

To the beat of drums and the voices of singing women, two Nyau dancers in Malawi tell stories and teach lessons in the Gule Wamkulu, or the “great dance.”



Living Rock Art

Looking for hidden sites and secret rites in rural Malawi

by JONATHON REYNOLDS

I WIPE THE SWEAT from my eyes and look up the path through the dense scrub to a huge granite boulder. Small caves on either side of it look like dark eyes staring out at us as we hike to the rock art at the rocky Chentcherere outcrop in the central part of the southern African country of Malawi. Around the edge of the boulder I see the rock art and my heart sinks. The site is spectacular—a 40-foot-wide panel of granite covered with a crowd of white figures

in all shapes and sizes mixed in with very faint red geometric designs that look like ladders—but almost all of it is obscured by a cloud of black and white modern graffiti. Only the heads of the largest white figures break free of the scribbles onto the clean rock high on the wall.

Reactions are mixed in our small group. Mr. Gondwe, about 60 years old, the local village expert on rock art paintings, is not surprised. He has brought the curious here for decades

and has seen the recent changes at the site. My guide, Malizani Phiri, who is in charge of developing tourism around the city of Dezda, reacts with anger. Henry Ngambi, a local guide, is upset because he may not be able to bring tourists here anymore. Martin Ngwira, our driver, doesn't react at all. Years ago, rock art inspired my interest in archaeology, so to see these paintings defaced is very upsetting—hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years of local history destroyed in



a few years by the local equivalent of “Leroy was here!”

This is one of four rock-art sites at Chentcherere in the newly designated UNESCO Chongoni World Heritage Site. Gondwe is adamant that there are no other sites, and he does not believe me when I say there are at least 127 in the area, according to a small map supplied to UNESCO by the Department of Antiquities in Malawi. UNESCO describes the Chongoni area as “the richest concentration of rock art in Central Africa,” for the variety and extent of its rock art, which consists of two overlapping traditions—the abstract red art of the Batwa people, who were similar to modern pygmies in Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda, and the white figures of the Chewa people, who displaced the Batwa in the fifteenth century when they migrated from what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. For the Chewa, the rock art once played a key role in ceremonies and initiation rites, and helped villagers adapt to social change. I’ve come to see some of this rock art and determine if it still has a place in the lives and ceremonies of the locals.

The map, which is my only clue to the locations of these sites, is the result of the work of a few scholars such as Ben Smith, director of the Rock Art Research Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. It is covered with dozens of dots, but unfortunately it is not very detailed. We’re going to have to be clever if we’re going to see more than this defaced wall.

FROM THE TOP OF the outcrop, we can see much of the region. To the north, Chongoni Mountain cuts a ragged line across the cloudy sky. Malizani and I look over the map and discuss how to find some of the other sites. He looks out of place in his long green dress pants, shiny black shoes, dark blue dress shirt, and a white vest, but Malizani is now determined to help me find sites in a better state than the one at Chentcherere. His name, he tells me, means “if you start something you should finish it.” When he was a student, he recalls, his class was supposed to go to a rock-art site until the trip organizer disappeared with the trip money. But

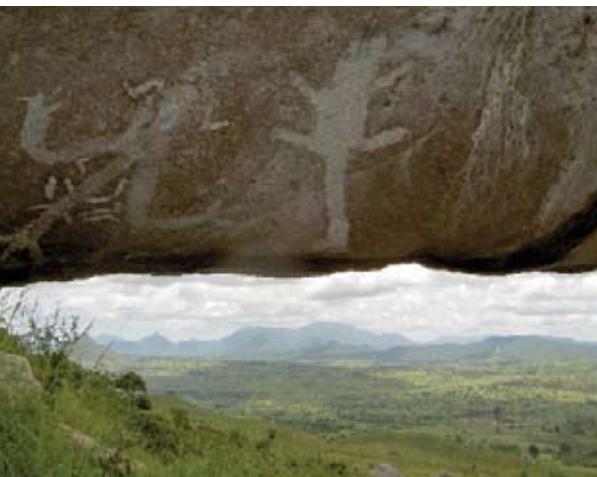
Malizani remembers the name of the village nearby: Mphunzi. It is on the map and is now our next destination.

We take our leave of Gondwe and spend an hour traversing 12 miles of rough road. The guides and driver are amazed I would travel so far for rock paintings. Martin, the driver, is characteristically quiet, but when asked about the rock art, he says, “It is our heritage, we should protect it and respect it even if we don’t understand it.” We arrive in Mphunzi in time to see students streaming out of the school, and we ask a boy if he knows about rock-art sites near the village. Schoolbooks in hand, he leads us through fields of maize, past small huts sheltering children whose job it is to scare away monkeys, and directly to a huge split boulder. He leads us into the gap, where the entire left wall—a 20-by-20-foot area—is covered in red schematic paintings, a band of circles, waves, and huge checkerboard patterns. There is no sign of modern graffiti. Little is known about the age of this type of work, or its specific meanings to the hunter-gatherer Batwas who made it. Malizani excitedly questions the boy about other

sites, and before we leave we visit three similar sites in and around Mphunzi. All are pristine, even the one just a few feet from a house.

These sites are much closer to a large population than those at Chentcherere, but they appear to be protected. When I ask why, no one has an answer. In theory, the Malawian government is supposed to follow the UNESCO recommendations to preserve and protect these sites, as well as those at Chentcherere, but little if anything has been done. The fences the government once put up around Chentcherere were taken down and used as farm implements by locals. They were never replaced.

Opposite, our driver, Martin Ngwira looks toward Chongoni Mountain from above Mwana wa Chentcherere II. Below are examples of the two styles of rock art found in the Chongoni area: the red, geometric patterns of Batwa art and the white, figurative designs of the Chewa people.



The 50-square-mile Chongoni area became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2006, and includes both the Batwa and Chewa work. According to scholars, the paintings range in age from thousands of years to mere decades old. Sometimes the two styles occur at separate sites, and in other places, like Chentcherere, they coexist and overlap. While the Batwa tradition is purely abstract and follows features of the rock face, the Chewa work features people and paintings of animals, such as a lizard with black spots. The rock art style continued into modern times—one painting on Chongoni Mountain shows a motor car. But now their art, and the social role it once played, is being quickly forgotten.

A joint effort of the University of Malawi and the University of California at Berkeley in 1972, led by J. Desmond Clark, excavated a number of Iron Age habitation sites and rock shelters. It was followed by a few others, but recently the main focus of research in the area has been the cultural interpretation of the rock art, and specifically the link between the rock art and the secret instructional initiation rites still practiced by the Chewa.

AT DAWN THE NEXT day, Malizani is eager for the search, but first we will see a ceremonial performance related to the Chinamwali, or a female initiation rite depicted in some of the rock art of Chentcherere. Malizani has traded his shiny black shoes for decent boots, but nothing will tempt him to give up his umbrella, apparently an integral part of any explorer's kit in Malawi. In the few days I have known him, I have never seen him use his umbrella except as a walking stick, but I acquiesce when he insists I bring one too.

A few rough, bumpy hours later, we see the Gule Wamkulu, or the "great dance." This dance,



The site of Mwana wa Chentchere II shows initiation rite figures marred by modern graffiti. Below, my guide Malizani Phiri—umbrella in hand—continues the search for more rock art sites.

performed by the elaborately masked dancers of the Nyau, a secretive Chewa spirit society, is essentially a morality play about how to behave in society and often evolves to adapt to social changes. The dancers whirl and shake to the sound of drums and women singing. There are unique masks for each of the dozens of different dances on topics such as how to choose a wife, the duties of a husband, gender roles in the community, etc. Great shouts of approval greet each new dancer. The dancers are hidden behind and occasionally dwarfed by the imposing masks depicting white men, Asian men, and some sort of combination of a lion or cheetah and a fire god. The cat-fire-god dances with torches in his hands, which he extinguishes by crushing them into the ground with his bare chest. The loudest shouts from the crowd are reserved for the small boys and girls doing dances that seem to be about sexual conduct. As the great dance progresses, I start to see similarities between the masked figures and the rock art at Chentcherere. Some of the drawn figures resemble the masks very closely and can look, if you move your head the right way, as though they are dancing. The Gule Wamkulu is



like seeing archaeology come to life.

Leslie F. Zubieta, a graduate student at the Rock Art Research Institute at the Witwatersrand, draws definitive links among the rock art at a site called Mwana wa Chentcherere II, the Chinamwali female initiations, and the Gule Wamkulu. Certain rock-art sites illustrate stories that taught gender-related roles, duties, and taboos, which were then dramatized and reinforced in the dances and ceremonies. Zubieta had access to the secret Chinamwali, and local elders guided her through Mwana wa Chentcherere II. One image, for example, showing a large figure holding a smaller one, represents the practice of taking a young initiate to the river to teach her how to clean herself during menstruation. The corresponding women-only ceremony involves a frog mask (always clean because it lives in the water) and culminates with the shaving of all of a girl's hair, marking the transition to womanhood. Some of the designs are even personal accounts, drawn by the initiates themselves and explained to the next generation of young women.

The Chewa have used the art and dances to help them maintain their

traditions, build ties between villages, and cohere as a culture in a changing world in which they have been subject to invasion, colonization, the slave trade, independence, and now the threat of AIDS and modern poverty. Also, the art served a special purpose when the Nyau and their masks and rituals were discouraged in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries by missionaries, the British colonial government, and Ngoni migrants from the south. The art became the Chewa's only connection with their initiation traditions, but it no longer appears that it is part of the instruction and initiation. These sites needed to be remote and secret in order to fulfill their role in initiation ceremonies. As more and more people knew where they were and visited them, they lost their value, even as the public and private ceremonies continue. "I believe this is both because Mwana wa Chentcherere II is no longer hidden from the eyes of non-initiates; and because social change has seen women modify aspects of the ceremony—the

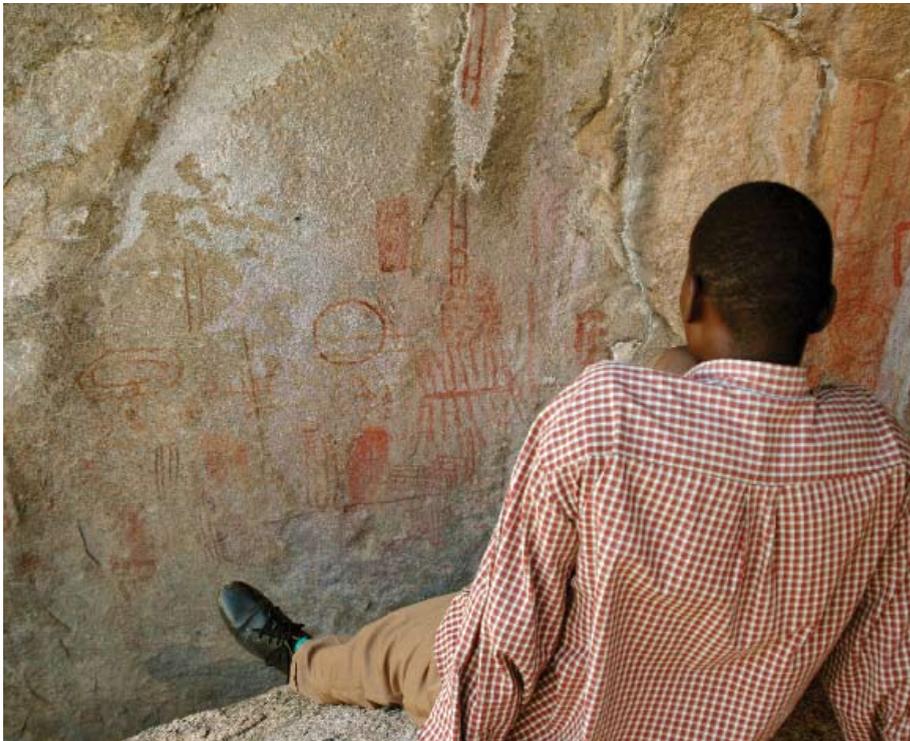
The wall of Batwa art near the village of Mphunzi was the first we had seen that had escaped the modern damage we saw at Mwana wa Chentchere II.

site therefore no longer serves as a useful means of instruction," Zubieta writes.

We leave the dance to resume our hunt for rock art. Malizani and I identified Banda Mountain on the map, a steep hill rising more than 300 feet from the scrub jungle. Several of the dots denoting rock art overlap there.

Access to these sites is more difficult than the previous day. The road on the map quickly becomes impassable and we have to push our way on foot across uneven terrain through dense overgrowth knit together with long vines. Four hours later, with the sun dipping to the horizon, we have found only two small sites, one is just a few faint red lines and the other is a star-shaped painting over what looks like a red banded snake. These sites are safe from defacement—they're too small, too hard reach, and too hard to find. Hot, scratched, and dirty, we straggle back to the truck, hoping it will start and get us back to our lodge before it is dark.

WE HAVE VISITED OVER 20 sites in the last week, but none as impressive as Mphunzi. On the last day, the sites we





The women back away from one of the last Nyau dancers of the day—the one representing the white colonial government.

are looking for are unfamiliar even to the local villagers. One leads us over a mountain to a huge cave, but all we find there is faded graffiti and a floor churned into a muddy quagmire by cattle. In another village, an older man tells us there are rock-art sites on the mountain above. His directions are vague and interspersed with warnings about thorny vines and some type of plant that itches and burns. We get the impression he only knows the sites through stories passed down from his ancestors.

From a maize field the hill rises steeply in dense tangled brush. We spread out and struggle up. The local guide Henry Ngambi is off to my right and I can hear Malizani to my left, crashing through the brush with his umbrella. Soon even those sounds fade away and my world shrinks to a circle of green crisscrossed by thorny branches. My pants are already torn in four places and my upper thigh is bleeding from a particularly nasty encounter with hooked thorns. I climb a granite slope to another impenetrable maze of interlaced branches, but through them I see tantalizing glimpses of pink granite. Forcing my way through the thorns at the expense of long red scratches on my arms, I straighten up and freeze—spread across the rock in front of me are a series of pristine red Batwa paintings arranged around natural features in the rock. They cover about 10 feet of the rock, curving parallel red lines joined to make a

snaky ladder. Around a round hole in the rock, a centipede-like drawing is flanked by two sets of seven vertical parallel lines. The brush is so thick I can't see where the paintings end.

I am spellbound. I know I am not the first person to see these paintings—the Department of Antiquities map is dated 2003, but at this moment, alone in the jungle, these pictures are a connection across time, to a lost hunter-gatherer society whose traditions gave way to the more complex symbology of the Chewa. The isolation and difficult access will preserve this site for a long time, perhaps. Others will not be so lucky, but the good condition of the accessible sites at Mphunzi demonstrate that it is possible to protect with education and respect instead of fences and thorns. I stand and stare until a sharp cry of pain from below and a whistle from above bring me back to reality. Malizani ran into the old man's stinging plant, and his arms are covered in large bumps, and Henry found another set of rock paintings above. But I stand transfixed another few moments, ease my way back through the thorns, and leave this place to the next person to stumble across it. ■

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