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# Acculturation as translation: mimicry, satire and resistance in Chewa dance

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The *gulewamkulu* mask dance is the major Chewa dance performed in all Chewa communities of Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. With this particular dance – and indeed with many others – historical connotations, cultural reverberations, and systemic institutionalisation come into play. The hierarchical organisation of the Chewa dance systems and the orderly and enigmatic tendencies of the dance displays are reminiscent of historical phenomena linked to the Chewa diaspora. In essence, mimicry, satire and other forms of enactment (often dramatic) in Chewa dance subtly or candidly unearth acculturative elements within the Chewa ethnicity. This article seeks to illustrate that the Chewa dances *gulewamkulu* and *mganda* constitute theatre and that their performance demonstrates a manifestation of traditional Chewa cultural features that have been altered or modified by borrowing from or adapting to other Bantu-related and European cultures.

## Akkulturasië as vertaling: mimiek, satire en weerstand in Chewa-dans

Die *gulewamkulu* maskerdans is die belangrikste Chewa-dans wat in alle Chewa-gemeenskappe in Malawi, Zambië, Mosambiek, Tanzanië en Zimbabwe uitgevoer word. Met hierdie dans – soos ook in die geval met andere – geld historiese konnotasies, kulturele weerklanke, asook sistemiese institusionalisering. Die hiërargiese organisasies van die Chewa-danssisteme en die ordelike en enigmatiese tendense van die dansuitvoerings herinner aan historiese fenomene wat met die Chewa-diaspora verband hou. In wese openbaar mimiek, satire en ander vorme van spel (dikwels dramatiese) in Chewa-dans akkulturatiewe elemente binne Chewa-etnisiteit op 'n subtiele of openlike wyse. Hierdie artikel wil illustreer dat die Chewa-danse *gulewamkulu* en *mganda* 'n vorm van teater uitmaak, en dat die uitvoering daarvan 'n manifestasie van tradisionele Chewa kulturele kenmerke demonstree deur middel van 'n ontlening aan of verwerking van ander Bantoe-verwante of Europese kulture.

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SUN MODIA  
BLOEMFONTEIN

This article is adapted from a more extensive work aimed at investigating, documenting, describing and analysing the drumming practices of Malawi's Chewa ethnic group. The larger study focused on three key issues related to Chewa drumming, namely the elements that constitute the Chewa art of drumming; the application of this art in the traditional media of music and dance, and the adaptation of the art by Malawi's contemporary music performers. As a consequence of the study, a number of dance-related cultural dimensions became evident. For example, research participants' responses demonstrated a significant need to study the targeted dances based on the rich Chewa cultural history and how it related to the current performances.

The Chewa people form Malawi's largest of ten major ethnic groups, numbering approximately six million of a total population of fifteen million. Identified by different titles over the years, the Chewa people are scattered in different districts of Malawi, parts of Mozambique, eastern Zambia, and other neighbouring countries.<sup>1</sup> Historically, the Chewa people are nomadic and settled in Malawi in the 1500s, relocating from what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In this article, I will use two Chewa dances, namely *gulewamkulu* and *mganda* to illustrate my two observations. First, Chewa dances demonstrate a clear manifestation of traditional features of Chewa culture that have been altered or modified by borrowing from or adapting to other Bantu-related and European cultures. Secondly, their performance constitutes theatre in that they incorporate a plot, rehearsals, a stage, and an enactment. Based on personal observations, culture (original or modified) can be performed and, therefore, comprehended by critically observing the performance media. As Damen (1987: 367) suggests, culture involves learned and shared

1 The Chewa label was acquired during a sojourn in Zambia before they pressed on into Malawi. The title Chewa derives from the word *Cheva* or *Sheva* or *Seva*, which applied to them as a migrating group and contained the meaning of foreigner (Lecture by Dr Hastings Banda, 1974). In Malawi, the dispersion and ensuing Chewa diaspora led to some of the groups identifying themselves by referring to significant features of their habitat, such as Anyanja or Anyasa (people of the lake) and Achipeta (people of the tall grasses). This created the impression of the existence of a multiplicity of ethnic groups (Dr Sam Mchombo, unpubl).

day-to-day human patterns or models for living. These patterns and models pervade all aspects of human social interaction, thereby rendering culture as humankind's primary adaptive mechanism.

## 1. Methodology

This article gives an ethnographic description of two major Chewa dance practices, taking into account Chewa peripheral cultural issues that emerge through music and dance. Drawing on the methods of participant observation and interviews which culminated in a detailed description of the two dances, my investigation further sought to explore various acculturative elements among the Chewa people and their impact on the performance of the Chewa dances. It was found that, through interaction with other cultural groups, a new Chewa identity has emerged alongside an insistence for the preservation of a traditional one. The context of dance, in this study, significantly provides the platform for processes of cultural hybridisation, producing new and different types of identity, which may be speculatively investigated as instances of acculturation and translation.

I conducted questionnaire-based interviews with singers, dancers, drummers, drum makers, village elders, centre directors, researchers, and academics. In addition to the questionnaire-based interviews, I audiotaped stories on Chewa culture, and videotaped live performances. The latter recordings were done in three phases, namely of the singers, of the drummers, and of the audience, in order to document both the different drum rhythms, how they related to each other within the performance, and how they related to the singing of the melody, and the audience's reactions to, and comments on, the live performances.

In addition, I took still pictures of dancers, drummers and different drums to record dance formations, drumming postures and distinct drum features, as well as aspects of costume that facilitated the narrating of musical and other stories. The findings of this ethnographic study are situated within the context of the available literature on Chewa culture, in general, and Chewa music and dance, in particular. I applied Gray's (2003: 12) recommendation that a wide variety of methods should be used when "investigating complex sets

of relationships which are present in cultural processes”. Marshal & Rossman (1999: 105) also conclude that qualitative researchers typically rely on four methods of gathering information, namely participation in the setting; direct observation; in-depth interviewing, and analysing documents and material culture. Applying these methods, among others, helped determine which cultural elements are formally (or legally) and/or informally prescribed or proscribed, and which of these are enforced through sanction and which are not. As such, I inferred deeply embedded cultural beliefs about the Chewa way of perceiving the world, which are rarely discussed explicitly by society members.

This study is based both on the respondents’ reports and on my own interpretation as a Malawian citizen regarding the performance of cultural transformation or cultural interface through dance in the Chewa context. It is hoped that this will stimulate debate, engender curiosity, and lead to future research. As a native speaker of the Chewa language, I personally conducted the oral interviews during the field research, while occasionally relying on a group of local elders, who had undergone my day-long orientation, to clarify my questions directed at the research participants. The elders also helped me in the sampling of participant villages and dance groups, and further advised me to obtain written permission from the Traditional Authority (an area chief) before collecting any data. Through the chief, I undertook to keep anonymous the names of research participants who gave details about the *gulewamkulu*, a sacred Chewa dance, in particular.

My research focused on the Chewa as a community, and on a selection of informants who have adequate knowledge of the community’s activities. These informants identified other informants representative of the community, and snowball sampling was thus used to obtain a saturation of informants in all empirical areas of investigation. Informants were interviewed multiple times, using information from previous informants to elicit clarification and deeper responses upon re-interview. This process was intended to reveal common cultural understandings related to the phenomena under study.

Main field recordings and interviews took place between July 2007 and January 2009 in three districts, namely Dedza, Ntchisi and Dowa.

These field trips were a follow-up to the field recordings I made in Ntchisi in 2004 in preparation for an African dance workshop held in Pretoria in the same year. I made a total of twenty-six individual and group videotaped recordings during the 2007-2009 field trips. Thirty-four individuals and six performing groups responded to my questionnaire-based interviews. Comments by several audience members were also recorded during live performances. I also solicited archived recordings of specific Chewa dances from the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation Television (MBCTV) for a comparative analysis with my field recordings and participants' reports.

## 2. The context of acculturation in Chewa dance

The *gulewamkulu* and *mganda* dances are discussed in detail in the following pages to support my arguments on the reflection of acculturation and cultural translation in Chewa dances. Particular attention is paid to theatrical elements of satire and mimicry within the dances as examples of the Chewa ways of embracing, responding, or reacting to alien cultural practices and/or interferences.<sup>2</sup> Such dance theatre expressions are critical in the sense that they, in one way, represent a long historical ongoing dialogue that existed between the Chewa and other cultural groups and, in another, explain memorable experiences.

The more traditional dance (that is, dance in its customary context) permeates human social interaction through regularly organised events, the more it presents a clear discourse regarding adaptive cultural elements. In this instance, culture is dynamic and is often revitalised by irresistible currents of change. Thus, it may be contended that culture is historically created (cultural genesis) and regularly adjusted (cultural progression) by way of designs suitable for

2 The Chewa view of 'foreigner' or 'alien' is, to some extent, complex. For example, a man who marries and decides to live at his wife's home is called *mkamwini* (property of another person). On the other hand, a married woman who lives at her husband's home is referred to as *mtengwa* (one who has been taken or hired). Their participation in village matters is restricted for the rest of their lives. However, if these are non-Chewa individuals, the restriction is much greater; they are viewed with suspicion and are automatically excluded from privy Chewa information (Nthala 2011: 54). They have no voice, although they generate a great deal of interest regarding their ways of life (Achewa are very curious individuals).

living, explicitly or implicitly, in rational, irrational or non-rational ways, but existing at any given time as potential guides for human behaviour and general co-existence. As such, the historical aspect of culture contains the traditional or customary elements, whereas the progressive aspect manifests new elements which may be accepted as inevitable instruments for cultural stabilisation or equilibrium in any given space and time.

### 3. Acculturation as cultural translation

Over the past decades, the concept of acculturation has been defined in a number of ways. Berry (1980: 9) views acculturation as phenomena which result when different culture groups come into continuous first-hand contact, leading to changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups. Taking this view into account, the change is initiated by a conjunction of two or more autonomous cultural systems as a consequence of direct cultural transmission, ecological causes, and demographic modifications. Acculturation may thus be delayed due to internal adjustments, or it may be a steady reactive adaptation of alien value systems. Acculturation may also involve the process of integration and differentiation of role determinants and personality factors, thereby triggering a conflictual transition through the process or phases of contact, conflict, and then adaptation (Berry 1980: 11). The contact between different cultural entities is necessary for acculturation to occur; the conflict between the cultural groups is probable, and some form of adaptation is inevitable. Adaptation may also take the form of rejection or resistance. More recently, the notion of cultural translation has emerged as a new field of academic study. In this regard, the work of Homi Bhabha (1994: 173) has been particularly influential, in that his formulation of the concept encompasses the process and condition of human migrancy, and not merely the literary translation of two texts. Similarly, Buden *et al* (2009: 198-207) apply the concept of translation not only to the words of different languages, but also to human beings. They argue that human beings may be culturally “translated”, and that this process has both existential and political consequences. It may then be observed that the process of cultural translation is significantly premised on notions of socialisation (the adoption of the behaviour patterns of

the surrounding culture) which encompass the knowledge and values shared by a society, and the process of assimilating new ideas into an existing cognitive structure.

As different cultures meet, merge and thus undergo transformation, socially critical and cognitively salient features develop. These help to underpin progressive and demographic changes within an existing cultural entity, thereby reflecting on the presumed resultant balance or imbalance from shared or imposed traits with another culture. With regard to culture as constituting commissioned inherent features, the following description by Banks & McGee (1989: 69) is illuminating and still valid within the current intellectual sphere:

The essence of a culture is not its artefacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies.

The interpretation, perception and use of the various aspects of human engagement by the societies concerned are fundamentally modified in observable ways as a result of social integration, leading to the adaptation of relevant or appealing alien values, symbols and meanings. This observation is primarily an explanatory platform for observable cultural transformations within Chewa communities as viewed from the perspective of dance, and is central to this article as the following descriptions of the two major Chewa dances demonstrate.

### 3.1 The *gulewamkulu* dance

The *gulewamkulu*, literally translated as ‘big dance’, is a Chewa initiation cult that involves all males above the age of 12 who, having undergone initiation rituals, are involved in masked dancing during annual thanksgiving festivals, chiefs’ installation ceremonies, members’ funerals, and commemorations of the dead. Masked dancers of different types, shapes and forms dance to drums and/or handclapping, accompanying songs that are characterised by words of wisdom, societal correction, and storytelling, often in coded language. The Chewa people regard the *gulewamkulu* as ancestral spirits or wild animals; therefore, the divergent mask appearances are an embodiment of their corresponding personalities. The initiation

camps are situated within or close to graveyards where these ancestral spirits 'live'. In the Chewa communities, *gulewamkulu* is the generic term for the dance, the dancers, and the secret society/cult, with each one of these also bearing specific names.

This society is also referred to as *nyau* (ghosts) or *gule* (dance). Traditionally, the term *nyau* refers to all basketry masks and the title *chilombo* (wild animal) is relegated to the other non-basketry mask characters. Currently, the terms *nyau*, *gule* and *gulewamkulu* are used interchangeably. Historically, the Chewa considered that there were spirits of men and animals behind *nyau* masks, so that when the *nyau* moved into the village from the bush, there occurred a re-enactment of the Bantu primal myth in which men, animals and spirits lived in harmony (Linden 1974: 118).

*Nyau* characters are grouped according to the three categories of friendly, semi-dangerous, and dangerous reincarnated personalities. They are also categorised in terms of their seniority, bipedal human-like mask characters being less authoritative than their basketry and animal-like counterparts. Friendly *nyau* dancers socialise freely with singing women and other audience members. Semi-friendly *nyau* dancers interact with the audience with some restriction, often demonstrating an unpredictable behaviour, such as chasing away the women singers in the process of dancing. Dangerous *nyau* characters perform different roles in the *gulewamkulu* society. Some emerge as mourners or community policing agents. These do not engage in any dancing, and physically attack everything, human or animal, that crosses their way. In addition, basketry characters are highly shielded by human escorts, who dance around them by sweeping the ground and causing dust to rise. Mask forms with the colour black have a higher status or are more serious and dangerous than those with the colour red, which are, in turn, more dangerous than those with the colour white (Birch de Aguilar 1995: 414). In addition:

All animal constructions are more important or higher in status, role, and hierarchy than all other masks. [...] In this hierarchy, the category of animal constructions [is] the most respected as the oldest, most sacred mask forms, and as the masks which are most tied to tradition handed down by the ancestors (Birch de Aguilar 1995: 414, 416).



Mask characters are either male or female regardless of their form – human-like or animal-like – just as people are not merely people, but male and female (Birch de Aguilar 1995: 413).

Traditionally, *gulewamkulu* performances take into account specifically four aspects of time, namely time of the day; season; agricultural calendar, and functions or events, for example, funeral, celebration and memorial. As a result, *gulewamkulu* characters are categorised as nocturnal dancers; daytime dancers; combined daytime and evening dancers; special funeral masks; guest masks for female initiation ceremonies; masks for commemorative rites; special masks for chiefs' installation ceremonies, and general masks for celebrations.

### 3.1.1 Organisation of the *gulewamkulu* performances

The *gulewamkulu* has three key performance locations or sites. The *dambwe* (initiation camp) is a highly protected place which serves as an initiation school, a workshop for making masks, and a training site for the dancers. The *liunde* (backstage) is a temporary structure constructed near the dancing arena where dancers rest and prepare to take the stage. The *bwalo* (dancing arena) is a clearing that can hold dozens of participants seated in a determined order according to their rank and role during a *nyau* performance.

All *gulewamkulu* events are organised by individuals who hold different community positions. The executive committee comprises the patron (*mzwimzinda* or *mnuwake mzinda*), who is always a village chief or his representative and is the honorary owner of, and ultimate authority for all *gulewamkulu* performances. The title *mwinimzinda* stands for owner of the city – a *gulewamkulu* area of jurisdiction. The administrator (*wakunjira*) is the patron's relative, usually a nephew, and can be compared to the prime minister who is responsible for supervising all *gulewamkulu* preparations. The stage manager (*tsabwalo*) is responsible for the preparation, organisation and supervision of the dance arena. Finally, the drum manager (*tsang'oma*) is responsible for procuring, storing and tuning the drums. Non-executive position holders include initiation camp officials such as *pilinsipolo* (principal), or bishop, or *mkulu wa kumadzi* (the head of the water source – a cryptic term for *nyau*); *namkungwi* (the chief advisor), and *phungu* (counsellor) who is assigned to an individual initiate.

The following two pictures show how a typical *bwalo* is arranged during a *nyau* performance. *Nyau* officials sit on chairs (Figure 2), whereas children and other audience members watch the dance while standing or sitting on the ground in a semicircle facing the *liunde* wherefrom the dancers emerge.



Figure 1: A section of the *gulewamkulu* dancing arena (*bwalo*)<sup>3</sup>



Figure 2: *Nyau* officials conferring during a *gulewamkulu* performance; seated on the ground is a *gulewamkulu* character called *mbunde*

3 All pictures in this article were taken by Grant Nthala in 2008.

### 3.2 The *mganda* dance

By contrast, *mganda* is a military mime dance that was created as a result of the indigenous populace's fascination with British brass-band music during the colonial era. Dancers mimic the marching of soldiers with exaggerated leg movements. The *mganda* is performed in two or more straight lines, depending on the number of dancers. The dancers dress smartly in military or police-like attire, dancing stylishly with mostly leg movements and limited arm gesticulation. In all *mganda* performances, there is also a considerable attempt at portraying military attire such as combat boots, thermal liner socks, berets, canvas belts, neckties and scarves or military emblems. Dancers carry the *badza* mirliton, a type of kazoo, in the right hand and a small flag in the left hand. The kazoo sound that intersperses the singing is an imitation of the colonial British brass-band trumpets. The linear dance formation, the dancers' generally smart dress and well-trimmed hair are characteristic of the military lifestyle which the dancers seek to portray.

Apart from the Chewa people, different Malawi ethnic groups perform the *mganda*, but adopt their own styles and names. The two well-known Malawian versions of this dance are *mganda* and *malipenga*. The term *mganda* stands for the leg movements as they stretch forward in time with the drum sound. The term *malipenga* has been adopted by the Tonga of Nkhata Bay and is literally translated as 'trumpets'. In Tanzania where this dance is also performed, the word *mganda* stands for 'drum', while in Zambia it means 'to march' (Tembo 1995). Whereas the real meaning of the word *mganda* remains contentious, considering its use by people of different nationalities and linguistic backgrounds, in an interview 74-year-old Foreman Moloko<sup>4</sup> maintains that:

[t]he Chewa people who migrated into Tanzania are likely to have taken the *mganda* name there irrespective of who now performs the dance. As far as we are concerned, the term *mganda* is derived from the two syllables: *[m]ga-* and *nda-*. One can clearly 'hear' these syllables in the *gunda* drum sound. As legs are stretched out and later hit the ground in harmony with the drumming, they 'pronounce' these syllables.

4 Personal telephonic communications, 2 June and 26 May 2008.

A number of literature sources point to the fact that the dance was invented in Tanzania among the Matengo and was first adopted by people living on the shores of Lake Malawi, who later changed its name to *malipenga*. The dance later spread to Malawi's hinterland, where the Chewa maintained the original Tanzanian name. Tsuruta (2003: 219) lists *mganda* among Tanzanian men's dances performed by the Ngoni, Nyasa and Matengo peoples. He further suspects that *mganda* was a remnant of *beni*, a dance which, he claims, was invented in the 1890s in the old Swahili towns along the Kenyan coasts of Mombasa and Lamu to imitate military drills and the accompanying brass bands of the British navy. According to Tsuruta, *beni*, from the English word "band", developed from pre-existing traditions of competitive dance societies in urban Swahili communities. Hill (2002: 30) compares *mganda* with *beni* as follows:

Some important similarities are the use of European-derived movement styles (marching and parading), instruments, costumes (military uniforms or British colonial clothing, particularly white shorts), and military titles and command hierarchies.

Two observations can be made on the basis of Tsuruta's account. One of the mentioned groups who performed *mganda* is the Nyasa people, probably a subgroup of the Chewa people (*cf* footnote 1). These could have influenced the name of the dance, according to Moloko's assertions. Either *mganda* or *beni* could be the remnant of each other, or simply a similar development in addition to pre-existing competitive dance traditions. It appears that Tembo (1995: 3) agrees with Moloko on the origin and meaning of the term *mganda* as follows:

The name of the dance is derived from the Tumbuka language term *ganda* which means 'to march like soldiers.' The name of the dance also depicts the loud boom sound from the large marching band style drum that is used during the dance.

According to Moloko and Tembo, the name depicts both the leg movements and the drum sound, each attributing the meaning to their mother tongues of Chewa and Tumbuka, respectively. Hill's (2002: 27) account of the practice of *mganda* among the Matengo of Tanzania helps solve the problem of origin of the dance. He reports that the Matengo are very open to outside influences, adopting and adapting readily: "They are likewise quick to abandon older practices

no longer relevant to social life and adopt new ones that fit better with contemporary realities”.

Hill (2002: 30) concludes that, regardless of its ultimate origin, the Malawian version of this dance is strongly syncretic, arose in and firmly reflects the colonial era, and was the model for the Tanzanian *mganda*.

### 3.2.1 Organisation of *mganda* dance

*Mganda* is organised at the village level in a *boma*: a group of *mganda* dancers with its own administrative structures as a centralised authority system, whose membership applies for recruitment, undergoes competence scrutiny, and pays allegiance to its governing statutes in matters dealing with dance performance, its improvement, and its success. A new *boma* is acquired from an existing one through systematic and indigenous legal processes. Administratively, a *boma* operates through an executive committee, a corporal, a king, and a captain. The *mganda* dance is performed for entertainment at weddings, village competitions and political events.



Figure 3: *Mganda* dancers of Kayaza Village in Dowa District, Malawi; note the captain with a police cap

*Mganda* serves as a medium for social interaction between young men and women from different villages to get to know and admire each other, often leading to marriages. The *mganda* dance is also a channel for community and individual artistic self-expression, depicting

elements of joy, confrontation, political and social caricature, and mimicry of the past and present through the song lyrics and especially dance routines. The following picture illustrates aspects of *mganda* performance; in other words, the linear dance formation, the *badza* mirliton (kazoo), the bright uniform (in the picture T-shirts were used only as temporary uniform for a civic education campaign), and dance posture. The dancers in Figure 3 face two drummers who appear in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Men drumming for the *mganda* dance on two contrasting drums with two men supporting the drums by holding the beam (*mtanda*); traditionally, two v-shaped poles (*mphanda*) are used as beam holders at each end

### 3.3 Underlying key dance elements

*Gulewamkulu* and *mganda* represent a number of common acculturative features embedded in them. For example, over the years, the *gulewamkulu* mask dance changed from traditional, culture-specific presentations to a hybridised performance. The changes were a result of the historical contact between the Chewa people and, among others, the Tumbuka people who settled in the northern region, the Ngoni people who migrated from South Africa, and the early European missionaries. The missionaries condemned the Chewa *gulewamkulu* on the grounds that it was evil and that it promoted promiscuity (Kerr 1998: 31; Tracey 1966/1967: 52). As a

result, the Chewa responded to the missionary interference by, among others, introducing masked dancers who satirised Bible personalities as well as well-known colonial administrators. This is also observed by Linden (1974: 120):

The initial response of the *nyau* to Catholicism was the absorption into the cult of the key religious figures of St. Peter, St. Joseph and the Virgin Mary. Masks were invented which held these important Catholic figures up to ridicule and began to appear with increasing frequencies at performances.

As I observed elsewhere (*cf* Nthala 2011), this might have been a ploy to counter the missionaries' criticism by desecrating, as it were, such sacrosanct personalities. On the other hand, the *gulewamkulu* dancers' use of Biblical lyrics and themes to compose songs and their arrangement of Christian hymns could be interpreted as an attempt by the Chewa to appease the rival Christian community. My research discovered one example of such songs:

*Owerenga adadziwa ee kuli moto*  
Those who are able to read are aware there is fire

*Owerenga adadziwa ee kuli moto Kumwambako*  
Those who are able to read are aware there is fire there in Heaven

*Dziwa! Dziwa!*  
Know it! Know it!

This *nyau* song clearly advocates the Biblical theme of God's final judgment on sinners through hell fire. Interestingly, the Chewa composers of this particular song seem to suggest that they are only acting as spokespersons for those who are able to read – the literate Christians. They somehow seem to acquit themselves of the possibility of God's punishment on them by feigning ignorance of what is contained in the Bible, since they are not able to read it themselves. However, by telling others to know (*dziwa*) about the fire in Heaven they act as preachers, although the *nyau* context in which the song is performed affords the song a derisive connotation and meaning.

Despite the seeming attempt by the Chewa performers to appease the Christian missionaries, neither of these groups compromised their stance, which initially led to an intensified rivalry between Christianity and the *gulewamkulu*. The consistent introduction of Zulu elements over the years in contemporary *gulewamkulu*

characters is also a manifestation of the Chewa memory regarding the confrontational Ngoni people. Hence, the contemporary *nyau* philosophy is a perpetuation of Chewa historical experiences.

Similarly, the *mganda* use of traditional drums instead of the brass-band drum; the *badza* mirliton for the trumpet; the adaptation of non-military bright costume, and the exaggerated dance miming may fall short of the British soldiers' military parades, but yet fundamentally portray a new Chewa dance identity. Therefore, the theatrical elements within the *gulewamkulu* and *mganda* dances provide a critical platform for understanding how the Chewa culture has translated from an autonomous and independent cultural group in terms of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, and aesthetic conviction. This translation involved cultural modification by accepting or adopting and attempting to reject beliefs or traits of another culture, resulting in the alteration of original cultural patterns, whereas the Chewa identity chiefly remained distinct.

#### 4. Reconstructing cultural identity

Before providing specific examples of how the Chewa culture has translated since colonial times, as reflected through alien practices within the dances under discussion, I wish to recapitulate certain critical aspects of culture as a relay. As Buden (2006) contends, the notion of cultural translation can be applied by both the essentialist and constructivist understanding of culture, that is, either in order to arrange relations between different cultures, or in order to subvert – as a kind of a reconstructed universalism – the very notion of an original cultural identity. In other words, the concept of cultural translation can be generally understood and applied in both contradictory paradigms of postmodern theory and postmodern political visions: multiculturalism and deconstruction. Buden (2006) further posits that multiculturalism is based on the concept of the uniqueness and originality of cultural formations. Thus, it assumes that there is an essential connection between culture and racial, sexual, or ethnic origin. From this perspective, multiculturalism challenges the notion of universality, for it perceives every universal concept as culturally relative.



Buden (2006) also argues that there is no universal culture, but a plurality of different cultures either “tolerantly recognizing or violently excluding each other”. While I do not totally agree with this line of thought, it may, nevertheless, be true that multiculturalism is the basis of modern political practice, which decisively shapes our world by emphasising the rights of minorities and marginal communities within a homogenised space of nation state, while simultaneously legitimatising the right of a specific national or ethnic community to protect its allegedly unique and original cultural identity.

On the other hand, deconstruction challenges the concept of multiculturalism, according to Buden, by claiming that every identity has an origin in some kind of a pre-given essence. Deconstructionists view culture as a system of signs, or a narrative “without any historical or physical origin”. According to this approach, there are no origins at all, only their traces and their copies, and there is no end to the progression or regression of signs in space and time. This, in fact, means that cultures never reflect some natural state of things, but instead constitute or construct their own origin, beyond any racial, sexual, ethnic or genetic essence. This, I suppose, should ferry us to a clearer disposition on the subject of identification and identity, in which the former is constructed on the back of the recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group (Hall 1996: 2), leading to a kind of solidarity and allegiance. Hall (1996: 3) loosely defines cultural identity as the collective self-hiding inside the many other more superficial or artificially imposed selves which a people with a shared history or ancestry hold in common. Hence, what we try to change or seem to understand as having changed (as a result of whatever forces) remains the same, and is a mere narration of a historical past. In this regard, identities are only constructed, maintained and produced in historical and institutional sites within specific discursive practices occurring over time. These practices represent a translated cultural phenomenon.

Cultural translation indeed involves cultural transfusion, a process whereby cultural traits are transmitted from one culture to another (Spencer 1979: 69). This process consists of borrowed cultural practices that are often integrated into a new type of cultural complex. Cultures tend to borrow helpful ideas and inventions from one another. Thus, no culture is static; it continually develops through contact with other

groups and making adaptations to meet the changing ways of life. My research of the *mganda* dance revealed that the Chewa people adopted some Tumbuka and other foreign words and incorporated them in *mganda* songs. North of the Chewa kingdom live the Tumbuka people who came into contact with the Chewa people as early as the sixteenth century (Phiri 1975: 10). The Tumbuka influence is manifested in such aspects of the Chewa life as chieftaincy and dance songs. Phiri (1975: 10) describes this influence as resulting from linguistic incorporation, cultural overlap, and mutual borrowing between whatever interactions took place between the Tumbuka and Chewa groups. The title for a Chewa senior chief is *chalo*, a Tumbuka word for “land”, “country” or “territory”. One *mganda* song is a good example of the use of *chalo*:

*Kale m'malalata ine, m'malalata ine, nili n'o bambo n'o mayi*  
Once upon a time I boasted, I boasted, when my father and my  
mother were still alive

*Kale m'mavala zisanu nguwo, ina y'o nyalubwe n'o vumbwe*  
Once upon a time I wore five different clothes, one from leopard  
skin one from bush cat

Chalo *chagwedezeka*  
The earth (the land/ the territory) is shaken

Foreign language and other aspects of cultural tools are common phenomena in Chewa communities where this research was conducted. According to Foreman Moloko,<sup>5</sup> there was a famous *mganda* song in 1955, praising the formation of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (a 1953 political amalgamation of what is now Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe). In this song, English and Tumbuka words were used instead of their Chichewa equivalents. The use of foreign words, foreign emblems, or foreign expressions in *mganda* dance was synonymous with being well travelled; therefore, civilised. As a result, many *mganda* songs contain names of foreign cities and countries. English and Tumbuka adaptations in the following example appear in bold:

5 Personal telephonic communications, 2 June and 26 May 2008.

Khingwi wethu, *ku Lusaka kwaimika mbendera* (repeat)  
Our king, a banner (flag) is raised in Lusaka

*Rhodesia Nyasalande chitaganya*  
Rhodesia and Nyasaland [are in a] Federation

It is not clear whether the Federation banner was indeed raised in Lusaka, Zambia. However, the mention of Lusaka in this song is convenient to the intentions of its composers. In the song, the “king” could mean the *mganda* king or the King of England who ruled Nyasaland as a British colony.

Further examples that demonstrate the aftermath of acculturation include the emergence of *nyau* characters such as *bwana DC* (Mr DC – Mr District Commissioner) and *ngoni warrior*. The District Commissioner was the colonial local government administrator whose mask imitation has long ‘hair’ to impersonate a White man and a bossy attitude. The *ngoni warrior* has protracted ‘hair’ above the forehead to typify the headgear of the Zulu warriors. Another mask, *mchawa*, represents an incarnation of a man from the Yao tribe.<sup>6</sup> The fluffy ‘hair’ of the *mchawa* mask symbolises use and belief in magic spells by the Yao neighbours, a view held by the Chewa creators of this mask.

These and other similar *nyau* characters take different forms and bear alternative names, depending on the Chewa geographical area where they are performed. The red or yellowish colours of these face masks symbolise primarily the White man’s face, but also the notion of stranger or ghost. Figure 5 shows the three masks of *Bwana DC*, *Mchawa* and *Nkbokomba*, the Ngoni warrior.

6 *Mchawa* is a synonym for a Yao person, but is often used as an insulting term adopted by the Chewa and other tribes against the Yao based on historical conflicts and tribal prejudices among them.



Figure 5: *Gulewamkulu* masks depicting Chewa views of other cultural groups. *Mchazwa*: mockery of the Yao tribe *Bwana DC Nkhokomba*, the Ngoni warrior

<<http://www.axisgallery.com/exhibitions/maravi>>

## 5. Chewa dances as theatre

A number of observations can be made relating to Chewa dances as constituting theatre. Theatrical features in Chewa dances manifest in the singing, dance movements, costume, characterisation, special enactments, and staging. As a performance stage, *gulewamkulu* and *mganda* dances take place outdoors, in well-prepared dance arenas. As a stylised formation dance, *mganda* is organised in a linear formation typical of the colonial parades unlike most Chewa dances that are performed in circular and anticlockwise patterns. All *gulewamkulu* and *mganda* dancers incorporate dramatic movements to narrate to the audience (through interpretation of) cultural, social or political representations. Costume types, designs and colour combinations help define these representations.

Costumes for Chewa dances can be grouped into two categories: historically oriented costumes and contemporary oriented costumes. In the *gulewamkulu*, for example, some masks portray customary characteristics of funerals, initiation, chieftaincy, and health. Some masks display cultural survival traits against foreign interference and attacks on foreign culture, and represent an interaction forum on current affairs, as observed earlier. Other masks symbolise cosmic and non-human characters, which is a manifestation of the existing Chewa deep religious inspiration.

In the *nyau* dance, the drumming pattern, style, and tempo are chosen to reflect on the characteristics of a particular mask as a dramatic presentation. Along the same line, Kerr (1998: 26) quotes Blackmun and Schoffeleers on the *gulewamkulu* drumming tempo which corresponds to undesirable characteristics personified by a *gulewamkulu* mask called *tamutamu*:

This dancer is accompanied by a slow heavy beat on the drums as he takes long, lurching strides, leaning and bumping into others on his way. This heavy quality is reflected by the artist in his treatment of the mask particularly that of the mouth [...] an expression of open-mouthed, drunken stupor.

The audience is often familiar with such staged movements and is able to identify with the message being conveyed or story being narrated by the dancer.

The *mganda* dance arena accommodates an audience of approximately 100 people. During a wedding reception, *mganda* dancers take to the stage through the arena's 'gate', an open space located at the back of the *bwalo*. The dancers move forward, backward and sideways, forcing the *bwalo* to change in size and shape in the process as the audience gives more space for the dancers with the help of the corporal. As the dancers take these dramatic movements to settle themselves into the dance, they engage with the expectant and curious crowd that whistles, sings and dances along in this dance preamble. In comparison, events at the *gulewamkulu* dance arena are organised to ensure a smooth progression of the ceremonies. The dancers, drummers, officials (elders), singers, and the audience are positioned and grouped in an orderly manner. The elders are positioned at the entrance of the *bwalo* facing the *liunde* to signal to the dancers to take the stage and to inspect their costume before they appear to the audience in turns. As such, they act as stage managers. Next to them, the drummers are lined up facing the audience. In the immediate front of the drummers is the dancing space for the mask characters. On the right hand side, facing the drummers, are the singing men and, behind them, women. On the opposite side of this singing group, men are sitting according to their status in the *gulewamkulu* society. The audience composed of women, girls, and boys faces the drummers and the elders in a horseshoe formation.

The *nyau* performance opens with drumming and handclapping at the signal of the *wakunjira*, the master of ceremonies. A procession of the village elders performs the *mnjedza* as part of the opening formula. They dance in a linear semicircle, turning left and right at intervals, as they sing the *kbowe* (a type of yodelling fanfare music) and make sweeping gestures. The sweeping symbolises the cleansing of the dancing arena to ensure that it is safe for the mask performers. The elders are believed to have cleansing powers by virtue of their positions in society. The *mnjedza* dancers are followed by the *kalulu* (the hare – ‘the clever one’) animal structure, whose dancing is meant to finalise the cleansing of the *bwalo* in case the *mnjedza* elders omitted some evil powers. A typical song for the *kalulu* goes as follows:

*Eede, bwandende, ede bwandende*  
Oh, dispeller of evil spirits

*Kalulu mkulu/mtengo wabwalo!*  
Kalulu the boss/magic of the arena!

*Eede, bwandende, ede bwandende*  
Oh, dispeller of evil spirits

*Wadza mkoma kuli yede!*  
Here comes one who is helpful at dawn

In the song, the *kalulu* animal structure is recognised as the dispeller of evil spirits, the boss of the arena and the magic tree. The phrase “one who is helpful at dawn” signifies a herald or a pioneer, who takes the stage ahead of the other dancers in order to cleanse the *bwalo*. Following the cleansing ceremony by both the *mnjedza* dancers and the *kalulu*, different ordinary masks take the stage in turns before animal structures close the ceremony. The kind of organisation of the *mganda* and *gulewamkulu*, as narrated in this section, is what qualifies them to constitute theatre.

In any society, music and dance occur in a place or locale, which is the physical geographical setting of social activity. These settings are penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences, and have a hierarchy of moral and political order. In this order, music and dance play a vital role as symbols of social boundaries. Not only do music and dance reflect cultural patterns and social structures, but they also help in the generation of meaning, its manipulation, and its enhancement within certain cultural limitations. In line with

the above observation, Stokes (1994: 2) concludes that music and dance are socially meaningful chiefly because they provide the means whereby people recognise identities and places, and the boundaries that separate them. Therefore, musical and dance performances provide the means whereby ethnicities and identities are constructed and mobilised.

As far as the Chewa scenario is concerned, as dancers of different Chewa dance traditions move in different directions with different agility and combinations of movement, they discuss social, cultural, and aesthetical issues through their dance. This also extends to discussing historical occurrences experienced by group members, thereby forcing upon themselves a translated way of performing their own dances, in addition to discussing their own interpretation and embracing of such historical occurrences. All these take the form of drama. This kind of discourse becomes a communal cultural property that demonstrates emotional and psychosocial expressions. These expressions allow both the performers and the audience to experience harmony (interrelationships), balance (social equilibrium), and rhythm (social progress). They also afford them the opportunity to experience the mysterious, express their imaginations, communicate ideals, and execute ritualistic and symbolic functions. Again, within the contemporary Chewa culture, this is perpetuated and administered by culturally recognised individuals who ironically bear Western and military titles such as captain and corporal (as in the *mganda* dance) and bishop or principal (as in the *gulewamkulu* dance).

## 6. Conclusion

This article attempted to demonstrate that, within the context of Chewa dance, one can deduce unique elements of what constitutes acculturation as cultural translation, embedded in the Chewa cultural group. Although this may not be considered an exclusively Chewa experience, the Chewa example is particularly fascinating in that the manifestation goes beyond ordinary language to practical elements within major traditional dances, of which only two were used in this article. Through this observation, one can draw a link between translation and colonisation. This link could be accompanied by the argument that translated cultures have been actively impacted

by the colonisation process, thereby disseminating an ideologically motivated image of the colonised people.

The metaphor can be used of the colony as an imitative and inferior translational copy whose suppressed identity has been overwritten by the coloniser. While this may convey a view of translation as a damaging instrument of the colonisers who impose themselves to construct a distorted image of the suppressed people, it may as well be inaccurate. Taking the Chewa example, contemporary practice of the discussed dances does not seem to suggest a kind of slavery by an oppressive alien figure. On the contrary, it does indeed describe a satisfied and progressive cultural grouping, which enjoys what has now become part of its heritage. After all, neither the original culture nor the translation can claim to be fixed, since they are in themselves constantly transforming in space and time, making it unnecessary to play victim or to demand an apology for any adopted change at any given time.

Mbembe (2002: 242) justifies this when he proposes that current African notions of the self – cultural or ethnic identity – may be understood as “born out of disparate but often intersecting practices, the goal of which is not to settle factual and moral disputes about the world but to open the way for self-styling”. He further suggests that the African present is borne out of the disparate and intersecting practices whereby Africans stylise their conduct and life. This may be true of the contemporary Chewa dance experience discussed in this article.



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