

Chimphuli

(A day or night structure from the Mua area)



Themes

1) Communion with the ancestors 2) Compassion of ancestors for the living 3) Sharing of beer 4) Unity & harmony

Etymology

The meaning and derivation of the name are unclear but may refer to *phuli*, a bright flash of light like lightning.

Description

This large structure is three metres long, one metre wide and two metres high, made of a bamboo frame on which a variety of materials can be woven or attached (palm leaves for the night performance, maize husks or white cloth painted with stripes and colourful spots for the day events). The structure features an animal of unknown species. The back is often flat with one hump toward the long tail. The head displays thin horns, long hanging ears and a ferocious mouth with aggressive teeth. A mane made of maize husks or grass runs down the short stout neck. The edge of the structure near the ground is concealed with a maize husk fringe hiding the feet of the dancers activating the structure.

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Nyau members see **Chimphuli** as a relative and a deputy of Chimkoko. It plays a similar role on the occasion of funerals, commemorations, initiations and *dambule* ceremonies. Its dancing style closely resembles that of Chimkoko: it circles the *bwalo* rapidly, moves forward and backward, then stops for a while and sways sideways. Moving at high speed, it chases the women in all directions. It also spins around in the manner of Kasiya maliro. Like Chimkoko/Chiwoko and Mdondo, the structure is sent out to survey the beer being brewed to be offered to the spirits and shared among the villagers. **Chimphuli** does not have a song of its own but uses the song sung for Chimkoko/Chiwoko with a slight transformation: 1) "*Chiwoko, Chiwoko, **Chimphuli**, oh Chiwoko!*" The women answer, "*This structure is white, this structure is white, it came from Dowa.*"

The structure of **Chimphuli** is not as ancient as Chimkoko in the Mua area. Informants say it was introduced into the dance some time around the 1940s from the Dowa region. **Chimphuli** can be seen as a relative of Chimkoko because of its length, color, shape and dancing style. The shorter length makes **Chimphuli** a sort of 'minibus'. Its whiteness conveys its links to the spirit world. A leading senior member of *gule* recalls that **Chimphuli**'s mouth was larger in the past. During the funeral rites its head entered through the door of the funeral house and the corpse was 'fed' to **Chimphuli**. The dancers inside carried the body to the graveyard. There it 'defecated' it into the grave before the villagers paid their last respects by circling the grave before the body was buried. It would have been the privilege of **Chimphuli** to accompany a person of status to the spirit world and preside over his/her transition.

Today **Chimphuli** circles the arena, gathers the villagers and brings the spirit world together like Chimkoko does. During the commemoration ceremonies, **Chimphuli** is sent on behalf of Chimkoko (when that structure is not available) to collect the pots of beer together on the *bwalo* in order to celebrate the unity of the living and the dead. Its aggressive character (like that of Chimkoko) is meant to inculcate respect in the villagers for those who are entrusted with the wellbeing of their descendants.

Songs

- 1) "*Chiwoko, chiwoko, **Chimphuli** oh chiwoko!*"
- 2) "*Woyera gule, woyera gule, wochokera ku Dowa!*"

Source

Interviews in 1987, 1991, 1993, 2000 and 2001

Reference

Scott, D.C. (1892). *A Cyclopaedic Dictionary of the Mang'anja Language spoken in British Central Africa*. Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland: Edinburgh. p. 77, p. 547