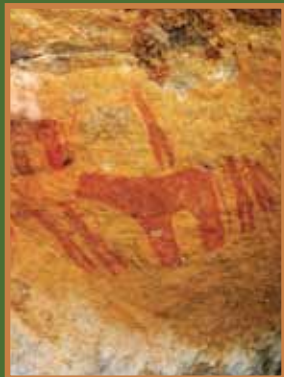


# NYERO & OTHER ROCK ART SITES IN EASTERN UGANDA



DEPARTMENT OF MUSEUMS AND MONUMENT





NYERO

*With the support of the*



[www.gov.ug](http://www.gov.ug)



DEPARTMENT OF MUSEUMS AND MONUMENTS

[www.ugandamuseums.ug](http://www.ugandamuseums.ug)



[www.usembassy.gov](http://www.usembassy.gov)



[www.africanrockart.org](http://www.africanrockart.org)

Photos © David Coulson / TARA unless credited otherwise

Text: David Coulson, Terry Little, Jackline Nyiracyiza,  
Sarah Musalizi, Nelson Abiti, Gloria K. Borona, and Rose Nkaale Mwanja

Coordination: Terry Little and Portia Allen

Design & Layout: Richard Wachara ISBN 9966-7453-7-8

© 2013 TARA

*Front cover: **Top** (from left), White concentric circles, Nyero 3: Grinding Hollows on Dolwe (Lolwe, Lolui) Island; **Centre**: Granite landscape at Nyero; **Bottom** (from left), Paintings at a Karamoja site: Twa paintings at Nyero 2: Pottery sherd, Nyero.*

*Back cover: **Top** (from left), Paintings at Komuge: Visitors from United States of America Embassy, Nyero 1; **Bottom** (from left), Paintings at Mukongoro: Landscape at Kakoro site.*

# CONTENTS



Uganda Department of Museums & Monuments	1
TARA - Trust for African Rock Art	1
African Leaders & Rock Art	1
Welcome to Nyero	3
The Rock Art of Nyero	4
Other Rock Art Sites	11
Conservation Efforts	18
Rock Art Code of Conduct	18
Where to Stay	19
How to Get There	20



# UGANDA DEPARTMENT OF MUSEUMS & MONUMENTS

The Uganda Department of Museums and Monuments is mandated to protect, promote and present the cultural and natural heritage of Uganda through collection, conservation, study, and information dissemination. It is responsible for over 650 national sites, of which 56 sites are of rock art paintings, engravings, and gongs. The Department is based at the Uganda Museum, which was established in 1908 and is the oldest museum in East Africa. The Uganda Museum houses ethnographic, archaeological, paleontological and historical as well as botanical artifacts, making it a national research hub.

## TARA - TRUST FOR AFRICAN ROCK ART

TARA is a Nairobi-based, non-governmental 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.

## AFRICAN LEADERS & ROCK ART

"Africa's rock art is the common heritage of all Africans, but it is more than that. It is the common heritage of humanity."

**President Nelson Mandela**

"The rock art of Africa makes up one of the oldest and most extensive records on earth of human thought. It shows the very emergence of the human imagination. It is a priceless treasure...Africa's rock art is the common heritage of all Africans, and of all people...Perhaps the greatest threat (to this heritage) is neglect. A lack of resources, combined with a lack of official interest, has left too many rock art sites unguarded against vandals and thieves. It is time for Africa's leaders to take a new and more active role. We must save this cultural heritage before it is too late."

**United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan (2005)**



*Paintings of animal and human figures holding bows at a newly recorded site in Karamoja.*



*Paintings at Nyero 5.*





# WELCOME TO NYERO

Nyero rock paintings are unique pre-historic paintings, which date to well before 1250 AD. The paintings enrich the identity of the Iteso of eastern Uganda, and Africa as a whole.

They offer values of inspiration, decorative art, and inscription on natural isolated inselbergs in landscapes with beautiful scenery for visitors to enjoy. Rock art in general is a priceless treasure. It should be studied adequately for us to understand our past and to determine where the future is leading us. Nyero rock paintings are a pride to Uganda; we must protect and guard them responsibly from any kind of destruction.

I invite all stakeholders to consult with government and collaborate openly to ensure that future actions respect the site values and derive intellectual inspiration from our ancestral past.

**Agnes Akiror**  
**Honourable Minister**  
**Tourism, Wildlife & Antiquities**



*Wide view of the granite landscape at Nyero. The paintings are located along this hill.*



*Elaborate white concentric circles at Nyero 3 adopted by Uganda Museum as their logo.*

## THE ROCK ART OF NYERO

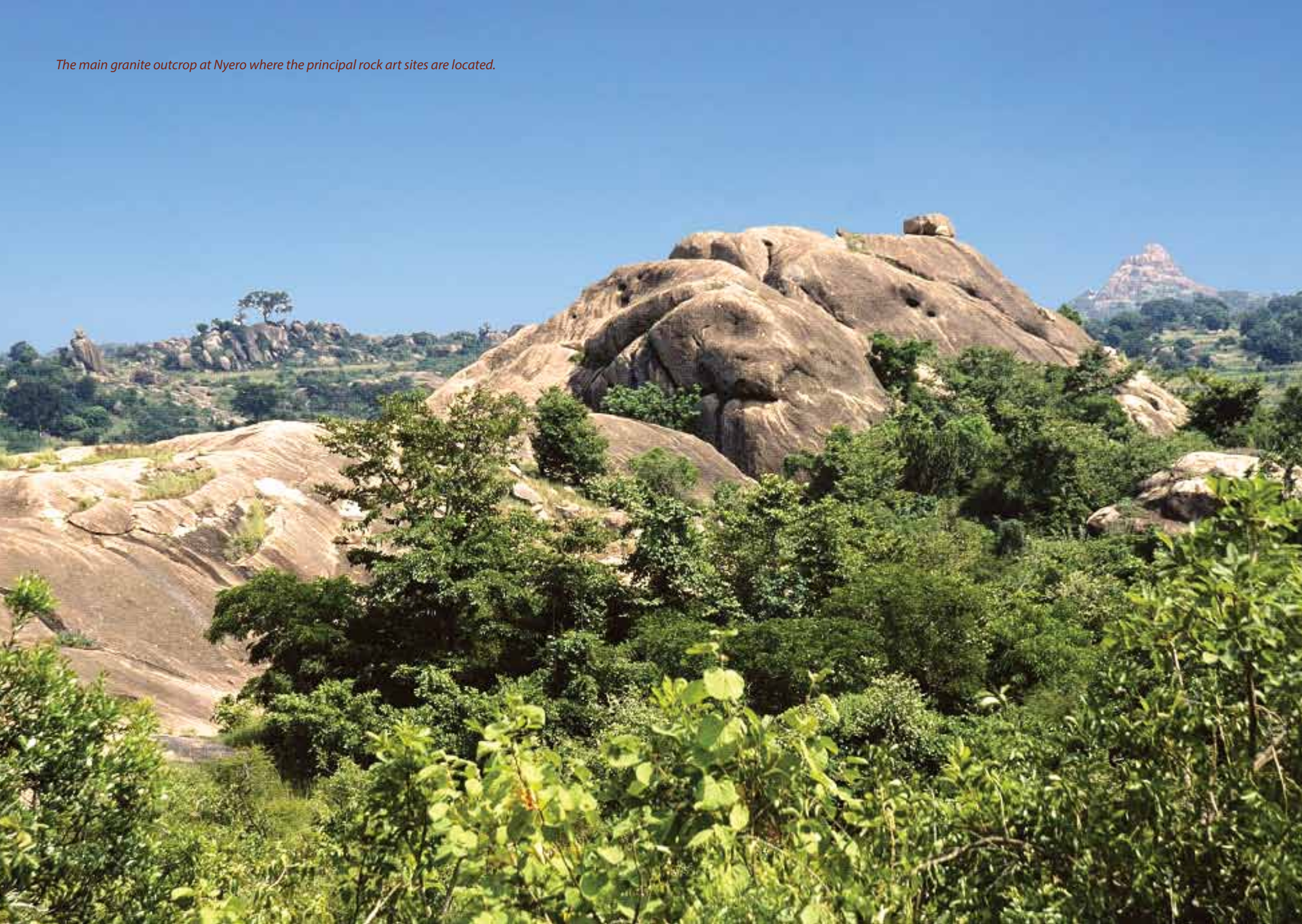
The rock art of Nyero was first documented in 1913; later, it was studied by many researchers who described the rock paintings as largely of geometric nature (Chaplain 1967). This type of rock art is part of a homogenous tradition often depicted in red pigment, spreading across east, central and parts of southern Africa, matching the distribution of the Late Stone Age hunter-gatherer culture. This art is generally attributed to Batwa (Twa) hunter-gatherers who are of Pygmy origin, and are today found in small groups near Rwanda and eastern Congo.

While little is known about the meaning of the art, experts have suggested that the concentric circles may symbolize the Twa's relationship with the all-providing and protective nature of the forest. Rainmaking and fertility rituals have been held at some sites until recent times, including one Kenyan Twa site.





*The main granite outcrop at Nyero where the principal rock art sites are located.*





Archaeologically, the rock art sites are rich in paintings, stone tools, iron works, and pottery; the last two attributes being good indicators of settled agricultural lifestyle. Radiocarbon dates, so far, indicate that people lived in this area between 1,000 and 5,000 years ago which also correlates with the hunter-gathering and early Iron Age. It is likely that Twa hunter-gatherer communities once lived in the area of these rock art sites, probably moving on due to the arrival of the present inhabitants (Nilotics, Luo, and Bantu groups).



*Paintings at Nyero 2.*

According to Iteso oral legend, when the Iteso (Nilo-Hamitic people who originally migrated from the Sudans) moved to this area, they found hunter-gatherer people living there who appeared to fit the description of the Twa. It is likely that some of the Twa probably did opt to stay/live with the Iteso and would soon have learned their language. Similarly the Iteso probably took on some of the rituals and traditions of the Twa.

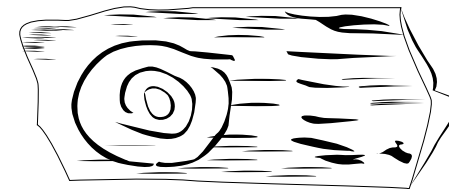


The Nyero Rock Art site is located in Kumi District, eastern Uganda (eight kilometres from the town centre). It has an important concentration of red and white rock paintings located in shelters. The first excavations at Nyero 2 (main shelter) were carried out in 1945 by C.A.E. Harwich, but not published.

In 1961, Merrick Posnansky re-examined Harwich's material at Cambridge University Museum and later re-excavated the site below the main panel (Posnansky & Nelson 1968).



*Pottery with concentric circles and geometric designs found in most of the sites in eastern Uganda.*



*Sketch by Merrick Posnansky 1961:108.*

Pottery found in the upper levels of the deposit at Nyero 2 was introduced only within the last 2,500 years. The site was gazetted in 1972 as a National Monument of historical and archaeological significance. During that time, various conservation and maintenance activities included erecting cemented walls to protect the paintings from rain and to limit access by animals. This work was done by the Ugandan Department of Museums and Monuments in partnership with various stakeholders.





Main panel at Nyero 2 featuring sets of red concentric circles, "canoe" shapes and other lines, probably the work of Twa forager-hunters, perhaps 1,000 years ago or more. The large writing, bottom left, is recent graffiti.





## OTHER ROCK ART SITES

Perhaps due to their visual appeal, the Nyero rock paintings are the best known and the most documented rock painting sites in Uganda. There are, however, other Ugandan rock art treasures in places like Dolwe Island, Komuge, Mukongoro, Kapiri, and Kakoro; some of these are rock engravings.

The paintings, like the ones at Nyero, are early forms of visual communication. The paintings and engravings are usually powerful symbols; many often portray great skills in their form and delineation, and demonstrate the artistic talents of our ancestors. (For meaning of art, see page 4, para 2).



*Small panel of red Twa geometric paintings next to a foot-path leading south from main town on Dolwe Island.*



### **Dolwe Island**

Dolwe Island, also known as Lolwe or Lolui, is situated in Sigulu Sub-County, Namayingo District in Lake Victoria where several rock art sites are found; the largest and most impressive is 'the sanctuary' (closest to Golofa town), which comprises several huge supporting boulders, four of which are extensively painted near the entrance to the rock chamber. The paintings at Dolwe have a concentration of dumbbell shapes predominantly in red pigments, punctuated by sets of concentric circles, sausage shapes, and other motifs associated with rock gongs. Most of the painted sites are located near them within the shelters. This art is also believed to be the work of Twa.

### **Komuge**

At Kachumbala Sub-County, Bukedea District, there is a large, spectacular, shelter consisting of two large boulders, one resting on the other forming a large enclave. There are several geometric images in shades of red, white, and orange monochrome and bichrome pigment, congruent with images at other sites in the region. There is a large, dominant, triangular shaped motif in thick pasty off-white pigment, slightly obscured by similarly painted superimposed motifs.

*Line of large grinding hollows carved out of the granite on Dolwe Island. There are several hundred such hollows on the Island which could have taken years to create and which might have been used for the ritual preparation of food.*





### Mukongoro

In Mukongoro Sub-County, Kumi District, the paintings comprise red finger-painted concentric circles similar to those at Nyero 2. There are also lines at alternating points along the inner circles. At one other site, images comprising oval shapes and thick dots joined together with a line running around the oval shape are found. At another site, the images (slightly covered in soot and dust) comprise dots, zoomorphic designs, anthropomorphic images, indeterminate forms, lozenge shapes, and a central concentric circle with externally radiating 'U's shape. Most shapes are finger painted in red and white monochrome pigment.

### Kapiri

Kapiri is an impressive shelter with a commanding view of Lake Bisina and surrounding villages. Part of the large boulder rests on several small boulders forming a small enclosure with two painted panels consisting of two rayed circles, six concentric circles and with lines running through them as well as several other non-circular motifs, all in red monochrome pigment.

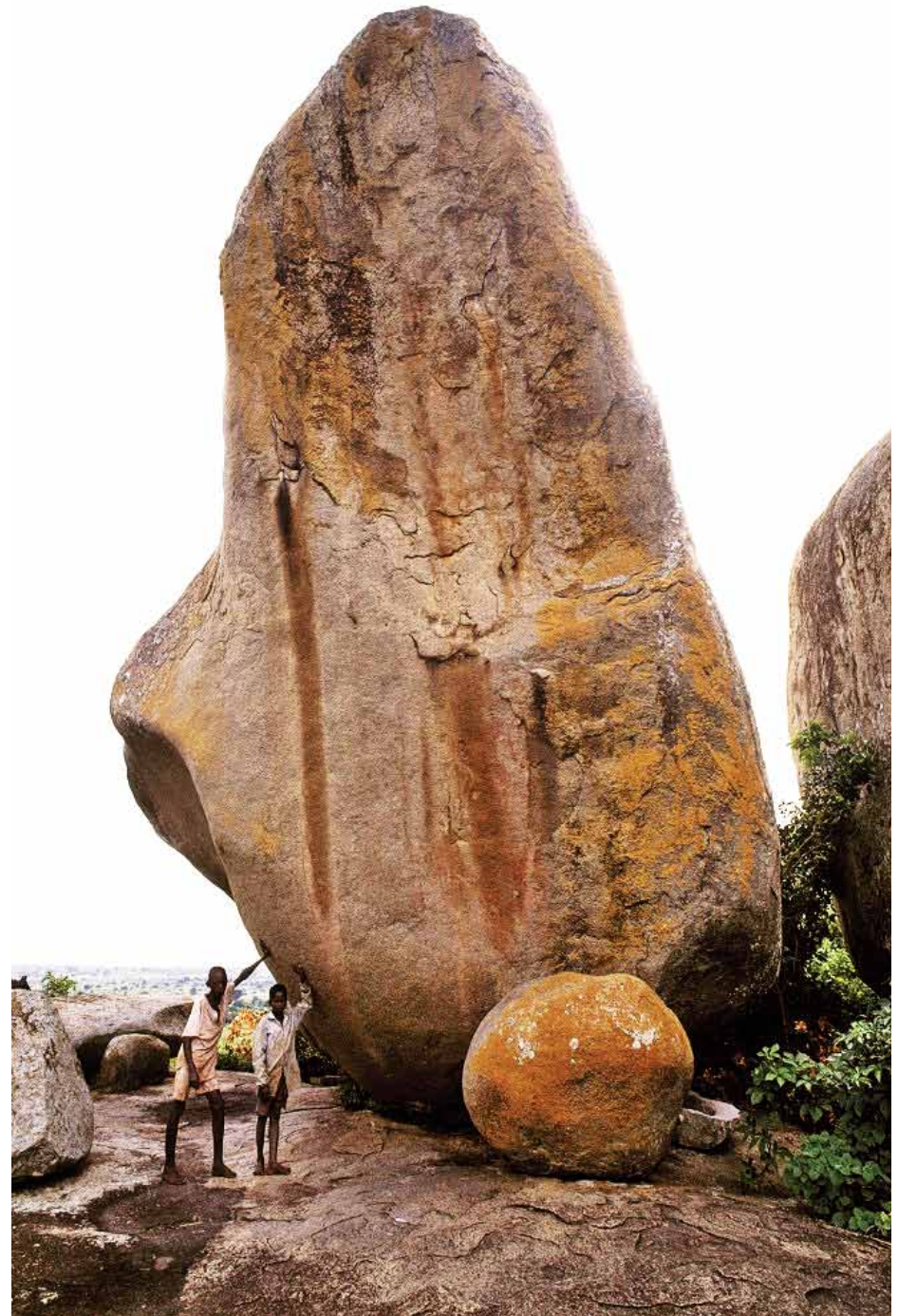
### Kakoro

On an impressive granite hill in Kakoro Sub-County, Pallisa District, are faded orange, red, and whitish paintings that are generally geometric shapes and concentric circles similar to those at Nyero. Close by on the same hill at another site are similar paintings. In a low shelter penetrating far under a massive upright boulder are more paintings of concentric circles and other geometric shapes. The granite hill can be seen from a great distance and from the top are some of the best scenic views of the Iteso region. Three principal shelters with orange, red, and white geometric designs are located on the hill.



*Left:  
Engraved rock in the collections of the Uganda Museum featuring an elaborate spiral or concentric circles. The rock was found by archaeologists at a site in Karamoja, north east Uganda during colonial times.*

*Right:  
Granite boulders on the top of Kakoro rock (see text above). Red Twa paintings are located near the base of the boulder. At bottom right, beneath the big rock is a place where rain making rituals were performed.*





*One of the beautiful bays on Dolwe Island on Lake Victoria. The granite hills and outcrops are an important feature of this special place and are full of interesting archaeological and rock art sites.*







*Queen of Iteso Akaliat Agnes Osuban together with community members at Nyero.*



*Family of pigs sheltering beneath the paintings at Nyero 5 illustrates one of the conservation challenges at this site.*

## CONSERVATION EFFORTS

TARA works with the Ugandan Department of Museums and Monuments to document and safeguard the rock art heritage of Uganda. Threats to this heritage include graffiti and vandalism as well as destruction by people quarrying.

Currently, the Ugandan Department of Museums and Monuments is revising a Nyero Rock Art Site Management Plan (2013-2018), as part of the World Heritage nomination process of six different rock areas: *Nyero and other hunter-gatherer rock art sites in eastern Uganda*. The site management plan outlines the current state of conservation and management of the site, and lays out a series of activities aimed at improving management and conservation.

## ROCK ART CODE OF CONDUCT

Rock art paintings are very old, fragile and easily damaged. Please help to preserve them:

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 of other visitors.
4. **Do not litter.** Take your rubbish with you when you leave or use the trash bin provided.

Rock art sites are part of our heritage and are protected by the laws of Uganda. Respect them and the traditions of the local community. For any further information, please contact [tara@africanrockart.org](mailto:tara@africanrockart.org).





## WHERE TO STAY

### Green Top Hotel in Kumi

Tel: +256 772 408304, 772 542340

Email: akukufarmseedsltd@yahoo.com

### Kumi Hotel

Tel: +256 772 434380, 772 490659

Email: kumihotel1@yahoo.com

### Mount Elgon Hotel & Spa in Mbale

Tel: +256 (45) 4433454

Email: sales@mountelgonhotel.com

### Shine-on Hotel in Mbale

Tel: +256 702 763850

Email: admin@shineonhotel.com

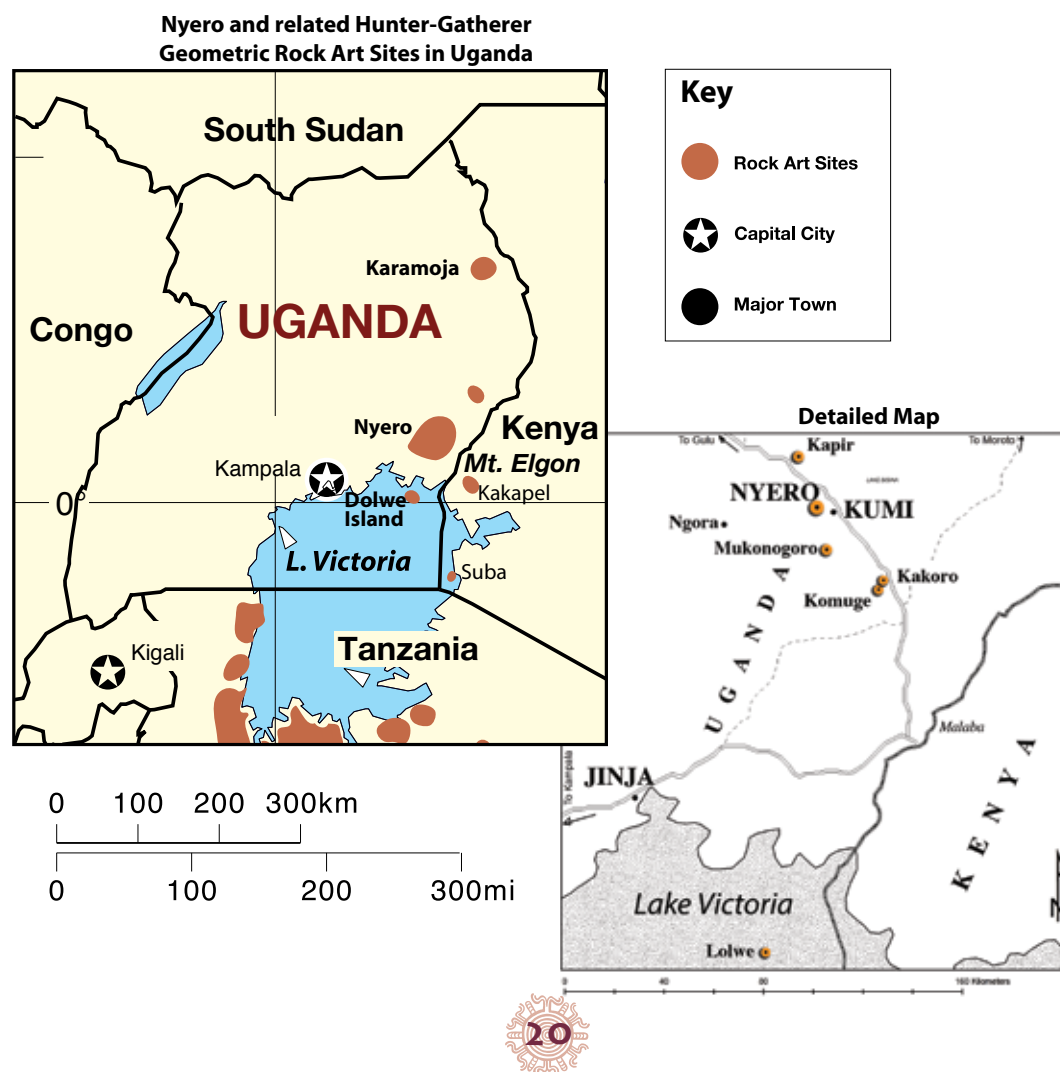


Mount Elgon Hotel & Spa in Mbale.

## HOW TO GET THERE

The Nyero Rock Art Site is located in Kumi District, eastern Uganda (eight kilometers from Kumi town), four hours drive from Kampala, Uganda. The route to the rock art site is well sign-posted from Kumi town (10 -15 minutes drive).

**Entry to Nyero:** Fees in Ugandan Shillings from January 2014 for Adult foreigners is 10,000; Adult Ugandans 5,000; and all Children 3,000. Guides are available at the site. For more information, contact the Uganda Museum at info@ugandamuseums.ug or +256 414 232707.







United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

In cooperation with



World Heritage  
Centre

