



Interpreting Archaeological Evidence of a Common Kenyan Cultural Heritage

Kristin Uhlemeyer

MS 715: Interpretation

Professor Luby

3/13/2012

1) Stakeholders

Many groups claim to have an interest in the site's interpretation; however, the National Museums of Kenya is the stakeholder with the most significant control. NMK will have the final say on all text and design because the government has ownership rights over the archaeological site. Furthermore, they will also be providing the staffing, the construction of signs, and the supervision of restoration. However, other stakeholders include UNESCO, the Archaeological Institute of America (who provided the grant for the restoration project), local community members, Professor Luby and the San Francisco State University Museum Studies Department.

2) Site's Significance

Second only to Great Zimbabwe, Thimlich Ohinga is one of Africa's largest stone enclosures. Its survival for over 500 years is a testament to a village's ingenuity and creativity. The effects of colonization are long felt, so a pre-colonial edifice, like Thimlich Ohinga, provides grounds for cultural unity and pride in traditional heritage.

3) Mission and Vision of the Parent Organization (National Museums of Kenya)

The National Museums of Kenya's official mission statement provides an operational framework: "A centre for collecting, documenting, and preserving, researching, studying and presenting our past and present cultural and natural heritage and to enhance knowledge, appreciation, respect, management and use of these resources for the benefit of Kenya and of the world." At Thimlich Ohinga, NMK is trying to create a tourist destination which will attract foreigners (who will hopefully spend money on a vacation loop of western Kenya). In addition, NMK wants to be community-focused and involve local audiences in the restoration of the site. They want the site to become one of the foremost centers of traditional history – a place of national pride.

4) Specific Communities Involved in Developing Interpretation

Professor Luby is a consultant to the National Museums of Kenya. He both teaches the MS715 class at San Francisco State University and also liaisons with the staff at the archaeological site. Professor Onjala is the director of the National Museums and supervises and conducts work at Thimlich Ohinga. Professor Onjala and Professor Luby are the leaders who bridge the gap between the United States and Kenya.

In San Francisco, the MS715 class created didactic panel ideas from the perspective of the international tourist since we are a community of Americans who have not visited the site. Meanwhile, in Nairobi, national museum staff also created didactic

panels with their insider perspectives. The goal is to learn from each other and create the best interpretative signs for Thimlich Ohinga.

5) My Theme Idea

I created an audience matrix to help identify any patterns or similarities among the varying visitor groups. At first, I was not sure how to tie together the seemingly incongruous needs of the participating members. Some motivations fall into completely different categories: local people want jobs; tourists want recreation; professors want archaeological research. However, a recurring theme slowly emerged which tied each group together – the desire for a celebration of cultural heritage. The reasons behind this theme may again vary (national unity, experiencing a foreign culture, teaching local history, etc.), but the end results are the same.

Theme:

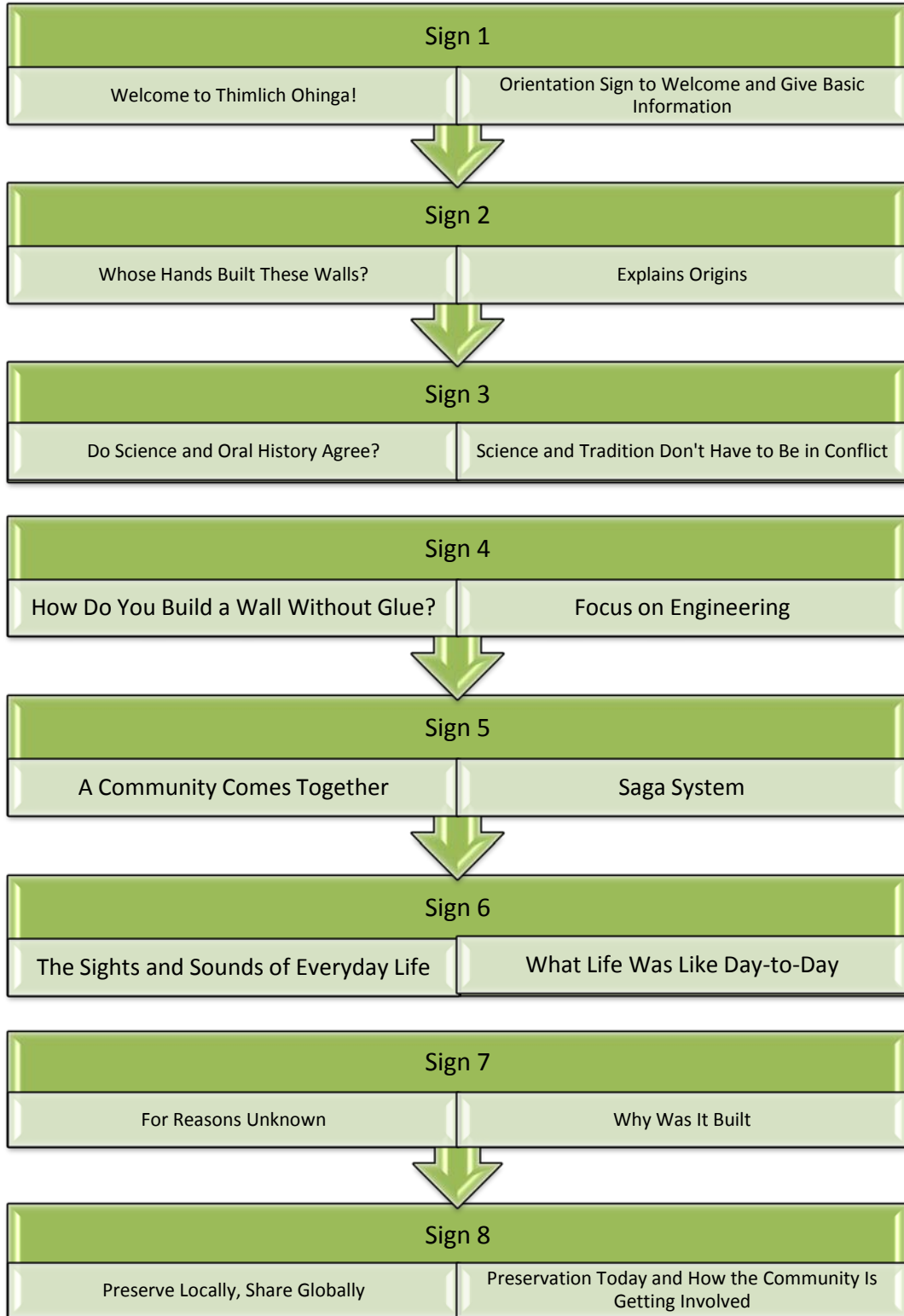
- *Preserve Locally, Share Globally*

Objectives:

- To emphasize the importance and achievements of pre-colonial civilizations
- To combine past oral tradition with modern archaeology to remember a forgotten past
- To bring unity through a common culture
- To share local culture with the global community

To convey this theme, I decided to use a narrative voice. Because the local people have such a strong tradition of oral history, I wanted to convey information in the form of a story. Since the area also has a tradition of sectarian violence among tribes and disputes exist concerning the site's origins, I wanted to avoid favoring one group over another. Instead, I chose to tell the tale from the perspective of a rock that helps to form the wall. By personifying the stone, I could represent all people. Furthermore, teachers could utilize the rock character to make the information more child-friendly; a cute rock mascot is much more inviting than cold stone. This rock could be the basis to tie together a whole thematic unit – we can connect history with literature, science (geology), and math (potentially the geometry of the site).

Sign Order:



6) Target Audiences

International audiences:

- Ecotourists,
- Cultural Tourists,
- Natural History Tourists
- (The intrepid German tourist also has his own classification ☺).

Local audiences:

- Bandas travelers
- Primary and secondary school groups, and their teachers
- University students from Kenya and East Africa
- Community Members who live at or near the site

The National Museums of Kenya indicated that they want to focus on children in the region as a key audience. A workshop will be held for teachers to visit the site and learn what they can present to students. Although academics, like archaeologists, may also visit the site for research purposes, they will probably not utilize our interpretation; therefore, they are not a target audience.

7) What do Visitors Want to Do, See, and Experience

What Visitors Should NOT Do (But Will Probably Try)

- Climb the walls
- Pull out stones
- Take home a souvenir (If there is a gift shop, then travelers may be less inclined to steal a piece of stone from the site.)
- Venture into the forest
- Play with the monkeys

What Visitors Will Want

- A place to rest after such a long trek
- A place to get water and go to the bathroom
- Shade
- Guidance about the trail
- An understanding about the buildings and who built them
- To see the local sights, possibly camp outside
- To experience the traditional lifestyle
- A connection to classroom learning (if they are a school group)
- To take interesting photos that they can share when they return home

8) **Design Components:**

Color Scheme:

Glare is a major issue along the equator because of so much direct sunlight. To reduce brightness and increase eye comfort, I used an off-white, grey tone for the background color instead of the typical white. I wanted to maintain the natural integrity of the site; therefore, I chose a color palette which would blend in with the environment but would still show up along the path. Green, brown, and grey are predominant and blend well because brown and grey are neutral colors. They are used in muted, low saturations and high values to present a calming, soft effect.

Orientation:

All interpretative material is in landscape.

Size:

They are created in an 8.5 x 11 inch page layout, but as signs, they would be 24 x 36 inches, an average NPS size.

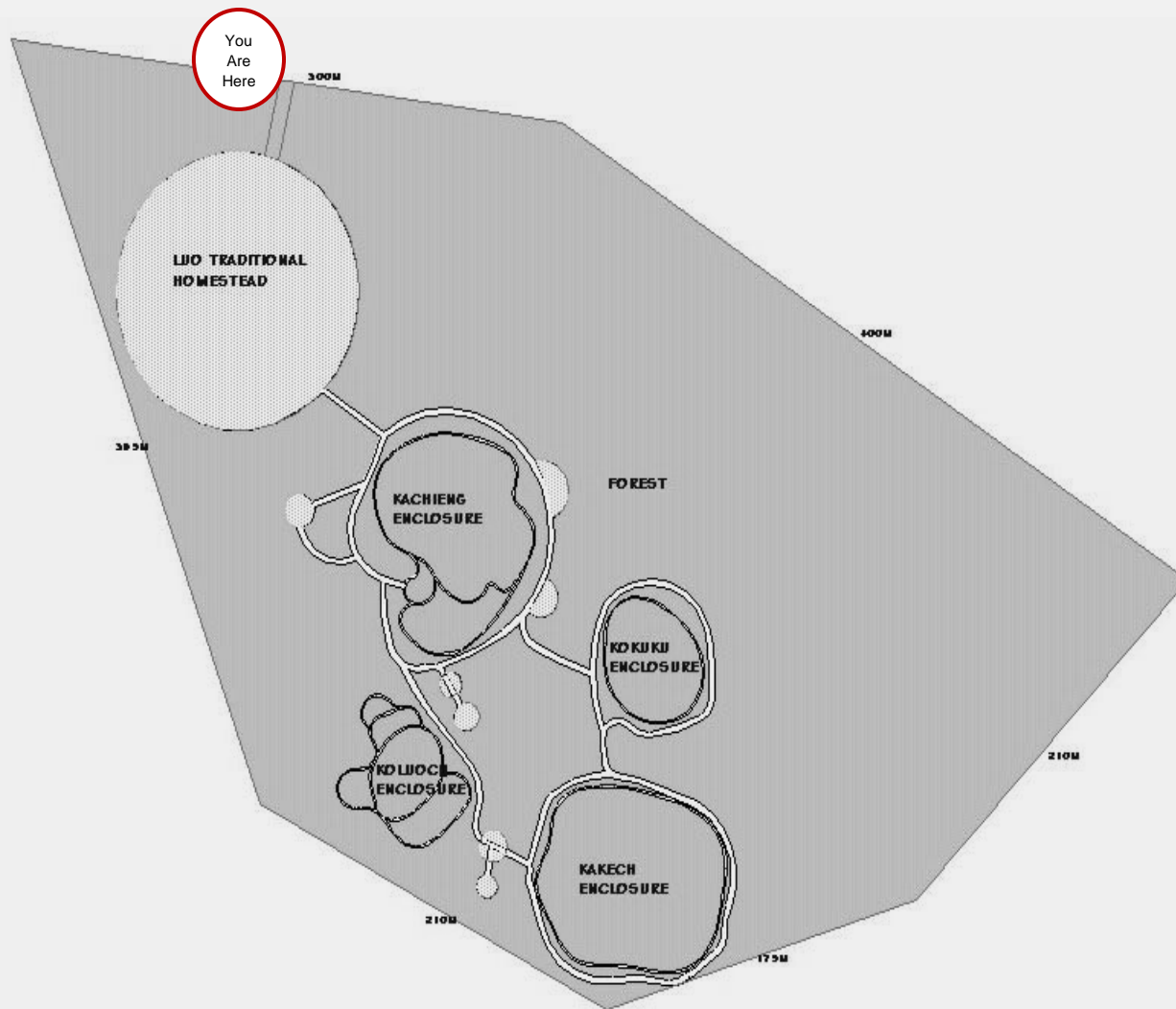
Typography:

For the title and subheadings, I used Britannic Bold. I chose this font because it reminded me of stone – thick and strong looking. It is a sans-serif font, so I used another sans-serif font, Arial, for the body text for continuity. Arial is more legible than the decorative header font.

Photographs:

Professor Luby has copyright ownership over all of the Thimlich Ohinga pictures used in this project. The monkey is a google image that I changed in Photoshop. I created the character of Rocky in Paint. All other cartoon characters were partially drawn in Paint, and partially changed from a conglomeration of other images in Photoshop.

Welcome to Thimlich Ohinga



Stories in Stone

What You Will See:

- Luo Traditional Homestead
- Camp Areas (Bandas Areas) for visitors who would like to stay the night
- Four Stone Enclosures
- Archaeological Discoveries
- Wild Vegetation
- Visitor's Center

Highlights:

Entire Trail is 8.05 km (5 miles)

Bring a Hat, Sunscreen, and Water



Whose Hands Built These Walls?

A Stone Speaks:

I can't recall the tribe that brought me here. *No one knows for sure.* Over the years, I heard the names Luo, Masai, and others, but to me, all hands look the same. Rocks don't measure time in days or weeks, we measure in place. I was there. Now I am here.

Although I do not know the names of the builders, I do know that their hands were strong and their numbers were many.

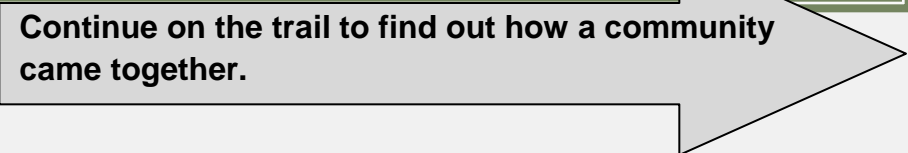


You Try:

Test your strength and pick up one of the stones next to this panel. Can you imagine carrying a heavy rock for 3km?

Also, look how many stones were used to build one enclosure. Even in this picture alone, the number is in the hundreds. One person could not complete this work.

Continue on the trail to find out how a community came together.



Do Science and Oral History Agree?

Think About It

Oral History is spoken tradition. These are the stories our parents told us. **Archaeology** is a science that reveals our past through found objects. **Compare the two perspectives to determine the age of the site.**

A Stone's Perspective

I watched generations of my people go into the thick, dense forest just beyond to bury their dead – this happens so many times over the years that I have lost count. The woods are sacred because they have held the spirits of the ancestors since the first migration between **1596 and 1920**.



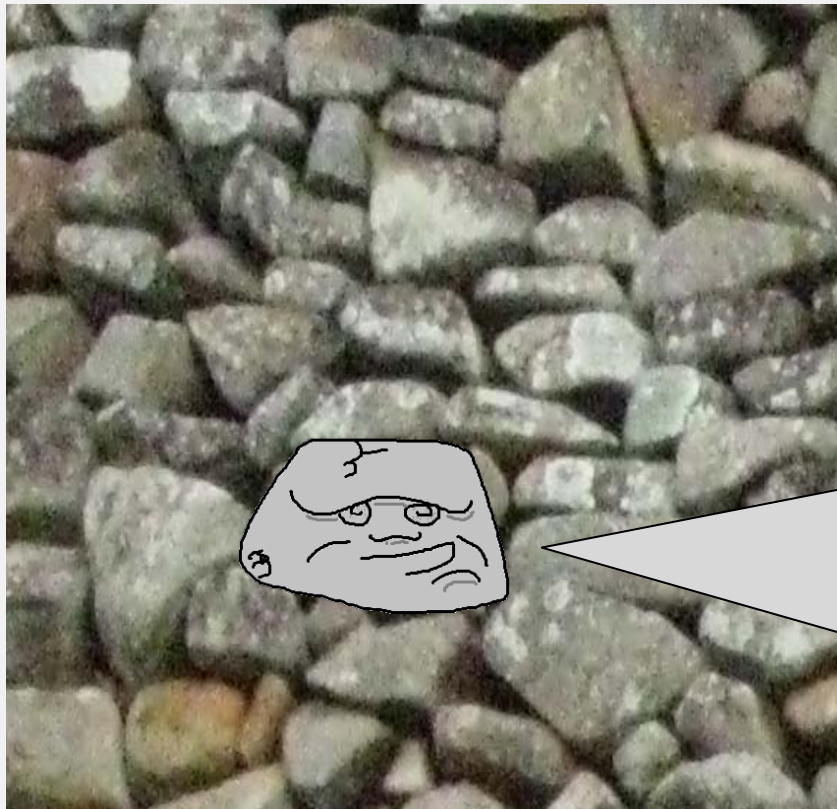
An Archaeologist's Perspective

I used radiocarbon dating to let chemistry tell me the date of the archaeological site. First, I found pieces of charcoal left behind. Because charcoal is organic (nature-made), I know it decays at a consistent rate. When I compare the amount of carbon in the charcoal to the amount of carbon in the atmosphere, I can find the approximate age of the charcoal. The pieces I found in Thimlich Ohinga originated between **1650 and 1900**.





How Do You Build a Wall Without Glue?



A Stone Speaks

Look closely at the stones in the wall to see how they are fit together. You will notice that there is no mortar, or glue, holding us together. We are tightly stacked and fitted together like a giant puzzle. The men took great care when judging our size and shape to find our best fit. By determining our strengths and weaknesses as individual stones, we were able to come together as this wall.

You Try

There is a pile of stones next to this sign. See if you can build a wall by placing the stones without any gaps or breaks.



Find Out the Community Roles in Building this Fortress at the Next Sign.

The Sights and Sounds of Every Day Life



What Part Did People Play in This Community?

Look around this enclosure. What evidence can you find of daily living?

The circular pile you see on your left was a smelting furnace. Blacksmiths would pound iron all day to create weapons and tools. Children would help underfoot.

The highly decorated pottery shards strewn on the floor to your right indicate that art was held esteem. Ceramicists created with works with clay.

If you lived here, you would hear complaining cows asking for food in the kraals (the center pens) all day. Many men cared for cattle or maintained structures like the worker in the picture.

This site may seem quiet now, but its stones still speak with the evidence of its ancestors

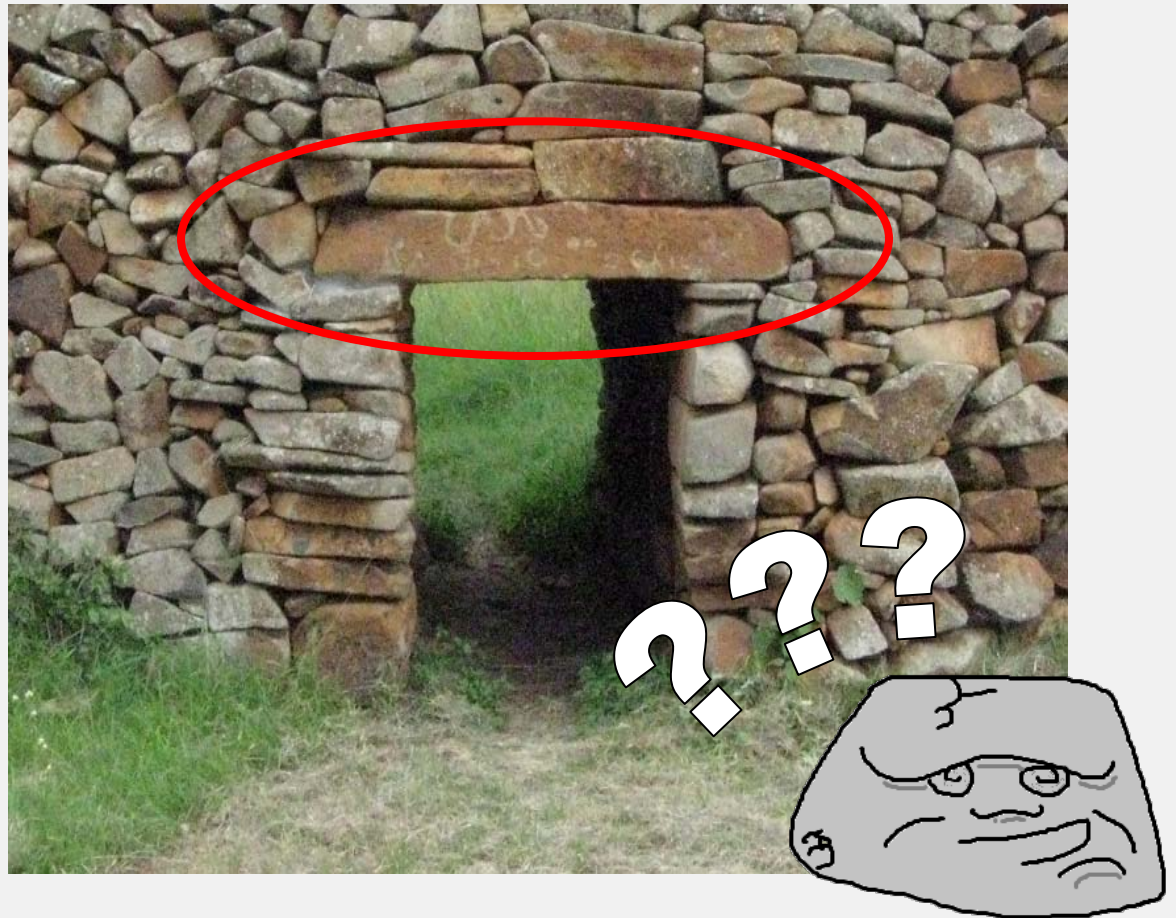
For Reasons Unknown

A Stone Speaks

The ways of men are not known to me – There are many reasons why these enclosures could have been built. Some clues are left behind, like the geometric designs carved into the gate lintel you see in the picture. Create an etching from the replica below for further study.

**Why do you think
this place was built?**

You can cast your vote by putting a coin or dollar donation in the poll box.
Which option is the most popular?



Preserve Locally, Share Globally



Today's Community

Local faces are still reflected in the stone.

The National Museums of Kenya is working with UNESCO to get Thimlich Ohinga named a World Heritage Site. Kenyan stonemasons are reconstructing sections of the fallen walls and local community members care for this national treasure. When you make a donation to help preserve this site, you can become a part of these stones' stories too.



A Community Comes Together: The Saga System



MEN would build.

Old **WOMEN** would prepare food like nyulea porridge.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN would transport building supplies.

The **CHIEF** was the commissioner.
He oversaw the work.

Now you know the parts community members played to build the walls. Move on to the next sign to find out people's roles in a typical day.

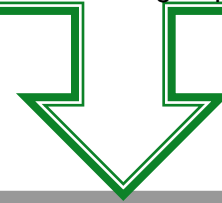
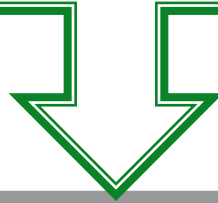
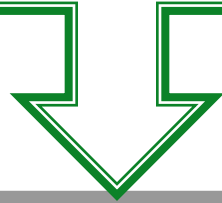
Cast Your Vote:

Why Was This Built?

I think these were built for protection against warring tribes. The entrances are small so no unwanted guests could enter. These were **fortifications for battle**.

As populations grew, some people were forced to migrate. I think these were built as **new homes** and provided a way to keep the cattle herd together.

I think these enclosures had a **religious significance** because they were close to the forest burial sites. They are constructed as circles – a very symbolic shape to the Luo and other groups.



Warning

Animals May Look Cute...
But They Are **All** Dangerous.
Stay On the Trail.

