

Chongoni Rock Art Area (Malawi)

No 476 rev

1. BASIC DATA

<i>State Party:</i>	Malawi
<i>Name of property:</i>	Chongoni Rock Art Area
<i>Location:</i>	Dedza District, Central Region
<i>Date received by the World Heritage Centre:</i>	2 February 2004
<i>Included in the Tentative List:</i>	15 September 1997
<i>International Assistance from the World Heritage Fund for preparing the nomination:</i>	20 April 1998 9 April 2002 24 June 2003

Category of property:

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

Brief description:

Within a cluster of forested granite hills, on the high altitude plateau of central Malawi, are a dense concentration of rock paintings that reflect the comparatively scarce tradition of farmer rock art, as well as paintings by BaTwa hunter-gathers who inhabited the area from the Late Stone Age. The Chewa agriculturalists, whose ancestors lived in the area from the late Iron Age, practised rock painting until well into the 20th century. The symbols in the rock art, which are strongly associated with women, still have cultural relevance amongst the Chewa, and the sites are actively associated with ceremonies and rituals.

2. ACTIONS

Background:

At the 29th Session of the World Heritage Committee in Durban, the nomination was referred back to the State Party to allow it to:

- Put in place legal protection for all the shelters through their designation as national monuments
- Augment the Management Plan to encompass the management of the woodland and its use by local communities
- Put in place as soon as possible arrangements to allow a minimum number of staff to work at the site

A response to these requests was received from the State Party on 30th January 2006.

Date of the Technical Evaluation Mission: 7-11 September 2004

Dates of request for additional information and of receipt from State Party: None

Consultations: ICOMOS has consulted its International Scientific Committee on Rock Art.

Literature: Juwayeyi, Y. M. & Phiri, M. Z, *The State of Rock art Research in Malawi*, Occasional papers Malawi Department of Antiquities, 1992; Smith, B. W. *Rock art in south-central Africa: a study based on the pictographs of Deza District, Malawi, and Kasama District, Zambia*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Cambridge University, 1995; Lindgren, N.E. & Schoffeleers, J. M., *Rock Art and Nyau symbolism in Malawi*, Dept of Antiquities publication, 1999; Smith, B. W. *Forbidden Images: Rock Paintings and the Nyau Secret Society of Central Malawi and Eastern Zambia*, in *African Archaeological Review*, 18, 2001.

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report: 10 April 2006

3. THE PROPERTY

Description

The nominated site coincides with the boundaries of the Chongoni Forest Reserve, in the centre of Malawi near the western border with Mozambique, 80 km south of Lilongwe the capital. The site covers 126.4 square kilometres.

The reserve, in the high altitude plateau, is focused on Chongoni Mountain with its flat grassy top and steep sides, surrounded by lesser hills and boulder strewn wide valleys. The granite rocks are mostly clothed in dense natural, *Brachystegia* woodland, interspersed with grassy 'dambos' or clearings. The Reserve is the only sizeable area of natural woodland remaining in Malawi.

Sheltered by the overhanging slopes of the mountains, are one hundred and twenty-seven rock art sites, together forming the densest cluster of rock art in central Africa.

The rock art reflects the traditions of hunter-gathers, the BaTwa (or Pygmies) who inhabited the area during the Late Stone Age and also agriculturalists who moved into the area during the Iron Age and added to the rock paintings.

The rock paintings are found in shelters, some of which archaeological evidence suggests were used as habitation sites by early inhabitants, and also on rock boulders.

The earliest red paintings associated with the BaTwa are also found elsewhere in Malawi. On the other hand around 70% of all white paintings associated with agriculturalists are located within the Chongoni Reserve.

The later white painting traditions persisted well into the 20th century and their images are still culturally relevant to the present day Chewa farmers who live nearby, reflecting beliefs and traditions still prevalent.

The property consists of the following cultural qualities:

- Early red schematic paintings associated with BaTwa hunter-gathers;
- Later white paintings associated with agriculturalists;
- Archaeological habitation sites associated with the later paintings;

- Living Chewa rituals connected with rock art symbols and the landscape;

And the following natural qualities:

- Natural woodland protecting the rock paintings.

These are considered separately.

- Early red schematic paintings associated with BaTwa hunter-gathers:

Rock art associated with hunter-gathers is found widely in south, central and eastern Africa. Its images fall into two distinct categories: the naturalistic images found in the mountains of Southern Africa as far north as the Zambezi River, in Namibia and Zimbabwe, and with an outlier in the north of Tanzania, around Kondoa; and what has been called the schematic images thinly scattered across central Africa in Malawi, Central Africa Republic, Uganda, Zambia and Angola.

So far this latter category is not represented on the World Heritage List. The Chongoni site is put forward as representative of this schematic art, which is thus visually different from the naturalistic hunter-gatherer images. In contrast the schematic art is thought to be *conceptually* distinct, perhaps linked with rainmaking and fertility divination.

This schematic art consists of images which can be related to two distinct types. The first depicts static animals occasionally accompanied by humans depicted in outline, in red, pink or violet, sometimes filled or partially filled. These types are only known from two sites. The second, mainstream, red paintings are dominated by geometric motifs in either red or red and white. The designs include circles with radiating lines, concentric circles, ovals, parallel lines, wavy lines, etc. Some of these could indicate atmospheric or climatic phenomena such as sunbursts, rain clouds and there is strong evidence for their association with rainmaking cults.

The red paintings are often found on the largest boulders, sometimes in shelters suitable for habitation and often prominently sited high up on the surface.

All are executed with quite a fine technique in red oxide pigment.

- Later white paintings associated with agriculturalists:

In many cases overlaying the red paintings, are white paintings of zoomorphic figures, spread-eagled or snake-like figures thickly daubed in white clay. Many of the figures have tails, four limbs and heads with protuberances, perhaps depicting horns or ears. They could represent mythical or legendary beings. These images are bold but lack precision.

These later white paintings appear to be associated with the influx of agriculturalist Chewa people, who arrived in what is now Malawi in the early part of the 2nd millennium AD.

Many of the paintings are associated with women's initiation ceremonies and were carried out by women. The symbols used are secret and still not divulged. Initiation

ceremonies continue to take place near these images although the tradition of painting has died out.

The paintings were executed until the 20th century. However the later paintings depict a stylistic shift: anthropomorphic and zoomorphic motifs depicting masked figures associated with the *nyau* or secret society of the Chewa. They rarely overlap the earlier white paintings and are usually found in the largest shelters.

It has been suggested that this latest style dates principally from the 19th and early 20th centuries, when the *nyau* was forced to become an underground movement because of its suppression by Ngoni invaders, missions, and the later colonial government.

The art provides a record of the way *nyau* has served in the process of overcoming and manipulating traumatic social changes faced by Chewa society in the last few centuries (The *nyau* society is discussed below). As well as the depiction of masked animal characters such as antelopes, pythons and several birds, *nyau* images include the hiding places of *nyau* structures, and meeting places associated with initiation.

- Archaeological habitation sites associated with the later paintings:

Within the nominated site, 195 archaeological sites have been identified. Of these 151 are open Iron Age sites, and 44 rock shelters of which 27 contain paintings. Six sites and six shelters have been excavated.

These confirm the occupation of the area by Later Stone Age people within the last 2,500 years. This presumably represents the first settlement of the area by the BaTwa, ancestors of the hunter-gatherer Pygmies in what is today the Democratic Republic of Congo, who migrated into parts of Zambia, Malawi and southern Angola. These are the only areas where their distinctive schematic art has been found and Chongoni has the largest concentration of paintings.

Material recovered includes bones from hunted animals around 2,000 BP. It has proved difficult however to relate excavated material to any particular type of paintings.

- Living Chewa rituals connected with rock art symbols: *nyau* society, initiation and rain making ceremonies:

The *nyau* society, which fostered the masked white images, is a society of masked dancers who perform at funeral rites. The masked dancers are seen as spirits. Some *nyau* characters represent human beings, others animals. Animals can be depicted by masks or by elaborate woven structures made from maize leaves carried by men. The *nyau* masks and structures are considered highly sacred and kept away from non-initiates for some time before ceremonies in caves near the shelters, and always burnt after the completion of the final dance of the season. Masked figures similar to those seen in the rock paintings can be seen today at dances in villages around Chongoni.

The *nyau* society is the most ancient corporate society in Malawi. It seems to have been in existence at the time of the formation of the Chewa states in the 16th century (see *History*).

A second important Chewa ritual is *chinamwali*, girls' initiation ceremonies. Several of the white rock painting images seem to reflect symbols from initiation rites and it is believed that these images were created by women as part of the initiation rituals. These secret ceremonies are still part of the living heritage of the Chewa people.

The third ceremony connected to the rock paintings is rain making. This in contrast to the other two ceremonies is linked to the hunter-gathering communities and to the earlier red geometric paintings, many of which are thought to represent rain. The Chewa remember the BaTwa hunter-gathers as skilful rainmakers, from whom they learnt their rainmaking traditions. Women are strongly associated with these rainmaking traditions, which are still carried out.

Although the Chongoni sites are still used for initiation, *nyau* and rain ceremonies, rock painting has ceased.

- Natural woodland protecting the rock paintings:

Surrounding all the rock art sites are dense miombo woodland, which demonstrates typical characteristics. The woodland is seen as an integral part of the rock art sites: together they are perceived as the Chongoni sacred landscape, a scarce and valued resource used for traditional ceremonies.

Fires in the woodland as a mean of controlling game have produced open areas and wood is gathered for firewood and construction. Although constituent hills are quite closely spaced, it seems that they do not all share similar flora and fauna and each need to be conserved as separate entities. In part of the forest, exotic plantations were introduced in the 1960s and it is clearly desirable that this process be reversed.

History

A few early Stone Age artefacts suggest that the area was first settled in the Upper Pleistocene time, although substantive evidence for earlier than the Late Stone Age occupation is lacking. The oldest archaeological evidence is from materials dated to 2,500 BP.

The Late Stone Age people were hunters and gatherers who seem to have been responsible for the earliest rock art – although there is no datable evidence.

During the 1st millennium AD, Iron Age farmers moved into the area from the north and introduced white rock art of naturalistic figures made in white clay. The farmers did not entirely displace the hunter-gathers and the two communities appear to have lived in a symbiotic relationship until some time around the 19th century when the hunter-gathers seem to have been assimilated into the farming community.

During the 15th century new groups of farmers, the Maravi Chewa, arrived in central Malawi (The present name of the country derives from Maravi). They are believed to have migrated from the north-west of Lubaland (the home of the Luba peoples) in what is now the south-east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Maravi quickly integrated several groups of peoples into a centralised Maravi Empire ruled from eastern Dedza. Its influence extended throughout central and eastern Malawi and into parts of what is now Mozambique. Within the Maravi state

there existed a sharp division between central and local government, the former being dominated by the Maravi immigrants and the latter by the original inhabitants. The *nyau* society flourished at local level and initially seems to have been a way of checking political centralisation. In time, however, the distinctions became blurred and representatives of the non-Maravi clans became chiefs and the Maravi rulers gained rights over the *nyau* organisation.

In the mid 19th century Ngoni peoples, fleeing Chaka in Zululand, South Africa, moved north and some settled south of the Chongoni area. The Ngoni appear to have despised the *nyau*, who as a result were forced into hiding. The *nyau* became used as a focus for Chewa resistance to the invading Ngoni. Thus the *nyau* came to be the guardian of Chewa culture in the face of opposition – a role it performed again as a refuge for those who refused to be drafted for portage in World War I. The *nyau* was discouraged by missionaries and to a certain extent by the Colonial government. In spite of this it has survived and is now recognised as a valued and vigorous expression of traditional culture.

In 1924 the Chongoni and surrounding hills were declared a Forest Reserve. The boundaries were revised in 1928 and 1930 to exclude the villages. Further areas were excluded in 1961 and 1965 in the face of encroachment. The boundary has remained unchanged since 1965. In the late 1960s a programme of planting softwoods was introduced and roads created throughout the reserve to service the plantations.

The first recording of the rock art was in the 1930s. In the 1950s several sites were published.

The five Chentcherere shelters were declared a protected national monument in 1969 and opened to the public (five out of 127 shelters).

Protection and Management

Legal provision:

All rock art sites are protected by the Monuments and Relics Act of 1990. Any person found guilty of damaging paintings at Chongoni could be liable for a fine of the equivalent of US\$ 96 and to imprisonment for three years. However it seems that the act is not enforced to prevent graffiti.

The Forest Reserve is protected by the Forestry Act of 1997. There are various penalties for contravening the law within a Forest Reserve, and, in comparison with the Monuments and Relics Act, they are more stringent, although likewise rarely used.

Although the Chentcherere shelters are national monuments, the remaining Chongoni sites are not yet declared as National Monuments. The Formal gazettement of sites is the work of the Monuments and Relics Advisory Council, which last met in 1994. Since that year, there has been no budget for the Council to meet and it has ceased to operate. The new Minister of Youth, Sports and Culture has apparently expressed interest in resuscitating the Council.

However the State Party has indicated in the information provided in 2006, that it is using an alternative way of gazettement the site in response to a formal request to do so.

A meeting has been held with all relevant stakeholders and this agreed on the importance of legal protection. As a result recommendations were made to the Minister to put a notice in the government gazette announcing his intention to declare the shelters as a national monument. This has not yet taken place but it is understood that the Minister is aware of the importance of the declaration and the process could soon be started.

Management structure:

A Management Plan has been drawn up and has the commitment and support of local communities and other necessary stakeholders.

The Management Plan is fairly comprehensive, but it is at the moment not supported by any funding and is a “wish list” rather than a reality. The likelihood of funds being allocated to implement the plan in the near future is not certain.

The importance of the forest as a protective measure for the rock paintings is stressed in the nomination. The forest is also culturally significant as being imbued with some of the sacred qualities attributed to the rock art, and for its ritual uses. The Plan does not cover the natural forest surrounding the rock art sites. There is a need to integrate the management of the forest with the management of the rock art sites so that in effect the management is for the whole area of forest and rock paintings together as a type of culture landscape.

One of the activities identified in the Plan of Action on p. 21 of the Management Plan is to encourage local communities to continue using the sites. The most recent information received from the State Party has indicated that the Forestry Department has established community based organisations throughout the area. These ensure the protection of the woodland as well as ensuring the local communities benefit from it through being allowed to harvest grass, mushrooms, herbal medicine and dead woods for fires. The department has also introduced bee keeping.

It would be desirable if some kind of agreement could be reached between Traditional Leaders and the Department of Forestry to set out guidelines for use of individual sites and the forest in general for religious and traditional ceremonies. Such a process could identify the key issues from all three perspectives and clarify their respective expectations and responsibilities.

To implement the Management Plan, staff with authority are needed on site. The most recent information received indicates that some officers have already started working on site and recently the Department has added two more people who work as patrolmen.

Resources:

For the 2004/2005 financial year, the Chongoni Rock Art project is on the budget of the Department of Antiquities. It is planned to provide a discrete budget in the future but this is not yet agreed by the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture.

There is no recurring budget – only funds for specific conservation or research. There is no budget given for staff.

Justification of Outstanding Universal Value by the State Party (summary)

The Chongoni rock art sites are of international importance:

- As the richest concentration of rock art in Central Africa;
- For the way they reflect rock paintings traditions of both hunter-gathers and farmers;
- For there still living association with Chewa traditions of the *nyau* society, female initiation and rainmaking ceremonies;
- One of the greatest concentrations of rock art known to have been painted by women.

4. EVALUATION

Conservation

Conservation history:

Very little active conservation work has been carried out on the rock paintings.

State of conservation:

In general the state of conservation is said to be good. There are problems with graffiti and with damage from water ingress. What is needed is preventative conservation to ensure that the sites do not deteriorate. Without an active presence on site, this is almost impossible to achieve. The dossier shows that previous attempts at formal site protection – such as fences, signposts and notice boards – have been unsuccessful and even counter-productive. The most effective protection currently is difficult access or when sites are regarded as sacred by the local community.

Protection and Management:

There is currently no Department of Antiquities station at Chongoni. As regular and no regular staff on site, visitors are discouraged from visiting the sites. There will be no public access until the Management Plan is being implemented with staff in post who are responsible for protection, guided tours and presentation of the site. The Management Plan envisages 4 conservation staff, 4 tour guides and 10 patrolmen.

Currently a skeleton staff is in place.

In the meantime visitors are directed to rock art sites outside the nominated area where caretakers are available.

Risk analysis:

- Lack of protection:

The greatest threat to the site is lack of active management and preventative conservation. With few staff on site there is also no monitoring of the site. Although the sites are officially closed, visitors still manage to reach the painted shelters.

- Vandalism:

Grffiti is a problem at some of the sites; action is needed to deal with existing graffiti and to put in place effective measures to prevent future graffiti.

- Grazing:

Cattle herders take their animals into the shelters where they may rub against the paintings. Occasionally the herders light fires in the shelters. Active staff on site should act as a deterrent to this practice.

- Fire:

Fire is acknowledged as a potential major threat. Fire appears to be used as part of hunting practices although it is technically forbidden. On p. 12 of the nomination dossier, it is said that the practice of taking boys to rock shelters for *nyau* instruction has been reduced because of the restrictions against fires but that “when World Heritage status is awarded, it is expected that there will be much greater flexibility in all regulations that currently constrain the rich living heritage practices ...” It is clearly crucial to put together a working arrangement for who uses the forest and how it is used. (see above and below).

Authenticity and integrity

Authenticity:

The authenticity of Chongoni rock art and the associated traditions is unquestionable.

Integrity:

The integrity of the rock paintings is not in doubt. However the integrity of the rock paintings in their natural surrounds has been to a limited extent compromised. First the people who lived in the areas where moved out when the forest was declared a reserve and secondly the natural forest has been planted in parts with exotic conifers. The management plan needs to encompass the needs of the forest. Thus could help to ensure that in time the plantations were removed, the regeneration of the miombo woodland encouraged and communities have sustainable use of its resources.

Comparative evaluation

No detailed comparative analysis is given in the dossier. However the nominated site has emerged as a site representing farmers' art in central Africa from the comparative study of Southern African Rock Art carried out by Janette Deacon in collaboration with the *Southern African Rock Art Project (SARAP)* for ICOMOS in 2002. This identifies as a group in parts of South Africa, Zambia, and Malawi agriculturist paintings depicting symbols significant during initiation ceremonies and ritual practices. Of these the Chongoni sites in Malawi are identified as having the densest representation, have still living traditions associated with the art and have forest around the rock art sites that are still reasonably intact.

Outstanding universal value

General statement:

The Chongoni Rock Art sites are of outstanding universal value for a combination of the following qualities:

- The rock art images reflect two parallel traditions of rock art of the hunter-gathers and of agriculturalists;
- The art of the hunter-gathers is conceptually and visually different from the naturalistic art found elsewhere in central and southern Africa;
- The rock art of the agriculturalists is the densest collection in southern Africa;
- The rock art is still within its forest surroundings;
- The rock art shelters and their images still have a key cultural role within the living traditions of the Chewa peoples and part of the images display a persistence of traditions dating back to the Late Stone Age;
- Much of the rock art seems to have been carried out by women.

Evaluation of criteria:

The site is nominated on the basis of criteria iii and vi.

Criterion iii: The dense and extensive collection of rock art shelters reflects a remarkable persistence of cultural traditions over many centuries, connected to the role of rock art in women's initiations, in rain making and in funeral rites, particularly in the Chewa agricultural society.

ICOMOS considers that the property meets this criterion.

Criterion vi: The strong association between the rock art images and contemporary traditions of initiation and of the *nyau* secret society, and the extensive evidence for those traditions within the painted images over many centuries, together make the Chongoni landscape a powerful force in Chewa society and a significant place for the whole of southern Africa.

ICOMOS considers that the property meets this criterion.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

Chongoni rock art site is clearly of great importance not only as a heritage site reflecting past practices but to the local community as part of their living heritage. The significance of the site is also strongly linked to the woodland surrounding the rock paintings, which not only protects the paintings but also is part of the traditional rituals connected to the site. If the site is to be managed as a 'living' site, there is as need for a written agreement with the traditional leaders and with the Department of Forestry to set out guidelines for use of individual sites and the forest in general for religious and traditional ceremonies. Such a process could identify the key issues from all three perspectives and clarify respective expectations and responsibilities.

A Management Plan has been drawn up but this does not cover the management of the woodland. However the State Party has indicated in its letter of January 2006 that community based organisations are now in place within the Forestry Department to encourage sustainable management of the woodland. It would be desirable if the

Management Plan could be amended to reflect the need to integrate forestry work with other community initiatives in the nominated area.

The process of implementing the Management Plan has begun and a few staff are now working at the site. For active management of the site, more staff will be needed to take forward the plan and there will need to be political commitment from local and traditional leaders, relevant government departments and national government.

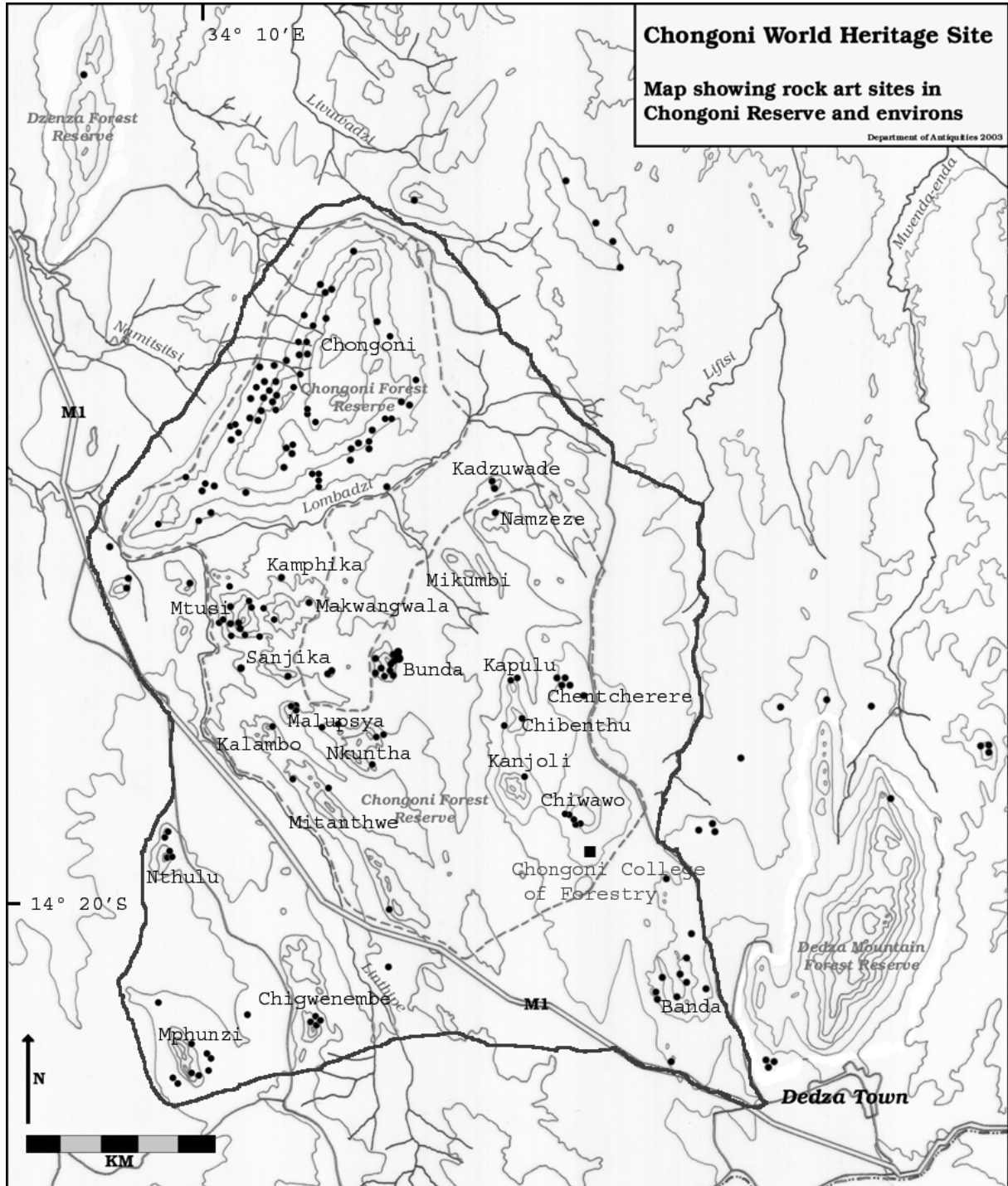
The State Party is commended for arranging for some staff to work on the site, as indicated in the information received in 2006, and is encouraged to put in place staff with conservation training and authority to oversee the implementation of the Management Plan. The process for giving legal protection to the site has been set in motion but the appropriate notices have not yet been served by the Minister. It is understood that this process will begin soon.

Recommendation with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that the nomination of the Chongoni Rock Art Area be ***referred back*** to the State Party of Malawi to allow it:

- to put in place legal protection for all the shelters through their designation as national monuments.

ICOMOS, April 2006



Map showing the boundaries of the nominated property



BaTwa rock art at site Diwa 2



Nyau paintings from Namzeze 1