

Some Notes on Kungoni Work at Club Makokola, Mangochi District, Malawi

Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art, Mua Mission, has just completed the decoration of a new restaurant which forms part of Club Makokola, a lakeshore hotel which is owned by one of its principal friends and sponsors, the Bizzaro family.

The water level of Lake Malawi has risen and fallen dramatically over the years. It is remembered that the shore was once far distant from Club Makokola, making it possible to walk out to the island of Boadzulu, which lies prominently offshore. Boadzulu itself is a traditional burial ground, on which the dead are immured in rock fissures and caves.

Even today villagers tell how the drums of long submerged villages might be heard from the shore.

Fr. Claude Boucher, the director, has been inspired by these stories and the lakeshore setting of the restaurant to offer a meditation on the life which the spirits of the dead continue to live under the water in continuation of their earthly existence. From the ceiling of the restaurant hang lovingly carved images of the fish of Lake Malawi, from a shoal of *usipa* to the mighty *kampango* (catfish). They are complemented by free-standing carvings: a leaping *mpasa* (lake salmon) and otters (*akatumbi*). On the columns which support the roof are set masks, which depict ancestral spirits, human and animal and *gule*. (*Gule wamkulu* is the great dance of the Chewa people of Malawi.)

The following images illustrate a cycle of wooden tableaux, which are set on ripples of cement work on the wall behind the servery.

The mizimu (spirits) are elongated and supernaturally pale. Their nakedness serves also to set them apart from the living. Although they are recognisably male and female, there is no sex among the dead, for sex is hot, and the spirits are cool.

The zingongo (women's plaits) are carefully depicted.

*This is a touching scene of mutual support and affection: ties of love and friendship, the artist reminds us, endure beyond the grave. Although the Chewa are reticent to express this emotion, we might compare the *gule* character Ndege, the flying coffin, which teaches that a wife's loyalty outlasts the death of her husband. To the right, a wife *agwada* (kneels in respect) before her husband.*



A village of nyumba ya dendera (native huts) lies submerged and decayed. The huts show their mitanda (roof timbers).

Among the Chewa, when a man dies, his house is ritually destroyed, to indicate that its owner inhabits it now in the spirit world. The place where it once stood is known as chigunda.

A mlambe (baobab) tree stands in the background. Chambo fish float through its branches; and an nkhanu (crab) guards the approach.



A fisherman draws in his catch from his bwato (dug-out canoe). His darker colour tells us that he belongs to the living.

The dug-out canoe is still the preferred fishing vessel on Lake Malawi. The flares which fishermen set in the bows of their canoes to attract fish give the lake its popular name, the Lake of Stars.

The image serves to bridge the divorce between the living and the dead.



An nthipe (cormorant) plunges into the waters of Lake Malawi: it dives from the air which nourishes the living to the waters which are the habitation of the dead.



Dzuwa (the sun) is reflected in Lake Malawi.



A nearby rock painting attests to the presence in the area of the Batwa or Akafula, the hunter-gatherer pygmies who preceded Bantu peoples such as the Chewa.

Their land too has been submerged. Here a Batwa bowman fixes an antelope with his arrow.



Mwali, the rain priestess, couples with Thunga, the sacred python who incarnates Chauta, God, as she casts water into the air to summon the rain clouds which bear life to the Chewa. A kachisi (shrine or spirit house) stands in the background, where people go to propitiate the spirits.

To the left, there is a mono (fish trap).



Life in the spirit village, although it has decayed, continues. A man carves an mpini (handle) for an nkhwangwa (axe); and women carry mitsuko (pots) and zikho (gourds) to the well to draw water. Mapale (potsherds) lie around the huts.

A kampango (catfish) floats by and an nkhone (snail) winds its way through the huts.



Here we see more of the daily round: chimanga (maize) is pounded in an mtondo (mortar) with a pestle (musi); the mphale (grain) is separated from the gaga (bran) in a lichero (winnowing basket); the mphale is pounded again to make the ufa (flour), which is required for nsima (maize porridge), the staple food of the Chewa.

An ncheni fish, a chule (frog) and an nkhasi (turtle) float by.

The two larger figures, male and female, lift their hands, as if in prayer. It is the common lot to become a kholo (ancestor), which serves to bind the generations together in mutual dependency and respect.



Mr. Thomas Mpira, who is one of the longest established carvers of Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art, has contributed to the cycle illustrated above. He is responsible also for the *Spirits of Namalikhate*, who preside over the dining room at Namalikhate, which offers accommodation to visitors to the Kungoni Centre. In conclusion, an image is offered, to offer a point of comparison with his work at Club Makokola.

Three ancestral spirits, two male and one female, tower over the village which is clustered at their feet: so tall are they that their waists pierce the rain clouds. Their pale and leprous skin, together with their nakedness, serves also to distance them from the living.

The spirits reach down to the living with open and beneficent hands, interlocking their arms to shew their unity. They are aloof but kindly, concerned that the living should uphold the mwambo (moral code), which was, in turn, their duty in life. If pleased with what they see, they will petition Chauta, God, to send the rain on which the living depend.

Namalikhate means, 'the place of washing pots'. The hostel is set above the River Nadzipokwe, which flows through Mua Mission. A rocky shelf in the river allows the villagers to bathe and the women to wash clothes and pots.

The spirits are evidently pleased, for mvula (the rains) fall from the clouds at their waists and the River Nadzipokwe flows in full spate past their feet.



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18th February, 2012