

Singing Morality: Initiation Songs, Imagery, and Moral Education in Rural Malawi

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Abstract

Initiation rites in Africa mark a transition for the initiates from one stage in life to another, and are aimed at imparting knowledge and moral values that help them embrace and ably perform their new roles and responsibilities in society. One avenue through which lessons are conveyed to the novices during these rites is songs. In this article I examine and discuss the texts of selected songs used for moral education during the circumcision rite called *Jando* as it is performed in Muwawa village, Senior Chief Ngokwe, in Malawi's southern district of Machinga. I wish to show that the messages in the songs reflect the agrarian context within which they were composed and are performed. I also attempt to show that in their reference to animals and animal imagery, the songs reveal the people's embeddedness in their environment. I argue that while the songs are specific to their context in terms of the human behaviour alluded to and the imagery used, they aim at promoting values whose significance transcends time and space. My analysis of the songs is informed by a Functionalist approach to oral literature which focuses on the utilitarian value of a cultural activity for a particular society.

Keywords:

Jando, initiation, song, imagery, moral education, tradition, Yawo, Lomwe

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Introduction

Initiation rites or rites of passage constitute an important aspect of the educational fabric of many cultures in Africa and beyond. In Africa, in general, and in Malawi, in particular, these take many forms which include circumcision schools for males (which, according to Gerhard Kubik, is “an old Central African institution” [1983]), social transition rites for girls, and rites involving marriage,

birth, motherhood, and chieftaincy, among others. These ceremonies form part of a people's culture and their way of life. The rites mark a transition for the initiates from one stage in life to another, and are aimed at imparting knowledge and moral values that help initiates embrace and ably perform their new roles and responsibilities in society. Tasha Davis rightly observes that rites of passage “serve a double purpose; preserving the ongoing community as a symbol of collective immortality and permanence as well as providing a clear and guided means for transition from one life stage and sphere of responsibility to another” (2017, n.p). She goes on to say that “[t]hrough initiation, young adults [...] learn about the traditions and expectations of their community and will therefore be able to contribute to the maintenance of social order” (n.p). Initiation camps then serve as traditional schools where novices learn about their culture and the recommended ways of living. It is this role of initiation as a form of school in the Malawian context that is of interest to me in this article.

I examine and discuss the texts of selected songs used for moral education during the circumcision rite called *Jando*¹ as it is performed in Muwawa village, Senior Chief (SC) Ngokwe, in Malawi's southern district of Machinga. Like in the boys' circumcision and girls' puberty rites among the Swahili of Mafia Island in Tanzania, as observed by A. P. Caplan, the lessons in *Jando* are imparted and reinforced “mainly through the medium of songs” (1976, p.25). Muwawa is a village for the Lomwe people who migrated from Mozambique in the early 20th century and settled in Khannene village in SC Nyambi in Machinga district, before moving eastwards to settle in the area of SC Ngokwe. The reasons for moving included running away from crop-destroying baboons and the wish to be near Lake Chiuta to practise fishing. I wish to show in the article that the messages in the songs reflect the agrarian context within which they were composed and are performed. I also attempt to show that in their reference to animals and animal imagery, the songs reveal the people's embeddedness in their environment. I argue that while the songs are specific to their context in terms of the human behaviour alluded to and the imagery used, they aim at promoting values whose significance transcends time and space.

My analysis of the song texts is informed by a Structural-functionalist, or simply Functionalist, approach to oral literature. This approach, which is associated with British anthropologists such as Radcliffe Brown, focuses on the utilitarian value or function of a cultural activity for a particular people (Odhiambo, 2013, pp.73-74). The function of oral literature for example has to do with “stabilizing or validating the current order of things” or “integration and maintenance of society” (Finnegan, 2012, p.40). Although the approach has its limitations as exposed by Finnegan (2012), one of which is its tendency “to play down the aesthetic aspect in favour of the functional” (p.41), it does account for the continued practice of *Jando* as a form of traditional school that provides education on ways of life in society to young people.

Although scholars have commented on several aspects of the *Jando* ceremony, including its role as a school for morality, studies that analyse the song texts to examine the moral lessons are rare. Where they exist, they rely on informants which leads to incorrect translations and interpretations. An example here is Boston Soko’s essay titled “Traditional Forms of Instruction: The Case of the *Jando* Initiation Ceremony” (1980) in which some of the songs are translated erroneously (see note 6). Ian Dicks observes that

Few scholars [...] have written extensively on the main corpus of oral literature that is uniquely presented during these liminal ceremonies [that is, initiation ceremonies]. This is partly because of the mystery and secrecy that surrounds the initiation events [...]. This secrecy makes the events largely inaccessible to the uninitiated and difficult to record, even by those who gain entry. (2012, p.280; see also Soko 1980).

With regard to *Jando* songs of advice or *misyungu*, Dicks goes on to say “it is uncommon to hear the songs uttered outside” the initiation area because the novices are taught that the songs are only for the initiated and are not supposed to be sung outside the *ndaqala* or initiation camp (2012, p.281). But even if they were to be sung in public, many people would not know their meanings. As the reader

will notice from the discussion below, the actual message in each of the songs is simply implied and not explicit in the song text. The deeper meanings that I draw from the songs vary significantly from their literal meanings as represented by the texts. This is because only those privy to the lessons imparted through the songs would know what the songs are really about. My discussion and interpretation of the songs here is based on my experience of these in Muwawa village where I grew up, and my knowledge of Ciyawo, the dominant language of *Jando* initiation songs. The versions and interpretations of the songs have remained unchanged for many years, in spite of the social, economic and environmental changes that have taken place in Muwawa village in particular, and in the Malawian society, in general.

In Malawi *Jando* is associated with the Yawo tribal group whose members mainly inhabit the southern districts of Zomba, Machinga, and Mangochi. According to Kubik (1983) and Dicks (2012) *Jando* is a somewhat Islamised version of the Yawo people's initiation for boys called *Lupanda* which did not involve full removal of the prepuce. Contact with the Swahili from the east African coast with whom the Yawo traded resulted in the introduction of Islam among them and the introduction of circumcision to adhere to the tenets of Islam. In reality, however, *Jando* is not the preserve of the Yawo people. People of the Lomwe tribe with whom the Yawo live cheek by jowl in the three districts above also practice *Jando*, having adopted it from their neighbours. For the Lomwe of Muwawa, religion, that is Islam, is not the only factor that influences their choice of *Jando* as an initiation for their boys, given that Christians and non-religious people also send their children to *Jando*. Their choice of *Jando* sometimes has to do with the moral education that the initiates receive. Besides, as Ian Dicks observes, *Jando* is not "strictly a religious ceremony, though it looks to Yawo [Lomwe in the case of Muwawa] traditional religious practices rather than Islam as a source of power and protection" (2012, pp.124-125). In fact, strict Muslims do not allow their children to undergo village-based *Jando* which they perceive as contradicting "their own religious convictions" (Dicks, 2012, p.125). In this regard, Boston Soko's claim that "[t]he *Jando* initiation ceremony is strictly reserved to the children of leading citizens of the Yao society, although today any person *can buy access* to it" (1980,

p.147, my emphasis) may be true only in the context of the Domasi area in Zomba district from where he obtained the information. In other parts of Malawi, such as Machinga, *Jando* was open to ordinary people, non-Muslims, and people of other tribes long before the 1980s when Soko conducted his research.

The discussion that follows is in two parts. The first part provides a brief discussion of the aspects and characteristics of *Jando* in relation to moral education. The aim is to depict *Jando* as a school for boys' moral education in traditional societies. In the second section I discuss *Jando* initiation song texts, focussing on the lessons contained therein and the imagery used. The aim is to show the contextual nature of the lessons and the imagery used—revealing as they do the people's environmental knowledge and value system, since the songs were conceived in a particular context within which the lessons and imagery were expected to be understood.

Aspects and characteristics of *Jando*

In his paper “Boys to Men: African Male Initiation Rites into Manhood,” Martin Wong mentions that “[w]hile each individual initiation may vary in format, content, and symbolism from tribe to tribe, from village to village, each in its own way includes six characteristics” (2016, n.p.). The characteristics are:

- (1) separation and seclusion away from the rest of the tribe—especially mother and women generally; (2) some form of pain and suffering—physical and emotional; (3) specific educational instruction; (4) cutting of flesh—usually circumcision or/and scarification of the body—and spilling of blood; [...] (5) entreaty to spiritual and/or ancestral elements; and (6) reincorporation back into the tribe/village as changed persons. (n.p.)

He goes on to say that “these six aspects may be specific and taught or may be inferred symbolically but they are to be found in almost all of the initiatory rites noted in the literature” (n.p.). The *Jando* initiation ceremony as practiced in Malawi includes the above aspects, in one way or the other (see Dicks, 2012 & Morris,

2000). For instance, in *Jando* (1) boys between the ages of 9 and 12 are secluded at the *ndagala*, a “grass compound built at a distance from the inhabited area or village” (Dicks, 2012, p.128); (2) they undergo endurance tests such as Mchopi² (Dicks, 2012, p.142; Soko 1980) and are sometimes woken up late at night for *misyungu*; (3) they receive moral or practical education; (4) they are circumcised; (5) there are entreaties to ancestral elements from the beginning to the end of *Jando*; (6) the initiates are reincorporated back into the society after acquiring moral lessons and new names. The seventh aspect, in my view, that Wong does not mention but is observable “in almost all initiatory rites” is the use or evocation of animals and animal symbolism.

Animals feature as symbols, as effigies of animals called *nambande* or *inyago* and *mwanambera*, as images or metaphors in the songs, and their names are adopted by the initiates while in the *ndagala*.³ This demonstrates the intimate relationship between humans and animals in Malawi, in particular, and Africa, in general (see Morris 2000). As Dicks (2012) and Morris (2000) rightly note, the adoption of the animal names signals the “liminal state” of the initiates’ identity, between childhood (irresponsible, bad-mannered, and ignorant) and adulthood (responsible, good-mannered and knowledgeable). Further, the animal names also underline the ambiguity of the initiates’ identity as they are yet to become responsible human beings in society after successful completion of the ceremony. As such, the adoption of animal names signals the process of erasure of childhood. Further, the initiates’ entry into the *mwanambera* from which they sing and announce their new names to the audience at the village ground on the night before the coming out celebrations can be read as a return to the womb and rebirth the following day. The initiation process itself actually symbolises death and rebirth. As Davis correctly puts it, the novices “must die to their child self in order to be reborn into an adult self, one characterized by greater knowledge of the world, deeper consciousness, insight and wisdom. The notions of symbolic death and resurrection are central to the initiation process” (2017, n.p.).

The third and last way, for my purpose here, in which animals appear in *Jando* is as metaphors. Regarding metaphors, Ian Dicks observes that most initiation

songs are metaphorical. He goes on:

Most taboo subjects, such as the correct way to have sexual intercourse or how to avoid stumbling across someone defecating in the gardens⁴ [sic], are dealt with using metaphorical *misyungu*. Metaphor is considered a good method of teaching, as it enables people to talk about subjects that are usually considered too shameful to talk about with direct speech.” (2012, p.285)

Some of the metaphors used in the songs are animal metaphors. In this regard one is inclined to agree with Claude Levi-Strauss’s view that animals are “good to think with” (cited by Soper, 2005, p.307). Where animals are used as metaphors their behaviour is expected to serve as an example for the initiates to avoid. Through use of metaphors the songs reveal the people’s familiarity and epistemological understanding of the animals’ behaviour which is incorporated in the songs to serve as lessons for the initiates.

As earlier mentioned, my focus in this article is on educational instructions. Where this is concerned the *Jando* initiation can be referred to as a form of a school for traditional education. Boston Soko refers to it as a “higher school of learning” (1980, p.146). Regarding its structure, Ian Dicks mentions that “[t]he Yawo rite of *jando* is mostly similar, in overall structure throughout Malawi; however, in each village and area there are particular differences” (2012, p.128). There are, therefore, similarities between the way the rite is conducted in Muwawa village, including the lessons, and the way it is conducted elsewhere. Although Muwawa is a Lomwe village, the majority of *Jando* songs are in Ciyawo, while few are either in Chichewa or in a mixture of Chichewa and Ciyawo. This is a clear indication that these *misyungu* songs, like *Jando* itself, were adopted from the neighbouring Yawo people.

During *Jando* the boys “hear the rules of morality, [...] the importance of helping people, the need to avoid laziness and the importance of respecting elders and women and so forth” (Dicks, 2012, p.140). These lessons are imparted through songs whose lessons are explained afterwards by the guardians or attendants. The songs, as Dicks rightly tells us, “are very short in length, each stanza being just two

or three short phrases [...]. The stanza of a *msyungu*, however, is repeated numerous times when sung and is accompanied by actions, dance and music” (2012, p.282) made with drums and a bamboo instrument called *Ngwasala* which the boys strike with sticks. After a round of songs, each of which has been sung several times and dedicated to one of the boys, the instructors (who are usually in pairs) explain the meaning of each song in the order in which they were delivered.

The functional utility of *Jando* for teaching traditional moral values is widely recognised by scholars such as Davis (2017), Dicks (2012), Kubik (1983), Soko (1980), and Wong (2016), among others. But, as Toluwalase Ajayi notes, while “African traditional moral education [here exemplified by *Jando*] were thought to be quite successful in maintaining discipline in children” (2017, p.100) in the past, many scholars have noted that “[m]ordenization, the loss of much of the wild bush, formal western style schooling, and the imposition of Christianity and Islam [...] have resulted in the abandonment of the practice of initiation and circumcision among many tribes—especially among those living in the cities” (Wong, 2016, n.p). Wong also notes that “Western style classroom education and modern health care methods are supplanting more traditional modes of education. Life is more outward looking and the village and tribe are not the cohesive centers to which everything is connected” (n.p). The idea of “modern health care methods” resonates with the negative perception surrounding the *Jando* initiation rite in our era of the AIDS pandemic, as the rite, like others such as the Yawo girls’ rite of *Msondo* and the Chewa rite of *Gulewamkulu*, is considered to encourage unsafe sexual practices among the initiated (Munthali and Zulu, 2007).⁵ My understanding is that promoting sexual licentiousness and promiscuity was and is not the motive behind *Jando*. The twin aims of the ceremony are circumcision (to adhere to religious tenets of Islam for Muslims) and imparting of moral lessons on the young. This is why Muslim, Christian, and non-religious families send their children to *Jando*.

In my discussion of the songs, below, I have divided them into various thematic areas, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, for purposes of clarity. These thematic areas include hard work in the field, respect for parents, child-

minding responsibilities and manners, and propriety. These thematic areas are evocative of the virtues and values of traditional African society such as charity, respect for elders, obedience, temperance, decency, and kindness or compassion, interdependence, and communalism, among others (van der Walt, 2003, p.52; Chuwa, 2014, pp.12-13). The thematic areas are also in line with those of Ubuntu which Broodryk describes as “a comprehensive ancient African worldview based on the core values of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values, ensuring a happy and qualitative human community life in a spirit of family” (cited by Chuwa, 2014, p.12).

Hard work in the garden

Commenting on teaching in *Jando*, Boston Soko observes that “[t]he instructors in the *Jando* ceremony put a lot of emphasis on teaching the boys respect, politeness, hospitality and honesty. They also teach against laziness, backbiting and hooliganism” (1980, p.153). The teaching against laziness or about the importance of hard work is in fact emphasised more than the other lessons. The emphasis on hard work is for a good reason. Hard work does not only contribute to the development of an individual, family and community, but it also makes one self-reliant and eradicates poverty. The very first and most important advice given to the initiates in the *Jando* traditional school is that they should work hard in the garden when they return home. This advice is imparted through the following song, which is the first to be sang during every teaching session at *Jando*⁶:

<i>Tinjimbe msyungu wandanda</i> x2	I will sing the first advice
<i>Wali wali Jando</i>	You <i>Jando</i> initiates
<i>Wanamakuto mwanangumwanja</i>	<i>Wanamakuto mwanangumwanja</i> ⁷
<i>Kumusi akalime, akalime</i>	When you go home work in the field
<i>Chachilapa sala kogoya</i>	Else you will lament the dangers of famine

This first and most important song warns against laziness and encourages the

novices to work hard, cultivating the garden, when they return home to avert poverty and hunger. The importance of hard work in a rustic and agrarian society cannot be overemphasised. The initiates need to know the importance of working hard to avoid famine, one of the greatest problems in communities that rely on subsistence farming. Food security has and will always be an important issue in Malawi. If a family fails to harvest enough food in a particular year, misery brought by starvation follows. This and the other two songs that follow are sung during every teaching session. Every instructor sings the three songs first before the other songs in his repertoire that he considers necessary to use for his teaching. The repetition of these songs is meant to drive home the significance of hard work, thereby highlighting the functional nature of *misyungu* songs which resonates with the Functionalist approach to oral literature.

The song that follows the one above deplores laziness and rudeness and encourages the boys to support their families in field work or cultivation. The song goes:

Leader:	<i>Ndilelereni mwana x2</i>	Mind the child for me
	<i>Kulima konse simulima ee</i>	Since you never work in the field
	<i>Mungogona ee x2</i>	You are just sleeping
All:	<i>Mwayesa kapolo wanu ndiine</i>	You think I am your slave
	<i>Wolera mwana kumunda</i>	Who minds a child in the fields

This is one of the few *misyungu* songs that are in Chichewa, Malawi's national language. In the song a mother requests her son who just sleeps instead of cultivating in the field to at least look after his young sibling while the mother is working. But the boy responds rudely, saying he is not a slave who should be looking after a baby out in the field. The advice in this song is that the novices

should support their parents in any way they can in their field work. If they cannot participate in the cultivation, they should look after babies while their parents work. This song also emphasises obedience and respect for parents. The novices are advised not to be rude to their parents but to respect them at all times, no matter how poor or insignificant they might appear to be. I discuss more songs on respect for parents below.

The third song ridicules people who think they can find a solution to hunger without cultivating and growing crops in their fields. In the song we hear:

Mbita nchisosa ntera wa sala

I am looking for medicine
against hunger

Ngamulire mpinipe ee

While carrying a hoe-handle
only

Instead of cultivating the land and growing crops, the individual in the song simply walks around with a hoe-handle looking for a solution to famine or hunger. Through the song the boys are taught that the best medicine against hunger is hard work in the field. It is folly to look for solutions against hunger with just a hoe-handle as one risks dying of starvation. This song, like the other two above, encourages hard work in the garden to avoid misery that comes with starvation. Food security is considered highly in an agrarian society. Benson Igboin observes that “[h]ard work is highly appreciated by [...] Africans [as] a value that engenders positive influence in the family and communal circles.” He goes on to say that “[t]he value of hard work is appreciated at worksites with proverbs, songs and praise names [since work] is regarded as the cure for poverty” (2011, p.100). Leonard Chuwa makes a similar observation when he says in traditional African society “utilization of personal potential by each person through hard work was a moral obligation” (2014, p.47). The emphasis on the message of hard work in *misyungu* songs is aimed at ensuring that the novices become productive and self-reliant members of society.

Respect for parents and the elderly

One of the fundamental values in most African cultures is that “one must respect one’s parents” (Olasunkanmi, 2015, n.p.). This respect can be determined in the manner in which one behaves towards one’s parents, the way one speaks to them, the way one responds when spoken to by them, the way one reacts when one is being advised by them, and the way one reacts when one feels some wrong has been done by them.

With regard to a perceived wrong committed by a parent the song below enjoins calm, respect and understanding.

<i>Nkhubuku yanga yoyera n'naikonda ee</i>	I loved my white chicken
<i>Inafera pa mtondo pali amayi ee</i>	It died at the mortar where mom was

In the song a mother accidentally drops a pestle on her son’s white chicken while pounding food. In a rural setting where pounding maize or sorghum is still the norm, chickens come milling around the mortar to pick whatever grain drops from it. In the confusion a mother can accidentally drop a pestle on a chicken. Instead of accepting what has happened as an accident and ensuring that the matter remains within the family as respect for parents demands, the child goes public, telling everybody and expressing his annoyance with his mother. Through this song the novices are advised to understand such mistakes when they happen and to remain respectful towards their parents. Parents are not perfect, when they make mistakes, unwittingly or otherwise, children should show understanding.

Another song that touches on the possibility of parents rubbing their children the wrong way is the one that goes:

<i>Matemba gangu wani alyire ee</i>	Who has eaten my <i>matemba</i> (small fish)?
<i>Atati namawo chalivalanje</i>	Mom and Dad will have to

explain themselves

In a rural setting where young people, especially boys, are encouraged to go fishing or hunting to supplement the family diet, chances of parents offering a child's catch to visitors, who often arrive without notice, are high. Hospitality is one of the moral values in Africa and when a visitor arrives and finds hosts unprepared, the hosts try as best they can to make the visitor feel welcome. Olasunkanmi observes that "African hospitality can be defined as that extension of generosity, given freely without strings attached. There is always spontaneous welcome and accommodation to strangers and visitors" (2015, p.5). Sometimes a sense of hospitality might mean offering visitors decent relish of fish or meat brought home by a child without his permission, hoping to explain to him later, preferably after the departure of the visitors. Aware of situations like these, instructors at *Jando* advise novices against pestering their mothers about the whereabouts of their catch or kill when they do not see it featuring on the menu. The lesson here is that the boys should not complain when food they brought home is given to visitors. Expressions of anger at the perceived injustice might embarrass the parents, especially if the visitors are still around. Lessons like these are also meant to encourage a spirit of sharing and a communal way of living among the novices. Further, in traditional society holding one's parents to account, as is the case in the song, is considered rude and disrespectful.

Another type of behaviour that is discouraged as it is considered rude, not only to parents but to other elderly people in society, is making noise early in the morning, before the elderly folk have stirred from bed. As Emeka Emeakaroha rightly notes, some of the reasons why Africans value respect for elders include the belief that they are "the teachers and directors of the young" and that they are "the repository of communal wisdom" which makes them deserving of "leadership in the affairs of the people" (2002, n.p.). He goes on to say that "[t]he respect given to the elders has its practical effect in the maintenance of custom and tradition" (n.p.).

There are a number of *misyungu* songs aimed at teaching novices to avoid

disturbing parents and the elderly through noise early in the morning. Instead of making noise, the novices are advised to go to work in the field or to do whatever job that needs to be done. One such song goes:

Masolokoto bwebwe eee

Mr Black-eyed Bulbul is noisy

Bwebwe pa ntopwito

Noisy at *ntopwito*⁸

This short and simple song provides an example of use of animal metaphors in *misyungu* songs. The Black-eyed Bulbul is a common and familiar bird in Muwawa that is well-known for its active and noisy behaviour. It is even noisier when in the company of other birds in a fruit tree. In this song young people who make noise in their hut early in the morning are compared to the Black-eyed Bulbul. This and other uses of animal metaphor, as we shall see later, are based on people's embeddedness in, and knowledge and understanding of, their environment. The message in this song is that the boys should desist from behaving like the Bulbul, and should show respect to their parents and other elders.

Another song with a similar lesson, and which relies on use of animal imagery, is one that says:

Wagomba ngoma kundavi ana wani welewo,

CheLititi, CheLititi walikanire nganimba unejo asongolo

Asongolo walikanire nituma m'wejo

Waumbale welewo, waumbale welewo

Who is beating a drum this early? That's Mr Ground Hornbill

Mr Ground Hornbill protested, it's not me, but uninitiated children

Uninitiated children protested, we are not the ones

It's the initiated, it's the initiated

Again, here the incorporation of the Hornbill into the song has to do with the people's environmental knowledge and understanding. These songs arose in a context where people were integrated with their environment and understood the sounds and behaviours of animals, such as birds. Years ago, the Ground

Hornbill was a common sight in Muwawa and other parts of the country, such that the initiates understood why these birds were associated with drumming in the song, a reference to their booming drum-like sound often heard in the morning. Today these birds are a rare sight in the village. Human population growth and agricultural activities that have resulted in clearing of large tracts of land that used to be their haunts have driven them away. Today when this song is sung initiates fail to appreciate the significance of the animal metaphor.

In the song the Ground Hornbill protests that it is not the one making noise in the morning, accusing young uninitiated children instead. But the children also protest and say it is in fact the initiated that are beating drums early in the morning. Here the initiated are behaving worse than animals and small children. The initiates are, therefore, advised to respect their parents and other elders by desisting from making noise in the morning.

It would appear that birds are the preferred animals for use as metaphors in songs that advise against chaotic and noisy behaviour in the morning. This is not surprising considering that it is actually birds whose chatter and melodious singing announces the coming of day in the countryside. A third song that teaches sobriety and acceptable conduct in the morning also uses a bird as a metaphor. The song goes:

*Alumbisi totilo kumanangwa yee
Pati kuchele kutongolera ku mseso yee*

Mr White-browed Robin off to the cassava field
When day breaks he will sing melodies from the graveyard

In his book *An African Worldview: The Muslim Amacinga Yawo of Southern Malawi* Ian Dicks renders this song as:

Alumbisi totilo akumanagwa, pati kucele cakulya ca ku mseso-yee

Mr. Paradise Flycatcher off he goes for cassava, for food early in the morning at the plantation. (2012, p.466)

The English name for Lumbisi is White-browed Robin (formerly Heuglin's Robin [Wilson, 2012]) and not Paradise Flycatcher. Unlike the Paradise Flycatcher the White-browed Robin is a noisy bird whose melodious singing is heard at dawn (waking up people from sleep) and at dusk. Dicks is right though when he mentions that Lumbisi “has a very distinct clear sound. It is also a bird which wakes early in the morning and makes melodies” (2012, p.466). It is this melodious singing, considered noise, which is the target in the *misyungu* song, above. Although the rendering of the song is slightly different, the meaning or the lesson in the song is the same in Muwawa and among the Amacinga Yawo from whom Dicks collected the song. This song is aimed at advising the boys not to make noise early in the morning, like Lumbisi, disturbing parents and the elderly. Again, here the people's knowledge of their environment is clear, as they draw from animal (bird) behaviour for purposes of teaching acceptable behaviour to the young members in society.

The variations in the two versions of the song: “*cakulya ca ku mseso-yeē*” among the Amacinga Yawo according to Dicks, and “*tongolera ku mseso yee*” in Muwawa, could be a result of differences in context.⁹ While the Amacinga Yawo of Mangochi refer to eating, the Lomwe and Yawo of Ngokwe in Machinga refer to melodious singing (*kutongola*). Dicks' translation of *kumseso* as at the plantation, however, is also incorrect. *Kumseso* means “at the graveyard.” It is at such a place where the Lumbisi eats or sings, according to the songs. This is consistent with the second lesson in the song. It is not unusual for a *misyungu* song to have two meanings. The second lesson is that the initiates should avoid doing things they would be embarrassed about should they become widely known. Dicks is right in observing that “*Akumanangwa* is also a euphemism for illicit sexual activity” (2012, p.466). The idea of going to sing at the graveyard or even at the plantation (if we take Dicks' translation) is because the Lumbisi is embarrassed by what he has done and prefers to be alone.

Child-minding responsibilities and manners

Another issue that is close to the hearts of people in rustic societies such as Muwawa is childcare while the mothers are busy working. Young people

are expected to take care of their siblings to give their parents time to engage in productive work. At *Jando* the boys are therefore advised to look after their siblings in a manner that reflects the fact that they are initiated or are responsible adults. One thing that is emphasised in minding children is avoidance of violence and sexual abuse. A song that carries a message against physical violence goes:

<i>Ngoma jangu ja m'mbawa jinasepile'ne</i>	My African mahogany
	drum I carved
<i>Jakulindima jisylenepe nganimbone</i>	It produced sound
	without being beaten
	I have never seen the
	likes of it

In the song a mother refers to a miraculous drum that produces sound by itself. This of course is ridiculous as there is no such a drum. One has to beat a drum for it to produce sound. In interpreting this song, the drum is compared to a child who cries in response to a beating or in reaction to an unpleasant experience. This song, like many other *misyungu* songs, relies on a metaphor where a drum is compared to a child. The lesson from this song focuses on a likely excuse that a child-minder would give an inquisitive mother, namely that a child is crying for no reason. And yet, like a drum, a child would never cry without provocation. The idea of a drum that sounds without being beaten, therefore, shows the absurdity of a child crying for no reason. Through this song the initiates are taught to be patient with children and to look after them properly until their mothers are done with work. This advice is given in a context where maids or house help are unheard of, where children help their parents in raising their siblings.

A number of *Jando* songs also touch on the subject of child sexual abuse, especially of the girl child—a subject that is rarely talked about in African societies as it, like all open discussions of sex, is considered taboo (Bowman and Brundige, 2014). One can therefore argue that while “child sex abuse in sub-Saharan Africa did not become a topic of discussion within the disciplines of law and psychology,

or in the media, until the 1980s and 90s” (Bowman and Brundige 2014, p.235), it was certainly a topic of discussion in the *Jando* initiation ceremony long before the 1980s. *Jando* and other initiation ceremonies provide a licence for tackling taboo subjects in African societies. While some of the songs regarding sex and sexuality tend to be very explicit, most of those that deal with sexual immorality are subtle and circumspect. One such song goes:

Ana chichi mwanache akulira
Kansomile kasichi ka mbelemende

Why is the child crying?
 A small pigeon pea tree
 stump has pricked it.

In this song a mother or an adult asks why a baby is crying and the child-minder lies that a small pigeon pea tree stump has pricked it, when in reality he has sexually assaulted it. The reference to a stab by a small pigeon pea tree stump is a metaphor for sexual assault. The lesson in this song is that when taking care of children, the novices should never touch the babies’ private parts, as doing so is dangerous (as the baby would be hurt), morally reprehensible, and taboo. Further, anyone who engages in such behaviour is considered a wizard or a witch. In today’s Malawi where cases of child sexual abuse are reported regularly in the media, one wishes such pieces of advice were commonly shared so as to try and arrest the malpractice.

Another song on the subject, a graphic one this time, says:

Nantupuntupu nantupwile mwanache
Kasongoni napelaga susuwa

Uproot uproot I
 uprooted a child
 The little clitoris I
 thought it was a swelling

Ian Dicks translates *Kasongoni* as “the nakedness” (2012, p.461), instead of little clitoris (*ka-* is a diminutive marker in Ciyawo, as it is in Chichewa). It is possible that Dicks did not want to sound explicit. But in doing so he obscures the real meaning of the song. In the song the speaker laments his tendency of uprooting or pulling things which has resulted in his pulling a baby’s clitoris. The graphic

and explicit nature of the song is aimed at shocking the novices and instilling in them abhorrence of immoral sexual behaviour. The lesson in this song specifically prohibits touching or peeping at the private parts of the girl child. The two songs above, and others like these, strongly advise against child sexual abuse in society.

Propriety and general moral conduct

A great number of *Jando misyungu* songs touch on propriety and general moral conduct in society. What is considered good moral behaviour or discipline includes obedience, giving a helping hand to the weak and the elderly, respect, humility, and eschewal of inappropriate sexual behaviour, such as voyeurism and incest, among others.

Where sexual immorality, such as voyeurism, is concerned the lessons take into account the social and environmental context in the countryside. In the Muwawa of the 1980s when I first experienced these songs, pit latrines and ablution facilities such as fences were few and far between. Many people bathed in rivers or in the bush using water drawn from nearby wells. As a result of lack of latrines, open defecation was never frowned upon. In such a context songs and lessons like the ones below were necessary. One song that teaches novices not to engage in voyeurism goes:

Ndikwere mu m'bawa delemuke

Climb an African
mahogany tree I will fall

*Ndikawone amayi delemuke*¹⁰

To watch naked women
I will fall

Here again is a song in Chichewa. In the song climbing a tree is seen as an easier way of viewing women taking a bath in a river or at a well. While the bush could hide a person taking a bath in a river or at the well from the prying eyes of someone on the ground, it would be useless in protecting anyone's modesty from the voyeuristic eyes of someone perched in a tree. Aware of the risks women took in bathing in the bush, older members in societies like Muwawa had to teach young

people appropriate sexual behaviour, and voyeurism was not one of them. Besides voyeurism being morally reprehensible, the song also warns that climbing trees to watch naked women may result in accidents, such as falling, that may lead to injury or death. The initiates were then strongly advised against such behaviour.

Ian Dicks collected two songs with similar *misyungu* from the Amacinga Yawo of Mangochi district. In one of the songs the instructors and novices using animal metaphor sing:

Angwena kuliwutanga nale wa m'cipale, kuliwutanga nale wa m'cipale

Mr Crocodile dragging himself in shallow waters, dragging himself
in shallow waters. (2012, p.464)

The second song says:

*Mkawona bii mu mtelamo, mkawona bii mu mtelamo, acimwene, ce Uladi ni
wakutega ulimbo.*

Don't see darkness in the tree, brother, Mr. Uladi is the one trapping
[birds].¹¹(2012, p.467)

In both songs the message is the same: Voyeurism is morally wrong—the boys should not seek sexual gratification by hiding to watch women bathing. The first song compares the behaviour of the crocodile that drags itself in the shallows to catch animals coming to drink with boys who hide to catch glimpses of naked women. The second one which refers to the shadowy figure of Mr Uladi allegedly setting bird traps teaches against deceptive behaviour where Mr Uladi pretends to set bird traps when in actual fact he is ogling naked women who are bathing. The fact that these songs exist at all shows that the behaviour they are addressing was of serious concern in these societies. Although the social and environmental context has changed, moral lessons against voyeurism still remain relevant today.

In Muwawa, like in the other parts of rural Malawi, women did more than bathe or draw water at the river or well. They also washed, and still wash, their clothing. Some of the pieces of clothing they washed included intimate ones,

such as the menstrual cloth, commonly used in rural areas where sanitary napkins, pantyliners and tampons are unheard of. One of the lessons given to the boys has to do with the appropriate way to behave upon discovering that a woman has forgotten this piece of clothing. The lesson is delivered through the following song:

<i>Mbiranjirani amwalivo, mbiranjirani amwalivo</i>	Call that lady back, call the lady back
<i>Kavisa kawo alinalile,</i>	She has forgotten her piece of cloth
<i>Chindokote mbwale, chindende lamba</i>	I will wear it, I will use it as a belt

Through this song the novices are taught to be discreet when they discover that a woman has forgotten her intimate piece of clothing to avoid embarrassing her. They are told that the person who makes the discovery should draw the woman's attention to the matter in a discreet and respectful way, instead of shouting and announcing it to all and sundry as is the case in the song. Such behaviour is unacceptable for someone who has been to *Jando* and is therefore an adult. Today advice like this may perhaps sound dated to both rural and urban dwellers, given the social and environmental changes that have taken place over time. However, decorum and respect will always be necessary in human interactions.

Respect and decorum are also supposed to characterise the behaviour of young people when bathing in a river with others who are older than them. A song that teaches how to behave when bathing at the river says:

<i>Asakata kuluwi kunkuli ye</i>	Mr Monitor lizard makes the water dirty upriver
<i>Akulu nasamba kwivanda ye</i>	When elders are bathing downriver

This song uses two languages, Ciyawo and Chichewa. The expression “*Akulu*

nasamba' is in Chichewa. The reason for this mixing of languages here, as in other songs, is to add a dramatic effect to the singing. In the song a monitor lizard jumps into the water upriver while elders are taking a bath downriver. The behaviour of the animal is reprehensible as it dirties the water. The animal metaphor here compares the behaviour of the monitor lizard to that of undisciplined and impolite boys who would bathe upriver while their elders are bathing downriver, dirtying the water the older people are supposed to use in the process. The lesson in the song is that the initiated boys should not behave like the monitor lizard. They should wait until those older than them have taken a bath before taking their own. Admittedly, the context within which this advice was applicable is fast disappearing, but what remains relevant is respect for people that are older than one, wherever one might encounter these.

The song above shows that in the *Jando* ceremony lessons on morality take into account animal behaviour (the monitor lizard in this case) in relation or in response to that of humans. Another animal of interest is the little bird Tawny-flanked Prinia. A song that references the behaviour of this bird says:

Che Timba, Che Timba,

Mr Tawny-flanked Prinia,

Mr Tawny-flanked Prinia,

Che Timba kulila pekonde

Mr Tawny-flanked Prinia

calling in the bush

In this song the Tawny-flanked Prinia is crying noisily in the bush as a way of sounding an alarm against an intruder. The song and the lesson it carries are based on people's observations and knowledge about the behaviour of the bird, knowledge that would define the novices' future interactions with it. When the Tawny-flanked Prinia sees an intruder it becomes agitated, jumping from one tree branch or grass to another, calling noisily, flapping its wings and wagging its tail—perhaps warning other birds of danger. In some cases, it is joined by another bird or two and the noise becomes a racket. Awareness of this behaviour has resulted in the teaching that the boys should not throw stones at the bird when they encounter it for fear of hurting the human intruder who might have provoked it. Such an

intruder could be someone relieving him/herself in the bush or a couple having sex. As I mentioned earlier, lack of pit latrines in the countryside made open defecation almost an acceptable practice. This often led to a clash between humans and animals as is the case with the bird in the song. Somehow the elders knew that defecating in the bush had its own risks, which, curiously, had nothing to do with the spread of diseases, but the fear of a wayward stone landing on one's head. The clearing of bushes for agriculture and settlement, and the use of pit latrines nowadays has not only led to scarcity of the birds but also rendered this lesson almost obsolete.

I will end this section with a discussion of a song that advises against disrespecting elders, especially those who may also have a disability. William Conton rightly observes that “Africans generally have deep and ingrained respect for old age, and even when we can find nothing to admire in an old man, we will not easily forget that his grey hair has earned him right to courtesy and politeness” (cited by Olasunkanmi 2015, p.6). The song says:

Wakulungwawo wanggalola

Bwanawe kwendeje twamalire mbonga

The elderly man is blind

Friend let's finish all the
relish

In the song two young people who are sharing a meal with an old man connive to finish all the relish upon realising that the man is blind. Such behaviour is not only mean and cruel but also disrespectful to the old man. Where the elderly and the lame are concerned the initiates are advised to be respectful, sensitive and considerate at all the times. Such behaviour promotes caring and responsibility for others. Caring and responsibility are some of “the core values of African world views” (Asante, Miike and Yin, cited by Chuwa, 2014, p.13)

Conclusion

Initiation ceremonies play an important function in traditional African societies such as Muwawa. This is why, as the Functionalists would have it, they are practised to this day. In Muwawa, like in many other villages in Southern

Malawi, *Jando* helps to teach moral conduct to young boys to ensure that they grow into hard working and responsible members of society. The *Jando* ceremony also relieves parents from the burden of broaching subjects that are considered taboo, such as death and sex, with their children, leaving instructors and guardians to do so in the context of the initiation camp. The messages and imagery in *Jando* song texts as discussed above arise from and are suited to the agrarian/rustic context to which they belong. However, these days social and environmental changes in rural societies such as Muwawa render some of the lessons and metaphors somewhat obsolete. Nevertheless, some of the values promoted by *Jando*, such as respect, hard work, and propriety or decorum, are not only timeless, but are also relevant to and apply in both rural and urban societies. As Sunday Awoniyi observes, “Many of the cultural values and practices of traditional Africa [such as the ones discussed above] can be considered positive features of the culture and can be accommodated in the scheme of African modernity, even if they must undergo some refinement and pruning in order to become fully harmonious with the spirit of modern culture and to function most satisfactorily within that culture” (2015, p.8). It is the positive aspects of the *Jando* initiation ceremony that ensure its continuity and relevance in Muwawa village as in other parts of Malawi or of east and southern Africa.

Notes

1. Unlike other scholars, such as Dicks (2012), I use a capital “J” to underline the fact that this is a proper noun.
2. This is where initiates are made to stand on one leg for a long time.
3. *Nambande* or *inyago* are mostly animal masks. *Mwanambera* is “an animal structure that makes its appearance at the closing ceremony of the *Jando* initiation” (Morris 2000, p.125). It is from inside *mwanambera* that the initiates sing and announce their new names at the village ground on the night before the coming out celebrations.
4. In the past people defecated in the bush; those without pit latrines still do. Defecating in the garden was, and still is, actually considered morally reprehensible.
5. In their paper titled “The Timing and Role of Initiation Rites in Preparing Young People for Adolescence and Responsible Sexual and Reproductive Behaviour in Malawi” Alister Munthali and Eliya Zulu ignore evidence (from respondents who said they were not told to have sex when they return home from *Jando* in a practice called *kusasa fumbi* - cleaning the dust) to conclude that “[i]t is clear that both *Gule wankulu* and *jando* emphasize on respect and sex” (2007, p.10), and that “while

issues of respect and new roles in society are discussed, a key focus of initiation or puberty rites for both girls and boys is to advise them on the transition to a sexual world” (2007, p.13).

6. Boston Soko makes the misleading claim that this is the first song “sung at the *Jando* initiation ceremony” (1980, p.156). There are many songs that are sung at various stages and contexts during the *Jando* initiation ceremony. There was need to specify that this is the first song that is sung during a teaching session. Further, his translation of this song is also erroneous. He claims that the song says “I am suffering while I have children/ I hoe like this but I am not helped at all/ Do they not know that hunger is terrible!” The song says no such thing.
7. Efforts to translate or find the closest meaning for this expression bore no fruits.
8. Efforts to establish the meaning of *ntopwito* proved futile.
9. It could also be a result of improvisations during the song’s diffusion.
10. Linguistically, the word “delemuke” does not mean falling in Chichewa, but that is what was implied in the song. Similarly, the expression “Ndikawone amayi” implies watching naked women in the context of the song. That is beyond the literal meaning of seeing or watching women in Chichewa.
11. For clarity the translation of this song should have read: “If you see a shadowy figure in the tree, my brother/ It’s Mr Uladi setting traps for birds.”

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