

## THE NYAU BROTHERHOOD AMONG THE MOZAMBIQUE CEWA\*

A. RITA-FERREIRA

The *nyau* male brotherhood is closely associated with the traditional political structure and the social and magico-religious life of the tribal communities among the Cewa of Mozambique. Its functions and internal organization. The initiation in adult life through *nyau*. The secret place known as *dambwe*. The occasions when the *nyau* is held: *cinamwali* or female puberty ceremonies; *maliro* or mortuary rites and *bona* or the propitiation ceremony of the spirit of the deceased.

The author had prior knowledge regarding the organization of the brotherhood through field work carried out during two years spent in Macanga and from papers written by Portuguese and foreign authors who had investigated the *nyau*. During recent visits to the administrative areas of Macanga and Angonia, he personally interviewed a large number of *eni mzinda* who co-operated with great willingness, anxious that the importance of their duties in the tribal and social organisation should be better known.

The *nyau* may be defined as a brotherhood, characteristic of the traditional culture of those peoples known as *Maravi* and found north of the Zambezi between the Shire and the Luangwa rivers. These are usually divided into three sub-groups: the Nyanja, the Cewa and the Nsenga. In Mozambique they inhabit the administrative areas of Angonia, Macanga, Maravia, Moatize and Mutarara.

The *nyau* is closely associated with the traditional political structure and the social and magico-religious life of the tribal communities. It plays the following important roles: (a) through its medium the boys are initiated into adulthood; (b) it is part of the mortuary ritual of important people; (c) it urges its members and non-members alike to accept the traditional group values; and (d) it is a reaction of the males against female predominance charac-

teristic of the matrilineal and uxorilocal societies.

The leading personality in the internal structure of the brotherhood and one who decides when the *nyau* is to take place is the "owner of the secret place" — called the *mwini mzinda* (pl: *eni mzinda*). According to tradition, the right to a *mzinda* was formerly considered a hereditary and irrevocable privilege accorded to famous chiefs by the rulers of the Undi dynasty. It was therefore a mark of high status. The right to *mzinda* was passed on to their successors by these chiefs. The present *eni mzinda* whether recognized or not as chiefs by the administration are the descendants of those appointed by the Undis. However, a significant number of them are tribal chiefs, village headmen or councillors. They claim their right to *mzinda* was passed on to them by their ancestors, chiefly through the eldest maternal uncle, the *malume*, and they in turn will pass it on to their uterine brothers, or, in their absence, to the eldest sons of their oldest sisters, depending on the succession law observed by the tribal community to which they belong. The *eni mzinda* do not command more prestige and power than the officially acknowledged tribal chiefs.

Another leading personality in the internal structure of the *nyau* is the *lumbwe*. He guides and co-ordinates the activities of the members whenever a *dambwe* meeting is called or when public performances are to be given. He interviews all passing strangers who seek admission to the *dambwe* on the claim of an alleged membership in the brotherhood. Both the manner in which he is chosen and the length of time in office vary in different areas. In some places the office is held for life, a replacement is contemplated only if he should become old and invalid. In other places the *mwini mzinda* himself

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selects the *lumbwe* for each *nyau* performance. The *lumbwe* is usually a sensible man, physically powerful and capable of maintaining discipline and if necessary, of inflicting corporal punishment to rowdy and unruly youths.

The *namkungwi* of the *nyau* is another personality of some importance. She is the only female allowed into the *dambwe* and for the sole purpose of carrying food and water to the members of the brotherhood who are gathered there. Her choice and relationship to the *mwini mzinda* varies in some places. In most cases she is matrilineally related to the *mwini mzinda* and chosen by him. She would not be the *namkunkwi* of the *cinamwali*, the female initiation ceremony, although the latter would also belong to the matrilineage of the *mwini mzinda*. Formerly the same woman could sometimes be appointed to both.

As it has already been pointed out, membership of the *nyau* shows all the characteristics of an initiation ceremony into adulthood. The neophyte is even given the same name as the girls who have reached the age of puberty, that is, *namwali* (pl., *anamwali*). Membership is voluntary and restricted to males. The neophyte's name is told the *mwini mzinda* by one of the senior members of the brotherhood who is called *phungo*, sponsor of the *namwali*. There are also regional differences in the selection of a *phungo*. In some places there are no rules requiring kinship ties between the neophyte and his sponsor. In other places, it is advisable that both should be linked by such ties. Once the *namwali* is accepted, his parents must pay an entrance fee to the *mwini mzinda*. The amount and apportioning of this fee changes from place to place. It can, in fact, vary from a minimum of one to a maximum of seven fowls, or the payment of the corresponding value in money. The fees received may, according to each area, be used as food for the members of *nyau* at the *dambwe* or may be divided up amongst the *mwini mzinda*, the *lumbwe* and the *namkungwi*. Whenever the performance of the *nyau* is in preparation, the *namwali* is led, blindfolded, to the *dambwe*

by the *phungo* concerned. Meanwhile he is warned to keep absolute secrecy about all that he may see or hear. Arrived at the *dambwe* he is submitted to flagellation, ill-treatment and mockery to determine his capacity of endurance. The *phungo* teaches his protégé the secret words to be employed at the *dambwe* to describe the objects and materials used in making the masks and zoomorphic figures. He also teaches him tribal history and customs and above all, the rules of courtesy and respect which should regulate all his dealings with older people. Before being considered a full member of the brotherhood, the *namwali* must drink a concoction prepared by the *phungo*, from the root of a bush known as *kapilapila*, used in the making of the zoomorphic figures. It is claimed that this magic medicine is taken to prevent the neophyte from speaking in his sleep and thus being indiscrete about the events witnessed in the *dambwe*. The neophyte who for the first time appear in public wearing masks and disguised as animals must wash their bodies with another concoction prepared from the root of the *mtuzituzi*.

The secret place is commonly known as *dambwe*. As already mentioned, it is also located in the thickest bush, far from any paths and villages. Any paths leading to the neighbourhood are blocked with branches as a sign for the passer-by to keep away. For the same purpose, lengths of cloth are placed banner-like at the top of the highest trees. The *dambwe* may change its location according to the need to keep it hidden in the deep woods and where the necessary materials for the manufacture of the zoomorphic figures can easily be found. Strangers are admitted to the *dambwe*, whatever place they come from, provided they can prove themselves to be members of the brotherhood by their satisfactory answers to all the questions put to them by the *lumbwe*. Informants state that, traditionally, non-members who deliberately tried to enter the *dambwe* were assaulted or even killed. Tribal law did not provide any punishment for these crimes: they were considered as accidents. However those who unintentionally

approached the *dambwe* were simply fined, and this fine could be collected at the tribal courts. As had been mentioned, the *phungo* must teach his *namwali* the secret words to be used by the members of *nyau*, whenever they refer to tools and materials employed in the zoomorphic figures. For example, to say grass *udzu* or bamboo *nsungwi*, they must employ the words *ubweya*, hair and *ntiti*, rib. When referring to *nyau* the word *gule*, meaning dance, must be used. In the manufacture of the masks and zoomorphic figures a great variety of plants is used such as grass, bamboo, husks, banana leaves. After each performance, they are returned to the *dambwe*. The masks are carefully hidden and those who know are forbidden to disclose their whereabouts. The animal figures are completely destroyed by fire in a pit, and the ashes are buried or scattered in the water. The length of time spent at the *dambwe* varies from one to four days, depending on the number and types of the animal figures, called *virombo* (sing. *cirombo*) — wild animals, required for each performance. During this time the neophyte may not leave the *dambwe*, unlike the other members of the brotherhood. In the *dambwe* the use of obscene language and songs is the normal practice. In this place and also when underneath the zoomorphic figures members of *nyau* are usually naked. Lest the dancers should feel dizzy during their contortions in the *bwalo*, the dancing arena, small cuts are made at the knees and elbows which are then rubbed with an ointment made by grinding an insect called *sambisambi* which skims and flits over the surface of waters, and adding earth from the nest of a swallow, *nsamzeze*. It is therefore an instance of sympathetic magic as it is intended that the swiftness and agility of these animals be passed on to the dancers themselves. Once the zoomorphic figures are completed, the members of *nyau* carry them together with the masks to the *liunde*, a place close to the village where the dancers get ready before their performance. The removal of the figures from the *dambwe* to the *liunde* and vice-versa is carried out at night. When it takes place women and non-members of

the brotherhood must keep away. The zoomorphic figures are usually shown at night. Whenever they are shown in the daytime, women are forbidden to attend the performance. The phantasmagoric apparitions in the darkness help to instill the supernatural origin of the figures in the mind of the women. One of the main purposes of the ritual is to keep the women in a permanent state of awe before the virile activities of the *nyau*. The performance takes place in the dancing ground of the village or if it is a part of a mortuary ritual close to the hut of the deceased. At these performances, in addition to females of any age and status, only males who belong to the brotherhood, except infants in arms, may be present. Women are forbidden to participate in the dances. The dancers must never be recognized by them. To avoid this happening the dancers therefore hide behind the masks and under the zoomorphic figures, smear their bodies with clay, and call out in falsetto shouts to the female chorus, etc. Formerly, the members of *nyau* used to wander about the villages fully masked stealing food which was to be eaten by them at the ceremonies and public performances.

One of the occasions when the presence of the *nyau* is requested is the *cinamwali*, the initiation ceremony of girls reaching the age of puberty. The period of abundance following the harvest season is not always chosen for holding this ceremony. The chief organizer of the *cinamwali*, the *namkungwi*, is a very important woman in the social set-up. Formerly, it seems that the *namkunkwi* of the *nyau* was also the organizer of the *cinamwali*. At present and in most areas, the *namkunkwi* of the *nyau* is not the same as that of *cinamwali*, although both belong to the matrilineage of the *mwini mzinda* and are chosen by him. It is the girl's mother who advises the *namkunkwi* that her daughter has reached the age of puberty. The *namkunkwi* then informs the *mwini mzinda* of this fact. Only after deciding whether in the area there is a sufficient number of girls in similar condition does he hold the ceremony of the *cinamwali* with or without the *nyau*, in keeping with the desires of the respective

families. During the *cinamwali* with a *nyau* performance, a marginal period with prohibition of sexual intercourse is usually observed. The start of both this period and the manufacture of the zoomorphic figures is simultaneous and it ends when the figures are destroyed by fire. The persons affected vary in different areas. The *mwini mzinda* the *namkungwi*, the *sankulo* (god-mother of the puberty rites for girls), the *namwali* and her parents always observe it. Sometimes this interdiction also extends to some of the dancers of the *nyau*. Some of the masks of the *nyau* known as *kamkuanya*, *kamuganga e kaligwengwe* are used during the ceremony to instill respect in those *anamwali* who have shown themselves irreverent and disobedient. To show that the marginal period has come to an end and that those covered by it have been reintegrated in society once more, the participants in the *cinamwali* have to drink a magic medicine known as *pundabwi* or *fundabwi*. In its preparation bits of vegetable matter used in making the masks and zoomorphic figures as well as the ashes from the burning of these figures in the *dambwe* are used. This magic medicine is taken by the same persons who were forbidden sexual intercourse.

The *maliro*, burial, is another occasion during which the *nyau* is held. Formerly, it was held only at the funeral of native chiefs and of the most important and senior members of the brotherhood. Now, it is held by request at the burials of the members' female relatives and of their infant children. It is always held at the *maliro* of the deceased members. The corpse is removed from the hut by two members of the *nyau*, masked as *kapole* (a mask made with the wings of fowls) and carried some distance away before being handed over to the grave diggers, *adzukulu* (sing. *mdzukulu*). During the performance of the *nyau* which takes place in the evening of the day of the funeral in front of the hut of the deceased, only the permanent masks are worn.

The *bona* is the ceremony par excellence for the performance of the *nyau*. It is through this ceremony that the spirit of the deceased is propitiated, and it consists in pulling down the hut, shaving the hair of the mourners and in selecting the successor of the widow's husband, the *cokolo*. It is held during the period of abundance following the harvest season. The period between June and December is the best for the performance of the *nyau*. With rare exceptions, the *nyau* appears at the *bona* held in honour of the deceased members of the brotherhood. It is also performed, upon request, at the *bona* for the deceased females of the members' families or for the members' infant children. The preparation of *mowa*, native beer, starts on the same day in which the members of *nyau* begin their work on the zoomorphic figures in the *dambwe*. The time spent in the *dambwe* varies in accordance with the time required for making these figures. The *bona* lasts from three to five days, depending on the quantity of *mowa* prepared. The order of the rituals varies in different areas. The *lumbwe* orders the members of *nyau* to depart from the *liunde*, while the *adzukulu* pull down the hut in which the deceased lived, shave off the hair of the mourners and bury it at the place where the *mowa* was poured out in honour of the *mzimu* (pl. *mizimu*), the ancestor-god which the deceased has now become. Afterwards, drinking and dancing is kept up for a variable number of days. Once the ceremony is over, the members of *nyau* depart for the *dambwe* in order to destroy by fire the zoomorphic figures especially made for the occasion. In some areas, from the time when work on the animal figures is begun until their destruction by fire, sexual intercourse is forbidden to all the inhabitants of the village where the deceased lived and where the *nyau* is performed. In other places this prohibition extends only to the parents and the widows or widowers.

In some areas, but exceptionally, the permanent masks may be worn at dances for members of the brotherhood when, after consulting the diviner on account of

illness, he diagnoses a vengeful discontentment of some ancestor-god who is anxious to be propitiated by means of a *nyau* performance.

P.O. Box 281,  
LOURENCO MARQUES,  
MOZAMBIQUE.

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## FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

A Dinner is to be held at Kelvin House, Johannesburg on Friday, 2nd February, 1968, at 7.00 for 7.30 p.m. for members of the Witwatersrand Centre of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science so that they may meet and exchange views on a social and informal basis. The President of the Association will be in the Chair and after dinner an eminent scientist will give a short talk on "Science and the Nation's Health". The Dinner will also be the occasion of a special tribute from the President and members to Professor Raymond Dart on the eve of his 75th birthday.

A European Spring Garden Tour, under the leadership of Professor H. B. Rycroft will leave Johannesburg by air on the 24th April, 1968, and return on 24th May, 1968, for the purpose of visiting famous gardens in Europe. Those interested should contact Messrs. Rennie's Travel Service, Garden Tour, P.O. Box 4847, Cape Town.

Under the auspices of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies, members of the Faculties of Science and Engineering and the Southern Universities Nuclear Institute will offer a short course: "Introduction to Nuclear Power" over the period 8th February, 1968, to 16th February, 1968. The course will consist of 13 afternoon lectures, descriptive rather than mathematical. For further details write to:

Dean's Secretary, Faculty of Engineering,  
University of Cape Town.

Die Tak Stellenbosch van die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns en van die Afdeling Biologie bied 'n simposium oor Natuurbewaring aan wat op 14, 15 en 16 Maart 1968 aan die Universiteit van Stellenbosch gehou word.

The University of the Orange Free State is organising a Symposium on Proteins and Food Supply. This symposium will take place in Bloemfontein from 8-11 April, 1968. Authoritative scientists from within the Republic of South Africa and from abroad will deliver papers at the symposium.

On the 18th January, 1968, at the Monthly General Meeting of the Institution of Certificated Mechanical and Electrical Engineers held at Kelvin House, Johannesburg at 8 p.m. a paper entitled "The use of timber in engineering" will be presented by Mr M. S. H. Dryden, a Visitor.

A. S. & T. S. have decided to experiment with a series of Lunch hour Lectures on matters of current interest. These Lectures will be held in the Main Hall of Kelvin House on the third Tuesday of every month, will commence at 1.20 p.m. and last approximately half an hour. The Restaurant at Kelvin House will be prepared to serve lunches earlier than usual on these days. The first lecture will be held on the 16th January, 1968, at 1.20 p.m. and the subject will be "The Standard Bank Centre". The speakers will be Mr Alan Johnson, Site Engineer, L.T.A. and Mr Martin Shilback, Site Engineer, Concor. All members of A. S. & T. S. and their friends are cordially invited to attend these lectures.