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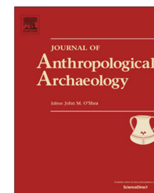

Learning through practise: Cheŵa women's roles and the use of rock art in passing on cultural knowledge

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ABSTRACT

Stereotypes that confine women's roles to duties within the domestic sphere, such as food preparation and child care, have been challenged in the last 40 years by the introduction of gender as an analytical tool. To advance knowledge of the range of female activities and capabilities, I explore the role of Indigenous women in the creation and use of rock art for girls' initiation ceremonies in south-central Africa. Rock paintings are no longer employed during these ceremonies. Instead, objects created for this occasion are used to pass on specific knowledge. I find that the analysis of the actions behind the production of ritual objects in present-day girls' rites of passage provides a common ground to understand the past uses of rock paintings. Rock art served as visual prompts to convey intergenerational cultural knowledge exclusive to women participation and use. Some aspects of the ceremony are restricted to initiates and only permitted material is discussed.

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1. Introduction

From its inception deeply rooted in feminist perspective, a vast and rich body of research in archaeology prioritizes women both as subjects of archaeological inquiry and as scholars (see Kehoe, 1992; Wylie, 1992; Smith, 1995b). The archaeology of gender has engaged in a large range of empirical and methodological studies from the mid 1980s throughout the 1990s (Conkey and Gero, 1997; Conkey and Spector, 1984; Mazel, 1992; Nelson, 2006; Wright, 1996); as happens with any good theoretical perspective, it has expanded from its own fundamental analytical categories such as gender and sexuality, and the mechanisms through which gender constructions are produced (see Butler, 1993; Perry and Joyce, 2001).

Gender is a crucial tool of inquiry in rock art research as it prompts questions regarding authorship and encourages us to investigate historic perceptions of gender in the study populations. By looking into the social constructions of gender (see McDonald, 2012; Solomon, 1992; Yates, 1993), rock art studies have examined how gender is visually represented. The study of gender perceptions and representation in archaeological materials, including the paintings and engravings, provides an academic place where we can critically assess our own gender stereotypes and our preconceived categories of "female" and "male" that we deploy in the reconstructions and interpretations we make of the past (see Hays-Gilpin, 2012; Wylie, 1992).

Despite the impact of gender in archaeological studies and the burgeoning number of published works, the roles of women as producers of rock art have been less prominent in rock art research (cf. Hays-Gilpin, 2004, 2012; McDonald, 2012; Smith, 1993; Stevenson, 1995; Whitley, 2006). In the last decade, some attempts to investigate *who* made the rock art in the past have studied hand stencils in European rock art by looking into relative lengths of digits between females and males (see Nelson et al., 2006; Snow, 2006, 2013). I will not focus here whether gender can be determined from finger lengths (see Hays-Gilpin, 2012: 203 for further discussion); what I am interested in is the media coverage in 2013 of results showing that 75% of those hand stencils could be of females (Snow, 2013: 755), with titles such as *Were the First Artists Mostly Women?* (Hughes, 2013), and *Prehistoric Cave Artists In Europe Were Mostly Women, Ancient Handprints Suggest* (Ross, 2013). The newsflash was translated into Spanish, French, German, Turkish and other languages. Perhaps the idea of female authorship still today dazzles the modern imagination in challenging the dominant paradigm whereby men were seen as the primary authors of Palaeolithic rock paintings (see Diaz-Andreu, 1998; Russell, 1991).

Ethnographic research in various parts of the world suggests women very likely had multiple roles in the creation of rock art, either by applying pigment on the rock, or by helping to achieve

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the desired end with powerful songs, performances or their sole presence (see Hays-Gilpin, 2004; Kaberry, 1936; Smith, 1991). For example, in Lesotho in Southern Africa a woman at full moon was said to be involved in the grinding of ochre for the preparation of pigment to which eland's blood was added (Mapote personal communication to How, 1962). In Native California, Steward (1929) recorded ceremonial paintings made at Luiseño and Cupeño girls' puberty initiations, with diamond-shaped and rectilinear designs respectively (Steward, 1929: 227). At the end of the ceremony, girls had to race to a certain rock where their relatives waited to give them pigment to paint. In particular, diamond-shapes and zigzags in southern California have been interpreted as representations of rattlesnakes, which the girls received as spirit helpers during their visionary quest (Whitley, 2006: 306). A similar situation pertains to women's activities, where senior Aboriginal women in the Kimberley region of northwestern Australia, according to Phillys Kaberry, repainted from time to time the Rainbow Snake regarded as a fertility spirit (Kaberry, 1936: 398). Because of the restrictive access to women's knowledge, along with the biased early ethnographic research in Australia (and worldwide), which prompted and promoted a limited understanding of women activities; little is known about the full capacity and role of Aboriginal women in the production and use of rock art in Australia (see Hays-Gilpin, 2008: 250).

The present paper shows that women have been major producers and users of this important category of visual and material culture. Using case-studies from south-central Africa, Malawi and Zambia, I discuss the imagery made in the context of initiation into womanhood, *Chinamwali*, as a visual prompt to convey important lessons on proper and expected behaviour in Chewa society. Rock art and objects, as used in this setting, shared symbolic associations; as they show an effective knowledge transmission, we can see how the analysis and understanding of the objects are crucial to understanding the rock art.

So I have worked with this premise: in order to explain the symbolic connections between objects and rock art in the recent past, we should pay close attention to the context in which they play a role, to the actions behind their creation, use, and disposal, and to record if possible those processes in the field. I have focused on the uses of material culture rather than its meanings, so this paper is concerned with the role of objects and rock art in the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, with the actions underlying this process, and with the people involved in those actions. I describe and discuss extensively the examples that I myself recorded in the field, with a comparative look at older data recorded since the 1900s.

2. The *Chinamwali* ceremony of the Chewa

At the turn of the 19th century, during a visit to central western Mozambique in 1894, H. Angus Crawford mentions for the first time some activities in Chewa rituals exclusive to women and reports the use of objects in *Chinamwali* girls' initiation ceremonies. With great effort, he managed to obtain important information of a woman's initiation into pregnancy. At a dance performed only by women who had borne children, he reports, the dancer was holding a clay or a wooden model of the "virile organ", while a like model was placed on a small mound which the dancers appeared to "worship" (Angus, 1898: 481–482). No more details were provided.

Chinamwali is a complex Chewa ceremony divided in various phases: the first stage, and the most elaborate, known as *Chinamwali chaching'ono*, consists of a series of rituals in which young girls participate during the dry season, after their first menstrual cycle, in order to be transformed into adult women. *Chinamwali* is a sacred occasion for the Chewa; instructions are given in special spaces, such as the initiation hut close to the village (*tsimba*), and a place at the outskirts of the village (*mtengo*) marked by a significant tree under which instructions are given. The main teacher (*namkungwi*) instructs the initiates during the ceremony while each girl has a tutor(s) (*aphungu*) responsible for the overall learning process in which the *mwambo* (moral code, traditions) is transmitted. Public ceremonial performances occur in the plaza, a focal space inside the village known as the *bwalo*.

Objects such as the ones recorded by Crawford were not the only medium through which women transmitted knowledge in the past during initiations; rock paintings were also used. In the 1930s, Margaret Metcalfe recorded rock paintings made with white pigment at Mphunzi and Chiwenembe sites in Dedza District, central Malawi. In 1956, some of her diagrams were published in *The Nyasaland Journal*; there she remarked on the modern look and apparent lack of interest in the white rock paintings she encountered. She suggested "they must have been made for some reason as it meant taking the trouble to fetch the white pigment to the spot in order to do them" (Metcalfe, 1956: 60). Despite this observation, she did not discover the importance of those white paintings.

The rock paintings Metcalfe described were later attributed to women's initiation ceremonies and more specifically to *Chinamwali* (Lindgren and Schoffeleers, 1978; Phillipson, 1976; Prins and Hall, 1994; Smith, 1995a, 1997; Zubieta 2006, 2009a,b, 2012, 2014); it is a rare example of a tradition known to be made and used exclusively by women.

The distribution of the rock art attributed to *Chinamwali*[1] has been located until now in the confluence of the political borders of Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique (Fig. 1). The art consists of snake-like motifs, circles, circles with internal divisions, ovals, arcs, crescents, lines made out of dots, and star-like motifs. The most distinctive motif, resembling an extended animal skin viewed from above, is also known as the *spread-eagled design* (SED) (see Smith, 1995a), ranging in size from a few centimetres to more than a metre in length. The body of the SED runs generally in a vertical position, with an extension from the bottom suggesting a tail and often with four limbs and protrusions from its head (see Lindgren and Schoffeleers, 1978; Smith, 1995a; Zubieta, 2006). The pigments employed were generally white and black in colour and applied with the fingers (Fig. 2).

Dots sometimes cover the snake-like motifs, circles and SEDs (Clark, 1973; Smith, 1995a, 1997; Zubieta, 2006, 2009b, 2012). In Malawi and Mozambique black dots persist, whereas in eastern Zambia white dots more commonly fill the body of the SED. Only a few examples in central Malawi show a black line placed in the middle of the body and the tail (e.g., Bunda 6, Kampika and Mwana wa Chentcherere II sites); some have tails filled with alternating white and black horizontal lines (e.g., Chongoni 39 site). Dots occasionally were placed in various specific ways over the motif's body and/or around the SED, e.g., emanating downwards from the upper limbs or hands (Fig. 3). A few examples in central Malawi (e.g., Kampika and Mphunzi 7 sites) show dots concentrated in a particular part of the motif's body – on the head, or on just one side of the body. The reasons behind the placement of these dots need further research; modern parallels would suggest these dots were painted on certain parts of the motif's body for teaching purposes (Zubieta, 2009b).

Isolated images can be found in remote shelters, but this is not common (e.g., Chongoni 38, central Malawi). Instead, the superimposition of rock art images, sometimes hundreds of designs within

[1] Also known as The White Spread-eagled tradition (see Smith, 1997, 2014; Zubieta, 2006).

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