

Chimwaye

(A day or night structure from the Mua, Khwidzi, and Salima areas)

Themes

- 1) Assisting transition of deceased to spirit world
- 2) Mother Ancestor
- 3) Pregnancy instructions & childbirth
- 4) Sexual taboos (*mdulo*)

Etymology

Mwaye means 'soot'. It is found on the hut or kitchen ceilings when fire is lit inside. The *chi* prefix demonstrates amplification, that is, 'the big soot'. Soot is an important ingredient in the making of African traditional medicine (*mankhwala*), because it is symbolically seen as fire that has cooled down. It is a component of medicine against breaches to the *mdulo* complex.

Description



(miniature model, night version)

Chimwaye is a large structure two metres tall and one metre wide, depicting an expectant mother. It performs at both night and day rituals for funerals of senior members of the community. The construction consists of a bamboo frame that borrows the shape of a granary for the base and narrows to the chest and the neck. The head takes the shape of a round ball attached to the apex. Two arms made of grass hang down on the sides and end in armlets. The outside finish of the construction varies according to whether **Chimwaye** appears at night or during the day. For the night appearance, **Chimwaye**'s bamboo frame is coated with dried grass and woven with palm leaves (*chilale*) in a zigzag pattern which serves to reflect the light. For the day performance the palm leaves are replaced by a white cloth, which highlights the print of the dress and the details of the face (nose, eyes, mouth). The general appearance of both night and day versions of **Chimwaye** is that of a giant expectant mother protecting her children.

She appears with the very first light (dawn) of the day the deceased is to be buried. She circles the funeral hut and waves sideways. She may even enter the house and dance around the corpse. She next appears at dusk after the deceased has been buried. She erupts from the graveyard and makes

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Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art, Mua Parish, P. O. Box 41, Mtakatika, Malawi

her way to the funeral hut (*masiye*), where people gather after the burial for another night vigil. **Chimwaye** is led by a dancer who shakes the rattle (*silambe*) to guide her to the house. Again, she circles the house of seclusion or enters it to dance for a short while, putting the spirit at rest. The drummers beat the *chisamba* rhythm and the singers lead the song: “*Come out of this house, you, the expectant one* (the big tummy), **Chimwaye!**” The song is an invitation to the spirit in transition to move out of the house and to settle in the graveyard. A spirit in transition is perceived as unsettled, moody and reluctant to move to his new home, the grave. It tends to cling to the hut where the person used to live. The deceased is tempted to come back, but this creates havoc in the village.

Moreover, the person in transition, like a newborn child, is perceived as cool and fragile. Therefore, that person needs protection against sexually active people and those who are considered as ‘hot’. This is the function of **Chimwaye**: to offer the deceased a safe transit to the spirit world. Because of its very name, ‘the big soot’ or ‘the big mother soot’, **Chimwaye** presides over the rebirth of the spirit of the deceased. Four days after birth, a Chewa mother protects her newborn child with a medicine called *mkulumulo*. It shields her child against the cutting disease (*mdulo*) and against people who are sexually hot (active). Similarly, this is the role of **Chimwaye**, the great mother of the Chewa, who is perceived to be pregnant whenever one of her children departs from the village and enters the spirit world. Like Kasiya maliro, she carries in her womb the person in transition and gives birth to a new ancestor in the land of the spirits.

In the past, the close members of the family were expected to keep sexual abstinence for at least a month and a half after the burial. This was to insure that the new spirit settled peacefully in the world of the ancestors, away from sexual heat. The deceased is ‘cool’ and sexually inactive like the ancestors themselves. The song conveys this as a second meaning in “*Come out of this house!*”, which is an invitation to the members of the family to keep the sexual continence required for the deceased’s safe transition. When these rules are lifted after the prescribed period, the members of the family gather at the funeral home and are given medicated porridge and are able to resume sexual activity and to return to normality. The traditional medicine used for the occasion is called *kundabwi*. Its composition involves *mwaye*, soot (as fire that has cooled down for a long span of time). *Mwaye* is therefore mixed with *kundabwi* roots in order to end the period of ritual coolness and to reinstate heat as a normal feature of daily life.

In a third instance, the song “*Come out of this house, you, the big tummy!*” is an invitation to expectant women to keep away from the funeral house and from the graveyard. Among the Chewa, a woman who carries life is usually discouraged from encountering death. There is a law of avoidance between the two. A woman in this condition is forbidden to be near a corpse, to enter the funeral parlour or attend a funeral. The song reminds pregnant women of this prescription and invites them to come out of their huts (where they lock themselves during the funeral) and behave normally since the body has been buried. The funeral is over and they can now move freely in the village.

The character of **Chimwaye** is a very ancient feature around the southern end of Lake Malawi. Unfortunately, the Chewa communities are today witnessing **Chimwaye**’s disappearance from the funeral rites. The main reason is that the construction of most structures is labour intensive and their storage difficult during the rainy season. Moreover, the economic pressures on the Chewa

communities since the mid 1980s and their preoccupation with survival limit leisure time and curtail communal creative exercises such as that of construction of *gule* structures. Moreover, the dancer who performs **Chimwaye** must keep the rule of sexual coolness required for the occasion. It is sad to imagine that one of the important mother ancestor symbols of the Chewa may vanish and die for future generations.

Song

*"Tuluka m'nyumbamo, mkulumimba **Chimwaye** (2x), **Chimwaye!**"*

Source

Interviews in 1992, 1994 and 2007