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Assessment of the Gule Wamkulu as a Rite of Passage among the Chewas of the Central Region in Malawi

Mastone L.K. Mbewe

“Chabwino ngati ali ndi mphotho zofupa nyauzo mutha kuuza ana kuti akamemeze gule pamidzi yozungulira (Makumbi 1975, p. 48).”

(“Alright if the people who want to organize Nyau Dance have the appropriate things to give the dancers, go ahead and tell the youth to announce date for the occasion in the neighbouring village”).¹

Abstract

This chapter examines the initiation of boys and girls in Chewa societies in the Central Region of Malawi. It results from an analysis of available literature and older scholarly data. The initiation ceremonies among the Chewa, usually done through Nyau masquerades, are conducted in an environment of rampant beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery, and in ritual fortification as a means of protecting the initiates from attack by evil people. By contrast, Christian missionary societies conducted similar ceremonies, but without recourse to fortification or witchcraft beliefs. The chapter raises the question of the relevance of these practices and underlying beliefs today. It argues that the Nyau exists as a means for the initiation ceremonies of boys and girls because it has become a source of income for chiefs, leaders of dambwe, leaders of liunde and leaders of girls' initiation ceremonies (*Namkungwi*). This is because the initiation ceremonies are less beneficial for the initiated than for these leaders since the time available for initiating boys and girls is insufficient for them to achieve the purposes of initiation. I therefore argue that until these stakeholders of the initiation of boys and girls find alternative means of making money, they are unlikely to hand over this instructional aspect to the official guarantors of education like the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.

¹ Translated by the author.

Introduction

This chapter assesses the role of the *Gule Wamkulu*² as a rite of passage among the present day Chewa of the Central Region in Malawi. Boys aged between eight and twelve among the Chewas of this Region are expected to go through this rite of passage. Yet, boys whose parents are serious churchgoers are not allowed to undergo this kind of initiation. Girls, on the other hand, go through the initiation rites at the beginning of their first menstrual period. If a boy or a girl does not go through this rite of passage, he or she is not fully accepted in his or her own community because he or she is considered to have missed an important stage in life. Boys and girls who are not initiated into the Gule Wamkulu are excluded from participation in important functions in their communities. In the pre-colonial period, all boys or girls among the Chewa were required to go through the initiation rites. The arrival of missionaries in the late 1800s significantly changed how initiation ceremonies were conducted. The churches stopped the Chewa who had converted to Christianity, including members of their catechumenate classes, from attending the traditional Chewa initiation ceremonies. They conducted their own initiation ceremonies. In these circumstances, the Nyau secret societies started directly recruiting boys between eight and twelve years of age instead of adults who had one or two children (Breugel 2001, p. 127). The missionaries' interference with the initiation ceremonies purposefully stopped Chewa Christian converts from attending the traditional initiation ceremonies. The colonial government agreed with the chiefs that they would not interfere with the local running of things in traditional societies. This was the British policy of indirect rule pioneered by Lord Lugard. The age of entry into the initiation ceremonies for girls did not change. It remained the onset of puberty.

Relevant Aspects of the Nyau From Earliest Times to Present Time

In addition to the factors that have affected Nyau outlined above, there are other factors that we need to consider. These factors include the loss of

² The Gule Wamkulu ('the great dance') is a dance practiced by initiated members of Nyau secret societies among the Chewas of the Central Region in Malawi. Typically, the dancers wear full-body masquerades.

importance of the Nyau masquerade, the introduction of Free Primary School Education, and the rise of secularism and globalization in the country. In the pre-colonial times, the Nyau secret societies were so important that their membership was constituted by the whole Chewa society. With the passage of time and the impact of various factors, the Nyau was reduced to a form of entertainment. To appreciate the current status of the Nyau among the Chewa, we have to begin with Russell's (1962, p. 14) assertion that: "The circumstances of men's lives do much to determine their philosophy ... conversely their philosophy does much to determine their circumstances". In terms of Russell's statement above, the Chewa started as a closed society that was motivated by fear of death, and the need to produce children. The Chewa considered it important to follow their forefathers' practices and modes of behaviour. Evil things in society were considered to come about as a result of disobedience to the spirits of the ancestors or the spirits of recently departed people. The emergence of missionary education and commerce brought significant changes in their beliefs about life. Consequently, not only have the peoples' beliefs about the Nyau changed, but the circumstances of their lives have also changed. For instance, at present, young boys and girls consider the Nyau performers to be human beings, not spirits or wild beasts, as was the case in the past. Similarly, all children have to go to school at present. In the past, a large proportion of the children were not going to school. In the paragraphs below, I describe circumstances that have led to the loss of importance of the Nyau as a rite of passage in Chewa societies. I begin with a description of the Nyau in the pre-colonial Chewa societies. The discussion of the Nyau in pre-colonial societies is followed by the effects of Christian missions that arrived in the country in the late 1800s. The Nyau societies' reaction to the missionaries' activities brought about changes in the organization of Nyau as a rite of passage. The post-independence government introduced other changes that affected the Nyau as a rite of passage. These changes are discussed below.

Nyau in Pre-colonial Times

In pre-colonial times, the Nyau membership was reserved for adults with one or more children (Breugel 2001, p. 125). Only adults who had given proof of bravery and endurance were allowed to join the Nyau secret societies (Breugel 2001, p. 127). In the precolonial times, the Nyau were considered as fearsome creatures that uninitiated passers-by had to keep away

from in order to avoid being beaten or injured by the Nyau. The introduction of the Christian Missions in the late 1800s brought about three changes in Chewa societies. These changes were: The depletion of numbers of the Nyau and *Chinamwali* initiates (male and female initiates); the reduction in age for entrance into the Nyau societies from adulthood to eight or twelve years; and, the degeneration of the purpose of the Nyau dance to mere amusement as reported by Hodgson in 1933 (Bruegel 2001, p. 127). In the following paragraphs, I discuss these changes.

The Depletion of Nyau and Chinamwali Initiates

The decrease in numbers of initiates was a serious issue because it led to reduction of the wealth in the form of cows, goats, mats and chickens that chiefs collected from parents of the initiates. The central issue in the relationship between chiefs and missionaries was money. In her book "*Growing up in a Chewa Girls' Initiation*," Longwe relates how each girl that had taken part in an initiation ceremony was finally redeemed at the chief's house by her parents through paying the appropriate charge for initiating a girl. The wealth that a chief collected from initiation ceremonies was called in Chichewa *chuma cha unamwali* (initiation fees). The missionaries offended the chiefs by introducing their own initiation ceremonies. They did not allow the Chewa who had been converted to Christianity or the members of their catechumenate classes to attend the Nyau ceremonies. They conducted their own initiation ceremonies for boys and girls in their schools. The net effect of introducing alternative ways of becoming an adult in a Chewa society meant the reduction of initiation fees (*chuma cha unamwali*) for the Chewa chiefs. This led to the conflict that Linden (1974) refers to in his book and that I have described above. These alternative ways of becoming an adult in Chewa societies operate up to this day. In one village near my home, there were two chiefs at one time. One of the chiefs was referred to as a white chief and the other as a black chief. The white chief was a Christian and was responsible for everything except the Nyau. The black chief was responsible for the Nyau functions only. This implies that there are now accepted alternative ways to the Nyau of becoming an adult and ultimately a leader, at least in some Chewa societies.

Change of Age of Entry into Nyau Societies

The missionaries engaged children in most of their activities. The Nyau societies realized the need to change the age of entry into the Nyau from adulthood to eight or twelve years in their competition for initiates with the missionaries. This change implied that their abstract concepts of spirits, *mdulo* complex, and ways of placating spirits to avoid disaster, had to go hand in hand with entertainment. The purpose of the Nyau, hence, degenerated into “mere amusement” as Hodgson (1933) observed. Since that time the Nyau societies have wavered between being a source of amusement and entertainment to children and women or solemn structures of societies of the Chewa. The change in entry age was not accompanied by adjustment in the content presented to the initiates of Nyau. Consequently, the concepts and ideas that could be considered too abstract for children are taught without making any adjustment.

Rules and Regulations

As Lwanda (2005, p. 188) states, in the precolonial times, the Nyau masquerades were such fearsome creatures that used to beat with sticks any uninitiated boys and girls. Later, this practice pleased neither colonial administrators nor the Ngoni invaders. The only way boys and girls could be saved from being beaten by Nyau was to join them. In these circumstances, the colonial government ruled that the Nyau masquerades should not beat anyone moving on the roads or pathways in the country. This ruling ensured that children who had not yet been initiated could meet the Nyau masquerades face to face without running away from them. In the pre-colonial times, a person carrying a red flag walked ahead of the Nyau masquerades, calling on all travellers on the route of the Nyau to run away and hide themselves. In the post-independence period, there was no need for even uninitiated persons to run away from the Nyau. The Nyau, hence, ceased to be fearsome creatures as was the case during the pre-colonial period.

Domestication of the Nyau

The rulers of Malawi in the early post-independence period made an effort to reduce the Nyau to an ordinary dance. They used the Nyau to entertain people during political meetings (Lwanda 2005, p. 188). The Nyau dancers

took turns to perform in these meetings like any other dancers. When going to political rallies and meetings of the Malawi Congress Party, the Nyau boarded lorries or buses. This had the effect of enabling children to realize that the Nyau masquerades were performed by human beings. It seems that during the post-independence period, the Nyau became only a dance that could be used to attract foreign travellers to the country.

The Length of the Nyau Initiation Ceremonies

In the precolonial times, the initiation ceremonies were reported to last for one month (Breugel 2001, p. 145). It is not possible today for a boy to stay one month at the *dambwe*. The school calendar cannot accommodate such lengthy ceremonies. Schools in Malawi open in September, and close in December for holidays. The Nyau ceremonies are often held between September and November. Consequently, the Nyau have had to adjust their calendars to avoid collision with the school calendar. In the post-independence period, a Presidential order ruled that except for the purpose of a funeral, the Nyau ceremonies should not be conducted during the rainy season. This means that the initiation ceremonies now usually last only three or five days. In her book, Longwe (2006, p. 137) showed that the events that girls had to attend during their initiation ceremonies were so many that she could not attend all of them and decided to miss some of them in order to attend others. It thus seems that much content is crammed into a small amount of time.

Free Primary School Education

The conflict between the Nyau and the state school education system was resolved in 1994 when the government introduced free primary school education. From 1994 onwards, all children are expected to go to school. The Nyau or Chinamwali functions have to be conducted during school holidays. This has led to further reduction in the length of the duration of the Nyau and chinamwali initiation ceremonies.

Legends of Nyau

According to Giannotta, & Stefanin (2014), the Gule Wamkulu masquerade, also known as Nyau among the Chewas, originated in Zaire, today

the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This is where a rock painting depicting the present-day *Kasiya Maliro* in Malawi, dating back to 992 AD has been found. *Kasiya Maliro* is a type of Nyau that resembles an antelope and is usually featured during funerals and other important functions (Ngoma & Chauma 2010, p. 49). Among the Chewa in Malawi, however, there are various legends about the origin of the Nyau. In his notes on the Chewa and Angoni, Hodgson (1933, p. 146) states that the most common explanation of the Nyau origin is that when God made the country and its people, he also gave them the Nyau. Hence, there are two types of legends about the origin of the Nyau. As already noted above, one legend suggests that the Nyau was imported from the DRC while another legend considers the Nyau to have been crafted in Malawi. Ngoma and Chauma (2010, p. 47), for instance, state that the Chewa brought the dance with them when they moved from the DRC to Malawi. According to these authors, the dance was called *Mburi*. Although these authors' position on the origin of Nyau concurs with that of Giannotta, & Stefanin (2014) presented above, they have not indicated the sources of their story. However, in the available literature, no other authors have referred to *Mburi* as the origin of the Nyau dance.

Breugel (2001, p. 134) has reported another important Nyau legend. According to this legend, it was Makewana, the rain priestess at Msinja, who made the Chewa dance the Nyau. When Makewana noticed that the people did not sufficiently respect Chiefs among the Chewa, she decided to introduce the Nyau, which had not existed until then. According to Breugel, Makewana chose several chiefs and gave them the right to have a dancing place for the Nyau (*bwalo*). It is reported that after Makewana started Nyau, she saw that much respect was being paid to the chiefs. As indicated later, one of the lessons girls learn during their initiation ceremonies is to respect the village chief and other elders. This legend emphasizes the important roles of chiefs in conducting the Nyau functions. According to Breugel (2001), Rangeley reported a legend of Nyau in which a certain Nyanda sought to obtain food from women by dancing during a period of famine. Nyanda was joined by other young men and continued to dance even after the famine was over. The dance pleased many people very much. When Nyanda died, the dance was performed at his funeral. It became a traditional way of mourning the deaths of important people in the Chewa communities. This legend reflects the idea of personal gain that seems to be inherent in the Nyau secret societies.

Breugel (2001, p. 134) also reports another legend presented by Salaun. According to this legend, a man and a woman decided to use animal structures and mask dancers to frighten girls at their initiation and to add solemnity to the initiation ceremony. This legend tells us about the use of the Nyau in the initiation of girls. Another legend reported by Phiri (1974) considers the Nyau to be a dance that started among women. The men admired the Nyau and took it away from the women. It became a dance exclusively for men who performed it during the funerals of important members of the Nyau Community. According to this legend, the Nyau dance was performed at the funeral of the chief, his wife, or nephew, Namkungwi and Wanjira.

Nyau Reactions to the Changing Environments

The available literature suggests that the Nyau was originally a dance of men, who were often naked when dancing while the women sang songs, and that membership was reserved “to those who had given proof of bravery and endurance (Breugel 2001, p. 175; Stannus 1910, p. 197). Animal structures and masks were used when performing the dance. For a chief to conduct the Nyau, he or she had to get a bundle of rights from a Senior Chief for the performance of the Nyau dance at such rituals as, funerals, and initiations of boys and girls. This bundle of rights was called *Mzinda*. Any village chief conducting initiation ceremonies without receiving *Mzinda* from his or her Senior Chief was severely punished. A chief who did not have *Mzinda* could not conduct initiation ceremonies or receive initiation fees that took the form of money, chickens, mats, cattle and goats (Phiri 1974, p. 237). It seems, therefore, that it was in the financial interest of any Chewa chief to get every boy or girl initiated to increase the initiation fees collected from the parents of the initiates. Longwe (2006, p. 150) tells us that at the end of the initiation ceremony for girls, the parents of the initiates “*are supposed to redeem their daughters by giving the chief the required amount per girl*”. One aspect of the conflict between the Christian missions and the Chewa chiefs is that the missionary activities led to a reduction in the amount of the fees the chiefs collected from the initiates. This reduction came about because the missionaries did not allow children who went to school to join the Nyau-based initiation ceremonies. Instead, the missionaries conducted their own initiation ceremonies for

the children attending their schools. In addition, they did not pay any initiation fees to the Chewa chiefs. This lowered the number of participants in local initiations.

With the passage of time in the late 1940s, the Nyau Societies began to experience the effects of the activities of the missionaries. As indicated above, membership of the Nyau was confined to older people. The missionaries instead focused their activities on young boys and girls. The Nyau Societies hence saw the implication of the activities of missionaries as depletion of the base from which they recruited members of the Nyau. Consequently, they decided to start recruiting young children as well (Linden 1974). The membership of the Nyau hence changed from strictly adults to adults and children. However, Hodgson (1933) reported that the incorporation of children in the Nyau dance changed its purpose to mere amusement (Breugel 2001, p. 127). Rangeley (1949) used the word degeneration to describe the change that occurred in the purpose of the Nyau secret societies. This change has had significant effects on the role of the Nyau in the post-independence period.

The incorporation of children in the Nyau secret societies was followed by the domestication of the Nyau in the post-independence period. During the post-independence period, attempts were made to reduce the Nyau to an ordinary, entertaining cultural dance. Hence, the Nyau dancers were used to entertain people during political meetings. The dancers were perceived as ordinary people and not wild animals (*zirombo*) as they had been viewed before. In this period, the Nyau in their ceremonial masquerade could board vehicles with ordinary people to go to political rallies. Furthermore, they were strictly forbidden from beating people on roadsides and pathways. They were also used to mobilize people to attend the political rallies of the Malawi Congress Party. The Nyau, therefore, became an ordinary dance with the same status as *chimtali* or *mganda*³. As Lwanda (2005, p. 188) observed, the Nyau dancers in the post-independence period ceased to be fearsome creatures from which an uninitiated person used to run away during the pre-colonial period. The Nyau was also used to chase people from their houses so that they go to attend political meetings. It may be concluded in this connection that the Nyau succumbed to the forces of nationalism.

³ Chimtali or mganda are not masquerade dances. They are other forms of ordinary dances.

Other international factors that have affected the Nyau include secularization, globalization and diseases. According to Crossman (2021), secularization is a cultural transition in which religious values are gradually replaced with nonreligious values. The youth today are becoming less influenced by ideas of spirits, ancestors, or *mdulo*. Secularization as the transformation of religion forms its ethics without any reference to spirits, ancestors or God. Secularization confines religion to the individual and not to public institutions or states. Globalization is looking at the whole world as one economic unit. What matters in the world economic unit is to produce goods that other people want to have and are prepared to pay for them. The Nyau are currently not one of such goods; hence, the youth may see participation in the Nyau secret societies as a waste of valuable time. In addition, in recent years, diseases such COVID-19, Ebola and cholera have tended to discourage the gathering of large numbers of people, and in some years, the Nyau or Chinamwali ceremonies had to be postponed. Any assessment of the Nyau as a rite of passage must consider the factors presented above.

Initiation Ceremonies of Boys and Girls

This subsection begins with a description of the initiation ceremonies of girls. This is followed by a recounting of the initiation ceremonies of boys and a discussion of relevant aspects of the Nyau secret societies from the earliest times to the present.

Initiation of Girls (Chinamwali)

As indicated previously, the initiation of girls begins with puberty. The initiation of girls takes place at funerals, the commemoration of funerals, as either ad hoc initiation (*chikudzu-kudzu*) ceremonies or proper initiation ceremonies. Unlike the case with the initiation of boys, the age of entry into the initiation of girls has remained unchanged since time immemorial. Longwe (2006, p. 148) states that initiation for girls lasts five days. The description of each of these days is derived from the process of beer brewing for the celebrations to the end of *chinamwali*. The first day is the beer-brewing day, the second is beer re-boiling day, the third is the day when the beer cools down, the last but one day is the day when the beer is sieved and the last day is the beer-drinking day. During these days and nights, the initiates are subjected to intensive verbal, practical and demonstrative teachings of various aspects of sexuality, adulthood and the

expectations of society about their behaviour as adults. Important lessons are embedded in songs to enable easy memorization.

Longwe (2006, p. 134) gives the following as a lesson that is embedded in song:

The girls respond: Chingondo (head crown)

Mwana wanamwiali tandiuza mawanga ankhanganga (Initiate tell me)

Response: Chingondo

Mwana wanamwali tandiuza: Kapanda maso

Response: That without eyes (Male sexual organ)

The lessons embedded in songs are those that can be presented in public.⁴ The girls' instructors include the leaders of initiation ceremonies, older women, and girls who were already initiated. The Nyau also take part in the initiation of girls through threatening, harassing, and sometimes providing actual information to the girls. Girls' initiation includes visiting the places where the Nyau masquerades materials are kept in the village in order for them to learn about the Nyau. The overall aim of *Chinamwali* seems to produce an adult woman, who is knowledgeable about what is expected of her regarding sexuality, good behaviour and responsible national citizenship.

Initiation of Boys

According to Breugel (2001, p. 144), the initiation of boys takes place when Nyau members are at the *dambwe* (the place where initiation ceremony happens), preparing their animal structures (*zirombo*). In many places, the initiation of boys takes place between September and November. Like in the girls' initiation ceremonies, each boy is accompanied by a senior previously initiated member. Blindfolding the initiate as he approaches the *dambwe* is a common habit. On approaching, the initiate is welcomed by people singing at the *dambwe*. Sometimes, the initiate is beaten with sticks. Breugel tells us that punishment given to the boy who had misbehaved is sometimes very harsh and could maim boys for life. Among the lessons given to the boys, are the vocabularies of about 100 lessons, which are secret to the Nyau. They consist of symbolic languages for communication. The initiates are also made to eat or drink various things believed to be remedies for various mystical diseases. Through these practices, the initiates are closely supervised by *aphungu* (advisors).

⁴ Readers who are interested to learn more about these lessons should consult Longwe's book Chapter 3 on pages 40 to 70 and Appendix A, pages 145 to 151.

One of the main tasks of instructors of male initiates is to communicate the various rules and regulations that the ancestors have put in place for the well-being of individuals and the community as a whole. Chakanza (2000) presents a collection of 2000 proverbs, some of which were used by the Nyau instructors as a way of promoting a spirit of hard work among the initiates. Proverb No. 649 *kuthyola ndiwo ndi kuwerama* (if you want something, sweat for it) stands out as a shining example of such a valuable proverb (Chakanza 2000, p. 147). Similarly, Mbewe (2017, p. 217) adds another proverb that agrees with that of Chakanza. The proverb states “*Munthu amamva nkhwali, nkhwali ikalira mmawa, iye azidzuka nayamba kugwira ntchito* (A human being is supposed to get up as early as possible and start working). Initiates also learn that they are supposed to get up and start working once they hear birds in the morning. Part of the lessons also include aspects of the Chewa belief about the Nyau. For example, they tell the initiates that the Nyau masquerades are apparitions of the spirits of ancestors. There are good as well as evil spirits. There are also the uncategorized spirits that are unpredictable. Communicating these beliefs to eight-year-old children can indeed be a difficult task.

Some churches consider the Nyau-initiated persons to be outcasts or pagans. Other churches refuse to organize burial ceremonies for boys who happen to die while practicing Nyau masquerade, even if they were baptized in the Church. In the Nyau communities, however, people who have not been initiated into the Nyau, are not allowed to take leadership positions in these communities. When a boy is initiated into the Nyau cult, the letter O or A is prefixed to his name when calling him (Longwe, 2006). This is done to acknowledge his change of status from a minor to a responsible adult. For instance, Dalitso becomes O Dalitso or A Dalitso. In this sense, the initiation ceremony serves as a rite of passage to full adulthood in a community where leadership positions are still exclusive to the Nyau initiates. All in all, it seems that when the age of entry into the Nyau secret societies was adjusted from adults to young people, the content taught to initiates was not changed. Makumbi (1975) summarizes the instructions given to boys during initiations into twelve rules. One of the rules prescribes a period of sexual abstinence for couples after childbirth. Another rule advises the initiates against stealing food from cooking pots. A further rule urges parents to take proper care of their children even if they are engaged in work.

One of the common ways of ensuring acceptable behaviour among boys and girls in the Nyau is to tell them that when they do wrong things, either

they or their relatives will suffer from a strange disease and may die in the process. This ritual disease is referred to as the *mdulo* complex by Breugel (2001, p. 171). Rangeley, however, reported that when medical officers examined persons suffering from *mdulo*, they invariably diagnosed diseases such as hookworm, malaria, dysentery, bilharzia and chronic malnutrition. He stated that some cases of tuberculosis were also considered to have been caused by *mdulo*. It seems that *mdulo* cannot be equated to any illness known in medical science. In the thinking of the Chewa, it is a mysterious disease that occurs when ancestral spirits have been annoyed by failure to conform to the ancestral ways of doing things. *Mdulo* for instance, occurs when a woman has a sexual relationship with a man during the menstrual periods. One of the functions of the initiation ceremonies is, therefore, to convince boys and girls about the importance of observing ancestral rules to avoid *mdulo*.

One of the practices of the traditional boys or girls' initiation ceremonies for the Chewas that cannot be reconciled with practices of Christian institutions is fortification (*kukhwima*). Chewa initiation ceremonies are conducted in an environment of strong beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery. Before the initiation ceremonies are held, a medicine man or a chief with more powerful magic is invited to fortify the grounds and house in which the girls or boys would be staying. The ceremony itself is also fortified to ensure that no disturbances take place in the course of the initiation ceremony. Initiation rites are considered, among the Chewa, to be vulnerable to attacks by enemies that can harm the initiates mysteriously (Longwe 2006, p. 45). The Chief of the village that intends to hold initiation ceremonies has the task of protecting his or her subjects from such mysterious attacks. The concoctions that are planted around female initiation areas are called deterrents by Longwe (2006, p. 45). These beliefs about possible attacks are so strong that anything that girls or boys come in contact with is carefully isolated and thrown into a pit latrine to avoid possible use by enemies or cruel people in bringing harm to the initiates. This aspect of initiation ceremonies among the Chewa contrasts sharply with the practices of religious institutions where no fortification ceremonies take place.

The importance of the initiation ceremonies in Chewa societies is indicated by the fact that on the final day of initiation, which is called the day of beer-drinking, the initiates and other people are entertained by the *mnjedza* dance, which is performed by chiefs, their wives, the initiation instructors and other senior elders. Longwe (2006, p. 148) reports that the

final day is marked by feasting and the slaughtering of goats or chickens. People from surrounding villages also attend the ceremony. The most important Nyau masquerade, *njovu* (the elephant masquerade), is featured on this day. Monies are showered on the Nyau. The hair of the initiates is shaved on this day. Finally, the initiates are escorted to their respective homes by the *Namkungwi* and other senior instructors.

Assessment of the Nyau as a Rite of Passage.

For the readers to understand why the Nyau persist to exist and the initiation ceremonies continue to be conducted even in modern times, it is necessary to consider the beliefs of the Chewa, especially their perspective on death and other cases of misfortune. The Chewa are said to be a people who are mainly concerned with death, illness, drought, and infertility (Ott 2001, p. 11; Breugel 2001, p. 267). The fear of death and the need to have children appear to be the main drivers of important activities in a traditional Chewa community. To understand the nature of this fear, Breugel (2001) carried out a survey of causes of death among the Chewa. He looked at 451 deaths and, in each case, asked for causes for the death as perceived by his respondents (Breugel 2001, p. 26). I applied Colaizzi's (1978) method of analysing data and collapsed his categories to four presented in the table below.

Table 1: Causes of death among the Chewa

Categories of causes of death	Number	Percentage (%)
God	48	11
Nature	38	8
Evil in man	356	79
Spirits	9	2
Total	451	100

Source: van Breugel (2001, p. 26)

Among the Chewa, every death has a cause. As indicated in the table, the most frequent cause of death is the evil that is in man. Breugel (2001, p. 26) also states that the majority of the deaths he surveyed were considered to be caused by the evil that is in man. The Nyau is a society of men who are involved in placating spirits so that they do not do any harm to

the society or to individuals. The aim of the initiation ceremonies is, among other things, to introduce children to the world of the ancestral spirits, the spirits of the recently departed, and the spirits that have been denied the ancestors' status (*ziwanda*). Even though these beliefs are still widespread, it is obvious that children of eight to twelve years may be too young to grasp things to do with spirits. Secularization among Malawian citizens also works to discredit the idea of spirits.

The Nyau masquerades nevertheless remain very important in present day Chewa societies because there are people who are benefiting from their existence. The chiefs get paid when the Nyau are in operation. It seems, therefore, that the Nyau masquerades exist today not because they provide reasonable rites of passage for children to adulthood, but because they are a source of income for the leaders of the *bwalo*, the leaders of the *dambwe*, and the leaders of girls' initiation ceremonies.

CONCLUSION

The task of the Nyau secret societies is to provide adulthood education to boys and girls in the Chewa communities. At present, the adult education to boys and girls is provided in an environment that is full of beliefs about witchcraft and sorcery. One wonders whether these beliefs are necessary considering that the missionaries had set up units of adult education without resorting to fortification and witches. It needs to be acknowledged that the purpose of initiation, has always been to prepare boys and girls for adult life in their communities. For boys, it was meant to equip them with knowledge and skills that would enable them to live as adults in their societies. However, societies are rapidly changing and as Parrinder (1954, p. 146) observed "*the clock cannot be put back*". Forces of nationalism, trade, education, and other religions, are bringing about rapid changes in African societies. The use of archaic methods of providing adult education to boys and girls in the present society is unlikely to be successful. There also appears not to be enough time to teach the boys and girls' aspects of adulthood sufficiently as the ceremonies had to be shortened significantly to accommodate the school calendar. All in all, it seems to me that this

aspect of education for boys and girls to become adults has yet to be entrusted to the Ministry of Education Science and Technology, even at this time when we, citizens of this country, are running all education institutions. The main issue at stake in this matter are finances accruing to the chiefs and the other stakeholders of the Nyau. Until the main stakeholders of the Nyau find other sources of income, it is unlikely that this aspect of education will be handed over to appropriate public institutions.

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