

NYAU MASQUERADE PERFORMANCE: SHIFTING THE IMPERIAL GAZE

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ABSTRACT

Nyau Masquerades have been studied by missionaries, anthropologists and religious specialists, but have seldom been documented by theatre and performance specialists. This dissertation argues for the acceptance of Nyau performance as a contemporary world theatre form rooted in tradition. Charting the uneasy relationship between the Nyau and those who have sought to record their performances, the author delineates a vivid dramaturgy of this art form. In doing so, the boundaries of what define theatre as it has traditionally been understood in dominant discourses are made more fluid. Nyau performances have been affected by Colonial processes in varied ways. They were banned by the former government of Northern Rhodesia and severely censored by Catholic Mission teachings in the former Nyasaland. Other forms of vilification have been more subtle. Information about performance in Africa has often been collected and arranged in ways which limit the understanding of these genres. Images of Africa which cluster around the notion of the 'Primitive Other' have enabled a representation of Nyau masking as a superstitious and outdated practice with no relevance for contemporary Africa. This work calls for a new examination of the Nyau, through the lens of local discourse as well as contemporary global understandings of performance.

Chapter One examines the issue of primitivism and the ways in which Africa has historically been posited as the exotic Other to Europe. Chapter Two examines the Nyau in terms of specific dramaturgical elements, adjusting previous misconceptions surrounding the theatre forms of Chewa and Nyanja people. Chapter Three is devoted to a discussion of space in ritual theatre and Nyau performance, while Chapter Four explores masking and questions of transformation and liminality. In conclusion, it is seen that the use of the mask is a metaphor for the suspension of rigid boundaries separating subject/object, self/other, ritual/theatre, a suspension which needs to take place before an enriched understanding of performance in Africa can be reached

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This work is dedicated to Everina Njovu.

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It is announced that the United States of Africa have built a reservation for ethnologists in the heart of Africa, where they are protected and maintained in ideal ecological survival conditions and fed at set times of day as is the custom in their countries of origin. The reservation is off-limits to Africans, whether their intentions be philanthropic, scientific or cannibalistic, for fear of damaging the natural equilibrium of the tribe or endangering its chances of breeding, though matters in this regard are already very precarious. The African states assure us that all possible measures will be taken to save this disappearing race: the crucial thing is that it should be completely isolated from the outside world. The first experiment along these lines had already been attempted years ago by the people of Chad, whom the French government had paid a great deal to carry on holding a certain Mme Claustre, an anthropologist, and whom they had thereby saved from the clutches of the Whites who wished to turn her over to scientific prostitution. This almost accidental event soon resulted in all the West's anthropologists rushing off to African reservations, where they could at last devote themselves to the observation of the only ethnic group worthy of the name - their own. By contrast, upon their approach, all the beasts of the savannahs ran off to take refuge in urban zoos, and the Africans themselves withdrew into their missions, for fear of being devoured by ethnologists who had very rapidly reverted to cannibalism.

Jean Baudrillard, 1990.¹

¹Jean Baudrillard, Cool Memories, trans. Chris Turner, (London, New York: Verso, 1990)

INTRODUCTION

At a recent annual meeting of our presbitary all Missionaries present and especially the Native Representatives present, expressed their gravest concern about the present allowance and existence of the Nyau ceremonies, on account of the fact that it is not only a revival of the Old Native ceremonies, but it is accompanied by the most degrading and destructive practices of nudism, harlotry and cannibalism.²

(Letter from the Dutch Reform Church Mission, Nyanje, 1954.)

Nyau Masquerades, otherwise known as the *gule wa mkulu* or 'great dance', have been perceived and represented as dangerous, mysterious and unknowable, not only by missionaries and colonial governors, but also within local discourses. This thesis explores some of the reasons why such images have been projected onto the Nyau, as well as offering some alternative ways of looking at the art-form.

Far from being 'degrading', 'destructive' 'Native ceremonies', Nyau masquerades are an important part of Chewa social, spiritual and political life, so important that their banning, prior to 1954, became an effective method of achieving subjugation of Chewa and Nyanja people in what was previously Northern Rhodesia. Today, they are seldom regarded as displays of 'nudism, harlotry and cannibalism,' as they were in the not-too-distant past. They are still, however, subject to other subtler forms of censorship and control. The cultural imperialism which dominates much of Zambia, as well as local political manoeuvres, continually threaten to control and dominate Nyau activity.

The pages which follow will demonstrate how Nyau performances are situated on ever-shifting borders and thresholds. These borders may be real or imaginary, physical or spiritual, but they form the identity of Nyau. An interrogation of borders and boundaries in relation to the issue of

²From a letter from the Dutch Reform Church Mission in Nyanje to the Provincial Commissioner in Fort Jameson, dated 12/6/1954. Reproduced with permission, the Zambian National Archives.

categorisation of theatre shall reveal fresh understandings of theatre from Africa in general, and the Nyau in particular.

The Nyau are a secret male society or cult within Chewa and Nyanja societies, and the word Nyau refers to the society itself, the member or initiate of the society, the characters or animals portrayed, as well as various accoutrements (such as masks) associated with the society. Secrecy is the governing principle of the Nyau, and membership of the society is exclusive to adult males. The Nyau body, while ultraconservative in some areas, particularly in Malawi, has long been associated with resistance, change, and outspoken social satire. Politically, the Nyau are consistently engaged in redefining borders. Spiritually, the Nyau operate as emissaries between the worlds of ancestral spirits and material, daily life. 'Renegade artists', 'marginalised critics of society', these labels are as inadequate to describe the Nyau as terms which allude to harlotry and cannibalism. These masqueraders can however be described as truly liminal figures.³

The research presented here draws on a diverse range of sources. I begin with the very broad umbrella of post-colonial studies. Speaking very generally, many theorists writing from within the context of post-coloniality are concerned with questions of marginality. This thesis can, on one level, be described as an attempt to tell the story of one margin within a margin: the Nyau, already marginalised within Chewa society, where Chewa people have often been pushed to the edges of their own world.

The areas of focus within post-colonial studies include the study of primitivism, interculturalism, theories of representation and Performance Studies. Nyau masquerade performance becomes a case study to illustrate a number of concerns within these disciplines. We see how the study of a theatre form which would, in Western contexts, be regarded as 'exotic' or 'primitive', can illustrate just how the relationships between power, knowledge and discourse operate, allowing

³The term "liminal" comes from Arnold van Gennep's seminal work, Rites of Passage, first published in 1908, and is used to describe an in-between status that is accorded to certain people when they are in transition from one social state to another, for example, initiates leaving boyhood and entering manhood first pass through a phase of liminality. Victor Turner uses the term extensively, see for example Victor Turner, The Ritual Process, (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).

one discourse to become dominant and 'central' while others are pushed aside and marginalised. We also see how the borders between categories such as 'theatre' and 'ritual' fall under scrutiny. Theorists such as Victor Turner and Richard Schechner have worked at disintegrating these tightly held genres, and post-colonialism itself transcends boundaries between disciplines, drawing on varieties of sources.

Likewise, theorists, writers and artists who have been concerned with the idea of the margin, are not restricted to the umbrella of post-colonial theory. Antonin Artaud, the visionary thinker, theatre-maker, and, some would say, madman, was fascinated with the idea of thresholds: thresholds of cruelty, of pain, of consciousness. Julia Kristeva, the feminist critic and psychologist, writes extensively on borders, abjection, and foreignness. These thinkers have influenced this study by prompting a need to investigate the idea of boundaries and borders, particularly in relation to artists and others who deliberately choose to operate on borders. I am talking of borders between cultures, between states of consciousness, between gender divides. Victor Turner's anthropological studies of liminality have provided a conception of an in between zone, a space which is distinct from a margin, which Nyau maskers inhabit.

The main aims of this research are to scrutinise the binary opposition between 'the West' and the 'exotic Other', indeed to disrupt many of the binarisms which cluster around the idea of the 'West and the Rest'⁴. These include primitive/civilized; nature/culture; rational/emotional; art/craft and theatre/ritual. There has been a tendency in Modernist art, literature and theatre,

⁴ See Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 2nd Edition, (New York, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988, 1993) for a clear description of the basic tenets of post-structuralist philosophy. Taking its cue from Jacques Derrida, post-structuralism questions the human desire to find a "centre, an authorising pressure, that spawns hierarchized oppositions." Sarup writes, of Derrida's criticisms of structuralism, that "Firstly he doubts the possibility of general laws. Secondly, he questions the oppositions of the subject and the object, upon which the possibility of objective description rests. In his view the description of the object is contaminated by the patterns of the subject's desire. Thirdly, he questions the structure of binary oppositions. He invites us to undo the need for balanced equations, to see if each term in an opposition is not, after all, an accomplice of the other." (p. 39-40). My argument, in part, is a response to that very invitation. Derrida's ideas as expressed by Sarup, are key to the processes entailed in this thesis, particularly the idea that the subject's own desires and repressions are projected onto the descriptions of the object. In this case the 'object' is Nyau Masquerade in particular and 'African theatre' in general.

to be fascinated with the exotic, the so-called Primitive. The avant-garde's theatre movements in the first half of the twentieth century borrowed heavily from 'exotic' theatrical traditions, making use of findings that were made available as a result of anthropological studies.

My aim here is to study a theatre which would be *perceived* by the West as 'exotic': the theatre of the Nyau secret society, to discover what function it fulfills in its community, whether this function is so different from the functions that other theatres fulfill. I attempt to establish what conditions or characteristics make this theatre *appear* to be exotic in the eyes of other world theatres. The basic premise is that there is no 'evolution' from ritual to theatre in Africa or anywhere else for that matter. The theatre that forms a part of the Chewa artistic canon is different from the ritual that is a part of that society, although the two are invariably conflated. It is therefore inappropriate that performance traditions in Africa have been so consistently documented by anthropologists and not by theatre specialists.

Another objective of this research would be to discover whether or not there are what Schechner and Turner call 'universals' of performance which transcend cultural barriers, as well as celebrating differences between two theatre forms stemming from two different world views⁵. As Rustom Barucha writes, "we need to keep in mind that before differences can be dissolved, they need to be acknowledged." ⁶

Many performance forms in Africa exemplify a holistic tradition which fulfills Artaud's ideal of a theatre which is embedded in the metaphysical yet speaks for a community's social needs. As contemporary western drama struggles to rediscover a sense of holism and ritualism in its own theatre tradition, a discussion of African performance, where these elements are commonplace, becomes vital.

⁵See Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, (eds), By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), for some detailed discussions of the idea of universals in performance, in particular the essay by Victor Turner, "Are there universals of performance?", p. 8-18.

⁶Rustom Barucha, "Negotiating the 'River': Intercultural Interactions and Interventions", T.D.R., vol14, no. 3 (Fall 1997)(T155), p. 31.

I do not wish to present the theatre of the Nyau as an 'other' form of theatre, non-Western, different, more in harmony with nature, although there may indeed be striking strangenesses about the *gule wa mkulu* to Euro-American viewers accustomed to even the most experimental of avant-garde plays. I would also avoid creating the impression that a *gule wa mkulu* performance is *the same* as an avant-garde theatrical event because both are in touch with the unconscious irrational, chthonic impulse. Neither will I expect the *gule wa mkulu* to stand as a representative of 'African' theatre as something opposite to 'Western' theatre. I will respect that the *gule wa mkulu* is a unique theatre form, sustained by and sustaining the environment which produces it.

By examining the specific dramaturgical elements, such as the role of the mask and the use of space, I hope to show that the theatre of the Nyau is not that substantially different or 'Other' compared with theatre forms in the West. At the same time it will become apparent that the ways in which the avant-garde have approached the task of instilling theatre with ritual is ultimately, not the solution to theatre's crisis in the West, as it is elitist rather than holistic. Ultimately the avant-garde and the Nyau do have a common goal, which I will call ecstasy, after Marianna Torgovnick's use of the term in *Primitive Passions*. The dissolution of boundaries between self and other, inner and outer worlds, is what the liminal artists who feature in this discussion are seeking to achieve.

My interest in Nyau theatre has been stimulated by indirect involvement in the tourist industry during my protracted residence in the Kunda constituency. I have long observed that 'foreign' tourists, whether American, European, British or Japanese, consistently hold preconceived ideas about 'Primitives' which are similar in tone to those images treasured by modernist avant-garde artists and theatre makers.

Chapter One will explore how the image of 'the Primitive' has permeated the Western imagination, in particular twentieth century avant garde theorists and practitioners from Alfred Jarry to Peter Brook. Primitivism has been one of the most pervasive aspects of modernity and its political implications have not always been adequately questioned. The chapter argues that although the avant-garde movement may seem to be far removed in space and paradigm from a

small village in Eastern Zambia which performs ritually based theatre, the impact of those philosophies and ideals has been felt in those areas. Theatre practitioners in Africa have been rendered voiceless by those writing from within a dominant discourse. This chapter draws from a diverse range of sources, including Michel Foucault, Christopher Innes, and Marianna Torgovnick. Post-colonial theorists as diverse as Wole Soyinka, Kwame Anthony Appiah and V.Y. Mudimbe all contribute to my argument and inform my thoughts on issues such as traditionality and culture.

Chapter Two introduces the primary study material, the *gule wa mkulu* performances which are presented annually by the Chewa men's secret association known as the Nyau. I shall attempt to situate these performances in a number of contexts. By describing a history and world-view as articulated by the Chewa people, an understanding of the kind of role that the *gule wa mkulu* plays in Chewa society should become clear. An examination of the literature on the Nyau will be placed alongside an overview of the function that the Nyau has in society. Rather than trying to place the performances in categories which arise from a Western framework I shall concentrate on attempting to show that these categories are unnecessary in a discussion of this kind. Instead, reference to the 'uses' of theatre takes preference. The work of Victor Turner, Mikhail Bakhtin and other Western theorists will be of interest in discussing how non-Western performance has traditionally been perceived in a Western paradigm.

Chapter Three will look at the notion of space in ritual theatre. The ideas of metaphoric space, ritual space, liminality and threshold-crossing will be discussed in some detail. This chapter rests on the simple premise that theatre is a tool for understanding one's environment. A detailed study of how the Chewa interpret their cosmos will throw up an array of issues which in turn will contribute a great deal to the central concerns, namely otherness, boundaries, marginality and community.

A further effect of the West's fascination with the 'Primitive' is that of cultural tourism and anthropological interest both of which have mushroomed in recent years, and the penetrating gaze which has come from both of these has had an enormous impact on performance traditions in Africa. The chapter explores some of those effects.

The fourth chapter in the thesis covers the issue of transformation, looking in particular at masking, self, and the body. Masking will be looked at as a transformative theatrical device, as well as a ritually efficacious method of affecting personal and social transformation. Of particular interest is how consciousness itself is altered through mask wearing, characterisation and performance techniques. In this regard it will be worthwhile examining the so-called shamanic states, such as trance, possession and other altered states of consciousness. It is through masking and transformation that the ultimate goal of 'ecstasy' is achieved. Alternative conceptions of the self and the mind-body relationship are looked at as an adjunct to theories of consciousness in performance.

Ultimately, the thesis will argue, the goal of theatre-makers wherever they come from, is to disintegrate the boundaries between self and other, subject and object. The Imperial Gaze is one which maintains boundaries and categories to such an extent that certain art forms are written out of the canon. An holistic perspective which accepts plurality is presented as a more appropriate viewpoint.

Methodology

In my approach to the methodology of this work, I take my cue from the content: holism is a guiding principle. The dissertation has come about as a result of participatory research, fieldwork, and an interrogation of both primary and secondary sources. Interviews have been conducted with performers and villagers about the nature and function of the Nyau dances; performances have been documented and recorded on video. Verbal descriptions, photographs and song lyrics are used in a discussion of the dramaturgy of the performances.

The nature of this research is such that an anecdotal tone will be required at intervals throughout the thesis. It is my contention that much of the ethnographic writing on the Nyau and on performance traditions in Africa generally, takes on an objective stance which excludes the viewer/observer from any interaction with the 'subject'. Indeed the very notion of subject-object separation which occurs in so many traditional anthropological studies has become highly questionable. Performances, whether theatrical or ritualistic, require a flow of interaction between

audience and performer, spectator and actor. Any study which attempts to observe this process would seem incomplete without an awareness of the observer's role.

As Grimes writes,

Employing an autobiographical style while engaging in methodological considerations may seem strange, since methodology is usually our most abstract, impersonal mode of reflection. But for this very reason it is usually the best hiding place for private and ethnocentric hermeneutics. So I find it best not to allow the interpreter/observer to go uninterpreted or unobserved.⁷

A qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to research is best suited to the kind of work this thesis sets out to investigate.⁸ The methodology employed in this research is necessarily less objective and more autobiographical because it involves a fair amount of personal history. Having spent most of my life in Eastern Zambia in Kundaland amongst Kunda people without actually being a Kunda by birth, much of the 'fieldwork' that would normally take place in an anthropological study has already been completed in my formative years. My childhood and upbringing have already equipped me with a familiarity with language and customs of Kunda people; tools which the field worker would ordinarily have to sharpen for a lengthy period before beginning a study such as this. I am often asked how a young white female with a Western education, such as myself, can study a secret all-male society in an African 'tribe', without experiencing overwhelming difficulties in obtaining information.

In reality it is not so difficult. My family is well known and respected in Malambo district, my grandfather has been accorded headman status, and my chiKunda is reasonably fluent. My

⁷Ronald L. Grimes, Beginnings in Ritual Studies, (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1982)

⁸See John Somers, "Approaches to Drama Research", Research in Drama Education, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1996, p. 165-173. Quantitative research is generally associated with a positivist attitude which "holds that life can be measured, and through measurement, understood." Qualitative research moves away from a scientific model, taking "account of the individual realities and experiences of humans...Rather than starting with a more defined assumption and involving themselves in a search for the 'facts', qualitative researchers more often 'see what's there', describing what they find and sometimes generating hypotheses from it, taking part in a search for 'meanings'."

position therefore is a uniquely privileged one. I already have the trust of many informants, yet I am still enough of an outsider for people to feel comfortable telling me sensitive pieces of information that other Kunda girls my age might be scolded for asking about. My personal standpoint is such that I am in a paradox which works to my advantage: I am both insider and outsider at once.

Writing as an outsider/insider observer/subject, the borderline position which I occupy enables me to maintain an osmotic style of researching, one which flows in and out of various viewpoints, using both local idiom and Euro-American philosophy.

The outside observer from another culture can never know it as the insiders do.

In another sense, however, the people brought up in a certain tradition can never see it. They are blind to it just because it is, for them, the only way things could possibly be.⁹

In terms of style, I am indebted to the examples which Kristeva and Helene Cixous provide. These writers privilege the more subjective, less rational and linearly ordered style of writing dubbed “feminine *écriture*”. Such a style is seen as a corrective to centuries of logocentric writing and it is of crucial relevance in examining the colonised body as a gendered body. More than just a justification for a personal methodology, the precedents which writers such as Cixous and Kristeva have set will be taken for granted as solid ground on which to base a critique of Imperialist notions of the ‘Primitive’ and the ‘exotic allure’ of Africa. Torgovnick’s discussions of the ways in which African landscapes are feminised, and subsequently penetrated, in explorer literature also forms a backdrop to my thinking.

During the early stages of my research into Nyau practices it became very clear to me that to study the Nyau alone, the male organised rituals, was not enough. Chewa, Nyanja and Kunda women are as much a part of the Nyau performances as the men even though they are forbidden

⁹Didier Kaphagawani and Jeanette G. Malherbe, “African Epistemology”, in Philosophy From Africa, ed. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux, (Johannesburg: International Thomson Publishing, 1998.) p. 213-4.

membership to the society, and not allowed access to the secrets. Women have their own set of rituals and secrets, one of which is the 'maturity' or *Chisungu* rite of passage for young girls. As a long-standing resident in a Kunda-speaking area, and because of my interest in Kunda and Nyanja performances and rituals, I was invited to be initiated into Kunda womanhood. This took place in August 1998. Although the initiation itself doesn't impact directly on my research, the bonds and alliances that were created between myself and the women who were associated with my initiation have proved invaluable as a source of knowledge.

Problems in fieldwork of this nature are well documented. The one that I encountered frequently was that very human problem - the tendency on the part of informants to idealise the past and refer with nostalgia to a time when people were more moral, harvests more bountiful, mangoes so much bigger. Therefore although elder members of society are seen to be the storehouses of knowledge, and recall the historical records of their communities, the tendency for the past to become a fictitious, constructed reality is constantly there.

I must acknowledge that all ethnographic writings are themselves necessarily 'fictitious' and constructed. Whereas a 'poetics of ethnography' would have been unthinkable several decades ago, James Clifford's discussion of the issue of 'fictionality' in ethnographic writing now seems incontestable.¹⁰ Finally laying to rest the notion of an objective ethnographic text, Clifford makes several assertions about the partiality and incompleteness of ethnographic writing. Whether it is in the translation of other people's realities, or the elision of personal or other circumstances deemed to be irrelevant, "even the best ethnographic texts," writes Clifford, "are systems, or economies, of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control."¹¹

The stylistics of ethnographic writing, and indeed of writing on performance of any kind, become more important than one might otherwise imagine. Clifford argues that

¹⁰James Clifford, Writing Ethnography: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1986)

¹¹Clifford, 1986 p. 7.

Once cultures are no longer prefigured visually - as objects, theatres, texts - it becomes possible to think of a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances. In a discursive rather than a visual paradigm, the dominant metaphors for ethnography shift away from the observing eye and toward expressive speech (and gesture).¹²

Such observations are not necessarily licence for flowery passages of self-reflexive prose. What they do call for is a constant awareness of the 'positioned-ness' of utterances: who is speaking; why; what cultural, personal or economic differences are being played out, what power relations are at work, and so on. Above all, a certain 'literariness' or 'writerly-ness' of style may remind the reader that the material on the page is a text, fashioned out of subjective experiences in the field, and not the last word on a particular culture. It is with this in mind that I attempt to record my own subjective and necessarily incomplete experiences.

In terms of methodology, it is a necessary strategy to employ an interdisciplinary approach, as the traditional academic stance of dividing knowledge is no longer a feasible method of understanding reality. Post-colonialism acknowledges the fact that we are living in times which are characterised by the clamour of many voices, many disciplines, and therefore a multi-vocal, plural reality is to be reflected. It is part of the post-colonial project to forge syntheses of knowledge from many disciplines, many cultures, many margins in a move towards holism.

I must however stress that this is not an anthropological study. The research is very much entrenched in the field of Performance Studies. While research in such areas at the end of the millennium definitely requires an inter-disciplinary approach, it is my intention that the argument presented will be an addition to the existing body of knowledge of multi-cultural performance in a post-colonial framework.

A final point about methodology remains to be made. Where necessary, I have chosen not to

¹²Ibid., p12. In speaking of a visual paradigm, Clifford is referring to the argument of Walter J. Ong, which points out that "the truth of vision in Western, literate cultures has predominated over the evidences of sound and interlocution, of touch, smell and taste." See W.J. Ong, The Presence of the Word, (New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 1967) and Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies on the Interaction of Expression and Culture. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1971)

name my informants by their real names, but to give them pseudonyms. I realise that it is problematic to collect information without acknowledging the role that informants play in terms of authorship. Historically, stories, histories and myths were gathered from oral societies, and labelled 'a Nyanja story' or a 'Zulu folktale' without bearing an acknowledgment of who the artist, historian or teller of the story was. However, in the case of sensitive research such as this, many of my informants have requested that their identities are not revealed because they fear trouble within their communities for having imparted secret information. Together with these people, we have decided that some detailed information or secrets should not be published, but that in general it is permissible for the sake of scholarship to unveil the less protected secrets.

I have respected the laws of secrecy to the best of my ability, preferring to focus my debate on the ways in which the Nyau have been perceived rather than attempting to uncover the inner workings of the Nyau. Even with such caution however, there is a need to protect people who may be perceived in a small community as having 'said too much'. It is my hope that these pages will reflect the cooperative spirit I have encountered in my fieldwork rather than any abuse of the knowledge I have been given.

A Note About Terminology

The terminology used to describe performance traditions in Africa is inadequate at best and at worst, completely misleading. In the context of colonial Africa, the British language has been used to classify and pigeon-hole, to smooth over gaps between concepts and to keep both population groups and their practices very widely apart. John Picton writes that

In the very use of English, or, indeed, any other Western European language, we are of course stuck with European histories of ideas; but knowing this will at least help us to begin to subvert Eurocentric assumption and implications, and thereby to clarify our perceptions of the distinctive qualities of visual and dramatic events in specific locations in Africa.¹³

It is not my concern here to render precise *definitions* of the phrases and terms I use in this dissertation. Rather, I want to provide *conceptions* of what the terms I use could or can mean in various contexts.

Ritual / Theatre / Drama / Performance

David Kerr describes **ritual** as "an action which is undertaken to give homage to, obtain assistance from, or in some way intercede with supernatural forces."¹⁴ I agree with this conception, adding that features such as repetition and the performative element are key to an understanding of what ritual is. Ritual has a performative function, it is efficacious. In other words when a ritual is enacted something happens as a direct result. The couple is now married, the girl is now a woman, the boy is now a man, or a Nyau. The power of the ritual is symbolic, but that doesn't mean that it is any less efficient. The symbolic nature of it means that it stands as a visual materialisation of an immaterial event. The ritual has such an entrenched place in society that its effect is very concrete. In the same way that a marriage ceremony in Western cultures would traditionally have changed the life and status of a woman, so the funeral ceremony

¹³John Picton, "The Masque of Words" in Karel Arnaut and Elizabeth Dell, (eds), Bedu is My Lover: Five Stories About Boudoukou and Masquerading. (Brighton: The Green Centre for Non-Western Art, 1996.)

¹⁴David Kerr, African Popular Theatre, (EAEP: Nairobi; Harare: Baobab; Cape Town: David Philip; Portsmouth: Heinemann; London: James Currey, 1995) p. 1.

is crucial in Chewa societies, if the soul of the deceased is to move on to the next realm.

Drama, according to Kerr is "a display of actions to an audience, in which there is an imitation of events in the real or supernatural world," with an element of story, suspense, or conflict.¹⁵ The way I have understood the term drama includes such criteria as a script (whether written or oral) and a *representation* of reality.

I use the word **theatre** as an umbrella term, covering a variety of performance forms, including drama, virtuoso feats and some forms of ritual. Theorists such as Schechner place ritual and theatre on either end of a continuum, with ritual as more efficacious than theatre, and theatre as primarily entertaining. The two are not, however, on either side of a binary opposition, nor is a hierarchical structure implied in their relationship and neither is there a strict separation between the two. Theatre can quite easily slip into ritual and vice versa, at any given moment.

The word **performance** refers to an even wider umbrella of phenomena, including social performances such as law courts and sporting events. 'Performances' which entail the adopting of a persona in social situations are also included in this conception. The distinction between performance and theatre is that theatre involves aesthetics, whereas performance involves any form of heightened behaviour. Quite often, however, I resort to the chiChewa words, *gule* which means 'dance', 'performance event' or 'spectacle' and '*vina*' which is the verb for 'dance'. Neither of these words have a direct English equivalent and there are no words in chiKunda or chiChewa to distinguish ritual from theatre.

Festival Dramas

The festival drama, according to Oyin Ogunba, is not only a religious occasion in the way that Westerners would understand an Easter festival, for example, nor is it an arts festival in the sense of an occasion which presents many unrelated artistic events. The festival drama is the "prime artistic institution of traditional Africa".¹⁶ It is an occasion, usually about a week long, that

¹⁵Kerr, 1995, p. 1.

¹⁶Oyin Ogunba, "African Festival Dramas", in O. Ogunba and Irele, (eds), Theatre in Africa, (Ibadan: University Press, 1978.)

celebrates such events as harvest, rites of passage, or the death of an important chief. It is in a sense, one long performance, stretched over several days. Or it can be seen as a series of short performances that are linked by a common theme. Some of these performances are short dramas, satirical sketches, or re-enactments of old myths. Some are rituals. The event itself may be considered as a ritual occasion, but the performances which make up the event are, in my view, theatre.

Avant-Garde

Richard Schechner writes that

Although the term “avant-garde” exists in scholarship as well as journalism, it no longer serves a useful purpose. It doesn’t really mean anything today. It should be used only to describe the historical avant-garde, a period of innovation extending roughly from the end of the nineteenth century to the mid-1970’s (at most).¹⁷

The ‘historical’ avant-garde, for Schechner, is distinct from four other avant-garde movements that he identifies, including the current avant-garde, the forward-looking avant-garde, the tradition-seeking avant-garde and the intercultural avant-garde. All these, he acknowledges, have shared qualities, and “a single work can belong to more than one of these categories.”¹⁸ Where I refer to the avant-garde in this work, it is to the historical avant-garde. This broad movement was by no means unified, spawning as it did sub-movements as diverse as surrealism, cubism, expressionism, futurism, and naturalism. These were, however linked by an anarchic impulse, a need to question and rebel against what Western society (and art) had become. Schechner quotes Michael Kirby as saying,

“Avant-garde” refers specifically to a concern with the historical directionality of art. An advanced guard implies a rear guard or at least the main body of troops following behind...Some artists may accept the limits of art as defined, as known, as given; others may attempt to alter, expand, or escape from the stylistic aesthetic

¹⁷Richard Schechner, The Future of Ritual, (Routledge: London and New York, 1993), p. 18.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 5.

rules passed on them by the culture.¹⁹

The modernist avant-garde, or 'historical' avant-garde, as Schechner prefers to call it, is also characterised by an interest in tradition and intercultural performance, and these are the aspects which will be studied in this work. Strictly speaking, some of the work of Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook may fall more into the realm of 'current' rather than 'historical' avant-garde. For my purposes, the 'avant-garde' shall be understood as that movement which, rejecting the mechanisation and rationality of Western society, has turned either to the performances of 'other' cultures, perceived to be exotic, for inspiration, or it has returned to 'inner' states, explorations of the unconscious, or of unexplored aspects of the psyche. The unconscious and the 'exotic' alike become sources of inspiration, well springs from which to draw in order to renovate Western art and theatre.

Colonialism/ Imperialism/ Post-Colonialism

Ania Loomba writes that "colonialism can be defined as the conquest and control of other people's land and goods" but points out that unlike other historical colonial processes,

Modern colonialism did more than extract tribute, goods and wealth from the countries that it conquered - it restructured the economies of the latter, drawing them into a complex relationship with their own, so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonised and colonial countries.²⁰

Colonialism and imperialism are often used interchangeably, but in this context I agree with Loomba who writes that "Imperialism can function without formal colonies (as in United States imperialism today) but colonialism cannot."²¹ Imperialism implies a "global system", economic and cultural but not necessarily political. Loomba writes that one way of distinguishing between colonialism and imperialism is to think of them in spatial rather than temporal terms. Both words mean entirely different things in different historical periods. For these purposes then, it is useful

¹⁹Schechner, 1993, p. 6. Quotes Michael Kirby, The Art of Time.

²⁰Ania Loomba, Colonialism/Post-colonialism, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) p. 2-3.

²¹Ibid., p. 7.

to think of

imperialism or neo-imperialism as the phenomenon that originates in the metropolis, the process which leads to domination and control. Its result, or what happens in the colonies as a consequence of imperial domination is colonialism or neo-colonialism. Thus the imperial country is the "metropole" from which power flows, and the colony or neo-colony is the place which it penetrates and controls.²²

The 'Imperial Gaze' in this context refers to a process by which a dominant network of discourses and practices have been interpreting and representing the discourses and practices of colonised countries in limiting ways. Imperial in this sense has been used to imply that there is a centre - the urban metropole - from which all valid discourses, economies and cultures spring. My reading does not insist that there is a binary opposite between imperial centre and colonised margin, nor do I interpret the global, international, network-like character of imperialism as opposite to the specific, local nature of the colonial, as Loomba's observation might imply. The imperial, as I understand it, is that which assumes itself to be the standard by which all else must be judged, or sets itself up as the font of power. It is that aspect of the Imperial Gaze which requires adjusting.

Post-colonialism is discussed more fully in the first chapter, but it should be stressed that the term is not meant to imply 'after-independence', as most previous colonies are still affected by the effects of colonialism. Rather we should note that "post-colonialism is a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction."²³

The Primitive

Marianna Torgovnick indicates that

When we put *primitive* into quotation marks, we in a sense wish away the heritage of the West's exploitation of non-Western peoples or at least wish to

²²Ibid., p. 6-7.

²³Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, (eds), The Post Colonial Studies Reader, "General Introduction", (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) p. 2. Hereafter referred to as "Ashcroft et al."

demonstrate that we are politically correct. But the heritage of Western domination cannot be abolished by wishing or by typography. In fact, funny things begin to happen when primitive goes into quotation marks. The first thing is that all other constructed terms - especially terms like *the West* and *Western* - seem to require quotation marks as well, a technique that despite its seeming sophistication ultimately relieves writers of responsibility for the words they use.²⁴

I agree with Torgovnick that to isolate the word 'Primitive' by placing it in quotation marks without doing the same with the 'West' seems to indicate that the 'Primitive' may be a figment of the West's imagination and nothing more, while the 'West' is a real entity. I believe both terms are problematic, but in this thesis I hope to explore *why* they are problematic instead of merely indicating that they are with the use of quotation marks.

The word 'primitive' was first used in the fifteenth century to mean the ancestor or origin of animals or men. In the eighteenth century it was used to refer to the early period or stage of the church and it continues to have specialised meanings in mathematics, grammar and biology where it means 'pure', 'simple' or 'original'. By the end of the eighteenth century it was being used to refer to 'aboriginals', natives of non-European lands. In art history, it referred to the arts of societies that have been the subject of ethnographic research, African, Native American, Eskimo and Oceanic peoples.²⁵

When we say primitive today we generally designate certain social formations within relatively isolated areas of ...the world - social formations characterised perhaps most clearly by the absence of tools and technology widely available elsewhere.²⁶

These societies are supposedly characterised by tendencies such as

the legality of custom, the presence of traditional leadership roles, the paramount importance of kinship in social and economic organisation, widespread and diffuse social and economic functions assigned each individual, the importance

²⁴Marianna Torgovnick, Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) p. 20.

²⁵Torgovnick, 1990, p. 18-19.

²⁶Ibid., p. 19.

of ritual for individual and group expression..., and a relative indifference to Platonic modes of thought - in short the condition of societies before the emergence of the modern state.²⁷

These characteristics are those which Torgovnick deems part of the “most persuasive definitions of the word”, but I am reluctant to fix a definition at all. What does become clear however is that *the use of the word* is more important than the actual definition of it.

The best we can do is to uncover, from a political and cultural perspective, the kinds of work key terms like primitive have performed within modern and postmodern culture and the kinds of work they have evaded or short-changed.²⁸

It is certainly preferable, in a study such as this, to use the term ‘primitive’ rather than any of its synonyms, because the discourse which I am entering, primitivist studies, has preferred the use of the term ‘primitive’. The synonyms are just as politically loaded: terms such as “savage, pre-Columbian, tribal, third world, under-developed, developing, archaic, traditional...non-Western”²⁹ all take ‘the West’ to be the norm and ‘the rest’ as inferior and different. As Torgovnick says, “we simply do not have a neutral, politically acceptable vocabulary.”³⁰

My own usage of the term, like Torgovnick’s, places an emphasis on the way in which the idea of the Primitive has been constructed and used by the West.³¹ The Primitive is therefore presented as an image, or a series of tropes, rather than as an essential, definable type of person or society. Where I wish to refer to a group of people who may have been regarded as Primitive according to the historical usage of the word, I will refer to them as a specific group: the Kunda, the Chewa,

²⁷Ibid., p. 21.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹The idea of ‘The West’ is equally problematic and equally constructed. I take ‘the West’ to be Europe and North America, although countries such as Japan, Russia and parts of South Africa are ‘westernised’ or modernised to a degree. It is less a geographical concept than a mind set or world-view: the modernised, mechanised, bourgeois world which places great value on ideals such as individuality, property ownership, rationality, science and progress.

the Yoruba.

When I use the term 'Primitive' in such a way as to indicate that there is a problem with the term I signify this with the use of the capital letter. The same applies with the 'West'. In certain instances I choose to emphasise, for example, Colonial or Imperial as concepts with more immediate weight than the ordinary usage would allow. In these instances I again employ capital letters. Where I have used foreign-language terms I have placed them in italics. The word Nyau, as the name of the cult and the theatre form is capitalised because it is a proper noun but not italicised as there is no translation for it.

CHAPTER ONE:

Knowledge, Discourse and Power

“Knowledge is Power” (name of restaurant in Nyimba, Eastern Zambia and popular idiom in Zambia and Malawi.)

There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations. (Foucault, 1977)³²

The performances of the Nyau masqueraders, known as the *gule wa mkulu* have been viewed, studied, reviewed and scrutinised through the colonial lens, often with complete lack of understanding or sympathy as to the role of the performances within Chewa society. Severe clashes between Catholic missionaries and the Nyau societies have been documented by Ian Linden³³.

The nyau was immoral in the priests’ minds 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.³⁴

Schoffeleers³⁵ points out that much of the research on the Nyau is “woefully inadequate in that almost all of it has been collected and written by Europeans and for European consumption.”³⁶. The situation has been rectified somewhat since then, with studies being initiated by the

³² Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish, (Tavistock: London, 1977) p. 27.

³³ Ian Linden, ‘Nyau Societies and Holy Liberalism,’ in Catholics, Peasants and Chewa Resistance in Nyasaland, (University of California Press, California, 1974).

³⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

³⁵ Dr M. Schoffeleers, ‘The Nyau Societies: Our Present Understanding’, Society Of Malawi Journal vol xxix no 1, (January 1976) p. 61.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 59.

University of Malawi, but it is certainly the case that many writings on the Nyau are a record of the colonial fascination/abhorrence for the primitive.

Reports and correspondences made by District Commissioners in the Chipata district (formerly Fort Jameson) illustrate with vivid and melodramatic clarity the ways in which Nyau was demonised and misunderstood. How did this perception come about? It is easy to blame ignorance and a lack of understanding, but it is also necessary to come to grips with how the West constructs an image of 'the Primitive Other'.

The Nyau Masquerades, or *gule wa mkulu* of Chewa communities in Eastern Zambia and Malawi are secret male societies whose active presence plays a crucial role in monitoring social issues in their communities. To have knowledge of the Nyau secrets is to have power in a very literal sense. It is of enormous importance that this study situates itself within a discourse that questions its own methods of gathering and disseminating knowledge and representing culture. The study also charts the ways in which knowledge of the Nyau Masquerades has been gathered and managed in recent colonial history, and what that process of knowledge management reveals about power relations in these areas. Researching such sensitive practices, I hope that I manage to maintain a level of respect which avoids the abuse of my empowerment via knowledge collection.

Overview and Context

The purpose of this chapter is to situate my argument in a frame of reference - or a series of frames of reference in this case, because this study requires a multi disciplinary approach in order to reactivate the way in which people think about theatre in Africa, and in order to challenge some deeply entrenched assumptions. It is necessary to show, with the use of a broad overview, exactly why it is that the Imperial Gaze needs to be shifted.

The broad framework for this study is that of **post-colonial discourse**, itself a multi disciplinary field which draws from psychology, literary criticism and history, to name but a few of the areas

which have fed into this vast discipline. The term 'post-colonial' is not easily defined³⁷ but Loomba is correct in pointing out that the word

"post-colonial" is useful as a generalisation to the extent that "it refers to a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and is probably inescapable for all those whose worlds have been marked by that set of phenomena: 'post-colonial' is (or should be) a descriptive not an evaluative term".³⁸

Post-colonialism should not be taken to mean the period after colonialism as this would wrongly imply that the colonial process is a thing of the past.

Post-colonialism, rather, begins from the very first moment of colonial contact. It is the discourse of oppositionality which colonialism brings into being.³⁹

There is an overlap and some confusion between post-colonial studies and postmodernism, but they should not be conflated.

This confusion is caused partly by the fact that the major project of postmodernism - the deconstruction of the centralised, logocentric master narratives of European culture, is very similar to the post-colonial project of dismantling the Centre/Margin binarism of imperial discourse.⁴⁰

However, as Kwame Anthony Appiah has noted, the 'post' in post-colonial is not the same as the 'post' in postmodern, and their practical processes are markedly different.⁴¹ Ashcroft et al. point out that poststructuralism "licenses a return to the canon" because "a new set of theoretical tools" can be applied to "well-worn texts". Post-colonialism on the other hand

³⁷See "A Note on Terminology" for a fuller discussion of terms such as colonial, imperial and post-colonial.

³⁸Loomba 1998, p. 120.

³⁹Ashcroft et al., 1995, p. 117.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹ See Kwame Anthony Appiah, In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture (London: Methuen, 1992).

precludes any return to a canon because the field itself transforms what we understand literature to be.⁴²

This study embraces the post-structuralist project of disrupting binarisms, but it is also concerned with post-colonial processes of examining the discursive effects of imperial power. Or, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o would have it, with the process of "decolonising the mind"⁴³.

Post-colonial theory involves discussion about experience of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy and linguistic, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being. None of these is "essentially" post-colonial but together they form the complex fabric of the field.⁴⁴

Looking through the very broad window of post-colonial studies, let me now isolate the areas which feed into this study. Of key importance is the issue of **representation**: how Africa and Africans have been represented in British discourses about 'the colonies'. How in turn performing arts in Africa have been represented and constructed, and finally how the Nyau masquerades have been represented, suppressed and have resisted domination. The process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome is in this case a process of "de-scribing"⁴⁵ and deconstructing the texts which have contributed to the image of Primitive Africa, untamed and untamable, 'history-less' and superstitious.

Anthropology and ethnography both have their origins firmly situated in the colonial process, and were instrumental in the formation of tropes and images of traditional Africa. Indeed most of the literature on performance in Africa comes from the pens of ethnologists rather than theatre and performance specialists. Where performance experts were involved in African theatrical arts it was less in the capacity of documentation than in regarding the traditions as a resource or a

⁴²Ashcroft et al., 1995, p. 118.

⁴³See Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Decolonising the Mind: the politics of language in African Literature, (London: James Currey, 1986).

⁴⁴Ashcroft et al., 1995, p. 2.

⁴⁵See Alan Lawson and Chris Tiffin (eds) De-scribing Empire, (Routledge: London, 1994)

storehouse of 'tribal lore' and inspiration. A crucial point that needs to be made early on this work is one made by Henrietta Lidtchi:

Contrary to popular assumptions, we can assert that the science of anthropology, like all sciences "hard" or otherwise, is not primarily a *science of discovery*, but a *science of invention*. In other words it is not *reflective* of the essential nature of cultural difference, but classifies and *constitutes* this difference systematically and coherently, in accordance with a particular view of the world that emerges in a specific place, at a distinct historical moment, and within a specific body of knowledge.⁴⁶

My emphasis in this thesis, therefore, is less a straightforward examination of the practices and performances of Nyau masqueraders, than an investigation into how those performances have been *represented* and *constructed* in the discourses of colonialism. Where I do interpret the *gule wa mkulu*, it is with the aim of correcting the distinct binarisms implicit in the Imperial lens which cloud an *experiential* relationship between spectator and performer.

As Ian Mackintosh writes,

Often the motives and prejudices of those who advocate foreign or archaic forms of theatre are of greater interest than the forms themselves.⁴⁷

It might be more appropriate therefore to refer to some aspects of this study as intercultural voyeurography, then, or some such coinage: the study of how perceptions of cultural forms come about, and what impact they have. For the most part, it is necessary to find alternative ways of viewing the *gule wa mkulu*.

Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault's contribution to the notion of representation and his ideas on the relationship

⁴⁶Henrietta Lidtchi, "The Poetics and Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures", in Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, Stuart Hall (ed.), (London: Sage Publications in association with The Open University, 1997) p. 161.

⁴⁷Iain MacKintosh, Architecture, Actor and Audience, (New York: Routledge, 1993) p. 1.

between discourse, knowledge and power are indispensable as a background to this research. Foucault was interested in "discourse as a system of representation," a system which "produces knowledge".⁴⁸

By "discourse" Foucault meant "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about - a way of representing the knowledge about- a particular topic at a particular historical moment...Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But...since all social practices entail *meaning*, and meanings shape and influence what we do - our conduct - all practices have a discursive aspect."⁴⁹

The interplay between knowledge and power, through institutions, government systems and discursive formations in a particular historical period was what gave rise to 'truth', or rather, a 'regime of truth'. In other words the way in which knowledge and power was applied in a given period was responsible for producing truth. In the words of Stuart Hall,

Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of "the truth" but has the power to *make itself true*. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has real effects, and in that sense at least, "becomes true". Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practices...Thus, it may or may not be true that single parenting inevitably leads to delinquency and crime. But if everyone believes it to be so, and punishes single parents accordingly, this will have real consequences for both parents and children and will become "true" in terms of its real effects, even if in some absolute sense it has never been conclusively proven.⁵⁰

As I understand it, Foucault's conception of a 'regime of truth' is applicable to the situation in Malawi and Zambia under British rule, as well in other colonial contexts. The Imperial Gaze situated itself in a superior position of knowingness. Various apparatus such as media, advertising, ethnographic disciplines, ethnological museums, displays of 'ethnic curiosities' such as Sara Baartman allowed the Imperial Gaze to place itself on the outside of cultures (and

⁴⁸Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation", in Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, Stuart Hall (ed.), (London: Sage Publications in association with The Open University, 1997) p. 44-5.

⁴⁹Ibid., p.44.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 49.

discourse) encountered in Africa, with the supposed ability to penetrate these 'systems' with a knowing gaze. The Imperial Voice then controlled the knowledge it gained from its powerful position, through institutions such as schools, in order to create a 'regime of truth' which, sustained by discourse, became the 'norm' of society. In this way, entire populations have been subjected to discipline and control, part of "an unrelenting expansion of rationalised systems of administration and social control."⁵¹

Foucault's idea of power needs to be carefully delineated. In the traditional view, power is regarded as a commodity which may be possessed or seized, and imposed on a subject from above. Foucault, in contrast, conceives of power as a web or network which extends to include all aspects of society. It is an "open cluster of relations" rather than

an institution, a structure, or a certain force with which certain people are endowed...All social relations are power relations"⁵²

According to Foucault it is inadequate to conceive of power as repression, constraint or prohibition. Power "produces reality"; it "produces domains of objects and rituals of truth".⁵³ Foucault remarks that we often hear the cliché "power makes mad" but we should consider the fact that the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge. Conversely, knowledge induces effects of power. It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power.⁵⁴

Aside from this exploration of discourse, power and knowledge, or rather, intrinsically tied up with it, is another strand in the tapestry that makes up post-colonial studies: that of **Interculturalism**. The study of global theatre forms and contact between theatre forms of 'different' cultures generally goes by such names as **Intercultural Communication**, or the broad umbrella of **Multicultural Studies**.

⁵¹Sarup, p. 72.

⁵²Ibid., p. 83.

⁵³Ibid., p. 74.

⁵⁴Ibid.

There is a vast field of study which is dedicated to investigating the work of artists who are literally operating on the borders between cultures. Theatre makers such as Eugenio Barba, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Richard Schechner, have all at one time or another and to varying degrees, turned to cultures other than their own for inspiration. This thesis turns a critical glance at such interculturalism where it reveals new facets of the 'knowledge-power' interaction. However Interculturalism *per se* is not my main emphasis. The fact that cultures influence one another, that syncretic theatre forms emerge as a result of cross-pollination and that global dialogue takes place, is not under question. What is to be criticised is when, in Richard Drain's words, "The west seeks what it believes it lacks, and converts what it sees to its own uses."⁵⁵ In these cases the relationships between world theatre forms are not always reciprocal.

In the rest of the world the first step to a healthy theatrical culture has often meant developing a resistance to western material and western modes.⁵⁶

Rethinking the image of traditional performance in Africa requires a look at the broad field which Schechner has dubbed **Performance Studies**: the examination of all forms of performance, from social, through religious and political:

Under the auspices of ...Schechner and the late Victor Turner, a new discipline, "Performance Studies", has sought to place theatre proper within a wider context of rituals, sports, games, and even "social dramas" such as trials and social crises. Turner in particular argued that all such activities carried out the same performative function, as mechanisms for dealing with social schisms, reintegrating the communal whole.⁵⁷

Performance Studies as a discipline is not without its own challenges and pitfalls, and has met with some criticism.⁵⁸ I hope to identify some of these challenges, even while remaining indebted

⁵⁵Richard Drain (ed), Twentieth Century Theatre: A Source book, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 291.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 293.

⁵⁷Colin Counsell, "Peter Brook and Ritual Theatre" in Colin Counsell, Signs of Performance, (London and New York, Routledge, 1996.) p. 176-7.

⁵⁸See Counsell, 1996, p. 177. He argues that "Performance Studies effectively strips human activities of what is most particular and meaningful, rendering real political relations -

to its originators: the work of Performance Studies theorists has provided a great deal of ground-clearing, making way for alternative understandings of theatre and performance.

The underlying argument for the chapter is, in fact fairly straightforward, even if the paths winding in and out of it are complex and interlocking. The underlying premises are these: firstly, the relationship between knowledge and power is inseparable. As a Zambian idiom has it, “knowledge is power”.⁵⁹ Secondly, the management of knowledge by the British in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has resulted in the construction of an image of Africa and African culture which is damning and damaging. It amounts to an abuse of power and a manipulation of knowledge. The constructed image of African Culture as an essential knowable category has been presented as a polar opposite to European Culture. The assertion has been that Britain and British is superior, sophisticated, rational, whereas Africa and African is inferior, primitive, emotional. Finally, at the cusp of the millennium, it seems appropriate to loosen the stranglehold that the dominant discourse has had on knowledge, in order to reach different perspectives, different ways of conceiving and disseminating knowledge which can act as powerful instruments for change.

The process of ‘disengagement’ from colonialism thus involves several steps. In the context of this research, the first of these steps is a) to acknowledge the inseparable nature of power and knowledge, and then b) take the relationship between the two into account throughout the process.

The next step, in terms of this chapter and the ones that follow, is to realise that much of the theorising within post-colonial studies needs to take place on a local level rather than in the broad, global terms which are often used to explain and describe situations in vastly diverse conditions, from Settler Australia to India to protectorate Northern Rhodesia.

relations of power - the expression of some supposed ‘universal’ impulse.”

⁵⁹Personal communication with Bernd Schulz has led me to understand that the origin of the phrase in European philosophy is with Nietzsche, whose claim “Wissen ist Macht” was appropriated by Foucault: the frequency with which the phrase is overheard in African contexts need not have anything to do with the Nietzschean origin and seems to suggest instead that there is an intuitive validity to an assertion which recurs in the philosophies of diverse cultures.

Having focussed on a local theatre form, the next step is to come to terms with the ever-shifting power relations between the local and the global. The issue at stake here is that of classification, and the collection of knowledge about performing arts in Africa. There is a need to examine the ways in which dominant discourses (in this case British colonial propaganda as well as Western ethnological writings) have shaped perceptions of performing arts in Africa. Following that, we take a look at the image of the Primitive in the Western imagination, the avant-garde's fascination with the Primitive, and the reasons why theatre in Africa has been so consistently ignored or disregarded *as theatre*.

1.1. Theatre, the Church and Anthropology: Performing Arts in Africa

Let us look at some of the many ways in which knowledge about performing arts in Africa has been manipulated and controlled. The first, most basic of these is the perception that 'native' African theatre simply didn't exist before colonialism. Ruth Finnegan was instrumental in the opening up of this debate, and her ideas are typical of the view that the dominant discourse held: the view that where traditional drama did exist in Africa it was "quasi-theatrical" or "proto-dramatic".⁶⁰ The following quote from Finnegan illustrates this:

How far one can speak of indigenous drama in Africa is not an easy question...Though some writers have very positively affirmed the existence of native African drama, it would perhaps be truer to say that in Africa, in contrast to Western Europe and Asia, drama is not typically a widespread or a developed form.⁶¹

As Biodun Jeyifo has cautioned, in response to Finnegan, even if this perception is waning, and

even if virtually no critic or scholar makes this assertion any more, we should note that this view belongs to a not-so-distant past. And what is more important is that subtle variations of the theme persist in the scholarship on the African theatre, and they are promoted as much by African scholars as they are by

⁶⁰Ruth Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa, Nairobi, 1970, p. 501.

⁶¹Ibid.

Western critics.⁶²

1.1.i. Theatre in Africa: a place in the canon?

The belief that there was no theatre indigenous to Africa before colonisation was quite formally instituted. Peter Okpokodu points out that:

By 1932 the British Drama League's conference on Native African Drama had formally decided that Africa as a whole had no indigenous drama.⁶³

It seemed to be widely held that the majority of performance forms which were encountered by colonial explorers, missionaries and later, anthropologists, could not be classified as theatre, but instead should be regarded as dramatic storytelling, dance, and dramatic ritual.

There are multiple reasons for these perceptions. The first is that it was in the interest of the colonising powers to propagate the idea that Africa had no culture of its own, or the culture that it did have was underdeveloped, primitive, less sophisticated than European culture. As David Kerr points out,

the economic imperatives of the slave trade helped to create the myth of African cultural inferiority as a spurious moral justification for slavery and unequal exchange of commodities.⁶⁴

By associating Africans with nature, thereby excluding them from culture, and ultimately history, empire builders attempted to justify the social and economic injustices that were being committed on the continent. Peter Okpokodu quotes Hegel in this regard:

⁶² Biodun Jeyifo, "The Reinvention of Theatrical Tradition", in Patrice Pavis (ed.), The Intercultural Performance Reader, (Routledge: London and New York, 1996) p. 154.

⁶³ Peter Okpokodu, "'Lest One Good Custom Should Corrupt the World': African Theatre and the Holy Canon." SATJ 9/2 September 1995, p. 5.

⁶⁴ Kerr, 1995, p. 18.

It (Africa) has no history in the true sense of the word. We shall therefore leave Africa at this point and it need not be mentioned again. For it is an unhistorical continent, with no movement or development of its own. And such events as have occurred in it -ie in its northern region - belong to the Asiatic and European worlds...What we understand as Africa proper is that unhistorical and undeveloped land which is still enmeshed in the natural spirit.⁶⁵

Aside from acting as propaganda to the public 'at home', the perpetuation of myths of inferiority had an added and very real psychological effect on the colonised people themselves. The effects of such demoralisation and conditioning are still apparent in South Africa and other African communities today. It is a very effective method of demoralising a people: to attack and condemn their arts and culture, especially as it underpins so much of daily existence.

The most concerted and ideologically articulate attack on African indigenous performing arts came from the proselytising zeal of European Christian missions....The fundamental reason why the Christians were so keen to suppress African performing arts was that they realised cultural forms held the symbolic key to the religious and moral basis of indigenous societies.⁶⁶

Ngugi wa Thiong'o refers to the process by which colonialism destroyed people's faith in themselves and their cultures as "a cultural bomb". "The effect of a cultural bomb", he writes, "is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their language."⁶⁷

Pigeonholing and classifying

Another reason why theatre in Africa was never regarded as theatre *per se* was because it simply didn't conform to Western norms of what theatre should be. Okpokodu strongly contests the idea of the canon as the elitist and exclusive standard by which theatre, literature and art should be judged. He articulates clearly the

problem of carrying a canon, no matter how seemingly perfect, from one culture

⁶⁵Quoted in Okpokodu, 1995, p. 5

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ngugi, 1986, p. 3.

to another and erecting it as the only acceptable frame of reference.⁶⁸

According to the British canon, there could be no possible way of conceiving of the performance forms encountered in Africa as theatre. There were no scripts, no playhouses in Africa, and the performances contained little or no dialogue. They seemed to consist entirely of religious ritual, 'superstition' and wild, orgiastic dancing. The fact that there seemed to be an inordinate degree of 'audience participation' was also perceived as a reason to disregard theatre forms in Africa as theatre.

Anthony Graham-White correctly points out that

at the very time that Europe was freeing itself from the restrictive dramatic conventions of the well-made play on the well-made proscenium stage, Europeans in Africa were unconsciously using such standards to judge African cultures as wanting in drama. Groups of performers and spectators roaming a village did not match the European observer's conventional image of theatre.⁶⁹

Chinyere Grace Okafor confirms what I think is a valid argument, namely that judging theatre in Africa in terms of Western criteria has resulted in myths about performing arts in Africa being perpetuated.

Misunderstandings about the nature of traditional drama arise when it is evaluated on the basis of Western critical criteria, such as K. Uka does in faulting it for including elements that lie outside the realistic mode or as Ruth Finnegan does in suggesting that it has "little or no linguistic content."⁷⁰

The tendency towards categorisation and classification which so marked nineteenth-century thought and practice has dominated the way in which African performance traditions were perceived by the West.

⁶⁸Okpokodu, 1995, p. 21.

⁶⁹Anthony Graham-White, The Drama of Black Africa, (New York: Samuel French, 1974) p. 14.

⁷⁰Chinyere Grace Okafor, "Behind the Inscrutable Wonder: The Dramaturgy of the Mask Performance in Traditional African Society", Research in African Literatures, Vol. 22, Winter, 1991. p. 39-40.

Ogunba writes that

such strict categorisation into religious and secular, religious and political, seems alien to the spirit and nature of the traditional African.⁷¹

Ogunba is rightly protesting that there has been a consistent tendency in criticism on African theatre to label various traditions as 'ritual' simply because they seem to have religious content or are performed on religious occasions. It is as if an obsession with genre and taxonomy and with trying to establish whether certain art forms are 'ritual', 'theatre', 'ritual-theatre' or 'dramatic ritual', has led to a short-sightedness which fails to take into account the fact that a great deal of performance forms in Africa are holistic and multi-dimensional. Thus there is a need to transcend the pattern of naming and classifying, to focus instead on the theatrical experience itself, and how it is understood by the participants themselves.

This is not to say that one should abandon the process of naming and classifying altogether: they are important tools by which humans make sense of reality. Instead, there needs to be an awareness that there are several problems with the process when it is applied to ethnography. The first problem is that the categories into which the world gets divided are not necessarily universal and are often even fairly arbitrary. Aristotelian and Shakespearean models of drama may be deemed applicable in a European context, but are not necessarily the norm. Mzo Sirayi, looking at Aristotle through Owomoyela writes

Aristotle did not claim that his conception of drama was intended to be universally applicable...Aristotle based his concept of drama primarily on dramatic performances and plays that took place in the Greek society of his time, but nowadays African dramatists frequently cite him as if he intended his observations to be universally applicable without being contextualised.⁷²

Criteria for 'good' theatre in Britain and Europe were, ironically, being contested, at exactly the same time that they were being upheld as the ultimate standard in 'the colonies'. Compare

⁷¹ Oyin Ogunba, "Traditional African Festival Drama" in O. Ogunba and A. Irele (eds). Theatre in Africa. (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1978) p. 5.

⁷² Mzo Sirayi, "Oral African Drama in South Africa: the Xhosa Indigenous Drama Forms", SATJ 10 / 1 May 1996, p.49.

Finnegan's claim that African performances lacked dialogue, audience-actor participation and scripts with the following quote from Christopher Innes:

avant garde theatre is characterised by the merging of audience and action, by a rejection of language or verbal logic as a primary means of communication; and where the aim is to induce trance states these are active and tend towards convulsions.⁷³

Another reason for the misunderstandings that arose around the issue of classification of African performance forms was that they were generally encountered, documented and interpreted by people who were not necessarily performance experts and had strict agendas to uphold. Anthropologists and ethnologists in the latter part of the century were seeking curiosities and trying to uphold 'difference', whereas missionaries and District Commissioners perceived the performance forms to be a threat to the peaceful continuation of British rule.

Before the pedantry of the scholar, the authoritative voices of commentary on African theatre were those of the *missionary* and the *anthropologist*...[then came] the arrival of the "objective scholar" to replace and displace the inexperienced, jaundiced gaze of the missionary and the anthropologist. It then becomes paradoxical for the scholar to be in turn unconscious of the freight of methodological principles she or he brings to bear on the body of African theatrical traditions by assuming, with a tenacious logocentrism, that "reality" lies at the other side of scholastic discourse.⁷⁴

The methods by which ethnographic information was collected and classified in systems by Western travellers/collectors was often completely arbitrary. Lidtchi describes how

Until the nineteenth century most of what we would now label as "ethnographic objects" were collected in a spasmodic and fortuitous way, acquisitions whose value lay in their novelty or "curiosity"...the classificatory system devised in ethnographic museums is...predominantly a geographical or social one.⁷⁵

⁷³Christopher Innes, Holy Theatre: Ritual and the Avant Garde, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 7.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 155.

⁷⁵Lidtchi, 1997, p. 161.

The criteria used to determine whether or not theatre was theatre were, it seems with hindsight, equally arbitrary. Today we understand that there does not need to be a special building in which theatre happens; it does not need to represent reality naturalistically, nor does it need dialogue, nor does it necessarily have to entertain instead of being ritually efficacious.

Jeyifo refers to Graham-White's book The Drama of Black Africa as an example of how scholars in this field start "with the intention to refute" myths surrounding African theatre, "only to be entrapped by the coils of the unexamined foundations and premises on which the critical orthodoxy rests." One of these "coils" of entrapment is the tendency to be over concerned with genre, and criteria for classification, resulting in conclusions which posit that even though theatre may exist in Africa (a seemingly reluctant concession) then 'tragedy' certainly does not. The result of the conclusion is the same: keeping African culture apart from European. It is simply another layer deep in the onion, so to speak.⁷⁶

The problems with classification are that it is a) limiting; b) arbitrary; c) not instituted by theatre specialists; d) performed by those with a specific agenda in mind; e) it ignores the experiential aspect of performance watching; f) it comes from an evolutionist perspective f) classification so often rests on binary oppositions such as ritual vs theatre or entertaining vs efficacious.

A study of the image of performing arts in Africa quickly reveals how the dominant discourse (British propaganda and church teachings, in the case of Nyau performances in Zambia and Malawi), in possession of power, controls the way in which knowledge is constructed and distributed. Citizens of Britain and potential colonisers are taught, through museum displays, propaganda, advertising and the manipulation of public images, that Africans are backward and lacking in culture, and so the economic injustices seem justified. Simultaneously, Britain uses its so-called superior knowledge to teach Africans that their culture is worthless, thus encouraging a dependence on European culture and rule.⁷⁷

⁷⁶Jeyifo, 1996, (p. 154).~

⁷⁷I realise that this viewpoint is a simplification of the extremely complex processes of colonisation. One of the paradoxes implicit in the process is that while Africa was being portrayed as primitive and uncivilized, it was also necessary to present it as an attractive place

So what is it then that needs to shift if theatre in Africa is to have a place in the world canon? I identify three main areas: 1) the binary oppositions which keep categories such as ritual and theatre distinct from one another; 2) the evolutionist perspective which insists that culture 'develops' from one state of sophistication to another, and maintains a child-parent relationship between colonised and coloniser; and 3) rigid Western conceptions of what 'theatre', 'ritual' and 'drama' can be or can do. I shall now examine these in more depth.

1.1.ii. Ritual and Theatre: transcending the binary oppositions

Two fundamental aspects of the 'ritual vs theatre' debate need to be further deconstructed. The first is that critics writing on theatre and ritual in Africa frequently make the claim that theatre **evolves** out of ritual, that the 'roots' of theatre are found in ritual, and that African ritual, once it becomes secularised, is on its way to becoming theatre. The second aspect of the debate is that ritual and theatre are often posited as binary opposites, with no middle ground in between.

There is little concrete evidence to support an evolutionist perspective. Again, many writers use Aristotle to justify the idea that theatre has its roots in ritual. But as Ogunba points out,

Nigerian ritual drama is not "a raw form (like crude oil) which has to be purified before it can be converted to use." The crucial dramatic element, role play, already exists in Nigerian festival drama. If European drama emerged from Ancient Greek Dionysian mysteries as Aristotle suggests, then it doesn't follow that the same thing happened in the quite different conditions of Africa.⁷⁸

worth colonising. The prospect of teaching, 'civilising', and Christianising the 'colonial subjects' was a very appealing one to well-meaning church-goers in Britain, and popular nineteenth century fiction is teeming with images of the noble, self-sacrificing missionaries who gave up their lives in England to live in Africa. The intentions of such people were often wholesome and one cannot think of the process of colonisation as a deliberately evil intent on all levels. Only with hindsight can one really see Colonialism as a machine whose overall mechanisms were unjust even if its parts were innocent. As mentioned above, Foucault's concept of power enables us to understand that power is a web which ensnares all strata of society, rather than being a top-down process of subjugation.

⁷⁸ David Kerr, "African Theories of African Theatre", SATJ 10 / 1 May 1996, p. 5. Quoting from Ogunba, 1978.

It seems just as likely in fact that ritual and theatre can evolve along side one another, or that a performance tradition can fulfil both ritual and theatrical needs in a given community. As Schechner writes,

Rituals are performative: they are acts done; and performances are ritualised: they are codified, repeatable actions. The functions of theatre identified by Aristotle and Horace - entertainment, celebration, enhancement of social solidarity, education (including political education) and healing - are also functions of ritual.⁷⁹

The difference between theatre and ritual, claims Schechner, is determined by “context and emphasis.” Rituals tend to have greater efficacy, while theatre emphasises entertainment, but

this list of differences (not oppositions) does not support the tendency in Western scholarship to suppose that ritual performance precedes or is at the origin of theatre.⁸⁰

The evolutionist viewpoint has been used in various ways, to further the agendas both of colonial myth makers and nostalgic pan-Africanists. For the former, there is a great deal to be gained by positing an evolutionist viewpoint as it enables a hierarchical structuring of what might be considered as ‘high art’ versus ‘primitive superstition.’ By classifying traditional theatre in Africa as ritual, traditional Africans can be equated with ‘irrational’, ‘unscientific’ modes of being, incapable of ‘sophisticated’ culture, where the existence of ‘art for art’s sake’ is seen to be a criteria for authenticating high culture.⁸¹

Another way in which the evolutionist perspective has been used is to suggest a mythic, timeless

⁷⁹Richard Schechner, 1976, p. 613.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹It is possible to over-correct this problem by labelling all rituals in Africa as theatre. In other words, funerals, initiation ceremonies and other rituals have, in some recent works, been ‘reclassified’ as it were, and named theatre, in an attempt to widen the category of theatre to include a variety of ritual forms. Mzo Sirayi does this, in his analysis of Xhosa initiations and hunting ceremonies. The point is not that every ritual should be renamed as theatre. Rather, the binary opposition that keeps theatre and ritual so separated should be overcome, and a new conception of what theatre can/could be, may subsequently arise.

past in which the evils of modernity seem to be absent. J.P. Clark, for example, wrote in 1966 that the origins of Nigerian drama

lie where they have been found in other people's of the earth, deep in the past of the race...in the early religious and magical ceremonies and festivals.⁸²

The evolutionist perspective, when used in this way, has a nostalgic tone which freezes 'pre-colonial' African culture into a timeless mythic frame, allowing for little in the way of cultural dynamism. It does not allow for the fact that contemporary theatre in Africa can also have magical and ceremonial qualities.

Schechner places ritual and theatre on either end of a continuum, identifying theatre with entertainment and ritual with efficacy. In Chapter Two, when we discuss Nyau Masquerades in more detail, it will become apparent that the 'uses' of theatre in Africa, (or anywhere for that matter) are more multi-faceted, with a single performance fulfilling ritual, theatrical, educational, and healing purposes all at once.

The fundamental conclusion which arises out of this is that the categories between ritual and theatre are a great deal more porous than some academics writing on 'African theatre' have made them out to be. I do not wish to decide conclusively how much one performance tradition tends towards ritual as opposed to theatre. It is impossible to speak of 'African Theatre' as if it were one homogenous whole in any case. The Chewa and Kunda do not isolate the experience of either ritual or theatre or dance, they simply use the word *vina* which means dance. (*kubvina*: verb, 'to dance'). One way to shift the Imperial Gaze would be to simply acknowledge that one should not attempt to place performance traditions in Africa in an either/or set of categories. 'Both/and' is far more useful.

The debate as to whether performance traditions in Africa can be termed theatre or ritual is a clear example of how intimately knowledge and power are linked. The dominant discourse manipulates knowledge of African theatre to such an extent that it becomes completely misrepresented, and performance traditions are denied the status of aesthetic art. A later section

⁸²Kerr, 1996, p.4.

of this chapter is devoted to some trends in ethnography in which the dissemination of knowledge shows up the power balances and imbalances of colonialism and ethnography. Firstly, however, I wish to explore exactly how the image of the Primitive has dominated so much of modernist thinking and aesthetics. This discussion should further illuminate why the Imperial Gaze finds it necessary to misrepresent performance forms from Africa.

Why there was such a tendency to 'otherise' African people? Let us deconstruct this combination of fascination and repulsion, titillation and fear regarding the Primitive. What exactly do we mean by 'Primitive' anyway?

1.2. The Primitive Other

As Freud began to clear the way for probing into our own uncharted waters and empire builders paved pathways for explorations into Africa and Asia, as images from the colonies entered mainstream culture on European soil, sifted through the filters of such figures as Gauguin and Picasso, so the image of The Primitive gradually emerged from its uncomfortable shadows.

It is only relatively recently that academics, let alone the public at large, have become uncomfortable with the word Primitive, have begun placing it in inverted commas. However placing a word in quotation marks often does little more than signifying a general unease. The real implications of what the word has come to mean, what it says about those who use it, with or without self-consciousness is seldom examined.

1.2.i. The Image of 'the Primitive'

"They exist for us in a cherished series of dichotomies", writes Marianna Torgovnick in the opening passage of Gone Primitive:

By turns gentle, in tune with nature, paradisaical, ideal - or violent, in need of control; what we should emulate or, alternately, what we should fear; noble

savages or cannibals.⁸³

The study of the Primitive as a "modern and postmodern obsession", or what we might call primitivist discourse, must take into account the dichotomous nature of the primitive sign. Balanced on the precarious opposite side from the 'civilized', the image of the Primitive see-saws between the negative and positive aspects of representation.

Thomas writes that

"Primitivism", typified by this sort of contrast, is something more specific than an interest in the primitive: it attributes an exemplary status to simple or archaic ways of life, and thus frequently shares the progressivist understanding of tribal society as an original and antecedent form, but revalues its rudimentary character as something to be upheld.⁸⁴

He goes on to acknowledge that

What is problematic is the extent to which this New Age primitivism reiterates the negative as well as the potentially positive features of archaism attributed to Aborigines. Constructing them as culturally stable since the beginning of humanity does imply an ahistorical existence, an inability to change and an incapacity to survive modernity; this essentialism also entails stipulations about what is and what is not appropriately and truly Aboriginal.⁸⁵

Marianna Torgovnick analyses how "Western thinking frequently substitutes versions of the primitive for some of its own deepest obsessions", and how "this becomes a major way in which the West constructs and uses the Primitive for its own ends".⁸⁶

Clifford too, notes that

⁸³Torgovnick, 1990, p. 3.

⁸⁴ Nicholas Thomas, Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government, (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994), p. 174.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 176

⁸⁶Torgovnick, 1990, p. 18.

It has become clear that every version of an "other", wherever found, is also the construction of a "self", and the making of ethnographic texts...has always involved a process of "self-fashioning".⁸⁷

Torgovnick adds:

The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. It is our ventriloquist's dummy - or so we like to think.⁸⁸

Thus it is that the image of the Primitive, as the "sign and symbol of all that we have repressed"⁸⁹, becomes the alternatively idealised or demonised flip side of the West's dissatisfaction with itself. If Western theatre is perceived to be stale and spiritually empty, so 'other', 'exotic' theatres are seen to be brimming with life and vitality, laden with ritual and spirituality.

Although the Primitive as a concept, "seems to be infinitely docile and malleable, as what we want shifts and changes"⁹⁰, there are consistent themes which keep emerging. One of these, as Thomas indicates, is that Primitive societies are changeless and timeless, so bonded with nature and buffered against historical events that they offer the rest of the world (Europe and America) a vast wealth of 'folklore' and 'tribal knowledge'. Primitive societies then are seen to be the storehouses of ancient wisdom, of spiritual connectedness. Avant-garde artists then turn to the Primitive as if it were somehow at their disposal, a source of all riches, of curative powers.

The inherent dualism in the primitivist stereotype comes about as a result of a basic schism in the modern Western psyche. Colin Counsell, describing the work of Peter Brook, refers to Frederick Nietzsche's contribution to the articulation of the modern condition. In The Birth of Tragedy, for example, Nietzsche describes the split between the Dionysian and the Apollonian principles, whereby

⁸⁷Clifford, 1986, p. 23-4.

⁸⁸Torgovnick, 1990, p. 9.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Ibid.

the human subject [is] polarised between the rational and the intellectual on the one hand, and on the other, the sensual and instinctual. This dichotomy...was to prove crucial to modernist conceptions of the self, reiterated in some of the key discourses of the early twentieth century.⁹¹

Freud's concept of the Pleasure Principle versus the Reality Principle also contributes to this idea of divided modern man, as Counsell illustrates:

Freud's Reality and Pleasure Principles ...proffer an opposition between nature and culture as fundamental to humanity: a modernist version of the self existing in a primal state and a social self which represses it, shaping its desires to meet social norms.⁹²

The way in which modern civilisation demonises that which it has repressed, yet also thrives on it at the same time, is a key concern in some of Foucault's thinking. For example, Madness and Civilisation, (1961) describes how madness was invented as a category in order to

centralise and conserve power, that is, to exclude from the social fold those who did not conform to the established codes of normal behaviour...Society kept itself pure, gave itself a "good conscience" as it were, by proclaiming the necessity to "purge" itself of those undesirable elements of "difference" which threatened its sense of legitimacy.⁹³

The same process happens with Puritanism, whereby sexual (or any other kind of) deviancy is posited as an opposite, repugnant social manifestation.

In short, the codes of our modern Western civilisation frequently work in a duplicitous or self-contradictory way, condemning those very "outsiders" they themselves have created. The deviant of unreason is someone whom the puritan

⁹¹Colin Counsell, "Peter Brook and Ritual Theatre", in Signs of Performance (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) p. 174.

⁹²Counsell, 1996, p. 174.

⁹³Richard Kearney, Modern Movements in European Philosophy, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1986.) p. 292.

loves to hate yet never ceases to cultivate.⁹⁴

The above statements read like a history of the West's relationship with Africa, its deviant and fictitious 'Other' self. Some of the ways in which this imaginary shadow-self has been cultivated and used as an 'original source', will be explored in the following section.

1.2.ii. Primitivism and the avant garde

The avant garde movement, from Bakunin in 1878 until the present, has been marked by a consistent rejection of contemporary western society and a concomitant glorification of an idealized set of tropes, namely the primitive.⁹⁵ For numerous artists and theorists in a modernist framework, the image of the Primitive provided an attractive alternative to the increasingly alienating, overly rational western mind set. For artists such as Paul Gauguin, the allure of the exotic was a very real lifestyle alternative, an escape from the confines of a bourgeois morality.⁹⁶

Other artists looked to the exotic 'Other' for inspiration in their work. Many theatre practitioners, for example Alfred Jarry, Antonin Artaud, Jean-Louis Barrault, Peter Brook - to name but a few of the more influential figures - regarded the exotic, whether the Orient, Africa or Mexico as synonymous with the unconscious, the irrational, the Dionysian impulse. The so-called Primitive began to be seen as a cure-all for what many perceived to be a crisis in European theatre at the time.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 294.

⁹⁵See Innes, 1993, p. 8-9, where he describes the "identifying signature" of the avant - garde as an "unremitting hostility to contemporary civilisation." Its positive aspects in the theatre have manifested in two ways: firstly, the "transformation of the theatre into a laboratory for exploring the fundamental questions about the nature of performance and the relationship between audience and actor." Secondly, there has been an exploration of "primitivism in various shapes: the exploration of dream states, the borrowing of archaic dramatic models, mythological material or tribal rituals."

⁹⁶See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native", *Art in America*, (July 1989), vol.77, p. 119-128, for a discussion of Gauguin as "the founding father of primitivism and the prototype of the "savage" artist.

Artaud, in The Theatre and its Double, 1938, advocates a return to a type of

mass theatre, thereby rediscovering a little of the poetry in the ferment of great, agitated crowds hurled against one another...and the audience will believe in the illusion of theatre on condition they really take it for a dream, nor for a servile imitation of reality.⁹⁷

He believed that to do this,

to link theatre with expressive form potential, with everything in the way of gestures, sound, colours, movement, is to return it to its original purpose, to restore it to a religious, metaphysical position, to reconcile it with the universe.⁹⁸

Christopher Innes describes Bakhtin's fascination with carnival as an instance of the anarchic spirit of the avant-garde, the tendency to delve into the past for inspiration.

An antidote to the 'official' culture (whether ecclesiastical or feudal) that promotes an abstract spirituality at the expense of the physical, and is characterized by rigidity and intellectual seriousness, the carnival spirit asserts the biological basis of life, the oneness of human existence with the earth.⁹⁹

If we take 'carnavalesque' to imply performance forms which are by their nature anti seriousness, which embrace the grotesque; the subverting of social norms and taboos; which associate themselves with the appetite; with sexuality, laughter and the chthonic principle, then we have an apt description of the theatrical principles that the avant-garde was striving for.

Western artists, notably Picasso, began incorporating elements such as African masks in their works, or dark figures that were somehow meant to encapsulate the shadow side of modern humanity. Meanwhile D.H. Lawrence wrote passionately about primal primitive desires, base urges, smothered under heavy blankets of repression. While all this was happening, the dramatist's search for a new theatre, one that delved into the primitive, led them to borrow elements from the East, or from Africa. These searchings were always accompanied by a plea

⁹⁷Artaud, 1938, p. 65.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 51.

⁹⁹Innes, 1993, p. 7.

for a return to the ritual roots of theatre. Ironically or perhaps tellingly what was happening in the field, in the colonies, was that those who came into contact with the theatres that would have been perceived as Primitive were doing everything they possibly could to stamp it out and make it disappear. The question in this dissertation then is, does an art form such as the Nyau match up to the idea of the Primitive which the avant-garde held?

1.2.iii. The Politics of Primitivism.

The Scramble for Ritual

In the anguished catastrophic times we live in, we feel an urgent need for theatre that is not overshadowed by events, but arouses deep echoes within us and predominates over our unsettled period.¹⁰⁰

Artaud's call for a theatre form that embraces ritual is part of a quest to "return [theatre] to its original purpose, to restore it to a religious, metaphysical position, to reconcile it with the universe."¹⁰¹ Brook's purpose is similar:

he seeks a ritual theatre, one which, in celebrating the Invisible, offers its audience an experience of *communitas*. He is concerned, then, not only with theatre as a means of representation but also with its performative powers, its ability to establish a sense of communality and so heal the "sick social body" of the West. The primary question for Brook is therefore how to restore to theatre this ancient ritual function of maintaining the communal whole, how to create what he calls a "necessary theatre".¹⁰²

Brook tackled the problem of a lack of spirituality in Western theatre in much the same way as other avant-garde artists: he looked to Africa and Asia as sources of ritual and 'holiness'. He achieved a kind of interculturalism in his work, particularly his later work, by incorporating

¹⁰⁰ Artaud, 1938, p.64.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁰² Counsell, 1996, p.145.

“techniques, images and texts drawn from the theatres of the non-western world”.¹⁰³ Counsell describes how performances spawned by the Centre for International Theatre Research (CIRT)

have often been shaped by formal Asian disciplines such as Japanese martial arts katas, Yoga, T'ai Chi and Indian narrative dance, while the devices of Noh, Balinese mask and puppet drama, and the traditional Chinese circus have all featured in Brook's productions. Costume in his work is often based on Asian clothing, whereas music has drawn upon the traditions and/or instruments of Japan, Africa, Bali, Sri Lanka, Australia, Turkey, Iran and India.¹⁰⁴

While there can be nothing wrong with a growing interest in global dialogue in theatre, I doubt that the kind of interculturalism which Brook and others have invested in really does much to “heal the sick social body”.¹⁰⁵ My argument is that simply taking the trappings of rituals from other cultures and placing them out of context, in a (Western) play does little to ‘re-ritualise’ theatre. Only by actually examining *how* ritual works in those other cultures and contexts can we begin to understand how it may be possible to reinstate ritual into our own lives and theatres. In other words, we need to learn from, rather than take from cultures which we perceive to have useful ways of achieving holism in their performance traditions.

Soyinka endorses this argument, maintaining that theatre in the West has undergone a process of fragmentation whereas ‘African theatre’ is more holistic in approach. Schechner writes,

Perhaps not since classical Athenian festivals and medieval pageants have we in the west used performances as the pivots in systems involving economic, social, political and religious transactions. With the re-advent of holism in contemporary society, at least a discussion of such performances becomes practical.¹⁰⁶

I agree with Schechner that a *discussion* of holistic performance forms is useful, but I am inclined to sympathise with Soyinka's viewpoint:

¹⁰³Counsell, 1996, p. 148.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 148.

¹⁰⁶Richard Schechner, “From Ritual to Theatre and Back Again”, in R. Schechner & M. Schuman, Ritual, Play and Performance. (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

He feels that it is useless for Western stage directors to borrow “exotic” techniques, such as audience participation, if they can no longer rely on the social, religious or community structures to support it. This contrasts with African theatre which, at it’ most vital, displays a “primal simultaneity off art forms in a culture of total awareness and phenomenal involvement.”¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, one should guard against idealising theatre in Africa as *always* holistic, without taking into account the diversity of performance forms on the continent. Moreover, a standpoint which places ‘African theatre’ in a dialectical position as somehow ‘better’ than theatre in Europe is to be avoided. Torgovnick writes that a

fascination with the primitive thus involves a dialectic between, on the one hand, a loathing and demonizing of certain rejected parts of the western self and, on the other, the urge to reclaim them.¹⁰⁸

It is this process of reclaiming parts of the Western self that has been regarded as so problematic by critics such as Rustom Barucha, some of whose ideas will be discussed below.

Cultural vandalism?

The relationship between Europe and Africa, Asia or Oceania has been a troubled one at the best of times and it is hardly surprising that artists and critics in Africa have felt the need to protect their cultural heritage from a perceived threat of cultural vandalism. The fine line between what is cultural syncretism or crossover and what is tantamount to artistic or cultural plagiarism is still a highly contentious issue.

One of the intriguing features of twentieth century European drama criticism is the way it has valorized “exotic” performance traditions from Asia and Africa. Theorists such as Yeats, Artaud, Brecht, Grotowski, Derrida and Brook have found in Asian and African modes of performance those psychic, communitarian or spiritual energy sources which they find deficient in occidental theatre. One consequent motive prompting African theatre theory is the need to protect the continent’s performance traditions from over-zealous appropriation by western

¹⁰⁷Kerr, 1996, p. 11, quoting Wole Soyinka., (Art, Dialogue and Outrage).

¹⁰⁸ Torgovnick, 1997, p. 8.

practitioners and theorists.¹⁰⁹

Rustom Barucha has been one of the most vocal critics of the tendency towards cultural imperialism in the avant-garde movement. He draws attention to a comment by Richard Schechner:

People didn't question too much whether or not this interculturalism - this affection for Kathakali exercises, the precision of Noh drama, the simultaneity and intensity of African dance - was a continuation of colonialism, a further exploitation of other cultures. There was something simply celebratory about discovering how diverse the world was, how many performance genres there were, and how we could enrich our own experience by borrowing, stealing, exchanging.¹¹⁰

What Barucha objects to is precisely this non-questioning, and the comfortable assumption that the cultures being 'borrowed' from profit as much as the borrowers themselves. His concern is not that contact with other cultures should necessarily be regarded as problematic, as he admits to sharing Schechner's view that "confrontation with 'the other' can deepen 'our grasp of who we ourselves are', the Other being 'another and a mirror at the same time.'"¹¹¹

What Barucha does regard as problematic is precisely the same point that Torgovnick makes, namely that when the 'Other' ceases to be another, but becomes a *tabula rasa* onto which one projects one's ego, "then all one has is a glorification of the self and a co-option of other cultures in the name of representation."¹¹²

Africa as resource

¹⁰⁹ Kerr, 1996, p3.

¹¹⁰Rustom Barucha, Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture (Routledge: London and New York, 1990, 1993) p. 14, quoting Richard Schechner, (The End of Humanism)

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Ibid., p. 52.

The example of Brook's journey through Africa in 1972 is useful as a way of illustrating some of the points I have made thus far in this chapter. He and eleven members of the CIRT, together with an enormous crew went to 'Africa', which in this case meant West Africa, in search of 'the ideal audience', an audience unaccustomed to the conventions of theatre in the West, who would therefore be part of Brook's experimental search for a universal theatre language that would cut through linguistic and cultural barriers.¹¹³

Brook's idealisation of Africa is often vividly apparent. Like many other theorists, particularly in the sixties and seventies, he is distraught at the lack of 'humanness' in the West, and so turns to Africa and the East to find these qualities. But as Albert Hunt and Geoffrey Reeves say, "he sometimes talks about Africa in the same way that he talks about the 'natural state of childhood innocence' or 'the childhood state of oneness'"¹¹⁴

Hunt and Reeves quote Brook's vague generalised concept of Africa:

The African who has been brought up in the traditions of the African way of life has a very highly developed understanding of the double nature of reality. The visible and the invisible and the free passage between the two, are, for him, in a very concrete way, two modes of the same thing...In Africa this is understood not as fantasy but as two aspects of the same reality.¹¹⁵

Who exactly this ideal 'African' might be remains a matter for speculation. The fact that Brook has only travelled through a very small portion of Africa, namely Nigeria, does not seem to be acknowledged. As David Moody writes,

Where "in Africa" is this wonderful understanding to be found? In Lagos or Nairobi or Soweto? Even among the Yoruba, whom Brook did meet, is it true to say passage between the worlds is so "free" and "easy"?...such gross simplifications made in the name of serious "theatrical exploration" contribute to

¹¹³This journey is entertainingly documented in John Heilpern, Conference of the Birds, (London, 1977).

¹¹⁴Albert Hunt and Geoffrey Reeves, Peter Brook, Directors in Perspective Series, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.) p. 185.

¹¹⁵Ibid.

a global system of signification which contributes to the continued exploitation of societies in Africa.¹¹⁶

What Brook seems to want from Africa is a clean slate, an audience that is not conditioned by Western forms, or “an idea on which he can hang his theatrical experiments,”¹¹⁷ but the results of these experiments are difficult to determine, because there is no record from the audiences themselves of how the performances were received, all we have are Brook’s own subjective feelings, his own voice. Hunt and Reeves add, perhaps not overly cynically, that

we have to remember that what he was also doing during those journeys was exploring a way of staging a major production which he would offer in what was soon to be seen as a global village¹¹⁸

Whether or not Brook found concrete staging techniques on his journeys, Moody’s assertion that “the African audience is to fill a lack Brook perceives in the European or American audience” certainly holds true.¹¹⁹ Tourists encountering theatre forms in Africa often fall victim to the same temptation. That which appears strange is seen to be unknowable and therefore becomes a blank slate for imaginings and projections.

1.3. Anthropology and Colonialism: a fruitful collusion?

I have argued so far that ways in which Africa has been represented, idealised and ghettoised are a result of fixing the image of Africa in a series of binary oppositions, as the West’s Other. The list is probably endless: primitive / civilized; natural / cultural; emotional / reasonable; static / dynamic; spiritually full / spiritually empty. These perceptions have been generated and sustained by the workings of power and knowledge: the image of Africa becomes a ‘truth’ for all those

¹¹⁶David Moody, “Peter Brook’s Heart of Light: ‘Primitivism’ and Intercultural Theatre.” *New Theatre Quarterly*, v.11, (February 1995) p. 36.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 191.

¹¹⁹Moody, 1995, p. 35.

ensnared in the web of power/knowledge/discourse.

The attempt to write Africa out of history and out of culture has happened on many levels, and not all of them have necessarily been deliberate. Foucault's ideas have taught us that power is not necessarily a top-down process of domination and control: all strata of a social apparatus become part of their own knowledge-generating machine. Thus, producers of ethnographic texts are in fact prisoners of the process of generating images about the Primitive.

Anthropologists conducting fieldwork often faced extreme rigours in order to pursue what were - to them - noble and important goals: to understand more about the Western Self by studying the exotic 'Other'. Often the problem with ethnographic writing is not that it is intended to alienate the Primitive Other but that it was received and 'digested' by commentators who abused the powers of their dominant knowledge.

There are two major aspects of the stereotype of African culture that I have explored so far. Firstly the image of Africa as a continent without history: idyllic, changeless and perpetuated by tradition. The other is of Africa posited in a binarism opposite Europe or the West. Both these images feed into one another, and both are perpetuated in diverse and subtly shifting ways. The image of pastoral Africa has been posited by colonial myth-makers, Africanist philosophers, the hippie generation and the avant-garde alike. Both images can be read in either a positive or a negative fashion. This section of the chapter is devoted to further destabilising those images, and to examining the part that anthropology and ethnographic writing have played in their construction.

1.3.i. Recent Trends in Anthropology: new dilemmas and old

Marlene van Niekerk describes much of Western anthropology as

a history of successive strategies of othering, strategies that were (and are) at the same time rationalisations of the successive stages of imperialist expansion into,

and capitalist exploitation of, non-Western territories and cultures.¹²⁰

Early nineteenth century anthropology, argues van Niekerk, fostered an evolutionist perspective which described the development of humanity from a “state of savagery” into “civilization.” Quoting the ethnocentrism of E.B. Tylor, van Niekerk makes her point plainly:

because light has increased in the world, and where barbaric hordes groped blindly, cultured men can move onward with clear view. It is a harsh, and at times even painful office of ethnography to expose the remains of crude old culture which have passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction. Thus active at once in aiding progress and in removing hindrance, the science of culture is a reformer's science.¹²¹

If the discipline began as a speculative history of the culture of the human species, with the intention to uphold Enlightenment thinking as the ideal, then it can at least be said that anthropology has continually been able to reinvent itself. Van Niekerk reminds us of the “dialectical antithesis” to the evolutionist school: the cultural relativism of Franz Boas.¹²² This school realises the danger of Eurocentrism, declaring that cultures should be studied on their own terms, in their own language. Objectivity is held up as an ethical principle to be adhered to, in order that the ‘subject’ will not be contaminated by any prejudices the West may impose. The “culture-embeddedness” of human beings was stressed, whereby “each culture is centred on itself and can only see the world in its own terms.”¹²³

The shortcomings of relativism, as Van Niekerk quite rightly points out, is that however well intentioned, it does in fact amount to “cultural closure”, a determinism which allows only the West the privileged position of observer, whose scientific objectivity and neutrality assume that it is “only in ‘other’ cultures that people are enculturated and imprisoned in the perceptions and

¹²⁰Marlene van Niekerk, “Understanding Trends in ‘African Thinking’ - a Critical Discussion”, in Philosophy from Africa, ed., P.H. Coetzee & A.P.J. Roux, (International Thomson Publishing Southern Africa: South Africa, 1998, p.53 .)

¹²¹Ibid., p 58. Quoting Tylor, 1913 (1871). (Primitive Culture: Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, language, art, and custom.)

¹²²Ibid., p59.

¹²³Ibid., p60.

judgements typical of those cultures.”¹²⁴

New trends in anthropology, according to van Niekerk’s ideal, would achieve

a praxis where classical Western modes of othering as distancing of the “Other” will have to be replaced by taking sides, by siding with the “Other.”¹²⁵

This attitude seems to me a problematic one as well however, as it does not transcend a dialectic framework. What does seem to be of prime necessity is that anthropology pursues its more recent tendency for self analysis and self questioning. Only if the observer can turn the lens on her or himself, conceiving of the entire interaction as an *exchange*, can the operation be really fruitful for both parties. Otherwise anthropology remains a discipline which merely rationalises and sanctions the continued subjugation of people, perpetuating a situation where, in van Niekerk’s words,

The “Other” has to be conceived of as *different* and *distant* in order to rationalise a political praxis of exploitation and subjugation that takes place very close to home.¹²⁶

The following chapter explores the process of ‘otherising’ in relation to the Nyau in more detail.

1.3.ii. Constructing Culture

“Culture is a Western concept,” writes van Staden¹²⁷, and has been used to perpetuate the notion of Western supremacy. This has been achieved either by the reference to ‘culture’ as a universal ‘standard of achievement’ (in which the West has excelled); or by the division of non-Western people into manageable units of specific ‘cultures’. As such, culture is always a political issue,

¹²⁴Ibid., p 59.

¹²⁵Ibid., p 54.

¹²⁶Ibid., p56.

¹²⁷Christo van Staden, ‘Using Culture in African Contexts’, in *Philosophy from Africa*, ed. P.H. Coetzee & A.P.J. le Roux, (International Thomson Publishing, South Africa, 1998) p. 15.

and any study of culture will be full of pitfalls. Van Staden reminds us that it is impossible to speak of cultures as “essential categories” divorced from their spatial and temporal contexts. The mistake of regarding a culture as a “homogenous and undifferentiated” whole is also to be avoided. “It may make more sense,” writes van Staden, “to speak of Yoruba cultural formations than to speak of Yoruba culture as such.”¹²⁸

The question to be asked at this point is this: is there a way of speaking about ‘African culture’ without either essentialising Africa, reducing it to a finite knowable, or failing to take into account the diversity of peoples and cultures on the continent? The obvious answer is that rather than referring to ‘African’ culture as some vast sweeping term which encompasses all groups in Africa, from the Xhosa to the Tuareg, one should be focussing on local populations and cultures, in other words, working on a specific rather than a general level. But even here we run into difficulties.

The terminology used to differentiate between various population groups in Africa is politically loaded. Familiar phrases such as ‘Chewa society’, ‘Chewa culture’ or the ‘Chewa tribe’ are misleading. Chewa-speaking people are scattered throughout Eastern Zambia, Malawi and Mocambique. ChiChewa is linguistically similar to chiNyanja, chiNsenga and chiBisa, and the material culture and daily practices of these ‘tribes’ seem indistinguishable. I am also very aware of the fact that many Chewa speakers who live in urban environments still hold on to their cultural identity, while not living the ‘traditional’ village life. Can we, therefore, speak of ‘Chewa society’ without implying that it is a static changeless entity? Words such as ‘society’, ‘tribe’, or ‘culture’ are Western terms, used to classify people into manageable units. T.O. Ranger points out that

Almost all recent studies of nineteenth-century pre-colonial Africa have emphasised that far from there being a single “tribal” identity, most Africans moved in and out of multiple identities, defining themselves at one moment as subject to this chief, at another moment as a member of that cult, at another moment as part of this clan, and yet another moment as an initiate in that professional guild. These overlapping networks of association and exchange

¹²⁸Van Staden, 1998, p. 19.

extended over wide areas.¹²⁹

I prefer, with Brad Strickland, to employ the Kunda word '*mutundu*' (group or type) of people rather than a tribe or society.

The history of the *mutundu* is full of the dynamics of contests over power relationships; these are dynamics which stand in stark contrast to the static notions of "tribes" which would have been, nay, *are* convenient for government administrative purposes.¹³⁰

The use of the term *mutundu* enables a discussion of a distinct constituency, without imposing western concepts which are inappropriately constricting. Strickland notes that there has been a historical need to refer to 'societies' and 'cultures' in Africa as ways of situating practices which do not seem to have a parallel in Euro-American social models.

Since... European-centred international economic and cultural hegemony has allowed European knowledge to be that standard by which all other parts of the world might be judged on developmental value scales, many African intellectuals (and some Europeans and Americans) have had interests in arguing for the validity and integrity of African human organisational practices in European terms. Those kinds of arguments seek to legitimise African practices within the operations of "culture" and "society" as defined by the history of Euro-American social science.¹³¹

¹²⁹Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa", in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), The Invention of Tradition, (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1983) p. 248.

¹³⁰Bradford Sayles Strickland, Makhalidwe wa Akunda as Kunda Ways of Staying, PHD dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1995, p. 57. Strickland's dissertation is focussed on the Kunda people of Malambo district in Luangwa Valley, Eastern Zambia. As I have suggested, there is a great deal of porousness between Kunda and Chewa people. Strickland writes "To people not permanently resident in Malambo it is often difficult to discern Kunda people from Chewa, Bisa and Nsenga people, as their domestic languages and routines may sound and look much the same." (p. 2.) My own encounters with Nyau performances have been in a Kunda rather than a Chewa context, in spite of the fact that most of the literature which exists on Nyau insists that it is a Chewa phenomenon.

¹³¹Ibid., p. 5.

Kunda people disrupt the comfortable use of terms and concepts such as 'culture'. The alternative to defining the Kunda idiom as 'culture', they offer, is to refer instead to 'ways of staying together' or *makholidwe*.

Kunda people disorganise disciplined study of "culture" in the local explanation of their idiom *makholidwe wa Akunda*. This explanation posits the objective of any Kunda "way of staying" as the position-specific accumulation of power (*mphamvu* or *viso*). This power may be specified more precisely as *mphamvu kukhokha wanthu*, or "the power to gather people". This power is of utmost importance in Kunda practices because it drives the dynamics of alliance formation which is the basis of all Kunda production and political organisation.¹³²

It makes a great deal of difference to the student of Chewa and Kunda practices to be able to use the local idiom in this way. The main reason for this is that the notion of *makholidwe* immediately implies a dynamic mode of being: alliances to other villages and family lineages, allegiances to chiefs, versions of common histories can all be understood in terms of a constantly shifting flow. The *mutundu wa Akunda* are not caught in a timeless window called African Culture, where they can be studied as if through a microscope, with a particular set of rules which the anthropologist/tourist can use to predict certain behaviour and reaffirm certain preconceptions. Rather the *mutundu wa Akunda* can be seen as

an actively practised series of overlapping interests, whose material reality requires display of loyalties, respect, and submission - displays of immediate power relations - for its sustenance.¹³³

Again, it is the issue of classification that is at stake here. Just as there is a need to shed our tired preconceptions of what theatre is or can be, so it becomes necessary to interrogate the assumptions we hold about what defines social and cultural formations. I think it is preferable, for example to refer to a theatre form such as the *gule wa mkulu* as one of many 'ways of staying together' rather than a tradition, when 'tradition' implies staleness and sterility. *Makholidwe* can be many things: theatre forms; histories; initiation ceremonies; ways of giving and showing

¹³²Ibid., p. 8.

¹³³Ibid., p. 12.

respect and allegiance; agreed upon hunting and agricultural practices. In short a collective, material response to geographic, climactic and historical conditions. The idea of *makhaliidwe* enables us a vision of Kunda or Chewa life as fluid, open-ended and constantly redefining itself, whereas 'culture' and 'tradition' in the usual senses of the words imply stasis, closed-ness and predictability.

1.3.iii.Tradition, Cultural Purity, Fixity

The notion of 'tradition' is problematic for many reasons, the prime one being that it is too often used to suggest nostalgia for a timeless, changeless past. Post-structuralist thought has ensured at least an alertness to the casual use of such concepts. As Docker points out,

Derrida has influenced anthropologists to critique an older structural-functionalism where traditional societies are constructed as stable, unified wholes; in the post-modern world, cultural identities are perceived as multiple, fragmented and contradictory.¹³⁴

The freezing of cultures in time and space continues to happen. On a daily basis, tourists to regions such as the South Luangwa express anxiety and horror at the globalization or westernisation of 'the local people', whose 'traditions' are being threatened by 'Americanisation'. The following chapters will illustrate that it is exactly because of fluidity and the ability to bend with change that Kunda and Chewa 'traditions' such as the *gule wa mkulu* have survived so well. The attitude of such tourists is always rung about with a sense of loss: again referring back to the idea of Europe and North America regarding the Primitive as an idealised resource. The feeling of loss often seems to refer to loss of knowledge and wisdom, of folk medicine and healing, methods of ancient rituals and crafting techniques: all things which may be somehow useful for Western consumption.

I am not attempting to argue that there is no commonality or communality among Chewa or Kunda people. The *makhaliidwe* are powerful ways of forming group identities, it is simply

¹³⁴John Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: a Cultural History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 131.

desirable to regard these identities as open-ended and porous. Thus, while the notion of 'cultural purity' is becoming increasingly questionable in the context of millennial globalization, one must resist the residual temptation to speak of some villages as more conservative or traditional than others, by virtue of their isolation from European or modern influence.¹³⁵

Mudimbe is careful to explain that there is a "zero degree discourse" which interprets the genesis and "historical becoming" of a culture, a complex web of myths and legends the continued reference to which "marks the everyday practices of a community."¹³⁶

He goes on to describe how

Families reenact this discourse in their ordinary lives; mothers consciously transmit its rules to their children (teaching the origins of a culture as they force upon the child an internalisation of a civilization, its spiritual and cultural rules, and its values), and the community as a whole - through its procedures of initiation, schooling and socialisation - will make sure it produces a citizen who has the "feel" of a tradition.¹³⁷

This assertion is applicable to any group or community of people: we are all schooled on how to be citizens of our particular time and place. The problem occurs when students of culture and 'Other' cultures fail to recognise the difference between being a citizen of one's time and place, and having to cling to knowledge and traditions which have become meaningless. In distancing the 'Other', the tourist, anthropologist, colonial observer and romantic Africanist denies so-called Primitive people the right to any kind of citizenship. It is one thing to encourage traditional practices, (whether this encouragement comes from the 'post-colonial' government or from developmental workers is immaterial), but there seems to me to be a subtle agenda at work when

¹³⁵The main study area, Kalambwa village in Eastern Zambia could be described as a conservative, rural area where traditional values are upheld, if only because it is an extremely isolated village with difficult access to urban culture. It is, however, close to a mission, and so can in no way be regarded as immune to European or Christian influence: I don't believe there are areas in Zambia or Malawi for which the above would be true.

¹³⁶V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, (London : James Currey and Bloomington and Indianapolis : Indiana University Press, 1994) p. xiii.

¹³⁷Ibid.

such exhortations are made: the sub text of 'revive your traditions' can so easily be taken to mean 'stay as you are, do not change, do not become part of the global village.' When this happens we are back to where we started: the image of the Primitive as harmonious, connected to nature, whole and un-fragmented: the calm, marginal resting place in the global sea of unrest and 'real', central, political action.

CHAPTER TWO:

CARNIVAL, CATHARSIS AND *COMMUNITAS* IN THE THEATRE OF THE NYAU

This chapter examines the masking tradition of the Nyau cult, a Chewa men's secret society. I offer an in depth study of the Nyau and the *gule wa wa mkulu*. It is an attempt to understand how an holistic approach to theatre can operate in a given society. The Nyau model can offer a solution to the avant-garde call for the renovation of the Western spirit, not because it is a source from which the West can appropriate material and techniques, but because an encounter with the Nyau might provide an opportunity for the West to redefine the potentials and possibilities of theatre and performance.

The chapter will also be devoted to an exploration of how the Nyau have been perceived, represented and persecuted in recent history. Some of the texts I offer for interpretation or 'rereading' include reports made by District Commissioners in the early 1950's. These letters and official documents speak volumes about the way in which Nyau has been persecuted.

Emigh writes

Cultures don't create performances. Individuals living in complex and contested cultural circumstances do. The hope is that by drawing closer to an understanding of how these particular performances proceed, and what is at stake within the various contexts that give rise to and sustain them, we may also come to a clearer understanding about theatre itself as an artistic and social phenomenon.¹³⁸

Much of the literature of post-colonial studies is concerned with rewriting history, adjusting the imbalances of previous power relations. There is no question that this is a commendable activity, that the injustices of colonialism must be analysed and re-analysed. However it is often the case that while the broader implications of coloniality are discussed at length, the specifics are neglected. As Thomas writes, --

¹³⁸ John Emigh, *Masked Performance: The Play of Self and Other in Ritual and Masquerade Performance*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1996, p. xix)

it is becoming increasingly clear that only **localized theories and historically specific accounts** can provide much insight into the varied articulations of colonising and counter-colonial representations and practice.¹³⁹

It is with this in mind that I introduce the theatre of the Nyau, or *gule wa mkulu* as a masking tradition of the Chewa of Eastern Zambia and Malawi. This theatre form is not viewed as an isolated event; it exists within the social, physical and political environments out of which it arises.

2.1. Introducing the Gule wa Mkulu

2.1.i. The Chewa in Context

I must stress that the idea of a Chewa people as a discrete and homogenous entity is misleading. Ranger quotes Wim van Binsbergen as saying,

Modern Central African Tribes are not so much survivals from a pre-colonial past but rather largely colonial creations by colonial officers and African intellectuals... Historians fail to qualify the alleged Chewa homogeneity against the historical evidence of incessant assimilation and dissociation of peripheral groups... They do not differentiate between a seniority system of rulers imposed by the colonial freezing of political dynamics and the pre-colonial competitive, shifting, fluid imbalance of power and influence.¹⁴⁰

The Chewa are a *mutundu* who are and have been in constant flux, influenced and colonised by more than just the Europeans. Ngoni invasions began before European infiltration and settlement. In Malawi, the Yao were responsible for a substantial amount of cultural imperialism and domination which impacted heavily on Nyau societies.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹Nicholas Thomas, Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. ix. (Bold font added).

¹⁴⁰Ranger, 1983, p. 248.

¹⁴¹See Ian Linden and Matthew Schoffeleers, "The Resistance of the Nyau Societies to the Roman Catholic Missions in Colonial Malawi", in The Historical Study of African Religion, T.O. Ranger and I. N. Kimambo, (eds), (London: Heinemann, 1972.), p. 252-5.

The second point that needs to be made at the outset of this chapter is that Nyau is not exclusive to the Chewa, as is often believed. We cannot speak of Nyau practices as 'belonging' to Chewa people, and Chewa people alone. Schoffeleers reminds us that "the cult is shared by the Mang'anja and the Chewa peoples north of the Shire Highlands and extending into N.E. Zambia."¹⁴²

In an investigation into Nyau practices, initiated by the Provincial Commissioner of the Eastern Province of Zambia situated in Fort Jameson, the correspondence reflects a pressing need to establish whether or not the Nyau Societies are Chewa institutions or not.

As stated in your paragraph 3 of minute 246/2/8/6 of the 31st January, 1955 addressed to the Reverend T. Botha, it is confirmed for this District that the Nyau Dances are essentially a Chewa institution and never danced by non-Chewa. Membership remains selective and certain villages only could request permission from the Chief to hold a dance.¹⁴³

This necessity on the part of the colonial administration to establish the boundaries of where Nyau performances could be found was motivated by the same drive to classify and categorise people into 'tribes' as manageable units. If it can be established where the performances take place and by whom, it is assumed that they will be easier to manage and control. In reality, because of intermarriage and other variables, Nyau performances were not as easy to predict and contain as the Provincial Commissioner might have hoped.

Matrilineage

Chewa societies are matrilineal and uxori-local. When a young Chewa woman is married her husband is bound to come and stay with her at her mother's village. This is for the protection of the young woman. If her husband proves to be violent, lazy or otherwise unsuitable it is easier

¹⁴²Ian Linden and Matthew Schoffeleers, "The Resistance of the Nyau Societies to the Roman Catholic Missions in Colonial Malawi", in The Historical Study of African Religion, T.O. Ranger and I. N. Kimambo, (eds.), (London: Heinemann, 1972.) p. 257

¹⁴³Letter from the Office of the District Commissioner, Lundazi, to the Provincial Commissioner, Fort Jameson, dated 15th March, 1955.

for him to be expelled from the village of his mother in law than otherwise. In this way it is ensured that women do maintain a relatively strong voice.

Women are regarded as the managers of the domestic sphere, shouldering most of the household and agricultural tasks. Hoeing the fields, planting crops, pounding maize, cooking, brewing beer and collecting firewood and water are just some of the daily tasks that women perform. Bridging the world of the animals of the wilderness and the men and women of the domestic realm are the performers of the *gule wa mkulu*, a group of young men who call themselves the Nyau.

Matrilineal lineages in the Chewa social system are frequently cited as the single most important reason for the existence of the Nyau. Marriage is regarded as a secondary rite of passage in Chewa society, not nearly as important as the *Chisungu* (maturity) Initiation ceremony.¹⁴⁴ Thus husband and wife remain associated with their mother's lineages, children are affiliated to their mothers and mother's siblings. The dominant male figurehead in a child's life will be his or her uncle, the mother's brother, *malume*.

Consequently, although a man in this society has great power over the members of his own matrilineage, he has only a limited voice in matters concerning his own children. It is even said that husbands are nothing but those who sow seeds of children inside their wives.¹⁴⁵

It is exactly this marginalisation of young husbands which is said to be the founding reason for the formation of the Nyau. When asked about origins of Nyau societies, men would typically reply: "women have their secrets, about birth and so we have made our own secrets...we have made secrets about death."¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴Personal interview with Ruth Banda, September 1996.

¹⁴⁵ K. Yoshida, "Masks and Transformation among the Chewa of Eastern Zambia", *Senri Ethnological Studies*. Vol 31, 1992, p208.

¹⁴⁶Father Boucher, personal interview, Mua Mission, September 1996 The "secrets about death" are the Nyau secrets pertaining to funerary rituals, these being major occasions for the performances.

The Nyau as a Secret Association

When Chewa boys reach puberty, they are required to undergo an initiation in order to become members of the Nyau secret society, and in order to become adult men. The word Nyau therefore is used to refer to the secret society and the men who wear the masks, as well as their practices and some of their paraphernalia.

Chewa and Kunda women have their own secret initiation rituals which usher the young girls into womanhood. The *Msungu*, or maturity initiation teaches the young initiates, known as *chiNamwali* secrets surrounding birth, menstruation and the intricacies of married life. Many of the oral histories state that the Nyau originated as a response to the secrecy of the women's initiation. Rangeley records an informant as saying,

When the men saw that the women were instructing the girls at initiation ceremonies, the men also started to give instruction to all who entered the company of the dancers of Nyau.¹⁴⁷

The performers are masked and their identity is always concealed, in order that they may be protected from speaking out against their neighbours.

There are several methods employed to construct the aura of mystery and secrecy which the Nyau perpetuate. On a social level, the Nyau maintain an exclusivity which amounts to something of an open secret. The men are supposed to keep their secrets to themselves but, as one informant told me, women 'trick' the men into revealing secrets by withholding sexual favours. All the rehearsals, training and construction of masks take place in the graveyard or *dambwe*, which is situated away from the domestic centre of the village, thus perpetuating the 'otherworldly' mystique of the Nyau, the fact that they are representative of spirits of the dead. The Nyau members are thus said to 'fish' the spirits out of the graveyard.

On a theatrical level, further devices are employed to conceal identity. Voices are altered, and the

¹⁴⁷W.H.J. Rangeley, "'Nyau' in Kotakota District", *Nyasaland Journal*, vol. II, no. 1, (January 1949), Netherwick Press, Blantyre, p. 37.

performers use a nasal falsetto or imitate animal noises when they use their voices at all. Distance is always maintained, with dancers only remaining in the village while they are actually moving. When they are not dancing they remain on the outskirts of the village, where invisibility is assumed.

The night masks, or *Nyau Yolembe*, are associated with much stricter taboos of secrecy than the day masks. Huge basket structures which can conceal up to ten people inside them, are assumed by non-initiates to be '*zirombo*', a word which means both 'wild beasts' and 'spirits' (the singular being *chirombo*.) Elephant masks and eland masks are among the most popular, and the most impressive of these 'beasts', but a range of creatures are depicted, including cars (*galimoto*) and tortoises (*fulu*). Figure 2 shows a *Nyau Yolembe*, a zebra, being led by a young initiate with a rattle.

The people inside one of these structures will form a train, and the last person, walking backwards, sweeps away the footsteps. The beast thus magically floats over the ground, terrifying the children into good behaviour. Alternatively, they leave circles or strange marks on the ground behind them, which is why they are known as the *Nyau Yolembe*: the Nyau that draws. Masks are made in the graveyards at night away from the rest of the village, (again, men being on the margins) and all masks are burned after a festival.

Another system used to maintain the secrecy on a social level is the use of riddles. Nyau initiates will test outsiders with a riddle "What is a Nyau?" Only those who know the secrets of the cult can answer "A Nyau is a man". The rest will say it is a wild beast, or a spirit.¹⁴⁸

An interview conducted at Kalambwa village reveals the mechanics of this "open secret" system which the Nyau employ as a way of maintaining otherness. After the performance, the members of the Nyau cult were gathered in the shade of one of the huts. I was asking questions about the different masks and the songs which accompanied them. This was not a transgression of the guarded information as it only concerned content of the dances and not the 'how' or 'why' aspect of them. At some point however the boundary was crossed:

¹⁴⁸ Personal interview with Johnston Phiri, September 1997.

I asked, How was that mask made? The one with the white eyes that shine like that?

There was a long silence and uncomfortable laughter. Informant A replied “No. You don’t understand. You see we do not make these Nyau. We only look after them. You see we go into the *dambwe* (graveyard), and we find the *zirombo* (creatures) there. We escort them into the village for people to see, then we take them back.”¹⁴⁹

This incident illustrates the rigorousness with which the more precious secrets are protected. Such secrecy becomes a *makhaliidwe*, or a way of keeping the group bound together. I was permitted to probe up to a point, after which the ranks closed and there was no more allowance for the possibility that human beings could be behind the Nyau masks.

Chewa Epistemology

The people who live in Kalambwa village, on the edges of the Luangwa valley, in Msoro district, are Kunda. Kunda people may find various ways of defining themselves as an entity distinct from Chewa or Nsenga people. These *makhaliidwe* (ways of staying) may include the telling of history stories, stories of origin, they may also include theatrical events, initiation ceremonies which provide a sense of identity for a *mutundu*. Perhaps the most important *makhaliidwe wa Akunda* (way of staying as a Kunda), is the giving of allegiance to the chief: *kupasa ulemu*.

The concept of respect-giving is helpful in gaining an understanding of Chewa and Kunda life. There is no direct English equivalent of the word *ulemu*. It means respect, but it also refers to good manners, or etiquette. To give respect to someone (*kupasa ulemu*) however, is more than simply being polite, it implies acting within an entire code of behaviour.

Kunda (and Chewa) people have a very functionalist attitude towards knowledge. Knowledge divided into knowledge *of* something (ie ‘I know that person, I know that news) or knowledge *how to*. In all cases, knowledge is regarded as useful. The elders are storehouses of knowledge. One way in which one gives respect is to give knowledge, to tell someone a useful piece of information. The elders therefore are worthy of much more respect because they know many

¹⁴⁹Personal interview, Kalambwa Village, 19th September 1997.

more useful things than any one else. To show your respect for someone, you would give them knowledge and in doing so, you would also be creating a bond with that person. To *pasa ulemu* to a chief therefore is to create an allegiance with them. Members of a Kunda village, a particular *banja* or family lineage, will give respect to their headman who in turn gives respect and allegiance to a particular chief. Giving allegiance to a Kunda chief therefore determines Kunda belonging.¹⁵⁰

The systems of allegiances are unstable, complex and interwoven. I would have to have a thorough understanding of and familiarity with each and every village in order to know exactly where allegiances lie in a given area. For the purposes of this dissertation, a great deal of commonality is assumed between *mutundu wa Achewa* and *mutundu wa Akunda*. I do not use the two interchangeably but I do assume that there is a great deal of porousness between these and other groups in the area, particularly with the common fact of intermarriage between the different *mutundu*.

Knowledge is useful. This fact of Kunda life cannot be stressed enough as it guides all sorts of aspects of daily life, and has particularly strong repercussions for fieldwork. People are constantly curious or suspicious as to why you want this information. To want to know is to want to do. Not to know for knowledge's sake. For example, if a tree or herb has medicinal purposes it is useful, therefore it will be named, catalogued in oral records and remembered. The same does not apply to plants or pieces of knowledge which do not have use. If a person is curious as to the uses of that plant - suppose it is poisonous - then the suspicion will be that you want to use it to poison someone. The implications for Imperialist attitudes towards the collection of knowledge in colonised areas is therefore enormous. To have knowledge is to have power, and vice versa.

Several of these principles are reflected quite clearly in Nyau practices. The fact that elders are seen to be the storehouses of knowledge is seen in the fact that the council of elders must always be consulted if a Nyau dance is to be performed. The secrecy is also explained in part by the fact that all the knowledge, of how to make masks, how to dance, knowledge pertaining to the theatrical aspects of the *gule wa mkulu*, must be protected, because the Nyau is a potent force

¹⁵⁰Pamela Guhrs, personal communication, Mfuwe district, August 1996.

and the power (knowledge) must not get into the wrong hands.

2.2. Conceptualising the Gule wa Mkulu.

2.2.i. The Nyau in the Literature.

With such levels of secrecy surrounding Nyau masquerades it would be impudent, impolite and lacking in respect (*kulibe ulemu*) to try to search for the heart of the Nyau, or the essence of what the performances 'mean'. Records and descriptions of *gule wa mkulu* are all from quite different viewpoints and historical perspectives. My own accounts of performances I witnessed are necessarily incomplete, and I believe that it is better for them to remain so. Although many 'secrets' of the Nyau have been published, the most detailed pieces of knowledge have been respected.

As Strickland notes, Kunda history telling varies from village to village and so do versions of the Nyau masquerades. Later in this chapter I will examine a range of texts which describe or respond to the *gule wa mkulu*, as well as offering my own subjectively-situated commentaries on performances I have witnessed. It will become apparent from these that there cannot be an 'authentic' Nyau performance. At the same time, all Nyau performances are authentic, responding as they do to the environment and changing conditions which spawned them.

Before presenting the reader with such a plethora of descriptions and viewpoints, it will be necessary to try to extract some general features and trends of the Nyau masquerades, in order to provide some sort of base from which to speak.

The texts I offer include some glimpses from Yoshida's detailed encounters with Nyau performance. His extensive research in the field included a year long stay in a Chewa village which culminated in his initiation into the Nyau secret society. His work remains a text, necessarily incomplete and subjectively situated. Any encounters between Nyau and a foreign fieldworker will necessarily be coloured and shaped by withheld information and suspicion at worst, or at best by caution or simple forgetfulness.

My own encounters with Nyau are to be regarded as unreliable texts. Both are recorded on video, but the very fact that a video recorder was present during performances changes the nature of the 'show'. It is hoped that by placing all these texts alongside one another, a conceptualisation of the *gule wa mkulu* can be arrived at.

Many of the writers who have encountered the *gule wa mkulu* have attempted to essentialise it, to place it in a strict categorical envelope. Among the European or American commentators of Nyau almost all attempts to understand the performances have been made from a Western paradigm, where researchers try to find a European category that 'fits'. Schoffeleers records a French traveller, Edouard Foa, who after witnessing a performance in 1890, described it as "a ballet portraying the temporary reconciliation between man and animals and their subsequent separation."¹⁵¹ Schoffeleers finds strong parallels between the performances of the Nyau and the "liturgical celebration" of the Catholic Church.¹⁵²

Timpunza Mvula et al. note that studies on the *gule wa mkulu* have been either one sided or incomplete. They cite Rangeley's comment that "although the term '*gule*', dance, is used, these *gule* are really mimes or small plays."¹⁵³ Schoffeleers on the other hand focussed on the religious rather than dramatic nature of the *gule wa mkulu*. Kaspin too refers to the practices of the Nyau cult as "traditions" and "archaic rituals",¹⁵⁴ thus cementing the performance in the realm of religion instead of facilitating a discussion of the *gule wa mkulu* as art in its own right.

Thus much of the early research on the Nyau is, as Schoffeleers acknowledges, "woefully inadequate in that almost all of it has been collected and written by Europeans and for European

¹⁵¹Dr M. Schoffeleers, 'The Nyau Societies: Our Present Understanding' in The Society of Malawi Journal, January 1976, vol. XXIX, no. 1.

¹⁵²Schoffeleers, 1972, p. 257.

¹⁵³Kamlongera, Nambote, Soko & Mvula. Kubvina: an Introduction to Malawian Dance and Theatre. Zomba: University of Malawi, 1992, p35. Hereafter referred to as Mvula et al.

¹⁵⁴Deborah Kaspin, 'Chewa Visions and Revisions of Power: Transformations of the Nyau Dance in Central Malawi' in Modernity and its Malcontents, in J. & J. Comaroff (eds) (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993.)

consumption."¹⁵⁵ The problem with research that attempts to pigeon-hole the *gule wa mkulu* is that inevitably it is only partially understood. As I indicated in the previous chapter, my position is not that the performances should be regarded as **either** ritual **or** theatre. The commentators who stress only the religious nature of the *gule* or the aesthetic aspects miss the point that it is an holistic performance form. They also miss the point that theatre does not need to be purely aesthetic, it can include religious and political aspects at the same time as aesthetic ones. As Ogunba writes, "such strict categorisation into religious and secular, religious and political, seems alien to the spirit and nature of the traditional African."¹⁵⁶

The situation has been rectified somewhat since the 1970's, with the work of Mvula et al, who

do not seek to show that *gule wa mkulu* performance is a form of ritual drama or not, but to examine the functions, structure and content of *gule wa mkulu* performance as an aesthetic indigenous art form in which music, dance, educational process, and drama are totally integrated to constitute one indivisible symbolic and reflexive restored behaviour.¹⁵⁷

Peter Probst has attempted to understand the *gule wa mkulu* by referring to it in relation to a number of forms. He covers a much broader range in describing it as

- A carnival, during which time the normal strict social rules are reversed, one can be rude to one's mother in law, flirt with people other than one's spouse. A venting, catharsis of social tensions.
- A cosmic ritual, marking the movement between two seasons, the death of the old season, the rebirth of the new.
- A symbolic representation of the spirit world.
- A way to placate the *mizimu*, or ancestral spirits.

¹⁵⁵Dr M. Schoffeleers, 'The Nyau Societies: Our Present Understanding' in Society Of Malawi Journal vol xxix no 1, January 1976. p. 59.

¹⁵⁶Ogunba. p5

¹⁵⁷Mvula et al, 1992, p35.

-A prayer for continued fertility.¹⁵⁸

Rather than attempting to find an appropriate label or genre for the *gule wa mkulu*, I am interested in exploring the role of the Nyau in Chewa society as a *makhaliḍwe*, in order that I may a) interrogate my own understanding of the function of theatre in society, and b) shift the Imperial Gaze away from its obsession with the Other, and back onto a more honest assessment of Self. Perhaps in examining the function of the *gule wa mkulu* in its own context it will become clear that the solution to the West's perceived theatrical crisis is not imitation of the Other, but an effort to open up the conception of what theatre can offer. In order to do this, it will first be necessary to offer an overview of Nyau theatrical activities.

2.2.ii. Gule wa Mkulu: a Dramaturgical Overview

For this purpose I will draw from Yoshida's field studies, which give an excellent account of the occasions on which *gule wa mkulu* are performed. His field work was conducted in Eastern Zambia, at a village in Chadiza district. I also draw heavily from Mvula, who writes as a Chewa male, and therefore has less of the 'outsider' status which characterises so much of the writing on Nyau. He posits a dramaturgy of the *gule wa mkulu* which is clear and concise and extremely helpful in providing the reader with an idea of the nature of the performances. I will then describe some aspects of a performance I myself witnessed, also in Eastern Zambia, in Kalata village, Msoro.

Families of Masks

There are three broad categories of masks, all of which correspond to spatial categories in Chewa cosmology. Day masks, which are carved wooden face masks, are associated with the domestic sphere, the village. The village (*mudzi*) is seen to be the domain of women. The day masks deal with satirical issues, critiquing events in the village. The night masks are basketry structures

¹⁵⁸Peter Probst, "Dancing Aids: Moral Discourse and Ritual Authority in Central Malawi", Paper presented at the 11th Satterthwaite Colloquium on African Ritual and Religion, Satterthwaite, 22-25 April 1995.

which are associated with the bush, the outside of the village and represent mainly animals. (See plate 2). The bush is regarded as the domain of both animals and ancestral spirits. The other category of masks are the intermediary masks which travel to and from the inner realm of the village and the outer, bush world. These masks comprising of cloth and feathers are referred to as *kasinja*, and represent the spirit of the recently deceased. They travel from the *dambwe* (graveyard) outside of the village where the men are preparing the masks, into the village where the women are preparing beer. They tease the women, steal maize husks required for the building of night masks and return back to the *dambwe*.

Although skits range from comments on political events to satirical sketches on lazy wives, only the wooden face masks portray visual characterisation as such. Characters such as the prostitute, the drunken man, the lazy husband, the grotesque European couple or, in former times, the cruel District Commissioner or tax-collector, are all frequently portrayed stereotypes. These sketches are often quite didactic, but also sometimes purely entertaining. Their purpose is to maintain the status quo, to provide social criticism, functions which satire achieves remarkably. The performers are masked and their identity is concealed, in order that they may be protected from speaking out against their neighbours. The *kasinja* masks also deal with social satire, but the content of their dances are only indicated by the song lyrics as sung by women chorus, and the movements or gestures of the dancer. The visual appearance of the masquerader remains consistent throughout, regardless of the material being performed. Regardless of whether the *kasinja* performs, or whether it is another character such as *Natola* (the one who picks up or steals anything left lying about in the village)¹⁵⁹, the satire is always relevant to local and domestic politics and events.

The audience participants believe that the actors are spirits of the ancestors which must be feared and revered, thus the performers in this category [anthropomorphic masks] freely sing and dramatize sketches about the corrupt village chief and court counsellors, foolish husbands who are henpecked by their possessive wives, lazy or impotent husbands, the stupid and selfish chief who does not protect the interests of his people, the untidy and quarrelsome wife, the

¹⁵⁹Mvula et al., 1992, p. 38.

uncle who wants to bewitch his nephew...¹⁶⁰

The *Nyau Yolembe* on the other hand are associated with spiritual matters, such as effecting the transformation of an initiate into a man/Nyau, or transporting the soul of the deceased into the bush where it will transform into an ancestral spirit. Their significance will be described below, and in Chapter Three, where I describe the importance of space with regard to the night masks. Appendix II lists a variety of different characters and mask types.

The Occasion

Part of the reason that commentators have been baffled as to the nature of the *gule wa mkulu* is that the performances often coincide with public events which have a ritual status, for example puberty rituals, mortuary rituals and harvest. While it is true that the *gule* are ritualistic in the sense that they are efficacious, it is not advisable to conceptualise of the performances as either ritual or theatre, as the function and content of the dances are multi-layered and multifaceted. Broadly speaking however, a distinction can be made between the day performances which are more satirical, educational and entertainment based, and the night performances, known as *Nyau Yolembe* (Nyau that draws) which are more grounded in ritual.

Traditionally, Nyau masquerades were performed at the funerary rituals of important persons in the community. The occasions often had multiple purposes because the novices were initiated at the same time, and the ceremonies themselves would be timed to coincide with harvest and beer brewing.

If someone in the village dreams of a *makolo* [ancestor] and they have been told “why are you forgetting about us? You must dance the *gule wa mkulu* for us.” Then they must arrange for it.¹⁶¹

In recent decades the timing is not necessarily as rigid and it is not uncommon for the Nyau to be commissioned to create a performance for a specific occasion. In Malawi the Nyau are often

¹⁶⁰Mvula et al., 1992, p. 38-41.

¹⁶¹Personal interview, Mike Banda, Mfuwe, September 1997.

called upon to perform at state functions, although a conservative Nyau society might regard such 'professionalism' as improper. At Kalata village, where I witnessed a *gule wa mkulu* performance, I was at first informed that we could not arrange a performance because it was not respectful to give money to the Nyau.¹⁶² However, if we happened to be passing by the village the following Saturday and there 'happened' to be some *gule* dancing, that would be acceptable.¹⁶³

It is for funerary rituals, however, that the *gule wa mkulu* is originally intended. Yoshida describes the Chewa funeral rituals in some detail. The first part of the ritual is the burial rite (*utaya*). Yoshida records that the burial is largely Christianised in most parts of Zambia and Malawi. The Bible is read and there is no major Nyau activity although undisguised Nyau members will carry out the task of burying the corpse. However in some parts the burial is associated with the day masks, the carved satire masks, while the second part of the funeral, the commemorative rite (*bona*) is associated with the night masks, the basketry structures. There is also an interim rite, known as 'washing hands' (*cisamba manja*) which takes place two or three months after the corpse is buried. Its function is to purify those who were involved in the burial.¹⁶⁴

The period in between the *utaya* and the *bona* rite is a transition period during which the spirit of the deceased (*chiwanda*) roams around the village. It is the final rite, the commemorative, *bona* rite which actually transforms the ghost into an ancestral spirit (*mizimu*). This is achieved by the appearance of the basketry structures (*Nyau Yolembe*) in the actual village, transgressing the boundary between bush and village, and carrying the spirit from the hut belonging to the

¹⁶²The issue here is not so much one of the dancers being insulted by the 'buying' of performances as one of secrecy. The *chirombo* come from the bush and money does not mean anything to them. To maintain this illusion, it is necessary to find alternative ways of paying the dancers: our negotiations at Kalata village resulted in the decision to give a 'gift' to the men who 'bring' the *chirombo* from the bush.

¹⁶³Personal field notes, Kalata village, September 1997.

¹⁶⁴Yoshida, 1992, p, 217.

deceased into the bush, where the *mizimu* dwell.¹⁶⁵

The *bona* rite has to be performed in the dry season after harvest, when there is enough grain to use to brew beer. The *bona* rite, as recorded by Yoshida, is often made to coincide with initiation rites, and the *gule wa mkulu* thus serves both as entertainment for everyone at the occasion as well as providing an opportunity for the neophytes to be taught the secrets of Nyau, and to be initiated into the cult. Probst notes that just as the night masks “capture the spirit of the deceased and return with him into the graveyard as the place where both the nyau and the ancestors rest,” so the “Puberty rituals...follow a similar scenario. Just as nyau spirits claim dead people during mortuary rituals they claim boys during male initiation.”¹⁶⁶ He doesn’t go so far as to suggest that the initiation signals a death of the old (the child) and the rebirth of the new (the adult). But I think this is certainly the case. The Nyau is carrying off the old, symbolically dead self of the boy.¹⁶⁷

These are the ‘traditional’ occasions for Nyau performances: the commemorative part of the funerary ritual, coinciding with beer brewing, harvest, and initiation rites. However there are, as I have mentioned, other occasions for the masquerades. These may include “festive occasions such as Independence anniversary celebrations; and political rallies”¹⁶⁸

The following section describes the structure of a *gule wa mkulu* masquerade.

¹⁶⁵Probst, 1995, p. 8. It should be noted, however, that not all the night masks perform this important function. It is the *kasiyamaliro* basketry mask, considered to be the most potent of all the basketry masks, that transports the spirit of the deceased. The *kasiyamaliro* represents an eland, one of the most spiritually significant animals in Chewa as well as other Bantu mythologies. See Credo Mutwa, *Isilwane*, (Cape Town: Struik Publishers, 1996) p. 160.

¹⁶⁶Probst, 1995, p. 8.

¹⁶⁷See Yoshida, 1992, p. 219, for a description of how the arrival of the neophytes is announced. The instructor shouts to the Nyau in the dambwe “*Tilubwera uko ni maliro uyo*” (we are bringing the dead.)

¹⁶⁸Mvula et al., p36.

Structure of Performance

Once the decision has been taken to perform a *gule wa mkulu*, the **executive committee**, or **council of elders** fixes a performance date, allowing four weeks for new songs to be written, masks to be made, beer to be brewed, and drums to be maintained. The executive committee is made up of the village headman (*mwini mzinda*) who is the patron of the performance and the owner of the *gule wa mkulu* society. The *wakunjira* is usually the nephew of the patron, and his duties include

protecting his dancers and the performance arena from bewitchment which may result from competition between actors, jealousy of either *eni mizinda* (patrons) or audience, or from mere ill feeling. He is further charged with the responsibility of maintaining the smooth running of the *gule wa mkulu* performance.¹⁶⁹

The *Tsabwalo* is the person responsible for the maintenance of the *bwalo*, or dancing arena. If fencing needs to be done, or cleaning or clearing, then it is his job to see to it. He has to ensure that there are no roots or uneven surfaces that the dances may trip over. Finally the *Tsang'oma's* duties include collecting the drums, repairing them, making sure that they are in good condition, and rewarding the drummers with prizes where necessary¹⁷⁰.

During the preparation period, the women remain in the village, preparing the inner space, sweeping the performance area and making the beer, while men carve the masks away from the village.

All of this is evidence that the *gule wa mkulu* is not a 'spontaneous' performance which can be reproduced at any moment. There is a tendency to regard performance in Africa as some sort of 'off the cuff' event that happens without rehearsal or preparation, a spontaneous outburst. The foregoing is evidence that a great deal of preparation is required, as with any theatrical event the world over.

¹⁶⁹Mvula et al., 1992, p. 36-7.

¹⁷⁰Ibid., p. 37.



Plate One: *Kasinja* headdress.
Photo: Ben Guites, 1997.

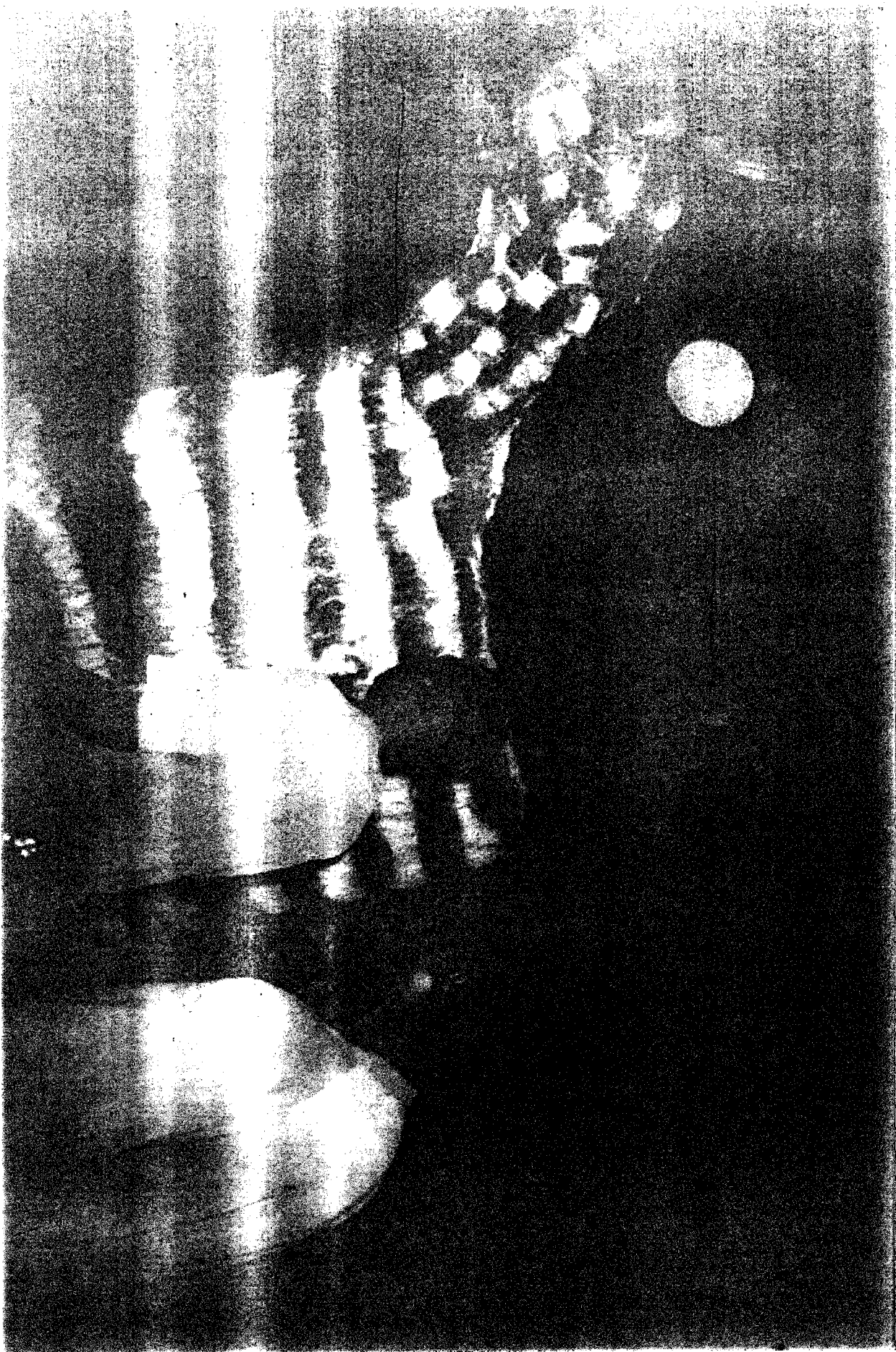


Plate 2: Nyam Yolemba, 1997
Photo: Kam Gahnd.

It is during this **initial preparation period** that the *kasinja* are very active, and begin visiting the women, joking with them and gathering maize husks. They are characterised by guinea fowl and chicken feather headdresses which symbolise “the elusive but earthbound nature of the spirit.”¹⁷¹ (See plate 1). The *kang'wing'wi*, who also ‘play’ with the women, accompanying them into the bush to collect firewood, play a similar role. Both *Kasinja* and *Kang'wing'wi* can be thought of as **heralds** and are liminal figures, able to transgress the boundaries between village and dambwe, and signalling the beginning of a reversal of the usual social norms. Mvula et al. write,

The *kang'wing'wi* plays the role of an erotic man who is nevertheless conscious of the sexual taboos of the society. Normally two or even three of them find the women busy fetching firewood in the forest. They hum to announce their arrival. Then they try to court the women. The women shout at them to scare them away. As the *Kang'wing'wi* withdraw, the women provoke them by singing:

Eee eyaye chilombo msala
 Ee eyaye chilombo msala
 Bwera, bwera!
 Bwera, bwera!
 Bwera.
 Nanga umadzchita
 Apo ubwerera, aye?

Oh, what an erotic animal
 Oh, what an erotic animal
 Do come, do come!
 Do come!
 What did you want then,
 Since you are running away?

They then go on to describe how

On hearing the song the *Akang'wing'wi* go towards the women, and the women wiggle their hips and buttocks to tease them. But they withdraw again without taking advantage of the women’s provocation.¹⁷²

Yoshida also presents an illustrative account of how the normal social taboos begin to be erased with the appearance of the ‘heralds’.

¹⁷¹Yoshida, 1992, p. 221.

¹⁷²Mvula et al., 1992, p. 43-4.

A *kasinja* found a woman taking a rest and started ridiculing her:

Kasinja: "Why are you so long-faced?"

Woman: "I am not feeling too well"

Kasinja: "Is there something wrong with your pussy?"

People: Burst into laughter.

Kasinja: "You have probably hurt it by making love too much with your husband."

Woman: "No. I have a stomach ache."¹⁷³

Joking about or referring to the genitals of another person is one of the greatest insults in Chewa life. Only close cousins can even use such terms when speaking to one another. Yoshida argues that the exchange of such insults between the *Kasinja* and the women indicates that

the living represented by the women, and the spirit of the deceased embodied by *kasinja*, have entered into a very close relationship similar to that of joking partners. This is then supposed to console the spirit of the deceased.¹⁷⁴

While this may well be the case, such joking relationships are also a clear sign that the carnivalistic atmosphere associated with the *gule wa mkulu* has begun, and the disruption of usual taboos is encouraged.

The next phase of the preparations would be the **audition and rehearsal**, in the *dambwe*, where old songs are presented, and the public may criticise. After it has been deemed what is acceptable and topical, composers teach the singers the songs and choreographers teach new initiates the dances. Drummers teach the drumming patterns and the chorus is taught the hand-clapping patterns.¹⁷⁵

The night before the main day performance, the atmosphere is set, with *chirombo* representing ancestral spirits, jackals, lions roaming through the village making animal noises, singing, barking and whooping like mournful hyenas.

¹⁷³Yoshida, 1993, p. 222.

¹⁷⁴Ibid., p. 223.

¹⁷⁵Mvula, 1992, p. 44-5.

These harbingers of the performance prowl in the corners of the village in alternating sequences for nearly the whole night. On the day of the performance the *bwalo* is set, ready for the dramatic experience.¹⁷⁶

For the **day performance**, the audience is seated in the *bwalo*, the open air theatre arena. Strict seating arrangements are maintained: a) elders at the entrance, to prompt the actors and inspect costumes. b) drummers next, facing the audience. c) facing the drummers, women, girls, non-initiates, who form a chorus, arranged in a horse-shoe shape. d) in between the elders and the women, men are arranged according to their social status.¹⁷⁷

At this point I shall describe the day performance which I witnessed at Kalata village. After the space had been prepared and swept, and the drums had been tuned by heating them over a small fire, six drummers beat out a rhythm to call the other villagers to gather to the performance. This was followed by a long period of waiting, during which time I watched some comings and goings, such as men walking off into the bush with a sense of shared purpose and secrecy, and a great deal of consulting. At one point a small child followed one of the men into the bush, in spite of an older girl shouting after him not to go where he was going. Minutes later the man came back holding the child and gave him to the older girl to hold, telling her to make sure he was not followed. I overheard one child saying excitedly to another: "*Nyau alikudambwe*", (there are Nyau at the *dambwe*). During this period the women and young boys and girls began to slowly gather around the *bwalo*.

The first masks to enter into the space were three carved wooden masks, including a baboon, and a mask with red and blue 'ears' which I later learned was called *Lowya*. They walked through the village, making animal noises, bearing green leaves in their hands and mouths, to indicate that they have come from the bush. Having walked through the village, led by a boy with a rattle, they came to rest on the border, underneath some trees, where they continued making hyena-like whooping noises.

¹⁷⁶Ibid.

¹⁷⁷Mvula et al., 1992, p. 46-7.

After their appearance, two *akasinje* and a wooden mask made the same procession-like journey through the village, from another direction, and joined the *virombo* under the tree. They were then joined by an old man character, led by a boy holding a rattle/shaker, (see plate 3) and he also joined them under the trees. The overall impression was that the village was being invaded, or penetrated from all angles. The boundaries that kept the village separate from the bush were literally beginning to dissolve, as the alien *virombo* entered the public living space. (See plates 3 and 4, the masks being led through the village, and plate 5, masks waiting on the outskirts of the village.)

The three masks which entered first then danced briefly. (See plates 6 and 7.) As soon as they had finished dancing, a huge blast of wind came from nowhere, and blew through the bwalo, stirring up dust and knocking fruit off the tree. (See plates 8, 9) The space was swept again and soon the rest of the dances continued.

Some of the skits that I witnessed through out the course of the day were more accessible than others. To understand the full meaning of some of the songs one would have to be familiar with a lengthy period of village history, as well as all the characters that appear and reappear. Nonetheless I can give a superficial impression of the content of the dances and songs, and in doing so I can begin to indicate what the 'uses' of the *gule wa mkulu* are.

The old blind man with a stick, who moves with the frail gestures of the elderly, goes by the name of *Ndodo* (which means 'stick'). The lyrics of the song which accompanies his mournful dance refer to the fact that he is all alone in the world, with no children, no money, no clothes.

"Mwana wanga napita kanaGawa"

"my children have gone, I'm going to see the chief."

He is led on by the young boy with the rattle, and the drums start only when he is in the space. He stands bent and hunched over, and gradually lets the rhythm infuse his body, it begins to animate him, first his feet, then he begins tapping with his stick. He walks in a circle, hands his stick to the boy, walks faster in the other direction, circles, stops in the middle and performs a

stationary dance, most of the movement initiated by his knees.

“*Wawa, wawa, Chowawa ene,*” sing the women: “Pain, pain, life hurts / I hurt”

He then continues the circular dance, moving further away from the centre each time he stops, until he is on the side closest to the trees. As he gets closer to the others his movements begin to fade and flag, but still in a stylised manner, like a dying puppet doll. He then swoops back into the space one last time and the boy comes and gives him his stick.

By embodying the sadness of an old man who has no one, not even a chicken to take to the chief, the *Ndodo* character serves as a warning to those in this life: be kind to your elders, you do not want them to end up like this sad old man. The following sketch follows a similar warning. The dance and song (*nyimbo*) is called *Lowya*, which is also the name of the imagined audience or child that the song is addressing, for it is an instructional song: “*Lowya*, the earth eats people, you must behave in this life, you must stay with respect,” the message of the lyrics run, and it is obviously a song the children are familiar with, for they breach the boundary of the acting space, run into the *bwalo* and out again, in a familiar sort of ‘tag’ relationship with the dancer. The purpose of this song, the village headman tells me, is to teach respect:

“*Lowya* - it’s the name of someone - it is teaching respect (*ulemu*). It is teaching the people that the land they’re on is far away from our people that have left us (died). The earth is eating the people. Everyone should be careful because all men and children have died. We must keep ourselves safe.”¹⁷⁸

The lyrics do not translate easily: “*Lowya, panse apa nipatale pasila wanthu.*” means something like “the place here is far away from others (that have died).” The implication of the song is that people die because of things like bad manners and fighting, and no respect, this is why the earth eats people and takes them far away. Therefore you (*Lowya*) must watch out and behave, and have respect, otherwise you will end up far away from your friends and family on this land.

¹⁷⁸Personal interview with Headman of Kalata village, 19th September, 1997. Msoro District.

Other characters which appear that morning include *Mukutumula* who is rude and unfriendly and will not play with the children. When they run into the space, he kicks dirt at them and chases them away, much to their glee. 'Proud Banda', or *Banda chituMeka* whose dance consists of arrogant strutting and posing, is supposed to deter from proud and worldly behaviour. *Kwala kwase* was a character with small bumps all over his skin and he scratched and itched his way through his dance to song lyrics which speak on his behalf, asking

Kwala kwase

kwala kwase

nikatere nikatere

sinatikuziwa kuti nikaloso.

Kwala kwase

Kwala kwase

who made me?

Who made me?

I do not know why I am like this.

One particularly striking carved mask with white shining eyes had a particularly terrifying quality and a ghostly appearance, drifting through the space. Once it had passed through, it never reappeared. When I asked the headman, Jeremiah Banda, what this mask signified his reply was simply that it was called *Chidantere* and it was supposed to scare people. "The power, that comes out of its eyes will make you scared," he said.¹⁷⁹

Generating fear and respect is a key feature of the night masks as well. The *Nyau Yolemba*, or Nyau that draws [circles on the ground] are protected by even greater taboos of secrecy than the day masks, partly because the levels of virtuoso and theatrical trickery are more impressive. Like a magician who needs to protect the mechanics of her craft, the Nyau need to keep a certain distance between themselves and the audience.

As with Egungun masquerades, the more skilled and impressive the masquerader, the more

¹⁷⁹Ibid.



Plate 3: Nyan character masks, passing through Katsite village.
Photo: Ram Gehrms, 1997.



Plate 4: Entering the village. Kalata village, September 1997.

Photo: Ken Gubins.



Plate 5: On the border between village and bush.
Katata village, September 1997.

Photo: Sam Guitus



Plate 6: Nyau performance, Kalata village, September 1997.
Photo: Sam Gurnes.



Plate 7: Nyan performance. Kalata village, September 1997.
Photo: Pam Gubins.

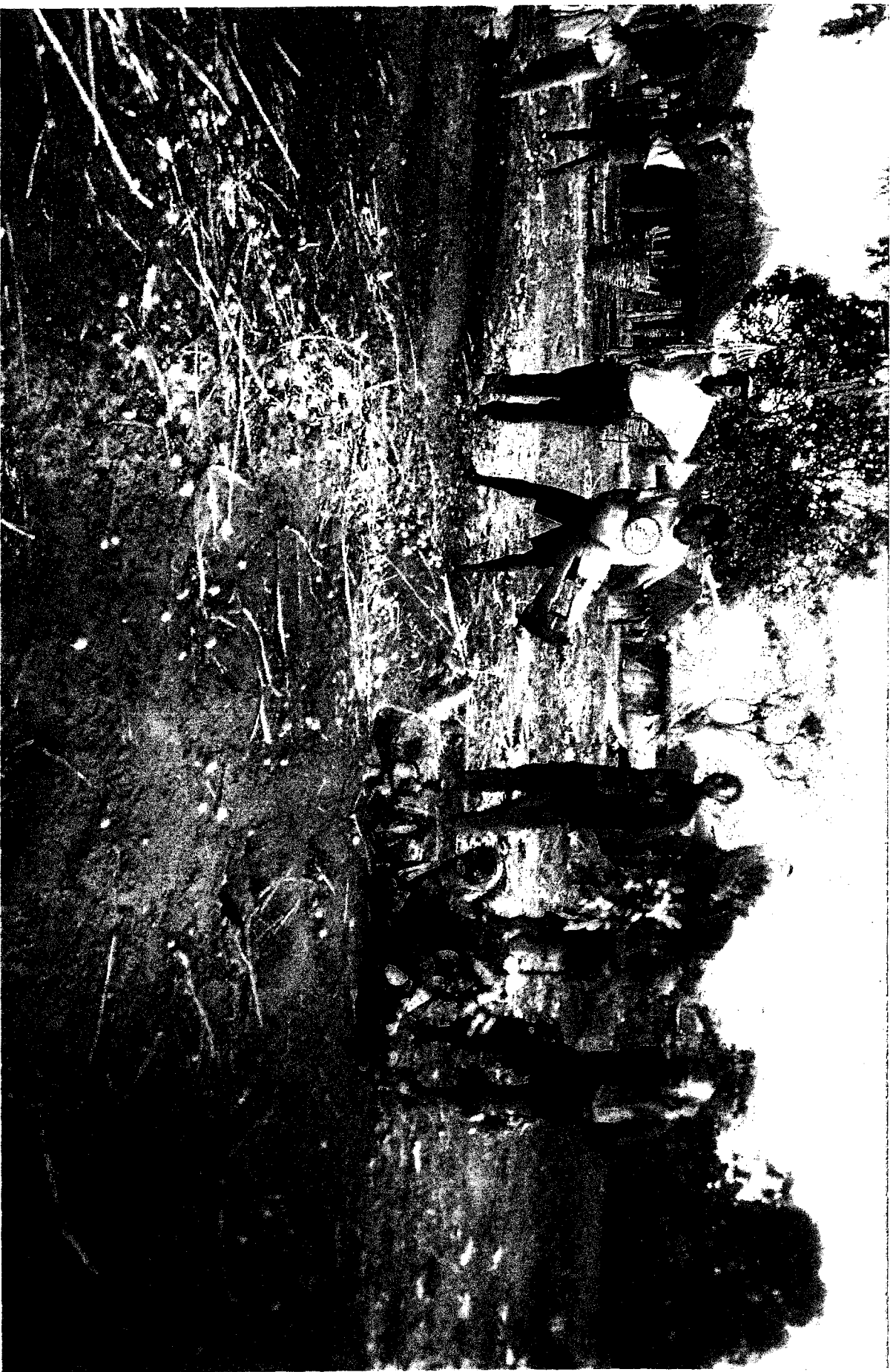


Plate 8: Nyau masks. Katata village, September 1997.
Photo: Pam Guitars.



Plate 9: Kasinga marks. Katata village, September, 1997.
Photo: Ron Gutman.

respect is generated for the family of the person in whose honour the performance is being held. The *virombo* must truly appear to be magical beasts which perform strange deeds, draw circles in the ground and depart as mysteriously as they came. The following section explores some 'uses' of the *gule wa mkulu*.

2.3. Interpreting the Gule wa Mkulu: Some uses of theatre

The next section of this chapter is devoted to interpreting the *gule wa mkulu* from several standpoints. Having examined so many differing perspectives on the performances it has become clear to me that it is impossible to find one single interpretation to the Nyau performances. What follows is an attempt to offer some very diverse opinions on Nyau masquerades. Some of these arise out of extremely personal responses to performances I witnessed: how they affected me emotionally. I record meanings which came to me spontaneously, without claiming to speak on behalf of anyone else but myself. Neither am I claiming that any of the impressions I received were necessarily 'put there' intentionally. The section is a pure 'reader response'.

I will also offer some more reflective, but equally subjective, thoughts on the role of the *gule wa mkulu* in society, as well as some ideas on what theatre can be and can do. Inspiration for these ideas comes from a diverse range of sources. I draw from Artaud, Bakhtin and Torgovnick, as well as from conversations held with Nyau masqueraders themselves. Once again, I speak from the border, extracting meaning from local as well as global sources.

It is impossible to pinpoint one single function for any sketch in the *gule wa mkulu*. Even the dances and songs which seem obviously didactic have multiple meanings and operate on many levels. For example, the *Lowya* song is aimed at teaching people about *ulemu*, about good behaviour and not being jealous of others or practising witchcraft. However it is also quite simply a poetic expression of the transience of life: "the earth eats people".

The character Proud Banda (*Banda chituMeka*) carries an overt moral message, but he is also a familiar stereotype who prompts an enormously joyful reaction of recognition when he appears.

Makanja, the stilt-walker, dances to a song which tells of an *ulendo wamwamba* - a journey in the sky, and both the song and the dance, I was told, refer to Samora Machel's death by plane crash. *Makanja* dances high up above everybody's head, and then, in an astonishing moment of virtuoso, ends up on the ground, miming death throes. The Samora Machel reference is a metaphor for an underlying message: "be flexible, don't be tough or you will fall."¹⁸⁰

Much of the literature emphasises the **cathartic** aspect of the *gule wa mkulu*, the fact that it acts as a 'safety valve' or psychological relief: an outlet for the shadow side which has to be sublimated in society under strict social taboos. Mvula et al. write that

the *gule wa mkulu* performance is functional in that the performers and the audience-participants find in it a means of expressing their suppressed desires which can legitimately be released in the world of *gule wa mkulu* performance.¹⁸¹

The **educational** qualities of the performances are also frequently stressed. One of the *akasinje* at Kalata danced to a song which is aimed at teaching the children what is good to eat and what should be avoided. Grasshoppers, they are told, make an excellent snack.

Satire, in the *gule wa mkulu* can have a potent political efficacy. Social affairs, current issues and difficult members of the community can all be dealt with through the vehicle of satire. Ideas of opposition can be expressed indirectly, couched in humour and caricature. Probst provides an excellent example, seen in a village near Lilongwe. He describes the appearance of two Nyau:

Herbs and roots around the ankles and wrists identified them as sing'anga, local doctor or medicine man. However there were also modern elements. Both figures wore motorcycle glasses on their head. While the small figure was carrying a camera with which he went around snapshooting the audience, the big one held a telephone in the hand. Entering the middle of the dance ground and holding the receiver on his ear, he spoke loudly the following words with an imaginary official somewhere in town:

Yes, yes, I am here. I will dance shortly.

Hello hello, yes I am here, I will dance.

¹⁸⁰Interview, Jeremiah Banda, Kalata Village, 19th September 1997.

¹⁸¹Mvula et al., 1992, p. 58.

But listen there are many people here, I can see people.
 I can see people, many people looking not good. The people here are thin, very thin indeed.
 There is AIDS, do you hear me.
 The people here, they die of AIDS.
 AIDS, yes, there is AIDS.
 You better come quick,
 AIDS, there is AIDS.¹⁸²

As Probst points out, this brief sketch works on several levels at once. On the surface it appears to be highlighting an awareness for AIDS issues, and the morality issues associated with AIDS. However it also serves to satirize the incompetence of government officials who never hear the pleas or complaints of the constituency.¹⁸³ The fact that the Nyau represent familiar characters such as *sing'anga*, yet are complete with modern trappings pushes the issue into another realm, illuminating the tension between the National which involves government officials, national laws and broad, top-down governing methods; and the Local, which involves another set of laws, medicinal practices and moral issues. The issue of AIDS therefore, is underscored as far more complex than it might initially appear. AIDS is shown up to be an issue of morality as well as a political concern. Village policies are shot through with wider, national as well as global policies, moralities and decision-making processes. Satire is the ideal vehicle for illustrating such complexities without making them seem esoteric or didactic.

So far, the image we have of the *gule wa mkulu* is that of a performance form which is intrinsically involved with the texture of daily life in the community out of which it arises. Domestic issues, such as the problem of one person in the village who is not doing their fair share of labour, or political issues such as the unfair collection of taxes in colonial times, can be addressed and critiqued within the safety of relative anonymity. The children can be taught to be good and well-behaved citizens of their village. Myths are retold, ancestors appealed to,

¹⁸²Probst, 1995, p. 1-2.

¹⁸³Ibid., p. 14.

neighbours have fun poked at them. It does not seem to me to be such a mysterious Other at all, but very similar, serving very similar purposes to theatre in the West.

Except in that it is populist rather than elitist. And like popular theatre forms in the West, such as Augusto Boal, or historical popular forms such as Commedia d'el Arte, the *gule wa mkulu* is not afraid to mix the political with the holy. The following section will explore this in more depth.

The Nyau Performances as Holy Theatre

Holy Theatre is a term coined by Peter Brook which refers to a type of performance that “aspires to the communication of intangible, universal levels of experience.”¹⁸⁴ Auslander identifies two concepts of holy theatre which emerged from the avant-garde movement. The one originates with Copeau; a notion of theatre which “brings its spectators into emotional harmony with one another by celebrating their common identity as human beings.” This is referred to by Jacques Copeau and his followers as “Communal Theatre”.¹⁸⁵ The other type springs from the work and ideas of Artaud and Grotowski, and is “therapeutic theatre designed to accomplish spiritual renewal by unmasking repressed psychic materials.”¹⁸⁶

In a discussion of the significance of the *gule wa mkulu* in Chewa society it is not necessary to distinguish, as Auslander does, between holy and communal theatre. The *gule wa mkulu* serves a multitude of purposes, ranging from the cathartic to the educational, and fulfills both the roles of holy theatre: bringing the community together and effecting psychic healing.

The psychic healing takes place on many levels: the psychological cathartic release, which vents repressed emotions such as antipathy towards one's mother-in-law is as important as the fact that men who otherwise feel marginalised are given a sense of purpose and belonging. It can be

¹⁸⁴Philip Auslander, “‘Holy Theatre’ and Catharsis”, Theatre Research International, vol 9 no. 1, (Spring 1989),

¹⁸⁵Ibid.

¹⁸⁶Ibid.

argued that if healing is taking place on an individual microcosmic level, then it follows that the community will be more harmonious.

Nyau and *Communitas*

Victor Turner describes *communitas* as a shared communal experience which transcends the usual boundaries between people and categories, a state which occurs when the normative rules of society drop away:

For me, *communitas* emerges where social structure is not. Perhaps the best way of putting this difficult concept into words is Martin Buber's - though I feel that perhaps he should be regarded as a gifted native informant rather than as a social scientist! Buber (1961) uses the term "community" for "*communitas*": "Community is the being no longer side by side (and, one might add, above and below) but with one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from I to Thou." ¹⁸⁷

Communitas is an experiential rather than a cognitive or reflective mode of being, explains Turner, and it "breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority."¹⁸⁸ He adds that

It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or "holy", possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalised relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency.¹⁸⁹

One very important point which must be stressed is that although, as Turner writes, "Instinctual energies are surely liberated by these processes," one must not make the mistake of assuming that *communitas* is "solely the product of biologically inherited drives released from cultural constraints." On the contrary, *communitas* comes out of such faculties as "rationality, volition and memory," and it is the mature and well-prepared members of society who are responsible for

¹⁸⁷Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), p126-7. Quotes Martin Buber, (*Between Man and Man*).

¹⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹⁸⁹*Ibid.*

initiating it. Thus one must not fall into the trap of thinking that the experience of *communitas* is exclusively a defining criterion for 'primitivity' in the popular sense of the word. *Communitas* and structure go hand in hand, argues Turner,

Maximisation of *communitas* provokes maximisation of structure, which in its turn produces revolutionary strivings for renewed *communitas*.¹⁹⁰

Turner's concept of *communitas* is extremely helpful for the purposes of understanding a) the 'usefulness' of the *gule wa mkulu*, b) the 'usefulness' of theatre in any context, particularly in the ways in which Artaud and Brook conceive of it: as a way of restoring the communal whole. The challenge as Brook articulates it is

How to make theatre absolutely and fundamentally *necessary* to people, as necessary as eating and sex? I mean a theatre which isn't a watered-down appendage or cultural decoration to life. I mean something that's a simple organic necessity - as theatre used to be and still is in certain societies. Make-believe is *necessity*.¹⁹¹

Although I am suspicious of the methods which many artists employ to restore this element of 'necessity' to theatre, I believe that theatre can effectively initiate *communitas*, and that *communitas* is necessary for a healthy human existence. Turner refers us to John Dewey on this matter.

True theatre "at its height signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events." When this happens in a performance...A sense of harmony with the universe is made evident, and the whole planet is felt to be at *communitas*.¹⁹²

The sense of atonement with humanity, animals, and even inanimate objects is a state of being

¹⁹⁰Ibid., p. 129.

¹⁹¹John Heilpern, Conference of the Birds: The Story of Peter Brook in Africa. (London: Methuen, 1989.) p. 22.

¹⁹²Victor Turner, "Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual and drama?" in By Means of Performance: Intercultural studies of theatre and ritual, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) p. 13. Quotes John Dewey.

which finds expression in the *gule wa mkulu*, particularly in the night performances where

The spirits and animals come in from the bush and a temporary reconciliation with man is enacted as they associate with the people in the village around pots of beer, as in the Chewa creation myth they were first united around the waters which came with them from heaven.¹⁹³

Yoshida quotes an informant, an elder, who explains the appearance of the *Nyau Yolembe* in terms of the following mythic narrative:

“God (*mulenga*) originally created humans and animals. Humans and animals therefore lived very happily in the old days. Even when humans got hungry, they only had to look up in the sky and say, ‘*shomo mulenga*’ (‘God have mercy’), and animals would die of their own accord and provide meat. However, because humans started feeling jealous of one another and started using sorcery, God became angry and separated animals from humans. Since then, it has become necessary for humans to chase and hunt animals when they get hungry. Animals, on the other hand, started running away from humans, and if they encountered humans by chance, they began hurting them or causing them illness. But even today, during the *bona* rite, that is, when the deceased return to God, animals remember the old days and come back to the village. Then, they cry for the deceased together with humans.”¹⁹⁴

Returning to the Source

What is interesting about this narrative is that it points to a common underlying theme in a number of artistic and theatrical ventures. This theme might be titled ‘pre-lapsarian nostalgia’ or an expression of longing for a timeless, idyllic past in which harmony reigned. Kristeva might call such a longing a need to return to mother. The work of many avant-garde artists reflects this longing quite frequently, in their search for a theatre that is connected to ‘the source’ of inspiration and creativity. Bakhtin’s thought refers to a nostalgia for union with chthonic forces, with nature and the earth symbolically swallowing one up. Carnival, for Bakhtin was in part about

¹⁹³ Schoffeleers & Linden, 1972, p. 257. See also Schoffeleers, 1976, p. 63.

¹⁹⁴ Yoshida, 1992, p. 236. Collected from Mr Sebeliano Phiri in Lavu village, 2 Oct. 1995.

the people's awareness of being part, through the language of the lower bodily stratum, of the eternal processes of the natural world, a cosmic relationship to the earth, sun, and star-filled sky.¹⁹⁵

The point of my argument is that one must make a distinction between the *experience of communitas* and the *longing to experience communitas*. To regard an Other culture as somehow possessed of the secret, the real union with the earth mother as it were, is fallacious. These same cultures are more than likely consumed by the same longing for a return to a womb-like Eden. To assume that 'they' know something that 'we' don't simply perpetuates the myths about 'Other' cultures that keep the separations greater than ever. 'They' are more in harmony with nature, more in tune with their 'natural instincts', more possessed of 'Natural Rhythm' than 'we', these are the myths that are perpetuated: a continuous thread of binary oppositions, each of which supports a futile stereotype.

In order to disrupt these binarisms it is essential to realise that all societies can experience *communitas* and all societies probably long for the mythic union with the 'earth mother', or a state of original union with nature. There is a subtle difference therefore, between one image of the *gule wa mkulu* (or African Theatre in general) which states that the performances are instances of unbridled Dionysian frenzy based on unreason and superstition and producing anarchy; and another image, which states that, as with most theatre forms, the very existence of the performance itself signifies a longing for chthonic merging, and the moments of *communitas* which may take place are part of a process of willed, reasonable seeking out of an ecstatic mode of being.

Finally, it seems justifiable to make the claim that if there are 'universals' in performance, then the 'longing for' as well as the ability to achieve *communitas* are common features of performance the world over.

There are, as I have indicated, several 'uses' of theatre, several areas in which theatre can be a powerful instrument of social and spiritual regulation. Two of these: the power that theatre has to **define the boundaries of existence** and to **make sense of the physical and cosmic**

¹⁹⁵Docker, 1995, p. 180.

environments; and the power to produce a mode of being which we might call 'ecstasy' or *communitas*, will be discussed at greater length in chapters three and four respectively.

2.4. Shifting Viewpoints, Moving the Stationary Eye/I

In the following section, I will dwell briefly on the issue of how the *gule wa mkulu* has been perceived and represented, and this discussion will reveal more about the **political** aspects of the *gule wa mkulu*. In order to do this it is necessary to delve into the not-so-distant historical past.

'Evil and Hellish Practices': Nyau Societies and Authority.

Sir, as a Christian who is responsible before God for this people, and on account of the love of Christ Who died for a lost world I beseech you to forbid this EVIL and Hellish practise. It serves NO good but only leads men to HELL.¹⁹⁶

Having looked at some of the 'uses' of *gule wa mkulu* and Nyau, and having gained a view, if a very situated one, of what the performances entail for audience and actors alike, I found myself being more and more impressed, not only by how flexible the organisation has been over the years, but also how integrated the performances are with social aspects of being a Kunda or Chewa. The Nyau performance that I witnessed in a Kunda village, was probably at some point appropriated from the Chewa and changed to suit the particular needs of life in Kalata.

It was all the more astonishing to then read some of the reports and correspondences of district commissioners and missionaries in Eastern Zambia in the early 1950's. I was aware that Nyau had been persecuted under colonial rule, and aware too of the kind of dual horror and fascination that seems to exist in the minds of missionary/explorer men and women who were encountering masked dramas in central Africa in the first half of this century. But it is only in actually reading some of these documents that one experiences the full absurdity and melodrama of the colonial relationship to the 'irrational Other' I reproduce verbatim from an anonymous fragment found

¹⁹⁶Letter from Rev. Botha. Dutch Reform Church Mission, Kamoto, 29th November, 1954, to The Provincial Commissioner, Fort Jameson. Reproduced with kind permission from the National Archives of Zambia.

in the National Archives. Something About the Masked Dance was sent to the Provincial Commissioner in response to his investigation into the Nyau in Eastern Zambia.¹⁹⁷

For some years the write (sic) of the article had been aware of the existence of the mysterious "Nyau" ceremonies which attend certain funeral practices, but because this masked dance of death had been accompanied by such unparalleled bloodthirst, the British government put a stop to it and from that time the dances were performed secretly in distant villages where the eye of the white man could not reach them.

In this first paragraph alone there are a number of familiar tropes concerning the Primitive. The phrases "dance of death" and "unparalleled bloodthirst" are typical of the sensationalist terms used in colonial propaganda to paint a picture of the 'savage' as an object of fear and loathing whose dangerous behaviour the spotlessly blameless British Government (capable of no "bloodthirst") is magnanimously eradicating. The "eye of the white man" recalls Clifford's and Ong's idea that ethnographic writing has been all concerned with vision and reason and not enough with other senses.

The following paragraph describes how the "writer" (still anonymous) is accompanied by "old Zibalo".¹⁹⁸ They go back to the "Mission Station" to fetch "a piece of cloth which was the writer's contribution to the funeral to show his goodwill."

In the next paragraph the "writer" describes attending the funeral, being

¹⁹⁷The 'article' was enclosed in a letter to the Provincial Commissioner, Fort Jameson, from the Officer in Charge, Rural Development Headquarters, Katete, dated, 18th March, 1955. The only reference to it is as follows: "I enclose for your interest a letter dated 14/3/54 from Mr Brewer who is Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at Stellenbosch and a translation of an article in 'Aventuur', an Afrikaans publication, on an account of Nyau."

¹⁹⁸ A familiar trope in popular adventure fiction of this time: the 'trustworthy native' who serves faithfully. See Dorothea Hammond and Alta Jablow, The Africa that Never Was, (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1970) p. 163. "The loyal African servant is a stock figure in both fiction and non-fiction. Whatever faults he may have are redeemed by his devotion to his master...The loyal servants... are significant figures, for they are the only Africans to elicit love from the British

the only white man amongst a crowd of half mad moaning people. The wail that rose from hundreds of throats was enough to drive one mad....Not far from here the masked dancers lay waiting for the coming of darkness.

Late that evening the writer sneaked into the village. The moon was not up yet, and everything was quiet. He reached the hut of old Zibalo safely. He had persuaded the African that morning to accompany him to the dance. They both realised that it was a most risky undertaking as nobody could say how a number of natives incited by savage emotions would act - the cruel mutilation of live animals and even human beings that came across their way, was not unknown.

It was midnight, the moon was shining; Zibalo was restless and shoved along, to and fro without saying a word. Suddenly without any warning, the beatings of the drums started very near the huts - a terrible noise sounded through the village. The dancers had come! The noise kept on for some time and then changed like into the roar of a fierce lion. Heavy footsteps came nearer and the shuffling of things dragged along the ground could be heard. The footsteps went into the direction of the drums. Zibalo and the writer left the hut and disappeared into the bush. The writer's face, arms and legs were smeared with a kind of sticky leaf in order to remove the smell of the white man.

They reached an open space (near the graves). The drummers ceased their beatings - everything was quiet - the dancers were coming. All of a sudden a masked figure appeared in the centre of the open space with high jumps and sending the most alarming yells through the night. Out of the darkness the masked figures appeared one by one. They stood quite still for some time. In the bright moonshine two long rows of figures covered with grass, made their appearance and formed a circle round the dancers. Then the wild Death Dance started, accompanied by the wailings and groanings of the two rows of figures on the ground. This went on for about two hours. The wailings stopped; the masked figures squatted. Rattling sounds came from the other side of the open space. A group of naked figures carrying something like a human body appeared amongst the dancers and according to the awful sounds which escaped from the body, the writer concluded that it had been half choked. The naked figures threw their load amongst the masked dancers and the next moment they came down on it like a lot of vultures. At this moment Zibalo seized the hand of the writer; the two of them disappeared amongst the trees and ran for life.

This passage really speaks for itself. It is crowding with Primitivist tropes. Note the fear that the author feels, as it is impossible to predict "how a number of natives incited by savage emotions would act - the cruel mutilation of live animals and even human beings that came across their way, was not unknown." Note too the details which the author chooses to highlight. The mention of the full moon associates the performance with the dangerous, feminine, lunar principle; the "wailings and groanings"; the "half mad moaning people" and "terrible noises"; the nudity are

all mentioned as if to reinforce an image of licentiousness. Note also the assumption that the figure which the naked figures are carrying has been “half-choked”, instead of the possible alternative that this entrance might be part of a performance and therefore the “awful sounds” might be feigned. This is indeed a vision of the repressed Western shadow: a vision which strikes terror into those who fear they may have confronted that worst aspect of themselves. Deconstructed, it may seem foolish, but it is an imagined vision which continues to grip people with horror and dread.

2.6. Shifting Performances ; Tourism, Galimotos and the Case of Zuze

Charles Mbuze is generally known in the Mfuwe community as ‘Zuze’. He has achieved a degree of personal fame and stardom which is unheard of in strictly conservative *gule wa mkulu* society. Traditionally, Nyau dancers are completely anonymous. Indeed, to the uninitiated, the figures they see dancing before them are not even human but are taken to be creatures that have been found in the bush by the men who know about *Nyau*. One could say that the entire success of *gule wa mkulu* rests on the fact that the identity of the dancers is concealed, thus enabling a greater freedom of speech, criticism and satire.

But Zuze is a freelancer. He learned his art in a Chewa village in Chadiza district several hundred kilometres away. He lives and performs in a Kunda speaking area where the strict laws and codes of *gule wa mkulu* do not apply. He carves his own masks and performs solo dances with accompaniment from several drummers and sometimes a female chorus but not necessarily. In a *gule wa mkulu* society a performer is always part of a group, even if he appears alone and performs a solo, it is part of a larger whole. The carving of the masks is usually the job of one carver who has the required medicine and protection. When I asked Zuze in an interview, “can anyone make a mask?” he replied, “Yes anyone can make a mask but they don't because they fear trouble.” It is this “fearing trouble” that separates freelancers like Zuze from those who operate only within the closed corporation of the Nyau society.

Another taboo that Zuze breaks quite regularly is that of speaking while wearing the mask. At the end of his act he announces to the audience his stage name, '*Pondo Chizere*' which means "he who stamps his feet and carouses". This takes the place of a curtain call or bow signalling the end of a performance. Traditionally, Nyau dancers are only permitted to make animal sounds and howling noises while wearing a mask.

The reason I am pointing out these differences in what one might call a performance ethic is to illustrate the questions of tradition, stasis and adaptation that challenge citizens of increasingly urban areas. Schechner, in his essay "From Ritual to Theatre and Back Again", documents cases where tourism has affected performance, where shows performed for tourists are devoid of the ritual efficacy which characterises their 'traditional' status.

Tourists (or anthropologists) who bemoan the degeneration of African Performance due to Westernisation are, however, missing the point. Zuze does not believe he is 'betraying' Nyau societies by acting alone. He is simply using the skills he has to make money from tourism, making his own performances, telling his own story. The version which tourists see in tourist villages may be very different from the performances which take place at funerary rituals with the elders present, but to see them as 'watered down' versions of the Authentic Nyau is extremely patronising. Zuze would be insulted if he were told he were not a 'real' Nyau, or that he is a victim of the encroaching West.

The Tourist Gaze, in this case, needs to overcome its obsession with that particular binarism, authentic/inauthentic, and understand that the performances which Zuze offers in the tourist village are true to the spirit of Nyau while being inconsistent with its traditions. One moment performing a subtle satire of a tourist unable to walk because he is so laden with camera equipment, another moment portraying a local stereotype of a *mzungu* resident on his 'Honda' motorbike, unable to kick start into action, Zuze is as much a liminal trickster as the Nyau described by Kerr who, in the 1950's, imitated a *mzungu* (European) with a fondness for eggs but a refusal to keep his own chickens.¹⁹⁹ It is only because of their flexibility, their capacity to adapt to change and outside influences, that the Nyau are still so resilient to external pressures and so

¹⁹⁹See Kerr, 1995, p. 54.

‘authentic’.

Conclusions

Nyau Masquerades are not as ‘Other’ as they might initially appear to the unaccustomed eye. Tourists, anthropologists, missionaries and adventurers have on several occasions recorded feelings of negativity and fear in response to performances they have witnessed or heard about. However even a superficial understanding of the context out of which the performances arise serves to illuminate their usefulness in society. And ultimately the question which needs to be asked about performance is ‘what can theatre do, why do we need it?’ The challenge which Brook isolates is how to make theatre *necessary*?

Those who encountered theatre in Africa and refused to believe that it could be regarded as theatre were using superficial and limiting criteria for defining what theatre is or can be. Had they looked at the possibilities that theatre has within a community, rather than dwelling on such characteristics as audience participation, theatre buildings, dialogue, and whether or not ‘reality’ was being represented, they might have understood both their own theatrical traditions and those ‘Others’ in a different light.

Theatre has the capacity to be a stringent political forum; a means of healing social schisms; a vehicle for expressing the inexpressible. If the *gule wa mkulu* can be a way of ‘criticising neighbours without offending them; expressing pain and loss; trying to make sense of a confusing and often hostile universe while still helping people to laugh at themselves, it has certainly achieved the status not only of theatre but of ‘necessary theatre’. My response to Brook would be that all theatre is necessary, or it can be. But theatre makers in the West cannot solve their ‘crisis’ by imitating or borrowing in superficial ways from exotic theatre forms. In order to know what theatre *is* we must know what it can *do*. Rather than recycling styles of theatre, and finding a ‘new look’, we must search for what it does, how it affects us.

If we begin to look at theatre in terms of what it can do, how it can encourage *makholidwe*, or ‘ways of staying’ amongst people, and if it can create *communitas*, then we begin to see that

theatre does have an underlying common impulse in Kalata Village as in Stratford-Upon-Avon. It has the capacity to create community, to heal. It has the ability to give several people at once a chill of horror or a smile of recognition.

Paradoxically, one of the clearest ways of coming to terms with this commonality in theatre is to celebrate difference. To understand that Nyau theatre is not the foreign 'Other' but simply one of many ways of making theatre 'necessary.' Imperialism attempts to reduce what it cannot understand to a quantifiable commodity. The reason why it failed to do this with the Nyau is because the very nature of these performances: they are so multi-faceted and have such a wide range of 'uses' that they were impossible to categorise, and therefore impossible to eradicate.



Plate 11: Nyam feeding an animal, Kalata village, 1997.

Photo: Sam Gubins.

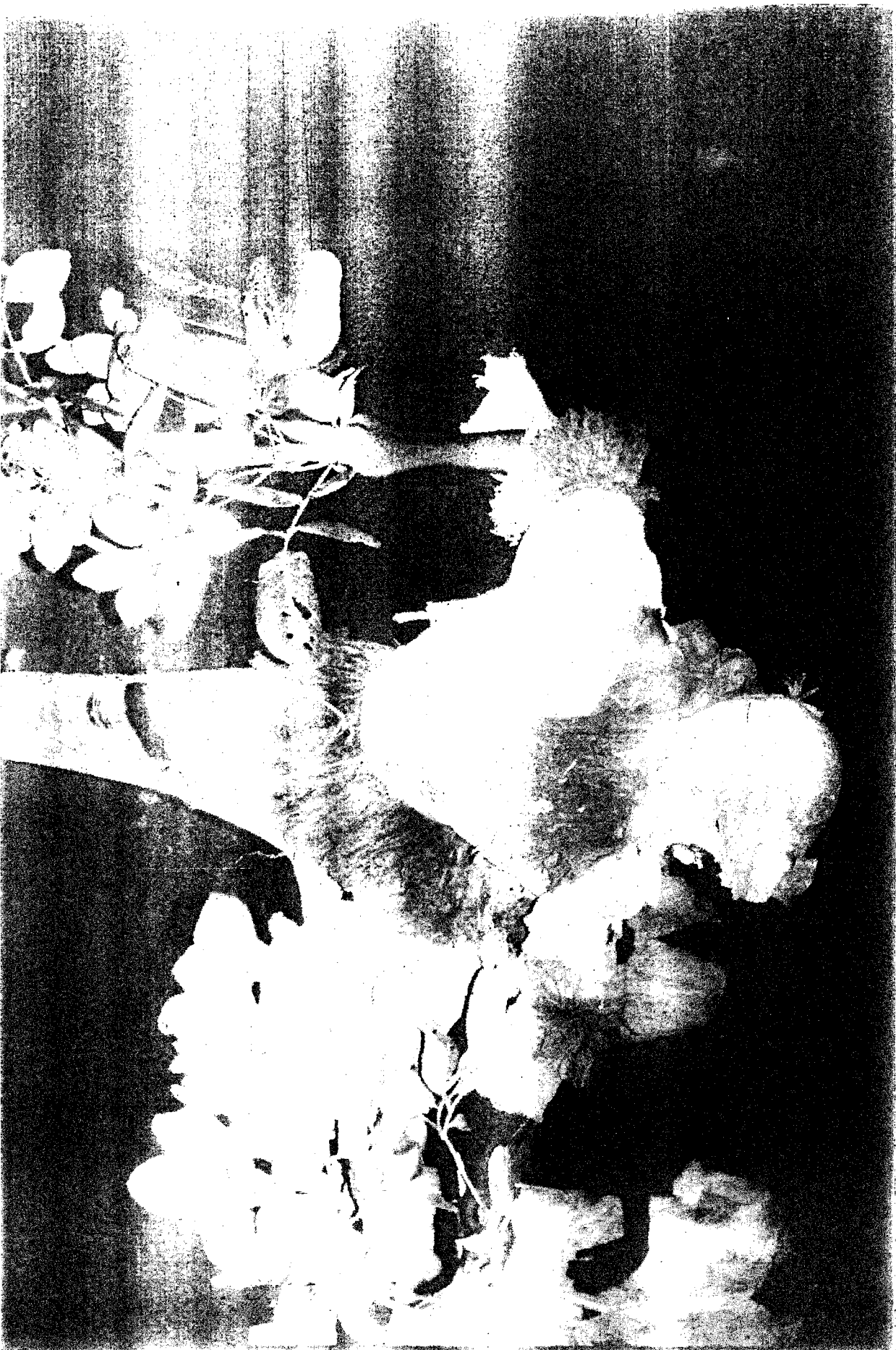


Plate 12: Night mask, Kalata village, September 1997.
Photo: Ben Gubins.

CHAPTER THREE

The Sanctity of Space

The previous chapter introduces the idea of the *gule wa mkulu* as a way of cementing allegiance to a group of people who ‘stay together’ (*khalidwe*). This chapter furthers that idea, extending an exploration of the role of the *gule wa mkulu* in village life. The traditional approach to such an exercise might be to examine the way in which the Nyau performances are a reflection of social systems, how they entrench the status quo, shaping cultural norms and practices while remaining a product of those practices. Indeed this is the way I initially approached the research, as a study of the ‘function’ of theatre in society. It has become clear however, that to approach the topic in this way is precarious.

To refer to the ‘uses’ of *gule wa mkulu* is not completely inappropriate, as the idea of the usefulness of knowledge is key in Chewa and Kunda thinking. However, imposing a Western paradigm on the subject, behaving once again as objective observer is to be avoided. It may just be that the ‘uses’ I refer to are as much a product of my own imagination as truly relevant to village life.

It is necessary to state that my exploration of ideas about the *gule wa mkulu* comes partly from within the Chewa idiom and is largely derived from my own *interpretation*. I sustain an awareness of the ‘fictional’ nature of my standpoint.

The ideas of space and boundaries is crucial to understanding why human beings need theatre. In what ways can specific dramaturgical elements can be interpreted as revealing something about boundaries and thresholds in Kunda village life? This section is devoted to a deeper examination of what theatre can be and what theatre can do.

3.1. Sanctifying Space.

Theatre then is one arena, one of the earliest that we know of, in which man has attempted to come to terms with the spatial phenomenon of his being.²⁰⁰

It is so commonplace and obvious a notion to say that space is crucial to theatre, that theatre can't happen without space, that one hesitates to make the point. But in this chapter I wish to explore not simply the use of physical space in a theatrical performance, but also other spatial realms that are far less tangible. The immediate environment, the world in which we find ourselves, is explored alongside the idea of **cosmic space** and **metaphoric space**.

One of the reasons why it becomes so difficult to speak of space in a theatrical context is because of the deceptive obviousness of the concept. The problem is a linguistic one. We use the word 'space' often, meaning discrete yet deceptively similar things. 'Space' means that 'wide expanse in which things move and live' or it might mean an area of emptiness, as in 'clear a space'. It also refers to the freedom to be yourself, as in 'I need my space'.

Theatrical space is the space within a defined area in which a performance takes place. It has in some way been sanctified or ritually framed and it attains a metaphorical significance when it is made to represent the **Cosmic space**, what Wole Soyinka refers to as "the cosmic envelope", a "manageable contraction" of the universe.²⁰¹ Another important spatial concept relating to masquerade drama is the **spirit world**. In Chewa and Nyanja culture, this space is the *mtengo*, the bush, synonymous with the world beyond the grave. Maskers are often said to be messengers of sorts, interlocutors between this world and the next. These are deliberately crude definitions as I intend to speak in a divergent manner, exploring various ideas of space: physical, poetic, and environmental.

We speak of both inner and outer space, outer space being the measurable dimensions of the

²⁰⁰Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) p. 40.

²⁰¹Wole Soyinka, 1976, p. 41.

physical world, inner space being that personal realm of self and secrecy, 'head space'. In the theatre, directors are very free with the word space and use it in the sense of inner space, when talking about character, or space as in the stage space, which may be small and claustrophobic or wide and panoramic.

It is a director's task, as it is a choreographer's, to move and arrange bodies in space, quite literally, in a quantifiable manner. In pure physical terms the director, designer or choreographer in the theatre can draw a map of how the bodies are arranged. The two actors are a metre apart, or they are on opposite ends of the stage. The dancers are spaced equally across the stage, or one is alone in a corner while the rest are grouped together some distance apart. Each of these spatial arrangements will signify something quite different about the power relationships between the performers, just as it will carry a message in terms of the balance and harmony of the composition. An equal and balanced placing of a number of bodies in the space might suggest a harmonious whole, while one single figure at the front of the stage with a mass of figures behind and to the left may, through its very asymmetry, convey an impression of danger and conflict.

Boundaries

Naturally the concept of boundaries is what enables a discussion of space at all. 'Space' is the area that falls inside the frame. I have argued that one of the social functions of masquerade theatre in Africa, certainly in the case of the Nyau, is to create a sense of community. Paradoxically, one of the ways in which this is achieved is through the deliberate violation of boundaries, as we shall see below with Nyau performances. However, Soyinka notes that, "Sound, light, motion, even smell, can all be used just as validly to define space."²⁰²

The idea of an internal, private space will also be discussed, in order to introduce some of the concepts which feature in the final chapter, namely personal boundaries and the idea of Self. **Secret space** can be that space within the individual's own consciousness where no other person can reach, or it can be a physical secret space, separating the individual from the world, such as

²⁰²Ibid., p. 39.

the secret space used in initiation ceremonies, or the privacy created by the boundary of a mask.

The stage as a ritual vessel: sanctifying space for performance

The stage, the acting space, whether it is a village *bwalo* or an opera house is a ritual vessel. It is not enough to do as Peter Brook did in 1968, “take any empty space and call it a bare stage,” unless in the act of calling it a stage one sanctifies the space and gives it a symbolic significance.²⁰³

David Napier has explored the phenomenon of boundary-making in some depth, noting that “the practise of ritually marking boundaries may be glimpsed in the earliest evidence we possess for what may be called human culture.”²⁰⁴ “The frame marks the bounds, explains Napier,

it draws the line, it sets the limits within which meaning must manifest itself...the ritual marking of boundaries sets the limits within which real objects become supernormal, where events take place that, otherwise, might have passed as a normal part of the real world or might even have gone unnoticed.²⁰⁵

Soyinka is careful to point out that although the symbolic arena has latterly become secularised and “contracted into purely physical acting areas on a stage”, there is always a symbolic element in ritual theatre.

Ritual theatre, let it be recalled, establishes the spatial medium not merely as a physical area for simulated events but as a manageable contraction of the cosmic envelope within which man...fearfully exists.²⁰⁶

An acting space which has been thus sanctified becomes a frame within which the metaphysical battles between good and evil may be played out. The immense and unknowable universe, shrunk

²⁰³Peter Brook, The Empty Space, (London: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 11.

²⁰⁴A. David Napier, Foreign Bodies: Performance, Art and Symbolic Anthropology, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1992) p. xvi.

²⁰⁵Ibid., p. xv.

²⁰⁶Ibid., p. 41.

to this manipulable space, becomes comfortingly less fragmented. At the same time, the seemingly bland piece of physical space takes on the enormity and mystery of the universe. It becomes an area where imagination and symbolic language are called into being.

The idea of sanctifying a space may sound absurd to the logical minds of the Western academic tradition but nevertheless it rings true on an intuitive level. Actors often refer to the stage or theatre building as a 'holy' place, somewhere that is sacred, where some kind of communion takes place. Often such an attitude is for practical purposes, as it helps the actor to have a demarcated area which has psychological and physical limits placed on it. It may help the actor to have a magical ring in which to transform, so that the ego may be discarded at some point and the character, the new persona can be assumed.

Naturally it is useful for the audience as well, to understand that once the actor has stepped into the 'sacred arena' or the frame, as it were, he or she is now no longer subject to the usual social norms and may behave in ways that would never usually be sanctioned in everyday life. In a recent Fringe production of the Grahamstown National Arts Festival the performers intruded on the personal space of audience members in outrageous ways, taking off their shoes, covering their smart clothes in powder and so on, and the audience were delighted and amused by what in everyday life would have been huge affronts of personal space.²⁰⁷ The performers were protected by the social contract which states that while they are in that space, they are allowed to behave in these ways. My argument is that it is first and foremost the spatial realm that decides this. This is the semiotic clue that alerts the spectator to the fact that 'theatre is happening there' as opposed to a madman standing on a street corner proclaiming. The frame's the thing, as it were, and this frame may or may not be a physical arena. It may also be an unspoken social agreement or a consciously adopted attitude on the part of the performer.

Interestingly, where the space is not demarcated in a physical way, such as in Egungun theatre where the audience may follow the audience through the streets, in these cases there will be a taboo protecting the performer which states that it is forbidden to touch a person wearing a mask.

²⁰⁷Aldo Brincat, Two Green Men, Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts, Grahamstown, July 1997.

In these cases the mask itself forms a frame, or a sacred space around the dancer/actor.

It follows of course that this sanctification of space must be performed as if it were a contract between audience and spectator. In Soyinka's words, "the stage is brought into being by a communal presence".²⁰⁸ An actor standing on a street corner proclaiming that the end of the world is in sight will be considered a madman by all who pass him by. But if the actor marks out a boundary, in full view of his spectators, an unspoken agreement can be reached, an agreement that states 'while I stand in this area of symbolic space you may believe me, for in this realm anything is possible.'

The Opera House and the Bwalo

In a Western theatre building, this contract between spectator and performer has already been agreed upon. When we walk into a theatre, take our seats, and the house lights dim, a silence descends over the audience, and in this moment, we suspend our disbelief and are willing to be transported into whatever place the actors will take us. We accept that an everyday object such as a broom can easily become a gun, a tree, even a person. The code of conventions that surround an evening at the theatre, the building itself seems to carry the memory of the Western theatrical tradition and it does not matter if there are no spectacular lights or realistic sets to take us into the symbolic realm.

One of the judgements that theatre in Africa has had to contend with is that because there are no theatre buildings in traditional rural Africa, no official spaces where theatre regularly takes place, it is somehow different from other theatre traditions, which have sanctified buildings. In reality, theatre in Africa, like theatre anywhere else in the world, does take place in an arena which has been specifically demarcated for the purpose of theatre; whether it is surrounded by bricks and mortar and red leather seats is immaterial. The contract itself is what is important.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o notes that one way of looking at a performance space is as

²⁰⁸Soyinka, 1976, p. 43.

a self-contained field of internal relations: the interplay of actors and props and light and shadows - mise-en-scene - and between the mise-en-scene as a whole and the audience. The outer boundaries of this space are defined by a wall, material or immaterial. The material could be stone or wood or natural hedges. The immaterial is the outline formed by the audience in what is otherwise an open space.²⁰⁹

The space itself however only acquires its magical significance and power in its relationship to the audience, whereby "the entire space becomes a magnetic field of tensions and conflicts."²¹⁰ This recalls Soyinka's phrase again: "the stage is called into being by a communal presence."²¹¹

Osita Okagbue, in an essay on masked performance, echoes this notion when he explains that performers enter into "a contract of play" with the audience, setting up a "world of make believe which the spectators accept or join in by willingly suspending their disbelief."²¹²

The performance space therefore becomes a 'zone-of the unknown' or a liminal zone in Turner's sense: a zone of anti-structure,²¹³ in which the notion of play is as important as the seriousness of the occasion.

My argument therefore is that it is the play frame which is responsible for bringing this zone of potential into being and that the whole creative and functional potential of theatre in all cultures, in all ages and in all contexts, arises from its play/playful dimension.²¹⁴

Ngugi's challenge to Peter Brook is thus perfectly valid: "Is a performance site ever empty, as

²⁰⁹Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'Enactments of Power: the Politics of Performance Space', The Drama Review, vol 41 Number 3 (T155), Fall 1997, p. 12.

²¹⁰Ibid.

²¹¹Soyinka, 1976, p. 43.

²¹²Osita Okagbue, 'When the Dead Return: Play and Seriousness in African Masked Performance', University of Plymouth, England. SATJ 11/ 1&2 May / September 1997. p. 94.

²¹³Okagbue, 1997, p94. Quotes Victor Turner (The Human Seriousness of Play)

²¹⁴Okagbue, 1997, p. 94.

in the title of Brook's book?"²¹⁵ It becomes clear that a performance space is "Bare, yes, open, yes, but never empty."²¹⁶ A performance arena is always shot through with significances that are greater than the sum of its physical parts: psychic and political forces; invisible social contracts which regulate it in unseen ways; memories and projected longings infused into it by audience and spectators alike. Those Western narrators of culture in Africa who claimed that Africa had no theatre because it had no theatre buildings were aware of the fact that space is of crucial importance in what makes a theatre experience a theatre experience. They were blind to the fact that what demarcates a space is not the physical boundary alone. It is also correct to assume that their entire understanding of space was quite different to that held by African philosophers, theatre-goers and villagers.

3.2. Merging zones: an African understanding of the physical and metaphysical environments

It is not my intention to essentialise an 'African' world-view as a polar opposite to the European or Western view of the cosmos, but I believe it is possible to point out some fundamental differences. Just as the physical environments in Africa is vastly diverse yet also different in terms of terrain and vegetation to European habitats, so the relationships between humans and the environment, while ranging in diversity from community to community, are different to a Western, Judaeo-Christian way of interacting with the world and the physical and metaphysical environments.

Speaking from the context of the Igbo masking tradition, Okagbue writes that

in Igbo metaphysics "the dead are not dead" because death is not seen as the end of life, which it usually is in some other cultures; rather it is perceived as a moment that marks the passage of an individual soul from one plane of existence on to another... Life itself is conceived as a continuous progression along an ontological chain that leads from one state of being to another, from the material state of being to the spiritual and back and hence the cyclic mode of perceiving

²¹⁵Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1997, p. 12-13.

²¹⁶Ibid.

the universe which is peculiar to most African peoples.²¹⁷

Life on the different planes of existence are not separated from one another in the way that a Judaeo-Christian outlook separates the living from the dead. The ancestors are regarded as having the ability to commune with those living in the phenomenal material world, and the unborn may relate with the living in equally affective ways. All three planes of existence are mutually affective.

In an Igbo world view therefore, the masquerader is regarded as an interlocutor between the spirit and material worlds, a visible manifestation of an ancestral spirit who has the ability to “influence affairs on the human plane.”²¹⁸ Onekwe is quoted as saying,

In the manifestation of the dead among the living, the former become not only instruments of social solidarity and communal affirmation, but entertainers who dramatize their own life as well as those of the living.²¹⁹

The Egungun performances of the Yoruba reflect a similar relationship between the material and spiritual zones, with the masquerader bridging the two. In fact it is less of a bridging of the two worlds than a merging. More than bringing a message from the ‘other side’, the masked figure is in effect bringing the other world into the present by virtue of his appearance. His presence invokes the ancestral domain, creating a liminal space for performers and spectators alike while the performance continues.

In the Chewa and Kunda contexts, the spatial divisions of their universe are crucial to the meaning generated by the masquerader. As in Igbo cosmology, the belief that ancestors have the ability to intervene in the affairs of the living is taken for granted in Kunda and Chewa life. As described in the previous chapter, some of the masked figures are seen as ancestral spirits, others as sorcerers or wild beasts. But as with the Igbo and Egungun masks, their appearance signifies

²¹⁷Okagbue, 1997, p. 90.

²¹⁸Ibid.

²¹⁹Okagbue, 1997, p. 92. Quotes Onekwe (Igbo Masks: The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre. 1987, Lagos: Nigeria Magazine Publication).

a merging of domains, a blurring of the usual boundaries between the spirit and domestic worlds.

3.3. Space in Gule wa Mkulu Performance

Chewa cosmology divides the universe into three zones, or spheres of belonging. These spatial categories regulate the division of labour, gender roles, and the relationship between humans and the environment. They are also a crucial means by which to understand the activities of the Nyau. The domestic world, the village, is regarded as the 'inside', the inner pole of society. It is the domain of women, the safe protected hearth of society. The 'outside', the bush (*mtengo*), is said to be occupied by spirits (*mizimu*) as well as wild animals (*zirombo*)²²⁰. It is associated with night, wildness, the unknown, while the domestic hearth is associated with daytime. The in between world, or the periphery, is symbolically occupied by men, possibly because men quite literally regard themselves as on the margins of this matrilineal society.

Men, being responsible for hunting and fishing, are taught bush survival skills from an early age, but women invariably do not venture into the *mtengo*, (bush) for any purpose. This does not include travelling to and from the river to collect water, or on established footpaths between villages. Strickland records a conversation during the course of his fieldwork between himself and some girls:

But, I said, you also go into the bush for jobs - to collect firewood.
The girls answered, But we go into the bush close-by only, not far away. The boys
go far, far into the bush looking for animals.
Why do you divide these jobs so? A girl can also hunt, I challenged.
Girls do not kill animals in the bush! They do not hunt, Buladi!²²¹

Men, however, are taught from childhood how to survive in the bush and hunt and trap animals. They are quite comfortable in the domain that is 'out of bounds' for women.

²²⁰Yoshida notes that ghosts are said to travel in the form of wild animals at night, and a number of informants have confirmed this.

²²¹Strickland, 1995, p. 122.

Corresponding to the three separate realms, or zones, of Kunda/Chewa existence, are three types of performer. Firstly, the women, who are the chorus, who stay 'inside' (*mkati*), in the village, and prepare beer. They devise the content of the songs as well as performing them. The second type of performer are the masked figures known as *kasinja* and *kangwingwi*. These masqueraders do not wear carved head masks, but have their heads wrapped in cloth and are decorated with guinea fowl feathers, symbolic of the fact that they are embodiments of the spirits of the deceased. These are peripheral masks, with the privilege of travelling to and from the bush and the village. The *Nyau Yolemba* are the 'masks' associated with the bush, with the night world, the 'outside' (*kunja*).

Preparations for the *gule wa mkulu* take place simultaneously in the inner and marginal realms. The men build masks, train actors and rehearse in the graveyard or *dambwe* which is separate from the village, but not quite in the bush. At the same time the women prepare the inner space, make the beer, sweep the performance area, or *bwalo*, which is within the parameters of the village. It is during the preparation period, that the *kasinja* begin to make visits into the village, and their appearance signifies the first 'interruption' of the usually tightly maintained spatial categories.

The performance itself takes place in the *bwalo*, which is specially demarcated for this purpose. When the Nyau masks enter the village a violation of the normal boundaries occurs. The masks are said to be 'fished up' from the bush, embodiments of ancestral and other spirits. When they enter the *bwalo* they may do so only if they are dancing. Otherwise they remain on the periphery. Thus a merging of domains occurs, with the bush/spirit world entering into the hearth of the village, causing a wake of festivity and a carnival-like reversal of social rules. It is through the violation of the usual boundaries that *communitas* is achieved. It is also a symbolic merging of the phenomenal and spirit realms, where the dead are quite literally thought to walk again.

Emil Hrvatin describes how sound and the voice in certain theatrical circumstances can define space in the absence of vision or light.

Sound information coming from the auditorium is an enlargement of stage space, a sign of the extension of the stage world beyond its conventional spatial

limitations. The voice of an actor *seen* in front of us but *heard* from behind, forces us as spectator/ audience to imagine a scene a scene as a spatial surround. The voice is able to transport bodies and spaces where they literally cannot move to.²²²

In the *gule wa mkulu* performance this observation is very appropriate. The day masks, when entering the village, bring the external space with them into the hearth space. The 'other world' space of the bush and spirit world is made concrete in the village when the masks use their animal voices, the voices of the bush, to merge the various cosmic zones into one temporary frame of unified existence.

In a theatrical sense, the use of space is crucial in entrenching the secrets and air of mystery pertaining to the Nyau and their *virombo*. In the night performances particularly, the strictest rules of spatial orientation are enforced. Spectators can by no means approach the basket structures (*Nyau Yolemba*), and young initiates maintain 'crowd control' by literally beating off viewers who come too close. Thus fear is deliberately cultivated in order to maintain the illusion that the beings are in fact beings from beyond and not men in basket work structures.

Whether a person is concealed in a hut, by placing a *chitenje* (cloth) over their head, or by keeping them in a moving basket structure, the fact of spatial separation between audience and performer ensures a level of secrecy which is bound to create intrigue.

Another aspect of the concealment is the fact that while the initiates are contained within their secret and concealing mask/structure, they undergo a process of transformation and rebirth.

Turner maintains that *communitas* is something which can only occur as an event quite apart from daily activity, and this idea is confirmed by the Nyau treatment of their own performances as distinctly separate from the daily mundane life of Chewa existence.

²²²Emil Hrvatin, "The Scream", *Performance Research* vol.2 no.1. (Spring 1997), p. 82.

Violating the Space: Liminality and Renewal

The treatment of space in *gule wa mkulu* performance is one of many 'ways of staying' in a Kunda village. The subtle interplay between the strict maintenance of boundaries and the deliberate violation of the threshold in order that it may be renewed, is one of the ways in which a sense of community is wrought in Kunda life. Probst describes quite succinctly the process of violation and renewal which takes place symbolically in the *gule wa mkulu*:

While in the beginning to the middle of the ritual, only the diurnal figures enter the village thereby constantly violating the spheres of belonging, this violation reaches its climax at the end of the ritual when the nocturnal figures enter the village. Their appearance, however denotes not only the total breakdown of the spheres but also the process of establishing them anew. Thus socially as well as spatially nyau ritual constantly demolishes and recreates the very boundaries on which the cultural identity and distinctiveness of Chewa rests, not only towards within - vis- á-vis the other members of society - but also towards outside vis-á-vis other social groups.²²³

The process of violation and renewal is what ensures a cyclical rather than a dialectic world-view. The destruction of boundaries marks the death of the old season, and ushers in the rainy season, the period in which to begin planting and renewing the cycle. Similarly, the symbolic death of the young initiates marks a new period in their lives, the shedding of an old skin, as it were.

3.4. Secret Space

One of the means by which the sanctity of space in performance rituals and ritualistic performances is preserved is by the careful management of knowledge and secrets.

In initiation ceremonies throughout Africa there is frequently a period during which the initiate is concealed from the rest of the public, by being spatially separated. Drewal describes the initiation of young boys in Yoruba societies who are taken into an enclosure where the secrets

²²³Probst, 1995, p. 8.

of adulthood are revealed to them as “wonders”, and they are “given rebirth”²²⁴.

Yoshida explains that when the Nyau initiate is taken into the *kasiyamaliro* mask, the basketry structure, he is taught the secret riddles, the knowledge of which ensures that he is now an adult member of the Nyau society.²²⁵

In Kunda society the *Chisungu*, girls of puberty age are kept inside the house (*ntsimba*) for instruction purposes. Historically, girls were ‘in the house’ for a month, during which time they were taught the necessary (secret) information which they required in order to join adult society. In some areas more recently the month long period has been reduced to a day and a night of intensive instruction and celebration.

In most cases the purpose of concealment is for instruction. It is a period of withdrawal into a liminal state of introversion. The imagery and symbolism associated with this period of seclusion figures rebirth, emerging from the womb and destroying the mother, or separating from the mother. The symbolism is not always explicitly stated. In the case of the Kunda *Chisungu* girls, they are told to dance on the clay sculpture of a large cow which is said to represent the mother, which they are now breaking into pieces. (See plate 13). This signifies the breaking of a boundary, the crossing over from one social space into another.

Young Nyau and *Chisungu* initiates perform a dance in which they must pass through the legs of their tutor (*nyamphungu*) in an allusion to the act of emerging from the womb. Certainly when the initiates emerge from the house after their period of seclusion, they are regarded as ‘new’ persons, embarking on a new phase of life. The basketry structure mask and the initiate’s house, or fenced enclosure, physically demarcate in space an area where the neophyte may remain separated from the rest of society. They are all physical containers to symbolise the liminal status of the initiate, and the period of introversion which they must undergo as individuals.

²²⁴Margaret Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992.) p. 48.

²²⁵Yoshida, *Masks and Transformation*, p. 232.

It is worthwhile noting the similarities between the seclusion that the *Chisungu* girls must endure and the journey of the Nyau boys into the 'womb' of the *kasiyamaliro*. While unlike the Graeco-Roman idea of what a mask should look like, the *kasiyamaliro* can nonetheless be regarded as a structure which conceals and transforms the wearer's (or 'inhabitor's') identity. If one can accept that, then it is also possible to regard the initiate's hut as a mask which performs the same function as a Nyau basket structure or even the cloth costume of an Egungun masquerader. Once again, the categories which have traditionally separated concepts such as 'mask' and 'performance space' need to be re-evaluated in order that we can reach an understanding of what *communitas* can achieve, namely the conflation of space, mask and self into a state of unity. The 'birthing' which takes place as a result of a period of seclusion then ushers the community and the individual into a new phase of existence.

What is also of interest here is that the 'retreat' element of initiation ceremonies and Nyau masquerades metaphorically underscores the fascination that Westerners have had for these so called 'primitive rituals.'

The point is best illustrated by a personal anecdote. In August 1998 I underwent a Chisungu initiation ceremony. I am bound by oath and personal obligation to maintain the secrets that were revealed to me during my seclusion, but I have no qualms about discussing the *implications* of that same secrecy, or the 'management of knowledge'.

The house where I and two other initiates were kept for a day and a night is not situated in a secluded bush area as the *dambwe* is for the Nyau men and boys. It is a house in the village, in the public sphere. For all intents and purposes the outside of the house acts as a mask concealing its inhabitants. The fact that everyone in the village knows that there are secrets being taught inside the house only adds to the sense of intrigue and mystique. Drumming and singing are clearly audible from the outside but the song lyrics themselves do not reveal any secret knowledge as they are layered with metaphorical significance. Only when they are decoded, and their contents 'unlocked' by the *nyamkungwe* do the neophytes understand their full significance.

Throughout the period of seclusion there were curious children and young men who were trying

to spy on proceedings through the only window in the house. The senior *nyamkungwe* frequently had to chase people away from the house with threats and shouts.

At the beginning and end of the period of concealment the initiates are required to perform some dances in the public arena. The dance illustrated in plate 14 illustrates once again the physical separation of initiates from the others, the way they are contained in a marked area from which they will emerge recreated. The actual performance space itself is defined by bodies. People form a ring, framing a round arena-type space in which the dances occur. Important personages sit on the inside of the ring, the front row. Such personages include the initiates, the mother of the initiates, the *nyamphungu*. This seating hierarchy is strictly maintained.

The public dances also operate on multiple levels of meaning. The apparent literal meaning of the dance and songs is enough to provide content and scenario for the audience members but the dances will have an additional, deeper meaning and this will be revealed to the initiates in the secrecy of the hut. The apparent content thus acts as a smokescreen, leading the audience away from the secret content.

During these dances we [the initiates] had to maintain a level of separation from everyone around us by not making eye contact with anyone else, keeping our heads down and never betraying any emotion on our faces. This separateness is contrived by convention, and maintained by severe scolding if the girls break the taboo. The separation through body codes works in the same way as the taboo of not touching a Nyau dancer or an Egungun performer and is for all intents and purposes a spatial separation.

While in the hut, if a *Chisungu* girl wishes to go outside to the toilet (*yenda ku chimbuze*) she is escorted out with a cloth over her head: only her feet will be visible. The cloth, or *chitenje*, acts as a concealment, a mask, in which she is separated spatially from the other villagers, because she is in a liminal zone. The separation is not in literal, physical space, but the covering acts metaphorically, to signal her separation in terms of social space.



Plate 13: 'Breaking the Cow.' Chisungu
initiation, Pakalima village
Photo: P. G. G. G. G., 1998.



Plate 14: Chinmagan initiation, Katakina village, 1998

Photo: Ben Gubins.

The result of this secrecy, as mentioned previously, is that whatever the ritual and symbolic meanings implicit in the concealment and encirclement of the initiates, an aura of mystique is created. Non-initiates long to be part of the secrecy, to 'get the knowledge'. It is my contention that the information that is imparted during these occasions, while significant, is not nearly as significant as the fact that secrecy must be maintained at all costs. The fact that women are seen to own such knowledge ensures their power and status in society.

Of course what also happens as a result of the intrigue generated by the strict maintenance of secrecy is that stories about 'what really goes on in the hut' become exaggerated and inflated. I myself experienced being badgered for information by non-initiate men, as well as being asked if certain stories were true. For example: a white non Kunda male related that he had been told by a Kunda male who had spied on a *Chisungu* ceremony as a youth, that girls were taught how to perform fellatio by demonstrating on bottles. He was very keen to try to find out if this was really true. The reality is that knowledge imparted is far more likely to concern household matters and matters concerning menstruation. But images of sexual licentiousness, witchcraft and magic are the kind of images that are perpetuated, in the male imagination and in the Western / Outsider imagination.

It strikes me that this is very similar to how the images and tropes of the Primitive start to form in the Western imagination. An imperfect understanding of the subject, combined with secrecy and a reluctance to share intimate details of tribal lore with strangers on the part of the Primitive, resulted in a distorted view of what Primitive life / psychology consisted in. Add to this a moralistic repressive mentality on the part of colonial myth makers and missionary teacher/interpreters and it is easy to see how the image of the orgiastic, cannibalistic, heathen, blood-drinking bacchanalian dance becomes the norm.

3.5. Political Space

Ngugi writes that the "magic sphere" of the performance space is so charged with energy, so

“potentially explosive” that the state, as a “repressive machine” regards it with nervousness.²²⁶ Thus, as well as being the “cosmic envelope” that Soyinka describes it as, the performance space is also “constituted by the totality of its external relations to...other centres and fields.”²²⁷

The real politics of the performance space may well lie in the field of its external relations; in its actual or potential conflictual engagement with all the other shrines of power, and in particular with the forces that hold the keys to those shrines. The shrines could be the synagogue, the church, the mosque, the temple, parliament, law courts, television and radio stations... in other words it is often not so much a question of what happens on stage at any one time but rather the control of continuous access and content.²²⁸

It is for this reason that the open, public spaces of performance began to be seen as threatening to the mechanism of the state. ‘The state’ refers to the colonial or the post-colonial state, that which acts as a repressive mechanism. Ngugi asserts that “the more open the performance space, the more it seems to terrify those in possession of repressive power.”²²⁹

Thus the spaces for performance in pre-colonial Africa, where “visitors can come into the scene at any time, for the main door is not barred to any would-be guests,” were regarded with unease by the colonial state which,

from the very beginning... was very wary of the open air. It was not sure what was being done out there, in the open spaces, in the plains, in the forested valleys and mountains. It was even less sure of people dancing in the streets, in market squares, in churchyards and burial places. And what did those drumbeats in the dark of night really mean? What did they portend?²³⁰

Thus the state began to find ways of denying artists their performance space, or at the very least restricting it. In the case of Ngugi and others this meant exile, forcing artists out of the state

²²⁶Ngugi, 1997, p. 13.

²²⁷“Other centres and fields” include such areas of human action as factories, farms, schools.

²²⁸Ibid.

²²⁹Ngugi, 1997, p. 26.

²³⁰Ibid.

performance arena or territory. Or permits were required, to authorise any gathering of more than five people, as under the Chief's act in Kenya.

And in 1952, when the colonial regime once again acted against the nationwide upsurge of anti-colonial dances and songs, it banned all open air performances in any part of the country...Every performance, a simple gathering for prayers even, had to be authorized.²³¹

So theatre buildings become an effective means by which politically inflammatory performances can be controlled, and audiences can be reduced to select, elitist groups of people who will not be incited to violence. The charging of an entrance fee further regulates the 'kind' of people who watch theatre. A wealthy bourgeois audience is less likely to become an angry crowd, as they have more to lose. Ngugi quotes Guillermo Gomez-Pena:

It is one thing to carry out iconoclastic actions in a theatre or museum before a public that is predisposed to tolerating radical behaviour, and quite another to bring the work into the street and introduce it into the mined terrain of unpredictable social and political forces.²³²

Kerr comes close to this idea in his observation that in the 1920's and '30's, the "expatriate bourgeoisie" felt the need to start building theatres and leisure complexes "to create on African soil an environment in which the whites could define themselves and their Europeanness in contrast to the black African culture by which they were surrounded." Permanent theatres, in English settler enclaves such as Southern Rhodesia, Kenya, the Copperbelt of Northern Rhodesia, came to be seen as "symbols of cultural solidity and superiority". Naturally the types of plays performed in these buildings were crucial to the cementing of colonial middle class values.²³³ Furthermore, the existence of these buildings came to symbolise an elitist 'club' that 'allowed' black dramatists 'in' only if the style and content of their plays conformed to a literary canon.

The treatment of the Nyau in Zambia can now be seen in a clearer light. Nyau performances were

²³¹Ibid., p. 27.

²³²Ngugi, 1997, p. 27. Quotes Guillermo Gomez-Pena. ('The Artist as Criminal')

²³³Kerr, 1995, p. 22.

clearly regarded as a site of resistance to colonial rule on the one hand and missionary teaching on the other. Kerr records that

the reason for Christian opposition was partly one of prurience, an objection to male Nyau performers dancing at night in front of women, and partly a political hunch that Nyau societies formed centres of resistance to colonial rule.²³⁴

Ultimately, however, it proved impossible to police the Nyau completely, as there are secret spaces that can be found all over a landscape, particularly a landscape which is familiar to its inhabitants, but not to those in charge of controlling the performance spaces. Nyau performers, banned under Colonial administration, began to meet in caves and out of reach places, where the secrets continued to be passed on.²³⁵

The Tourist Village: a different kind of violation

It is through the transgressing of usual boundaries that much of the meaning of the *gule wa mkulu* is generated. The success of the dance, the fact that it is believed to be a merging of different worlds, a period of liminal activity which destroys and thus recreates the usual status quo rests heavily on the existence of boundaries, on the fragile contract which exists between performers, chorus and spectators. The fragility of this contract is revealed when a different kind of spectator is involved in the entire process. Anthropologists, tourists, foreigners who are unfamiliar with the conventions associated with the performance can change the entire meaning of one of these occasions.

As Wole Soyinka writes

To move from its natural habitat in the shrine of the deity, or a historic spot in the drama of a people's origin, or a symbolic patch of earth amidst grain stalks on the eve of harvest; to move from such charged spaces to a fenced arena at a Festival of Arts, or even to an authentic shelter of the god only lately adapted for tourists and anthropologists alike; this constitutes an unfair strain on the most even-

²³⁴Ibid., p. 50.

²³⁵Pam Guhrs, Personal Communication, September 1998.

tempered deity, and also on the artistic temperament he shares with humanity.²³⁶

By way of illustration I would like to briefly chart the audience/performer interactions that took place over three separate performances that I witnessed. The first performance took place at the recently opened cultural village called Nsendemila Village. Nsendemila means crooked or upside down, so named because of the fallen baobab tree at the centre of it, but I thought it quite an ironically apt name given the nature of the interactions that took place there.

Nsendemila Village is a large area surrounded by a grass fence, with an assembly of mud huts each dealing with a typical Kunda activity: in the one hut there is basket and mat weaving, in another clay pot making in another iron smelting and so on. In the centre is a huge lopsided baobab tree and a circular space defined by horizontal logs which the audience sits on. The purpose of the village is to show tourists what Kunda culture is all about, what daily living consists of, and what kind of performances there are. It originated as a result of the local development project, a Norwegian funded scheme called Luangwa Integrated Research Development Programme (LIRDP), urging certain members of the community to construct a cultural village so that tourists could 'partake of some local culture' after visiting the National Park for game viewing.

The inaugural performance, which I attended was on a hot afternoon and the audience members who gathered at Nsendemila Cultural village were having trouble deciding whether it was better to wear one's hat or to fan one's face with it. The majority of the initial gathering were European staff from the various safari camps in the area. As the afternoon progressed and the drumbeats were heard, children from the neighbouring villages gradually gathered there as well. The whole scene looked like something from the home video collection of an American tourist.

The first part of the performance was the Nsenga dances performed by the elderly women. This dance is performed at the funerals of great chiefs or hunters who have died and consists of an elaborate and stylized rendition of a hunt, with women miming/ dancing animals being hunted,

²³⁶ Soyinka, 1976, p.

running for cover, in the throes of death, being pursued by the hero hunter. One woman will dance with her *chitenje* held out in front of her, in much the same way as a matador 'dances' with both the red flag and the bull. The other women will lunge towards her. This dance was received relatively well, but because it relies on audience members getting up and running into the scene as if they were prey animals, and because the largely European audience were 'trained' in the conventions of sitting still and applauding only at the end of the performance, it fell flat.

The second part of the performance, which caused much consternation, was a reproduction of some of the *Chisungu* dances, which are traditionally performed during the young girls' initiation. Five girls came into the space, wearing their triangular folded *chitenjes* appropriate to *Chisungu*. They looked down at the ground, maintaining an aloof distance from the spectators. Within seconds of the beginning of their dance there were murmurs which sounded from various areas in the audience, including from the local women sitting next to me. The women were horrified that the *Chisungu* dances, usually restricted to the secrecy of the initiate's hut, were being performed in public, in front of men. These same women felt powerless to stop the public performance, but spoke their views afterwards. The second time I visited Nsendemila village, the female audience members were asked to enter into a hut to watch, and participate in, the *Chisungu* dances, away from the male gaze.

Again, the use of a secluded space is tied up with issues of power and knowledge. Such de-contextualisation does not imply a loss of authenticity in the performances so much as an upsetting of the balance of power. By taking the *Chisungu* dances out of their secret space, knowledge was been given to an inappropriate section of the population.

Conclusions

In summary, there are several factors that have become clear to me in this discussion of performance space, elucidating my argument as a whole. The first is that a space is never empty, that it is always crowding with memories, associations, political or cosmological significance. At the very least there will be a socially agreed upon boundary that marks out the performance space as a 'magic realm' full of potency and potential. The fact that a performance has to take

place in a space that is either visibly or invisibly *framed as a performance space* is crucial to my understanding of *what theatre can do* and *what theatre can be*, both of which are key questions shaping and guiding this research.

Ngugi writes that

the politics of the performance space is much more than a question of a physical site for a theatrical show. It touches on nearly all aspects of power and being in a colonial and post colonial society.²³⁷

I would have to add that it is not only the politics of a performance space that are of utmost importance but the spiritual and metaphoric aspects as well. The way in which I understand the Nyau use of space as an expression of their marginal role in society, as a *makholidwe*, way of staying together, and as a means of defining the parameters of the known and unknown worlds illuminates my entire understanding of theatre. Theatre can truly be a means to come to terms with one's place in the universe, as Soyinka suggests. It can also be a way of providing commonality between people: narrating histories, making sense of the environment, remembering better times, educating people on how to be effective citizens of the geographical and social space they are born into. Finally, I must add that my own conceptualising of what theatre is, must include the demarcation of space as a frame. In other words, if we are to ask, what makes theatre theatre instead of just an arbitrary public event or social drama - the answer would have to begin with the fact that theatre is theatre if it spatially signifies itself as such - if the space is sanctified, demarcated or ritually bounded in some way.

Africa as constructed Space

A final point on the question of space - one that has been implicit throughout my investigation of the representation of the 'Other', is that Africa itself has become an entity or a space which seems to exist as much as a physical reality on a geographical plane as in another zone, sustained and created by discourse and media. This mythical land, romanticized and always changing to suit changing needs, may have very little resemblance to the actual physical reality of Africa, but

²³⁷Ngugi, 1997, p. 28.

it is a space which has a strong hold on very many imaginations.

At this point I come back to that phrase of Soyinka's which has been something of a recurring mantra throughout this dissertation: 'communal ecstasy'. If this chapter on space has been a way of understanding the 'communal' nature of theatrical experiences, the following chapter will dwell on their ecstatic nature. For there is another side to my understanding of what theatre is and what it can do. The 'cosmic envelope' is no good at all without an individual in it, and a group of people watching. It is crucial to discuss the issue of space in performance. But it is equally important to discuss the persons in and around the space namely the actor and the spectators. The following chapter zooms in on the individual in the void and discusses some aspects of the beings that inhabit theatrical space: bodies and their masks, as well as the crucial question of consciousness in performance.

CHAPTER FOUR:

From All Sides of the Mask

In the last analysis, subject and object are one. We can only grasp the essence of the world if we can grasp, in all its irony, the truth of this radical equivalence.²³⁸
(Jean Baudrillard, 1996)

To find ways of merging subject and object we need to immerse ourselves in the power of the mask. Enormous generalisations continue to wash through the literature in waves, sweeping away differences and rendering all masquerade forms in Africa the same, with the same characteristics and functions. All African masqueraders have to do with ancestor worship, the discourses tell us; and when a person dons a mask in an African ritual, he becomes possessed by the spirits. This chapter is devoted to unravelling some of these myths, and searching for new ways of understanding masks and masking in Africa. A presentation of some of the misconceptions surrounding masking in Africa, as well as adjustments in perception are offered below.

A second area lies underneath the first in a sense: a philosophy of self. A discussion of masking necessarily entails a discussion of selfhood because there always seems to be a self that is being masked. It is almost as if, when we uncover the myths about masquerades in Africa we have to uncover myths about personhood too, or at least challenge the ways in which 'we' as Western Cartesian entities have thought about selfhood and personhood.

The chapter is by no means exhaustive. There are many articles on masquerade traditions in Africa and one cannot attempt a detailed analysis of the literature that exists. I will isolate two major points of discussion. The first is the issue of transformation: whether the actor/dancer becomes 'possessed' by the spirit of the mask, whether his/her consciousness changes, or whether he/she cultivates an aura of mystique which enables a privileged status in society, built on fear and respect for the otherworldly. The answer is obviously not clear-cut, but, like the

²³⁸Jean Baudrillard, translated by Chris Turner, The Perfect Crime, (London, New York: Verso, 1996)

masqueraders themselves, it slips and slides through various levels of truth and deception, and is constantly transforming and shape-shifting.

The second issue, after transformation, is that of liminality, ie. the mask as a physical border between person and environment, as well as a liminal figure which leaps over socially constructed borders. The masker as liminal figure is a paradoxical creature, one that is hidden and yet reveals; defines and evokes boundaries while transgressing those same borders. In some ways this is simply a continuation of a discussion of space. The mask is a boundary and a simultaneously liberating and enclosing space, throwing open the body to new conceptions, new possibilities. The mask forces us to question our ideas about the body, about consciousness and about self.

There is a need to search for ways of looking at masquerade performance in Africa which keep the integrity of mystery and secrecy intact while still trying to dispel some of the more damaging myths. It is with this in mind that I attempt to uncover the relationship between character, mask and actor and how they relate to trance and possession.

I am not attempting to homogenise African masquerade by reducing mask performance to a quantifiable entity. It is understood that masquerade performance throughout Africa varies from community to community. The Nyau once again is my primary source material but it is hoped that this microcosm might provide a source of ideas for a wider body of theory.

4.1. What's in a Mask?²³⁹

Ronald Grimes describes masking as a “widely found ritual gesture”²⁴⁰, but it is obviously a typically theatrical device as well, one that fascinated avant-garde theatre makers in their quest for the ‘primal source’ of the theatrical impulse.

²³⁹The title of an article by John Picton, 1990.

²⁴⁰Ronald L. Grimes, Beginnings in Ritual Studies, (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1982), p. 75.

“Masking is the making of a ‘second face’”, writes Grimes, who is nonetheless aware of the fact that defining what a mask is not necessarily a simple task. What we think of as masks include such categories as headdress masks, miniature masks, make up and body masks. Not all masks are worn on the face, some are carried, worn on top of the head, or used for display only. Nonetheless, ‘wearability’ seems to be a key feature, even if by this we only mean that there is “an iconographic semblance of an exteriority which presupposes a human or divine interiority.”²⁴¹

John Picton points out that the words ‘mask’, ‘masquerade’ and ‘mascara’ are Arabic in origin, coming from the Arabic verb *sakhira* which means to “laugh, scoff, jeer, sneer, ridicule, mock, deride, make fun.”²⁴² He also points out that “the very word ‘person’ derives from the Latin ‘persona’, originally the mask worn by an actor”²⁴³ From these two historical etymologies we can deduce that there are two significant aspects of the mask: the first is that masks often imply a degree of playfulness, brought about by their presence, and that they are invariably connected to ideas about personhood and selfhood.

Picton cautions, however, that

We cannot assume that putting on a mask necessarily transforms a person’s social identity. Nor is masking necessarily about secrecy.²⁴⁴

In fact, the ways of thinking about masks are numerous and the temptation to make neat, universal generalizations about them should be avoided. Masks can be face coverings, but as I discussed in the previous chapter, an initiate’s hut can also be regarded as a mask, as can a large basket-woven structure.

²⁴¹Grimes, 1982, p. 76.

²⁴²John Picton, “What’s in a Mask”, in African Languages and Cultures (1990): 181-202.

²⁴³John Picton, “The Masque of Words”, in Bedu is My Lover: Five Stories About Boudoukou and Masquerading. Karel Arnaut and Elizabeth Dell, eds. (Brighton: The Green Centre for Non-Western Art, 1996.)

²⁴⁴Ibid.

Picton points a variety of ways of conceiving masks, writing that

The mask is, for me as for anyone writing in the English language, a word, of course, and an idea and a metaphor, as well as an artefact, of European culture; and yet...even so obvious a thing as the “mask” embodies taken-for-granted ideas about Africa and its arts that are informed by presuppositions hidden within the history of ideas in Europe: the “mask” is, indeed, another of the problems of understanding and explanation that arise as function of translation.²⁴⁵

Picton isolates “distance” as a feature of masking:

If I refer to all these things as “masks”, it is only because I can categorise them as serving to establish distance between certain people and certain other people; but, as I have already said, common knowledge in appropriate circumstances achieves the same end.²⁴⁶

The very word, ‘Eku’, has the power to put distance between people, Picton points out, citing the example of a man shouting out “Eku is coming”, when the conversation turned to “certain matters”. “Any females within earshot would scatter,” writes Picton, leaving the men to discuss their private matters.²⁴⁷

Mask as a metaphor is a familiar idea: we often speak of unmasking someone, to reveal their ‘true’ self. In these contexts we refer to the capacity that masks have to conceal, or if removed to reveal, thus denying or suppressing the ‘truth’ about a person’s personality.

Masks are also artefacts, not all of them designed for theatrical or ritual use. There are gas masks, oxygen masks, surgical masks, welding masks, painter’s masks²⁴⁸. For these purposes, I am obviously referring to masks which are artefacts, worn by one or more performer, for theatrical

²⁴⁵Picton, 1990, p. 185.

²⁴⁶Ibid., p.186.

²⁴⁷Ibid., p. 187.

²⁴⁸Ibid., p. 189.

purposes. I point towards the multiplicity of meanings for masks in order to create an alertness to the glib assumption that 'a mask is a mask is a mask', or that Anglo-European conceptions of masks are necessarily the same as those of the Nyau or other masking traditions in Africa.

Picton refers to Jedrej's analysis, which suggests three possible ways of conceiving of the relationships between performer, mask, and identity in performance.

Firstly, that in which...maximum significance attaches to what is concealed... Secondly,... attention is focussed on a materially and symbolically elaborate mask... Thirdly there is the interesting possibility of both mask and what is being masked being accorded equal significance.²⁴⁹

At his point in the discussion we need to ask not only what a mask is, but **what does the mask 'do'?**

Grimes isolates four "moments in the masking process: (1) concretion, (2) concealment, (3) embodiment, (4) expression."²⁵⁰

Concretion can be described as the "bodying forth or fixing of an external power".²⁵¹ Death masks are an example of this, in the way that they eternalize the power of the deceased. The *kasinja* masks of the Nyau also concretize the power of the deceased; and the unwelcome elements of society which are satirized in character masks, such as the tax-collector, are reduced to a knowable exteriority in this process of concretion.

In concealment,

otherness is generated and used by the masker...the wearer of masks may stand outside roles and use them to control those who observe. Masking, then, is no longer a solidification of exterior powers, but is a deception for socially

²⁴⁹Picton, 1990, p. 190. Referring to M.C. Jedrej.

²⁵⁰Grimes, 1982, p. 76.

²⁵¹Ibid.

acceptable ends.²⁵²

The role of concealment in the *gule wa mkulu* is of great importance, not least because of the power that the *Nyau wa Bisa* (Nyau who is hiding) gains while in concealment. Artaud writes that

Any true feeling cannot in reality be expressed. To do so is to betray it. To express it, however, is to *conceal* it. True expression conceals what it exhibits.²⁵³

The paradox of the Nyau maskers is such that the masks they wear conceal one identity in order to reveal another, less obvious identity, which has a far more potent force than their suppressed selves. That power is then 'hidden' or masked by the playfulness that accompanies the performances. The power, however, is always latent in the performers because of their knowledge of the Nyau secrets. They do not necessarily have to be wearing the mask in order to be associated with that power.

The masks (and the power associated with them) are frequently used to terrify non-initiates. Another paradox comes into play when we note that the ability (power) to inspire terror in others has led to attempts on the part of colonial authorities to exercise a counter-power and suppress Nyau activities altogether.

4.2. The Spectre from Beyond the Grave: Towards a philosophy of Masquerades in Africa.

In this discussion of masquerades in African contexts, there are two important considerations. The first is that it seems to be necessary to try to demystify to a certain extent some of the myths surrounding the masquerade figures, in order to dispel irrational reactions such as were taking place in the former half of this century, with the Nyau being banned because of the images of horror, cannibalism and death associated with them. The second is that one must remain true to

²⁵²Ibid., p. 79-80.

²⁵³ Artaud, 1993, p. 53.

the spirit of the masquerade's self cultivated air of secrecy and mystique. It is no good spoiling the joke by over-explaining. We need to take into account the fact that groups such as the Nyau rely on a fair amount of theatrically manufactured 'terror' in order to perform their artistic and social functions. What is really required is a new understanding of consciousness in performance. We need to re-ask the old question 'what actually happens when an actor puts on a mask?', or, even more simply put: 'what do masks do?'

4.3. Transformation and the Mask

Grimes writes that

The term "embodiment" applies to those instances in which interior and exterior, inside and outside, are considered so in harmony as to be virtually indistinguishable.²⁵⁴

Several attempts have been made to understand the psychology of the masked performer, the play between performer and character, or dancer and mask.²⁵⁵ There are several reasons why it is important to pursue this question here. One is because of the specific problems that Nyau has encountered with authorities in Eastern Zambia. These problems have arisen because of the sometimes violent nature of Nyau maskers. The issue is really one of responsibility: if the masker is possessed by spirits, then he has no control over his actions and cannot be held responsible for any violent or offensive behaviour.

Harding quotes Messenger's account of the Anang people's belief in this regard:

In the past it was thought that when an *mbop* (mask) was donned, the soul of the

²⁵⁴Grimes, 1982, p. 81.

²⁵⁵See Frances Harding, "Actor and Character in African Masquerade Performance." Theatre Research International 21 (Spring 1991): 59-71, and C.G. Okafor, "Behind the Inscrutable Wonder: The Dramaturgy of the Mask Performance in Traditional African Society." Research in African Literatures 22 (Winter 1991): 39-52. Also O. Okagbue, "When the Dead Return: Play and Seriousness in African Masked Performances." SATJ 11/1&2 (May/September 1997)

ancestors possessed the wearer, and the latter was not responsible for his own actions, even if they resulted in the destruction of valuable property or the death of others.²⁵⁶

If on the other hand he is perfectly conscious and in control of his actions, then the implications are somewhat different. Missionaries would then regard Nyau activity as less of a spiritual threat, but a Chief or Headman who has been treated disrespectfully by a Nyau may be able to call them to account. Linden & Schoffeleers quote a Kololo chief as saying,

You cannot arrest and punish an animal which has hurt you because what it did was pure accident. There is no case because there is no accused.²⁵⁷

The second reason why the issue of consciousness in masked performance is of significance is because of the implications it has in the debate as to whether performances of this kind should be strictly categorized as theatre or ritual. Harding writes

Perhaps because of a predisposition to perceive the African performer as mystical and unknowable rather than as practical and artistic, the product of a long history of "othering", by and large, masqueraders have not been presented in the literature as performance artists but as religious specialists, fulfilling religious duties to a more or less satisfactory degree (aesthetically) in the eyes of the community, rather than as persons exploring their own aesthetic and creative skills.²⁵⁸

While I agree with Harding that it is problematic to regard the masked performer as a "religious specialist" only, rather than an artist, I feel that the real difficulty with an argument of this kind is the way it perpetuates attitudes which insist on classifying masquerades as *either* ritual *or* theatre, in other words continuing the tendency to impose a binary opposition where an holistic approach would be more useful.

"As soon as an actor dons a mask," writes Okafor, "he is transformed on physical and spiritual

²⁵⁶Harding, 1991, p. 63.

²⁵⁷Linden & Schoffeleers, 1972, p259.

²⁵⁸Harding, 1991, p. 65.

levels.”²⁵⁹ The physical transformation is immediately apparent: the identity of the wearer is concealed and a new identity, contained in the features of the mask, is presented to the audience. Whether or not the dancer ‘becomes’ the spirit he is representing is what is at issue here.

Okafor writes that

Among the Dan, spirits are believed to reside in the mask, so that the performers who wear the masks actually become the spirits...The mask is necessary for such role changes since it imbues the wearer with a supernatural quality.²⁶⁰

Harding, however, maintains that one should distinguish carefully between “being” and “seeming to be”. What tends to happen, he points out, is that “the abandonment perceived in the performer by the audience is conflated with an experience of apparent self abandonment in the performer.”²⁶¹

Responding to Picton’s assertion that in Ebira masquerade, “as eku, a man was changed, for though still himself, yet he was not himself”, Harding writes that the reason the performer is “no longer himself” is because he “is no longer *presenting* himself.” The change that takes place in the performer, is for Harding nothing more than a change in status and “oracular capability”: the masker is *impersonating* the spirit/ ancestor, and is not “overcome” by an external agent.²⁶²

This argument certainly seems supportable. In Nyau masquerades there is a great deal of ‘manufactured’ secrecy, an air of mystique which is bolstered by theatrical means, particularly as far as the *Nyau Yolemba*, or ‘night movers’ are concerned. The *Chimkoko* mask, a *nyau yolemba* which is several metres long, is occupied by up to ten or fifteen men. The impressive quality of this mask is furthered by the fact that it leaves no footprints, and is said to glide across the ground. What happens, I am told, is that the last person in the mask walks backwards,

²⁵⁹Okafor, 1991, p. 44.

²⁶⁰Okafor, 1991, p. 44.

²⁶¹Harding, 1992, p. 62.

²⁶²*Ibid.*

sweeping away the footprints of the others. At night performances the audience is kept at a strict distance from the performers, and non-initiates are threatened with beating and the possibility of severe misfortune if they dare to come too near. Thus any theatrical trickery employed will be harder to detect.

As with Egungun masquerades, the greater the level of virtuoso on the part of a performer, the more magical and 'otherworldly' the masked figure will appear. The more otherworldly the appearance of the 'spirit', the more respect is accorded the men who 'know about Nyau', or are capable of 'fishing' the *virombo* out of the graveyard. Yet there seems to me to be more to the argument than this. Even if we assume that there is no 'possession' of the actor by a mysterious 'spirit of the mask' whereby he loses all control of his actions, can we not still argue that there is a change in consciousness, that the actor enters into a trance-like state, for example, or at least undergoes a psychological change?

Again, a personal anecdote may help to answer this question. I attended a mask workshop recently with four other students.²⁶³ The workshop lasted two days and we worked with a variety of masks including neutral, larval, archetypal and character masks.²⁶⁴

With each of these types of masks I experienced a transformation which was too subtle to call possession but more powerful than the changes I had ever experienced in ordinary character acting. With the character masks, for example, each mask seemed to have a 'spirit' of its own which 'takes over', depending on how open I was, how much I allowed the process to happen.

²⁶³"The Power of the Mask", workshops run by Mark Fleischman, University of Cape Town, Grahamstown, July 1997.

²⁶⁴All of these masks are commonly used in actor training: neutral masks cover the entire face and have no expression. They are used for 'unmasking' the body, freeing the actor from physical blocks. See Sears A. Aldridge and Hollis W. Huston, 'Actor Training in the Neutral Mask,' in P. Zarilli, (ed.) *Acting (Re)Considered*, (Routledge: London and New York, 1995.) Larval masks are naive half formed face masks which cover the entire face. Archetypal masks represent various archetypes and also cover the entire face. We worked with the Huntress, the Trickster, the Blind Man, the Fool. All those masks which cover the entire face are silent masks, that is the actor remains silent while wearing them. Only with the character masks, the commedia masks, does speech become possible.

When I spoke to the instructor, Mark Fleischman afterwards he described the number of factors that came into play. On the one hand the interplay between the actor wearing the mask and the spectators watching is very influential. As I turn to face the audience, wearing a comic mask, they see my 'new' face, and laugh at what they see. I in turn react to their laughter, and become 'funnier'. I did experience this, but I felt there was much more at work and said so. He laughed and said

"Yes. There is more to it than that, but no one actually knows what happens. There is a magic, a mystery. There just is."²⁶⁵

Another thing Fleischman said, during one of the sessions with the character masks, was that the relationship between wearer and mask is extremely tenuous. If the actor tries to either resist the power of the mask or impose a state of mind or character on to it, then the mask does not come alive on the wearer. A phrase that was repeated over and over again by Fleischman was 'listen to the mask.' He was continually encouraging us to listen to the mask, to allow the mask to speak through us. This is what needs to happen in a discussion of masquerading in Africa. If it really is a new philosophy of masquerades that we are searching for, a new way of looking at theatre, then we must listen to the mask, to what it has to say. Only then will we be able to understand what happens when an actor dons a mask.

During the performance I attended at Kalata village, an incident took place which illustrates the tension between different explanations for the existence of magic and otherworldliness in masquerades. After the preparations had been made and the drummers had summoned the audience to the *bwalo* for the performance, the first Nyau made their appearance, passed through the *bwalo* and came to rest at the border of the village and the bush, under some trees about one hundred metres from where I was sitting. They were joined by two *kasinja*, who also walked through the *bwalo*. Then an old man character with a walking cane passed through the performance space to join the others. All the masks were making animal noises and had leaves, and twigs in their mouths or hands. Once these masks were all assembled, the three figures

²⁶⁵Mark Fleischman, University of Cape Town. Personal communication, Grahamstown, July 1997.

wearing carved wooden masks came into the space and began to dance. It was the first dance of the day. After a few minutes, from out of a clear, still sky, an enormous wind began to blow. My field notes record, in capital letters, BIG WIND and I switched off the video camera and replaced the lens cap, as I was sure the twigs, sticks, stones and dust that were suddenly flying around would damage the lens. I couldn't dispel the eerie feeling that this was somehow part of the performance. It was a very strong and sudden wind, which literally seemed to appear from nowhere, with no warning. Knowing that spirits are supposed to sometimes travel in these gusts of wind known as 'dust devils,'²⁶⁶ I made a mental note to ask people about it afterwards. It died down as suddenly as it had arisen, and the performance continued.

During interviews with Nyau members after the performance, I asked what the meaning of the sudden wind was all about, or if it had just happened arbitrarily (*chabe*). There was a short silence, followed by lots of laughter, and then someone said, "Yes, the wind comes and cleans the *bwalo* of spirits, takes everything away." A little later, when I asked why *Malia* (Maria, in English.) didn't come to the *bwalo*, (during our initial discussions and negotiations, it had been mentioned that *Malia* was part of the Kalata village repertoire.), the reply was "No, we can't do *Malia*, the wind will take her away." This comment was greeted by guffaws of laughter and much amusement.²⁶⁷

Several things are happening at once in an exchange such as this. Firstly, whether or not the wind was a coincidental freak of nature is immaterial, still it was something extremely useful for the Nyau men there. It afforded them an opportunity to surround themselves with further mystique. This same mystique in turn generates power for the Nyau. It is entirely suitable to their purposes to appear to have such seemingly capricious forces as the weather working with them, if not under their control, and to have magical, super-normal powers which set them apart from other members of the community. However, my assumption that there was something of a magical/spiritual significance to the gust of wind could just as easily be an example of the ways

²⁶⁶I was taught as a child to 'direct' these dust devils away from me by licking my finger and holding it out to ward off the spirits, and was instructed never to enter into a dust devil or let it pass over me, or it would take away my 'power' (*mpamvu*).

²⁶⁷Field notes, Guhrs, Kalata Village, 19th September 1997.

in which my own fascination with Otherness in this moment led me to assume that there were otherworldly forces at work. On the other hand, why shouldn't there have been?

Whatever the case may be in this regard, it is clear that the incident with the wind provided an excuse for the non-appearance of Malia, and it is equally possible that the reason Malia did not make an appearance is because she satirizes a *mzungu* (white-European) stereotype, and the Nyau of Kalata Village perhaps did not want to cause offense to their *mzungu* (albeit Kunda speaking) guests.

There is something strange and unknowable about the mask which will probably always remain strange and unknowable. The important point to realise, is that these powers are often exaggerated and cultivated. What needs to be resisted is the temptation to fix the meaning of mask or impose meaning onto it. Harding's claim that the performers are performing and presenting other selves does not sufficiently take into account the magic of the mask. Fig. 15 shows the reverse side of a mask, which is covered with *mankwala*, (medicine) protecting the dancer from unwanted spirits. That this aspect of the mask is on the *inside*, and not for public display, would suggest that there is more taking place than a theatrically orchestrated 'show'.

Occasions for change

The more power the Nyau men are seen to have via their knowledge of masks and *virombo*, the more potential there will be for political and social efficacy in their performances, and the more autonomy and agency they will have in their marginal positions within matrilineage. In the theatre of the Nyau, as in other masked theatre traditions, the mask is the primary transformative device. The *gule wa mkulu* performances are almost always about transformation. The performances hold constant dialogues about change, social, political change, whether it is being advocated or stemmed. Transformation occurs on several levels. The wearer of the mask, the dancer, is both visually and psychologically transformed. The performance itself transforms society into an upside down world where taboos are relaxed, and the festival nature of the occasion is one of rebirth and renewal, ushering in a new season of growth and fertility.



Plate 15: Protective medicines, reverse side
of marm.

Photo: Peter Gahner, 1997.

The mask enables the members of the Nyau secret society to have anonymity when they critique social issues. It also allows them to have more courage, when they are wearing a mask, to be bold enough to break the social taboos they would not otherwise break, like stealing chickens from their mother in law, or kicking sand in the face of the person trying to photograph them, or breaking the camera of a researcher. In short, it gives them an amount of 'diplomatic immunity' as it were, a liminal status which enables a freedom of speech and action unheard of in the daily structure of life in society.

Linden and Schoffeleers remind us that

The exact historical relationship of the Nyau leadership to traditional village authorities is hard to ascertain. While the local chiefs are considered as the 'owners of the Nyau' in the Chewa areas, this role seems to have been lost among the Mang'anga. None the less the society claims jurisdiction over offences taking place during the course of the dances. 'Milandus' (litigation) involving dancers are tried at a special court presided over by the 'elder of the forest'. ²⁶⁸

It is crucial to understand however that transformation for the Nyau, although efficacious and politically potent, is not the same as possession. The masker is in control of his faculties. Anti-social or aggressive actions such as the breaking of the field-worker's camera are deliberate and purposeful.

Harding records the following incident:

In an Idoma village in late 1989, I was standing watching several masked figures perform in an open arena in the centre of the village...when one of the masked figures, instead of passing me by, swivelled and hit me over the head with his truncheon of rolled up banana leaves. Evidently he had singled me out as he had to alter his line of exit from onstage to offstage...Later the elders sent an apology saying that they "could no longer control the young men"... at the moment of being hit, I was vividly aware of three things: first, that I was opposed to institutionalised violence of any sort, including that done by masked figures; second, that in the moment of being struck, I moved from being audience to being performer; and, thirdly, that the act was neither instinctive nor made under a mental state over which the performer had no control, but was one of deliberate

²⁶⁸Linden & Schoffeleers, 1972, p 258-9.

choice.²⁶⁹

Possession vs Transformation.

“Performance is a period of intensified presentational behaviour distinct from that of everyday behaviour and controlled within recognised parameters,” writes Harding, and as such it is different from spirit possession, which involves a complete erasure of self and does not seem to be accompanied by the same control and parameters.²⁷⁰

Possession, on the other hand, implies a loss of ego control, a displacement of self and soul. Yoshida observes that among the Chewa “masking, spirit possession and sorcery are all, in some sense, considered as means of transformation of humans into animals.”²⁷¹ While these three are all broadly regarded as spirit possession, they differ in terms of consciousness, gender divisions, and what animals people are transformed into. There is one chiNyanja verb, “*u-sanduka*”, used to refer to all forms of visible transformation, including “to disguise oneself as an animal with a mask, to be possessed by an animal spirit, and to change oneself into an animal by means of sorcery.”²⁷² However, Yoshida notes that “the masker (*nyau*), the spirit medium (*mgwetsa*) and the sorcerer (*nfiti*), avoid one another”²⁷³

Yoshida also observes that,

Nyau dancers believe that they are possessed by the spirits of the dead or of the animals portrayed by the masks which they wear during their performances. They say “we feel hot and light when we dance”. This indicates that their bodies have borne some attribute of the spirits which are incorporeal and are thought to be

²⁶⁹Harding, 1991, p. 69-70.

²⁷⁰Harding, 1991, p. 60.

²⁷¹Yoshida, 1992, p 203.

²⁷²Ibid., p. 207.

²⁷³Ibid.

hotter than human beings. This type of spirit possession differs from that which causes trance, for it is said that the dancer in this condition is still able to recognise every movement of the audience. This, however, does not mean that it does not involve a genuine form of spirit possession.²⁷⁴

Terence Carter records an incident which reflects what he calls “the contact between European rationalism and African concepts of magic”.

The District Commissioner on tour in the [Gwembe] Valley came upon a lion near a village. He was carrying a rifle, so he at once raised it, aimed, pressed the trigger. There was no report. The gun had misfired. The lion apparently took no notice of this action and removed itself, disappearing into the bush. The District Commissioner told the headman of the village of his encounter. “Oh,” said the headman “You can’t shoot that lion. We know him very well and often see him near our village. He is headman Jeremiah who died many years ago. Oh no, you won’t shoot that lion.” “Nonsense,” said the District Commissioner. “It was a simple case of a dead cartridge!” “Would you” asked the headman, “try firing that same cartridge again?” The District Commissioner, with the same cartridge in the breech, cocked the rifle, aimed at the sky and pulled the trigger. There was a very healthy explosion as the bullet left the gun and soared upwards. The headman, and the villagers who had gathered around nodded their heads. The case had been proved. The District Commissioner, although momentarily shaken, remained a sceptic.²⁷⁵

Incidents such as these illustrate several aspects of the relationship between the “rational European” world view and an African one which may be more accepting towards the inexplicable. The District Commissioner’s refusal to believe that there was any explanation other

²⁷⁴Yoshida, 1992, p. 216-7.

²⁷⁵Terence D Carter, The Northern Rhodesian Record, and Colonel T Wright, A History of the Northern Rhodesia Police, (Printed by University of Portsmouth Central Production, 1992) p. 93-4.

than a rational one is typical of that positivist mind frame. Again, the incident serves to polarise African 'mumbo-jumbo' opposite European 'superior' rationality. A more holistic vision would include both the rational explanation (the gun jammed) and an explanation such as the villagers offered, which involves taking into account forces not immediately discernable by visual or tactile means.

Carter mentions another incident, where a man-eating lion had been shot by a local hunter, but reported to the local District Commissioner that the day he had shot the lion, in the left flank, "Chief Sinazongwe suddenly said he had a great pain in the left side of his chest and he rolled over and died." Having made "discreet enquiries", the District Commissioner

found that all the villagers, to a man, believed that it was the old chief who had taken on the form of a lion in order to enhance his authority among his people.²⁷⁶

In an interview with one elderly woman, I was told that when a chief dies, the claws of a lion are placed on his fingernails and toenails before he is buried, in order to help him become a lion more easily.

As far as spirit possession goes, she told me, anyone can get possessed by a spirit. If this happens to a person, they begin to feel unwell. The spirit then wants to dance. There is a certain drumbeat which will satisfy the spirit. Sometimes the spirit will speak through the person, saying "I want to dance. I have come from the grave." When that person is asked "What is your name?" they will not be able to remember, and will say something else. The person dances to the certain drumbeat until very tired, at which point they will collapse. Then the person must sleep, and "no-one will wake them because they will know what has happened". The next day the person will not be able to remember anything that has happened, but "will feel very tired from dancing."²⁷⁷

It seems clear that the type of possession referred to above is different to the type of transformation where sorcerers or chiefs inhabit the bodies of lions or other predators, or turn

²⁷⁶Ibid., p. 94.

²⁷⁷Interview, Myna Njovu, Mfuwe District, 1997.

themselves into predators (*virombo*). These two forms of transformation are also distinct from the use of masks to externally transform oneself.

Altered States of Consciousness:

As Yoshida points out,

The three differ not only in their method of transformation, but also in the state of their consciousness during the transformation. The nyau dancers are fully conscious of their own acts and well aware of their surroundings even when they are masked and dancing. On the other hand, the spirit medium is unconscious while being possessed by the spirit. As to the state of consciousness of sorcerers, much remains unknown...²⁷⁸

Emigh refers to the process of transformation during the wearing of masks in a Balinese context as “visitation”, preferring this word to “possession” because it is “less loaded, mystical, and mad-sounding”.²⁷⁹

Visitation is characterised by a loss of the sense of “me” and an engulfment of the self by an entity that is considered “not me” - with an attendant loss of conscious control and a scanty memory of what took place while performing... Visitation is distinguished from certain forms of madness characterised by extreme dissociation by the ability of the performer or the society to control the entrance into and the coming out of this behavioural state.... if the body is considered - as it often is - a home for the soul, then in visitation the home is loaned to a guest, while in madness the guest takes over the home.²⁸⁰

I believe that this is a far more useful term as it doesn't imply the strict opposition between presence and absence of mind. We can remain assured that there are a variety of modes of being, of states of consciousness in performance, and there is not one specific state of mind that is restricted to one specific activity. Emigh makes the valid point that the phenomenon known as character acting is distinct from trance possession or visitation, but the boundaries between actor and healer, shaman and showman are not always separated.

²⁷⁸Yoshida, 1992, p. 261.

²⁷⁹Emigh, 1996, p. 29.

²⁸⁰Ibid., p. 29-30.

Ritual performers I talked with have cited times when they have feigned trance. This is not always a matter of failure. Indeed, because of the common association of masking with trance, there is a complex interplay between the rival performative modes of character acting and visitation, and several traditional forms involving masks deliberately play with these gray areas of experience and perception.²⁸¹

I believe that Emigh's comment can apply to Nyau performances as appropriately as they can to Japanese Noh theatre and Balinese topeng: in all forms there is a blurring between aesthetics, spirituality, tradition and innovation.

4.4. Away from the Self...

The problem with many of the arguments on masquerade in Africa, including Harding's, is the way in which they rely so heavily on a dualist view of mind and body. New conceptions of selfhood need to be opened up and explored. Napier's critique of Cartesian and Freudian concepts of selfhood is illuminating:

What we would like to believe, and what our cultural canons tell us to believe, is that a loss of self is a weaker form of humanness, and that individual strength comes of being enough self-aware to see through the masks that metaphor holds up to us - to see the real person whose fixed memories make us "really" what we are. However, there are a number of important flaws to such a view.²⁸²

Freud's conception of personhood, according to Napier, "thoroughly depends upon an awareness of the radical distinction between self and environment", the resulting solipsism of which leads to a "self-centredness" which places anything that is foreign, other, or unknowable at odds with the self, which is knowable. And the

more...we argue that we can only know ourselves, the more we imply that knowledge is only self-centred...The more we devalue any sort of experience that is not reflexive or narcissistic, the less capable we are of appreciating any sort of

²⁸¹Ibid., p. 30.

²⁸²Napier, 1992, p. 181.

value in the alien.²⁸³

A Biology Lesson

In an episode during his field work which Strickland affectionately describes as “My Biology Lesson”, he learns of an important way of understanding Kunda concepts of body ownership, self, community and belonging.

Strickland relates his ‘lesson’ as follows:

Vainesi was first to say that it is the heart which must tell the brain what to do; the brain’s job is to figure out how to do it...the heart knows what it wants, and the brain must think the plan for the body to do it. The action (*machitidwe*) must be wanted in the heart. The brain on its own can do nothing; it only thinks (*kuganiza*) of the plan to make the body do the action the heart wants (*machitidwe wachifuna*)

Vainesi continued. Action, she explained again, comes from the heart. A person who is very active (*ocenjere* - active or clever) has a very powerful heart. That person has much power in his heart, and a very good brain.²⁸⁴

Strickland then asks where the power in the heart comes from, expecting to be answered in material terms, for it to come from food, or the movement of blood. Instead he is told “you must want power in your heart. To have power in the heart, you must choose to have it there. You must put it there.”²⁸⁵

The word for ‘power’ (*mpamvu*) thus refers not only to the physical bodily strength of a person, but also to their will, or their “wanting of the heart”. The episode continues with Strickland touching the baby that one of the women is holding. He rubs its head and the woman says,

“you see there Kefa, that action was sent to you from me, when Buladi rubbed

²⁸³Ibid., p. 177.

²⁸⁴Strickland, 1995, p 98.

²⁸⁵Ibid., p. 99.

your head. From my heart I sent to his heart to make him do the thing I wanted for you.”

The conversation continues,

So people can do that, I asked? To send from the heart to another person, and get them to do wanted actions, without even speaking any words?

Yes, said all three women. That is how the heart works.

What is wanted in my heart, explained Vainesi, I can send to you and make you do it. That action is sent by me. From my heart to your heart. (*Kutuma macitidwe nicifuna, ku mtima ku mtima*).

Even without my thinking or wanting to do that thing, I asked ?

Yes, said Vainesi. I can even make you do something you do not want to do.

Can everybody send from the heart this way?

Yes. All three women answered again, this is the way the heart works.

Strickland continues:

I found myself in a position where I needed to explain my surprise and interest in all this sending from the heart. I explained to them that when we are in school in America, we are taught that our actions stop with the ends of our arms, where my flesh stops. Apart from that which I can do with my own body, I can have no actions. This is the way that natural science teaches that our bodies are separate. It does not teach us that we can send actions that we want from our hearts and make someone else do that action.

No, the women said. That's wrong.

But that means when I send actions to someone else to do it, it is like I have two bodies, or more?

Yes, said Efrida, by sending from your heart.

I went on to explain also that we are taught that the brain does all the wanting of the body. That the heart just pumps around all of the blood.

Efrida agreed that that is one of the jobs of the heart, to make blood move to all parts of the body. But that is only part of what it does. It is wrong to say the brains do want anything, because it is the job of the heart to want for a person...that is how people are staying. Staying together and wanting as people want.²⁸⁶

The implications of being able to send and receive wants to and from other people are tremendous for an understanding of community. I had always been well aware of the necessity for a sense of togetherness in Kunda and Chewa philosophy. Proverbs such as ‘One stick will

²⁸⁶Strickland, 1995, p 99- 103.

break easily but a bundle of sticks cannot break', are common. Strickland's conversation with Vainesi and Efrida illuminates this concept very clearly, showing just how integral this basic understanding of bodily power is to the Chewa and Kunda world-view. It is a world-view that does not accommodate a philosophy of isolation or individualism. If a person stays outside of the village, alone in the bush, a mad person, for example, then he or she is not regarded as a person at all, but an animal, with no connection to anyone else. In Efrida's words:

You cannot send from the heart to that one. Staying in the bush, with no parents, no family, means you are only an animal (*nyama chabe*), not a person. To be *munthu* means to be staying with other people (*wanthu*), wanting as people want.²⁸⁷

The implications for Nyau masking are equally significant. In my interviews with Nyau performers at Kalata, I asked which part of the body changed when the men put on masks and danced with masks. The headman replied that the brain stayed the same, but the heart changed.²⁸⁸

If this is so, then it follows that Nyau masquerade performances are capable of transforming not just the dancer but all those present. Harding's contention that the actor presents a performance which is interpreted another way by the audience does not therefore apply to Nyau performance. Instead, a communal transformation takes place, an occurrence which I would be tempted to call a 'transformance'. To delve more deeply into my own subjectivity, I would venture that I have experienced something along these lines. Watching some of the performances at Kalata, I intermittently experienced a surging sensation in my chest which could be attributed to excitement at watching the *gule wa mkulu* close up, but could as easily be attributed to a moment of what Turner would call *communitas*, and what Efrida and Vainesi would call "sending from heart to heart."

Kathy Foley, writing about the body of the artist in performance traditions of Java describes a world-view which

²⁸⁷Strickland, 1995, p. 103.

²⁸⁸Kalata, September, 1997.

might seem mystical and esoteric from the Western point of view, [but] it is an ecology of the mind which the traditional Javanese world view finds simple and pragmatic.

Her experience of masking within the Sundanese puppet theatre of West Java has consisted of exposure to

training...designed to give each performer multiple personae, with different vocal, energy and spatial usages - different "bodies"- so that the performer can ultimately realize that *all* of the masks of the "other" are merely sides of the eternal self. The major masks represent the directions of the world, the ages of life, and the elements of the universe. All of these inhabit each human being.²⁸⁹

Describing the attractiveness of mask and object theatre, Foley mentions the capacity for "moving away from oneself" which in turn enables a better understanding of the "potential of the self: the positive and/or negative actualisation of the power latent within all beings. Foley quotes Benedict Anderson's description of Power in Java:

Power is that intangible, mysterious, and divine energy which animates the universe. It is manifested in every aspect of the natural world, in stones, trees, clouds, and fire, but is expressed quintessentially in the central mystery of life, the process of generation and regeneration. In Javanese traditional thinking there is no sharp division between organic and inorganic matter, for everything is sustained by the same invisible power.²⁹⁰

I realize that at some point this discussion will seem to many to be bordering on the mystical and the New Age spiritual, but I feel that in order to 'shift the Imperial gaze' as it were, it becomes necessary to tread where others fear to tread. Discussions of such ineffable phenomena as trance, possession, transformation, and the 'sending of power/wants from the heart' are bound to be fraught with difficulty, if only because language does become extremely limiting.

Dismayed by the facile emotional theories of the origins of religion held by so many of their predecessors, most of the present generation of British social

²⁸⁹Kathy Foley, "My Bodies", in *Acting (Re)Considered*, ed. Phillip B. Zarilli, (Routledge: London, 1995), p. 165.

²⁹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 163.

anthropologists have studiously avoided paying much attention to anything that could be called spirituality.²⁹¹

I am firmly convinced, however, that it is of crucial importance to take these phenomena seriously. The Imperial Gaze, such as it is, has been far too concerned with observation, documentation and classification, maintaining a cool aloof distance. It can be argued that an acceptance of a more fluid notion of self hood, as is evidenced in the Javanese and Kunda models, would prohibit the kind of atrocities which were committed in the name of Imperialism. For if one believes that we are all connected through heart, that to hurt one person is to hurt all persons and self included, then the economic and social injustices that Imperialism perpetuated are rendered impossible.

Strickland is obviously not the first ethnologist (or traveller) to experience the need to re-evaluate his concept of self. Yoshida also questions the Western notion of personal identity. Again, the perception of the ego as a unique conscious unit is seen as illusory. Yoshida quotes from Lacan as follows:

Only the anti-dialectical mentality of a culture which, in order to be dominated by objectifying ends, tends to reduce all subjective activity to the being of an ego, can justify the astonishment of a Van den Steinen when he is confronted by a Bororo who says: "I'm an ara (parakeet)". And all the sociologists of "the primitive mind" busy themselves around this profession of identity, which, on reflection, is no more surprising than declaring, "I'm a doctor" or "I'm a citizen of the French Republic", and which certainly presents fewer logical difficulties than the statement, "I'm a man", which at most can mean no more than "I'm like he whom I recognise to be a man, and so recognise myself as being such." In the last resort, these various formula are to be understood only in reference to the truth of "I am an other".²⁹²

It becomes quite clear from observations like the one quoted above that once we begin to question the Western notions of personal identity as inalienable, indivisible fact, then suddenly the question of whether or not a person can be possessed by spirits or transformed into an animal, is a little easier to digest.

²⁹¹I.M. Lewis, Ecstatic Religion, (Routledge: London, 1971 & 1989) p. 1.

²⁹²Yoshida, 1992, p205. Quotes Lacan (Ecrits).

Perhaps we can finally do as Glenn Bowman suggests, and initiate a process whereby the

the absolutist authority and autonomous being of the Cartesian ego is... dissolved back into the discourses of the societies from which it emerged and the subject can thus begin to think of its subjecthood as a social fact... The other then becomes like ourselves in so far as, like ourselves, he or she does not simply have an identity, but builds up a repertoire of identities through identifications with subject positions set out in the discourses he or she encounters in negotiating his or her life.²⁹³

4.5. Liminality, Borders and Abjection: From all Sides of the Mask.

If the first half of this chapter is devoted to the idea of the mask as transformative device, and of issues of transformation in general, this next section must look at the idea of the mask as border, the masked figure as a liminal being, a shifting boundary, which travels in and out of various realms. There are many aspects to this idea. Firstly I want to discuss masks as devices which bring/carry messages/images from one world to another, or masks as messengers, in a sense. Secondly, I will look at the idea of the liminal as potential threat, or pollutant to structured society.

Making the Absent Present

Masks bring the 'Other' from the 'void' into the present. Sometimes this is achieved by evoking the presence of the deceased. The *Kasinja* masks in the *gule wa mkulu* are representations of the newly deceased, and their presence in the village is said to keep the women company and comfort them, reminding them of their departed relative.

The *Nyau Yolemba*, as manifestations of otherworldly spirits and *virombo*, bring the alien, feared 'Other' into the village, into the domestic sphere. In doing so, the feared aspects of the *mtengo*,

²⁹³Glenn Bowman, "Identifying versus identifying with 'the Other': reflections on the siting of anthropological discourse", in After Writing Culture: Epistemology and Praxis in Contemporary Anthropology, eds Allison James, Jenny Hockey and Andrew Dawson, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) p. 45.

outside world can be confronted, and the audience thus experience cathartically the delicious repulsion of seeing a terrifying vision in a 'safe' context.

The foreign inexplicable is represented by the Nyau frequently: the pink *Dona* and *Malia* masks representing the European housewife and the Virgin Mary respectively, are both examples of the Nyau portraying foreign *virombo* in humorous and satirical fashion. Masks are used to explain the unexplainable, make visible the invisible, express the inexpressible. In this way, any 'creatures' which do not fit into the usual social envelopes can find a place during the carnival atmosphere of the *gule wa mkulu*, and the foreign Other can merge temporarily with the 'beings from beyond' and the villagers themselves.

Binary Terror

If the conflation of subject and object poses a threat to the established self in the Western, masculine 'civilized' and individualistic sense, that may go some way to explaining the note of hysteria that is contained in some of the responses to the *gule wa mkulu* masquerades. A certain Reverend Botha writing to the Provincial Commissioner for Fort Jameson in 1955, from the Dutch Reform Church Mission in Kamoto has the following to say of Nyau masquerades:

Now Sir, I can not see how it is possible to allow a heathen custom that the chiefs themselves - and many being heathen themselves - consider a menace and danger for their people. THE NYAU DANCE HAS ABSOLUTE NOTHING PROFITABLE AND GOOD IN IT. ON THE CONTRARY IT IS ACCOMPANIED BY: VICE, fighting, harlotry, murder etc. and it kepps the children away from schools! Yes it is indeed deemed at destroying the very ground that has been won in the past by again REINTRODUCING HEATHENISM !!²⁹⁴

Rebecca Schneider refers to a condition introduced by Patraha referred to as "binary terror": the sense of rage and horror that people experience when they are confronted with the possibility of

²⁹⁴Letter from Reverend T. Botha of the Dutch Reform Church Mission, Kamoto, to the Provincial Commissioner, Fort Jameson, dated 29th November 1954. Reproduced with permission, the Zambian National Archives.

the dissolution of their comfortably held boundaries and dualist categories.²⁹⁵ It is not an uncommon phenomenon:

The terror that accompanies the dissolution of a binary habit of sense-making and self-fashioning is directly proportionate to the social safety insured in the maintenance of such apparatus of sense. ²⁹⁶

Figures such as masqueraders do seem to pose a threat to established society, if only because of their deliberate evasion of categories.

Artaud, Cruelty and the Plague: Abjection and Transcending Self

Whether they admit it or not, whether a conscious or unconscious act, at heart audiences are searching for a poetic state of mind, a transcendent condition, by means of love, crime, drugs, war or insurrection.²⁹⁷

Artaud, writing in the thirties, was highly aware of some of the issues that are raised in this thesis. In spite of the fact that one can find fault with his tendencies to essentialise and homogenise 'Oriental theatre' as a rich and exotic source of new spirituality for the theatre, Artaud's ideas were extremely progressive for his time. He remains one of the most radical and influential theorists that theatre in the West has known, and while many artists have responded to his call for the renovation of the theatrical spirit, in some ways his diagnosis of theatre's sickness has not yet resulted in the best treatment. His commentators have often misunderstood him. Of all the avant-garde theatre makers and philosophers, he stands out as the one from whom we can still learn.

There are several concepts and images in The Theatre and its Double which seem to have relevance for a discussion of Nyau masking. The first is the image of the plague as a force which

²⁹⁵Rebecca Schneider, The Explicit Body in Performance, (London and New York, Routledge, 1997.), p. 13-15.

²⁹⁶Ibid., p. 13.

²⁹⁷Artaud, 1993, p. 81.

sweeps through society, annihilating boundaries between people and turning the usual social order upside down.

Once the plague is established in a city, normal social order collapses. There is no more refuse collection, no more army, police or municipality. Pyres are lit to burn the dead whenever men are available. Each family wants its own... Then the houses are thrown open and raving plague victims disperse through the streets howling, their minds full of horrible visions.²⁹⁸

The picture Artaud paints is one of extreme conditions, a state of affairs which Kristeva would term as 'abject', where horror reigns, and boundaries are disrupted.²⁹⁹

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he's a saviour.³⁰⁰

I would add to her list 'the masked figure'. Certainly, in keeping with Artaud's description of plague victim, Kristeva writes that "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life."³⁰¹

Artaud's description of the plague conjures a state of affairs where boundaries are completely violated.

The scum of the populace, immunised so it seems by their frantic greed, enter the open houses and help themselves to riches they know will serve no purpose or

²⁹⁸Ibid., p. 14.

²⁹⁹See Julia Kristeva, "Powers of Horror" in The Portable Kristeva, ed. Kelly Oliver, 1997, (New York: Columbia University Press) for a full discussion of abjection.

³⁰⁰Kristeva, 1997, p. 232.

³⁰¹Ibid.

profit.³⁰²

If the doors of the houses are thrown wide open, so too are the bodies of plague victims:

Soon the fluids, furrowed like the earth by lightning, like a volcano tormented by subterranean upheavals, seek an outlet...Buboes appear around the anus, under the armpits, at those precious places where the active glands steadily carry out their functions, and through these buboes the anatomy discharges either its inner putrefaction, or in other cases, life itself.³⁰³

Theatre, Artaud urges, should be able to affect groups and individuals in such extreme and explosive ways, but without killing people.

For if theatre is like the plague, this is not just because it acts on large groups and disturbs them in one and the same way. There is something both victorious and vengeful in theatre just as in the plague, for we clearly feel that spontaneous fire the plague lights as it passes by is nothing but a giant liquidation.³⁰⁴

I think that Nyau and other masquerades, in their most chaos-embracing and anarchic forms, approach Artaud's vision of what a theatre can do for a society.

The plague takes dormant images, latent disorder and suddenly carries them to the point of the most extreme gestures. Theatre also takes gestures and develops them to the limit. Just like the plague, it reforges the link between what does and does not exist in material nature.³⁰⁵

Artaud also reminds us that

A real stage play upsets our sensual tranquillity, releases our repressed subconscious, drives us to a kind of potential rebellion (since it retains its full value only if it remains potential), calling for a difficult heroic attitude on the part

³⁰²Artaud, 1997, p. 15.

³⁰³Artaud, 1997, p. 11.

³⁰⁴Ibid., p. 19.

³⁰⁵Ibid., p. 18.

of the assembled groups.³⁰⁶

It is no wonder then that District Commissioners and non-Chewa chiefs became so threatened by Nyau. The entire *raison d'être* of Nyau as a society is to celebrate marginality and the disruption of social category. Artaud's metaphor of the plague is echoed in the kind of efficacy that Nyau has in society. Marwick points out that

if someone defecates near the place in the bush where neophytes are taught and dances practised (the *liunde* or *dambwe*), the boys are made to pick up and pretend to eat the faeces, and are told to examine them carefully because 'they must be familiar with things that, in the village, are looked upon as filthy.' Similarly, they are made to wash in urine..³⁰⁷

All that is not of the village, of the civilized world, all that has been rejected by that world and regarded as filth and defilement thus becomes part of the domain of the Nyau as border-dwellers and liminal creatures. Their country is one of abjection, and of breaking taboos.

Human beings seem to need borders in order to make them feel civilized, separate from nature/chaos. But problems occur when these borders are over-protected, when merging with the universe is repressed. Anne McClintock writes that

In imperial fiction and commodity kitsch, boundary objects and liminal scenes recur ritualistically. As colonials travelled back and forth across the thresholds of their known world, crisis and boundary confusion were warded off and contained by fetishes, absolution rituals and liminal scenes. Soap and cleansing rituals became central to the demarcation of body boundaries and the policing of social hierarchies³⁰⁸

Such behaviour then leads to the obsession with self and high regard for individuality which the

³⁰⁶Ibid., p. 19.

³⁰⁷Max Marwick, Sorcery in its Social Setting: A Study of the Northern Rhodesian Chewa, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1965), p. 236.

³⁰⁸Anne McClintock, "Soap and commodity spectacle", 1995, in Representation: Representations and Signifying Practices, ed. Stuart Hall (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, in ass. with The Open University, 1997) p 280.

West has perfected. This is the kind of solipsism which Napier critiques:

the more we imply that knowledge is self-centred, or that the only knowledge we value is self-conscious cognition, the more we relieve ourselves of the burden of the unknown by cutting it out, from the start, as unknowable. The more we devalue any sort of experience that is not reflexive or narcissistic, the less capable we are of appreciating any sort of value in the alien.³⁰⁹

Dionysus and Apollo: Transcending the Binary Oppositions

While I think it is extremely important to emphasise that theatre can encourage the ecstatic, transcendent or 'poetic' states that Artaud refers to, I do not wish to perpetuate the image of Nyau societies and by extension Chewa culture, as wild and abandoned groups of people who become seized by Dionysian frenzies every time they perform the *gule wa mkulu*. The distinction between Dionysian and Apollonian cultures is, I believe, an artificial one.³¹⁰

Rather than fostering such binary oppositions, I think it is possible to understand the Nyau masquerades as performances which are useful as emotional/social/psychological release valves, but which are nonetheless extremely rule-governed, to borrow a term from a structuralist mind set for a moment. The actor is there-but-not-there, ego-less but in control. Ecstatic states do not imply a level of anarchic social decay. On the contrary, when a less linear and more circular understanding of time and existence is adopted, a certain peaceful orderliness would seem to follow suit.

Artaud's ideas may seem radical, but I think a theatre which does not facilitate repression, but which embraces evil and violence as part of a cyclical understanding of life and the cosmos, does

³⁰⁹Napier, 1992, p177.

³¹⁰Ruth Benedict, rooted in the Franz Boas school of cultural anthropology, coined the distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian cultures. Dionysian cultures, according to her analysis, encouraged "emotional abandonment in social responses," while Apollonian culture fostered order and control. From *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, ed. Alan Bullock and Oliver Stallybrass, 1977, (London: Fontana Books) p 30-1. See also R. Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, Boston and N.Y., London, 1935.

necessarily entail a measure of violence. The difference between what the Nyau model offers and what someone such as Reverend Botha fears, is that the Nyau performances are necessarily structured, rehearsed and deliberate, instead of wildly orgiastic as is so often imagined to be the case. In other words the threat of Nyau does not lie in their unbridled, chaotic darkness. They are threatening to the structures of imperialism precisely because they cannot be classified as chaotic or orgiastic. They continue to subvert their own categories.

Artaud reminds us constantly of the necessity of cruelty

Theatre, like the plague, is made in the image of this slaughter, this essential division [of the sexes]. It unravels conflicts, liberates powers, releases potential and if these powers are dark, this is not the fault of the plague or theatre, but life.³¹¹

And as Torgovnick convincingly argues, repressing the cruelty or shadow side of human nature more often than not results in maladjusted power relations between self and other. Theatre, and masking in particular is one of the ways in which a group of people or an individual can release the shadow and regulate the cruelty.

The question of what the notions of ecstasy, self and abjection have to do with a discussion on masquerade forms in Africa, is thus answered quite simply, by saying *this is what masks do*. While they may not be directly responsible for dissolving boundaries, for assisting the process of merging with the landscape / cosmos / natural world, they certainly do assist in a process which Torgovnick has called a 'voiding of self', whereby the ego is set aside and other selves, or other beings may play freely through the body.

Once again, my position here is not firmly on one or the other side of the mask/ border. One cannot grasp the relationship between mask and performer wholly if one is too heavily embedded in a materialist framework, isolating mind and body as separate units. Of course the 'marvels' and 'wonders' which Okafor speaks of are manufactured theatrically to some extent. And there is no doubt a theatrical trick behind the illusion of *kakayomoto*, the sorcerer that dances with fire.

³¹¹ Artaud, 1997, p. 21.

The existence of theatrical trickery however does not preclude the existence of altered states of consciousness, trance states which allow performers to endure beyond the limits that the body is capable of on a daily basis.

These are the ways in which masquerades have been perceived. On the one hand there is the view which states that masked performers are invaded by spirits, that they are conduits for foreign entities, and that 'traditional Africans', because they are more in harmony with nature are more capable of such 'channelling'. The other view states that maskers are perfectly conscious and deliberately aware of their actions, that any seemingly supernatural tricks are theatrically orchestrated. I feel that both of these views are beset with problems.

I have experienced that there is a mysterious otherness which permeates my being when I put on a mask, but I certainly don't think I am 'possessed', or even invaded by an Other entity. Perhaps after all the best way of describing what happens when you put on a mask is in fact the Nyau way: 'We fish these creatures out of the water' or 'We find the *zirombo* in the bush, then we bring them to the people.' Perhaps all that happens is that my Self (dominant daily Self) is temporarily (and gently) put aside (not voided, voided is too violent) and Other selves come into my body from their sleeping places. These may be Other aspects of my self, repressed, unconscious selves, or they may be spirits from beyond. If I am in a state of ecstasy where there is no boundedness between me and stones and nettles and baboons, then does it really *matter* where the *virombo* come from?

One thing that may be concluded, is that an over-emphasis on the cult of the individual, as happens in avant-garde theatre, is in fact a barrier in the path towards transformation. To cling to self and ego is to resist the power of the mask. In the words of Napier,

In primitivism we parody the attention to detail and to ritual meaning that anthropologists discover in other cultures, while we fear the connectedness that might lead us to be creatively transformed.³¹²

³¹²Napier, 1992, p. 24.

Conclusions

The question I had in mind at the start of this dissertation was 'What is the West looking for and why does it think Africa has it?' The question was asked in a half playful spirit but it does encapsulate the central issues of this work. The answer is simple, but requires contextualising. Western intellectuals, tourists and theatre makers, as well as individuals fascinated by the exotic, seem to be attracted to that state of being which we have called ecstasy.

Modernist and Post Modernist thought and aesthetics are founded on expressions of longing: longing for union with an original, harmonious state; longing for mystical union, for belonging, merging. Torgovnick makes the claim that

the primitive is the sign and symbol of desires that the West has sought to repress - desires for direct correspondences between bodies and things, ... between experience and language, ... between individual beings and the collective life force.³¹³

³¹³Torgovnick, 1997, p8.

Yet to project this seemingly not-quite attainable ideal onto a 'Primitive Other' is not the solution. Nyau artists also long for that connectedness, the reunion of nature and humanity. To hold up another culture as being 'there' - in the moment of 'presence', of 'merged-ness', of pre-linguistic connectedness with the mother, is fallacious.

All communities are capable of finding ways of connecting, moments of *communitas*. If one group of people (the West) perceives that it has lost its ways, then it may look to another group of people for guidance. What would be sought then would be the *ways* in which this is achieved. By incorporating politics together with spirituality, for example, in a more holistic approach. Merely finding a ritual and repeating the empty trappings of it in another context is a futile attempt at restoring spirituality and holism. There are no quick fixes. Moreover, turning to the 'Other' as a re/source presents this ever present possibility: "a dilemma that haunts all western attempts to reach out to other cultures: that the voice we hear as theirs may be our own"³¹⁴

Thus the enormous fascination which the West has for the Primitive is laced with fear, and as a result, ecstasy remains out of reach. As Napier writes,

It should not appear strange then, that the final agenda of the avant-garde less concerns anonymous "connected" activity than it does an attempt to confiscate the artefacts of the exotic, to domesticate, define, and institutionalize them, to mark them with our names rather than let ourselves be transformed by them.³¹⁵

There are multiple conclusions to be reached at this point. A shift is required - a shift in thinking. A shift which moves the Imperial Gaze from objective outsider to a different position. And this shift is not as simple as a move from outside to inside, to a relativist position. We need to move to a position that accounts for the fluidity between object and subject, between things and people, between self and other. Perhaps then we can approach the kind of theatre that Artaud was calling for, a theatre that can be efficacious and entertaining at once, ignoring the usual boundaries between politics and spiritual affairs. A theatre that understands that these elements of life are deeply entwined.

³¹⁴Drain, 1995, p. 296.

³¹⁵Napier, 1992, p. 24.

And this, ultimately, is what decolonising our minds is all about. It is about understanding that all things are interconnected. Understanding too that all societies can be primitive and civilized at once. That selves do not necessarily end with flesh-clad fingertips.

Social groupings are not really able to live in a state of permanent ecstasy. As Turner points out, there would be great difficulty maintaining even basic survival if this were the case. The structure feeds into the *communitas* which in turn fuels the need for further structure. The *gule wa mkulu* destroys the boundaries, it is true, but it also purposefully recreates them. Rather than conceiving of this process as a dialectical one, or even a cyclical one, one can imagine rather a process which resembles the path of the Luangwa river. The Luangwa river is a meandering one. It cuts through the landscape in lazy arcs, forming a neck below the loop. One side of the neck will be eroded until the water course breaks through, leaving an oxbow. The river will keep up this process until it reaches the Zambezi. The oxbow left behind forms a fertile flood plain, an area often called a '*Luangwa wafwa*' or 'dead Luangwa'.

The Nyau performances work like this: the daily life of a village begins gradually to wear away at the social fabric. People become tired, resistance wears thin. Then, as the rains approach, the Nyau enact their performances, the boundaries which hold people in their strictly defined place are swept away, creating, momentarily, a flood of water. This flood is not a mass of chaos: there are laws which govern its flow. The new river course will flow according to where the soil is softest, or according to how it is pushed by the weight of the river's tradition: the patterns are repeated year after year. Once the river has broken through, the old pattern is established again, until the following flood. The oxbow that is left behind is like the fertility created by the shedding of an old skin.

It is not a linear process: there are thousands of tributaries which feed into this meandering river, just as the Nyau is fed by influences and cross-pollinations from a number of sources, whether the technologies introduced by American cultural input, or intermarriage from other villages in other chieftainships. The entire process is like a network of different strands of knowledge, active in their various parts but existing as a dynamic, ever shifting whole. The power produced by these strands of knowledge, this web of discourses is not attributable to a single source. All of its

elements are caught up in the web.

The one shift that the Imperial Gaze could make is a gentle but brave shift: it is to allow, for a moment, a glimpse of the possibilities of a theatre unbounded by binarism and cloying categories. To allow for a moment a vision of a theatre which has the capacity to be truly regenerative and truly, humanly cruel. Helene Cixous writes

For a long time I believed my texts would only inhabit those rare and desert places where only poems grow.

Until I arrived at the Theatre. There was the stage, the earth, where the self remains imperceptible, the country of others. There do their words, their silences, their cries, their song, make themselves heard, each one according to a particular world and in a particular foreign language...

For if this theatre is necessary it is because it allows us to live what no "genre" allows us: the difficulty, the pain we have being human. Evil. What happens at the theatre is the Passion, but the passion according to...you,...according to me,...according to this enigmatic, tortured, criminal, innocent human being that I am, I who am thou or you.³¹⁶

In a strange and paradoxical way it is only by realising that we are all caught up in this web, all part of the system of power discourses, that we can free ourselves from thinking that some are more trapped than others, or more deserving to be trapped. If we can shift imperialism's gaze that much, we can grasp the possibility for equality on many levels. And, as Foley writes,

Through the one body we inhabit in this life we can, with the help of these puppets or masks and the ideas they encode, embody the whole of the universe.³¹⁷

³¹⁶Helene Cixous, from "The place of Crime, the place of Pardon", trans. by Eric Prenowitz. (Paris, Theatre du Soleil, 1986-7) Extract appears in Drain, 1995, p. 340.

³¹⁷Foley, 1995, p. 161-2.



Plate 16: 'The Marriage Goes On'
Ngau Sketch, Kapuni, 1997
Photo: Ram Gurus

Appendix I

Mutundu wa Nyau: Types of Masks

Akapoli: Carved masks which deal with current issues. They often sing a song or tune the audience knows well, but which has been adapted to suit specific topical needs of the community. Plate 16 illustrates a popular sketch, entitled “The Marriage Goes On” or “Two in One”. In this sketch the woman is continually falling pregnant, thus keeping her husband at home and not allowing him to socialise with his other friends.

Kasinja and Kang’wing’wi: Performers wearing cloth wrappings and feathers as headdress masks, representing spirits of the deceased who come to play in the village with the relatives.

Kalulu: Hare. “Dispeller of evil spirits, medicine of the area.”³¹⁸ Performs a short agile dance, has his own drumming pattern, to clear the acting space of evil spirits.

Dona: A European housewife stereotype, often portrayed by a very pink-faced mask.

Nyolonyo: A childless woman, asks man to buy her a radio before he goes away, so she won't be lonely.

Namalocha: Dressed as a woman, his sketch depicts a woman who complains that her husband does not buy her enough clothes.

Malia: a European (*mzungu*) mask which represents Mary or Maria, along with Yosefi (Joseph).

³¹⁸Mvula et al., 1992, p. 48.

These characters are appropriated from mission biblical teachings.

Kasiyamaliro: Enormous basket structure, can house up to ten people. Representing the Eland, this mask is the most sacred and potent of all the masks, and is said to represent the womb of the mother as well as being the vehicle for the deceased's spirit to travel from the hut to the bush.

Chimkoko: An animal structure, nine metres long.

Mbiyazodooka (Pots with Holes): Finale: Carries on his head a broken leaking pot in which there are stinking things which attract flies. Signals that the masks, which have only come for a short time to live with humans, must now return to the other side, to the grave. With his entrance the drumming and clapping slows down, becomes heavier. The villagers will soon return to their daily world of taboos.

Appendix II

Glossary

Banja: matrilineage / family.

Bisa: to hide.

Bona: Commemorative funerary rite.

Bwalo: performance area within the village.

Chirombo (pl. virombo): creature, predatory animal. Whereas **nyama** is used to refer to edible animals, **chirombo** refers more specifically to predators such as lions, leopards, jackals. Also used to indicate unknown, foreign creatures from beyond the familiarity of the village. Thus a car, **galimoto**, a white man, **mzungu**; a bicycle **njinga** and a leopard **nyalubwe** might all be referred to as **chirombo** in various circumstances.

Chisamba manja: Washing hands, phase two of the funerary ritual

Chitenje: brightly decorated cloth, worn by women around their waists. Also means 'shelter'.

Chiwanda: spirit of the recently deceased.

Chizera: verb used to indicate dancing, celebrating, carousing. The emphasis is on enjoyment and entertainment.

Dambwe: refers to both the graveyard area outside of the village where masks are made and Nyau initiates trained. Also the performance area outside of the village where the *Nyau Yolemba*, or night masks perform.

Makhalidwe: ways of staying. **Khakhalidwe** is a habit.

Makolo: ancestor and/or ancestral spirit.

Malume: maternal uncle

Mbili: stories; history stories.

Mizimu: ancestral spirit.

Mkati: Inside.

Mphamvu: power.

Mudzi: village. Also **mzinda**.

Mutundu: type, group.

Mwinimzinda: village headman.

Mzungu: European / white person.

Ng'oma: drum.

Nyimbo: song.

Nyamkungwe: instructress in girl's initiation.

Nyampungu: senior instructress in girls initiation.

Nzeru: knowledge, intelligence.

Ulemu: respect. **Kupasa ulemu** means to give respect. **Kukhala na ulemu** means to stay with respect.

Utaya: 'dispose of', refers to the first phase of the burial rite.

Veena: to dance.

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