

Lire lire or Khunju

(A day or night structure from the Mua area)

Themes

- 1) Compassion at funerals
- 2) Discretion in keeping the secrets of *gule*

Etymology

Lire lire means, “Cry, cry” or “Mourn, mourn.” The alternative name, **Khunju**, is a derogative term that suggests a womanish and foreign funeral. *Khunju* is a women’s dance first practised by the Nthumba (then Chewa captives of the Ngoni) on the occasion of funeral and commemoration rites. The *khunju* involves the use of drums similar to those of *gule wamkulu* but suggests a ‘second best’ to the big dance itself.



(miniature model, day version)

Description

The structure of **Lire lire** has similarities to that of Chikwangwala. It is a metre and a half tall, and the base is close to a metre wide. Like other structures, it consists of a bamboo frame covered with dried grass on which a variety of materials are added to enhance the structure’s appearance in a day or a night context: painted jute (for day) and woven palm leaves in a zigzag pattern (for night). The general shape of the structure is ambiguous. It resembles a woman with a broad skirt, but the head and the face are those of a wild beast with fierce teeth. The shape resemble a cone, and there are no arms. For day events, the top part is dressed with a shirt or a blouse. The head of the structure is crowned with a mobile cowlick made of feathers that emphasises masculinity. **Lire lire** contrasts male and female symbols, purposely highlighting a mockery that is well in tone with the function of the structure.

Lire lire appears exclusively on the occasion of funerals incorporating male and female puberty and commemoration rites that follow. It performs when the corpse lies in state in the house. The structure of **Lire lire** circles around the house and gyrates around the coffin followed by womenfolk dancing the

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khunju. The women clap hands in the *khunju* manner. **Lire lire**'s dancer leads his own song while the women repeat after him, "Mourn, mourn, mourn for the young men." The song expresses sorrow because young men are taken by death in their prime, through their foolishness or temerity.

Informants reveal that the origin of **Lire lire** was linked to the burial rites of *gule* members who had betrayed the secret of their own society. They were ritually murdered because of divulging the secrets protecting the *mwambo* and their own identity behind the mask. In the past, indiscretions concerning these matters were punishable with the death penalty. The defaulters would meet their fate within the *dambwe* (the secret place of gathering for the *Nyau* members). The cause of death in such cases was not disclosed, but the deceased was described as the victim of wild animals. None of the members of the secret society was permitted to reveal the true cause. (There is a sly clue in this, however, as the *gule wamkulu* dancers were sometimes referred to as *zirombo*, or wild animals.) The funeral would be conducted at the village and *gule* was performed as usual. Only the office bearers of *gule* knew that **Lire lire** had been created for this type of funeral, which was nicknamed a *khunju* funeral. Such drastic measures of *Nyau* discipline were still enforced during the colonial period, particularly in remote areas far away from any administrative government quarters. Rarely would such murders be reported to the local police stations, even if villagers had suspicions of what had really happened.

According to the logic of the Chewa secret society and a period of history that is now gone, **Lire lire** was highlighting the primacy of the *mwambo* and the danger for any individual to set himself above it. *Gule* was the only school known by the Chewa youth that inculcated discipline in the absence of military training. The rigidity of its rules included the death penalty for those who behaved immaturely and irresponsibly. With the advent of the missions and colonial rule, new priorities came to supplant the importance of the group: the focus on the individual and on personal development. The rigid discipline of *gule wamkulu* came under further attack by the 1930s and was undergoing major reforms enforced by the chiefs under the pressure of the colonial powers.

With Independence, the *Nyau* disciplinary methods were looked upon as barbaric and anti-development. The new black leaders, though they were sympathetic to their own cultural institutions (as was the case of Kamuzu Banda for the Chewa), nevertheless had to make concessions and to imbue their government with a progressive image on education and social development. The discipline of male societies came to be partly shared by the traditional authority and the police system that had been put in place by the government. The chiefs and those controlling the *mizinda* were no longer the sole authority over these matters. If discipline was to be maintained, other types of sanctions had to be invented in order to uphold the secret regarding the *mwambo*.

By the time of Independence, cases of ritual murders had become rare, but the character of **Lire lire** continued until the early 1970s. By then villagers had forgotten the real purpose of **Lire lire**. They considered it simply as one of the numerous structures present at *gule* funerals. **Lire lire** had by then evolved into a structure showing compassion at funerals and had lost its concealed face of the harsh disciplinarian. However, among the most senior informants still alive today, a few still hold to this piece of information despite the four decades of **Lire lire**'s absence from the arena.

Song

"E Lire lire (3x) lire anyamata."

Source

Interviews in 1991 and 2007