

SOME MUSIC TRADITIONS OF MALAWI

by

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Malawi, a country of great cultural diversity, shares many of its musical traditions with neighbouring cultures in other south-east African countries, namely Tanzania, Zambia, and Mozambique, as well as with culture groups further away, the Nguni (Zulu-Swazi) cultures of South Africa, for example. As part of the UNESCO CD series *Musics and Musicians of the World*, UNESCO (with AUVIDIS as co-publisher and distributor) made available *Music traditions of Malawi* (D 8265).

The items on this compact disc were studied and recorded by a team of scholars, enthusiastically involved in researching and promoting greater understanding of Malawian cultural traditions. They represented the University of Malawi, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Museums of Malawi, and the Malawi National Commission for UNESCO.

While condensed notes accompany the CD, a more thorough consideration of the great variety of Malawian musical traditions heard on the CD, as presented here, may better provide a greater understanding and deeper appreciation of the music of Malawi. The CD presents a selection of the rich music that has a place in the lives of Malawians living primarily in rural communities. These traditions include the music of instrumental soloists and ensembles; ritual, ceremonial and entertainment music closely associated with dance; initiation and secret society music; and music that has evolved in the more recent past, often derived from Malawi's colonial experience.

The rich storytelling of solo singers accompanied on the board zither, *bangwe*, found in many parts of the country, and the contemplative playing on the mouth-resonated musical bow, *nyakatangale*, an instrumental tradition primarily of the Asena people of southern Malawi, serve to introduce the listener to solo compositions with instrumental accompaniment.

Ulimba, the gourd-resonated xylophone tradition of Nsanje District, *nkhwendo*, the tubular scraped-ideophones of Ngoni (via Tanzania) origin, and *mitungu*, the struck hoe-blade ensemble that accompanies beer drinking songs of the Tumbuka show a cultural appreciation for multi-part instrumental complexities. While dance is associated with the instrumental ensembles mentioned above and, indeed, with most of the music of Malawi, the actual instrumental ensemble sound, in and of itself, is perhaps more important than the dance in these traditions.

Dance, on the other hand, is probably a more significant element in the *tchopa* and *mazoma* traditions of the Lomwe and some of their neighbours in southern Malawi, as well as in *chimtali* and *chisamba* of the Chewa, and *vimbuza* of the Tumbuka where intricate drum ensembles create rhythmic excitement, unity of spirit,

and an urge for movement for the dancers.

The great importance of dance as a cultural expression is equally true for the Ngoni people who migrated from South Africa northward to Malawi. Their music traditions, like the Zulu-Swazi traditions of their ancestors, make use of hand clapping and steady striking of sticks against tight animal hide shields instead of drums. This may be heard in *ngoma* and *ingoma* examples.

Ceremonies for the initiation of the youth, the arrival of adolescents at puberty, and the induction of initiates into secret society groups employ an interesting variety of musical types. These include the drum and vocal ensembles of *gule wamkulu* where the master drummer works in close rhythmic communication with the dancers, and *buyeni* and *msindo* songs of Ngoni women.

Music traditions in Malawi are certainly not static. It is for this reason that examples are included here of syncretic expressions, presentations that demonstrate the Malawian musical talent to take a foreign musical tradition and add an original flavour to make it 'Malawian'. This is demonstrated in the smooth, stylish movements, motions some Malawians refer to as exhibiting '*dama*', that appear in the traditions of *beni* and *mganda*, military-like formation dances derived from decades of observing colonial marching bands, and *visekese*, women's use of the raft rattle, *visekese*, to imitate the sound of colonial military snare drums.

What follows is a survey of some music traditions of Malawi.

Instrumental music: solo, and for accompanying singing and dancing

NYAKATANGALE

Nyakatangale is a mouth-resonated musical bow tradition of the lower Zambezi Valley. In Malawi, it is a tradition of the Asena people. Other mouth-resonated musical bow traditions, for example the *chipendani*, *chizambi* and *mkangala*, having quite different construction and performance characteristics from the *nyakatangale*, are found primarily in Mashonaland in Zimbabwe and in southern Mozambique. *Nyakatangale*, *chizambi* and *chipendani* are played by men, their musics differing in many ways from the *umqangala* tradition of Zulu women of South Africa, played in Malawi by women of Ngoni ancestral background.

Nyakatangale may be used to accompany the Asena dances *utse*, *mabzoka*, or *chikhwizoke*. However, because of its very soft sound, it is more frequently used as an instrument for meditation, providing musical sound for the performer's own inner pleasure.

The instrument is a plucked mouth-bow and is played by the player placing one end of the bow against the inside of his right cheek. He uses a raffia plectrum (*mlaza*) in his right hand for plucking the wound sisal string. Attached to the bamboo bow is a flat, rectangular metal plate with rattles (usually bottle tops) fastened to it. The player has basically three pitches at his disposal which he obtains i) from the open string, ii) by fingering the string at the opposite end to his mouth with his left index,

or iii) with both index and middle fingers together on the string. The change in the overtone array, that is to say, the strength of different overtones created by the player's changing the size of his mouth cavity around the bow, allows the performer to hear a wide range of pitches not experienced by the listener who does not have the 'inner' experience the player does.

ULIMBA

The *ulimba*, sometimes also known as *valimba*, of the Sena people of southern Malawi, is a xylophone tradition centred in Nsanje District along the lower Shire River, bordering Malawi with Mozambique. Having been brought into the area from Mozambique to the east, the *ulimba* produces a multi-instrument sound not too remotely dissimilar to the well known Chopi xylophone orchestra tradition from further south in Mozambique. Three musicians perform on one large, 21-keyed, gourd-resonated instrument with a rattle (*nkhocho*) added to complete the ensemble.

Ulimba players position themselves so that they each have their own 'territory' on the instrument, two players on one side and one on the other. The *nkhocho* player sits close to the longer keys of the instrument. Frequently, the performer playing the lower 'territory' of pitches just uses his left beater (*mithimbo*) on the instrument. With his right beater, he hits a key that is separated from the xylophone and placed over a chamber dug into the ground, creating an external, one-key, trough-resonated instrument providing additional rhythmic strength. The use of this innovative, one-key instrument extension (*gaka*) has not been recorded in earlier studies of the *ulimba* tradition (van Zanten 1980, Kubik 1989, A. Tracey 1991) and affirms *ulimba* as a healthy, growing tradition.

'*Ulimba*', also the name for the circular dance performed by both men and women, is performed for entertainment of all sorts and may also be danced, after the burial, at funerals. Dancers move clockwise around one or more xylophones at performances that may last from early evening to sunrise.

The tonality of the music of the Sena has been determined to approach that of an equidistant-heptatonic tonal system (see van Zanten 1980). This is so with the tuning of the *ulimba* and consequently, because the tonal difference from any one key to its neighbour is the same throughout, *ulimba* songs may start at any place on the instrument to produce the same intervallic/melodic relationship. Where a song starts depends on the energy of the singers; when there is more energy and the voice is higher the *ulimba* players play in a higher position on the instrument, when voices get tired the players play lower.

Besides the approximate equidistant-heptatonic tonal system, Kubik (1989) isolates also two other characteristics of Sena music uniquely different from other musical cultures in southern Malawi. These are, a "construction of any piece of music along specific tonal/harmonic cycles or 'cycles of chords'... usually constituted by four successive tonal steps", and "a relationship between Sena musical culture and that of the Shona of Zimbabwe, for example in the 'chord sequences' used, in the use

of polyphonic singing techniques, as well as yodel, and in the presence of highly developed instrument playing". (p.28. See also A. Tracey 1991)

BANGWE

The *bangwe*, a seven-string board zither, is played in many parts of Malawi. The instrument is made of a strong, rectangular shaped, hard-wood (*mlombwa*, *pterocarpus angolensis*) board with small holes cut across the upper and lower ends through which one long wire is pulled to produce seven parallel wires on the face of the instrument. The stringed board is then generally placed into an empty, 5-litre oil tin that provides a resonance chamber for its own small sound.

In the Zomba, Chikwawa, and Nsanje Districts of southern Malawi, *bangwe* is played in a manner similar to the way lamellophones such as *mbira* of the Shona of Zimbabwe are played in the lower Zambezi Valley, with the thumbs and the index fingers of both hands plucking the strings (wires), the fingers of the left hand playing the left side of the instrument and the fingers of the right playing the right side. In areas of northern and Central Malawi, however, the *bangwe* is played in a different way, strummed rather than plucked.

Frequently the *bangwe* serves to accompany storytelling, presentations that incorporate great use of proverbial lyrics and messages for the youth. Mangulama Kutcha, *bangwe* player from Zomba, in a performance of "Phumba", an example of a song sung at *lupanda*, boys' initiation schools, advises boys not to throw stones at birds as the stones may hit others.

Phumbwayo, Phumbwayo, Phumbwayo, lero
Phumbwayo, Phumbwayo, lero
Phumbwa akudya kachere
Nanga ndiponye bwanji pali anyamata lero

That bird, that bird, that bird, today
 That bird, that bird, today
 That bird is eating figs
 How can I throw the stone, there are
 boys today?

Nanga ndichite bwanji pali akulu lero
Ananu muzisamala, ulemu mukamaponya
mwala usamagwere kuseri uko udzamenya
akulu akulu kumeneko
Phumbwa, phumbwa, phumbwa akudya kachere
Nanga ndiponye bwanji pali akulu?
Nanga ndiponye bwanji pali akulu lero?

What can I do, there are elders today?
 Children, be careful, be polite when
 throwing a stone lest it fall
 behind where it can hit elders
 The bird, the bird, the bird eating figs
 How can I throw, there are elders?
 How can I throw, there are elders there
 today?

Chitenje Tambala of Mangochi District of southern Lake Malawi, blind from the age of six, although living in the Southern Region, has a different style of playing the *bangwe*. In a style common in some Chewa areas, and in parts of northern Malawi, he uses his left fingers to damp certain strings (wires) while his right thumb and index finger is used to strum repeated circular rhythmic patterns to create a backing to the singing.

Asked which was more important to his performance, the instrumental sound of the *bangwe* or the text of the song, Chitenje Tambala said that the instrumental sound

was more important because it is used to convey the message. “Without the *bangwe*”, he said, “there is no message”.

Although the accompaniment on the *bangwe* is of great importance, listeners gather in large numbers mainly to enjoy the texts presented by Chitenje Tambala, a performer well known throughout Malawi because of his recordings, frequently aired on the radio (Malawi Broadcasting Corporation).

One song he is known for is “Ellis”, a composition starting with the singer conversing with his *bangwe*, telling it, or at least the wires (*waya*) of the *bangwe*, to get ready to perform. Another interpretation of the use of the word *waya* is based on the necessity, decades ago, to ‘wind up’ (*waya*) the gramophone to get it going at the proper speed of the song. The term ‘*waya*’ is commonly used by older, popular musicians to tell others with whom they are performing that they are not in time with the rest of the ensemble.

After this initial line, the singer continues, expressing the thoughts of a woman in a polygamous marriage.

<i>Tiye waya upite mmwemo upite mmwemo</i>	Let’s go wire, go there, go there
<i>Amuna wanga chalaka chiwiri</i>	My husband can’t manage polygamy
<i>Chalakadi chalaka chiwiri</i>	Truly, he can’t manage polygamy
<i>Amunawa chalaka chiwiri</i>	This man can’t manage polygamy
<i>Chalakadi chalaka chiwiri</i>	Truly, he can’t manage polygamy
<i>Akamuka uko mmiyezi seveni</i>	When he goes there, it takes seven months
<i>Akabwera kuno mwezi umodzi</i>	When he comes, he stays one month
<i>Ati pochoka sandilawira ine</i>	And when he goes, he doesn’t bid me farewell
<i>Angochoka ngati ndine galu</i>	He goes away as if I am a dog
<i>Angonena andipatse chipi</i>	He should give me retirement
<i>Uwu sukwati ndiye nkondo</i>	This is not marriage, but trouble
<i>Chikhala mbeta nkadawatiwa</i>	If I were single, I would get married
<i>Singamude mkazi mzanga</i>	I can’t hate my fellow woman
<i>Kumderanji Ellis</i>	Why hate Ellis?
<i>Koma wamuna</i>	But the man
<i>Kumderanji koma wamuna</i>	Why hate her, but the man
<i>Sadziwa kuyendetsa mitala</i>	He doesn’t know how to manage polygamy
<i>Nanga, nanga chiwiri</i>	What, what polygamy!
<i>Tiye waya</i>	Let’s go wire
<i>E-E ii to to</i>	Yes, oh no
<i>Nanga, nanga chiwiri</i>	What, what polygamy
<i>Inde, ii to to</i>	Yes, oh no
<i>Akamka uko ii to to</i>	He goes there, oh no
<i>Miyezi naini kumeneko</i>	Nine months still there
<i>Akabwera kuno tsiku limodzi</i>	He comes here for one day
<i>Pochoka sandilawira ine</i>	When he goes, he doesn’t bid me farewell
<i>Ango chokatu ngati ndine</i>	He just goes as if I am nothing
<i>Ngati ndine galu abale wanga ine</i>	As if I am a dog, my relatives
<i>Angonena andipatse chipi</i>	He should declare retirement to me

Singamude mkazi mzanga, etc...

I can't hate my fellow woman, etc...¹

NKHWENDO

The *nkhwendo* scraped bamboo ideophone tradition is said to originate with the Amatengo of Songea, Tanzania. Today the tradition is widespread in Malawi and Mozambique. Oral tradition suggests that the Ngoni took over the tradition from the Amatengo. The act of rubbing two surfaces together is known in Chichewa as 'nkhwe', suggesting a probable origin of the name of this instrument (see Nurse, 1970, p.35).

Nkhwendo, besides being the name of the instrument, is the name of a dance among Malawians in Ntcheu and Mwanza districts. It was originally danced to celebrate a successful harvest, a birth, and the installation and/or death of a chief. Today, *nkhwendo* is also performed to celebrate important national and political occasions. The songs sung with *nkhwendo* backing may be happy or sad ones, depending on the occasion. The dance is performed by both men and women.

Bamboos and whistles form the core of the musical instruments used in *nkhwendo* dances. The bamboo is hollowed out and grooves are cut at equal, close distances all along the outer circumference surface of the bamboo. By rubbing a stick up and down the bamboo, a rasping sound is produced. The pitch and quality of the sound produced varies according to the size and length of the bamboos as different sized bamboos play different rhythms.

VISEKESSE

Tumbuka women make their own raft-rattles, *visekese* (sing: *chisekese*), and perform the dance of the same name during the dry season. Singing groups are organized to perform *visekese* at all sorts of celebrations, including political party functions. There are also competitions organized among the singing groups.

The *visekese* instruments, coming in a variety of sizes from approximately 30-40 cm long, 20-30 cm wide and 1-2 cm thick, are made from reeds constructed in a very narrow rectangular box structure. The box is filled with small seeds. Kubik (1982:202) describes the performance technique:

When playing, the rattle is held horizontally between thumb and index finger and is swung in a right/left movement, so to speak, whereby the left or right thumb alternates in tapping on the top of the body of the rattle at a certain point in the rhythmic cycle.

Visekese are used in many parts of East and Central Africa where they are known under a variety of names, for example in Mozambique where the name *chiquitsi* is used in southern provinces and *kaembe* in various districts of Tete. In Malawi they appear in areas where men's dances such as *mganda* and *malipenga* exist. In these areas they serve a function similar to the above named dances, as a replication of military marching sounds. The *visekese* dance is believed to have started shortly after the Second World War. The rhythms of the twenty or more *visekese* performing together, in simple-duple metre, is like the steady sound of military drums in a

¹ See Malamusi (1990) for a further discussion of text in the music of Chitenje Tambala.

marching band. No drums, however, are used in the *visekese* ensemble.

Dance traditions

TCHOPA

Tchopa, a Lomwe dance tradition of southern Malawi, is a circular dance performed during rituals to placate ancestral spirits. It was originally performed to invoke the spirits to assist with the start of the rains. It is generally danced between September and December when people gather for various reasons. Food and beer accompany the occasion.

During a performance of *tchopa*, men and women dance in brightly coloured costumes, men wearing special skirts made from raffia (*mlaza*) and animal skins (*zibiya*) tied around their waist, while small bells (*mangenjeza*) are tied to their ankles to enhance the sound of the stamping of the feet on the ground.

Musical instruments used in the dance include five small drums. The largest of these is buried half-way into the ground so as to produce a low, resonant pitch said to be essential to the dance. Apart from the drums that are played by non-dancers, several dance participants carry whistles which they use to rhythmically support the singing. Songs sung in *tchopa* performances normally depict events of socio-cultural importance. A popular composition, "Saulo", advises women not to accept a man named Saulo because he is unstable, often changing wives. During the performance, the dancers frequently carry weapons and farm tools such as bows and arrows, axes and farming hoes to exemplify some of the activities of the society.

MAZOMA

Mazoma, a dance of the Yao and Lomwe peoples of the Zomba District of southern Malawi, is mostly danced by men and only men play the five drums that make up the drum ensemble. The vocal accompaniment, however, consists of two lead singers, one man and one woman, and a choral response group of both men and women.

The introductory, a capella song that starts a *mazoma* session, a salute to the chief and other elders who are present, has a singing style similar to that of *lupanda* songs, sung at boys' initiation schools in this area. The name *mazoma* is the plural of *zoma*, i.e. dances connected with the instruction given to the initiates. The singing is performed by one man and one woman, frequently husband and wife. This style of singing is a very good example of the polyphonic, multi-part singing characteristic of this cluster of the people of East and Central Africa (see Kubik 1990).

The dance is performed at ceremonial occasions such as the installation of chiefs, religious rituals, at the end of the boys' initiation ceremonies and at libation ceremonies. It suggests competition among the dancers as it provides the opportunity for men to demonstrate their power and bravery by performing unique acts others would not dare to do. Today, the competition takes place between groups rather than among individuals in the same group. The dancing is done by three or four men dressed in raffia skirts with the leader wearing head gear of animal skins and feathers.

After the a capella introduction, the music continues with a singing duet, citing issues of common interest to the community. Drumming follows, after which the dancing begins. A chorus of men and women respond to the duet of lead singers. After the chorus starts, the dancers shake vigorously, leap into the air and perform various acrobatic stunts. These may include one dancer dancing on the abdomen of another lying on the ground, symbolizing that initiates have returned from their initiation school successfully.

When the mood has been well established, the lead dancer leaps into the circle shouting out commands and at times using his whistle to give instructions to the other dancers. The dancers obey the leader's whistle commands and his demonstrations of required dance movements. It is at this stage that the tempo changes, the dancers work themselves into a frenzy, and the singing stops. The drumming, whistle blowing and ululating increase and the dancers continue. The dance continues this way while spectators throw gifts of money to their favourite dancer.

BENI

Beni, a dance style performed in many areas of east and eastern-central Africa, has evolved with the return of military servicemen, imitating the parades they saw during their participation in fighting in both world wars. *Beni* is generally described as a syncretic dance mimicking the rigorous marching traditions of the colonial marching bands. It is believed by some that its name is derived from the English word 'band'.

In Malawi, especially in lake-shore areas of southern Lake Malawi, the dance is done by men and women moving together, women forming a line on one side of the dance area, next to the drummers, and the men dancing in a circle.

The instrumental ensemble consists of three single-head drums, *ngoma yekulungwa* (the big drum), *likuti* (the medium drum), and *chigogo* (the small drum), with drum heads nailed into the wooden body of the instrument, plus a 'metal', *chano*, sometimes a heavy metal part of a long-since out-of-use car, e.g. a useless part of a bumper.

The music usually starts with a vocal duet sung by two men, the leaders of the ensemble, followed by the singing of a chorus of men who sing phrases followed by a chorus of women who repeat the same text just sung. This happens repeatedly in *beni* songs. The songs are rich in figurative and imaginative language. Often a story, teaching a lesson, is told in the song. The three drums, metal gong and whistle played by the leader follow to complete the song.

The male dancers are dressed in khaki trousers and military tunics decorated with war medals. The dancers display impressive patterns of footwork while their arms and hands perform movements of symbolic significance.

Dances of Ngoni origin

MSINDO, NGOMA, INGOMA AND BUYENI

Msindo is a dance performed by older Ngoni women originally only at weddings of chiefs' sons and daughters. Now it is performed for a variety of celebrations.

There are no instruments used. The women clap hands and some hold a small shield in their left hand and a stick in their right. In unison, they hit their shields with the stick to keep a common rhythm. Moving backwards and forwards, the women form several circles in the dance arena.

While the *ingoma* dance of Mchinji and northern Ngoni areas in Malawi was a dance building up the spirit of men as they set off for fighting, *ngoma* of the Ngoni of Ntcheu District in the Central Region was danced as a welcome home dance for the victory of the strong men who returned from battle.

The movements of *ngoma*, and the musical sound that goes with the dance, is that of satisfaction, gratification that the fighting was well done. The dancers' movements are filled with pride as they stamp their feet firmly on the ground. The stamp of *ngoma* is different from the stamp of *ingoma* where fighting spirit, rather than pride is demonstrated. Women, as in *ingoma*, assist the men dancers by wiping the perspiration off their foreheads. As with *ingoma*, no drums are used in this Central Ngoni ensemble.

Ingoma came to Malawi in the middle of the 19th century with the Ngoni migration from Zululand in South Africa. Following the Zulu musical tradition, no drums are used by the Ngoni. Instead, shields, *chishango*, are slapped for percussive sounds, and women's hand clapping provide a strong rhythmic background. Two male singers serve as soloists with choral response coming from the group of men dancers.

Ingoma was formerly a circular dance performed in the cattle kraals of the compound. The strong, slow stamping of the feet on the soft mud and dung provided the emphatic sound of strength and power required to vitalize the men as they set off for fighting. The women's position in the music making process was to support the men by hand clapping, as mentioned, and wiping the brows of the men dancers as they built up energetic perspiration.

Buyeni is an Ngoni traditional dance performed by girls from Ntcheu District in the Central Region of the country. The dance is usually performed during the marriage ceremony of a chief's daughter, or the daughter of any prominent Ngoni man. During a wedding ceremony, the dance serves the function of claiming the chastity and virginity of the bride. There are no musical instruments used.

One popular *buyeni* song, "Kamwana Kamwini", expresses a wife's complaint that her husband wishes too frequent sexual attention and, therefore she wishes dawn would come quickly. This suggests to the girl being wed that she should leave her husband if he shows such behavior. Another, "Kaya wiyo", also refers to problems in the family and how the wife, because of an irresponsible husband, is just waiting for daybreak to go home.

The dancers line up in three or four rows. They dress in red skirts, white blouses and beads hang over their shoulders and across their chests. Long strips of coloured beads cover their faces. They hold small sticks in their right hands.

The bride, usually accompanied by a caretaker (*phungu*), wears *nthini* or *ndiwula* on her head; *nyongo* on the forehead, a red skirt, beads with white feather-like whisks on both wrists.

The bridegroom wears a skirt (*madumbo* or *zibiya*) made from strips of animal skin around his waist. Over this he wears *njobo*, a type of beadwork, on the front, rattles (*mangenjeza*) on both legs, and carries a shield (*chishango*) and a stick representing a spear or club in his right hand. He also wears a piece of cloth (*lamba*) over the shoulders and across the chest and white feather-like whisks on both elbows and knees.

During performances, the dancers are usually accompanied by four elders (two men and two women) who represent a consolidation of the significance of the event. The main function of the elders is to make sure customs and traditions regarding such marriages in the society are strictly adhered to.

Other song/dance types

MGANDA

Mganda, like two other song/dance forms found in Malawi, *malipenga* and *beni*, is greatly influenced by the colonial parade genre. It is mainly performed in Dowa, Kasungu, Nkhonkhotakota, Salima and Lilongwe districts, in the Central Region of the country.

Two drums, a large double-headed one, and one that is smaller and single-headed (*parekete*) form the instrumental ensemble. The dancers establish several lines facing the drummers. The best dancers are placed in the front line. They hold baton-type sticks and perform elaborate foot movements while the others often sing into gourds as kazoo-like aerophones to produce bass and tenor notes to enhance the sound of the drums. Such 'gourd trumpets' (*lipenga*, plur. *malipenga*) are used more in the very similar dance, *malipenga*, performed more frequently by people of lake-shore communities in Malawi. *Mganda* is a competitive dance having several teams of dancers competing during a performance, but with no obviously apparent winner at the end. It is also performed at public celebrations and at the installation of chiefs. Each *mganda* group has headquarters, known as their *boma*, where the dancers conduct their practices and compose new songs for the dance.

Mganda songs generally focus on relationships between men and women of the community. One popular *mganda* song, "Chidindo cha Jombo" (footprints of boots), tells of a jealous husband, suspicious of his wife, who demands to know the identity of the man who left footprints around his house. He believes this man is going about with his wife although she says the footprints were merely from a visitor searching for beer.

CHIMTALI

Chimtali of the Central Region is performed at weddings and other celebrations, the installation of chiefs, and frequently on political occasions. It is exclusively a women's dance that serves as a form of entertainment performed by girls in schools, and grown-up women of all ages. Songs accompanying *chimtali* are frequently directed toward a specific individual. One, for example, talks about a girl named Nasiwelo whose manfriend, the people of the community are warned, is a traitor to the State.

Three drums, played by men, are used to accompany the singing of the dancing women. The dancers form a circle around the drummers and dance by moving forward and back, swinging their bodies to the rhythms of the drums.

GULE WAMKULU

Gule wamkulu, the 'great dance', or 'big dance' is the term often used to refer to the secret society of the Chewa people of the Central Region of Malawi. The literature frequently refers to this secret society as *nyau*. Besides being a strong tradition of the Chewa, *gule wamkulu*, which is said to have come to Malawi from Zambia around 1800, is also performed by the Amang'anja people in Chikwawa and Mwanza Districts of the southern part of the country.

Gule wamkulu is a presentation of solo, duet, or a small group of masked dancers believed to be ancestral spirits who have come to join the function. Originally, *gule wamkulu* was only danced at funerals of chiefs and members of the secret society, *nyau*. Today, it has become a dance to entertain. It is performed at public functions of all sorts and in cultural presentations.

Gule wamkulu songs are introduced by the muffled singing of the masked dancers as they sing in their unintelligible language identifying the start of a dance. The music is performed by a female singing group plus a drum ensemble consisting of three drums, the largest, *gunda*, followed by *mbalule*, the master drum of the ensemble, and *tengundu*. The drums are either held between the legs of the drummer or leaned against an unused, spare drum that serves as a stand. When leaned in this manner, a helper assists by keeping the drums in position. Tuning paste, made from melted tyre rubber, is placed in the middle of the drum-heads to lower the pitch and offer an additional percussive tone quality. The master drummer and the dancers synchronise their rhythmic points of emphasis to make the dance performance rhythmically very strong.

Besides being the name of a dance type, '*gule wamkulu*' also refers to the society responsible for teaching the customs and mores of the people through initiation of boys, and to a lesser extent girls, into its membership. This society plays a significant role in Chewa political and social structures. Through *gule wamkulu*, the Chewa display consistently their ability to organize their society in a way that encompasses all aspects of social behaviour including religious and political activities of the people. Above all, *gule wamkulu* is connected with spirit worship and the

reincarnation of the spirits of the dead. *Gule wamkulu* performers are meant to placate spirits of the departed members of the *gule wamkulu* society.

During a performance, masked dancers take to the arena to act out different roles as required by *gule wamkulu* tradition. Animal characters, for example, by tradition, dance at funerals of senior members of the *gule wamkulu* society including funerals of chiefs and initiation instructors (*namkungwi*). In one popular *gule wamkulu* song, the living are complaining that the spirit who is dancing is a good and helpful elder who passed away a long time ago but who can not come back to help them any more.

This survey article on some music traditions of Malawi is meant to serve as but an introduction to the variety of music of this small but culturally diverse African country. The people of Malawi are proud of their musical heritage and pleased that the University of Malawi has established a music programme where Malawian students work to improve their ability to study and preserve the music traditions of the country. Articles on the music traditions of Malawi are presently being prepared by these students and will accompany the present survey soon.

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