruct someone when she has her first menstruation as when she is going to have a baby'. If we understand then that the rock paintings were made in the context of girls' initiation, we can also start to understand the complexity of the uses of material culture in order to propose how the paintings might have been used to communicate messages in the past. Paintings were used as another mnemonic device that could have been pointed at, danced around and sang to. Moreover, paintings perhaps had multiple layers of meanings.

It is during the ritual that women deal with their own role in society and transform it. The paintings were part of a complex mechanism in which singing and dancing gave life to the two-dimensional images that helped women to express ideas on fertility, sexuality and also their familial situation, their conflicts and their condition of being women in Chewa society.

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Figure 1. Map showing the location of the rock art of Chinamwali. Map courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin (I added the shaded area to show the broad location of the paintings).



Figure 2. The spread-eagled design is the characteristic motif of the rock art of Chinamwali. In this photography we can appreciate a few shapes of the spread-eagled design. Panel approx. length 50 cm (photo: Leslie F. Zubieta).

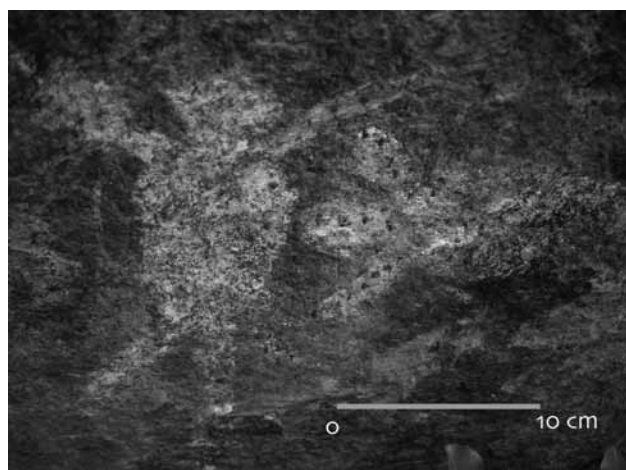


Figure 3. Spread-eagled design cover with small black dots (photo: Leslie F. Zubieta).



Figure 4. Spread-eagled design delineated in white and covered with white dots. Spread-eagled approx. height 55cm (photo: Leslie F. Zubieta).



Figure 5. A snake-like motif, originally covered with black dots, accompanies a couple of white spread-eagled designs. The one on the left is partially covered with black dots. Panel approx. length 3m (photo: Leslie F. Zubieta).



Figure 6. White circles accompany two spread-eagled designs – one with black dots – and a snake-like motif (photo: Leslie F. Zubieta).





Figure 7. The hoe (approx. 15cm in length) is one of the few artefacts depicted in the rock art of Chinamwali (photo: Leslie F. Zubieta).



Figure 8. This image was identified as the representation of a baboon at the site Mwana wa Chentcherere II, central Malawi in 2003 by one of the teachers of initiation. Spread-eagled approx. height 50cm (Photo: Leslie F. Zubieta; Zubieta 2006: 95-97).



Figure 9. Cheŵa women still make objects for girls' initiation. This chilengo is made with raw clay and covered with red, black and white dots. Recorded in Chadiza district, eastern Zambia (Photo: Leslie F. Zubieta; Zubieta 2009b).