The Nyau Dance

by Oona McCaffrey

Smart Banda, who was thirty-eight years old, ran our household in Lusaka, Zambia. It was a respected and necessary profession for Zambian men. One early evening, after a long day of planting, we sat with Smart in our garden. He began to talk.

> *In the village compounds, many local people still live in handmade huts, accustomed to old habits. Ladies come home from offices or shops in town, wrap long, traditional skirts over city clothes and slip their babies on their backs, nestled in a sling made from a simple shawl. Men pull on old pants, a comfortable shirt, take off their shoes. The ladies gossip with neighbors as they pound corn in a pestle, light their fire to cook the evening meal and watch over their children as they play. Men gather around, drink beer and exchange stories. Favorite storytellers are often begged, but mostly after night falls, to tell one of our folk tales.*
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> *After night falls, drums begin to beat, and big white clouds play hide and seek with the moon. Nyaus sometimes make a surprise visit to a village compound. In grotesque masks, they begin to dance, pinch pretty black girls and frighten the children.*

"Who are the Nyaus?" I asked.

"*Ife Ndife Zilombe*"—Nyaus are dangerous beasts.

He leaned back then and told us about the Nyau Dance Family. At times, English failing him, he would get up and act out his story.

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My family lived with the Chewa Tribe in the Eastern Province of Zambia. Some Chewas lived in Malawi. The Nyau Dance Family is part of tribal tradition for Chewa boys. It was all very secret. Some boys wouldn't join because they were too afraid of what might happen to them. These boys were not allowed to watch Nyau dancers perform. They would be killed if they did. Nyaus danced for women only. Other Nyaus sometimes watched.

When I was a child, several Nyaus made a train, an exact replica of the train Europeans introduced. They made it from laths, grass and maizecob fibre. One hundred of them crawled inside it to walk around the performance area of my village. None of their bodies could be seen! It was then that I decided I wanted to join the Nyau Dance Family. But my mother and father would have insisted I join even if I hadn't wanted to because those Chewa boys who did not join were disadvantaged. They grew up being taught only to build their huts by their own fathers.

When I was sixteen years old, my parents presented me to a Nyau elder. He took me to a medicine man to be sure I was in good physical condition. Then he took me away from my family and my friends. We were all scared, I remember, when I followed the elder out of my house and left my family and my village behind me. We walked fifteen kilometers into our Chewa people's graveyard. He reunited me with my ancestors and told me that I would live there and receive my training in this graveyard. Our ancestors were pleased, he said, because their burial ground had been chosen for the Nyau school. My training would make me strong, courageous and obedient, and I would be taught various arts.

A few women joined the Nyau choir. They sang the songs orally composed by Nyau teachers.

Each morning an elder woke us at 3:30 a.m., and we began the hour's walk to an icy cold stream where we had to swim to drive away the evil spirit *viwanda*.

We were taught to carve plates, spoons, drums, masks and drum tops, and to weave reed mats. We made the dancers' skirts out of fibre and his feather headdress. The bangles he wore on either ankle and on his upper arms we made by stringing together dried pea-filled pods to chachacha as he jumped and wriggled in dance.

The medicine man showed us how to use roots and herbs *mankhwala* to cure and heal bronchitis, diarrhea and some snake bites.

We learned how to dance to the rhythm of the drum beater, *mbalule*—to jump, to wriggle, and to make mime gestures that would thrill and excite young black girls in the audience. I was a Nyau *mbalule*.

Elders kept us in the graveyard two months for our training. Some Nyau boys became medicine men, some became carvers, others weavers. When training was completed, we returned home to our own villages sworn to secrecy. Our parents and our friends, fearful of the Nyau, didn't ask questions. Dancers, always in complete disguise, stashed their costumes and masks at the burial ground when they left, but in time other Chewa knew who they were. Good dancers were the most popular members of all, adored by young, pretty girls, the envy of all Zambian men. They remained with the Nyau Dance Family long after training.

Each role was chosen with great care. The Strong Man, *cadzunda*, was selected for his very strong physical features. His *cadzunda* mask was painted red or yellow. He wore very long black feathers for hair. A fibre skirt was tied on his strong, glistening bare body. He ran the chacha, chacha, chacha, chacha bangles up his legs and on his upper arms.

A muscular boy was the notorious *kang'wing'wi*. The *kang'wing'wi* wore feathers in his hair. His lips were drawn, then twisted; a rubberband holding them in place. Ladies in the audience thrilled to his naked muscular body covered only with a fibre skirt and the chacha bangles on his arms and legs.

Nyau Dancer with his drummers

An experienced dancer plays the part of the Big Man, *makanja*. The *makanja* head was coated in a mask of red dye. He walks on tall stilts, hidden by a long fibre skirt and shirt.

Maria was a young man trained to behave, dance and wriggle like a woman. His costume and mask impersonate a female.

Old Man Fall in the Field of Corn, *Nkhalamba-qwela-mumapila*, is a young man disguised and trained to dance like an old man.

Dancers all smear their feet, arms and chest with whitish mud, *mafuta*. And are always completely disguised.

Before going out to dance, Nyaus were given a drug to make them short-tempered, mean and cruel to mercilessly beat up non-members who might try to crash their performance.

Dancers, dressed in costume, used to walk with elders, sometimes for hours, to a dancing arena in the village. Each carried a stick, *sjambok*, and made loud animal-like sounds as they moved along. Non-Nyaus who attempted to join the audience were beat with the *sjambok*. Waves of terror prevailed over the village for days before a dance was performed. Male non-members would barricade themselves inside their houses until they were certain all of the Nyaus had left the village.

As part of the performance, a dancer pointed a long finger in which a charm had been inserted under the nail, at a serpent. With magic words he would charm the snake into crawling toward him. Then he'd grab the snake, pull off its fangs, lay it down on the ground close by. The ladies' chorus began singing, "Have you seen such a snake before?" (*Kodi Munaionapo Njoka Yotele?*). The dancer, in trance now, danced as the drums beat. The snake danced along, slithering its body, raising its head and shaking it. People were terrified of Nyau witchcraft. "You will not see the sun rise tomorrow" was the pronouncement of a death sentence carried out only by bewitching, *kulodza*. The sentence was taken seriously. The victim was denied his right to live.

Everyone loved Nyau songs. Non-members would hide behind trees, trembling in bushes just to hear the words and listen to the drums beating the tunes.

When food was short at the burial ground training camp, Nyaus went on a looting spree. Dressed in dancing clothes, while others performed, they stole goats, chickens, mealie-meal (*nshima*). Frightened villagers said nothing.

In the early 1940's the Chewa tribe began to spread, and boys from the *Kunda* and *Nsenga* tribes also joined the Family. I didn't know these boys. In Southern Rhodesia, dancers performed on White European farms where tribesmen from Malawi and Zambia worked. Even on these farms, non-members were beaten up if they attempted to watch.

I remember the late 1950's when the Nyaus became interested in money. They opened their dance to the public. And charged admission. I had just completed my training. The elders were outraged. They insisted the graveyard training ground continue and that no outsider should know of its existence, under penalty of death.

Real change occurred when the missionaries arrived in Zambia. Churches and schools were built. Learning to read and to write in the little schoolhouses, children and their parents were introduced to Christianity. Missionaries considered our dance savage, primitive, satanic; any boy involved was expelled from school. Parents, interested in education for their children, discouraged the Nyaus. A small minority of people tried to retain all of our tribal tradition. They burned and destroyed churches and schoolhouses. But Westernization took hold. The Nyau Dance Family was considered finished.

However, in the 1960's, just prior to Independence in Zambia, there was renewed interest. The dance surfaced. Political leaders demanded that threatening behavior and violence cease. Tribal traditionalists agreed that the terror in the performance should be eliminated. The dance was preserved and opened to the public.

I remained with the Nyaus for one year. Then went to the Missionary School. I learned to read and to write and to speak English there.

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His story told, Mr. Banda sat with us in our garden as we listened to the drums beating in the distance and to what seemed like thousands of frogs croaking in a nearby creek. Night sounds of Africa. After a little while, Smart stood up and barely whispered, the moment of enchantment respectfully preserved, "Good-night Bwana, Madam."

Winifred (Oona) McCaffrey *has returned to California after a two-year residency in Zambia with her anthropologist husband, John McCaffrey.*