Dolwe Island
Jewel of Lake Victoria
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, palaeontological and historical as well as botanical artefacts, 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.

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Dolwe island is one of Uganda’s (and Lake Victoria’s) best kept secrets, a beautiful island about 25 sq km, situated in Ugandan waters not far from the Kenyan border. It is characterized by the many granite rocks and boulders which rise like castles across the landscape, one gigantic boulder balanced on another, as if a giant had been playing with them.

And hidden away inside these natural castles are messages and symbols from the past in the form of rock paintings, carvings and engravings and also gongs (“rock gongs”), left behind by unknown people long ago (one of the largest concentration of rock gongs in Africa), opening windows onto Dolwe’s mysterious and enigmatic past. From these and other archaeological treasures we obtain glimpses of the many rich and diverse cultures that flourished here over the millennia.

There is also another mysterious and remarkable artistic heritage from the past in the form of what archaeologists call ground (carved) depressions/hollows in the granite which abound here in their thousands. Typically these are found carved into large granite slabs or flattish boulders where the sculptors of long ago have sometimes managed to squeeze in as many as a hundred of these “scoops” as we like to call them into a slab that might only measure 5 meters by 6 meters, and each scoop might typically measure about 35 cm long by 25 cm wide and maybe 15 cm deep, and looking at them you reflect on the fact that carving any one of these might have
taken an ancient artist, because this is art, months to create one of them, and there must be at least 20,000 of them on this small island! Nowhere in Africa, and probably in the world, is there such an extraordinary concentration of these hollows/scoops. Their very numbers, as well as the fact that they are often found 15 meters up on the top of huge boulders almost impossible to reach, suggest a ritual/spiritual origin (motivation), rather than a functional one such as for grinding maize.

The population of the island numbers around 10,000, we were told, at least half of which live in the town of Golofa facing onto a natural rocky harbour where one of the most important rock painting sites is also located. Meanwhile the rest of the inhabitants are scattered over a large area but are mainly in the northern part of the island. Most of the island is still wild and undeveloped and there are no roads or 4 wheel vehicles, the only motorized transport being Boda bodas who skilfully navigate the network of sandy paths that crisscross the island.

Apart from subsistence farming the main local industry is fishing of which the main products are Nile perch and tilapia. Nile perch on this lake can exceed 80 kg and can measure up to two meters. Today fishing is what this island is all about, which is hardly surprising, and the fish means birds which are there in their thousands Standing on the southern shores of the islands you look out over Africa’s biggest lake its blue waters punctuated here and there by little white sails and it’s as if you were at the edge of an ocean.

Bay at north of island seen from Kandege
Dolwe Rock Art Project

Dolwe Rock Art site is part of the six serial rock art sites in Eastern Uganda to be nominated to the World Heritage List. Submission was made to the World Heritage committee in 2015 but the file was referred due to lack of proper conservation/management of sites, a danger to a World Heritage Site. For Dolwe in particular, UNESCO recommended a systematic documentation of the island, recording of all rock art (paintings, engravings, cupules, hollows and gongs) including all archaeological sites that could be on the island and need protection.

In November 2015, a senior conservator (Jackline N. Besigye) was invited by the Trust for African Rock Art (TARA) to present a paper in Morocco-Agadir on rock art at risk in Uganda. The workshop in Agadir was aimed at safeguarding African rock art at risk. The presentations made by the Senior Conservator attracted members of the Prince Claus Fund (PCF) who then asked for collaboration towards the conservation of rock art sites in Dolwe. A project was then proposed and this was to be spear headed by TARA.

The project was intended to extensively document all cultural heritage sites at Dolwe island for development of a tourism product that suits international standards. An extensive survey and documentation on Dolwe island was therefore conducted.
and a number of rock paintings (12), gongs (13) including audio sounds, and engravings (8) were recorded through digital photography, sketching as well as coordinates of site locations. Some of the sites documented had been earlier recorded by previous scholars and researchers; however a number of new cultural heritage resources were also reported. Records from the documented sites indicate 4 new rock paintings, 10 rock gong sites and 6 rock engravings.

To ensure proper management and conservation, the existing management plan was reviewed and is currently under implementation. Community sensitizations were conducted to ensure that the available cultural heritage resources with their values are known to the local community. Sensitization included workshops, production of awareness materials such, t-shirts, banners, stickers, and fliers were distributed to people around the island. This booklet is as a result of the Dolwe rock art project. It is anticipated that results from this project will market Dolwe island for both domestic and international visitors. The project is ongoing though constrained by inadequate resources due to the size of the island and the high concentration of heritage sites.
History & Development

Though Dolwe island is situated in the north eastern part of Lake Victoria (Busoga region), the Basoga people never permanently settled on this island since they had no culture of fishing. According to oral history, the first inhabitants of Dolwe island were the Bavuma people from Buvuma island in 1904 who were chased from Buvuma after they abused their King (Kabaka Daudi Chwa II (Buganda King). According to Bivens (2015), communities in different parts of the Lake basin resisted the move by British colonisers who forcefully removed them from their traditional areas to new areas without Tsetse Fly, as the sickness had already caused thousands of deaths. In Busoga region, this problem had begun in 1901, and by 1904 there was wide spread sleeping sickness which caused many neurological disorders. This act of relocation of communities caused people to abuse the King which is why they had to flee. For instance, about 2/3rds of the people who lived on the Island of Buvuma in Lake Victoria then died from sleeping sickness. So the remaining people relocated to Dolwe island while others continued to Mfangano island (home of the current Suba people).

It is said that in the 1920s, there was an epidemic of sleeping sickness on Dolwe island and later, in 1954, this forced the majority of the inhabitants to evacuate. These interruptions to the continuous occupation of the island may have led to the loss of Dolwe’s oral legends and thus the knowledge of who its earlier inhabitants may have been and how they lived. There are indications regarding the former existence of such legends and mythologies as evidenced by the contemporary use of ancient sites (caves and rock shelters) by independent church groups today. These groups recognize the power of certain sites which they believe are inhabited by powerful spirits which they then harness to perform their rituals. The legends that
once explained these beliefs have been lost but the practices persist to this day. Currently, the island is inhabited by diverse groups of people from different regions of the country and the neighbouring countries.

Dolwe island is generally rich with cultural and natural heritage resources including rock art. A number of rock art sites have been documented at various times by different people. Bugire site 1 (Golofa) and Kandege site 2 (as named in the Museums and Monuments report, 2016) were reported by Hinchliffe and Neal in 1953 when searching for Mau Mau escapees from Kenya. The sites were then documented by the Museums and Antiquities curator, Merrick Posnansky, who visited Golofa site 1 in 1958 and made subsequent visits between 1959 and 1965. Excavations at Bugire 1 revealed Urewe, Entebbe and roulette potsherds that indicated different occupation episodes representing early, middle and later Iron Age. Since then Dolwe was listed on the national database that holds heritage sites of national and international status.

Following several survey trips by TARA, in 2016, the Uganda Department of Museums and Monuments together (with TARA), conducted a systematic survey and recorded a total of 12 rock paintings, 13 gongs including audio sounds and 10 engraving sites. Surface collection at some of the sites visited, such as in Singila area, revealed a concentration of lithics, Urewe, Entebbe and roulette potsherds. A stone wall was also reported that indicated late settlements.

In 1965 a wooden ladder was installed at Bugire 1 for easy access to the shelter. In 2013 this was transformed into a cemented ladder with rails. In the same year signage was installed on site and along paths in Bugiri, Namayingo and at Bwonda. At other island sites no development has taken place yet, but these will be under proper management. This follows the review of the 2012 Management Plan in 2016 that included a management committee with representatives coming from all 14 villages on the island.

**Signage on the mainland advertising Dolwe rock art sites**

![Signage on the mainland advertising Dolwe rock art sites](image1)

**Large painted lettering on boulder at Kandege advertising an independent church site**

![Large painted lettering on boulder at Kandege advertising an independent church site](image2)
Dolwe and the Cultural Landscape

Dolwe island has been studied for many years but none of the previous scholars seem to have seen the island as a Cultural Landscape. The 2016 team does however recognize the island as a cultural landscape because of the cultural values, the belief systems that existed among our ancestors and the present communities living on this island. When you look at this landscape you can only imagine how nomadic hunter-gatherers accessed and interacted with this treasure house of culture and history, with its legacy of stones that offered good shelter, where some of these people painted and engraved for maybe thousands of years. Perhaps the island was a reliable one-stop centre for hunter-gatherer communities because the boulders provided shelter from the sun and rain as well as natural warmth in colder times.

According to Anschutz et al. (2001), “Landscapes are in essence synthetic with cultural systems structuring and organizing peoples’ interaction with the natural environment. Looking at the many cultural products on this island, including rock paintings and engravings, rock gongs, ground hollows, stone tools and pottery, to mention a few, it seems right to attribute these landscapes as a world of cultural products”. It should also be noted that landscapes play a crucial role in the formation of identity at all levels (Cumming 2013). It is possible that Dolwe hunter-gatherers
and agriculturalists perceived this island’s landscape as enshrining knowledge of what happened in the past and recorded it in the rock art.

Based on data collected from the island in the 1960s, there is cultural material from the Middle Stone Age and the Iron Age (Posnansky et al. 2005).

This suggests that the last hunter-gatherers who inhabited the island may have been here before the Holocene (more than 11,000 years ago) at a time when the lake was either shallow or non-existent (Posnansky et al. 2005). The absence of Later Stone Age microlithic tools on the surface of the island might justify Posnansky’s argument that hunter-gatherers could not have reached the island if the volumes of water were at all similar to the present, given that to our knowledge boat-making skills did not exist at that time. Fig. 2 shows the kind of lithic material that was collected from 6 sites on the island during the project. At some sites there were large quantities of these stones indicating that these may have been ‘factory sites’. However our search did not locate a source of quartz rock on the island from where these could have been brought. It is possible that the source could have been on one of the nearby islands such as Bavuma or Sese or in western Kenya where similar activities were practiced.

*Ground hollow site near Singila and a detail showing complex geometric engraving near Kandege*
Rock Art of Dolwe

As already explained the existence of rock art on Dolwe has been known for more than 50 years but it is only relatively recently that the full extent of this art is becoming known. What is interesting and unusual is the diversity of different styles and types of art indicating that the art was the product of a number of different cultures over time. Normally particular styles of art are associated with different geographical areas but here they are together and apparently mixed up, and many of them have not been recorded anywhere else.

The main style/type of rock art associated with Eastern Uganda and Western Kenya is what we call Batwa (or Twa) art which can usually be identified because of its geometric imagery (typically, concentric circles and spirals). The same art is also found in north and north-western Kenya. Another name for the Ba-Twa (literally Twa people) is the Pygmies who are forest people. This appears to make sense given that not very long ago much of Uganda was part of the Central African Rain Forest, and much of western Kenya too. Recent research indicates that these geometric images were powerful symbols relating to their belief systems.

Abstract rock painting site at Bukangawa
Dumbbell style paintings on roof of Bugiri Cave site near Golofa
The most remarkable and important rock art on the island is at the main Bugire painting site which is situated beneath a massive flat boulder, weighing well over 100 tons, at the water’s edge not far from Golofa town. Most of the paintings (mainly red but some red and white) are either concentric circles or pairs of concentric circles linked by parallel lines giving the appearance of dumbbells. These paintings may well have been the work of ancestral Twa. They are mostly about a meter long and are painted on the ceiling of the shelter which is roughly 1.5 m above the floor. It is the fact that the paintings are on the ceiling that has preserved them so well. On the bay (water) side of the shelter are a number of rock gongs, rocks with natural resonance which were used in ancient times for divining and communication. When David Coulson and Alec Campbell of TARA first recorded this site about 16 years ago they were shocked to find bright orange graffiti superimposed on some of the ancient symbols (see page 21, centre image). The local people were unaware of the immense importance of this ancient site on their doorstep, and many of them still are.

During the 2016 project several remarkable new sites were recorded which are illustrated in this booklet, paintings and engravings which in TARA’s experience are unique. The team was also able to rediscover two important painting sites which TARA had photographed 16 years ago but whose location had subsequently been lost.

NB. WARNING. . Dolwe’s modern rock art! A few years ago a group of modern artists and musicians from the UK visited Dolwe in order to look at the rock art and play the rock gongs. They made a short documentary film about their visit. While they were there some of them created fresh rock art which might be confusing to other visitors who come across it today. A sculptor in the UK group cut a large egg-shaped stone in half and carved concentric circles on each of the flat inner surfaces. Someone else carved the deep outline of a life size crocodile on a long, low rock and someone else carved a simple design on a flat rock that looked a bit like lizards presented as arrows. These must be seen as modern contributions. For more information on this please contact Rungwe Kingdon of the Pangolin Foundry (Uganda and UK).

Two “contemporary” engravings made by a group of British artists who visited the island some years ago.
Main image: Engraving site, not far from Kandege, recorded for first time during the project. Inset: Complex geometric engraving at the same site
Sound is one of the senses that define a landscape. Although Dolwe is today occupied by about 10,000 people, most of them live only on the lake shore since the majority are fishermen. But a few who use the landscape for other purposes, attest that sometimes they can hear the sound of their ancestors through gongs, the noise of the wind and the mysterious sounds of waves crashing on the shores of the lake. As already mentioned, rock gongs are rocks with natural resonance which, when struck with a hammer stone produce a ringing sound that can sometimes be musical. Rock gongs occur in different parts of the world but are especially common in Africa. According to the information available these gongs were used in the past in order to communicate special messages, a bit like drums were used in different parts of Africa until recent times (e.g. in Uganda). They were also used for ‘divining’ purposes.
(evoking the spirits). What is unusual and special about the Dolwe gongs is how many of them occur in a relatively small area. Another interesting point is that in a number of instances they occur where there are rock paintings or where there are sacred sites. We can only guess the reasons for this proximity. Perhaps it could be a testament of visual art as a medium of mediating, divining and recounting as a means of fully experiencing profound human events (Taçon and Chippindale 1998).

Playing a rock gong near Bukangawa.

View of an important cave painting site above Bukangawa (see image on Contents page)
Carved Depressions/Hollows

Dolwe hosts the greatest concentration of ground hollows, large carved depressions in the granite, also called grinding hollows, and erroneously called cupules, which are small cup-shaped depressions in the rock. TARA has recorded these hollows in several countries including Kenya and Tanganyika as well as in the Sahara. TARA also has images and information on other quite large concentrations of hollows in Cameroon and South Sudan, but nowhere are there as many as what we have recorded on Dolwe. Much more research is needed to determine the possible purpose of these mysterious depressions. In TARA's opinion they were probably made for spiritual reasons. This is the most likely explanation.

Carved depressions/ground hollows near Singila, with Munene island beyond
Carved hollows near Singila (above) and at Golofa (below)
Pottery & Stone Age Sites

Out of the 19 sites surveyed during the project, 7 had pottery. Most of the potsherds recorded ranged from Early Iron Age to Late Iron Age Roulette. All traditions of the Iron Age agriculturalists were manifest. This served to confirm the findings of Posnansky et al. (2005) and Ashley (2010).

Stone Age sites
As already mentioned habitation on Dolwe island is believed to date from the Late Pleistocene because of the existence of Middle Stone Age stone tool. As observed by Posnansky et al. in 2005, the island appears to lack continuity of settlement between the Pleistocene and the Holocene as there is no evidence yet of microlithic tools that would characterize the Later Stone Age of the Holocene. So when was the rock art created and are the engravings older than the paintings? It is too early to say how old this art is but it is likely that the Golofa paintings might be very old and that one or both engraving sites recently documented by the team might also be very old bearing in mind the wear on the images. So far the oldest known rock art in East Africa is probably the Kondoa art of central Tanzania, some of which is believed by TARA to be as much as 9000 years old.

Other lithic sites
Other sites with stone tools were found at Singila and Raboro where we
documented large numbers of quartz artefacts covering an area of more than 900 square meters. It is for the time being not clear to us how such substantial quantities of quartz came to be here in the first place.

Stone Age demarcation lines and grids Small stone posts, arranged in lines were recorded in a flat plain near Singila village located close to a rock gong (at 36M 0579227 UTM 9984889, Elevation 1192M). The most visible of these lines had 16 posts but others could be buried beneath the surface of the ground. Their function is not known but they could have been used for demarcation purposes (Posnansky et al. 2005). Our survey team does not agree with previous researchers who attributed the lines to farmers of finger millet because there has been no study yet of the biological environment to see if finger millet was being grown on the island in the late Holocene. Meanwhile on the other (west) side of the island, TARA recorded other stone lines and grids on one of its early visits.

Quartz flakes at Stone Age factory site
Rock Art Conservation

Perhaps the biggest challenge with rock art conservation is “awareness” or “lack of awareness”. Most people don’t know what rock art is, and indeed they often don’t know that such a thing exists! So they know nothing about its importance, antiquity, fragility, significance, and the need to preserve it. The priority is therefore always to sensitize people about this heritage.

In the case of Dolwe there appears to have been no previous knowledge or understanding of what their rock art is or who might have made it and when. This is why the main site at Golofa, Bugiri (right), was seriously defaced (vandalized) on two separate occasions and why other sites are in danger of being damaged.

So during the Dolwe project the team conducted a local awareness campaign, arranging community meetings and using awareness materials, like posters (see page 22), fliers and stickers in different languages prepared by TARA. Another natural threat to the art is the fires that burn on the hills every year (top right).

An important part of this process is to engage the community in the conservation of their rock art.

Facing page: Conservation poster developed for local awareness project on Dolwe
Having survived untouched for thousands of years the ancient rock engravings and paintings of Dolwe Island are now under threat. The island population has increased hugely in recent years and there is widespread lack of awareness concerning the art’s antiquity and importance, with the result that unique artworks, which may have survived for millennia, are now threatened by graffiti and deforestation (see picture above) and destruction. Fortunately, however, the threat of quarrying, a major issue at so many east African sites, is not present here. While nobody knows for sure who made the art it is probable that some of it was the work of hunter-gatherers who may have been the first inhabitants of this area when much of East Africa was still forested (the original Central African Rain Forest). At the end of the 19th century the entire population of Dolwe was evacuated to the mainland as a result of an epidemic of sleeping sickness so that valuable oral legends may have been lost.
TOURISM

There appears to be good potential for “high-end” tourism on Dolwe Island. Wealthy visitors could for example fly in from either Entebbe, or from Kisumu, Mbita or Rusinga (in Kenya) in small charter aircraft, as soon as there is a landing strip on Dolwe. The island is much too remote for most tourists to reach by vehicle and boat which takes a long time and can entail rough crossings. Much of the island is still wild and undeveloped and therefore beautiful. There are no vehicles and it is important that the government makes a rule for everybody not to introduce vehicles here which would automatically spoil its exclusive nature. At present the only form of transport is by Boda Boda (bike). There is room for one or two high-end hotel operators to establish/lease concessions.
especially in the south or south west of the island. In the interests of successful high-end tourism which could be a major benefit to the island it is recommended that NO CARS be ALLOWED on the island and that this rule should not be “bent” or changed. This should be written into the contract. All they need is bikes to take people round the south part of the island, or to Golofa occasionally, and perhaps a quad bike for older people who are uncomfortable on normal bikes. There is a flat area in the centre of the southern part where an airstrip can be located that could serve one or more tourist concessions. There should also, we suggest, be a backpackers’ camp on the island, probably in the Kandege area near Golofa, as well as a store that sells basic food and other items needed by backpackers.

*Munene island seen from Singila*
How to Get There

On the north-eastern side of Lake Victoria, lies Dolwe island also sometimes known as Lolwe or Lolui island. A lush rocky landscape with spectacular scenery, it is a unique place that is worth visiting.

Altogether Dolwe island is approximately 5 hours away from the capital city of Kampala by road, and via an efficient speed boat from the main landing site of Bwondha. From the region’s main town of Jinja you drive 25 kilometers east towards Iganga town then turn off the highway from Musita trading centre on your right. Drive about 54 kilometers on a rough road currently under construction to Mayuge district, then 42 kilometers to Bwondha landing site in Namayingo district. From Bwondha landing site, Dolwe island can be reached by boat or canoe depending on availability and affordability.

A private speed boat will take approximately 1½ hours and a little longer on a public boat that transports commuters to different islands on the lake. Currently, plans are underway to lobby for a ferry from the government to ease the transportation of people, goods and services. Fresh water & basic food are available on the island.

In terms of future development the island has large expanses of open land that could allow for the creation of a landing strip, for those who can afford charter planes. Although transport facilities within the island are limited - there are no roads or cars, the motorcycle taxis’ known as boda boda, will take you wherever you need to go within the island at a minimum fee of 1000 Ugshs to 10,000 Ugshs (approx. 3 US dollars). For travellers who speak the local language, communication on the island is easy because it is a uniquely multilingual community who speak English, Swahili, Luganda, Lusoga, Luo, Samia and many others.

References
