

Challenges in preparing a serial transnational nomination for geometric rock art sites in the Lake Victoria region of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda



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Introduction

Lake Victoria's proposed rock art nomination represents an extensive collection of rock paintings. These include large geometric finger-painted shapes that bear an exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition that started over four millennia ago in connection with fertility and potency among the Pygmy hunter-gatherers, whose spirits are still in contact with generations living around the sites today (Namono, 2010a). For instance, the entrance to the Nyero 2 site in Uganda is shaped like a cervix (Figure 1) and it is indeed possible that at that time this area was used for fertility rituals.

The geometric rock art sites in the Lake Victoria Basin are found on granite outcrops, adding to the site's mystery. This is also seen on the islands of Lake Victoria, especially at Dolwe, Mfangano and Mwanza, where rock boulders are very often found on top of each other. The rock art in this area includes outstanding examples of a rock painting tradition made within a ritual context by hunter-gatherers ancestral to the forest Pygmies of East and Central Africa (Namono, 2010a). As the hunter-gatherers were most likely related to the Later Stone Age, the geometric paintings were probably made between 4000–14,000 BP. While further examples of the tradition are found on other islands in Lake Victoria in Kenya and in Tanzania, the Ugandan sites are more numerous, more detailed and more clearly associated with Pygmy cosmology (Hollman, 2017).

The significance of the rock art, its power and potency are derived from the meaning encoded in the shapes depicted and the sites selected (Namono, 2010a). These were sites of contact with the spirit world. The present inhabitants in and around the rock art sites attach new meaning to them, but they continue to fulfil a similar function of engaging with the supernatural. The surfaces with rock art

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Figure 1. Photo by Jeremy Hollman, who interprets this entrance to Nyero 2 to signify fertility. Most rituals took place at sites like this.

remain ‘pregnant’ with potency. In depicting phallic and womb shapes, the Pygmies were harnessing the potency of the forest which ritually assured fertility and regeneration (Namono, 2010a). Harnessing potency can be equated to harnessing the fertility that present-day users of rock art sites seek to obtain from the ancestors and the supernatural world. At Nyero 2, barren women seek to become fertile by

touching the surfaces on which the images are painted and leaving monetary tokens for the spirits in anticipated appreciation of success. At Kakoro, they slaughter chickens in appeasing these gods to get children.

Like the other sites in Lake Victoria region, such as Mfagano, the sites are also associated with rain-control activities, as elders from the local communities report to have witnessed or participated in the rainmaking practices at the rock art sites. All these sites are referred to as ‘the place of the spirits’, also reported by local people at Kapir, Kakoro, Mukongoro and Dolwe rock art sites. The sites therefore remained powerful, even after the tradition of rock painting had disappeared.

It is often said that rock art sites contain the world’s greatest works of art, with aesthetic values and powerful and spiritually charged imagery embedded in the landscapes (Neville et al., 2015, p. 6). In many parts of Africa, rock art continued to be made until very recently. For instance, some of the works in South Africa and Namibia are attributed to European art (Smith and Ouzman, 2004). In East Africa, we have art attributed to the Bantu that could date back around 100–200 years; and some white agriculturalist art can also be found in Kondo. The rock art found at Lake Victoria Basin, however, has a quite distinct style and cannot be found anywhere else. The form, and especially the spiritual values on fertility, make it unique.

The proposed Lake Victoria nomination properties belong to a distinctive tradition called ‘red geometric art’ (Mabulla, 2005, p. 36; Namono, 2010b, p. 41; Hollman, 2017). This is the geo-cultural framework of the nominated art, which is thought to be associated with groups of Pygmy hunter-gatherer peoples who occupied the central African rock art region for thousands of years (Namono, 2010a, b, 2011, 2012). In the case of the Pygmy peoples who lived around Lake Victoria Nyanza, and in the dambo landscape east of Lake Kyoga in eastern Uganda, they were also likely to have subsisted on fish. The attribution of hunter-gatherer authorship has been widely argued by researchers, e.g. Mortelmans (1952) and, most recently, by Smith (1995, p. 251, 2005, 2013) and Namono (2010a, pp. 26–38, 2012, pp. 406–19). Olivier (2011, pp. 204–301) agrees with this notion. He notes that the Batwa/Pygmy in Equatorial Africa are socially and economically linked to those in south and central Africa, and are the authors of the red geometric art.

Archaeologically, a few Ugandan and Kenyan sites show that rock art users were probably Late Stone Age to Iron Age. Kanyore pottery has been excavated in Nyero 2, Uganda and Kakapel in Kenya. Other common archaeological materials are LSA lithics, Urewe ware potsherds and MIA and LIA potsherds. Some tools, such as curved wood roulette, are also depicted on rock art. The dating of two Ugandan sites (Nyero and Kakoro) indicates that the paintings were done between 1,000 and 5,000 years ago. It should be noted that Mwanza is known for Early Iron Age sites from about 500 BC. We think that the sites documented by Chaplin (1974) and Mabulla (2005) are of the same cultural affinity.

Location of the project area

The serial transnational nomination is considering two sites from Kenya, five from Tanzania and six sites from Uganda (Figure 2). All the proposed sites for serial transnational nomination are either on islands or in areas which were formerly swamps or wetlands. In the same way as today, people who lived in the dombo areas made full use of their environment through specializing in the hunting of water antelopes, fishing and growing certain crops (Turchetta, 2013; Olivier, 2011).

The process for the serial transnational nomination dossier for the Lake Victoria region rock art of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda

This idea was first mooted in 2017 after several consultations with the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) on the Nyero and other hunter-gatherer geometric rock art sites in Uganda. A report by ICOMOS recommended that Uganda provide additional information on the comparative analysis. Following the report by rock art specialists, ICOMOS recommended a serial transnational nomination that includes other geometric rock art sites in the Lake Victoria region.

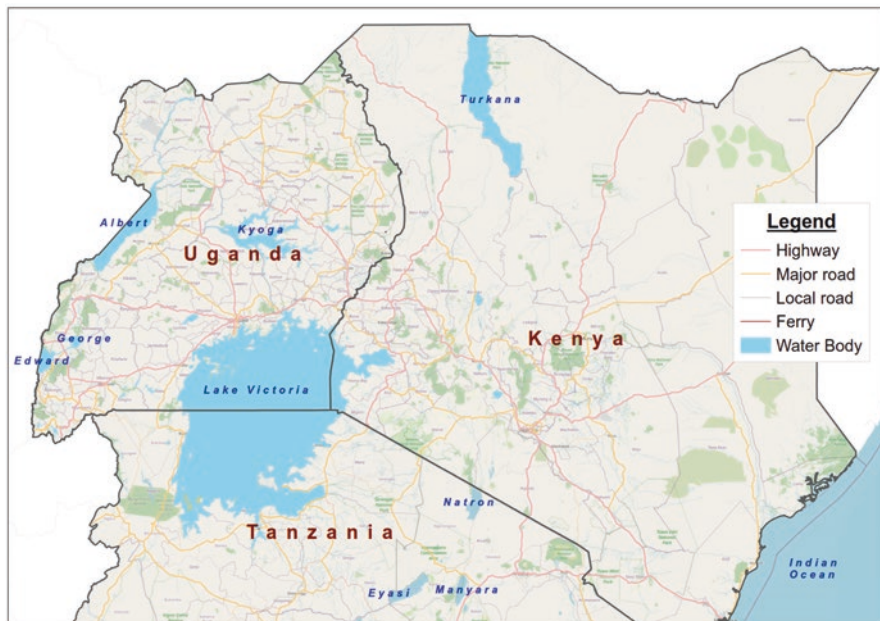


Figure 2. Location of nomination sites in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda (The names and boundaries shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations). *Source:* Jackline N. Besigye, 2021.

In this regard, a workshop to kick-start planning for the new project was held from 23–26 August 2018 in Uganda, Kampala (Figure 3).

Specifically, the workshop aimed to:

- Impart theoretical knowledge on what the scope of a serial nomination should be.
- Get further guidance on the roadmap to a successful serial transnational nomination dossier by inviting experts from within the region (Africa) and ICOMOS.

Workshop Recommendations

- Formulate a task force to be composed of around nine professionals.
- The task force should be an expert committee derived from the States Parties who have long experience of this work. Involve the museums from the State Parties and other institutions, especially universities in the three countries. Some of the universities suggested included Makerere University and Kyambogo University in Uganda; the University of Nairobi in Kenya and the University of Dar-es-salaam in Tanzania.
- Dr. Janette Deacon and Jeremy Holmann to be technical advisers on the activities to be conducted by the task force.
- Formulate terms of reference that show social links, in order to determine the connectivity to rock art sites. The nomination dossier for Uganda already has a lot of information and therefore other States Parties need to add to this.



Figure 3. Some of the members who attended the opening ceremony for the workshop. © Raymond Asiimwe.

- Assistance to the State Parties to be provided by the Africa World Heritage Fund (AWHF). The representative from the AWHF suggested that the task force should come up with a work plan and later engage the AWHF for assistance. This can be offered in the form of funding and technical assistance.
- Further research to obtain detailed information, based on facts. This includes mapping sites, a detailed interpretation of the rock art and the archaeology of these sites.
- An open database of rock art to be created, which will be accessed by the three States Parties.
- Conclusions from the workshop to be forwarded to the East African community by the Minister of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities (Uganda), so that possible resources could be arranged to conduct the nomination process.
- UNESCO regional office to initiate meetings between the three countries (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) to discuss the issue of the transnational serial nomination of the geometric rock art.
- ICOMOS representative to report to UNESCO headquarters in Paris, to request that they write to the regional office.
- Uganda to coordinate and lead the entire process of the transnational serial nomination.
- Uganda and Kenya to travel to Tanzania for the initial negotiations with Tanzania.
- The three countries to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU).
- Kenya representative to follow up on the signing of the MOU for the Mount Elgon Biosphere Reserve, for it to be submitted for nomination.
- The nomination file name to be changed to ‘Geometric rock art in Lake Victoria Region¹ of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda’.
- The name of the serial nomination to be forwarded to the Tentative List and individual sites for at least a year before the property is nominated.
- Department of Museums and Monuments to send photographs of the graffiti at Kandege 2 (Dolwe Island) to Dr. Claire Dean, who is based in Seattle, USA, and ask for her advice about removing it.

Activities undertaken to date

MOU drafted and submitted to Kenya and Tanzania through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the idea of rock art nomination tabled to the East African parliament by the Uganda representative, the Honourable Mary Mugenyi.

The Ugandan team, together with their Tanzanian colleagues, visited sites in Mwanza in July 2019 that had been documented by Chaplin (1974) and Mabulla (2005). We noted that all rock art in the Bukoba, Mwanza and Mara regions were

¹For the purpose of this task force, the area will be defined as encompassing Lakes Victoria, Kyoga and Turkana and their geo-cultural hinterlands.

last documented in the 1950s, 1970s and 2005, respectively. Therefore, no current proper documentation of these sites is available – for instance, their location and status is not currently known to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism. There is a lot of rock quarrying and use of rock outcrops for construction; therefore, it is possible that some unknown sites could have been destroyed (Figure 4).

Other observations from Mwanza

Two sites at Kigongo and Chole visited were well-preserved, although the ministry were not aware of them:

Kigongo rock art site

The site is a few metres from the lake and can be viewed from the ferry. It bears a cross which was erected on the topmost rock boulder above the paintings (Figure 5). The site is owned by the descendants of Chief Milewa, who welcomed Christianity to Tanzania and also had good trade ties with Mutesa I of the Buganda Kingdom. The painting is accessed through the chief’s courtyard, where there are even burial grounds.

Two shades of painting can be observed at Kigongo site: yellowish and red. No superimposed painting was observed (Figure 6).



Figure 4. Mwanza City, built on rocks. © Jackline Nyiracyiza Besigye.



Figure 5. The Christian cross on the topmost boulder, with rock paintings at the Kigongo site, just a few metres from the ferry landing site. © Jackline Nyiracyiza Besigye.



Figure 6. Kigongo rock paintings of both red and yellowish hues. © Jackline Nyiracyiza Besigye.

Chole rock art site

This site is in Chole subcounty, about 4 km from the main road and Kigongo. The paintings at Chole are magnificent, drawn on the base of the rock and its large overhang with a commanding view to the east (Figure 7). They are easily accessible, and can be viewed from a distance of just 10 m. The site consists of two large boulders, one resting on the other, to form an enclave on one side. On the other side is an open space with a wider view of rock painting on the lower end of the shelter. The base



Figure 7. Chole paintings, formerly documented by Chaplin (1974), that are similar to those in Uganda and Kenya, and could be of same cultural affinity. © Jackline Nyiracyiza Besigye.

of the panel rests on the edge of a heavily patinated rock, especially on the south-eastern side, due to running water. About 28 geometric designs were observed on the overhang boulder and 10 faded designs on the basement boulder. The artist has used the finger technique for these paintings, which are in red, superimposed over a yellowish hue.

Three copules, or rock hollows, similar to those of Dolwe Island, were also documented. The site is well preserved and a few metres from the lake. A few Kansyore, Early Iron Age, Boudine and Roullete sherds were observed on these sites.

Following the recommendations from the workshop and Mwanza meeting, rock art experts from Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, along with a rock art specialist from South Africa, were supposed to have visited and documented the sites of Kenya and Tanzania and created a database by November 2019. However this could not take place, as Uganda has been waiting for its counterparts to approve the MOU for this project.

Challenges of serial nomination

Consent from Tanzania: Because of differing policies and regulations from country to country, consent is still a challenge. Our Tanzanian colleagues participated in some of the initial activities but their full participation so far is still limited. In

January 2019, the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities of Uganda sent a reminder informing the Tanzanian Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism about the transnational nomination process, but we have not received any response to date.

A Draft MOU was drawn up by Uganda and submitted to Kenya and Tanzania through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but one year after the submission, there is still no response. This has caused a number of delays on the Ugandan side.

Resource constraints: Much as this is a transnational nomination process, funding is currently provided by one State Party – Uganda. For this reason, Uganda is pushing for the meeting between the three countries before the budget processes end.

The COVID-19 pandemic has halted some activities, e.g. Uganda's sponsorship of the geo-referencing of the entire Lake Victoria rock art sites project. Also, following the death of the Director of Antiquities for Tanzania, we have to begin afresh with a new administration.

Future plans

- Uganda is gazetting all the rock art sites.
- Department of Antiquities Tanzania is to appoint an expert to work on the serial transnational nomination.
- Tanzania is to survey and gazette rock art sites proposed as part of the serial nomination.
- Kenya and Tanzania need to fast-track the MOU.
- Department of Museums and Monuments of Uganda to work with Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ensure MOU between the three countries is signed.
- The three countries to write joint funding proposals for implementing the project.

Proposed criteria for serial transnational nomination in the Lake Victoria region

In East and Central Africa, only two rock art sites are inscribed onto the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL). It has been a longstanding question as to why Africa, rich with so many cultural sites, is so underrepresented on the WHL, and her sites mostly on the danger list.² In the case of rock art, only four sites from Tanzania, Zimbabwe and South Africa have been inscribed. While these sites have an element of hunter-gathering, the sites we wish to present in the serial transnational nomination of the Lake Victoria region present a unique feature of geometric red painting with fertility symbolism. They also contribute to the overall significance of the

² See: <https://whc.unesco.org>

proposed nomination properties and testify to the temporal and spatial depth and breadth of the Red Geometric Tradition in Central Africa (Hollman, 2017).

The criteria that we are proposing to use for the nomination are as follows:

Criterion (iii). The proposed nominated properties ‘bear a unique, or at least exceptional, testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared’.

- As regards the proposed serial transnational nomination, Lake Victoria region rock art ‘represent[s] an extensive collection of rock paintings with large geometric finger-painted shapes that bear at least an exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition that started over four millennia ago, in connection with fertility and potency among the Pygmy hunter-gatherers whose spirits are still in contact with present generations living around the sites today’.

Criterion (vi). Be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, with beliefs, or with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.

- Local people visit some of the proposed nominated Uganda and Kenyan properties in the hope of fulfilment of their wish for fertility and/or rain (Posnansky and Nelson, 1968). The proposed Lake Victoria sites have outstanding aspects of values incorporated in local, contemporary beliefs and practices that cannot easily be found anywhere else in the world.

Conclusion

We have noted that sites in the Lake Victoria region continue to bear symbolic and religious significance to the current occupants of the area, a tradition handed down through generations. Ethnographic records confirm rock art does not illustrate daily life, but rather the artists’ religious beliefs and experiences (Chirikure et al., 2018). As can be seen in Uganda, geometric patterns in Kenya and Mwanza (Tanzania) are related to rites of passage for boys and girls as they approach fertility. We also note the presence of rain-making rituals, Bantu Iron Age users from 500 BC (Schmidt, 1997), geometric patterns on potsherds representing curved wooden roulettes, Kansyore-Urewe pottery and red geometric paintings, all of which justify a serial nomination of these sites.

We note that serial transnational nominations are now key priorities of UNESCO World Heritage, but that some elements need to be examined. It should be noted that for such a nomination to be successful, all key States Parties must be engaged. When the UNESCO World Heritage Centre organized a site meeting during the 43rd session of the World Heritage Committee held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 2019, where the three State parties were present, there was limited interest due to other priority sites for nomination. It is therefore imperative that the World Heritage Committee consider partial nominations. This will ease the work of some States Parties who wish to nominate sites but whose neighbours are not ready.

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