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**Boucher, Claude (Chisale). *When Animals Sing and Spirits Dance Gule Wamkulu: The Great Dance of the Chewa People of Malawi*. Mtakataka: Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art, 2012. xxviii + 276 pp.**

Claude Boucher's *When Animals Sing and Spirits Dance Gule Wamkulu: The Great Dance of the Chewa People of Malawi*, with additional text from Gary J. Morgan, Director of Museum Studies at Michigan State University, and photographs by Arjen van de Merwe, offers a refreshing, insightful, and brilliant interlink between what could be regarded as artistic compendium and the fundamental spiritual cultural heritage of an African community, the Chewa people of Malawi, in the dynamic context of everyday paradigms of holistic life experiences. Through a drama-laced strategy, the book masterfully employs symbolic characters depicted in masks and woven structures in an analytical syringe of songs and dances to "play out" the realities of cultural philosophical values and communal expectations of the Chewa people.

The crux of the book is revealed in two major sections. The first is the introduction written by Gary Morgan. Here the reader is exposed to the historical background of Malawi in general, the historical origin of *gule wamkulu*, and the religion of the Chewa people. It also introduces the reader to the role, as well as the form of *gule wamkulu* characters. The history of the origin of the symbolic and ritual evolution and the eventual transition of the *gule wamkulu* characters are also extensively discussed. With the introduction, the reader is prepared for the subsequent intriguing and illuminating details to follow in the main section of the book.

The second presents the kernel of the book in seven major themes as "dramatized" through the performances of the *gule wamkulu* dancers. The themes vividly capture the Chewa people's worldview on moral codes. The holistic nature of the themes is compelling. They strategically cover the existential instructions for the citizens of the community, such as history and politics; community, authority and ancestors; sexuality, fertility and marriage; childbirth and parenthood; health, food and death; witchcraft and medicines; and personal attributes. The author brilliantly portrays the interpretations and dramatic uses of these themes in ways that vividly represent the authentic voices of the local people that may be impossible to achieve in any other format. Perhaps more importantly, the Chewa people's heritage of the spiritual linkage to the ancestral world, in which the ancestors continue to impact their living descendants as agents of societal moral standard, is substantially highlighted. This without any doubt constitutes a significant representation of the fundamental religious worldview of Africans on the circular nature of human

existence and the “never ending” reciprocal obligations and privileges between the living and the living dead, i.e. the earthly and the spiritual domains.

I find the intellectual and communicative strengths of this book enormous. It is comprehensively researched and the author admirably subsumes his subjective considerations of the themes discussed and allows the voices of the Chewa people to be heard in their “undiluted” forms. The colorful illustration employed throughout the book definitely enhances the reader’s imaginative and empirical understanding. The images are compelling and make the reading of the book engaging and less cumbersome. Also, both the mask name and the theme indexes at the end of the book provide the much-needed information on the locations of prominent words and ideas. In addition, the glossary of Chichewa terms and the interpretations of the songs in Chichewa and English afford the reader, who may not speak the Chichewa language, the basic understanding of the contents.

Surprisingly, with the author having a background as a Catholic priest, I did not find an interfaith discourse that I believe would have positively linked the moral codes of instructions of the Chewa thematic worldviews with the Christian (Catholic) moral expectations in the inculturalization spirit of Vatican II. This I believe would have raised the profile of the book as a doctrinal literature in the promotion of African Christianity (perhaps I was looking for too much) given the focus, objectives, and scope of the book. Notwithstanding this critique, the book presents a formidable resource as a “hypothesis” ready for further scholarly research for those interested in the rich African spiritual heritage in the context of existential humanity. In this regard, the book attests to the 2005 UNESCO description of *gule wamkulu* as “a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity.” On the whole, Boucher deserves to be applauded for his scholarly endeavor in writing this book.

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