

# **Migrant Chewa Identities and their Construction through *Gule Wamkulu/Nyau* Dances in Zimbabwe**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper focuses in the construction of the Chewa identity in Zimbabwe through the use of Gule Wamkulu or ‘nyau’ dances. The Chewa are an immigrant ethnic group from Malawi and are a matrilineal entity who distinctly use the Gule Wamkulu (‘big or great dance’) institution to initiate their members into an exalted status of adulthood as well as for entertainment or leisure purposes. The paper is anchored in the assertion that identities are either real, constructed or imagined from a plethora of variables. Thus, it basically argues that these dances are rich traditions that have gone a long way in the construction, reconstruction or imagination of the Chewa identity and in carving a niche for the migrants on the Zimbabwean landscape since the pre-colonial times to the present. The dances have acted as a distinct variable in identity articulation against other popular concepts like race, class, religion, linguistic as well as ethnic characteristics and stereotypes. In other words, the rites have over the years been the most conspicuous identity marker upon which the Chewa identity has been reconstructed or imagined. Despite such vitality and uniqueness, people in general; have tended to misrepresent these dances, which together with their xenophobic tendencies has in the process greatly distorted the image of the traditions and ultimately misconstrued and prejudiced the identity of Chewa people. Therefore, this paper attempts to uncover the dynamics involved in Gule Wamkulu traditions as well as show their role in the construction or imagination of the Chewa identity both amongst the Chewa themselves and the autochthonous groups in Zimbabwe.*

## Introduction

The Chewa people are part of the minority ethnic groups that constitute the Zimbabwean population today. As descendants from Malawi, they flocked into the then Southern Rhodesia as migrant labourers to work on European mines and farms from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. During this period they brought with them a cultural package embodying rich traditions and practices like the popular *Gule Wamkulu* dances amongst others. The *Gule Wamkulu* institution together with other unique ethnic characteristics like their *Chichewa* language became the axis upon which the Chewa identity would be constructed in their newly adopted home on the Zimbabwean frontier/landscape.

The Chewa perform *Gule Wamkulu* dances with an aim of transforming their members into an exalted status of adulthood as well as entertaining the audience. According to J. Davidson, ‘the dances and rites that are conducted among Chewa amongst others are done to signify a change of status in society as well as to preserve their identity’.<sup>1</sup> In this light, identity refers to the self image which members of any social group construct on the basis of identification and stereotyping both among the members and the outsiders. It is a sense of self hood and is not necessarily ethnic but can be based on gender, religion, profession, class, age, locality or political persuasion. Hence the identities can be real, constructed or imagined. The dances have thus, acted as a tag in differentiating the Chewa against other ethnic identities, in particular the dominant autochthonous Shona and Ndebele groups. Therefore, the dances have evolved through generations and have gone a long way in defining their identity and in carving a niche for this ethnic entity in Zimbabwe.

As an identity tag, the dances have evolved to the extent of surpassing other notable and major identity variables in African societies such as race, class, language and ethnicity. The dances have become the major symbol of ethnic identity used by the Chewa in viewing themselves as ‘*us*’ and the non-Chewa as ‘*others*’. According to Linden the Chewa are distinguished by an institution of remarkable resilience and vitality, the *nyau* societies, which served to unite the people in times of social stress and acted as powerful

curbs on the influence of foreign identities.<sup>2</sup> Despite the uniqueness of the rites, people in general have tended to misrepresent and mystify the traditions. In the process this has greatly distorted the image of the dances and ultimately misconstrued the Chewa identity in Zimbabwe. Moreover, it has led to the total mystification of *Gule Wamkulu* institutions, which has greatly affected the social standing of the Chewa both as a people and an identity. This mystic syndrome has been due to the closed nature of the *Gule Wamkulu* societies. Such secrecy is deliberate since it is meant to bring cohesion amongst the members and this has naturally invited the wrath of the general populace resulting in conflicts and prejudices that confuse their identities. Nonetheless, the Chewa people have continued to stick to their *Gule Wamkulu* traditions so as to preserve their identity in a country that has two dominant ethnic entities, that is, the Shona and the Ndebele people.

The study is conceptually situated within the constructivist school, which falls within the major debates on identity that has drawn various groups of scholars such as the primordialists, inventionists/constructivists, neo-primordialists and social constructivists. While this paper does not entangle itself into the general debates by these scholars, it however acknowledges that T.O. Ranger and E. Hobsbawm<sup>3</sup> as well as L. Vail and L. White<sup>4</sup> popularized the constructivist perspective, which focuses on how identities are invented in society through ethnic characteristics and stereotypes. Unlike the primordialists who perceive identities as innate or natural, Ranger initially argued that the colonial governments adopted the ethnic invention approach aimed at essentialising and stereotyping African ethnicities in pre-colonial times and the nature of African labour during colonial rule.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, he emphasized the aspect of ethnicity as the major characteristic that was used especially by colonial administrators to create particular identities among their subjects. After the criticism emanating from neo-primordialists, especially T. Spear<sup>6</sup>, Ranger revised his stance asserting that while some identities can be invented others can also be socially constructed or imagined.<sup>7</sup>

While this study agrees that most African identities, including the Chewa, are typical examples of constructed or imagined identities, it contrastingly argues that ethnicity was and is still not the only characteristic from which identities can be constructed,

reconstructed or imagined. Instead there are other important variables that can be used in this process. Hence, the study argues that in so far as the Chewa exist in Zimbabwe today, their cultural practices of *Gule Wamkulu* have been pivotal in the articulation of their identity, especially in those territories that this migrant group has settled as aliens, particularly in mines, farms as well as urban areas. Therefore, the Chewa identity in Zimbabwe has principally been re-constructed, not much from their ethnic or linguistic characteristics, but from their *Gule Wamkulu* traditions. So in this case *Gule Wamkulu* performances have replaced ethnicity, class, language and even physical attributes/somatic as a major variable from which the Chewa identity is being re-defined and re-constructed in the society. In other words the uniqueness and richness of the *Gule Wamkulu* traditions among the Chewa has taken precedence over other common variables of ethnic identity construction in Zimbabwe.

For instance, while the *ChiChewa* language has in the past been the major watermark in the general ethnicisation and identification of these Malawian descendants, it is doubtless that the popular dances have been an axis upon which their identity has been rotating since the nineteenth century to the present. In fact over the years, the Chewa language has lost its purity and originality as a result of the acculturation, assimilation as well as absorption of the Chewa people into the dominant Shona and Ndebele cultures. In this light, their language has therefore lost its influence as a variable in the general reconstruction and stereotyping of the Chewa identity. Moreover, it must be understood that in Zimbabwe, *not all Malawians are Chewa nor are all Chewa speakers Malawians*. Thus, many Malawian migrants do not belong to the Chewa ethnic genealogy, but they speak the general *ChiChewa* language in Zimbabwe and do not practice the *Gule Wamkulu* rites. Such groups include the Manganja, Yao, Nguru/Lomwe, Angoni and Tumbuka. In other words, the institution has also helped in distinguishing the real or actual Chewa from non-Chewa amongst the Malawian descendants themselves. Thus, *Gule Wamkulu* dances have overtime become the identity pointer used to identify and signify Chewaness in Zimbabwean societies. So, the Chewa in Zimbabwe today are identifiable not because they speak their *native* Chewa language since most indigenous Zimbabweans are now able to speak it. Instead, they can now only be easily identified or

known if they are associated with the *Gule Wamkulu* rites either as performers, singers, drummers or initiates. In other words the Chewa ethnic identity is now synonymous with *Gule Wamkulu* rites wherever they are conducted on the Zimbabwean landscape.

In terms of somatic characteristics like complexion, hair colour and physical appearance or stature, there is not much difference between the Chewa and indigenous Zimbabweans such that it is difficult, if not impossible to discern their ethnic identity by merely looking at their physical attributes. Because other than being neighbours both the Shona and Chewa among other ethnic groups in Southern Africa descended from the Bantu group of families. Moreover, most of these Chewa have been in Zimbabwe since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and produced a series of generations that have intermarried into the locals thereby assuming similar physical attributes as local Zimbabweans. In other words the *Gule Wamkulu* traditions are now the only conspicuous axis upon which the Chewa identity in Zimbabwe is rotating since other common variables such as language and physical attributes have all sunk into oblivion over time.

### **The Origins and Functions of *Gule Wamkulu***

The *Gule Wamkulu* tradition is synonymous with being Chewa. The dance, which is known in Zimbabwe as *Zvinyau*, has its origins in Malawi. Schoffeleers notes that *Gule Wamkulu* or the ‘big dance’ is a name for the masked dance and for the secret societies, which stage it.<sup>8</sup> According to Chabwera, ‘the owner of *Gule Wamkulu* tradition is the Chewa ethnic group which is a combination of several other groups like the Anyanja and Achipeta’ who are found in central Malawi in such districts as Lilongwe, Dowa, Salima, Ntchisi, Mchinji, Dedza and Kasungu.<sup>9</sup> The Native Commissioner of Lomagundi, E.G. Howman, reported that *nyau* dances were performed by *alien natives*, especially those from Nyasaland.<sup>10</sup> Such sentiments were also echoed by Sergeant H.M.G Jackson, the Chief Native Commissioner of Salisbury district in 1930, when he stated that ‘the Minister of Internal Affairs was informed that *Gule Wamkulu* dances are practiced in mines and farms and have been introduced from outside the colony by *native aliens*, from Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia.<sup>11</sup>

The *Gule Wamkulu* society is a multifaceted institution whose origins are highly mythical. The historical origins are traced back to the Chewa centre of origin during the Bantu migrations, that is, Lubaland. Apparently, *nyau* rites are said to have come firstly into Malawi and later into Zimbabwe with the Chewa or Maravi as part of their cultural package. In the same vein, one of the commonest myths asserts that *Gule Wamkulu* originated during a great famine and it came up as a means of survival as it allowed its members to dance and entertain people in return for food. Rangely details this by stating that the practice originated during a famine in Malawi when one starving man called *Kalanzi Phiri* invented the dance as a way of obtaining food from the village audiences and other interested individuals and dignitaries such as chiefs and headmen subsequently joined him.<sup>12</sup> It remains to be fathomed why rulers favoured participating in this dance. Apparently, it was partly out of genuine interest or due to their vision that they wanted to subsequently usurp control of the dance for political gains. Since the dignitaries did not desire to be exposed or be recognised as participants in what was perceived as a lazy method of getting alms from the starving masses, the dance developed into a masked dance. The usurpation theory goes hand in hand with another one that propounds that the institution was invented by poor people or commoners, but was later overtaken by the aristocracy who had become jealous of the commoners' success and thus demanded that the practice be subjected to them. This stance contends that the jealous of the chiefs and headmen led to a begrudging relationship between them and the commoners. So this portrays the founders of *Gule Wamkulu* as ordinary poor but respectable people; others speak of them as half-wits and marginal characters.

However, as for the Zimbabwean case it is without doubt that the practice came as a cultural package either during the Maravi invasions of the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> or later during the labour migration epoch of from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The tradition became a popular phenomenon within Southern Rhodesia's compound system in farms and mines primarily because of its entertainment value. While the colonial administrators generally condemned African dances on the pretext that they induced laziness and immorality amongst the subjects, some colonial officials such as the Native Commissioner of Sinoia

in 1930, G. Buard acknowledged *Gule Wamkulu* dances as a form of amusement and recreation.<sup>13</sup> Likewise the Superintendent of Natives of Salisbury district perceived *Gule Wamkulu* as part of the ‘organized drills’ that were conducted by Nyasaland *natives* especially on Saturdays and Sundays in mine and farm compounds. These drills included *Beni* dances and mock *Askari* military drills and all were done for entertainment.<sup>14</sup> Henceforth it was these dances that acted as the epitome variable for defining Chewa identity in every farm and mine settlement they resided.

Likewise, the functions of the institution are varied and intriguing. In essence the *Gule Wamkulu* tradition has been perceived as religious institution. It has been interpreted in some academic enclaves and also amongst the Chewa as a type of religious institution or basically a form of religion. Schoffeleers remonstrates that the Chewa have called it their ‘great prayer’ or their church; using the Swahili word ‘*kanisa*’ for this purpose.<sup>15</sup> L.C. Meredith, the Native Commissioner and Assistant Magistrate of Hartley now Chegutu, also echoed this by pointing out that ‘in some cases *nyau* dances are of religious significance to the *native aliens* especially through the invocation of departed spirits upon special occasions.<sup>16</sup> The religious cosmology of the *Gule Wamkulu* community consists of figurative symbols that act as the placenta to the ancestral world. For instance, their paraphernalia consist of figurines and figurative masks, which are believed to be the spirits of the dead.<sup>17</sup> Just like all traditionalists, the Chewa believe in the existence of a connection between the living and the dead such that they hold that the spirits of the dead exist in the present, overseeing all their activities in life. In the same vein the spirits also act as a medium between the Chewa people and their High God whom they allude to as ‘*Chauta or Mulungu*’. In this light, it can be argued that *Gule Wamkulu* performances and rites ensure a harmonious and symbiotic relationship between the Chewa and the appeased spirits and God. Hence, it was imperative for the Chewa to stick to the tradition because it had religious anecdotes which distinctly othered them from the rest.

### ***Gule Wamkulu* performances in Zimbabwean mines: The Case of Ayrshire Mine**

The *Gule Wamkulu* tradition is of much significance because it is the core feature of Chewa culture. Thus *Gule Wamkulu* defines Chewa identity and this institution has

continued to play the role of re-creating a sense of Chewaness in Zimbabwe in general and Ayrshire Mine in particular. The earliest evidence about the existence of *Gule Wamkulu* dances in the mines and farms of Chinhoyi was reported around the 1930s by the native commissioner of Sinoia, G. Buard. He remonstrated that these dances are held by Nyasaland *natives* in farm and mine compounds bordering Zvimba Reserve and in the eastern part of the Lomagundi territory.<sup>18</sup> The dances are the most central concept of the rites and have been at the centre of identity stereotypes and imagination by the general populace. The fact that dancers perform behind masks to hide their identities has greatly contributed in preserving the mystery as well as creating curiosity over the *Gule Wamkulu* tradition. Hence, non-members have tended to misrepresent the different types of *nyau* dancers that perform during an occasion. It must be realized that during performance, the dancers come in different forms, each with different roles and meaning.

In historical times, the first stage involved the appearance of the '*akapoli* or *kamwimwi*' dancers who ran around the village or compound to signal the start of the performance. Schoffeleers highlights that the '*akapoli* or *kamwimwi*' appeared practically naked and used various clays to coat their bodies and the behaviour of the *akapoli* seemed to be generally overtly sexually provocative.<sup>19</sup> The *kamwimwi* was a typical Chewa *nyau* dancer who opened the dancing ceremony and as he ran around the village he carried with him two whips or sjamboks meant for scaring away or beating villagers. Brazil Chiromo postulates that if one encounters the '*kamwimwi*' he/she is not supposed to run away or hide but has to kneel down with a bowed head beside the road and let the '*kamwimwi*' pass; failure to comply will result in a severe beating.<sup>20</sup> Added to this is the belief that if one flees he/she might fall and get injured and it is alleged that the resultant wound would not heal unless the '*Gule Wamkulu*' members offered the victim medication in return for conscription into the sect or pay a fine for freedom.<sup>21</sup> Apparently this appears to be an involuntary method of obtaining new members into the sect, however the action is meant to teach the populace to respect the *Gule Wamkulu* tradition since it was of much significance to the Chewa.



The second phase of the performance after the '*kamwimwi*' has finished his running routine, begins with people converging at the dancing arena which basically is an open space specifically meant for such occasions. The first *nyau* dancer to grace the arena is called '*Chisimoni or Makanje*' who is renowned for his tallness. Basically the '*makanje*' dancer enhances his height by attaching two long sticks to his legs that are then covered with an equivalently long pair of trousers.<sup>22</sup> Thus, some *makanje* performers can attain an awesome height of up to ten or more metres but at most they usually maintain a height of about four to five metres. Whenever this *nyau* dances, the audience always move away from the arena in fear of its accidental collapses. Although such accidents are rare and occasional they do really occur. In 2002, a *makanje* dancer by the name of Hardwell Phiri did fall whilst performing at Aryshire Mine's Marokotera beer hall in full view of the audience who quickly fled the scene in shock.<sup>23</sup> In response to the accident other members swiftly scooped their dancer and disappeared with him to their '*runde*' camp thereby marking the end of the performance. In pre-colonial times it was taboo and highly superstitious to witness the falling of this dancer. In Wemba's notions, 'such an unfortunate event symbolized fate in the *Gule Wamkulu* sect; hence it would symbolize the death of an important person in the society or misfortunes such as diseases or natural disasters like drought or floods'.<sup>24</sup>

When the *makanje* finishes performing, another dancer enters the fore and this is called the '*Chimombemombe*', which basically is an elongated structure with two or more people inside. In most cases it is a knitted regalia that resembles the shape or form of a snake, an elephant or any other intimidating creature. Since the '*chimombemombe*' tries to connect animal life with that of mankind it had a role of reenacting the symbiotic relationship between the animal world and humanity in Chewa society. Other performers that come after the exit of the '*chimombemombe*' also manifest aspects of role and meaning in *Gule Wamkulu* performances. For instance, another unique form called the '*Chazunda*' also performs and its mask is extremely light in complexion and handsome. According to Chaponda, 'in colonial times the '*chazunda*' was meant to sarcastically imitate cruel white colonial officials and their tyrannical activities hence, it symbolized the colonial period and its oppressive systems and was meant to remind the audiences of

this ordeal.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, another meaningful form of *nyau* that joins the process is called ‘*Mwana wamasiye*’, meaning ‘*he who has no parents or an orphan*’. Its way of dancing is passive to reveal a troubled soul with no one to look up to or take care of him. As noted by Brazil Chiromo, in ancient times this type of *Gule Wamkulu* usually performed at funerals where it would sleep on top of the coffin in mourning.<sup>26</sup> The funeral environment was an ideal context for the ‘*mwana wasiye*’ to fully show its artistry in a sombre mood.

In terms of gender there is another form of *Gule Wamkulu* that wears a feminine mask imitating the behaviour and gyrations of females in Chewa society. It is known as ‘*Maria or Dona*’<sup>27</sup> and like the ‘*mwana wamasiye*’ it usually performs at funerals. This dancer was simply a male member of the *nyau* sect who specializes in imitating and dancing like a woman so as to spice up and engender the male chauvinistic performance. As mentioned before, the *Gule Wamkulu* society represents a dual-gendered system that dichotomized the male and female spheres. Hence women are not allowed in the male *nyau* sect just as the females bar their male counterparts from the ‘*chisamba*’ initiation rites. The inclusion of the ‘*Maria*’ dancer is thus a superfluous gimmick to engender the *Gule Wamkulu* festival. In reality, women have always been marginalized and confined to singing, ululating and praising the men and this scenario reveals the typical patriarchal nature of the *Gule Wamkulu* society. Therefore, it can be observed that the Chewa *Gule Wamkulu* community in Zimbabwe has stuck to its unique dances in pursuit of preserving its culture and it is from such performances that the society has constructed or imagined the Chewa identity by interpreting the symbolic meanings of these dancers.

### ***Gule Wamkulu* and Ritual Environments**

*Gule Wamkulu* dancers always operate from their own unique ritual environments or bases in the forest. These sacred wildernesses or zones act as boundaries that define the Chewa ritual terrain and simultaneously symbolize the extent of their identity. Such shrines are known as the ‘*Runde*’ meaning shrines where the members converge to initiate new members and keep their sacred regalia and other *Gule Wamkulu*

paraphernalia.<sup>28</sup> Traditionally, these shrines were located at graveyards in order to preserve the mystery surrounding the practice. According to Wemba, ‘this idea was formulated by Chewa males who had usurped the cult from women who had previously been conducting the performances from the homestead.’<sup>29</sup> Apparently, the shift to the cemetery was meant to scare away their female counterparts and other non-Chewa from intruding into their business. Brazil Chiromo thus postulates that the *Gule Wamkulu* personnel operated from the graveyard because of the existence of an eerie environment that scared off intruders and it provided the ideal environmental context for the secret conduction of the initiation ceremonies as well as storing their regalia.<sup>30</sup> It can also be assumed that the move was also meant to transform the practice into a more serious and scary institution linked with the dead. So men began to operate from the cemetery and started making regalia resembling the dead and thus restricted women from dancing confining them to singing and praising the male dancers. Thus it is said that the *Gule Wamkulu* members do not beat up their women because they took over the cult from their female counterparts. In this case *Gule Wamkulu* represented a dual gender system, which demarcated the boundaries and stipulated occupations in relation to gender.

Nowadays, there has been an evolvement of the *Gule Wamkulu* ritual environments with a shift from the graveyard context in favour of simple secluded lodges or camps in the forest in the proximity of villages or people’s settlements. In order to scare away intruders and trespassers, minefields of herbs also protect these ‘*runde*’ camps. Red cloths are planted on visibly strategic locales in order to mark the ritual terrain and scare away non-members. Such a terrain definition by repulsive medicines, which also indicates defence consciousness, has been a recent phenomenon that arose due to the rise in wickedness by jealous or mischievous personalities. Certainly, with all these mechanisms the ‘*runde*’ camp creates the ideal context for a proper and complete initiation process and identity preservation.

### ***Gule Wamkulu* traditions in the doldrums: A tale of contestations**

In spite of these rich saliences, *Gule Wamkulu* traditions in Zimbabwe have of late been under siege from various quarters and this has indirectly affected the Chewa both as a people and as an ethnic identity. Since the late 1990s to the present, the rites have faced a plethora of challenges that are either direct or indirect products of xenophobia and modernity and such a scenario has had its own implications on the Chewa identity. The proliferation of western civilization has instigated a number of changes in most African customs and the *nyau* institutions are no exception. With the entrenchment of modernity in post independent Zimbabwe, *Gule Wamkulu* has rapidly lost its glamour and appeal to its major constituency, that is the Chewa youth, due to their acculturation into secularism or Christianity. Basically, modernization has indoctrinated the youth to shun joining *Gule Wamkulu* institutions such that renegades have emerged in large numbers. As a result *nyau* membership has lost its compulsive nature of enrolment. Hence the institution is no longer obligatory and to all intents and purposes it has become a voluntary association. Chaponda laments that *Gule Wamkulu* is no longer sacred because modernization has divided the Chewa youth who are in a dilemma of choosing between tradition and modernity.<sup>31</sup> However, since modernity has much to offer in terms of incentives, than tradition the youth have tended to opt for the former.

Consequently, the domineering effect of Christianity in contemporary Zimbabwe has proved to be a thorn in the flesh for the *Gule Wamkulu* practitioners. Certainly, Christianity as a religion together with its acculturative characteristics over indigenous converts has created an identity crisis for the Chewa people. The Christianisation crusade against the African societies that began with missionary activities at the dawn of colonization has produced much conflict and managed to acculturate many would be initiates simultaneously forcing them to forsake their traditional beliefs as well as their identity. Contemporary Christian churches have continued with their evangelization crusade preaching that such practices like *nyau* dances in the bush are practices that are anchored in heathenism thus they are demonic and pagan. Hence, society has tended to hate/dislike the traditions and anything that has to do with Chewa rituals thereby

promoting xenophobic tendencies. These protracted attacks have heavily distracted the continuity of *Gule Wamkulu* performances thereby instigating many changes in the process.

Similarly, the urbanization process has produced a boiling cauldron of conflict for the institution. *Gule Wamkulu* performances have always been popular among urban Zimbabweans in such suburbs as Mbare, Dzivarasekwa, Rugare and Epworth in Harare and farms as well as mines where significant populations of the Chewa are found. However, due to the expansion of urban areas, these urban zones have turned into volatile hubs of confrontations between the Chewa and the local communities. The *nyau* members have found themselves in conflict with local communities and councils, especially over space to construct their '*runde*' camps and bases. This has compelled the members to locate their shrines in open spaces in the proximity of roads or suburbs to the detriment of their sacred wilderness concept. Such desperate actions have in the process exposed the secrecy of the tradition to non-members thereby fuelling further conflicts within the community. Similarly, because of the intimidatory nature of *Gule Wamkulu*, its members have always invited the wrath of the general public, which results in xenophobic tendencies that prejudices the tradition's existence as well as confuse the Chewa identity. Hence, due to the public's inherent fear of *nyau* societies, people have ended up describing the Chewa by various derogatory or xenophobic names such as '*mabhurandaya, mabwidi or mabvakure*' implying people who came from afar or from beyond the horizon.

Another conspicuous change brought about by modernization to the *Gule Wamkulu* community is the nature and context in which the rites are being performed. These have greatly evolved to such an extent that the practice has lost its significance and meaning. Traditionally, *Gule Wamkulu* dances were staged at funeral ceremonies or rather the closing ceremonies of funeral and also at boys and girls initiation ceremonies. However, since the politicization of the *Gule Wamkulu* institution beginning with the reign of Kamuzu Banda in post-independent Malawi in pursuit of nationalizing the Chewa culture, the context has dramatically changed. Vail and White noted that the Chewa *nyau*

societies, and especially their dances, had long been despised by the educated as a symbol of Chewa backwardness in a modern world.<sup>32</sup> After the *nyau* societies demonstrated their loyalty to President Banda in the Cabinet Crisis by actively intimidating his enemies with physical threats, they became perhaps the heart of what is depicted as a national culture, even though they are the hallmark of Chewa culture only.<sup>33</sup> Nowadays, the few remaining *nyau* sects in Zimbabwe perform at national events and cultural festivals in stadiums, army barracks, farms and mines. This shift in contexts from scared ritual environments has eroded the religious element and without it *Gule Wamkulu* is rapidly fading together with the Chewa identity.

Similarly, the Zimbabwe government's recent look East policy has had a domino effect that has indirectly affected Chewa traditions. One can point to the plight of former migrant workers as a result of the 2000 land reform program whose ripple effects have led to the disruption of farming activities leading to the loss of employment by African workers, the majority of whom were immigrants from Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique. According to K.D. Manungo, 'the land redistribution programme unfolded the plight of former migrants in commercial farms by leaving them homeless and jobless as well'.<sup>34</sup> These farms together with mines had since the early twentieth century been the cradle of foreign African migrant labourers in which they had settled and maintained their unique cultural rites and *Gule Wamkulu* performances prior to the destabilizing effect of land reform. Hence, the demise of initiation institutions has to a large extent been instigated by the closure of farms and retrenchments in mines leading to the dispersal of the workers most of whom have trickled back to their mother countries. Some of the farms and mines in Mashonaland West, which had been hubs of *Gule Wamkulu* dances have been closed and these include Aryshire Stevenson and Dalkeith farms near Banket; as well as such mines as Muriel, Alaska and Mhangura. The closure of these places has therefore automatically meant the demise of the *Gule Wamkulu* dances. By so doing the demise has in the process denied the Chewa the only remaining platform or variable upon which their unique identity has been based in Zimbabwe.

## Conclusion

Therefore, it is doubtless that *the Gule Wamkulu* or *nyau* institution has been a central feature of Chewa identity in Zimbabwe. The paper revealed the richness of the tradition as well as underlining the fact that the dances have replaced other notable identity variables, particularly the *ChiChewa* language, in the construction or imagination of the Chewa identity. In essence, the tradition has evolved to become the pivotal axis upon which the Chewa have dichotomized and identified themselves as ‘*us*’ and other non-Chewa groups in Zimbabwe as ‘*them*’. The institution has also greatly contributed in carving a niche for this ethnic minority in a terrain that has been domineered by the hegemonies of the Shona and Ndebele together with the acculturative characteristics of modernity. The paper has explored the dances and shown that there are a plethora of subtle dynamics through which the institution has been used in the construction, reconstruction or imagination of the Chewa identity in Zimbabwe. Therefore, despite the modern challenges that are threatening the existence of the tradition, *Gule Wamkulu* institutions/rites shall always remain central features of the Chewa identity cosmology in Zimbabwe and elsewhere where the Chewa still practice the dances in Africa.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> J. Davidson, 1997, *Gender, Lineage & Ethnicity in Southern Africa*, Westview, Colorado, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> L. Vail & L. White, 1989, ‘Tribalism in the Political History of Malawi’, in L. Vail & L. White, (eds.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, London, James Currey, p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), 1983, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> L. Vail & L. White, (eds.), 1989, *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, London, James Currey,.

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- <sup>5</sup> T.O. Ranger, 'Missionaries. Migrants and the Manyika', in L. Vail & L. White, (eds.), The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa, London, James Currey, 1989. T.O., Ranger, The Invention of Tradition in Zimbabwe, Gweru, Mambo, 1988.
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- <sup>7</sup> T. O. Ranger, 1993, 'The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The case of Colonial Africa' in Ranger, T and Vaughan, M (eds.), Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth Century Africa, London, Macmillan, pp.79-80.
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- <sup>15</sup> J.M. Schoffeleers, 1976, 'The Nyau Societies: Our Present Understanding', in The Society of Malawi Journal, Vol. 29, 1, p. 59.
- <sup>16</sup> NAZ/ S1032, Native Commissioner and Assistant Magistrate, Hartley district, Correspondence General, 1906 – 1950



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<sup>17</sup> E. Chabwera, 'Instruction, Entertainment & Sexist Taboos: Culture & Development within Gule Wamkulu Secret Society in Malawi', p. 145.

<sup>18</sup> NAZ/ S235/392-393, Native Dances and Immorality, Native Commissioner Sinoia, G. Buard to Chief Native Commissioner Salisbury, Night Dances, 08 September 1930.

<sup>19</sup> J.M. Schoffeleers & I. Linden, 1972, 'The Resistance of Nyau Societies to Roman Catholic Mission in Colonial Malawi', in Ranger, T.O. & Kimambo, I.N., (eds.), The Historical Study of African Religion with special reference to East & Central Africa, London, Heinemann, p. 257.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Mr. Brazil Chiromo, 56 years, *Gule Wamkulu* member, Ayrshire Mine, Banket, 02 February 2006

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> I was part of the audience who witnessed this event and was equally flabbergasted like everyone else, thus I also fled the scene.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Mr. A. Wemba, 47 years, Leader of Ayrshire Mine *Gule Wamkulu* sect, Ayrshire Mine, Banket, 02 February 2006

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Mr. Naison Chaponda, 41 years, Deputy Leader of Ayrshire Mine *Gule Wamkulu* sect Ayrshire Mine, Banket, 05 February 2006

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Mr. Brazil Chiromo

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Mr. Brazil Chiromo Naison Chaponda and A. Wemba

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Mr. Naison Chaponda

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Mr. A. Wemba

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Mr. Brazil Chiromo

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Mr. Naison Chaponda

<sup>32</sup> L. Vail & L. White, (eds.), The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa, p. 182.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> K.D., Manungo, 2000, 'The Plight of Former Migrant Workers in Botswana', A Paper Presented at The Human Rights and Democracy Sarec Project Seminar, History Department, University of Zimbabwe, p. 2.

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### **Oral Interviews**

Interview with Mr. A. Wemba, 47 years, Leader of Ayrshire Mine *Gule Wamkulu* society, Ayrshire Mine, Banket, 02 February 2006

Interview with Mr. Brazil Chiromo, 56 years, *Gule Wamkulu* member, Ayrshire Mine, Banket, 02 February 2006

Interview with Mr. Naison Chaponda, 41 years, Deputy Leader of Ayrshire Mine *Gule Wamkulu* society, Ayrshire Mine, Banket, 05 February 2006

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