# **KENYA'S LAKE VICTORIA**

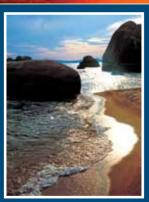
AND MFANGANO ISLAND

**Abasuba Natural and Cultural Heritage** 

















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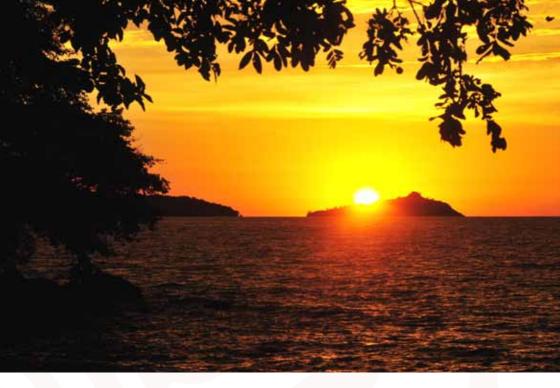
### **TARA - Trust for African Rock Art**

TARA is a Nairobi-based international organisation committed to recording the rich rock art heritage of the African continent, to making this information widely accessible and, to the extent possible, safeguarding those sites most threatened by humans and nature. To achieve its mission, TARA works closely with communities where rock art is found as well as with national and international heritage bodies including the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, the British Museum and state parties across Africa including National Museums and Departments of Antiquities.

### THIS IS A TARA PUBLICATION - www.africanrockart.org

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Seen from Mfangano Island, the sun setting behind Nzenze Island (sacred island of the Wasamo Clan).

### THE PLACE

Lake Victoria is the largest lake in Africa and the source of one of Africa's mightiest rivers, the Nile, which is also the longest river in the world (6853kms long). Lake Victoria's northern shores are situated below the Equator and many islands punctuate its vast waters. Most of these islands are in Uganda and Tanzania with a few like Rusinga Island and Mfangano Island on the Kenyan side.

Mfangano Island is cloaked in green vegetation and has a rocky backbone that rises above Lake Victoria (over 300 metres/1,000 feet). Narrow paths with shallow soil wind up the steep slopes of the Island. The Island's stunted dry forest of olive and associated trees survive on higher slopes. In some places, the Island is exposed as tall red cliffs.

The Island's shore is edged by black rocks with overhanging fig trees and beaches with black volcanic sand as well as narrow reed beds. Hedges of yellow flowering *Thevetia peruviana* bushes border many homesteads and wild morning glory abound in fallow fields. Beautifully-painted canoes can be seen lined up on the shore line. People get around mostly by boat, bicycle and motorcycle taxi.



### THE PEOPLE

The Abasuba people (Mfangano Island's main inhabitants who settled here roughly two centuries ago) nicknamed the Island *Ivangano*, which means reconciliation. The meaning is derived from a ceremony held to promote local community unity after a 17th century feud. Since that ceremony, the Abasuba people have promised to work toward a legacy of respect as a way of promoting peace within their community and beyond.

Primarily, the Abasuba people are fisherwomen/fishermen and small-scale farmers growing maize, millet, cassava, beans and fruit. They also rear cattle, goats, sheep, ducks and chickens. The Abasuba people are Bantu-speakers (believed to be from Uganda originally). Some of them first went to Tanzania before settling at Mfangano Island. The name *Suba* means people who are always wandering and it was given to the Abasuba people by the Luo people. It is important to note that Mfangano Island, over the years, has been occupied by several groups: Wakisori, Wakisasi, Walowa, Wagimbe, Waganda and Wakiaya.

The Abasuba community was divided into 14 Clans and several Clans had different ritual responsibilities. In Abasuba culture, male circumcision was important and only those circumcised were allowed to go to war or visit some of the Abasuba sacred places. The Abasuba had a fairly complex naming system that was based on animals and plants; later, they adopted the Luo system that was based on time and objects. Grandmothers played an important role in the socialisation and education of the children. Songs, riddles and stories were used to entertain, warn, teach and advise the children about what was correct or incorrect. Monogamy as well as polygamy were practised and the amount of economic wealth held was a determining factor as to whether a man married one wife or many wives. The maternal aunt played a very important role in the selection of the marriage partner and throughout the course of the marriage.

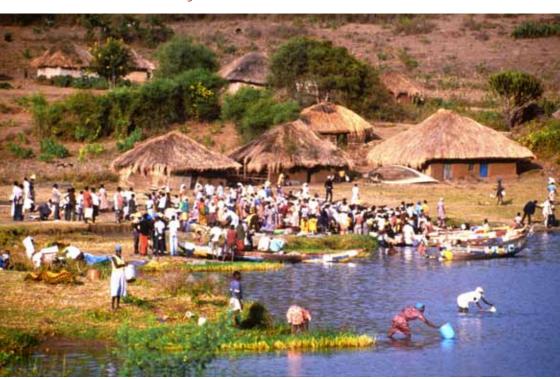
Funerals among the Abasuba people were social occasions, where the community got together to give the departed a hearty send off. When a man died, his wives poured ashes all over themselves and shaved their heads to signify their loss. The dead man was buried, wrapped with skin from a slaughtered animal. Another belief was that the deceased played a very important role in the Abasuba community (e.g. visiting the living in their dreams, warning the living about impending doom and advising the living on several matters affecting the community).

Also, the deceased acted as intermediaries between the community and the gods. The Abasuba people were assimilated linguistically by the neighbouring Luo community, to the





View across the Lake from Mfangano Island towards the mountains on the mainland.



Typical village seen on the mainland shore.



#### A woman with a basket of omena (Silver Cyprinid).

point that most of the Abasuba people were fluent in Dholuo (a language of the Luo people). Many of the younger generation are not conversant with the Abasuba language, Olusuba. Recently, there have been efforts to revitalise the Olusuba language especially after it was listed by UNESCO in the 2003 Red Book of Endangered Languages. In Kenya, the Olusuba language has several dialects spoken. It is unclear whether the dialects have any relationship or similarity with the Olusuba dialects spoken by the Abasuba community in Tanzania.



Dancer with feather headdress on the mainland.



### THE ROCK ART OF KENYA

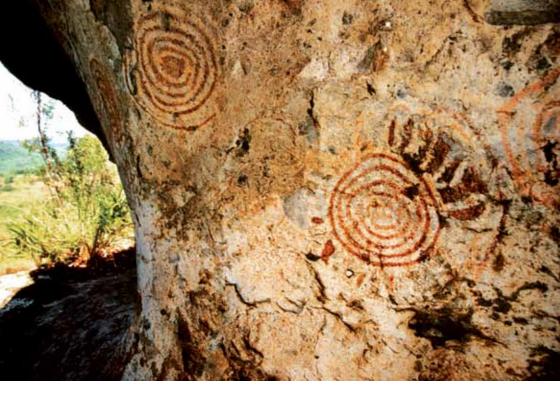
Kenya possesses an interesting variety of rock art, some of it possibly dating as far back as 4,000 years. The tradition of rock painting and engraving has continued until the recent past and many sites are still in use for sacred ceremonies. Most rock painting sites on Mfangano Island feature a geometric style of art usually consisting of concentric circles painted in red and white. This particular style is the dominant style in the Lake Victoria Basin and is found also in a number of different parts of Kenya.

Rock engraving sites from Mfangano Island include rock gongs and cupule sites. Cupules (cup-shaped depressions ground into the rock surface) often resemble a Bao game. Their original use is likely to have been for ritual purposes such as initiation. Cupules are found all over the world and are thought to be amongst the oldest form of rock art, probably predating paintings by thousands of years such as those at the rock art sites of Kwitone and Mawanga (see pages 9 and 10).

Rock gongs are normally free-standing boulders balanced on the 'living' rock which has a natural resonance and often bear numbers of cupules. When the boulders are struck with a stone, they emit a ringing tone like a beaten gong. Rhythmic striking produces a series of notes that carry great distances. A number of rock gongs are found in the Lake Victoria Basin and the Mount Kenya region.

Rock engravings of running giraffe near Lake Turkana, Northern Kenya.



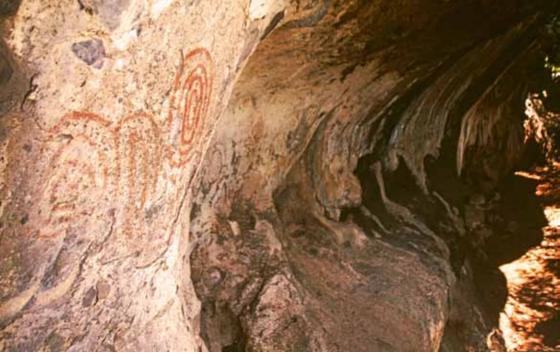


Kwitone rock shelter on Mfangano Island. These concentric circles are believed to have been painted by Twa (Pygmy) hunter-gatherers over 1,000 years ago and were used by the local communities for rain-making ceremonies until recent times.

### THE ROCK ART OF MFANGANO ISLAND

Mfangano Island is a unique setting for a number of rock art sites. The rock art here was created before the arrival of the Abasuba people. It is thought to be the work of ancestral Batwa (a forager-hunter, Ndorobo type people). The Abasuba people embraced the rock art as a part of their ancient heritage. Each Clan had custodians to manage the rock art site in their locality. Knowledge about the sites was passed down from one generation to the next. To become a custodian of a rock art site, you had to posses certain qualities such as being a custodian's child or grandchild, being married, having your own family, owning your own home and, most importantly, comprehending the significance of rock art and the ceremonies being performed at the rock art sites. The Abasuba people used the rock art sites for several communal and spiritual purposes. At these sites, they also performed rain—making ceremonies, reconciliation and purification ceremonies to chase away evil spirits after a war and other ceremonies to appease the spirits after calamities had occurred. In some cases, the rock art has retained power and importance in the Abasuba culture and this has helped to protect the rock art from damage and human encroachment.



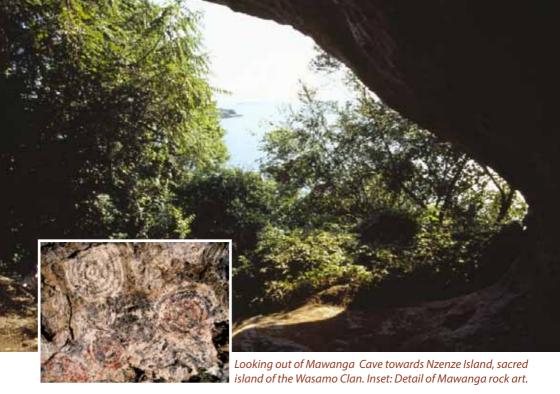


Geometric paintings in the Kwitone rock shelter.

# **KWITONE ROCK ART SITE**

The Wagimbe Clan are the custodians of the Kwitone rock art site who now live in the Wakula, Gulwe and Manta regions of Mfangano Island. The rock art at this site consist mainly of geometric paintings which were the work of Twa (Pygmy) hunter-gatherers who inhabited this Island before the arrival of the Suba people. The art may have been made between 2,000 and 4,000 yrs ago. Oral legend has it that during the 1850 Wasaki-Abasuba war, the Abasuba women wore war masks and stood atop Kwitone Hill. This made the Wasaki believe that the Abasuba men were on top of the hill. When the Wasaki came closer to the shores of Lake Victoria, the Abasuba men emerged from the low lands and killed them. Some of the inhabitants of Mfangano Island apparently believe that the rock art found at the Kwitone site was painted by prominent men from the Abasuba Clan in commemoration of the role that women played during the Wasaki-Abasuba war.

The rock art paintings found at Kwitone consist largely of concentric circles which are attributed to the Wagimbe Clan belief that the life of a living thing starts small and grows larger as time progresses just like concentric circles. Kwitone was a spiritual ground for the Wagimbe Clan and they would go there to worship their ancestors. It is where the ancestral spiritual powers are deemed to be found resting. It is also a ritual cleansing place. To maintain the spiritual powers of the site, the ancestors slaughtered special animals and conducted special prayers at the site.



# MAWANGA ROCK ART SITE

The Wasamo Clan are the custodians of the Mawanga rock art site. They live in the Nyawalongo area, which borders Wakula in Suba District. The rock art found at Mawanga mainly consists of red and white concentric circles that some believe were created by women. The story is that the women received special powers after being visited by the gods (in the form of stars) while the men were fishing. The red concentric circles were drawn to symbolize the sacrifice made to appease the gods in the absence of rain; the white concentric circles were drawn to symbolize the request by the Wasamo people to their gods to punish their enemies by bringing drought on their enemies' lands, thus forcing them to flee.

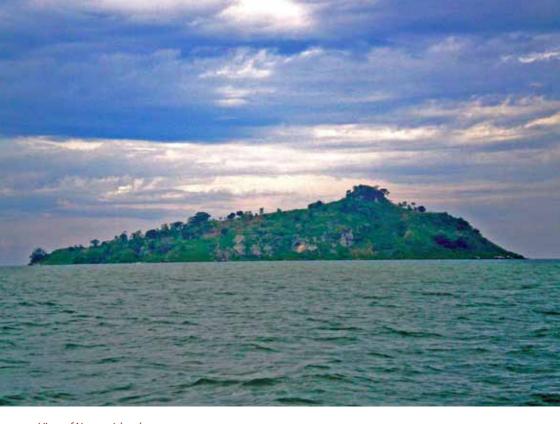
The red circles are associated with the moon and the white ones with the sun. The site is believed to be around 2,000-4,000 years old. The Mawanga Cave was mainly used for rain—making ceremonies and is divided into two major sections: the first section was for the men and the second section was for the women. The section for the women was divided into two parts: the first part was for an elderly woman who guided the younger women on how to handle various issues and the second part was set aside for activities. The Wasamo Clan are also traditional custodians of Nzenze Island, their sacred Island, situated directly opposite Mawanga Cave, where there was always food.

### KAKIIMBA ROCK ART SITE

According to oral legend, a man named Lware fell sick when he was travelling to Mfangano Island to trade with the Mfangano people. With an intention of meeting Lware on their way back, Lware's fellow traders left him next to the lake shore (near a big rock). Unfortunately, Lware's fellow traders were unable to locate Lware upon their return. Lware managed to convince an old man to give him food and shelter. After recuperating, Lware married a woman from the Wisoklwa Clan and they had two sons. One of Lware's sons (Kiimba) later moved to a Cave and settled there. It is believed that Kiimba is responsible for some of the paintings found at the Cave, now referred to as Kakiimba. The paintings are said to symbolize the experiences of Kiimba's people. The concentric circles symbolize the sun and the moon for example. After Kiimba's death, the community used the site for offering sacrifices to appease the gods and for peace negotiations in case there was a disagreement within the community.



Red concentric circle paintings at Kakiimba.



View of Nzenze Island.

## OTHER ATTRACTIONS

#### Nzenze Island

Nzenze Island, which means Grandfather, is located close to the Mawanga rock art site The Wasamo Clan are the custodians of the island (also called the Moving Island). The island is still used for rain-making ceremonies. It is said that the island followed the Wasamo Clan in their migration from Uganda to Kenya and will continue to follow them wherever they go. If a person is not from the Wasamo Clan, then s/he is not allowed to land on the Island. If one does, then they meet with unexpected obstacles. While no one is allowed to live on Nzenze Island, members of the Wasamo Clan have special cultivated plots there. There is another story about why the island is sacred to the Wasamo Clan. Long ago, the elders realised that the island was directly opposite the Mawanga sacred Cave and thus the energy from the Cave was naturally projected across the waters to the island. It was said that during drought times on Mfangano Island, the Clan would be able to find food on Nzenze Island. Nzenze's reputation as the emergency granary of the area continues to this day. As the island is not frequently visited, it is one of the few remaining places in Suba District where hippos and crocodiles are seen.

#### Sacred Forests and Peace Trees

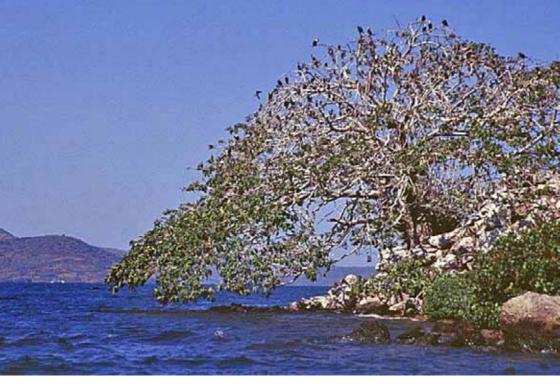
Within Suba District, there are a number of small sacred forests and peace trees. In the past, these forests and trees were considered locations of communication with the ancestors. Even now, most of them are protected and in use, especially for peacemaking within the community or settling family affairs. Most rituals are performed by elder men who retain most of the knowledge of these ceremonial places.

#### **Forests and National Parks**

The Gembe and Gwassi Hills are gazetted national forests and can be visited by road from Mbita or from the lake shore. From Mbita, its only 20 kilometres to Ruma National Park, where you can see roan antelope, leopard, buffalo, hyena and impala among others. The park has over 400 species of birds including the Blue Swallow. If you happen to visit Kisumu, on your way to Mbita, the Impala Sanctuary is a superb place for a stop over. It is the habitat of several mammals including the endangered Sitatunga. Also, the park has beautiful nature trails that are perfect for picnics and hiking. Next to the Impala Sanctuary is Ndere Island, which is gazetted as a national reserve. The island has two campsites and several walking trails that have amazing views of Lake Victoria.

Sacred forest of the Wagimbe Clan.





Large fig tree covered with cormorants on one of the Bird Islands near Mfangano Island.

#### **Bird Islands**

Located south of Rusinga Island and east of Mfangano Island, these Islands have been gazetted by the government of Kenya as a bird sanctuary. They are home to thousands of birds, the most common being the Great and Long-tailed Cormorants. Little White Egrets perch on boats, walk among the fisherwomen/fishermen and roost in large numbers on rocks or overhanging trees. Hamerkop feed at the water's edge and build enormous nests in fig trees. Sacred Ibis and dark Hadada or Hadeda Ibis can be recognized by their long, curved beaks.

Small birds of the shore include the Malachite Kingfishers and African Pied Wagtails. Pied Kingfishers hover in the air and plunge into the water after their prey. A variety of yellow Weaver birds build their nests in villages, in homesteads or next to fishing beaches. Near the shore are the Northern Brown-throated Weaver and Slender-billed Weaver. Inland, birds are a bit more difficult to see except for the large Black Kites always scanning for prey. Along the shore, there are Angola Swallows and Plain Martins. On the rocky ridges, Rock Martins are abundant.







# ABASUBA COMMUNITY PEACE MUSEUM

David Coulson of TARA was the first to record rock art on Mfangano Island in the year 2000, at Kwitone, after which more discoveries were made working with the communities. Then in the mid 2000s David met Jack Obonyo, a man from the island who wanted to promote the unique culture of his people, the Abasuba or Suba, a refugee group who had come from Uganda about 200 years ago where they found the Batwa (Pygmies) who were hunter gatherers and whose ancestors had created the Rock paintings.

Working with Jack, TARA obtained a grant in 2007 from the Tourism Trust Fund (EU funding) to increase awareness of rock art and promote rock art tourism in order to conserve the sites, as well as, generate income and jobs for the local population. An important element of this project was the design and construction of a museum and community centre. The new Abasuba Community Peace Museum serves as a gateway to the island's natural and cultural heritage.

The museum and the rock art tourism project were officially opened in October 2008 by the Assistant Minister of Tourism, Hon Cecily Mbarire, accompanied by other dignitaries including the French Ambassador to Kenya, Madame Elisabeth Barbier. Since the launch of this project, several thousand visitors, both local and foreign, have visited the rock art sites bringing direct benefits to the communities. At Mawanga for example, a school has been built with the proceeds from site visits.

### **Code of Conduct at Rock Art Sites**

#### The State of Rock Art Today

Rock art has survived heat, cold, blown sand, wind and rain (even if today some paintings are faded and pieces of engravings are eroded). The art may look robust, but it is fragile and easily damaged.

#### **Visiting Rock Art Sites**

Read about rock art before setting out, this will immeasurably enhance your understanding and, thus, your enjoyment. Take the trouble to make sure you will be travelling with a really knowledgeable guide. Make certain sufficient time is allowed in your schedule to view the art properly. Once at the site, you will want to spend time viewing the surrounding environment, photographing the rock art without a flash and finding out more information about the rock art.

#### How to Avoid Damaging the Art or the Site

- **1. Do not touch the paintings.** Your fingers leave sweat and oil marks on the rock which cannot be removed.
- **2. Do not put any liquids on the paintings.** They cause the paintings to fade.
- 3. Do not make your own paintings or write your name on the rocks. This destroys the value of the paintings and spoils the experience for other visitors.
- **4. Do not litter.** Take your rubbish with you when you leave or use the trash bin provided.

The sites and all you find at them are part of Kenya's national heritage, so please respect these sites. Please also respect the community traditions and ask permission before taking any photos.

# PLANNING YOUR STAY

# Abasuba Community Peace Museum – ACPM

Affordable community-run, camping facilities are available. The ACPM now also has a holiday cottage available. Upon request, a tour guide can be provided to the rock art sites and the sacred forests. Located next to the museum is a cafe that is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

#### **Contact:**

Tel: +254 723 898 406.

Email: info@abasuba.museum



ACPM holiday cottage.

#### **Bimoss Hotel**

This hotel is located near the Mbita bus terminus. It has self-contained rooms, a restaurant and conference facilities.

#### **Contact:**

Tel: +254 711 568 875

### Lake Victoria Safari Village

Located south of Mbita, this accommodation offers attractive traditional huts thatched with papyrus reeds. Rooms have private verandas overlooking the lake.

#### Contact:

Tel: +254 711 912 120

Email: safarivillage@safarikenya.net

#### **Rusinga Island Lodge**

This lodge has self-contained cottages. Other features include a swimming pool, wellness spa and restaurant. Fully-equipped speed boats with a captain are available for sightseeing and fishing.

#### **Contact:**

Tel: +254 20 2531314 / 5 Email: info@rusinga.com

# **HOW TO GET THERE**



You can reach Mfangano Island by road, boat or air. Air charters are available directly from Nairobi, Kisumu and the Maasai Mara. Rusinga Island is accessible by road through the Mbita causeway.

From Kisumu, a good road runs along the north shore of the Winam Gulf to Lwanda Kotieno, where there is a regular car ferry service to Mbita point. From Nairobi, Mbita can be reached via Narok or Kisii. Mbita or Sindo can also be reached from the Mara via Kilgoris. There is a regular motorboat ferry service to Mfangano Island from Mbita. Boats can also be hired at Mbita or Sindo. The ACPM can also arrange transport on its speedboat at an extra charge.

### **Mfangano Island Camp**

This luxurious camp has en suite rooms with private verandas and sun beds. The rooms are thatched with banana leaves and offer stunning views of Lake Victoria. The camp has a restaurant, bar and a swimming pool. Fishing trips, sightseeing boat trips around the island and visits to the rock art sites are on offer.

#### **Contact:**

Tel: +254 (20) 273 4000 - 5 Email: info@governorscamp.com www.governorscamp.com/









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