



Rock Paintings and Engravings in Suba Region along the Eastern Shores of Lake Victoria Basin, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The subject of rock art elicits a lot of interests. Although the Trust for African Rock (TARA) Project has conducted research in this field across some parts of the country, not much of has been conducted about rock paintings and engravings on the Eastern Shores of Lake Victoria, Kenya. Previous research involved a general survey of the region but less emphasis was put on mapping of rock art in the study area. This article gives an indepth analysis of their origin and meaning of these cultural heritage resources that are potential ecotourism destinations in Western Kenya. The aims of this study include interrogating various site feature paintings, classifying the rock art and provision of critical ethnographic accounts related to the cultural heritage based on oral reconstruction. Phenomenological and ethnographic modes of data collection alongside visual inspection was employed during the study. Content Analysis was used to develop meanings and values of the rock art paintings. Value Theory was significant in the interpretation of the data collected. Finally, the study contextualizes the rock paintings and engravings within the East African context.

Keywords: Engraving, ethnographic, oral history, phenomenology, rock painting, rock Art.

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1.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Research work relating to rock art in the Lake Victoria Basin started as early as 1950s. Archaeological investigations regarding the location of rock art sites, and their artistic styles as well as the associated cultural practices and meanings around Lake Victoria were discussed by [Chaplin \(1974\)](#). [Posnansky and Nelson \(1968\)](#) studied rock paintings and carried out excavations at Nyero in Uganda. [Soper and](#)

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Golden (1969) also reported the presence of rock art sites during their archaeological survey of Mwanza region in Tanzania. Robbins (1970) investigated the rock paintings at Napudeh Hill in Uganda. In 1974, Chaplin's work on rock art sites in Lake Victoria Basin discussed in detail most of the previous rock art research in the region.

Chaplin (1974: 19) reported the presence of red ochre paintings at the top of a hill called Itone on Mfangano Island. The figures consisted of concentric circles, spirals, and stylistic 'sun' figures. One of the 'sun' figures was practically elaborate consisting of a flame-like drawing, painted on the outer perimeter of a series of concentric circles. The site was associated with supernatural powers and miraculous events by the local residents. This brief inclusion of the Mfangano Island in Chaplin's article was based on the report of anthropologists from California State University who on their anthropological studies noted the presence of this rock art site in this area. Although this rock art site was reported in Chaplin's (1974) work, no further archaeological investigation was done in the area until recently. Apart from this report, no research work has been done in this area since to investigate these rock paintings further and to explore their relationship with other well-documented rock art sites in the Lake region. The name of the hill "Itone" refers to the site known today as Kwitone, and was identified as one of the rock art sites on Mfangano Island. The brief inclusion of this site in Chaplin's 1974 article and the apparent neglect of the region by previous researchers interested in rock art, necessitated the need for a renewed vigorous investigation of rock art sites in Suba District as a whole.

This paper presents research findings of a recent archaeological survey that led to the discovery of more rock art sites in the region. The aims of the study included 1. Identification and classification of the various rock art designs in Suba region, 2. Establishing the values and meanings of the different forms of rock art paintings in the study area. The field survey was carried out between June and July 2014 by a team of experts, which included archaeologist, a planner and a photographer. The survey crew visited and carried out visual inspection as well as made sketches and photographs of the various artistic drawings from different sites in Suba District. During fieldwork, various forms of artistic drawings were identified and recorded from sites on Mfangano Island and the adjacent Gwasi mainland.

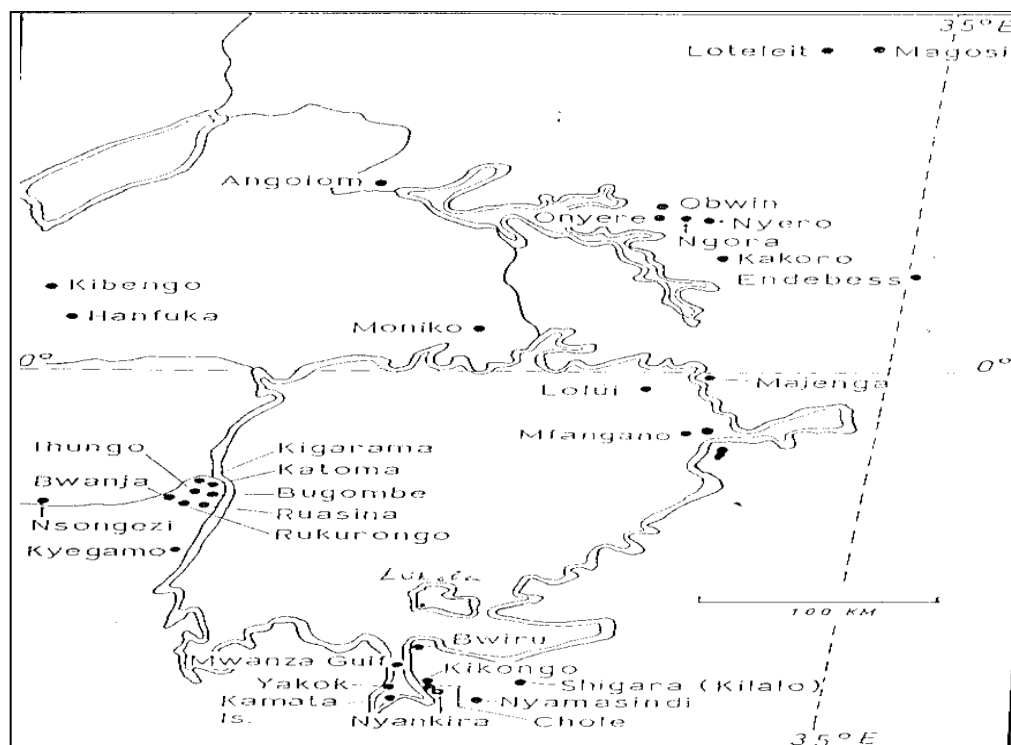
Generally, the meaning of the paintings is unknown; their interpretation could be understood in terms of ethnographic accounts related to these rock art sites in Eastern Africa. However, similarities exist in modern pygmy symbols applied to bark-cloth suggesting fertility and rain-making rituals. Oral interviews with the local elders provided information about the current uses of rock art sites in the region. Apparently, many rock art sites in the region remained in use for ceremonial and religious purposes. Finally, this paper presents new evidence for rock art engravings and paintings on the eastern islands of Lake Victoria and the adjacent Gwasi mainland in Suba District, Western Kenya. The other research questions attempted in this article include their origins and meaning in the broader East African context. An attempt has been made to place them within the East African rock art framework.

1.01 GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

Lake Victoria is the largest lake in Africa. Many islands punctuate this vast water mass in the three East African countries but most of them in Uganda and Tanzania. Two of these islands, Mfangano and Rusinga, with their adjacent shores, provide the nucleus of Suba District on the eastern shores of Kenya. The largest island, Mfangano, rises steeply from the great Lake, a hunched-over giant clothed with green vegetation. Its rocky backbone rises over three hundred metres above the Lake and is exposed as tall red cliffs in some places. The shore is edged by black rocks with overhanging fig trees, beaches with black volcanic sand and narrow stands of reeds. The land is rocky and the soil shallow, but a stunted dry forest of olive and associated trees survives on the higher slopes. On the eastern side, the climate is drier and plants tend to be bushy and thorny including acacias, shrubs and bushes. To the north and west, there is a little more rain and more diverse dry forest (Fig. 1). Some parts of the Island have sandy soil and sedimentary rock layers. Hills that rise from the centre are largely denuded but have many sites and features sacred to the local people.

The area is occupied by the Abasuba who is both Luo and Bantu speakers. They came into this region from Uganda more than 200 years ago. The name 'Suba' means people who are always wandering. They displaced and intermarried with the Nilotic Luo speakers in the area. The people cluster in small villages along the narrow Lake Victoria shoreline or live in widely-scattered homes on the steep slopes. The Suba people make their living from fishing. Further inland, there are agriculturists who grow maize, millet, beans, fruits as well as keeping cattle, goats, sheep, and chicken. Living along the water with a developed system of water transport, the locals are highly mobile and often move throughout the Lake Victoria region in search of fishing and trade. Rusinga Island is connected to the mainland by a causeway. The Island is densely populated with the shoreline dotted with many farms.

The smaller islands between Rusinga and Mfangano are also different. Takawiri Island, located to the east of Mfangano is low-lying, with planted coconut trees and beaches of gold sand. Too small rocky islands called Mbasas are also within the vicinity.



2.0 METHODOLOGY

2.01 DATA COLLECTION

The study involved general survey of the whole of the Eastern Shores of Lake Victoria Basin. During the survey, visual inspection of the geometric and concentric designs of the various rock art was undertaken. Photography of the various artistic drawings from different sites provided accurate illustrations of the cultural heritage.

The study employed ethnographic phenomenological collections of oral history of the sites from 10 elderly members (age between 70-90 years) out of 30 identified elders of the same age-bracket in the host communities (Plate 2). Purposive sampling was used to identify these informants. The study began with the identification of resource persons who were knowledgeable about the rock art (aged 70-90 years old). These were persons considered knowledgeable because they had grown up in the area surrounding the sites, had often used the sites for different purposes. In addition, they were aged seventy years and above thus could be viewed as custodians of the community's wisdom. Face to face interviews was used collect the meanings and interpretations of the rock art. Tape recording was done during the oral interviews. The information collected were transcribed, and then translated for the

researcher's use. Observation of the rock art sites and their surroundings was done through a tour of the locality to ascertain the existence of the rock art and visual inspection of the individual rock art. In addition, focused group discussions among the youth, elderly women and elderly men (Plate 1), of about 300 respondents (30%) out of 1200 inhabitants occupying the study area using stratified systematic sampling method of every 2 households, were carried out establish the values of the rock art and to compare with the information from individual informants (Hayombe, P.O., Odede .F.Z.A., Agong', S.G., Mossberg. L., 2014).

2.02 DATA ANALYSIS

The primary data was organized into thematic areas using content analysis. Nachmias & Nachmias (2009) defines content analysis as any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages. Kothari (2009) further argues that content analysis consists of analyzing the content of documentary material such as books, magazines and the content of other verbal material which can be either spoken or printed. Before 1940s, content analysis was frequently used in quantitative analysis of documentary material regarding particular characteristics that could be identified and counted. However, since 1950s content analysis has been qualitatively used in analyzing primary data. Qualitative content analytical approaches focus on analyzing both the explicit or manifest content of a text as well as interpretations of latent content of texts- that which can be interpreted or interpolated from the text, but is not explicitly stated in it. In the current research, analysis and interpretation of data was done to develop thematic areas with respect to the study objectives. This was accomplished through use of the Value Theory. Value Theory was applied in the analysis to establish meaning and significance of the rock art to the host communities where the sites are located.

Plate 1: Stakeholder Consultative Discussions at Mfangano Island. Plate 2: Elderly Informants from Suba Community.



3.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Site Location and Description

Rock art sites were recorded on different parts of Mfangano Island and the adjacent Gwasi mainland. Mfangano island is located at $0^{\circ} 26'S$, $34^{\circ} 01'E$ in Suba District, Kenya (Fig. 1).

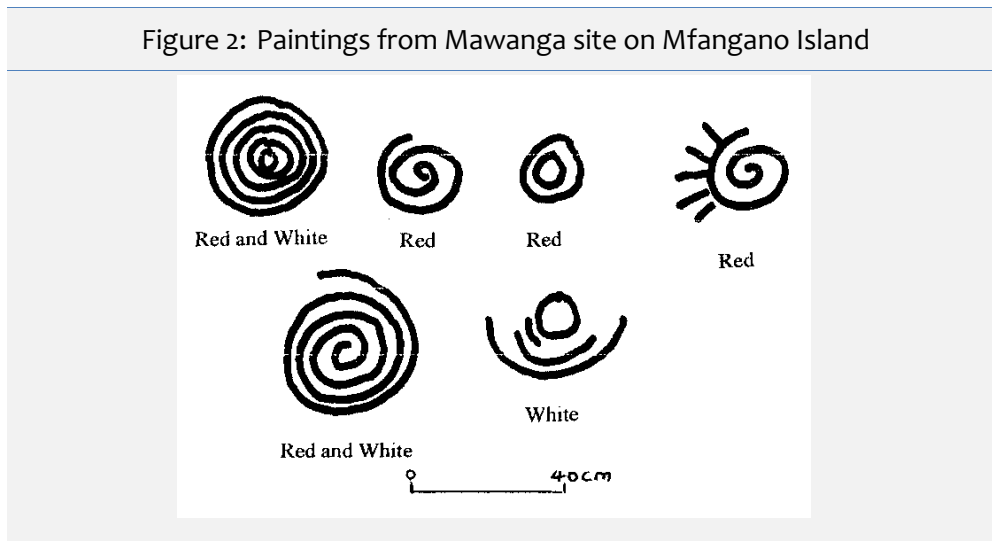
Rock Painting Sites in Suba

Rock painting sites include Mawanga cave and Kwitone on Mfangano Island. Their description is presented below.

Mawanga Cave

The cave at Mawanga on Mfangano Island is located at S 00 26 808, E 0 3357 690, just above the boat landing point. The site consists of a triangular-shaped cave, about 18 meters across the mouth and 12 meters at its deepest point. The roof lowers rapidly towards the back while there is a raised platform against the rear of the left wall. Behind the platform is a narrow recess about a meter deep. Soot on

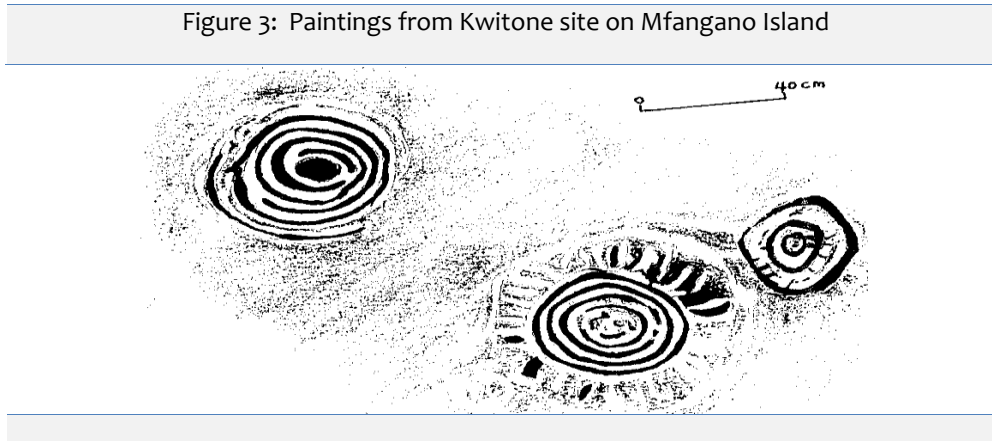
the cave roof and rear walls indicate its recent or previous occupation. Local clan warriors used the cave during inter-clan fighting in the past.



The site feature paintings, about 12 in number, which are located on the front, left wall and consist of concentric circles, spirals and a spiral with rays. They are smaller than those in Kwitone and less dramatic, but are executed in the same way and possibly belong to the same tradition (Fig. 2).

Kwitone Rock Shelter (Wagimbe)

On the upland part of Mfangano Island is the Kwitone rock shelter which is located at S 00 27458, E 03359962. The land is owned by Mr. Osodo.



The site consists of a 50 meter long overhang in the sand stone cliff below the shoulder of a ridge. The paintings are at the far end of the site, on the shelter wall over a sloping ledge and some four metres above the floor. Another ladder leads up to the main panel of paintings. The paintings are 11 in number and consist of spirals, concentric circles and circular geometric patterns executed in red and white (Fig. 3).

At both sites the paintings appear to be made of haematite and white clay, probably mixed with a binder such as plant juice, blood, egg-white, honey or urine, that is, some substance which carried the pigment into the rock making it more-or-less permanent. At the time of execution, the pigments were probably thinned with water and then smeared on the rock with the fingers. The surface rock appeared to have been prepared first by polishing with a stone and then the painted circles slightly ground down before paint was applied. The paintings may have been retouched or even completely repainted over time. The art is similar to those at Mawanga, although retaining more of its colour and vibrancy.

Rock Engraving Sites in Suba

The survey recorded cupules and rock gongs in various parts of the region. Rock cupules are found both on Mfangano Island and on the adjacent Gwasi mainland. They do not retain any ceremonial powers but are still in use for the traditional bao game, which in Suba is played with four rows of eight holes. Cupules are found on the rocky surfaces around Kwitone rock painting site. Another site, which has cupule engravings, is located on the adjacent Gwasi mainland opposite Mfangano Island.

Rock gongs are usually free-standing boulders balanced on the living rock, which have a natural resonance and often bear a number of cupules. A rock gong site is located on the southeastern side of Mfangano Island. Another rock gong site is situated on the adjacent Gwasi mainland.

Classification of the Rock Art

Two main types of rock art were diagnosed in Suba, namely, rock paintings and rock engravings or carvings.

Plate 1: Cupules at Gwasi mainland



Plate 2: Rock gong at Mfangano Island



Most rock painting sites in the region feature a geometric style of art usually consisting of concentric circles painted in red and white. This particular style is dominant in the Lake Victoria Basin.

Other paintings include spirals, circular geometric patterns and spiral with rays. Rock engraving sites in the area include "cupule" sites where cup-shaped depressions have been ground into the rock surface into the rock surface. Although cupules often resemble a bao game, their original use is likely to have been for ritual purposes such as initiation. Cupules are thought to be amongst the oldest form of rock art, in the world, probably predating paintings such as those at Mawanga and Kwitone in the same region (Fig. 3, Plate 1).

Rock gongs are normally free-standing boulders balanced on the living rock which have a natural resonance and often has a number of cupules. When the boulders are struck with a stone they emit a ringing tone like a beaten gong. Rhythmic striking of these rock gongs produces a series of notes that carry great distances (Fig. 4, Plate 2).

Oral History and Ethnographic Accounts Related to Mawanga and Kwitone Rock Art Sites

The paintings at Mawanga are thought to have been made by Twa, forager- hunters who predated the Nilotic Luo speakers who were displaced in historic times by Bantu-speaking Abasuba currently a mixed race of Luo and Bantus, known collectively as Luo-Abasuba. The paintings are similar in style to those found in many places around the Lake Victoria Basin and feature red and white painted concentric circles, spirals and sunbursts. They are thought to be between 1000 to 4000 years old. Although they are painted as part of a vanished mythology, the cave, the paintings and the surrounding area retain powers in the traditions of the Abasuba. The Wasamo clan, who live around the cave are the rain

makers of the Abasuba, and the elders agree that the paintings have been used for rain making ceremonies, with the red paintings representing the moon and the white ones the sun.

The elders of the Wagimbe clan explained that the locals used to communicate with the ancestors at the site of Kwitone. The Wagimbe also says that their grandmothers were the painters, although the paintings were almost certainly made long before the Abasuba arrived. According to the elders, in times of wars and trouble, people would come to the cave asking the ancestors to bring peace. The Wagimbe clan also took refuge in a cave in times of inter-clan wars. People still come to the cave to ask the ancestors for victory and success in their various endeavors. Trees around the site are sacred and are never felled.

Regional Perspective

A number of rock gongs are found on the Lake Victoria basin, in the Moru Koppies in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park as well as in the Mount Kenya region. Similar paintings to those found at Mawanga and Kwitone also occur in Angola, Tanzania, Uganda and in Kenya as far to the east as Lukenya (about 70 km east of Nairobi).

The paintings are associated with autochthonous people who occupied much of central Africa before the advent of pastoral and farming populations. Some of their descendants survived well into the 20th century and have been described as small, strong, hairy, yellow people who lived by hunting with large bows and arrows as well as collecting wild food and honey. They were known to Bantu-speakers as Batwa. The paintings probably date between 1000 and 4000 years ago and only ceased to be made after the arrival of farming peoples in the region.

Figure 4: Plan of Lolui site featuring rock gong.

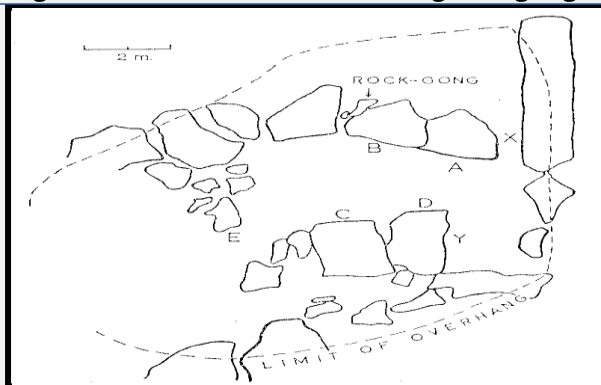
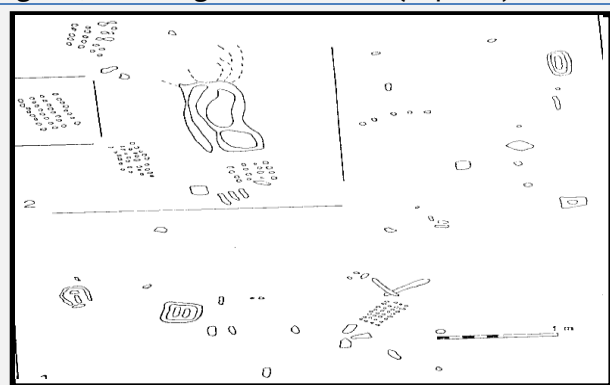


Figure 5: Paintings from Moniko (cupules)



Similar geometric style of art consisting of concentric circles has been found at other sites around Lake Victoria. One such site is Kikongo which is located at 2° 43'S, 32° 54'E on a rock above royal Sukuma graves in Mwanza region of Tanzania. The cleft between the rocks is the traditional place of execution for criminals and lepers (Tanner, 1953: 62-7; Chaplin, 1974: 12).

The site of Kakoro has similar concentric circles, rock-gongs and crude white paintings on a conspicuous rock (10 m high) on the southwest end of a saddle-shaped hill. The site is situated at 1°10'N, 34° 05'E in Teso region of Uganda. This is a rain-sacrifice site which is still in use (Lawrance, 1958: 39; Chaplin, 1974: 10). Lolui Island is located at 0° 08'S, 33° 43'E in eastern Uganda, 200 km north of Suba District of Kenya. The island has eight rock art sites (Fig. 4). The sites feature numerous rock-gongs, which have also been found in Suba region (Posnansky, 1961:105; Gartlan & Posnansky, 1965).

Other similar drawings of concentric circles have been recorded at Loteteleit rock art site. Its exact location is 2°55'N,34°25'E. The site is situated on a small hill in Karamoja region of Uganda (Morton, 1967:209; Chaplin, 1974:17).

The cupules found around Kwitone site in Mfangano island and the adjacent Gwasi mainland in Suba District display the same artistic styles and current local use as the so-called rows of small depressions engraved on laterite soil at Moniko site in Uganda. Moniko site lies at $0^{\circ}23'N$, $30^{\circ}54'E$ at about 1310 metres above the sea level. The shallow depressions resemble the *mancala*-type of board game, which is known locally in Luganda as "enyeso". Their use was however unknown to the local herdsmen around Moniko site (Chaplin & McFarlane, 1967:207-8; Chaplin, 1974:19).

Rock art paintings at Yayok ($2^{\circ}48'S, 32^{\circ}52'E$) and Nyankira ($2^{\circ}45'S, 32^{\circ}55'E$) sites in Mwanza Gulf, exhibit artistic drawing styles such as concentric circles, spiral and rock-gongs (Tanner, 1953:62-7; Soper, 1968:175-9; Chaplin, 1974: 21-24), which are similar to those found in Suba District, Kenya.

Archaeological research in Teso region of Uganda established a cluster of rock art sites, which had more or less similar painted concentric circle styles (Lawrance, 1953:8-13, 1958:39-42). Sites found in this region include Nyero ($1^{\circ}22'N, 33^{\circ}50'E$), Obwin ($01^{\circ}38'N, 33^{\circ}38'E$), and Onyere ($01^{\circ}38'N, 33^{\circ}34'E$). They have drawings of concentric circles which are similar to those of Mawanga and Kwitone sites in Suba region of Western Kenya.

4.0 DISCUSSION

Although Chaplin (1974:39) labeled such forms of stylistic drawings as non representational art, it is important to correlate Suba rock art with the meanings of other similar artistic styles from other related rock art sites in the Lake region in order to establish the underlying values associated with these rock art.

The stylistic drawings from Suba rock art sites are dominated by concentric circles just like the upper site of Nyero (Chaplin, 1974:40). This form of art also exists at Obwin and Lolui Islands. Within contemporary ritual contests, the concentric circle, often.

In three significant colours, namely, red, white and black is widespread (Chaplin, 1974: 40). Such evidence points to a strong possibility that these drawings have a symbolic significance. The prominence of the symbol of circles needs to be looked at in great depth. Rock art sites around Lolui and Nyero that had concentric circles were all used as ritual sites for rain making ceremonies (Chaplin, 1974: 40).

Figure 7: Paintings from Obwin



Figure 8: Paintings from Yakok



Kakoro and Lolui closely resemble Mfangano Island and Gwasi mainland in terms of their artistic impressions of rock gongs. Some of the drawings at Mawanga site in Suba have been classified as spirals and concentric circles which have also been reported at Loteteleit and Kangetet sites in north-eastern Uganda (Morton, 1967:209; Chaplin, 1974).

On the southern side of Lake Victoria, the site of Kikongo in Mwanza region of Tanzania displays such regularity in the stylistic drawings of concentric circles as to suggest some form of seriousness about the artwork. The drawings suggest an attempt to illustrate time concepts with months of the year and the passage of the sun. The art could serve well as an illustration of the passage of time. The proximity of Kikongo site to an important burial place for chiefs together with the knowledge that the Sukuma people had a religious system giving prominence to the sun also add more weight to the idea (Chaplin, 1974: 42).

Generally, the meaning of the paintings is unknown, but their interpretation could be understood in terms of ethnographic accounts related to these rock art sites in Eastern Africa. Although the meaning of paintings is unclear, similarities exist in modern pygmy symbols applied to bark-cloth suggesting fertility and rain-making rituals.

Figure 9: Paintings from Nyankira



Pygmy women decorate the bark-cloth today, and this could also suggest that some of the paintings may have been made by women involved in female initiation.

Researchers working in Tanzania during the 20th century interviewed the locals about the paintings. In 1931 a chief at Bahi in Tanzania believed his descendants (12 generations earlier) used to carry out rain-making rituals at the site. Customarily, young Maa-speaking men from Tanzania and southern Kenya usually paint a symbol, often a shield on a rock shelter wall after undergoing ritual ceremony of rite of passage.

Modern agricultural Chewa farmers in Zambia and Malawi claim their ancestors made many Late White Paintings and, until recent times, used them during secret society rites of passage to teach initiates entering adulthood and explain circumstances of death. The underlying purposes of some East African rock art are more obscure, but they may well symbolize objects of reverence. The rock gongs could have been used to summon the spirits that were believed to live in the ground, create rain and to some extent control human well-being.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Arising from the comparative studies of the various stylistic drawings from Suba rock art sites in relation to other well-documented sites from the Lake Victoria basin, it is apparent that no single cultural group appears to emerge to whom all the rock art in the region can be ascribed. The wider evidence suggests an area, which was receiving but also experiencing some form of interactions within the larger Lake Victoria Basin as supported by similar forms of art found in various rock art sites in different parts of the Lake Victoria Basin. Although these sites share similar artistic features to some extent, they also differ from each other in other forms of artistic drawings. The majority of the art is painted and depicts abstract forms, the range of these being on the southern part of the Lake region and was previously referred to as non representational art.

Oral history and ethnographic analogy provide the possible origins and meanings of Suba rock art. The rock paintings are attributed to ancestral Twa, a forager-hunter people who may have originally been related to the pygmies of the eastern Congo. Most of these paintings are thought to have been made between 1000 and 4000 years ago and may have been used for rain-making purposes. It is known for instance that similar paintings in eastern Uganda only 200 km north of Suba District were used for this purpose.

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