

Subverting Cosmic Connection in the *Gule Wamkulu* of Malawi

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Introduction

Malawi is commonly known as the “Warm Heart of Africa” and home of possibly the friendliest people on earth. Christianity has profoundly shaped Malawi since the time of David Livingstone. Operation World records the current percentage of Christianity at an astounding 80% (Operation World, n.d.). Multiple churches dot the landscape of most villages and fill the urban scene. Even the current president is an Assembly of God pastor. At a surface level, Malawi is a serene and predominately Christian nation.

However, within this ardent profession of Christianity and tranquility, there is an uneasy wrestling between the ancient ritual of Malawi’s largest tribe, the Chewa, and Christianity. This jostling is perhaps most acute for Chewa chiefs, who must blatantly choose between membership in the church or their traditional beliefs. The village calls successful men, who often grew up in Christian operated schools and churches, to serve as chief. The village expects the chief to maintain allegiance to his ancestral culture (Kaspin 1993, 51). The primary expectation centers around participation in what is called the *Gule Wamkulu*, or “big dance.” The *Gule Wamkulu* is the center of Chewa cultural identity and widely considered a *shibboleth* between full devotion to Christianity or culture (Van Bruegel 2001, 126).

The conflict pushes to the fore the perennial Malawian missiological question, “How should Christians interact with *Gule Wamkulu*?” Linden reports that Catholic missionaries opposed it from the beginning “because of the sexual content of the songs, the appearance of naked dancers in the presence of women, and because they had reason to believe that there were instances of adultery taking place after the performances” (Linden and Linden 1974, 119). Tension grew more pronounced when missionaries, especially Catholic, expected virtually all the village children to attend Christian schools. The *nyau*, special initiated Chewa who participate in the *Gule Wamkulu*, responded by vehemently urging the initiation of all Chewa young people and

refusing to send children to schools. They left the schools in mass, and some of the schools closed altogether (Schoffeleers 1976, 261). Consequently, the central and southern regions of Malawi, largely Chewa populated areas, have the highest rates of illiteracy even currently (Malawi Population and Housing Census Report 2018, 23).

Further conflict ensued when the *nyau*, often on the deathbed, agreed to Catholic baptism. This gave Catholics rites to perform the funeral, which is *the* focal point of the *Gule Wamkulu* (Schoffeleers and Linden, 1972, 267). Catholics and the Chewa fought over burial rites as both believed their funeral practices had significant implications for the future of the deceased spirit (Linden 1975, 37). The *nyau* pushed on the missionaries saying “We Chewa, cannot allow our customs to disappear. They are the legacy of our ancestors. We hold to them as sacred things” (Schoffeleers and Linden 1972, 267). Linden says of the situation, “Throughout Chewa country the *Nyau* became a major object of missionary attack, and simultaneously the *Nyau* developed as the main focus of cultural opposition” (Linden 1975, 33). He goes on to say, “To dance *Nyau* was to support traditional society and to show respect for the elders. It was to be Chewa” (Linden 1975, 33). Kaspin relates how missionary pressure led to the proliferation of *nyau* as the chiefs lowered the age of initiation to counteract missionary pressure to put children in school (Kaspin 1993, 37).

Christianity and the *Gule Wamkulu* are at odds with one another. Grant Maulidi, a Baptist pastor near the capital city of Lilongwe, says that in some cases the *nyau* will kidnap young men and take them to be initiated. Parents must either redeem them with an exorbitant payment or allow them to continue in the society. Many parents cannot afford the price and must leave their children in *nyau*, who at least sometimes do not allow their members to participate in Christian churches (Grant Maulidi, interview with author, 3 August 2022). Gabriel Machili, another Lilongwe area Baptist pastor, reiterates Maulidi’s story (Gabriel Machili, interview with author, 4 August 2022). Boys who enter the *nyau* often leave the church (Machili 2019, 5). Kaspin says there is a dualistic choice between *nyau* and Christianity. The latter is always identified with the outside, something foreign (Kaspin 1993, 50). The question of Christian interaction with the *Gule Wamkulu* is an old and central missiological question of contextualization.

Contextualization depends first on sound understanding of a practice (Hiebert 1985, loc 2277–2295). However, it is impossible to uncritically treat a cultural practice as a neutral object. The *Gule Wamkulu* is not an “it” that can be objectively and scientifically explicated. Every description is at once an interpretation. Thus, the honest description also blatantly declares its interpretive lens. This article is an etic attempt to interpret

aspects of the *Gule Wamkulu* through a Christian interpretive lens, which will allow contextualization to take place on surer footing. This effort is by no means provides a final answer, as contextualization should be inclusive of Christian emic perspectives and be more comprehensive than this presentation allows. Rather, this is a modest attempt by an outsider to theologically interpret one aspect of the *Gule Wamkulu*, its cosmic relational component, and provide tentative proposals for Christian engagement.

The thesis of this article is that the *Gule Wamkulu* among the Chewa people of Malawi attempts to maintain cosmic relationships in a truncated and misdirected form, and Christians must subversively fulfill its relational longings with the Christian gospel. In order to effectively substantiate this, the first step is to define the operative theology of religions in terms of idolatry and “magnetic points.” This makes explicit the interpretive grid for evaluation of the *Gule Wamkulu*. The next task is to describe the *Gule Wamkulu* in terms of its content and primary function, specifically delving into its cosmic significance. The final section will propose ways in which Christian missionary engagement may subversively fulfill the social and cosmic impulse of the *Gule Wamkulu*.

Theology of Religions

Quite boldly, Daniel Strange defines other religions as “*sovereignly directed, variegated and dynamic, collective human idolatrous responses to divine revelation behind which stand deceiving demonic forces*” (Strange 2014, 41). In *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock*, Strange argues convincingly that all non-Christian religions are idolatrous expressions of false faith. However, because of the *imago Dei* and what he calls “remnantal” revelation (Strange 2014, 120), they are not altogether false in every sense. Thus, all religions contain elements of perverted truth. It is these elements of perversion that comprise what Bavinck calls “points of contact” or better yet “points of attack” for evangelical engagement (Bavinck 1960, 140). Because Strange’s definition of other religions stems soundly from Scripture, it is the starting point for the interpretation of the *Gule Wamkulu* that follows.

Due to the *imago Dei* and “remnantal” revelation, one can speak of what Bavinck describes as five “magnetic points.” These are aspects of every worldview “that time and again irresistibly compel human religious thought” (Bolt, Bratt, and Visser 2013, 226). The first is “an experience of totality” (Bolt, Bratt, and Visser 2013, 151) or an “intuition concerning the totality,” what this article refers to as a cosmic connection (Bolt, Bratt,

and Visser 2013, 162). This concerns relationship with the surrounding world (Strange 2014, 251). The second is “the notion of the norm,” the fact that one “has to consider the norm by which his thoughts will be judged” (Bolt, Bratt, and Visser 2013, 163). It is how every culture/religion provides a governing structure for society. The third is a connection with the divine. Bavinck says, “Human history shows that awareness of a connection with a higher power has been present everywhere and among all peoples” (Bolt, Bratt, and Visser 2013, 182). The fourth is concerned with salvation. Again, Bavinck says, “One of the very real constituents of universal religious consciousness is the need for deliverance” (Bolt, Bratt, and Visser 2013, 183). Lastly, the final magnetic point relates to fate. Bavinck says that “human life is only thinkable as a continuous dialogue between action and fate” (Bolt, Bratt, and Visser 2013, 192). Every religion attempts to work out that tension.

Every one of these magnetic points identifies an area of connection and engagement for Christian witness. Every religion somehow “gropes” (Acts 17:27) for God in these aspects precisely because of the *imago Dei* and “remnantal” revelation. Yet, Satan actively deceives within every non-Christian religion and tries to answer their compulsions with a false faith. Therein is where Christianity must “subversively fulfill” each religious answer. Strange pulls from Hendrik Kraemer’s singular mention of the term and utilizes it as an interpretive grid for Christian engagement of the religious other. Christ does not simply fulfill other religions because many of their concepts and desires are misguided. Thus, Strange claims that “even the most contextualized communication of the gospel must issue in an appeal and a call for repentance: a turning from idols to the living and true God” (Strange 2014, 268). Christ subverts other religions by fulfilling their deepest desires in unexpected and unintended ways. The remainder of this article is an interpretation of the *Gule Wamkulu* with the presupposition that it is a false faith, an idolatrous expression, that nevertheless has a connection with truth which must be subversively fulfilled in Christ.

Interpretation of *Gule Wamkulu* in Malawi

General Description

The *Gule Wamkulu* is the “great dance” of the *nyau* society of specially initiated Chewa persons. Schoffeleers offers an apt description of the *nyau* which is worth quoting at length to provide a basis for further discussion:

Nyau is the name for a masked dance and for the societies which stage this dance. Traditionally, *nyau* dances are staged at funeral ceremonies, or

rather the closing ceremonies which take place from a few months to a year or so after the funeral, and at initiation ceremonies. Nowadays, they are also performed at national celebrations and cultural demonstrations. A full-scale *nyau* performance lasts several days and is synchronized with the final stages of beer-brewing. There are quite definite rules about when a certain mask should or should not perform; what kind of movements are appropriate for each type of mask, and what songs have to accompany its dance. There are dancers wearing human masks, all of which are male except one known by the name of Maria or Dona. Others wear masks representing animal faces, or a combination of human and animal features. The *nyau* also make large structures of wickerwork and maize leaves or other materials, representing an elephant, a large antelope, an ostrich or a zebu cow. More recently again there have been imitations of motor cars, lake steamers and other modern inventions. All these representations show enormous ingenuity and a great sense of humour. Most of the *nyau* dances take place in the slack period between harvest and hoeing for the next season, which is also the appointed time for initiations and a number of other rituals (Schofeleers 1976, 59).

This brief but succinct portrayal provides enough of a starting point to launch interpretive work. Due to the limited space of this article, the examination is limited to how the *Gule Wamkulu* establishes cosmic relationships in Chewa society. However, the other magnetic points provide significant clues to the cohesive Chewa worldview and opportunities for Christian engagement.

***Gule Wamkulu* and the Cosmos**

It would be impossible to rightly understand the power of the *Gule Wamkulu* without seeing how the dance ties the Chewa community to each other and the outside world. Kaspin acutely says the *nyau* societies “constitute a major part of social experience, drawing an extended community together on numerous occasions to create the largest arena of sociality that rural Chewa know” (Kaspin 1993, 39). In order to demonstrate this, what follows is a selected interpretation of the masks, elements of the dance, and an explanation of its social significance.

The Masks

The masks are the most visible and obvious aspect of the otherwise secretive *nyau*. However, fully describing them is difficult because there are a plethora of masks and a

seemingly corresponding multitude of interpretations. They appear under three broad categories of animal masks, human masks, and modern technological masks. Researchers also divide the masks into nocturnal and diurnal categories, the animals related to the former and personalized masks the latter (Schlofeleers and Linden 1972, 258; Kaspin 1993, 41). De Aguilar says that some of the masks originated merely as imitation of animals. It was later that a group of Chewa, the political Phiri group, utilized the masks as representative of deceased spirits. Then a later group of masks immersed as representations of human characters, like slave traders from Portugal, Catholic women, and English colonizing officers (de Aguilar 1994, 8–10).

In 1950, W. H. J. Rangeley set out to describe the various masks. Space prevents a full articulation of his findings. However, a full reading of his article along with Van Bruegal's updated description is most helpful in this regard (Rangeley 1950, 19–33). What follows is a description of some of the more common and significant masks according to the categories of animal, human, and technology. Technological masks are only mentioned in brief and within the human masks because of their rarity and small number.

Animal Masks

It is perhaps telling of the origins and central focus of the *Gule Wamkulu* that all masks are called *zilombo* (wild beasts). The *njovu*, “elephant,” is the most revered of the masks. Despite the multiple explanations of each mask found in the literature and the ambivalence of interviewees, this is perhaps the one point of agreement. It must have its own *dambwe* (staging place) and always dances on the last day (Rangeley 1950, 19). The *njovu* is king of the masks. Van Bruegal says it only comes at the death of a chief (Bruegel 2001, 157). Although, Linden says it also appears at the girls' initiation (Linden 1975, 32). During funerals, the large costume is carried into the local chief's house until the mourners move the body to the graveyard. While the funeral procession moves at a typical solemn pace, the *njovu* mask runs to the gravesite (Agness Kachala, interview with author, 4 August 2022). One *Gule Wamkulu* participant said that attendance at the dance of the *njovu* requires a special initiation. To be initiated, he claims, means that one had to kill a family member and sleep with his sister. If a non-initiate should attend the dance, they would die. Even if the *njovu* inadvertently steps on someone in the path, the person would die. If *njovu* brushes against a woman, she would become barren. The interviewee attributes this to the magic of the dancers, not the mask itself (Agness Kachala, interview with author, 4 August 2022).

There are multiple other animal masks, including a rabbit, antelope, baboon, bush pig, python, black mamba, lion, and jackal. The masked dancers imitate the animals both in appearance and behavior. Schoffeleers says that the *nyau* is typical of other similar societies, where “contact with the gods is not sought through mediating agents such [sic] sacrifice and prayer but by the reenactments of some primeval event in which the gods were involved” (Schoffeleers 1976, 63). He approvingly quotes Edouard Foa and says the dance is “a ballet portraying the temporary reconciliation between men and animals and their subsequent separation” and “touches on a central theme in Chewa and indeed Bantu theology, viz. that of the relationship between man and animal, or in a somewhat wider perspective, the relationship between man and his natural environment” (Schoffeleers 1976, 63). Thus, the animal dances demonstrate at least temporary reconciliation with the animal world.



Figure 1: *Ng'ombe* (cow) mask

However, Breugal observes that the animal mask are all fearsome animals that can kill people. They “represent powerful spirits” and some of them “the *mizimu* [spirits] of honoured elders” (Breugal 2001, 157). He sees a much more direct connection between the animals and spirits. However, interviewees may tell outsiders they have no special significance other than to entertain people (Amati, interview with author, 5 August 2022). This is possibly due to Christianization and modernization. However, it is hard to believe that within the Chewa worldview there are not at least some who see a deeper spiritual significance. This is an area that needs further exploration. Yet, it is safe to conclude that the animal masks represent connection with at least the animal world and likely, in many cases, the spirit world.

Human Masks

There are a large number and variety of human masks. Even the *njovu*, who otherwise dances alone, often performs with up to six human masks who portray hunters pursuing the *njovu*. A special human mask called *makanja* dances on stilts up to eight feet long (Rangeley 1950, 25). The dance is dangerous to perform but exemplifies Chewa dancing skill and creativity.



Figure 2: Makanja mask



Figure 3: Human mask



Figure 4: Other human masks

De Aguilar also makes a convincing argument that the *makanja* mask is a representation of Kenyan people, the tall and lanky warrior types (de Aguilar 1994, 46). Breugal sees the mask as “the spirit of a deceased *mfiti* [witch] who after his death continues to perpetuate evil deeds” (Breugal 2001, 162). Once again, it is difficult to know if the correct interpretation is spiritual or anthropocentric, or a combination.

Other dancers explicitly imitate the spirits of the dead. Kadyankadzi portrays a fierce and troublesome human. The name means “he who eats *nkadzi* trees,” which are typically found at the graveyard. This dancer is especially known to chase people in the village throughout the day (Rangeley 1950, 27–28). Breugal sees this mask also as a portrayal of evil spirits “who had no heart for their fellowmen and who themselves have no peace” (Breugal 2001, 164). Clearly, at least some of the masks directly connect to the spirit realm.

De Aguilar traces developments in mask making alongside historical developments. For example, there are depictions of Arab slave traders in some *Gule Wamkulu* groups (de Aguilar 1994, 38). There is also the *Chilembwe* mask, which derives from the historical figure and national hero John Chilembwe. He was a Malawian who led an uprising against British plantation owners. In response, the British sent soldiers who attacked and killed Chilembwe and his followers. The mask, ironically, is a horse, likely portraying the British pursuers (de Aguilar 1994, 44). Though it seems in many contexts the mask has lost its connection with Chilembwe and taken on new interpretations (de Aguilar 1994, 45). Breugal groups the mask among the animal dancers and says he is an angry spirit (Breugal 2001, 159). Another mask is Mr. Davis, a historical figure who reportedly recruited young Malawian men to work in South Africa. One also finds other historical figures like King George V, Charlie Chaplin, Elvis, and even modern inventions like cars, helicopters, and buses (de Aguilar 1994, 47–9). Simon Peter, Joseph, and Mary make an appearance in *Gule*, obviously a development related to the arrival of Christianity (Rangeley 1950, 28–30). *Gule* participants likely variously interpret the masks, but they surely indicate a fluid connection with the developing world around them.

Interpretation of Masks

Probst proffers that the meaning of the masks is best understood using the Chewa term *fano*. *Fano* is not an exact replica but “in the sense of being a product of imagination” or “an inner image” or “affective likeness and resemblance not one of visual identity” (Probst 2002, 195). This object behind the *fano* may be a spirit or even other objects such as foreign colonizers, movie actors, or vehicles. Thus, the “meaning of the *nyau* masks

is always polyvalent” (Probst 2002, 196). Because of their flexibility, “*nyau* actively adjusts and adapts elements outside the village sphere and transforms them into the something belonging to *nyau*” (Probst 2002, 196).

Kaspin sees the masks and accompanying dance as “appropriation” of the spirits of the dead. The village eats meat and dances with animals from outside the village, while the village gives their dead to the spirits (Kaspin 1993, 42). Ranger also sees a spiritual value, as “definitely connected with spirit worship and reincarnation of the dead” (Rangeley 1949, 36). It seems best to say the masks themselves offer a connection between the living and the dead, between animals and man, and between Chewa and the surrounding changing world.

The Dance

The *nyau* dance at funerals of significant persons or of deceased members, at a memorial service called a *chiliza*, or at the special request of the chief. Alternatively, they can take place as long as someone agrees to pay for it. Breugal says that the *Gule Wamkulu*, happens most often at the *chiliza*. Several villages may band together at one time for a memorial service (Breugal 2001, 141). Based on the author’s experience, they may also do a *chiliza* service for many deceased at the same time. These take place most often between harvest season and the planting season, from August to November (Bruegal 2001, 141).

The *chiliza* begins with women leading a procession with shakers, which are “eyes” for the *nyau* (Gabriel Machili, interview with author, 4 August 2022). Various masked *nyau* roam the village harassing people, even those participating in the memorial. The actual performance of the dance, which takes place the night of the *chiliza* service, is a dizzying array of polyphonic rhythms, intricate dancing, and audience participation. Machili reports that every dance is accompanied by six drums, each with an animal skin playing surface and a specific size. The drummers warm them by a fire before a performance (Machili 2019, 16). Women singers stand next to the drummers, providing a sort of background choir for the dance.



Figure 5: Women choir and drums



Figure 6: *Chiliza* memorial procession. Note the nyau dancer in the fluorescent vest.



Figure 7: *Chiliza* procession



Figure 8: *Chiliza* procession led by chiefs' wives and nyau dancer



Figure 9: Chiefs' wives placing flower arrangement on graves

At the dance this author attended, the dancers solicited money as they danced. Each mask took his turn in the *bwalo* (dancing field) and each with a particular style suitable to the mask they wore. Much like at a Chewa wedding, the participants expect the more well-to-do attendees to give the performers money. Usually, the givers use small denominations so that the giving takes more time. However, it is significant to note that the performance the author attended was specially arranged for non-initiated persons and solely for entertainment. This was just prior to a *chiliza*.

Schoffeleers and Linden report:

In the course of the performance women are subjected to insults, obscenities, and vituperative male behaviour. In the Chewa *nyau* the initiate is required to run through the village of the matrilineage into which he has married to steal chickens from his mother-in-law. This pronounced sexual antagonism plays an important role in the resolution of social conflict within the traditional matrilineal society of the Chewa people (Schoffeleers and Linden 1972, 258).

Dancers freely approach audience members totally free of the respectful humble interactions common to society otherwise. It is a communal event, where, apart from special permission from the chief, only the initiated participate.

Sociological Significance

The *nyau* carries significant sociological weight. One of the chief reasons the *nyau* is so significant is because the Chewa is a matrilineal tribe. A married man is termed a *mkamwini*, or “one who belongs somewhere else” (Kachapira 2006, 327). So, though the village chief is the owner of the *nyau*, it was nevertheless composed of marginalized men who found solidarity with other marginalized men (Kachapira 2006, 328). Schoffeleers and Linden say that the “*Nyau* cult has been of great religious and social significance to the Chewa-speaking peoples of Malawi.... Its function in the small Chewa village societies was to reconcile conflicting loyalties and provide alternate pathways to status within the framework of traditional values” (Schoffeleer and Linden 1972, 271). It is also a “social safety valve, venting tensions that may build within a closed community reliant on consensual decision making” (Curran 1999, 68). It is crucial in maintaining the sociological structure.

The *nyau* sit in a slightly paradoxical relationship with the village chief. In one sense he is the owner of the *nyau* in his village. According to Kaspin, the village chieftaincy and the ownership of the *nyau* is virtually synonymous (Kaspin 1993, 36). But in another sense, he is unable to prosecute crime by *nyau*. Schoffeleers and Linden quote one chief as saying, “You cannot arrest and punish an animal which has hurt you because what he did was pure accident. There is no case because there is no accused” (Schoffeleers and Linden 1972, 258). Thus, they conclude, “Thus the *Nyau* member finds in the society a world in which all the normal rules of behavior are reversed, a relative autonomy, financial benefits and an alternative structure in which to rise in social status” (Schoffeleers and Linden 1972, 258).

Each ceremony of the *nyau* reinforces social construction. They occasion the separation of men and women into their ceremonial roles. During funerals, men prepare the grave and the dances while women prepare food and grieve the dead. At the same time, the village takes advantage of the time to initiate new girls and boys. Each group receives and participates in their “secret knowledge,” their particular *mwambo* (Kaspin 1993, 40).

The central connective level for the *nyau* is at the local village and within the matrilineage, rather than tribe-wide (Linden 1975, 32). It is a counterforce to centralized governance, indigenous or foreign (Linden 1975, 38). It has served in the role whether against Chewa families who wanted to centralize power, Ngoni conquerors, British colonizers, or Christian missionaries (Linden and Linden 1974, 117).

Yet, it is also significant that *Gule Wamkulu* dances seem to almost always involve neighboring villages (de Aguilar 1996, 11). It focuses on the local village, yet connects Chewa across a particular area.

Summary of Cosmic Function

To summarize the meaning of *Gule Wamkulu* in its cosmic role, it serves as a representation of at least temporary reconciliation between humanity and the animal world, connectivity and appeasement of the spirit world, and a means of maintaining strained social relationships. Schoffeleers and Linden say, “In cosmic terms they may be interpreted as a re-enactment of the primal co-existence of the three categories of men, animals, and spirits in friendship, and their subsequent division by fire” (Schoffeleers and Linden 1972, 257). The masks, the dance, and its social arrangement give the Chewa a way to relate to their place in the world. Or, as Kaspin puts it, “[T]he dance always contains at least two levels of meaning. It points to the “symbiotic” relationship between “the human world and an external world” and “inscribes” that relationship on Chewa society and human relationships (Kaspin 1993, 44). Curran also claims that the dance represents a reconciliation of the spirits and the living within village (Curran 1999, 68). Yet, this is no theologically neutral function or performance. Thus, the remainder of this section is a theological interpretation of the cosmic role of the *Gule Wamkulu*.

Theological Interpretation of Cosmic Role

First, even if the animal masks *only* function to portray restoration between animal and man, the reconciliation is a façade. Malawians live in avid fear of snakes, dogs, chameleons, among other animals. A dance cannot truly restore peace between man and animal. The world needs a greater reconciliation, one where “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb” (Isa 11:6). The *Gule Wamkulu* pushes restoration into the present and only by symbol, with no hope of real and future reconciliation.

Secondly, if it is true, as seems to likely often be the case, that the masked dancers represent a connection with the spirits of the dead and a means of appeasement, the dance pulls the future hope of reconciliation into the present and twists it from hope to fear. The Bible does not speak of the spirits of the deceased interfering with the lives of the living. Non-physical beings do truly exist, both angelic and demonic. However, the souls of the deceased are either with Christ or separated from him in judgement and do not come to either harass or help the living. Scripture does not call people to please the spirits but to please God. Demons could likely pose as spirits of the deceased to attract

attention to themselves and steal true worship. The effort to please the spirits through the *Gule Wamkulu* is an idolatrous focus on demons posing as spirits of the deceased.

Third, the *Gule Wamkulu* provides a way for the disgruntled and underprivileged and outcasts to participate in community and offer their complaint. While this is a commendable attempt to maintain community, it attempts to do so in ways that will never finally achieve unity. Scripture plainly teaches that God is bringing the world together in Christ (Eph 2:14). Apart from Christ there can never be true unity. Rather than persons finding peace because of honest confession of sin and loving rebuke, the Chewa attempt restoration through special occasions of open protocol breaking and sanctioned inappropriateness. It achieves only a veneer unity through underhanded means.

Subversive Fulfillment as Missional Application

Having interpreted the *Gule Wamkulu* through the magnetic point of cosmic connection, it is time to propose ways in which Christian witness might engage it as it truly is. The first set of proposals deal with evangelical engagement and the second with contextualized discipleship. The first point for Christian connection to the Chewa is love for story, song, dance, and drama as communicative media. At first glance, it seems as if one could almost reproduce a *Gule Wamkulu* dance that illustrates the gospel story. However, local Christians have repeatedly stressed that doing so would be confusing to Chewa people. A local church planter says that the *Gule Wamkulu* and Christianity are two separate things that cannot be brought together. This is because beneath the mask, there are always levels of “medicine” and magic. The Chewa are not able to separate the two (John Masale, interview with author, 19 August 2022). However, drama, song, and dance make wonderfully culturally appropriate modes of communication. Machili, a pastor in a *Gule Wamkulu* area, proposes the use of the same drums, same tunes, and some of the same ceremonies. He says these are powerful attractions for the Chewa (Gabriel Machili, interview with author, 4 August 2022). Wise missionary engagement will utilize this aspect.

Secondly, the first point of attack toward worldview content is to stress that cosmic connection is found only in Christ. The Chewa rightly long for cosmic reconciliation but wrongly seek it through symbolic reenactment and wrongly aim it toward spirits of dead ancestors. Christ is redeeming the world and reconciling every part of it, similar to the longings of the Chewa. The animal world, spirit world, and human world is the object of

Christ's redemption. Yet, evangelists must preach that the division comes from man's sin. Only Christ has removed the barrier and the curse. The Chewa must turn from trusting their tradition, the dance, the mask, or a secret society for reconciliation. Christ's coming has initiated the great reconciliation, and only faith in him brings one into the community of the reconciled.

Thirdly, in light of the longing for communal connection demonstrated in the *Gule Wamkulu*, evangelists do well to emphasize the African historic roots of Christianity. Kwame Bediako articulated his concern that Christianity may strip the African of their identity. However, there is a way in which to become Christian is to become truly African (Hartman 2022, 10). To embrace Christianity is not to embrace a Western religion, but one that has deep historic and global roots. Evangelists do well to stress the African connections to the Christian story. Even though African Christians lose part of their local community in coming to Christ, they gain a great historic global community. Christians must emphasize and the Chewa must embrace the broader and more historic community.

Fourthly, Christians should evangelize the chiefs rather than merely condemn them. The chiefs feel the weight of responsibility to please their community, a cherished value especially outside of the West. Many of them want to also hold allegiance to Christ while serving their traditional communities. Evangelists should use dialogue to help the chiefs see where *Gule Wamkulu* practices contradict Scripture and require repentance, yet also affirm the positive values of the *Gule*, such as value of community and participation in God's wider creation. They are open to conversation and could be key to engagement of the wider Chewa community. This is not to say that the chiefs should hold onto the *Gule Wamkulu* as it is, but to say Christians should engage them in relationship like Jesus with the tax collectors, rather than in Pharisaical censure.

Lastly, evangelic witness and Christian maturation requires expansion of the Chewa timeline into the future. The preoccupation with the present virtually erodes the concept of future tense salvation so central to gospel proclamation. Moltmann rightly noted the significance of the future saying, "A proper theology would therefore have to be constructed in the light of its future goal. Eschatology should not be its end, but its beginning" (Moltmann 1967, 16). Eschatology is not an appendix to theology but "is the medium of faith as such, the key in which everything is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day" (Moltmann 1967, 16). Without this locus, Christian witness is all too susceptible to the deception of the prosperity gospel and over-realized eschatology. Christian evangelism and discipleship must incorporate

inaugurated eschatology, filling out the future tense concept, which is a possible, but often ignored, aspect of Chewa thought (Schilt 2021).

This is significant for evangelism as salvation from future judgement is a core component of gospel understanding. Apart from the concept of future judgement, salvation is always merely concerned with this world and misses the large-scale salvation from eternal damnation. Kaspin encapsulates the struggle when he says *nyau* concepts of “reincarnation on earth,” of the “return of the spirit of the dead to the land of the living” always misconstrue the passion and resurrection of Christ (Kaspin 1993, 53). Salvation is pressed into the present and earthly. Addressing this issue calls for evangelism that recognizes and addresses the present challenges of Malawian life, while still concerning itself with the urgent need of rescue from the day of wrath.

The concept of time is also significant for discipleship. Believers only concerned with the present will have a truncated motivation for evangelism and tend toward works-based Christianity. Everything is based on quid-pro-quo. The motivation of present sacrifice for future reward is cut off. This bleeds into issues of financial stewardship, family discipleship, missiological strategy, leadership development, among many other topics. There is a great need to teach Chewa Christians inaugurated eschatology and the many implications for the Christian life. Delving into all that entails is beyond the scope of the article, but it is surely a significant touch point for contextualization.

As a reorientation of time makes the first component of discipling the Chewa conception of the cosmos, the second involves reshaping the way social tensions are worked out. The *nyau* structure provides a passive-aggressive way of only releasing social tensions. Rather than addressing offenses directly, participants retreat to their own private group where they may protest mistreatment in concealment. Even dissension within gender specific groups is handled via manipulation and witchcraft. The Christian gospel calls for more open discussion of issues, mutual forgiveness, and restoration (Matt 18:15–35). Believers maintain unity according to biblical instruction, in confession and forgiveness.

Conclusion

The *Gule Wamkulu* among the Chewa people of Malawi maintain cosmic relationships in a truncated and misdirected form that must be subversively fulfilled by the Christian gospel. In terms of cosmic connection, the *Gule Wamkulu* rightly recognizes the need for

community and reconciliation of all realms but attempts to do so through inadequate means and for misguided purposes. As such, it is a false faith from which adherents must repent. Repentance does not entail leaving dance, song, drama, perhaps costumes, or even communal values, but it does mean fixing hope of reconciliation ultimately on Christ and his future complete restorative work. Only when the Chewa see this can they know true community as everything brought together in Christ (Col 1:19–20).

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