INTRODUCTION

Rock Paintings

Domestic and wild animals are an important source of food and medicines in south-central Africa (Yoshida 1992; Morris 1998, 2000b). In central Malawi, I have seen children catching tiny birds in the Chongoni Mountain using clever hunting techniques such as tree resin to immobilise their prey. Children also collect a variety of insects (e.g. flying ants, termites) available in different seasons, and adult men hunt bats and birds that later are skewered, roasted, and sold next to the highway. The longer you stay in the country and talk to local people, the more you realise that these examples, so easy to observe as an outsider, are just the tip of a complex connection to the animal world.

During my research into past uses and meanings of rock art in south-central Africa (Zambia, Malawi, and Mozambique) and its connection to girls’ initiation ceremonies (Zubieta 2006, 2014, 2016; Figure 1), I visited many villages and was invited to stay and experience everyday life. I was able to observe animal-human relationships during these stays.

As a guest, people always welcomed me into their homes, and women prepared exquisite foods such as toasted peanuts for a snack or a plate of nsima (a thick porridge made with maize flour and water) accompanied by a relish (ndiwo), which was usually prepared with beans, pumpkin leaves, or small dried kapenta fish cooked in a tomato and onions sauce with the right amount of salt. Goats (mbuzi), pigs (nkhumba), and chicken (nkhuiku) often run freely in the village (mudzi) and are only killed for special occasions, such as the visit of an old friend or for certain ceremonies in which food is shared exclusively among the headman/woman’s guests and immediate advisors.

Abstract

The most common role of animals in the Cheŵa culture of south-central Africa is twofold: they are regarded as an important source of food, and they also provide raw materials for the creation of traditional medicines. Animals, however, also have a nuanced symbolic role that impacts the way people behave with each other by embodying cultural protocols of proper — and not so proper — behaviour. They appear repeatedly in storytelling and proverbs to reference qualities that people need to avoid or pursue and learn from the moral of the story in which animals interplay with each other, just as humans do. For example, someone who wants to prevent the consequences of greed is often advised to heed hyena stories and proverbs. My contribution elaborates on Brian Morris’s instrumental work in south-central Africa, which has permitted us to elucidate the symbolism of certain animals and the perception of landscape for Indigenous populations in this region. I discuss some of the ways in which animals have been employed to teach and learn proper behaviour in a particular sacred ceremony of the Cheŵa people which takes place in celebration of womanhood: Chinamwali.

Keywords: Animal symbolism, initiation, Cheŵa, rock art, behaviour, Indigenous women, south-central Africa, Indigenous knowledge, Chinamwali
Not only have I seen the skin and meat of chicken being eaten but also the soft bones digested. Sometimes chicken bones are rubbed with special medicines and consumed at the end of some ceremonies (e.g. girls’ initiation).

The walls of many rock shelters in the mountainous areas at the confluence of these countries show the presence of paintings made with forms such as ovals, circles, rows of dots, snake-like forms, and spread-eagled designs (extended animal skins viewed from above), and all are outlined in white and sometimes covered with black or white dots (Figure 2). These paintings are linked to one of the most sacred ceremonies of the Cheŵa matrilineal people: Chinamwali, the girls’ initiation ceremony (Smith 1997, 2014; Zubieta 2006, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2016).

The meaning behind the rock paintings is not straightforward but encapsulated in the complex and multilevel ways in which the Cheŵa perceive the environment and the connections they have in particular to the animal world. Understanding those relationships is the work of a lifetime, and my research into the meanings and uses of this art corpus has benefited greatly from the outstanding and exceptionally lucid work of Brian Morris on animal symbolism and human-animal relations particularly in Malawi (e.g. Morris 1995a, 2000a, b), from which most of the examples I refer to in this paper were recorded. It is an honour to be part of this well-deserved festschrift.

The Chinamwali initiation rite

Chinamwali is an extraordinary and complex ritual that takes place during the dry season when young girls, who have reached puberty, are secluded in designated spaces to learn the proper rules of behaviour that their new status as fully grown women requires (e.g. how to be good mothers and wives). It is believed that if initiates fail to understand, attain, and practice certain rules of behaviour, sickness (mdulo) will affect the health of the community. Consequently, this is perceived as a crucial ceremony not only for women but also for the Cheŵa society as a whole.

The teacher of the initiation (namkungwi) and the initiate’s tutors (aphungu), who are responsible for the success of the ceremony no longer use rock paintings or the rock shelters as secret venues, but instead use clay objects to pass on the instructions. Some of the clay items resemble the shapes of rock art motifs. Some senior teachers still remember their grandmothers telling them that the images in the shelters were used during Chinamwali (Zubieta 2006: 94). However, for many people the meaning of each individual painting is almost forgotten. The mechanisms in which those visual aids were employed in the recent past has been discussed elsewhere (Zubieta 2016).

Girls’ initiation ceremonies are sometimes accompanied by Gule Wamkulu (the great dance) masquerade of the Nyau tradition. Nyau constitutes its own closed circle of knowledge exclusive to initiated men, and it has been extensively studied in the past (Rangeley 1949, 1950; Schoffeleers 1976; Birch de Aguilar 1996; van Breugel 2001; Boucher 2012). When Nyau theriomorphic structures and masks accompany Chinamwali, the latter is known as Chinamwali Mkangali (respectful initiation) (van Breugel 2001; Mtuta 2001). Some Nyau structures and masks will be discussed here in the context of girls’ initiation ceremonies.

Chinamwali is a ceremony of primordial importance to the people of the region, and I have been privileged to attend both as an initiate and observer. The ceremony is exclusive to women and some of the teachings are passed on in secrecy, thus the material presented here follows appropriate cultural protocols aligned to Cheŵa women’s wishes. It is important to stress that although the paintings need to be understood as the archaeological evidence of past practices of initiation, those images and their stories are still connected and are an undeniable part of the living culture of south-central Africa.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis of the Cheŵa animal-human relationship offers us a way to understand the connections between rock art and...
the Chinamwali girls’ initiation ceremonies. Here I examine the symbolism surrounding specific animals (e.g. elephant, baboon, and eland) to explore the complexities involved in the analysis of those relationships.

I have combined ethnographic data and my participation in such ceremonies to construct analogical arguments to explain past cultural practices and ritual performances. Ceremonies today are not exactly the same as those in the past. Cheŵa women told me that Chinamwali has not only changed the kind of media used to pass on instructions (e.g. the use of clay figurines instead of rock paintings), but also teachings today are less strict compared to those of past initiations (anamkwungwi, central Malawi pers. comm. 2003). Girls’ initiation ceremonies have been subject to external influences after Western contact, and its structure has been modified through time. For example, we know that elements of Nsenga Nodola girls’ initiation ceremony have influenced Cheŵa’s initiations after colonial rule banned the Nyau performances during Chinamwali (Yoshida 1992: 246). In the past, Chinamwali took place for two months, whereas ceremonies today take up to five days, or even just a weekend so that the girls do not miss school (van Breugel 2001; Zubieta 2006).

Despite the use of different media and shortening of the ceremony, I posit that the degree of variation in the instructions has been limited because the knowledge imparted in the context of girls’ initiation is constrained by being anchored to the female body and to the rules of proper behaviour dictated by the Cheŵa’s moral code of conduct, the mwambo. The fundamental gender concerns attached to the female body (e.g. menstruation, bodily hygiene, childbirth, fertility, and the practicalities of marital relationships) and the societal ways of managing them show great continuity over the past hundred years in the ethnographic record (Zubieta 2016).

As a complement to the Cheŵa accounts, I use the Bemba and Nsenga ethnographic accounts of their girls’ initiation ceremonies: Chisungu and Nodola respectively (Zubieta 2006, 2009). They are relevant to this study because of their close historical and archaeological roots to the Cheŵa, and their linguistic proximity to the same western Bantu-language speaking group (Kashoki 1978). I have, however, used these ethnographic accounts with caution, as often this material is charged with the ethnographer’s personal biases arising out of their specific socio-political and historical backgrounds. In archaeology, just as Anthony Giddens (1984) described for sociology, we are faced with a ‘double hermeneutic’ in our attempt to understand a world of external meanings while carrying our own specificities at the same time. The concept of a double hermeneutic derives from the ‘double process of translation or interpretation’ involved in the attempt to understand social phenomena (Giddens 1984: 284). In archaeology, such an interpretative process is linked to the archaeological ‘other’ with its own particular contexts and meanings coming from another place and time (Preucel and Hodder 1996: 13). As Paul Wason suggests, the challenge when using ethnography to understand archaeological data resides in ‘using the familiar to help us understand the unfamiliar, without so domesticating it as to miss the genuinely other’ (Wason 1994: 26).

Because body concerns are crucial during the initiation, I have deployed social and cultural analyses of the human body (e.g. Synnott 1993, Turner 1996) as a theoretical anchor to understand the associations of the female body to Cheŵa’s gender concerns and the animal symbolism represented in the rock art. Gender here is understood as a set of roles that are constructed both at the individual level and at a cultural level through the recognition of body functions and body behaviour deeply rooted in stereotypes of how a person of a particular sex should act, think, or feel (Zubieta 2006). The construction of the body reflects the values of individuals within society.

The interpretation I offer is based not on our contemporary conceptions of sexual identity and morality, but on a reflexive discourse that accounts for other cultures’ perceptions of sexual identity and the body, and the way we understand the past (Zubieta 2006). In order to explore the dynamics of how the Cheŵa perceive human and animal interaction, I have relied on outstanding contributions by Brian Morris (1995a, 2000a, b), Kenji Yoshida (1992), Matthew Schoffeleers and Adrian Roscoe (1985), and Claude Boucher (2002a, 2012) to analyse the use of certain animals in the context of initiation and to explore the possible meanings and uses behind the rock art. This analysis has also contributed to understanding why Cheŵa women in the past selected the rock shelters as teaching venues (Zubieta 2012).

**CHEŴA SYMBOLISM OF THE ANIMAL WORLD**

Cheŵa cosmology and the traditions linked to the animal world can only be understood through the metaphors that Cheŵa use to express these relationships in daily-life activities, and to convey issues and solutions relevant to daily-life dilemmas. Animal behaviour is used to make statements about the human condition (Schoffeleers and Roscoe 1985) because animals are seen as having certain characteristics in their behaviour that humans also share. For example, animals are regarded as wise, lazy, greedy, fast, and so on, just as fellow humans. Animals appear in songs, proverbs (Morris 2000a: 236–242), myths (van Breugel 2001), and folk tales (Werner 1906; Schoffeleers and Roscoe 1985). Many stories have a strong underlying conviction that humans have something to learn from the behaviour of animals (Schoffeleers and Roscoe 1985; Chimombo 1988).

Powerful desires are often expressed within the Cheŵa society through metaphors related to meat and food. Although eating meat is highly valued, in the context of initiation girls are not allowed to eat meat until the end of the ceremony. At that point, the act of eating meat and its link to sexual intercourse is reaffirmed by songs that are sung only for this specific occasion. Eating meat represents the capacity of initiates to engage in sexual intercourse as fully grown women (Zubieta 2009). Morris (1994: 26) has noted that meat, like sex, is considered harmful in some contexts, and a menstruating woman, for example, cannot eat certain meats such as bush pig.
hippopotamus, or elephant. It is worth noting that, like eating meat and having sexual intercourse, menstruating women are regarded as ‘hot’ (*-tentha), which is a condition conducive to pollution (and harm) in certain ceremonies and events\(^1\).

The encoded meanings behind metaphors are difficult to understand for outsiders — not only Westerners but also local people — who are not members of the closed circles of knowledge associated with initiation. I propose that some animal bodies shown in the paintings were used as metaphors in the context of girls’ initiation to discuss human behaviour and body concerns closely related to women’s perceptions of the world (Zubieta 2006, 2012).

Although the meaning of those paintings is almost forgotten, some Chewa women in my study of Mwana wa Chencherere II, central Malawi, identified some spread-eagled designs depicted on top of each other — the one on top being smaller — as an image of a baboon (*nyani*) (see Zubieta 2006: Figure 4.13). Women regarded this superimposition as a baboon carrying another baboon ‘just as baboons carry their children’. Baboons, according to Morris (2000a: 201), are recognised as humans in the way they care for their young and in their use of medicines. The baboon is also a character mentioned in a riddle I recorded during an initiation ceremony I attended in 2003. Baboons, along with dogs and hyenas, have been identified as representative of human sexual passions (*chilakolako*) (Morris 2000b), and it is also widely believed that male baboons may have forced sexual intercourse with women (Morris 2000a). Some of the designs represented in the rock art were perhaps used as metaphors to discuss issues related to human sexual behaviour in certain teachings (Zubieta 2006).

The baboon is also a *Nyau* theriomorphic structure known as *nkhwere* (*ku-kwera* — to climb) — a full-body costume covered with leaves of maize cobs — that appears during dances in the girls’ initiation ceremonies (Rangeley 1950: 23; Morris 2000b: 148). According to Morris, these night masks explicitly show sexual behaviour towards women when they approach them. In his seminal work on the *Gule Wamkulu* in central Malawi, Claude Boucher, an anthropologist and a missionary in Africa for 40 years, writes that the mask called *Matako alingana* (the buttocks are the same) represents a baboon that dances during the girls’ initiation to show that although men and women are physically and anatomically similar, they are different in their individual behaviour. The mask teaches that a happy married life does not depend on the external appearance or being well endowed but on the ability to understand and care for one another in the daily happenings (Claude Boucher pers. comm. 2003). One of the riddles that accompanies the mask is:

> Kuwaona akazi, anzanga,  
> *Matako alingana* pasiyana n’pa moto  
> *Matako alingana*.

When you look at women my friend,  
the buttocks are born the same but their performance on the fire differs,  
*Matako alingana*. (Boucher 2012: 171).

The presence of the baboon in the paintings therefore might have multiple levels of meaning. However, despite efforts to identify and interpret some of the spread-eagled designs as lizards, snakes, and chameleons based on formal characteristics, with folk tales and myths of origin (e.g. Lindgren and Schoffeleers 1978; Smith 1995; Zubieta 2006), the designs are not executed with enough detail to allow precise species identification. Of significance, here, regarding the influence of ritual on human-animal relations, I should note that the baboon at Mwana wa Chencherere II was acknowledged only because the person who recognised it was an insider — an initiated woman.

Visual ambiguity served the purpose of concealing the secret teaching behind the paintings. I posit that some of the spread-eagled designs represented in the rock art were intentionally created to act as visual metaphors imbued with meaning only to be decoded by going through the ceremony. Perhaps in the past, as it occurs in today’s ceremonies, it is through the combination of images and language (e.g. songs, proverbs, and riddles) that metaphors associated with animal symbolism were passed on in certain teachings (Zubieta 2009, 2016).

Other animals such as *nsato* (python), *thunga* (snake), *fulu* (tortoise), and *ng’ona* (crocodile), and *njobvu* (elephant) as part of the selection of animals represented in clay reliefs, which are clay images with volume slightly protruding from the ground, used during *Chinamwali* to pass on instructions in eastern Zambia (Zubieta 2016). Yoshida (1992: 249) noted that the majority of animals were identified with water. However, I would argue that not all represented animals have strong associations with this element. For example, Yoshida also noticed the *kalulu* (hare), and I have recorded the *njobvu* (elephant) as part of the animal repertoire represented in clay reliefs, which are clay images with volume slightly protruding from the ground, used during *Chinamwali* to pass on instructions in eastern Zambia. Leopards have similarly been identified as animals portrayed in the context of girls’ initiation (Yoshida 1992; Mapopa Mtonga pers. comm. 2007; Zubieta 2016); and genet cats among the Nsenga have been expressly linked to their *Ndola* girls’ initiation ceremony (Apthorpe 1962).

During *Chinamwali*, animal and human connections materialise not only as clay and/or rock painting but also through the initiate’s ability to symbolically transform into an animal during the initiation ceremony. This takes place at the culmination of the ceremony, a phase known as *Chingondo*, when the initiates wear a headdress shaped as an animal (Zubieta 2016).

*Chingondo* occurs once the initiate has learnt the dances and songs of *Chinamwali*. The *chingondo* is a representation of an animal (van Breugel 2001: 196–197). This animal varies according to area, but it generally represents the *kasiyamaliro* (an eland/ntchefu), known as the mother of all *Nyau* masks and linked to fertility and rebirth (Yoshida 1992; Morris 2000b; Mtuta 2001; Boucher 2012). Literally, the word *kasiyamaliro* means ‘the one who accompanies the corpse to the graveyard’ (Boucher 2012: 106–107). The headdress can also take the shape of other animals that perform in the *Gule Wamkulu* (*anamkungwi*, central Malawi pers. comm. 2006). Brian Morris
(2000b: 107) mentions that besides the eland, the headresses in central Malawi can represent the hare (kalulu), elephant (njobvu), and snake (thunga) — all animals of the woodland (m’chire). Wearing the kasiyamaliro as a headdress in the context of girls’ initiation represents the initiate’s future status or role as a mother (Claude Boucher pers. comm. 2007). A case, we could say, of multispecies or interspecies ‘becomings’ arising out of the mingling of creative agents (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010).

In his study on girls’ initiations in eastern Zambia, Bruwer (1946) notes that the clay collected to create the figurines was shaped as long strips with the appearance of an elephant’s trunk. Although he does not mention the creation of a specific animal headdress, he notes that the clay strips were wrapped around the head of the initiates and tied down with bark rope. The bodies of the initiates were also decorated with spots — like some of the clay figures, headdresses, and paintings. After the completion of this helmet-like headdress, the teacher of the initiation was noted to shout: ‘Nyamayo! Nyamayo!’ (Wild! Wild!) (Bruwer 1949: 163). The song that women performed while the initiates danced in the public place of the village (bwalo) throws further light on the initiates’ transformation:

Taonani ndembo! Chawa de!  
Ndembo chawa!  
Taonani ndembo! Chawa de!  
Ndembo! Chawa! Ndembo Chawa! (Bruwer 1949)

Although the translation and the meaning of the song is unclear, it encourages initiates to ‘look at the ndembo!’ According to William Rangeley, ndembo means ‘elephant’, and this is the most senior and respected of the Nyau structures (Rangeley 1950: 19). I propose that the song expresses, performs, and transforms the initiate’s connection to animals and also their relationships with humans. It is this latter facet of human-animal relations that is conveyed also during Chinamwali when the groom performs a ceremonial hunt (Lancaster 1934: 199; Bruwer 1949: 156; Boucher 2002a: 38). Here the groom personifies the hunter and his bride the hunted animal (Schoffeleers 1971: 271–282).

Although I have not observed a symbolic hunt among the Chewa, I recorded a song in central Malawi during a Chinamwali Mkwangali in 2006 when two young girls were sent to the bwalo to announce that the initiates were approaching the village. The messengers (the girls) walked around in circles repeating in a fake high-pitched voice: ‘Nyama, nyama! ’ (the animal, the animal!). Two initiates came into the bwalo and performed a series of dances in the company of their mentors. At the climax of that particular Chinamwali Mkwangali, the young initiates wore their clay headdress (chingondo). The older girl was given an elephant (njobvu) and the second a chimkoko (a theriomorphic structure that has been linked to the antelope, but also to the train because of its rapid movement; see Boucher 2012 for further discussion on chimkoko) (Figure 3).

Early in the ceremony I was invited by five senior headmen not only to participate in Chinamwali Mkwangali but also to see the creation of the njobvu structure of the Nyau inside the dambwe, a rare and extraordinary request. The dambwe is a sacred place inside the graveyard (manda), which is where the structures and masks are made, and where firewood collection and hunting is prohibited.

William Rangeley notes that there two separate dambwe, being the ‘senior dambwe’ the one known as dambwe la njobvu (dambwe of the elephant) or dambwe lilakulu (the great dambwe). Only the masks of njobvu (elephant) and ajere or abwenzi (hunters), which accompany the njobvu all the time in its performance, are made at this special dambwe. He also notes that membership of dambwe la njobvu is open only to old men who have graduated from the ordinary dambwe in which all the other structures are made (Rangeley 1949: 43). Thus, I felt extremely honoured, just as when I participated in previous Chinamwali, to have been invited to this important area within the dambwe where the njobvu for this particular ceremony was crafted. I was told this space is restricted to the young initiated men and that only senior Nyau members are allowed in (headman, central Malawi, pers. comm. 2006).

The njobvu represents the father ancestor and the chief, and it has great authority as it personifies the dead chiefs and the ancestors. It also represents the link of the headman with fertility. This structure is common throughout Chewa country and figures within initiation ceremonies, enthronements, funerals, and commemoration rites (Boucher 2012: 124). The headmen considered it important for me to witness the creation of the njobvu in order to have a better understanding of Chewa culture, but I also think it was a prerequisite for me to approach the Nyau theriomorphic structures and masks during the ceremony without transgressing the moral code (mwambo).

Normally women are not allowed to get close to Nyau. Women must stay away from them because masks are ancestral spirits (mizimu) and, as such, are feared. Only a few elder women, and women who have been initiated in Nyau, can approach the masks in a teasing playful way and sing and clap.
Learning through animals

Women close to them. I have seen how women call the masks to come closer to them, only later to run away screaming and cheering, which could be interpreted as a way of teasing the dead and associated spirits, and keeping a playful interaction between the dead and the living (Figure 4).

Because of my initiation into the dambwe, I was allowed to follow the impressive three-metre tall elephant structure with flexible trunk, straight tusks, circular ears, and two eyes, along with the men on its procession to the bwalo when it emerged from the graveyard. Men followed the elephant while singing songs praising and advising the headman, who walked closely and proudly in front of the elephant structure while touching and holding one of the tusks (Figure 5). The headman holds great authority and is also known as the mwini mzinda, the owner of the village and owner of the village initiation rite (Rangeley 1949; Phiri 1983).

Before the njobvu entered the village, it was protected with medicine (mankhwala) at the headman’s house. A congregation of senior headmen from the neighbouring villages, the headman’s advisors, initiated men, a few senior women and young boys gathered around the house. The ritual consisted of a series of speeches by different men praising the headman for his first Chinamwali Mkangali and showing their appreciation with gifts and money. Two ajere, the messengers of the elephant, were holding small ceremonial axes and never left the njobvu. When the elephant structure was approaching the outskirts of the village a group of women appeared at a safe distance waving their colourful chitenge (cloth) and singing celebratory songs about the coming of the Gule Wamkulu. The njobvu performed at the bwalo for a few minutes jumping up and down. The arrival of animal structures into the village during Chinamwali is a dramatic expression of the connections found in Cheŵa culture between humans and spirits, including spirits of the dead, and between hunting and agriculture that form an essential unity (Morris 1991).

Fortunately, we have detailed information on the meaning of the elephant among the Cheŵa and we can analyse some of its aspects which women may have chosen to highlight in the context of girls’ initiation. The ears, the trunk and the tusks appear to be key characteristics that the Cheŵa emphasise in the ceremony. According to Boucher (2002b) the initiates are blindfolded and taken in the evening to the bwalo to meet the njobvu mask and asked to touch the trunk. The elephant trunk symbolises the penis. Sometimes initiates are told to touch the tusks while songs regarding sexual taboos are sung to remind them that sexual activity is regulated by strict rules of behaviour (mwambo), closely supervised by the headman of the village. Moreover, the headman also has the responsibility, along with the initiate’s parents, to resume in sexual intercourse with their respective spouses at the end of the ceremony to unlock the girl’s fertility (kulongosola, to redeem) (Boucher 2012).

The action of touching the elephant mask has an important immediate benefit to the initiate as she will be given ‘the power of the chief, who is the spiritual head of the community and the representative of the spirits. Handling it [the trunk] helps to remove fears the girls may have about their first sexual encounter’ (Boucher 2002b: 44). Laurel Birch de Aguilar (1996: 173) also mentions that when the girls are allowed to grasp the tusks of the njobvu it shows they have learnt about the sexual opposite and shows respect for the chief. The elephant thus represents both authority and fertility (as embodied in the chief) in various media such as clay headdresses, reliefs, and masks used in the context of girls’ initiation. It is possible that this symbolism was associated with its presence in Cheŵa rock art.

Cheŵa rock art and the landscape

Many of the rock shelters I visited in Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique during my study were located in plateau and savannah woodlands. The savannah woodlands are often referred to as miombo, and comprise a wide variety of trees, shrubs and grasses that are used by local populations. Some of the trees identified close to the sites in the Chongoi Forest Reserve in central Malawi were mwimbi or the quinine

[Figure 4] Women teasing the mkhango (lion) structure, at a safe distance, in the context of a funeral, central Malawi 2011 (Photo: Leslie F. Zubieta)

[Figure 5] The headman of the village walks next to the elephant mask (holding the tusk) in procession from the graveyard to the communal place in the village (photo: Leslie F. Zubieta, central Malawi, 2006)
Rauvolfia caffra, *mlanje cedar* (Zubieta); *Widdringtonia whytei*), and trees *Faurea speciosa*, possess great ecological material for the creation of masks and for ceremonial related activities, including wood collection (Chidumayo 2002). Access to this resource has been restricted in some areas — especially nature reserves — causing harm to the lifeways of local communities who live in the vicinity, forcing some inhabitants to acquire wood illegally (Morris 2001; Walker and Peters 2007).

South-central Africa has been traditionally home to various kinds of antelope (kudu, duiker, bushbuck, waterbuck, reedbuck, eland, sable), and hartebeest, buffalo, rhinoceros, and zebra (Angus 1898; Shorter 1989). Elephants were found in many areas up to a hundred years ago (Hubbard 1928; Langworthy 1969) and were crucial for the extensive ivory trade that took place between the Indian Ocean and south-central Africa. Leopards and lions were important also for their magical properties, and their skins were given to the chiefs. Even today, the Gawa Undi (the King of the Cheŵa people, with his headquarters in Katete District, eastern Zambia) sits on top of a lion and a leopard skin and ivory tusks. Historical accounts, such as Antonio Candido Pedroso Gamitto’s incursion in the nineteenth century (Gamitto 1960), note the presence of these animals and the absence of others such as the giraffe. In the mid-twentieth century, people were still able to remember a time when large animals included eland, elephant, and rhinoceros still roamed the Dedza upland in central Malawi (Robinson 1975: 10).

The plateau crests and high altitude areas of the Chongoni and Dedza mountains in central Malawi are characterised by humid ferrallitic soils (Brown and Young 1965; Clark 1973). The montane evergreen forests growing in these areas contain species such as *Pygeum africanum*, *Apodytes dimidiata*, mlanje cedar (*Widdringtonia whytei*), and trees belonging to the Rubiaceae and Flacourtiae families (Topham 1952). However, the increase in population in the twentieth century has seen the intensification of land use activities, including wood collection (Chidumayo 2002). Access to this resource has been restricted in some areas — especially nature reserves — causing harm to the lifeways of local communities who live in the vicinity, forcing some inhabitants to acquire wood illegally (Morris 2001; Walker and Peters 2007).

The relationships and connections I have highlighted between the woodlands, the wild animals and ritual activity, I posit also conducive for ritual activities and protecting the initiates in their transition to womanhood (Zubieta 2009, 2012).

According to Morris (1995a), the perception of the woodland is related to external sources of life and power generators. As he notes, ‘it is from the woodland that fertility derives, in the form of rain or semen, which are, in Malawi, symbolically associated’ (Morris 1994: 39). Wild animals are perceived as beings that are close to the spirits of the dead and to political kinship, especially with male affines. Along with the woodland, they are seen as an essential source of fertility necessary for the continuity of the group and the village.

Rock art sites and the *Chinamwali* ritual

Cheŵa people associate the woodland with hunting and wild animals, while the village is associated with agriculture and domestic animals. Cheŵa women domestic activities, however, extend from tending the household agricultural plot and domestic animals within the village to going up the mountains and into the forests. They have been responsible, both in the past and present, for collecting water, firewood and useful plants for household consumption from the woodland areas (Abbot and Mace 1999) (Figure 6).

Following Morris (1994, 1995a, b) study on Malawian attitudes towards the woodland, I have suggested that women selected and used rock shelters as venues for *Chinamwali* not only because of their apparent remoteness from the village, which would allow them privacy to perform their teachings away from the gaze of men or the curious eyes of non-initiates, but most importantly because of the perceptions attached to the woodland and the creatures that live in this environment. The selection of shelters was also dependent on the vegetative cover that surrounded these venues, another important use of the *miombo* woodland (Zubieta 2009). The woodland is perceived as a ‘cold’ (-*zizira*) environment (Morris 1995b) and thus I posit also conducive for ritual activities and protecting the initiates in their transition to womanhood (Zubieta 2009, 2012).
posit, were fundamental to the selection of the rock shelters as crucial venues for teaching purposes. According to the women I spoke with, they still use today a wide range of wild, not domesticated, animals’ representations during girls’ initiation ceremonies. It is possible that in the time when Cheŵa women still painted rock art, certain wild animals were represented in the rock shelters. I have referred to some animal symbolism here, mainly relating to baboons and elephants, but it appears that women chose a range of different animals and their characteristics as examples to teach girls about transitioning to womanhood.

CONCLUSION

Because of their secluded nature in the past, rock shelters were used as sacred and ritual places for Chinamwali. During the latter half of the 19th century, sites such as Mwana wa Chentcherere II, were transformed from places of ritual to places of refuge for women (senior elder, central Malawi, pers. comm. 2003) trying to avoid capture by patrilineal Ngoni raiders and Yao slave traders; women became important commodities as prospective wives, child-bearers and agriculturalists (Robinson 1975; Phiri 1983). This was also the case with several other rock shelter sites in the mountainous areas in southern Malawi such as Zomba and Mulanje (Morris 2001).

Missionaries began to introduce Christian teaching and European techniques of education from the 1870s, and the Cheŵa were subject to colonial rule and a capitalist economy from the 1890s (Phiri 1983). Such changes disrupted the population distribution, social structures and the economy. The advent of colonial rule also brought changes to wild mammal hunting practices. The creation of game reserves and development of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries resulted in undermining traditional hunting methods in favour of European colonial style of big game hunting.

These major changes had significant impact on the ritual life of the Cheŵa, but institutions such as Chinamwali and Nyau have shown great resilience and ability to persist, especially in rural areas. Although some rock shelters are still considered sacred spaces, their use has shifted as women have found new ways to instruction young initiates (Zubieta 2006).

Here I have focused on showing the complexities involved in the analysis of animal-human relationships in the context of girls’ initiation ceremonies in order to interpret the archaeological evidence of past ritual practices in the rock paintings. Animal symbolism is not straightforward but encapsulated in the construction of conventions that many women learn how to re-enact in every Chinamwali. Further research needs to be conducted on the ways Cheŵa women perceive animals in the context of practicing Chinamwali today.

Most of the rock art sites I visited within the Chongoni Forest Reserve in Malawi are still surrounded with the original miombo woodland environment. However, over time in some forest reserves non-indigenous trees such as pines and eucalyptus have been introduced (Walker and Peters 2007). For example, Mwana wa Chentcherere II and adjacent rock art sites in central Malawi were surrounded partially by Brachystegia and by commercial pine plantation that were cut in 2000 and have since re-grown. This vegetative cover allows us to imagine how this site must have looked at the time it was used as secret venue (Figure 7). More studies are needed on the impact that population pressure, land tenure, and use have on miombo woodland dynamics (Chidumayo 2002).

Malawi is one of the most densely populated countries in south-central Africa (Morris 1995a; Walker and Peters 2007), and over exploitation of natural resources has badly degraded some areas. Human encroachment into protected areas has challenged the ways governments in the region include local people in forest conservation. Morris (2001) notes that since 1973, efforts in conservation have been most concerned with tourist enjoyment, and it is only in the past decade that community projects have been developed. The number of mammals has also varied due to changing policies. In some reserves, as a product of human attempts to protect crops, populations of elephants, rhinoceros, zebra, and hartebeest populations have declined.5

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore how such fateful multispecies encounters and associated decline of animal populations will influence future ritual practices. Today clay figurines, theriomorphic structures, and masks shaped as wild animals still carry deep symbolic power and play a crucial role in the Chinamwali ritual.
role in the transmission of knowledge during Chinamwali. As Nyau and Chinamwali have proved resilient over the past two hundred years, it is likely that Cheŵa people in the rural areas will continue using wild animal representations (e.g. elephant, eland, lions) in future ceremonies. However, although wildlife is still plentiful in some areas, in the near future some children may grow up having never seen some of these large mammals in the forests or on the outskirts of their villages. As their presence diminishes some animals may be remembered only through the lore and performance of ceremonies.

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NOTES

1. ‘Hot’ conducive elements and activities (e.g. meat, menstrual blood, adultery, relish, salt) can be dangerous in certain contexts. ‘Cold’ elements and activities include abstinence, ancestral spirits, nsima, and children. The mwamboma regulates the interaction of those conditions and their potential harm through strict rules of behaviour.

2. Interestingly, Bruwer also mentions that ndembo refers to the scarification marks on the face of the initiate. Kings Phiri (1975) has also recorded that Cheŵa’s distinctive tattoo marks are called ndembo. Ndembo is also the Chinsenga word for rock painting and body scarification (Apthorpe 1962: 13). The connection of these elements needs further research and analysis.

3. Nyama means meat and also edible quadruped (Morris 1991: 23). Nyama covers all mammals eaten as food and also includes fungi and roots of certain orchids with similar texture and taste to meat. The term does not include chicken, wild birds and fish. Interestingly the term refers to vital energy or to the essential property of a thing (Morris 1994: 24-5, 38).

4. Sexual abstention is a prerequisite for attending initiation ceremonies, burials and rain sacrifices ceremonies because any person who is ‘hot’ would ‘spoil’ and put in danger the ritual (Zubieta 2006: 64-5).

5. For example, between 1948-1961 large mammals were killed to protect crops in Malawi: 852 elephants, 1048 hippopotamus, 562 buffalo, 489 waterbucks, 554 roam, eland and kudu, and 1199 other antelope (Morris 2001: 361).

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