Chapter 4
The Rock Art of *Chinamwali* and Its Sacred Landscape

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The White Rock Paintings of South-Central Africa: A Brief Background

Four decades of research precede my own work; thus, many people have contributed to the current knowledge about the rock paintings of the study area. Based on the research conducted by researchers such as Desmond Clark (1959a, b, 1973), David Phillipson (1972, 1976, 1977), Matthew Schoffeleers (Lindgren and Schoffeleers 1978), Yusuf Juwayeyi and Mathias Phiri (1992), and Benjamin Smith (1995, 1997, 2001) amongst others, two traditions of white paintings have been linked to the farmer people of this region. In the late 1990s, Smith combined his doctoral results (1995) with previous analyses and proposed names for these two apparently separate traditions (1997): the White Zoomorphic tradition and the White Spread-eagled tradition.

Importantly, none of these pictorial traditions are still executed, but through the study of archaeological materials, specifically ceramics, oral traditions, historical documents and linguistic studies, researchers have linked these paintings to the ancestors of the Chewa. The geographical distribution of the paintings covers an area almost identical to the present-day concentration of this population (eastern Zambia, central Malawi, and central-western Mozambique) (Fig. 4.1). Given the fact that people stopped painting, possibly during the mid-twentieth century (Phillipson 1976), I worked with the premise that these paintings still play an active part in the memory of the people of the region, and thus it should be possible to recover valuable information regarding their meanings and function.

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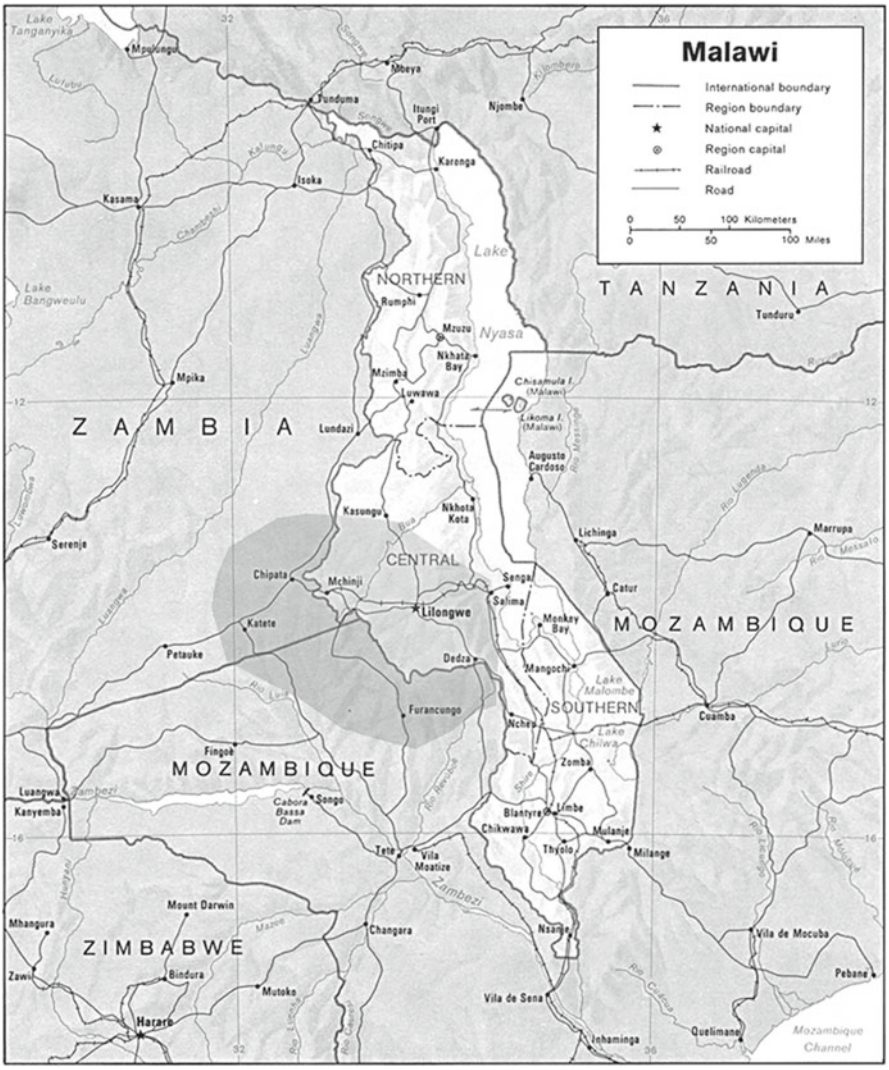

Fig. 4.1 South-central Africa map showing the distribution of rock art sites. This is also the location of the present-day concentration of Chewa modern population. Map courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin (enhanced area by author)

The second of these two traditions, and the one that I focus on this paper, is mainly characterized by a figure known as the spread-eagled design. Because of our limited understanding of this rock art tradition, this figure appears to be similar in shape to an extended animal skin that is viewed from above. The main body of these designs is usually represented vertically, but sometimes it can be found

Fig. 4.2 Some motifs characteristic of the rock art of *Chinamwali*. Snake-like motif in association with spread-eagled designs, some of them covered with *black dots* (approx. panel width 3 m). Photo Leslie F. Zubieta (2009:fig. 36)

horizontally. There is a variety in size and aspect of these designs, but in general one can appreciate a head, two arms, two legs, and a tail. The head has protrusions occasionally.

This motif is almost always accompanied by snake-like motifs and other geometric designs such as circles, ovals, and lines made of dots, all in white although sometimes the pigment looks pinkish or yellow. The pigment was applied with the fingers, and sometimes it is possible to see the traces of this application. The primary color used was white, but black is also visible in the instances when the body of the spread-eagled was covered with black dots or sometimes, as I have noticed, a black fine line delineates the body of these designs (Fig. 4.2). Sometimes some of the geometric designs are also covered with dots. An interesting thing to note is that in central Malawi the dots are usually black, while in Eastern Zambia the body of these designs is filled with white dots (Smith 1995; Zubieta 2006, 2009, 2012a, b), which probably reflects local variants within the same tradition.

Due to the formal characteristics of the spread-eagled designs, researchers have suggested that these represent a variety of animals such as chameleons, lizards and turtles. Such associations merit a special discussion below, and my research has focused mostly on such designs. In terms of their distribution, the rock paintings associated with this tradition are located, usually, in rock shelters that do not follow a particular pattern according to their size, orientation, or location. Paintings are

sometimes in noticeable superimposed layers, which indicate that these spaces were used repeatedly over time. However, examples of such rock paintings can also be found in small and isolated rock shelters (Zubieta 2009).

Rock Art and Girls' Initiation Ceremonies

The White Spread-eagled tradition has been linked to girls' initiation ceremonies (Phillipson 1976; Lindgren and Schoffeleers 1978; Prins and Hall 1994) and more specifically to *Chinamwali* (Smith 1997; Zubieta 2006, 2009). *Chinamwali* is an initiation ceremony to which all girls should attend when they have had their first menstrual cycle in order to be transformed into full-grown women. Such ceremony still is of great significance in the Chewa matrilineal society.

Since 2003, I had the opportunity and challenge to work in documenting and interpreting such tradition during my Masters and my Ph.D. studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, and I proposed that there was enough evidence to start calling it the rock art of *Chinamwali*.

For my analysis I relied on both the existent ethnographic accounts and my own field experience in order to understand how this ceremony operates and to suggest how rock art might have played its part (Zubieta 2006, 2009, 2011). Thus, I had the opportunity to undertake the task of understanding as much as possible about the context in which rock art was presumed to be part of in the recent past and that is the girls' initiation ceremony.

Chinamwali usually takes place when a small group of girls is ready for initiation. The community joins efforts in terms of organizing all the preparation for the ceremony because it is a time of rejoicing for the community and also because of financial considerations such as the preparation of beer and food for a large number of guests which is taken on by the initiates' family. The initiates or *anamwali* are isolated from their community and receive specific instructions from an adult woman who is recognized as the main teacher during the initiation, the *namkungwi*. Each girl has one or two tutors (*phungu*), who make sure that the initiate learns properly all the instructions given during the ceremony.

During my research I worked with Chewa women and men to record the information that people still remembered about the paintings and practices that took place in the past during the *Chinamwali* ceremony. I had the opportunity to participate in such ceremonies and to be initiated myself two times in central Malawi. Many of the ideas and outcomes that I have reached, and that I discussed throughout my research, are the result of my discussions with women throughout the region, in Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique. I am grateful for their patience and for granting permission for what I present here. I do not intend to go into all the details of the ceremony, which complexity I have covered elsewhere (Zubieta 2006), but I focus on those aspects that are important in order to build an argument about the usage of spaces during this ceremony and how this is linked to rock art, Chewa practices and religious beliefs.

Fig. 4.3 Women protecting the *mtengo* from non-initiated eyes. At the back we can see an area covered with trees characteristic of a typical graveyard in every Chewa village. Photo Leslie F. Zubieta (2009: Fig. 36)

In order to understand the dynamics of this ceremony, it is important to be familiar with the landscape where rituals take place today. The two main places that are used during the initiation are the *mtengo* and the *tsimba*. Although *mtengo* is the generic word for tree in Chichewa (the language of the Chewa), women, based on my field experience, use trees with specific characteristics that are linked to womanhood (Zubieta 2009:285). This tree is generally located on the outskirts of the village and is surrounded by vegetation, although it should be noted that throughout the region, mainly in Malawi, logging has been so extensive that these places of instruction are sometimes uncovered and unprotected; thus, I have witnessed women creating barrier-like constructions around the *mtengo* (tree) in order to preserve its secret atmosphere (Fig. 4.3). Any person who is not initiated in *Chinamwali* is chased away by women who are participating in the ceremony.

The other important place where instructions are given is the initiation hut, or *tsimba*, located within the village. It is within the *tsimba* where the main instructions and rules for being a good mother, wife and daughter are taught through songs and dances. I have had the opportunity and privilege to enter the *tsimba*, but I am not authorized to reveal its secrets. No woman is authorized to disclose what she witnesses inside this place and, just as it happens at the nearby *mtengo*, uninitiated people are prohibited from viewing or being close to the hut (*tsimba*).

The custom of the Chewa requires certain rules to be followed before starting *Chinamwali*, otherwise a serious consequence may occur, called *mdulo*. *Mdulo* is a

complex concept of a disease that may happen when sexual activity takes place when it is not required, and vice versa (Hodgson 1933). This means that *mdulo* happens when a ritual transgression occurs. People commonly speak of *mdulo* as the presence of certain symptoms such as excessive coughing or a general medical malaise of the body; its symptomatic expression is extremely complex. Detailed study on *mdulo* has been carried by Anne M. Drake (1976).

In order to get an insight of the effects that *mdulo* has on society, there are two important concepts that must be understood in advance. These are the concepts of "hot" (*-tentha*) and "cold" (*-zizira*). According to Johannes van Breugel (2001), these notions are part of everyday concepts and do not have per se good or bad connotation. Some activities, however, are considered mysterious and therefore dangerous for the community, such as sexual activity or the presence of sexual fluids, especially menstrual blood that makes women fluctuate from a "cold" to a "hot" state.

On the other hand, people who abstain from sex, ancestral spirits, and the bodies of the deceased are considered to be "cold." Sexual abstinence is a prerequisite for participating in the ceremonies of initiation because anyone who is in a "hot" condition may endanger the ceremony, the initiate, and the headman of the community. During *Chinamwali*, the headman, the parents of the initiate, and the women participating in the ceremony are required to follow sexual abstinence before the ceremony, and resume sexual activity at the end of the initiation. If someone disobeys the rules, they are tried and punished severely.

Secret instructions alternate between the tree and the initiation hut, but from both the accounts and my own experience, it is evident that not every teaching is conducted in secret. In fact, some lessons can and should be represented in public. The girls dance in a communal space in the village called *bwalo*. The community gathers around this space creating a circle. Usually there is a designated space for drums, another for women and children, and another for men. First, the initiates have to dance along with their tutors, who closely follow each step that the girl takes and then encourages her to dance alone in order to demonstrate to the community that she has learned the dances, along with their messages, which are dictated by the moral code and tradition (*mwambo*).

The last part of the initiation, or *Chingondo*, is when the whole community celebrates that the girl has become a fully adult woman. For this last stage, the girls wait under the tree (*mtengo*) until their instructor and tutors allow them to leave. A figurine made out of raw clay is decorated entirely with white flour mixed with water and then covered with black and red decorations (usually dots). This figurine is carefully placed on the head of the initiate by her tutor. The figurine represents an animal, and it has a great aesthetic value for the Chewa. Although it is my understanding that there is a limited repertoire of animals (e.g., wild animals such as antelopes and elephants), the animal most often represented is known as *kasiyamaliro*, perhaps an eland (Yoshida 1992), which symbolizes the mother ancestor of the community and that the initiate will eventually become a mother and that it "is from her womb that a new generation will come" (Claude Boucher, pers. comm., November 2003).

Once the initiate is ready, and wearing the aforementioned clay figurine as a headdress, she walks with her tutors from the tree (*mtengo*) to the communal space (*bwalo*). In the *bwalo* the girl must dance carefully so that the figurine will not fall. If it were to fall, it is believed that then she will not have children, and also she has to pay a fine. Once used, the headdress acquires great power and is therefore destroyed at the conclusion of the ceremony by the mother of the initiate. One of the instructors told me in 2006 that it is often necessary to keep the headdress safe after the initiates have finished dancing, thus it must be covered (with a scarf, for example). It is believed that evil people will try to get a piece of the headdress to harm the initiate, her family, or the people involved during the ceremony through witchcraft.

At the end of the ceremony, the initiate goes through a ritual shaving (*kumeta*). The tutors will shave the initiate's head, which symbolizes the transition from girlhood to womanhood. In addition, she is given a new name and returns to her house with great celebration, usually carried on the shoulders of her tutor. Her body is covered with white, red and black dots while the women around her dance and ululate with joy.

I have summarized the main events that take place during the initiation as I think that is of relevance to understand the context in which the paintings were once a part. In this regard, although rock art is no longer made for girls' initiation ceremonies, some women in central Malawi in 2003 confirmed that their relatives (e.g., their grandmothers) knew that the paintings at Mwana wa Chentcherere II, in central Malawi, were used in conjunction with girls' initiation. Moreover, some of the motif's meanings were still remembered (Zubieta 2006). Since then, I have interviewed many women throughout the region who still had a limited recollection about this link between initiation and rock art, but the knowledge throughout the region about the meanings of specific motifs is apparently lost.

It is possible that this rock art tradition stopped in the mid-nineteenth century and thus allows an historical continuity that permits important proposals regarding the use and symbolism of the paintings in the past. I do not presume that there is a uniformity between past and present belief systems and ritual practices, and I am aware of the limitations of using ethnographic material (Zubieta In press); however, I stress the importance of using the richness of oral traditions in the region for the role they have in the interpretation of rock art (Zubieta 2006, 2009).

Smith (1995, 1997) has pointed out that some of the designs that are part of this rock art tradition had a mnemonic function during girls' initiation ceremonies. This proposition arose because of the striking resemblance between the paintings and the objects that continue to be used nowadays in this initiation ceremony (see Yoshida 1992). I have taken this specific topic as the focus of my doctoral thesis, as I suspect that the understanding of rock art as a part of a wider range of material culture used for a specific context is the answer to understanding the way it functioned in the past (Zubieta 2009, 2011).

Moreover, the use of a variety of media to convey messages is not limited to the Chewa. Within the region of research, other matrilineal groups such as the Nsenga, the Bemba, and others utilize objects, even today, to pass on certain lessons during their own girls' initiation ceremonies (Richards 1945, 1956; Apthorpe 1962). It is

therefore conceivable that the ancestors of the Chewa also used objects and paintings to support the learning process and that these were used, as are today, as strategies that allow the Chewa women to memorize the instructions through the use of images and words. If so, the rock paintings to which I refer in this chapter, were made by women and used to educate the "new" women in topical aspects possibly linked with fertility and sexuality, among other things, which are central themes during initiation (Zubieta 2011).

It is through the current initiation ceremony that we know some of the methods that elder women employ to transmit their knowledge to the young girls. One of these methods, however, no longer continues into the present and involved the usage of certain rock paintings. The presence of rock paintings that I have described in the beginning of this chapter, sometimes superimposed on each other and covering the walls of rock shelters, attests to the continuous use of such shelters for ritual purposes.

Understanding Metaphor Representations in Rock Art

Why are certain images used during initiation and what subjects might they have been representing in the rock art? I particularly have found very useful the analysis of the body as a tool of inquiry and as a theoretical framework to answer these questions (Zubieta 2012a).

The social and cultural analysis of the human body, known as "body theory" has an impact in the way we understand the study of gender. Gender studies sometimes focus on the social construction of masculinity and femininity and social values that designate the sexual difference between women and men (Gilchrist 1991). In my study, I refer to gender as a dynamic construct, and as such, it is culturally specific. There are no textbooks or a systematic way of doing archaeological research in gender studies (Conkey and Spector 1984:2) but a variety of approaches to deal with it. I understand gender as a set of roles that are constructed, individually and socially, through the recognition of body functions and behavior. In this sense, these roles are the tasks that a human being has in a society based on social expectations deeply rooted in stereotypes of how a person of a particular sex should act, think, or feel (Zubieta 2006, 2012a).

The perception of the body not only reflects the values of different cultures but also of individuals within a society (Hodder and Hutson 2003). Body concerns deal with its physical characteristics and also with its psychological concerns such as identity and sexuality (Yates 1993; Meskell 1999).

Although the body has been a recurrent concern in the past, recent approaches (e.g., Turner 1996; Synott 1993) have shifted the ways archaeology and ethnology deal with how non-Western societies conceptualize the body. This shift also gave an interesting contribution to rock art studies as it showed that body perceptions are also reflected in the art. Archaeologists have imposed their own moral codes and perceptions when approaching material culture. Tim Yates (1993), for example, specifically worked on this topic based on body representations in Swedish

engravings. He eloquently discusses the fact that our own prejudices limit our ability to interpret gender, specifically when we assign sexual attributes to an image.

I have employed this theoretical framework, along with ethnographic material, and have found this combination most helpful to approach the interpretation of some of the images that the rock art of *Chinamwali* conveys. For this purpose I paid special attention to the perceptions of the body amongst the Chewa in order to understand how they might have represented their concerns related to this topic.

According to the Chewa, the body of a woman has a special ability to menstruate and most importantly to conceive a child. As I have mentioned earlier, there are certain things that allows a body to fluctuate between a "cold" and "hot" state and menstrual blood is one of them thus making a woman's body very powerful. Moreover, when she is in a "hot" condition, she is not allowed to have sexual intercourse with her partner or have direct contact with the food that her relatives, and especially her children, will eat. She is the transmitter of great danger while she is in this condition, and if she does not respect certain rules, she can even bring death to her family and community.

A woman, therefore, has to be careful throughout her life to know how to conduct herself in specific situations. This knowledge is given to her through *Chinamwali*. It is a must, therefore, to participate in this ceremony because if she fails to do so, she will ignore crucial rules for Chewa society stability. *Chinamwali* is a sacred and secret ceremony that gives pride to a girl and to the community. Due to the secretive dimension of this ceremony, I have dealt publicly in my research only with the information the women have allowed me to report. It is a pity that recently in, 2011, sensationalist reporters through the Internet have dealt with such ceremony and its current practice without acknowledging its complexity and value thus diminishing its importance.

The Chewa express themselves through the use of metaphors (e.g., the body of a woman is referred to through metaphors), and this leads me to suggest that the motifs in this rock art tradition can be understood through exploring the metaphors associated to animals and their linkage to people and other realms of Chewa society (Zubieta 2012a). As mentioned earlier, it has been concluded that the formal characteristics of some motifs in the rock art are suggestive enough to be identified with certain animals (e.g., chameleons, lizards). This apparent straightforward association to certain animals is far more complex.

Animals are an important aspect of Chewa cosmology as they play a role in their creation myths, their folk tales, and their proverbs. People often use specific characteristics of animals to talk about certain human behavior, thus I proposed in my research (Zubieta 2006, 2012a) that animal metaphors, in the context of girls' initiation, are used to maintain certain veiled secret teachings and messages that only initiates can understand.

I propose that women may have used the bodies of certain animals in the rock art to teach specific aspects of the correct behavior that women should follow within society. The presence of the paintings in the mountains attests that not all the instructions for girls' initiations were conducted within the village. In the recent past, the teachers, tutors and the initiates took a journey outside the confines of the village in order not to be disturbed or observed by the uninitiated. Surely because of the ways current ceremony operates, I presume women began their pilgrimage to the rock

shelters singing secret songs, clapping and carrying all the necessary things for their stay at this special venue in the woodlands: mats, food, pots and other related paraphernalia (Zubieta 2006).

Chewa knowledge system allows us to understand their perception of the world in which animal symbolism conveyed important messages. This perception is a key element to unlock some of the messages and symbolisms behind the rock art of *Chinamwali*. It is a challenge, however, to know the specific messages that were given through the rock art.

The Chewa perception of the landscape is also an important key; thus I propose that rock shelters were part of a sacred landscape that helped the initiates achieve their status as fully grown women. Choosing a rock shelter in the woodland, however, to carry out the instructions of some lessons during the initiation, was a more complex decision than simply searching for a remote-hidden place covered by trees. I propose that the decision of having a space for instructions in the woodland had to do with the ideas that the Chewa had about the village and the woodlands within the landscape.

The Use of Spaces Within a Spiritual Landscape

To understand the dynamics of how the landscape was used in the specific context of *Chinamwali* and its relationship to the animal world, I have relied specifically on the extensive work by Brian Morris (2000a, b), Kenji Yoshida (1992), and Matthew Schoffeleers and Adrian Roscoe (1985).

Brian Morris (1995) has proposed the following scheme (Table 4.1) to facilitate the discussion of the dichotomy between the village and the woodland, but I would note that his scheme cannot be taken as a generalization for all Malawian culture as he himself emphasizes.

As Westerners, looking at this table, we expect a straightforward association between women, the domestic sphere, and the village. Chewa women, however, continue to perform some activities in the forest, like collecting firewood, plants and water. If we remember the existing repertoire depicted in the rock art, we note that women, for some reason, decided to represent wild animals, not domestic ones, on the walls of rock shelters to carry out their teachings during initiation.

The Chewa associate the woodland with hunting and wild animals and, on the other hand, the village with agriculture and domestic animals. Morris's analysis, in my opinion, reflects two main domains or areas, that rather than being in opposition, they must be understood as complementary. Thus based on Morris's analysis and the archaeological evidence, the presence of rock paintings, I propose that the selection and use of rock shelters for initiation possibly had to do with the perceptions that Chewa had of the village and the woodland and the creatures living in them.

The perception of the woodland is related to external sources of life and power generators. Wild animals are essentially identified with the woodland and as a source of food. They are also perceived as beings close to the spirits of the dead and to political kinship, especially with male affines as an essential source of fertility and therefore as a necessary power for the continuity of the group and the village (Morris 1995).

It is possible that the rock shelters in the woodland that served as important venues for giving instructions also had a connection with the spirits of those male

Table 4.1 The woodland and the village

Woodland (*Thengo*)	Village (*Mudzi*)
Hunting	Agriculture
Dry season	Wet season
Affinal males (semen)	Matrilineal kingroup (blood)
Spirits of the dead (*mizumu ya makolo*)	Living humans (*anthu*)
Wild animals (*chirombo*)	Domestic animals (*chiweto*)
Graves	Houses

Fig. 4.4 Initiates wearing an animal headdress during the *Chingondo* last phase of the initiation. Photo Leslie F. Zubieta

affines and kinship, and thus facilitated fertility. I propose that in order to receive the necessary secret knowledge that only women can share during this sacred ceremony, young initiates embarked on a pilgrimage to the mountains to be immersed into a world different from the one in their own village (Zubieta 2012b).

In this matrilineal group, they usually observe a matrilocal residence, where the husband is perceived as an outsider and a hunter while the headman of the community represents the core of the matrilineal community. It is in the woodland where women seek to reconnect with the hunters, to these strangers, who will ultimately be their husbands and who shall claim them as their brides. They seek, at the end, sexually powerful men with whom to have children and assure the continuity of the community (Zubieta 2009).

Another important aspect of this proposal connects the initiate with wild animals. During the *Chingondo*, the last phase of the initiation, the initiate wears a headdress shaped as an animal as I mentioned earlier (Fig. 4.4). I suggest that this is the time when the girl symbolically represents the animal that is to be hunted when

she is betrothed. There are some accounts in which the groom has been recorded to have participated in a symbolic hunt ceremony (Lancaster 1934:199; Boucher 2002:38). Matthew Schoffeleers mentions that the groom personifies the hunter and his bride the hunted animal (1971:271–282).

As I mentioned, the girls are prepared for the *Chingondo* ceremony under the *mtengo* (tree) which I think is not a coincidence since wild animals belong to the woodland and not to the village. In other words, the *chingondo* headdress could not be recreated within the *tsimba*, for example, as the latter belongs to the village realm.

I propose that one of the main reasons why the mountains were important for the woodland-village dynamic dates back to the time when the farmer groups, who were the ancestors of the Chewa, arrived in this region. We know that when the matrilineal groups arrived (ca. eighth century A.D.) they found hunter-gatherers whom, according to archaeological evidence, had inhabited the region for more than 15,000 years. These groups, known by the name of Akafula or Batwa survived until the late nineteenth century (Clark 1973:40).

There are various propositions on how interaction took place between the farmers and the hunter-gatherers. According to Gadi Mgomezulu's (1978) lithic analysis in central Malawi, it is clear that the hunter-gatherers, rather than being displaced, coexisted with the farmers throughout the Iron Age, which has been divided in two periods, the Early Iron Age (0–1000 A.D.) and the Late Iron Age (1000–1900 A.D.). This coexistence allowed for the incorporation of a hunter-gatherers' lifestyle into the economy of food production (Phillipson 1977:252) as well as the exchange of ideas and symbols.

In their oral traditions, the Chewa claim to have adopted rain calling practices from the hunter-gatherers, and they even claim taking their sacred drum: *mbiriwiri* (Rangeley 1952; Ntara 1973; Schoffeleers 1973; Smith 1997). Farmers had a specific idea of who the hunter-gatherers were. The Akafula or Batwa were associated with mountains and important shrines like *kaphirintiwa* in central Malawi which acquired sacred connotations. For many years the ancestors of the Chewa, along with the hunter-gatherers, occupied the same landscape. Some authors agree that intermarriages took place between the hunter-gatherers and the farmers, but it is also possible that sometimes these interactions were not as friendly and led to death (Mgomezulu 1978; Crader 1984; for further discussion see Schoffeleers 1992).

Even though there is a high probability that ideas were exchanged, it is difficult to know the processes by which these ideas were assimilated. As a tentative hypothesis I proposed in my doctoral dissertation (Zubieta 2009) that the hunter-gatherers may have influenced the spread-eagled design, so characteristic of the rock art of *Chinamwali*. There is a formal similarity between this motif and one observed in the rock art that has been associated with the hunter-gatherers (the so-called Red Geometric tradition; see Smith 1997) which also resembles an "animal" hide seen from above, although red is in this case the predominant color (Fig. 4.5).

I presume that indeed hunter-gatherers had a strong impact as it has been suggested elsewhere (see Smith 1997) as to the possibility that the hunter-gatherers practiced their own rituals related to fertility and rain-calling before the farmers

Fig. 4.5 D-stretch image of a long *red* spread-eagled outline, eastern Zambia (approx. height 60 cm). Photo Leslie F. Zubieta

arrived in the region. Thus, I suggest that the ancestors of the Chewa might have taken, not only certain commodities, as I have explained, but also appropriated certain symbols from the Batwa and assimilated them into their own girls' initiation ceremonies. Perhaps the first step the farmers took was to appropriate the same spaces used by the Batwa. Such appropriation of spaces seems evident, since generally, the white paintings of this tradition are found in rock shelters where the red paintings of hunter-gatherers were also found, indicating a preference for the use of the same spaces.

Another possible scenario is that the ancestors of the Chewa might also have had a similar design as part of their own set of symbols. Similar motifs to the spread-eagled design painted in white have been observed elsewhere. Smith mentions that these designs have been found in Limpopo Province, South Africa, central and southern Zimbabwe, the Tsodilo Mountains in north-eastern Botswana, western Angola, central Tanzania, southwest Kenya, and in the Lake Victoria basin (1995:179–180). The spread of such motifs have prompted other authors to theorize about the possible link between their wide geographical distribution and possible interpretation (Prins and Hall 1994). Caution must be stressed, however, when suggesting that these motifs have the same meaning, and it is advisable to study each region independently before drawing regional conclusions.

An ideal scenario, I propose, would be one where women's fertility and the reproductive cycle of the earth had an importance for both groups, although approached through two different cosmological systems. However, after contact between these two groups, it is possible that some of these concepts were complementary, even compatible, and finally were adapted/adopted not only by the farmers but also by the hunter-gatherers involved.

The complex analysis of the sacred landscape and its connection to the rock art, also leads us to acknowledge the link that oral traditions have between the *Chinamwali* and the rain-calling ceremony of the ancestors of the Chewa. This association was discontinued, presumably, after an incident in which some initiates are said to have been drowned in one of the sacred pools (Linden 1974; Schoffeleers 1976). The sacred pools were important places associated to shrines and where priestesses used to officiate rain-calling ceremonies. This story is still a part of the present-day Chewa folklore, and sacred pools are still considered as pristine places that are protected. Another trace of this connection is evident in the time of year in which the *Chinamwali* takes place: during the dry season, from August to November, and before the rain starts.

The dry season is linked to hunting and the woodland domain thus hunting activities are mainly carried out during this same time of the year (Morris 1995; Schoffeleers 1971:275, 1992:33). I suggest that initiation ceremonies are also conducted at this time of the year so the initiate can then be symbolically transformed into an animal when wearing the headdress and when contacting with the spirits and the woodland.

During the ceremony, I suggest that the initiate is in a transitional state that allows her to wear the headdress. During this time, she is an animal whose access into the village is granted to perform in the communal space. She is perceived to be "hot" and "cold" at the same time because of her liminal state, this is a state that refers to her transitional status, an in-between period that will shape her identity as a fully grown woman at the end of the ceremony. Such condition, I believe, allows her to enter and exit the two main domains used during the initiation: the village, the *tsimba*, and the woodland, the *mtengo*.

The connection between the wild animals, the woodland, the matrilineal kin group and the initiation ceremonies would be incomplete if I omitted from this analysis the participation of *Nyau* and the creation myth known as *kaphirintiwa*.

Nyau is a closed association strictly for men in which members have to go through an initiation (no circumcision involved). The secret teachings are imparted in an isolated area within the cemetery (for more information see Rangeley 1949, 1950; Yoshida 1992; Smith 2001; Boucher 2012). *Nyau* has its own complexity in Chewa history that I will not address here, but suffice it to say for the relevance of this chapter, that *Nyau* has two types of masks; the first are anthropomorphic and symbolize the spirits of the dead and the second are immense zoomorphic creations made from perishable materials, which represent the guardian spirits of animals that can only enter the village at specific times of the day and mostly appear during the night. These masks perform during the girls' initiation and at funerals, and their performance is known as *Gule Wamkulu* or big dance (see Boucher 2012 for further

Fig. 4.6 *Gule Wamkulu* performing during a funeral in central Malawi (Photo by author)

discussion) (Fig. 4.6). *Nyau*, presumably, is responsible for the other set of white paintings that I have mentioned in the beginning of this chapter: the White Zoomorphic tradition (Lindgren 1978; Smith 2001).

In the *kaphirintiwa* creation myth it is said that "in the beginning" God, animals, a man and a woman lived together in peace until man invented fire. According to the myth when fire was invented certain animals ran away from humans and God rose to heaven escaping from the flames (Schoffeleers and Roscoe 1985). Matthew Schoffeleers (1971; also see Boucher 2002) has analyzed in detail the *kaphirintiwa* myth of origin and its relationship to *Nyau* and the reproductive cycles of the Chewa. However, it is also during *Chinamwali* that the Chewa recreate the conditions for reconciliation between people and animals by allowing the entrance of *Nyau* and the initiate wearing the headdress into the village.

The complexity of these connections between the landscape and wild animals, metaphors, and perhaps ancient links with hunter-gatherers allow us to understand that perhaps the distance that women had to go from their village to the rock shelters was just a tiny part of the equation. There was no need to cross borders into a far away land, but to cross the borders of the village, the communal space, and to get immersed into the woodland where the wild animals and spirits ruled.

Rock shelters were used in the past as ritual spaces for girls' initiation ceremonies. However, it is possible that the invasion of the patrilineal Ngoni in the last part of the nineteenth century (Clark 1973) was the main reason why women stopped painting in rock shelters for *Chinamwali*. Rock shelters became places of refuge, to

hide from the Ngoni, and thus the use of these spaces in the mountains for *Chinamwali* stopped and the meanings of these sacred paintings started to disappear (Zubieta 2006).

The interaction with Ngoni groups was also diverse; in some places intermarriages took place (Hodgson 1933:128). From the historical accounts we know that Ngoni invaders were almost exclusively men and intermarried with Chewa women. The children learned the language of their mothers (Chichewa) and with the language, also the rituals and oral traditions (Zubieta 2006). I believe that throughout the region, some rock shelters were used for a longer time than others, and that women gradually discontinued their visit to these sacred places in the mountains. *Chinamwali*, despite the abrupt contact with the Ngoni and the changes that followed within the Chewa social structure, such as the Church scrutiny (see Linden 1974), continued taking place. Women, through their ingenuity, sought new ways to face and to confront the challenges and to continue their traditions in which rock art no longer plays a part.

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