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***Special Memorial Edition***

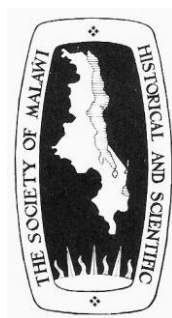
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**A Tribute to the Life**

**of**

**Fr. Matthew Schoffeleers  
(1928 — 2011)**

**Malawianist, Renaissance man and free-thinker**



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*Frontispiece*



photo: courtesy of Malawi Museums

**A Nyau, or *gule wamkulu*, mask**

**A Roman Catholic priest and non-African, Fr. Matthew Schoffeleers enjoyed the rare distinction of being inducted into the sacred, mystic ritual of *gule wamkulu*.**

## INTRODUCTION

This publication celebrates several important ‘firsts’ in the long history of the *Journal of the Society of Malawi (Historical and Scientific)* since its first issue in 1948 in what was, in those far off days, the British Protectorate of Nyasaland.

First and foremost this special issue celebrates the life of Fr. Matthew Schoffeleers a man who, as one becomes increasingly aware as one reads the remarkable eulogies and papers to come, dared to think the unthinkable and pursue sincerely held beliefs often in the face of considerable opposition, disapproval and censure. That Fr. Schoffeleers was undoubtedly right to pursue these beliefs is clearly apparent in the esteem, affection and indeed love that is evident in the tributes from fellow academics, colleagues and friends whose lives he touched, often profoundly, and here share their appreciation, memories and reflections.

Secondly, this edition of the *Society of Malawi Journal* breaks new ground in welcoming Guest Editors for the very first time ever in two highly distinguished Malawians, Dr. Louis Nthenda and Professor Lupenga Mphande. It is their unstinting and imaginative dedication that has brought together the broad church of disciplines and talents that is the hallmark of this remarkable tribute. The Society of Malawi is deeply grateful for their most thoughtful participation and informed contributions.

Thirdly, in a year when the complete 63 year run of *Society of Malawi Journals* has been made available in digitised form on **JSTOR**, it is surely especially appropriate that this special issue embraces electronic publishing to make this tribute accessible to the widest possible readership; especially in Malawi where printed works can be both expensive and elusive. Given the proliferation of Malawian hosted websites and social networks in recent years, there can be surely little reason why any Malawian with an interest in his or her heritage, or is curious to learn more about this great man who spent a considerable portion of his days living an essentially simple life amongst them, imbibing their culture and traditions, should be denied that opportunity. At a future date it is also the intention of the editors to publish this tribute in printed form.

**Colin Baker and David Stuart-Mogg, co-editors, *The Society of Malawi Journal*.**

## FOREWORD

As guest editors, our invitation to scholars all over the world to become involved in celebrating the intellectual life and lived experience of Matthew Schoffeleers by reminiscing and/or exploring how his life had touched and inspired them and others, and his legacy on the study of African cultures, received enthusiastic and overwhelming response, with 14 articles finally selected for inclusion in this special issue of the journal.

The articles fall roughly into three major categories: those that reminisce about Father Matthew Schoffeleers' personal life as a Catholic priest, student, and personal friend, those that cover his research methodologies, the immense volume of his academic publications and professional excellence, and those that cover his daring intellectual thought and engagement. We had hoped to get some contribution from the religious arts community since Matthew Schoffeleers' work was so much engaged in religious representation and interpretation, and the intersection between the divine and human worlds. We had also expected more contributions from the fine and performing arts community, and an exposé of the fuller range of Dr. Schoffeleers' impact on the artistic canvases of painting and theatre. Despite these shortcomings, articles in this issue are not only a testimony to Matthew Schoffeleers' central position in the shaping of critical thought on the study of African culture, but also reveal him as an intellectual beacon for every scholar and researcher interested in the subject.

Louis Nthenda discusses Matthew Schoffeleers' formative years as a graduate student of anthropology at Oxford, the scholars he interacted with most, and points to the possible foundations of his research and analytical tools. Historians believe that archaeology provides a set of methods whereby the validity of history reconstructed from oral traditions can be tested with independent data. Juwayeyi's paper is an example of the use of archaeology as verification of oral historiography: he provides data of his excavations at Mankhamba where evidence has been unearthed and carbon dated that seem to corroborate Schoffeleers' estimations from oral traditions. This contribution is an important part of an on-going debate about the relationship between archaeology and studies of oral traditions. Kings Phiri, one of the first students of the University of Malawi that Schoffeleers trained in the use of oral traditions for the study of African history, reflects on Schoffeleers' huge contribution to our knowledge and understanding of Malawi's early history; the political establishment as well as the common people often sought out the counsel of religious and cultural leaders in times of crisis.

Elias Mandala applies Schoffeleers' oral source method to analyse social practices of food production, distribution, preparation and consumption among the Mang'anja people of the Lower Shire Valley over time and their implications for social structure, age-grades, and gender politics. Terence Ranger acknowledges Matthew Schoffeleers' inspirational scholarship and the construction of a new paradigm in the study of African cultures as not only providing an invaluable insight into the study of African cultures, but also being revolutionary in the study of African religious institutions. Wim van Binsbergen discusses his long collaborative effort with Matthew Schoffeleers (his PhD supervisor) on analysing African oral narratives to unlock and retrieve Africa's distant past and its religious and social institutions and, using Schoffeleers as a departure point, he advocates a broader comparative transcontinental approach in the study of African folk tales to arrive at a new and deeper level of investigation and interconnectedness.

Adrian Roscoe reflects on his collaboration with Matthew Schoffeleers on a research project on African oral literature that resulted in the publication of *Land of Fire* (1985), and reveals a fascinating perspective of Schoffeleers not only as a rigorous and devoted colleague, but also as a meticulous scholar who set high standards for himself and others. Ian Linden's personal narrative of Schoffeleers as a contagiously affable collegial intellectual buddy and drinking-mate is both refreshing and stimulating, as is Jack Mapanje's portrayal of the priestly side of this imposing but dedicated person, who is not only devoted to his flock, but is also very much a private and compassionate person and he shows him to be something of an extrovert in the informal company of family and friends.

In the composition and production for the premiere performance of *The Rainmaker*, the playwright, Steve Chimombo reveals that he not only used Matthew Schoffeleers' original research material, but that Schoffeleers also donated his collector's precious spears, drums, chief's staff and other paraphernalia for the play's production, revealing Dr. Schoffeleers' unique largess and generosity. Paul Kishindo gives a students' perspective of Schoffeleers – the students' fascination and attraction to him and his spellbinding hold on them and their intellectual life. Lupenga Mphande gives an example of the application of Schoffeleers' analytical methodology on African territorial cults to some artistic works by citing select examples from Berlings Kaunda's wood and stone sculptures.

Jos Damen rounds off this Issue by his compilation for researchers of as complete a bibliography of Schoffeleers' works as are available in Dutch and English. It covers the 40 years of his active academic life from 1966 to 2006. Although it generally excludes book reviews, the Editors reckon that scholars of Schoffeleers' thought and those looking for sources, inspiration or reading matter for sheer enjoyment will find this Bibliography a useful starting point.

**Louis Nthenda, Tokyo, Japan and Lupenga Mphande, Ohio, USA.**

**Guest Editors: Fr. Matthew Schoffeleers Special Memorial Edition,  
*The Society of Malaŵi Journal.***

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## IN MEMORIAM



**MATTHEW SCHOFFELEERS (1928-2011)**

**Wim van Binsbergen, PhD. Amsterdam Free University; Professor, African Studies Centre, University of Leiden.**

*Schoffeleers' Student, Friend, Co-author and Colleague.*

It is with deep regret we announce the death of a leading anthropologist of Malawi and of African religion, Matthew Schoffeleers; sometime Deputy Chairman of the African Studies Centre (1980-1984) and for decades an important figure in Africanist research and teaching in Malawi as well as in the Netherlands.

### *Life*

Matthew Schoffeleers was born to a peasant family in the hamlet of Geverik, near Beek, in the extreme South East of the Netherlands, then still a wholly and emphatically Roman Catholic region. For a boy of his background a religious career was the obvious channel to bring his talents to fruition. So in 1942 he joined the minor seminary. In 1949 he took his first vows within the religious congregation of Montfort, and in 1955 he was ordained priest and went off to Malawi as a missionary. In Malawi he was stationed in the Lower Shire Valley, where rather than unreservedly proselytising for the Roman Catholic faith, he increasingly became involved with the local cult of the martyr / demi-god Mbona, and with the well-known *Nyau*<sup>1</sup> mask society. A conflict with his bishop ensued, and (like so many members of his generation, including Johannes Fabian, Sjaak van der Geest and René Devisch) Matthew Schoffeleers was brought to redefine his increasingly intimate relationship with Africa, from being a missionary, to being an anthropologist cum local participant. At the time, the Jesuits' Lovanium University at Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) offered (as a branch of Louvain Catholic University, Belgium) an anthropology curriculum geared to missionaries' mounting needs for critical intercultural (self-)reflection, and here Schoffeleers studied for a year (1963-64); one

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<sup>1</sup> \*Editor's Note: According to Prof Paul Kishindo, the popularly preferred name for 'Nyau' is now 'gule wamkulu'. (Private Communication).

of his classmates was the, now prominent, Congolese / American Africanist and classicist / Romanist Valentin Mudimbe; while the leading Belgian Africanist René Devisch would also soon begin his anthropological career there. Schoffeleers went on to Oxford University, where, after matriculating in 1964, he took, with amazing rapidity, under the supervision of Rodney Needham, the Diploma in Social Anthropology in 1965, the BLitt in 1966 and the DPhil in 1968, with theses on the Lower Shire Valley and the Mbona cult. Back in Malawi, he was appointed teacher at the Nguludi Roman Catholic Seminary (1967-1970); later becoming director of the Catechetical Training Centre in Likulezi (1970-1971). He then left to take up a Senior Lectureship at the University of Malawi's Chancellor College, then situated at Chichiri, Blantyre before it relocated to Zomba (1971-1976). In 1976 he was appointed Reader in the Anthropology of Religion at the Free University, Amsterdam, the Netherlands – a post to be converted, like all other Dutch readerships, into a full professorship in 1980. It was then, also, that he acted, for a few years, on the Board of the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands, as Deputy Chairman. In 1989 he exchanged his Amsterdam regular chair for a personal chair in Religious Anthropology at Utrecht University, the Netherlands, from which he retired in 1998 at the age of seventy. After his retirement he continued his research and publication activities including writing a history of the Dutch Montfortian missions worldwide, until Alzheimer's disease made it impossible for him to do so and forced him to give up his apartment in Leiden and to live with his Montfortian *confratres* in the South East of the country again; back to where he was born. His eightieth birthday (2008) was still celebrated in great style, with a solemn celebration of the Holy Mass and a festive dinner for dozens of relatives, friends, colleagues and former students. He passed away on Easter Day, 24 April 2011.

### **Work**

In the work of Matthew Schoffeleers the following major strands may be distinguished:

#### *(a) Religious anthropology*

As an anthropologist, he saw it as his first task to put the ethnography of the Malawian Mang'anja (a subdivision of the Chewa) on the map, and in particular to give an adequate account of their religious life. Here he rather avoided the reductionist, outsider perspective *en vogue* in religious anthropology in the second half of the 20th century; and instead he strove to encounter and understand the members of his local research population in their own, irreducible spirituality. In his attempts to make sense of the religious phenomena he studied and unreservedly shared in Southern Malawi, his main sources of inspiration were the *communitas*-centred religious anthropology of Victor Turner (the subject of his inaugural address as a Reader at the Free University) and the anglicised forms of structuralism as mediated by Needham (the subject of his surprising inaugural address for his Utrecht chair, 1991: *Waarom God maar één been heeft*, 'Why God has only one leg') – a discussion of mutilation and asymmetry as hallmarks of the sacred, thus situating the Mbona figure in a global comparative, and especially in a universalising and timeless, typological perspective.

#### *(b) Historicising anthropology*

Like many anthropologists in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Schoffeleers was fascinated by the historical implications of his (necessarily present-day) fieldwork data. He was greatly inspired by the movement of the Historical Study of

African Religion, initiated by the leading historian Terence Ranger (then of the University of California Los Angeles, later Manchester and Oxford) with a generous subsidy of the Ford Foundation. Here Schoffeleers was to occupy, in the 1970s-80s, a leading role, with impressive papers on historical aspects of the *Nyau* society and of the Southern African cult organisation around the High God, Mwali – culminating in his editorship of the collection, still authoritative, on *Guardians of the Land* (1979), on Southern African territorial cults. Realising that the retrieval of, glimpses of, the distant past through the analysis of oral traditions and of the details of ritual arrangements could only be taken seriously if based on an explicit and sophisticated methodological basis, Schoffeleers joined the small number of scholars (including Roy Willis of Edinburgh, and Wim van Binsbergen of the Leiden African Studies Centre) who sought to forge the necessary methodological and theoretical instruments for this purpose. This endeavour also characterises Schoffeleers' own contribution to the collective work he was to publish with van Binsbergen in 1985 on the basis of a high-powered international conference the two of them organised on behalf of the African Studies Centre, 1979: *Theoretical explorations in African religion* (1985, African Studies Centre series with Kegan Paul International). This line of Schoffeleers' work reached its culmination in *River of Blood: The Genesis of a Martyr Cult in Southern Malawi* (1992, Wisconsin UP). A related field of study is that of legends and folk tales as a form of historically-relevant oral tradition. So, also in this field of oral literature, Schoffeleers has made several contributions as far as Malawi is concerned.

(c) *African religion and the state*

While the political impact of the Mbona cult on the Malawi national scene appears to have remained minimal, the same cannot be said for the *Nyau* cult; the latter, for instance, was reputedly instrumental in the perpetuation of the Banda regime (1961-1994). While Schoffeleers disliked the imposition upon African religion of analytical theoretical models that sought to reduce religion to the social, economic or political field, he became more and more interested in the relations between religion and the state. From this concern stemmed, for instance, his major article (in the journal *Africa*, 1991) on political acquiescence as a conspicuous feature of African Independent Churches; here he revisited and revised a famous classic analysis by the pioneer analyst of African Independent Churches, Bengt Sundkler.

(d) *Religion and development*

Having realised the Christian roots of much of the development endeavour into which North-South relations were to be redefined after World War II and especially after the demise of colonialism, Schoffeleers and his Free University colleague Philip Quarles van Ufford went one step further, and set out to study development *as religion*, bringing to bear upon that institutional complex the entire analytical and methodological apparatus of religious anthropology. This made for an original and inspiring collective work (*Religion and development*, 1988) that still makes relevant reading.

(e) *African religion and Christian theology*

In the beginning of his career, as a missionary, Matthew Schoffeleers explored, with painful but productive results, to what extent one could identify with African forms of religion and still remain within Roman Catholic orthodoxy and church hierarchy. The struggle to arrive at an existential perspective in which Christianity and African religion could exist side by side, could meet each other and could cross-fertilise each other, has characterised his personal spiritual life and

increasingly formed the underlying inspiration of his more theologically-inclined explorations later in life – even though he has remained remarkably silent on this personal, existential dimension. In this connection, he explored the relevance of the South Central African indigenous model of the *ng'anga* (diviner-priest-healer) for a better comparative understanding of the figure of Jesus Christ as treated in Christian theology. From the same perspective, also the figure of Mbona appears in a new light, as a mutilated martyr figure mediating between heaven and earth for the sake of crop fertility and human healing. Here we can understand why Schoffeleers did not think it preposterous to combine his active role as a Roman Catholic priest (and as such entrusted with the pastoral care of specific Dutch communities, while passionately discharging that role) with being, for decades, the main driving force behind the survival of the Mbona cult. While most anthropological colleagues have had difficulty to follow him in his Christological explorations, Schoffeleers' insistence on taking African religion profoundly and seriously at the personal, existential level, and his distrust of all North Atlantic analytical imposition and deconstruction, made him a trusted ally, and an inspiring friend and teacher, for a whole generation of religious anthropologists who during fieldwork had come rather closer to African religion than their freshman handbooks of anthropology had stipulated.

### *Appraisal*

If, at this most premature stage, we must reluctantly come to some provisional judgment of Matthew Schoffeleers' work, what stands out and will remain of lasting value is a splendid and extensive, profound and unique contribution to Malawian ethnography and to Malawian studies in general.

Beyond that, I submit that Schoffeleers' career may be understood as an expression of fundamentally irreconcilable contradictions arising from various processes of profound change taking place, during his lifetime, in West European society, in the relationship between Africa and the North Atlantic region, in the world of scholarship, and in the Roman Catholic Church. A lifespan of over 82 years is far too long; and we cannot expect that most of the concerns and values governing its beginning will remain valid and relevant to the very end. Starting out in a milieu where Christianity was absolutely taken for granted as the paroxysm of human spirituality, it has been very much to Matthew Schoffeleers' credit that, as a missionary, he could respond to African religion in the existential, inclusive, largely unconditional way he did. Here he showed himself a man of high principles, and a visionary, ahead of his time, who recognised true spirituality wherever he met it, and who would not compromise that insight, at whatever costs. As Schoffeleers said on an historical occasion:

'It is my task to make my God visible, wherever, and in whatever form under which he is permitted to manifest himself', implying that he was also fully prepared to perceive and recognise his God under whatever cultural trappings, also in Africa. However, meanwhile in Western Europe the tide of secularisation could not be turned. As a result, the automatic reverence he was brought up to expect and to solicit from non-priests in his priestly role, seldom came his way after his return to the Netherlands in 1976. In many ways an outsider (as a priest, a Southerner, and one who took African religion seriously for its own sake), he ventured into the fortress of Dutch Protestantism that the Free University was at the time; here he found that, despite his controversial nomination, there was less and less institutional and national support for the study of African religion and religious anthropology, and that the number of his co-workers was dwindling. He also found that he was more of a

teacher and a writer, than of an administrator. When he had vacated his Amsterdam chair, this was soon redesigned into a focus for the study of Protestant church dynamics from a cultural studies perspective. Increasingly, also, Schoffeleers sought to resolve his personal existential dilemmas by theological experiments that risked estranging him from his fellow anthropologists. Meanwhile tables were turned in the relation between Africa and the North Atlantic region in the production of Africanist knowledge. The politicising of that relation by vocal and highly educated African colleagues was clearly regretted by Schoffeleers; and although he did teach in Africa and did publish with African scholars, most of his life he appears to have lived the old-fashioned, typically anthropological – and by now totally obsolete – illusory division of the world between a South where fieldwork was being done and *communitas* with one's 'informants' was being generated, and a North where writing was to be done, in splendid Northern isolation and unaccountability. Schoffeleers' active career ended before international scholarship had re-dedicated itself to the study of religion, including African religion, from such new perspectives as postmodernism and globalisation; also because of his reluctance to discuss his personal spirituality, he largely missed the boat of spirituality studies that was taking aboard much of what formerly went under the flag of religious anthropology. Finally, the 1990s saw, much to the dismay of Schoffeleers, a virtual collapse of the once cutting-edge intellectual industry of the retrieval of the distant past through the structural analysis of oral traditions and ritual. Meanwhile a new comparative mythology has arisen, that traces and compares local oral traditions including myths and folktales along much more extensive and much more complex trajectories of space and time – and in this light (as C. Wrigley already argued in 1988 in the *Journal of African History*), to reduce (!) the history of Mbona to the local and relatively recent facts of Portuguese expansion in the 16th century CE, appears, on second thought, somewhat myopic, although sympathetically Afrocentrist, in a way. After all, a martyr associated with crop fertility can only remind us of Osiris, Tam-muz, Dionysus and Christ in the Mediterranean region, the Japanese goddess Uke Mochi 保食神, several Meso-American crop deities, and, in Africa, Chihamba of the Ndembu as described by Victor Turner, of all people, etc.

For nearly four decades, I have been very close to Matthew Schoffeleers, not only as a friend, colleague, co-convenor and co-editor, but also as formally his student (I was the first person upon whom he was to confer a PhD, in 1979), and as beneficiary of his pastoral role – he solemnised my second marriage in 1985, and in recognition, my eldest son was named after him. A sympathetic personal appraisal is therefore expected from me, rather than the above assessment with some pretensions of objectivity. Most will remember Schoffeleers for his kindness; his occasionally slurred speech betraying the former stammerer; his hypersensitivity; his meticulous attention to details of social etiquette; his insistence on celebrating major events in his life with crowds of friends and colleagues; his attention to significant dates in his own life and that of his loved ones; his very productive scholarly life for which he made extremely long hours but which was yet to be combined with the more invisible tasks as a pastor and gardener in the convent garden; and the peculiar habit of keeping a full file of correspondence on everyone around him – a file from which he would lavishly quote during his unrivalled laudatory allocutions (gems of oratory, psychological and pedagogic skill) at the conclusion of each of the long series of PhD defences under his supervision. His PhDs include such prominent Africanists as Gerry ter Haar, Rijk van Dijk, Annette Drews and Ria Reis. Perhaps Schoffeleers' main characteristic traits were his sense of religious mystery and of the miraculous;

his tragic sense of loneliness and homelessness; and his lifelong struggle against what he considered – largely without grounds – his main sin, pride; and in which others who knew him well would merely detect the lifelong contradiction between the successful drive for achievement, and his very modest family background. With great charisma and charm, for many years he constituted the living core of the ‘Werkgroep Afrikaanse Religie rond Schoffeleers – WARS’ (Working Group on African Religion Around Schoffeleers), where many of his PhD students met, and found lasting inspiration that brought them to internationally recognised publications. Many of their testimonials can be found in the Festschrift *Getuigen ondanks zichzelf* (1998), which was prepared for his 70th birthday. It may well be as a passionate teacher that Matthew Schoffeleers will yet have the most lasting impact.

## MATTHEW SCHOFFELEERS AT OXFORD 1964 - 1968

Louis Nthenda, BScEcon. Lond., DPhil. Oxon.

Vice-President for International Business, Medium Medical Co. Ltd, Tokyo,  
Japan.

*Schoffeleers' contemporary at Oxford: 'Incredibly generous. Absolutely inspirational with infectious enthusiasms. From all accounts, he was a sort of pyromaniac intellectual. He lit fires everywhere he went.'*

Matthew Schoffeleers and I matriculated as postgraduate students at Oxford in the same month of the same year, October 1964, in disciplines of different Faculties at different Colleges. He was 11 years older. The anthropologist, Dr Godfrey Lienhardt, writer of the seminal work on Dinka Religion, brought the two of us together because of our common Malawi connection.

I quickly discovered that Matthew was not a man who would engage in small talk. He was single-minded and intense, and he immediately embarked on Mbona, posing questions on some obscure points about fire which he expected me to clarify. It was soon clear that he had made two assumptions about me, both wrong. Being Malawian did not necessarily prepare me to answer every question on Malawi history and traditional practices; such kind of knowledge is learnt, not innate. Secondly, the fact that I was at Oxford didn't mean I knew everything or was interested in everything. I am sure these points must have been common knowledge to a 36-year old man as Matthew was then; so my failure to answer his questions must have confirmed the obvious. His enthusiasm for Malawiana was infectious; but I didn't put much stock on his historiography; evidence from oral history wasn't as obvious to me then; but above all, I could not equal his enthusiasm for religious discourse. I must have disappointed him. We met on and off in the next 10 years or so, even after both of us had left Oxford and gone our different ways; but for me, he always seemed to be talking about Mbona and the fires at every meeting; so we were never close intellectual friends as such disputations continued to be of marginal interest to me.

Nearly half a century later, I find myself among his erstwhile colleagues, students and friends co-presiding over an academic wake in his honour. The man I first met when we were both embarking on training in scholarly research would rise to the very pinnacle of his chosen scholarship path and would pursue his various enthusiasms equally with the single-mindedness I had noticed at Oxford, and leave huge imprints on everything he touched in his adopted country of Malawi and inspire many more scholars worldwide.

*Why did Schoffeleers choose Oxford?*

For a person interested in the study of the Anthropology of southern Africa, Oxford was not, in 1964, a natural choice. Most of the British, Dutch or Scandinavian academics who had done field work in Southern and Central Africa were connected, in the UK, to Manchester, UCL, SOAS, LSE or Cambridge and, in Africa, to Rhodes-Livingstone Institute. John Clyde Mitchell and Jaap van Velsen, who had done fieldwork in Malawi in the '40s and '50s and had moved to the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in the late '50s and early '60s were Mancunians, with

connections to Rhodes-Livingstone Institute. Lucy Mair at LSE and Mary Douglas at UCL had both published on Malawi; the latter under her maiden name of Mary Tew had done ethnographic work on Northern Malawi in the late '40s. Audrey Richards at Cambridge was already a name among ethnographers of Northern Zambia.

Oxford was beholden to East Africa (Jack Beattie and Peter Lienhardt); to North East Africa (Evans-Pritchard and Godfrey Lienhardt); to Arab North and West Africa (Bernard Fagg of Nok Culture fame). At Oxford in 1964, there was no resident anthropologist on the staff of the Institute who had done fieldwork in the recently dissolved Central African Federation or in any part of Southern Africa, all such researchers having gone to other universities and institutes. Schoffeleers going up to Oxford in 1964 meant that he would not rub shoulders with any teachers of his geographical area of interest.

Oxford seems to have been an entirely fortuitous choice and came about through a circuitous route *via* a professor at the Kinshasa Campus of Lovanium University. Schoffeleers had been given a sabbatical by his Bishop to study at this Campus in the Congo, from the fall of 1963, an anthropology course tailored for missionaries in Africa. He left his Mission in the Lower Shire to spend the academic year October 1963 to July 1964, with many interruptions in between caused by political upheavals of the time, with no financial support from his Society or his Diocese. But while there, he met a Franciscan Friar, the anthropologist Fr Theuws who had published a major work on the Luba and, more importantly, had years before befriended Evans-Pritchard during a one term study at Oxford. With President Kasavubu besieged by Pierre Mulele, and widespread rebellions elsewhere in the Congo reaching a crescendo in July 1964, in some of which missionaries had been murdered, the re-opening of the University after the summer vacation and the security of life for the missionary students were matters that caused great concern. Schoffeleers was advised by family and friends not to return to the Congo. And Fr Theuws suggested he try Oxford and seek out Evans-Pritchard, the then Professor of Social Anthropology.<sup>1</sup>

Although Oxford was not an obvious choice, it was, in hindsight and in many ways, for Schoffeleers' professional training and future career, a fortunate one. Oxford had by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in keeping with the times, become a secular institution but with no institutional hostility to the practice of religion or to its study. A man of the cloth like Matthew Schoffeleers would therefore have found no hostility to the practice of his faith or of none, for that matter, or to the academic inquiry shorn of proselytisation of faiths of all hues and colours. This would not have been unique of Oxford, of course, as he would find the same indifference to personal religious belief and practice at any other English university.

But Oxford had some saving graces to compensate for Manchester, LSE, UCL or others. It was most fortunate and therefore it made all the difference for Schoffeleers that the senior members at the Institute of Social Anthropology had not only produced original works on African Religion – Professor Edward Evans-Pritchard on Nuer Religion and the then Reader in Social Anthropology Dr R. Godfrey Lienhardt on Dinka Religion – they were themselves by coincidence Catholic converts. The Institute took in some very bright researchers attracted to the study of Religion who, like Max Assimeng of Ghana, a contemporary of Schoffeleers', also went on, later in life, to make a significant contribution to the Sociology of Religion. Godfrey Lienhardt and Evans-Pritchard had shown what could be done with

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<sup>1</sup> Meyer Reis, 2005 *Schoffeleers*, ETNOFOOR 15-2 p.26

ethnographic material in constructing a theology. Francis Huxley, a zoologist-turned-anthropologist, a Research Fellow of St Catherine's whom the College would later appoint to be Schoffeleers' moral tutor\* also taught anthropology at the Institute, had lived with the Urubu and other "tribes" of the Amazon Basin and, more importantly, had lived in Haiti as a student of voodoo; had researched on North American shamanism, and had taken part in the Mass of mushroom-induced mystical experiences of the Yanomamo Indians. Moreover, Huxley shared Schoffeleers' admiration for Teilhard de Chardin.<sup>2</sup> There is good reason to suppose that Schoffeleers derived inspiration from Teilhard de Chardin's intellectual integrity and from his courage in the face of travails with Church authorities, and from the example of the Jesuit's unswerving religious faith. De Chardin may have been his model when Schoffeleers, clashing with his Church over differing visions of the Likulezi Catechetical institute, decided to move to the University of Malawi;<sup>3</sup> a move that was reminiscent of Teilhard de Chardin's frequently finding refuge in the Geological Survey of China whenever he hit a Church wall. It can, therefore, be said with some confidence that, only in the Oxford of the 1960s would Schoffeleers find such kindred spirits with whom he could engage in sympathetic religious disputations and who had themselves wrestled with questions similar to those he had faced and would continue to face in developing his historical approach to "native" religions and to creating a theology of inculturation.

In addition, Schoffeleers, as a Continental European, would find the Institute a more welcoming and friendly place to ideas from the Continent; in particular, to French and Dutch sociological thought and methodology. Evans-Pritchard encouraged this. The Lienhardt brothers, Godfrey and Peter, both anthropologists and both members of the Institute, were half-Swiss, half-English; and the elder brother Godfrey was strongly influenced by Durkheim to the extent of being called a Durkheimist. Rodney Needham, who would be Schoffeleers' Supervisor throughout his Oxford studentship, spoke French, Dutch and German, had studied at the University of Leiden, and had introduced Continental European ideas to the English-speaking world by his English translations of Levi-Strauss' works and of Dutch sociological studies. John Beattie, another Institute member, whose lectures on Uganda Schoffeleers would attend, had also spent some time at Leiden University.<sup>4</sup>

And there was more. Oxford anthropologists were also exploring, at this time, oral literature and the Oxford University Press had just started a new series, *The Oxford Library of African Literature*, which among other things, would collect and publish parallel texts of traditional poetry and other forms of oral literature. In 1968, the series would publish Peter Lienhardt's English translation in parallel text, of Hasani bin Ismail's long Swahili poem, *The Medicine Man: Swifa ya Nguvumali*: 215 pages of it.

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\*Editor's Note: An Oxford institution: a sort of confessor and personal adviser appointed by one's College to deal in confidence with a student's personal problems - concerning one's academic work and human relationships,- and financial problems. Students were also assigned a personal academic tutor who saw to the student's academic development and who set the weekly essays, readings and homework. The two tutors have different functions and should not be confused. Needham was appointed Schoffeleers' academic tutor for his Diploma course and Supervisor for the research degrees of BLitt and DPhil. Supervisors were academic advisers for research students, e.g., for BLitt and DPhil.

<sup>2</sup> Meyer Reis, *ibid.* p.27

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p.33

<sup>4</sup> Meyer Reis, *ibid.* p.27

So, all in all, taking a path that led to Oxford, one that would not at first sight have appeared obvious, made all the difference to Schoffeleers' intellectual development and future scholarly pursuits. For a student with interest in religion and folklore, Schoffeleers had unwittingly come to the right place.

*When did Schoffeleers arrive at Oxford?*

It is not clear exactly when in the autumn of 1964 Schoffeleers arrived at Oxford. Possibly during late September or, at the very latest, the first week of October. But what is certain is that he arrived at Oxford with only a contact name, hoping to embark upon an Oxford course immediately, without a prior formal application to the Institute, the College or the University. In fact, entry selections for the 1964-65 academic year had been decided many months before – and, in the majority of cases, by January 1964. But he had obviously consulted about entry, perhaps in letters to Evans-Pritchard or by an earlier flying visit to England. For when the possibility reared itself – after positive reaction from Evans-Pritchard, that the Institute would consider him - he asked his Bishop for a sponsorship letter both for a student visa and for a financial guarantee. However, he had only the vaguest idea as to how one enters Oxford. For it's clear that neither Schoffeleers nor the Archbishop of Blantyre knew where or how to apply; the sponsorship Letter from the Archdiocese to Oxford being addressed: 'To Whom It May Concern.'

The Letter which was prepared by the Archbishop of Blantyre is dated 22 September 1964. It notifies "*(To) Whom It May Concern*" that "*with the approval of the Archbishop, he will attend lectures at Oxford University and so be engaged in full-time studies for two years. The Archdiocese assumes the responsibility of his maintenance and eventual repatriation through Church funds*".<sup>5</sup>

The Letter seemed to have been rushed to the British High Commission (Passport Office) which in 1964 was located in Blantyre, a short distance from the Archbishop's Palace; for the British consular date-stamp on the letter approving and clearing Schoffeleers for a student visa into U.K. is also dated 22 September 1964. It is highly probable that Schoffeleers took the letter to the High Commission together with his passport in person before flying out to his family in Holland en route to Oxford to seek his fortune.<sup>6</sup>

But the letter was also meant to satisfy the 'University' Admissions Office. It suggests that the writer was unfamiliar with either the Collegiate structure of the University or the College route for admission into the University. Schoffeleers himself had no idea that he needed to belong to a College first and therefore doesn't seem to have contacted any College to test the waters before his arrival.

At Oxford, in the last week of September or the first week of October, the first person he ran into at the Institute was '*the great man himself*', Evans-Pritchard, whom Schoffeleers describes as '*a very old, very shabby gentleman...but he was also the most amusing person in the anthropology department. It is customary at Oxford that every person has an academic tutor. Mine was Rodney Needham, the structuralist who studied in Leiden for some years after the war. He knew Dutch and they thought, well, he should take me.*'<sup>7</sup>

Needham, one of the Dutch speakers on the staff of the Institute and a Fellow of Merton College founded in 1264 thus took him under his wing. Although a Merton College Fellow, Needham thought Alan Bullock, the Master of St Catherine's

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<sup>5</sup> St Catherine's College Record Extract in St Catz to Louis Nthenda Email Aug17,2011.

<sup>6</sup> Meyer Reis, *ibid.* p.26. Schoffeleers mentions this route without indicating the passage of time.

<sup>7</sup> Meyer Reis, *ibid.* p.26;

College, the newest College, raised to the status of a College just a year before in 1963, and a friend of his, would be the most likely person to consider Schoffeleers sympathetically and to take him at this late date without looking up old rules and deferring to 700-year traditions and precedents. Fortunately, Schoffeleers has recreated this meeting for us. Needham took Schoffeleers to be interviewed for admission and Schoffeleers recounts:

*“First of all I had to become a member of a college. Every college is a little university in its own and St Catherine’s was the youngest but very prestigious. Rodney Needham was a friend of the master of St Catherine’s and spoke to him and I had to present myself. And this master said:*

*‘Do you know that here are hundreds and hundreds of people knocking at the doors, why should I allow him in?’*

*“And Rodney (Needham) answered:*

*‘You’ve got everything: you’ve got Chinese, you’ve got Japanese, you’ve got monks from Tibet. So why not a Catholic priest, why not a missionary?’*

*So I went in, and that was that.”<sup>8</sup>*

The actual date of this interview is not recorded; but it’s most likely October 12, 1964; for it is on that date that he filled in his application form for admission to St Catherine’s. And it was important that he be admitted almost instantly, for matriculation ceremonies for University membership were already under way.<sup>9</sup>

He attached, to the Form, the Archbishop’s sponsorship Letter to confirm his financial standing and his visa status. To the question on the Form: ‘Give two referees familiar with your academic work’; he gave only one name, that of the Archbishop of Blantyre; none of his teachers from the Lovanium University in the Congo, not even Fr Theuws whose introduction had enabled him to reach Oxford, were mentioned. The space for the second referee he left blank. The process of Schoffeleers’ admission into Oxford was remarkable for its singular informality.

We know he had already found accommodation by this date for he was able to give an Oxford address as his present residence.

He did not anglicise his names on the application form. He put down his name as The Rev. Jan Mathys Schoffeleers, spelling his middle name with a single *t* and a *y*. Needham, his academic tutor and later Supervisor during all the four years of his studies at Oxford, always referred to him in reports as Fr Schoffeleers.

#### *Who financed his studies?*

Without access to Diocesan records, it is not clear how much the financial guarantee from ‘Church funds’ was worth. He had had no help from Church or Society funds while studying in the Congo. In an interview with Meyer and Reis in 2004, he said, for his studies in the Congo, he had supported himself by baby-sitting during term, and, during holidays in Holland by speeches and showing picture slides he had taken of Africa. Savings from these were enough to get him through his University year in Kinshasa.<sup>10</sup>

But such sources could not be enough to maintain him in England. So he must have lived frugally in the Dutch manner on a very tight budget with the ‘Church funds.’

The Archbishop’s Letter seems designed more to satisfy formal regulations. If funds came, they went to pay for his College and University tuition fees plus possibly

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<sup>8</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>9</sup> All extracts from Application Form are from St Catz *College Record* in St Catz to LN.

<sup>10</sup> Meyer Reis, *ibid.* p.26

his rent. The amount of work involved in producing weekly essays would not have permitted similar methods he had used in the Congo to supplement such income: earning money from baby-sitting and from giving speeches on missions in Africa would have been too disruptive. He would have been too busy attending lectures and seminars during term for him to divert his time in this way. After completing his Diploma and proving his intellectual worth, and after embarking on his second year to start on his BLitt thesis, Needham was able to get him a Morris Motors Fellowship which would be quite substantial.<sup>11</sup> Whether this amounted to double funding will only be known when Diocesan records are available. But this freed him from financial worries and enabled him to concentrate on his BLitt thesis writing. The scholarship may have been renewed when he returned to Malawi to collect more material for his doctorate as we shall see later. Nevertheless, his income and outgoings must wait a further and more leisurely investigation.

*Where did he live when he was at Oxford?*

On his October 12, 1964 application form for admission to St Catherine's College, in the space: 'Present address', he entered: '23, Park Town, Oxford', a residential area in North Oxford, a convenient address as it was within 10 to 15 minutes' walking distance both to St Catherine's and to the Institute. It was in the better part of Oxford as residential areas go, with small leafy parks and away from noisy traffic. He would have been surrounded for neighbours entirely by an academic community of married and unmarried dons, and well-to-do graduate and undergraduate students who could afford to pay higher rents; all gown here, no sight of town.



**23, Park Town: Schoffeleers' Oxford residence.  
Photo courtesy of Mrs. Sheila Minton, Chipping Norton.**

*How long did he live in Oxford?*

Oxford did not offer courses in Anthropology to undergraduate students. The Institute recruited students who had already graduated in such subjects as English Literature, Philosophy, Politics, Economics, Geography, Botany, Zoology, Physics and even Medicine. In this way, the Anthropology course was unique and its' three step structure practically inflexible. Schoffeleers, a graduate of a Dutch Seminary and

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<sup>11</sup> Meyer & Reis *ibid.*p.29

a mature student of 36 with field experience, would have to have the status of a postgraduate student. A good many of his classmates would be newly minted graduates, 22 years old, and a smaller number would be in mid-to-late twenties; most perhaps with overseas experience, connections or desire for foreign adventure. Moreover, there would be a significant international student component from many cultures around the world.<sup>12</sup>

Everyone registered initially for a one-year Diploma in Social Anthropology based on lectures and seminars on theories and methodologies, fieldwork training and weekly essays and ending in written examinations. Then followed the thesis-only BLitt degree: usually a two-year degree involving library / archival research and / or field-work and thesis plus an oral examination but no regular essays as in the Diploma and no written examinations at the end. This degree could be telescoped into one year. After the BLitt degree, a student could then proceed to the research and thesis-only DPhil degree which could take two to three years; and like the BLitt it did not require attendance at lectures, or submitting homework in the form of essays, or writing examinations at the end.

It may be instructive at this point to digress and explain how a degree called ‘Bachelor’ could be taken to be a higher research degree.

The styling of degrees at Oxford in Schoffeleers’ time, seemingly eccentric, was simplicity itself.

A first tier degree in the University in any subject in the Humanities, Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, Divinity, Law, etc was styled B.A. (Bachelor of Arts) after 2, 3, or 4 years of study as the case might be.

Any other ‘bachelor’ that was not Bachelor of *Arts*, was a second tier postgraduate higher degree involving 1 or 2 years of study. So, postgraduate students studying for their second tier qualifications could opt for:

1. Attendance at lectures, essays / lab experiments, written examinations and short dissertations in order to gain the BPhil, BSc, BCL, BMus., BD, BM, etc., all bachelor of this and bachelor of that; all postgraduate degrees equivalent at other Universities to MPhil, MSc, LLM, MMus., MTh, etc. Or

2. Research (archival, library, fieldwork), thesis and oral examination to gain the BLitt. This degree was for students deemed sufficiently conversant in their field with theory, practice and methodology and who didn’t need any further lectures or essay practice and were ready for independent but supervised research. This too was of 1 or 2 years’ duration.

In the Oxford Social Anthropology’s three-step structure, the common preparation for the BLitt for all students from their different disciplines was the one-year Diploma in Social Anthropology and every beginning student was entered for this.

Then came the third tier, that of the DPhil. This was a relatively recent qualification, having been introduced into Oxford in July 1917 from Germany. It was a direct German copy in its universality (DPhil in any subject from Humanities to Zoology to Medicine); in its structure (by research, thesis and oral defence); and in its styling, (DPhil instead of PhD)\*.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

\**Editors’ Note.* Lovers of trivia may be interested to know that a Committee which led to the establishment of the D.Phil was set up by the University in December 1915. By the summer of 1917 the statutes establishing the new degree were enacted and, on December 10, 1917, the University registered its first ever DPhil student, Lakshman Sarup, from the Indian subcontinent, (**continued bottom p.14**).

Before the introduction of the DPhil, Oxford had only the senior degrees of DLitt, DSc, DCL, DM, DD.

The Oxford of Schoffeleers' time had only one Master's degree, the MA, which had nothing to do with actual higher studies but was conferred on Oxford BA graduates of a certain standing, or on Cambridge or Trinity College Dublin BA graduates of equivalent standing when they moved to Oxford, or on graduates from all other Universities when appointed to University teaching posts at Oxford, or as a degree *honoris causa*. This MA was a relic of Oxford's Medieval European origins. Master's degrees common at other Universities such as MSc., MLitt., MMus., MPhil., or the MA awarded on the basis of higher study, did not exist and hadn't existed in the then Oxford's 800 years or so of its history.

Recently, however, the BLitt has been restyled MLitt. If Schoffeleers were still living, he would have been allowed to switch and restyle himself MLitt.<sup>13</sup>

In Schoffeleers' time, Oxford had minimum *residential* requirement of 2 years for any degree. In his case, he could, and did, count the one year Diploma towards fulfilment of this residential requirement for his one-year BLitt and later for his DPhil degree. He embarked on his Diploma course October 1964 and wrote the examinations in June 1965. It had been a very intensive course, writing one essay a week, meeting Needham every Friday afternoon to read and discuss it and continuing the discussion afterwards over a beer likely at a pub closest to Merton. And every Friday, Needham would set him a new essay with suggested readings for the following week.<sup>14</sup>

The Oxford Year was, for residential requirements, three Terms of 8 weeks each. Schoffeleers thus wrote 24 essays for Needham before his June examination on the main themes of Anthropology.<sup>15</sup> Besides, he would attend lectures and seminars at the Institute; and after seminars, which were usually at the end of the day, the participating staff and students would retire to the pub nearest to the Institute, the Gardeners' Arms in North Parade, to continue the discussion over beers before breaking up at 7 pm to go for dinner in their respective Colleges. Schoffeleers told Terence Ranger that it was in these post-seminar discussions in the Gardeners' Arms over drinks that he received his true education.<sup>16</sup>

He returned to Malawi in the summer holidays to do some more fieldwork and returned for the term beginning October 1965 to embark on his BLitt degree. He felt he had had enough field material and was confident that he could complete the thesis in one year instead of two.

The BLitt itself had a three-step structure. A student was first accepted on a trial basis and was registered as Probationer BLitt student. After proving to the Faculty Board through his Supervisor that he had enough material and sufficient research training for a creditable thesis and was ready to start writing up, he could apply to transfer to Full BLitt status. After completing writing up, he could then apply to be examined.

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<sup>13</sup> St Catz Alumni Relations Office, *Email Jul. 1 2011*, to Louis Nthenda,

<sup>14</sup> Meyer Reis, *ibid.* p.27

<sup>15</sup> Loc.cit.

<sup>16</sup> Terence Ranger, *You haven't known me* in SoMJ Schoffeleers Tribute Dec. 2011 below.

**\*Editors' Note continued:** who was then at Balliol College working on his BLitt. Sarup presumably abandoned his BLitt and instead developed his thesis on Sanskrit philology to meet the standards of the new degree. He successfully presented his thesis in June 1919, thus becoming the first Oxford DPhil on record. He subsequently went on to a distinguished career as Professor of Sanskrit at the University of the Punjab. (Michelle Conway of Oxford University Archives drew my attention to Renate Simpson, *How the PhD Came to Britain 1917-1959*, SRHE 1983, for this piece of trivia).

Schoffeleers registered as Probationer BLitt student in October 1965. In December 1965, he transferred to Full BLitt status. Within a further 5 months, in May 1966, he had finished writing up and he applied to be examined. This is an oral examination on a thesis and no written work is involved. Meyer and Reis refer to his Examination thus: *'In June 1966 he graduated with a literary (sic, written?) examination on anthropological theory and an oral examination on his thesis.'*<sup>17</sup> The first part of this sentence is incorrect. Schoffeleers had already covered anthropological theory during his Diploma course 1964-65. The Oxford BLitt degree was by thesis and oral defence only. If questions of theory arose, these were dealt with as part of the oral defence.

Again in the summer of 1966, Schoffeleers returned to Malawi. Although he had successfully defended his thesis in June, the Examiners' Report required Faculty Board approval and this meeting would come in the first term of the following academic year, October 1966. So he had to return to Oxford firstly to hear confirmation of the results of his examination and attend the ceremony for the conferment of his BLitt degree and secondly to apply for registration for the doctorate.

Upon registration, he immediately proceeded to obtain permission to leave Oxford to return to Malawi for field-work. As he had fulfilled the 2-year Oxford residence rule, permission was immediately granted and he returned to Malawi sometime in November 1966. This effectively marks the end of Schoffeleers' residence at Oxford. He stayed on in Malawi throughout the whole calendar year of 1967 and most of 1968, returning to Oxford for the Term beginning October 1968 to put final touches to his thesis, to consult and discuss with Needham, and to present it and be examined.

So although his Oxford student career spans October 1964 to December 1968, - 4 academic years and one term, 13 Terms in all – he was resident at Oxford only for 8 terms out of the 13: (2 academic years October to June 1964-65 and 1965-66, plus October to December Term 1966 and October to December Term 1968.<sup>18</sup>) The work on his DPhil thesis - further fieldwork and most of the writing up - was done entirely in Malawi, on leave of absence from Oxford, and was closely monitored by Needham during the two years January 1967 to September 1968.

*What kind of student was he?*

Wim van Binsbergen in his inimitable Obituary has correctly pointed out that Matthew Schoffeleers completed his three-step qualifications in Anthropology at Oxford in record time: One year (3 Terms) for the Diploma in Anthropology (standard); 1 year (3 terms: minimum time allowable) for the BLitt (now styled MLitt) instead of the normal 2 years for most students; 2 years (6 terms: minimum time allowable) for the DPhil. According to the counting in the previous paragraph, this should read: 3 Terms for the Diploma; 3 Terms for the BLitt. and 7 Terms for the DPhil.

#### *The Diploma in Social Anthropology*

Upon his matriculation in mid-October 1964, he could start attending lectures at the Institute and anywhere else in the University. But first his College would assign him his moral tutor who happened to be Francis Huxley of St Catherine's and the Institute.

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<sup>17</sup> Meyer Reis, *ibid.* p.29

<sup>18</sup> Oxford calls its three terms respectively Michaelmas, Hilary and Trinity. These names are omitted throughout this essay for the sake of simplicity.

Circumstances had already decreed that Needham would be his academic tutor. Schoffeleers mentions attending lectures at the Institute by, among others, Evans-Pritchard, Godfrey Lienhardt and John Beattie.<sup>19</sup> But of course he could attend and must have attended other lectures and seminars given at other Colleges or elsewhere in the University. We have his own account that he submitted 24 weekly essays to Needham during his Diploma Year. And Needham's composite Term Reports on these have survived. Needham had to report his charges to their respective Colleges. On November 21, 1964, he reported to St Catherine's about their missionary student after reading the initial 4 or 5 weekly essays with satisfaction:

*'Fr. Schoffeleers has been working very industriously and with considerable intellectual excitement in social anthropology, which, as it is taught here, is a new and intriguing subject even for a man of his educational background. He writes thorough and reflective essays and in every respect is making gratifying progress.'*<sup>20</sup>

By the following term, on March 1, 1965 Needham notes *'Fr. Schoffeleers' ... admirable energy and discipline. His essays have been clear and thoroughly prepared, and he shows a commendable grasp of the subject.*<sup>21</sup> And the last Report to St Catherine's in June, just before the written examinations must have induced in both his academic tutor and Alan Bullock, the College Master, who had taken a gamble in admitting a Dutch missionary priest after the admissions exercise had closed, self-congratulation. *'Fr. Schoffeleers,'* Needham wrote, *'has been working with his characteristic assiduity and effectiveness. I have no doubt that he will do well in the examination for the Diploma in Social Anthropology.'*<sup>22</sup>

He wrote the Examinations in June and the Pass List with his name on it came out in July.

### *The BLitt*

Schoffeleers was determined to complete this within one year. That he could do it can be explained by the fact that he had already done a great deal of the fieldwork required for the BLitt *before* coming to Oxford, thus doing away with one year's leave of absence for fieldwork normal with the standard 2-year degree. Thus on 18 Nov 1965, barely a month after he had been accepted as student on Probation for the research degree of BLitt, his Supervisor wrote in his periodic report to the Faculty Board of Anthropology and Geography to support Schoffeleers' application for change of status to Full BLitt in a single Term. *'Fr. Schoffeleers,'* Needham reported, *'has been applying himself with his usual diligence and seriousness. He has material for a thesis of considerable interest and can be entirely relied upon to make the most of it.'*<sup>23</sup>

The application for change of status to Full BLitt required the student to submit for approval a thesis title and abstract and prove to his Supervisor that he has enough material and is ready to start writing chapters.

Towards the end of the Second Term the thesis had already taken shape and Needham was able to report to the Faculty Board on March 5, 1966 on the basis of the finished chapters he had read:

*'Fr. Schoffeleers has been making excellent progress with the writing of his thesis. The ethnographic material, for much of which he is himself responsible, is full and*

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<sup>19</sup> Meyer Reis *ibid.* p.27

<sup>20</sup> St Catherine's *College Record, Personnel*, Reports to the College Board. Dates as given in the text.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Reports on BLitt / DPhil are extracts from Minutes of Faculty Board of Anthropology and Geography, (FBAG), dates as in text. Source: St Catz College Record, Personnel.

*reliable, and his exposition is clear and persuasive. He is working hard, and should have the work ready for submission by the first meeting of next term.*<sup>24</sup>

By the middle of the Third Term, the thesis was completed and Needham too was satisfied with it. It came time to request the Board to appoint Examiners. So on May 26, 1966 Needham wrote in support of such application:

*'Fr. Schoffeleers has completed his quite admirable thesis, on which he is now to be examined. He has worked clearly very hard indeed, with method and imagination. His argument is clear, the ethnographic data abundant and detailed, and the English splendidly clear and faultless. There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that it amply deserves the degree of B.Litt., and in many respects indeed it is of doctoral quality (my emphasis). He has not made nearly enough demands on me to justify the payment of a supervision fee or to compensate for the pleasure received in reading his work.'*<sup>25</sup>

Schoffeleers was a student at St Catherine's and Needham was University Lecturer and Fellow at Merton, meaning that Schoffeleers was 'farmed' out to be supervised by a member of a different College who therefore received a supervision fee from the student's College. The supervision fee that exchanged hands in this way amounted to GBP£8 per term in the 1960's.<sup>26</sup> It is not clear from Needham's Report whether he actually waived this fee or he is writing here jocularly and metaphorically. This writer's Supervisor, Sir Norman D. Chester, Warden of Nuffield College, about the same period but for reasons different from Needham's, actually waived his fee from St Antony's and supervised him for free. So this behaviour though unusual was obviously not unique and must at least have been much joked about in Supervisors' circles.

Schoffeleers had his *viva voce*, as the oral examination was called, for the BLitt on June 27, before two Examiners: Professor E. E. Evans-Pritchard as Internal Examiner and Professor V.W. Turner of University of Chicago as External Examiner who reported to the Faculty Board favourably thus:

*'The candidate's thesis ... makes fruitful comparisons between Mang'anja and some Shona and Christian cults.*

*'The Examiners agree that the candidate's study is of high quality, both as regards its anthropological sophistication and its scholarly competence and probity. It combines a mastery of the available data with sharp insight into the crucial problems posed by them. We strongly recommend the award of the B.Litt. to the candidate.'*<sup>27</sup>

Soon after his oral, Schoffeleers left for Malawi.

The Examiners' Report would have to wait for the first Faculty Board meeting of the new 1966-67 Term for approval. This took place on October 20 1966 and the degree of BLitt was conferred on him the following month at the ceremony of November 26 1966.

### *The DPhil*

That First Term of the 1966-67 academic year was very hectic for Schoffeleers. He needed to have his BLitt pass confirmed. This was done on October 20. Upon which he immediately submitted a thesis title and abstract for approval of registration for the doctorate. Acceptance and approval of DPhil registration came on

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<sup>24</sup> FBAG Minutes

<sup>25</sup> FBAG, *ibid*

<sup>26</sup> Common lore at the time

<sup>27</sup> Oxford University Archives (OUA) File: FA4/2/3/1 Bodleian Library

October 22. The registration came with permission he additionally requested for him to leave Oxford to return to Malawi to continue his fieldwork. He stayed on in Oxford that Term though to attend the degree ceremony for his BLitt on November 26. He must have left Oxford immediately after that date, for Needham's Report to the Faculty Board of December 12 has Schoffeleers already writing from Malawi. And for the next 2 years, all Needham's Reports place Schoffeleers in Malawi.

Needham writes in his last Progress Report of the Term, on December 12, 1966:

*'Fr. Schoffeleers is back in Malawi, and living only a short distance from the shrine of Mbona, on whom he wrote his excellent B.Litt. thesis. He has re-established himself among the people, and is taking up his investigations again with his customary enthusiasm and energy.'*<sup>28</sup>

Then on February 20<sup>th</sup> 1967 well into the Second Term, we are treated to Schoffeleers' kind of diligence that matched his huge frame and his prodigious appetite for data:

*'Fr. Schoffeleers writes encouragingly from Malawi. He has collected some 600pp. of material, and is in constant contact with sources of additional information. His superiors have required him to lecture in their seminary on African history and on Malawi religion, but these duties, although they distract him from field investigation, are proving valuable to him in other ways. He finds that his enquiries amply confirm the evidence and ideas in his B.Litt thesis, and is working with increasing enthusiasm and satisfaction.'*<sup>29</sup>

In research, a surfeit of information can get in the way of relevance and tight reasoning. For an Oxford DPhil thesis, the rubrics required a length of some 100,000 words, around 350 pages. To write a successful thesis therefore Schoffeleers would have to jettison about 40% of his data by getting straight to the heart of his material and not be distracted by side issues. This required intellectual discipline and an eye for purposeful and relevant arguments. Sifting through and reducing 600pp of field material to find the gems within were formidable and would tax his intellect to the extreme. If he succeeded, it would form good training ground for excellence, for brooking no nonsense or 'loose talk', for going straight to the heart of the matter in all his other intellectual pursuits. It would also leave plenty more for future seminal articles for academic Journals.

Needham who had watched over and mentored Schoffeleers was not an easy man to satisfy. The Daily Telegraph's Obituary of Rodney Needham (1923-2006) includes this paragraph:

*'Needham's extraordinary diligence in getting the facts right, his rigour in analysing them and his powers of demolishing slovenly and inaccurate thinking were also qualities that were appreciated (or at least feared) by his professional colleagues, and were a model for his students.'*<sup>30</sup>

The Times Obituary had this to say:

*'Needham was both ruthlessly challenging and completely supportive of his students, whom he taught to be critical of assumed dogma and of the academy itself. To be a scholar was for Needham not only an attitude of mind, but a true privilege. His pursuit of unanswered questions brooked no obstructions and often led him to embrace the very things others found most unsettling.'*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> FBAG Minutes

<sup>29</sup> ibid

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1536732/Rodney-Needham.html>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article1403456.ece>

We can assume that some of these qualities would rub onto Schoffeleers; for he had enormous respect for his Supervisor. Needham's Reports show that this respect was mutual. Schoffeleers rose, in diligence and analytical rigour, to the challenge and expectations of his mentor. Needham was much encouraged and impressed by his charge so much so that he recommended the renewal of Schoffeleers' 'research grant'.<sup>32</sup>

Needham didn't name the grant. It is not clear, therefore, from the context whether the 'research grant' refers to the continuation of the initial 2-year scholarship from 'Church funds' which must have ceased after the successful defence of his BLitt in the summer of 1966 and his return to Malawi; or to the Morris Motors Fellowship or to a different fieldwork grant from St Catherine's or the Institute or other source. But the more likely is the Morris Motors Fellowship under which he completed the BLitt.

The two maintain furious correspondence. Needham's Term Reports on Schoffeleers to the Board throughout the year show a punishing pace of a workaholic. 'To judge by his letters,' Needham reports in the summer of 1967, 'he is doing a formidable amount of work'<sup>33</sup>; and six months later he alludes to 'his customary conscientiousness and professional concern.'<sup>34</sup> By March 1968, Schoffeleers has made a breakthrough leading Needham to report that '(Schoffeleers) is preparing draft chapters for his thesis which he is shortly to send me.'<sup>35</sup>

In a further three months, Schoffeleers has reached the home stretch. Needham's final Progress Report of the academic year states: 'Fr. Schoffeleers has continued to work with undiminished energy and has much expanded even his vast knowledge of Mang'anja institutions. He has sent me two long and dense chapters for his thesis; they are excellent.'<sup>36</sup>

The thesis was ready for examination by the end of October which means that he had to have the rest of it written, typed, checked during the three months of the summer holidays and he had it read, discussed and approved by Needham during the opening weeks of October; then get the first Board meeting in October to appoint Examiners while actually still continuing to put final touches to 3 copies of the thesis in the days of mechanical typewriters and carbon paper.

Professor E.E. Evans-Pritchard was again his Internal Examiner. The External Examiner this time was Dr Mary Douglas from University College, London. His *viva voce* examination took place on Tuesday November 26. The Examiners prepared their Report in time for submission to the Faculty Board meeting 2 days later on November 28. The Examiners' Report reads in part:

*'We ... consider that his thesis makes a valuable contribution to the ethnography of the Mang'anja cultures of Southern Malawi. The cult of spirits which had been reported by observers fifty years ago was presumed to have disappeared since post-war anthropologists working in the region have had little to say about it. The rich material on this subject which the candidate's research has uncovered **proves that he has reached a profound level of investigation.** The candidate was well able to stand up for himself in the course of the oral examination. We recommend **without reserve** that his thesis be accepted for the degree of D.Phil.'*<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> FBAG Minutes, Jul. 8, 1967

<sup>33</sup> Loc.cit.

<sup>34</sup> FBAG Minutes, Dec 17, 1967

<sup>35</sup> FBAG Minutes March 3, 1968

<sup>36</sup> FBAG, Minutes, June 13, 1968

<sup>37</sup> OUA File:FA4/2/3/2, Bodleian Library (bold type, my emphasis)

The Faculty Board accepted the Report in time for the conferment of the degrees ceremony due 2 days later on Saturday November 30, 1968,<sup>38</sup> almost exactly 4 years, 2 months and 3 weeks after Schoffeleers' arrival and matriculation at Oxford.

This marked the end of one of the greatest chapters of Schoffeleers' life. Forty years later, when he was well into his 70's, he would tell interviewers, Birgit Meyer and Ria Reis: *'To me Oxford was the greatest experience of how life should and can be. Such an understanding. In those days, all colours were there, black, white, all colours.'*<sup>39</sup>

If we seek to find Oxford's influence on Matthew Schoffeleers, if we try to assess his intellectual nurturing and development at Oxford, then Rodney Needham would be a good starting point. Needham sponsored his admission to St Catherine's and therefore into the University. It was Needham who presided over his studies from the very first Oxford essay Schoffeleers ever wrote in October 1964 to the last chapter and footnotes of his DPhil thesis in October 1968. Needham tutored him for the Diploma. It was Needham who prepared his reading list week after week; deciding the essay topics and therefore directing his attention, by that very act, to what to look for in his readings. It was Needham who listened to his weekly compositions, criticising and advising him on how to present his ideas on the written page. And afterwards, discussions would spill over to the pub and such pub talks would presumably cover matters mundane and metaphysical.

Needham read his BLitt and DPhil theses chapter by chapter until he was satisfied that the theses could pass and Schoffeleers could apply to be examined.

Thus, Needham's influence on Schoffeleers' intellect and *weltungschauung* must have been immense. What this entails regarding the content of that influence and the extent to which Schoffeleers integrated Needham's thought and departed from it and what other Oxford influences he undoubtedly had from rubbing shoulders with the likes of Evans-Pritchard, Godfrey and Peter Lienhardt, John Beattie and Francis Huxley, his fellow students and other scholars in the University at large, is a subject for future researchers. But as an interim, provisional judgement, one is compelled to conclude that, for Matthew Schoffeleers, Oxford meant Needham; Needham meant Oxford.

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**Acknowledgements:** I owe enormous debt to St Catherine's College (St Catz), Oxford, (Schoffeleers' College) and to the Oxford University Archives; to Franca Potts of St Catz Alumni Relations; Nathan Jones of St Catz Communications Office; Jeremy Drew of the Degree Conferrals Office; Anne Petre, Assistant Keeper of Archives at the Bodleian. Nathan and Anne, in particular, supplied the original sources in the form of Schoffeleers' Supervisor's and Examiners' Reports and Extracts from the relevant Minutes of College and Faculty Board Meetings. In response to my inquiries, they searched through 'dusty, undigitised' manuscripts that had lain undisturbed for nearly half a century. In Malawi, my debt goes to Orama Nanthuru who traced people's addresses and alerted them of my impending unsolicited emails. And to David Stuart-Mogg and Professor Colin Baker for asking me to be co-editor, I say: 'Thank you. I have found this task enormously rewarding.' And to the Contributors: 'Well, now that you have paid your tribute to your friend, colleague and mentor and, through this publication, discovered kindred spirits, I hope you will strike new friendships and you will continue to explore intellectual by-ways Schoffeleers left unexplored.' Finally, to Lupenga: 'I could not have wished for a better co-editor. It was an inspired choice.'

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<sup>38</sup> Dates from the University Gazette supplied by O.U. Archives, Bodleian Library.

<sup>39</sup> Meyer Reis, *ibid.* p.28

**“YOU HAVEN’T KNOWN ME IF YOU HAVEN’T HELD THAT THESIS!”**

**Schoffeleers to Meyer & Reis, *Interview*, August 2004**

**Terence O. Ranger, BA, MA, DPhil. Oxon., DLitt. Zimbabwe, FBA.  
Emeritus Professor, St Antony’s College, Oxford.**

*Colleague and friend of Schoffeleers: “Schoffeleers opened my eyes to the possibilities of African religious histories.”*

I first came to know the work of Matthew Schoffeleers when his 1968 Oxford doctoral thesis fell into my hands. In a recent interview he said that no-one had ever read this thesis\* but in fact I for one devoured it. It was exactly what I needed in my pursuit of the historical study of African religion. Out of the blue I wrote to Matthew enthusing about his work. He was naturally pleased. There thus began one of the most fruitful and enjoyable partnerships of my life.

Matthew’s work was academically important to me because his rigorous analysis of the successive phases of the Mbona territorial cult represented the most successful statement of a religious history stretching back over centuries. When I moved from Dar es Salaam to the University of California, Los Angeles in 1969, I was generously funded by the Ford Foundation to organise a series of conferences in East/Central Africa. The first – exploring the possibility of a historical study of African religion - took place in Dar es Salaam in June 1970; the second – examining Christian interactions with African religion - was held at Chilema Lay Training Centre, Malawi, in August 1971; the third – pursuing the history of territorial cults - took place in Lusaka in 1972. Matthew Schoffeleers attended all three and gave papers which later appeared as chapters in books.

His presentation on Mbona was central to the June 1970 Dar es Salaam conference organised by Isaria Kimambo and myself, and to the book which followed in 1972, *The Historical Study of African Religion*, and centrality marked by the fact that the book’s front and back dust jacket is a photo of worshippers at the Mbona shrine. In 1971 Matthew was an animating figure at Chilema and a chapter by him appears in *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa*. In 1978 Matthew himself edited the third volume in the same series: *Guardians of the Land*, a collection of studies of Central African territorial cults based on papers given in Lusaka. Apart from myself he was the only person to attend all three conferences and to have chapters in all three books.

But equally important was Matthew’s friendship. He was a larger than life figure – a cigar-smoking, brandy-drinking priest. In 1970 I shared both cigars and brandy with him on the verandah of his house at Likulezi, his centre for the training of catechists on the slopes of Mlanje mountain. He told me then that his order had spent many years mis-educating him and that his eyes had been opened in the Gardener’s Arms, the pub in North Parade, Oxford, where the anthropologists used to gather after seminars. We listened that night to Matthew’s tapes of the virtuoso female spirit medium, who could be so convincingly possessed by so many identities. I remember to this day my delighted surprise when she was possessed by a District Commissioner and roared out: ‘Boy, where’s my bloody tea!’

Likulezi chapel was one of Matthew’s master works. On one wall were pictures of the life of Christ but on the other there was nothing from the Old Testament – it was covered with scenes from Mang’anja myth. In those optimistic

days he was confident that his catechists would soon become married priests prepared to preach an African Christianity. It is a great pity for the Catholic church in Malawi that these visions were not realised.

Later in 1974, when he was teaching at the University of Malawi, I stayed with him in his house on Zomba mountain, looking out over the plain and the twinkling lights of Mikuyu detention camp, as a reminder of the realities of Banda's regime. I was struck then by how Dutch as well as African Matthew remained. He was a great man for flowers and used to present bouquets to the lady Professor of Geography.\*\*

Later still in 1979 I visited him in Amsterdam to take part in the doctoral examination of his first doctoral student, Wim van Binsbergen. It was my first Dutch examination and I was astonished by its combination of pomp and informality. At the end Matthew presented Wim with ritual objects and then we all embarked on a barge on the canal, with people on its banks applauding Wim in his doctoral robes, to journey to the celebratory feast. It was very different from the dusty anonymity of Matthew's own Oxford doctoral oral.

Matthew was a sensitive man particularly over questions of academic recognition. When I gave the Wiles Lectures in Belfast on 'Witchcraft in the History of Three Continents' in 1978 and invited, as a Wiles lecturer can, six or seven academics as commentators, Matthew was mortified that he was not amongst them. 'Something within me died', he wrote to me. He was mortified too when his collection of essays on African religion, edited with Wim van Binbergen, *Theoretical Explorations in African Religion*, was published in 1985 as Binsbergen and Schoffeleers rather than the other way round, the publisher preferring alphabetical order to seniority. Such responses came from his fear that he would be regarded as still a missionary and not an academic. He did not need to worry. He was a great missionary and a great academic and his essential magnanimity and generosity ensured that he did not harbour resentments for long. I remember him as one of the key figures in my academic and personal life.

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**\*Editors' Note:** This refers to the interview MS gave to Meyer and Reis in August 2004. In answer to their question: "How was your doctoral thesis received?" Schoffeleers answered: "No one read it I think!" Meyer & Reis, 2005 Schoffeleers ETNOFOOR 15-2, p.32. Also loc.cit. for the quotation in the title head.

**\*\*Editors' Note:** Swanzie Lady Agnew of Lochnaw (1916-2000), founding Professor of Geography, University of Malawi (1965-75). She was born Swanzie Erskine in the Transvaal, of Dutch Boer stock on her mother's side (Swanzie=Little Swan in Dutch) and married the itinerant eccentric 10th Baronet of Lochnaw. The Erskines were kinsmen of the Earls of Buchan. Educated at Edinburgh and Montpellier Universities, she once taught Geography at her Scottish alma mater and for many years at Fort Hare. She resigned from the latter in 1960 when the Nationalists took over the Universities. Sir Ian Michael first Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malawi found her working as headmistress of the junior section of a dance school in London and plucked her to become Professor of Geography at the new University. Her husband was appointed the University's Assistant Registrar (1965-67). See obituary in *The Telegraph* of October 12, 2000 at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1369934/Swanzie-Lady-Agnew-of-Lochnaw.html>

## MATTHEW SCHOFFELEERS: MISSIONARY & TEACHER

**Ian Linden, CMG, MA, PhD. Cantab., PhD. Lond. Associate Research Professor,  
Study of Religion, SOAS, University of London, and Director of Policy, Tony  
Blair Faith Foundation.**

*Friend and Colleague of Schoffeleers: “Matthew introduced me to anthropology and taught me the deep importance of the authentic inculturation of Christianity.”*

That I was privileged to meet Matthew Schoffeleers and sit at his feet was something of an accident. The nearest Catholic Church to our house was Limbe Cathedral. It was staffed by Malawian and Montfort Fathers, Matthew’s Religious Order. It was also close to that other major local centre, the International Hotel, where Matthew was certainly not to be found, though I was. The year, 1968.

But had there not been the Montfort connection from the local Church, there would have been from research. Matthew later came to lecture in anthropology at Chancellor College where I was teaching biochemistry. The comparison was definitely “odious”: he was a brilliant teacher. I soon got interested in the history of the Catholic missions and their approaches to Malawian culture, and that brought me like a magnet into Matthew’s orbit. The problem was that, as an academic, I was trained as a developmental biologist accustomed to electron microscopes in New York, not the rudimentary laboratories of Chancellor College, as the University of Malawi was in those days. It was my wife who was the historian.

Matthew was a born teacher. He loved talking anthropology. You learnt from him even in the most social and informal of contexts. I suppose the best way to describe it was that, uninvited, I apprenticed myself to him. It was far from clear that he was pleased with this arrangement, but he enjoyed having an avid pupil who ‘hoovered up’ Evans-Pritchard, Rodney Needham, Victor Turner and large helpings of British structuralism, imagining himself, in blissful ignorance, to be privy to the brilliant originality of this remarkable priest from Limbourg, clearly a new Thomas Aquinas.

Well, I was only 28, knew more about chromosomes than *communitas*, and loved to listen as Matthew pulled sparkling ideas out of a hat like a circus magician, some were his own, others from an august lineage of Oxford and Cambridge anthropologists. I found myself under his influence particularly taken with the struggle to find historical content in the stories transmitted in oral history, trotting round Mua villages talking to informants who had supplied the content of *Mbiri ya Achewa*; there was the sheer thrill of the intellectual hunt, led by an experienced huntsman. I remember sharing with him a momentary *eureka* moment as he pointed out the extraordinary similarity between Nyau masks and European cave paintings of animals.

Apart from M’Bona, perhaps his best insights were how rain shrines worked, what was their theological content, and that of the *Nyau* societies and masks. I remember the lovely story of Matthew correcting a shrine priest who had built a square shrine, instructing him sternly to rebuild it, as it should be: round. Then a few hours later the indomitable White Father, Roger Saffroy, pitching up and hissing to the shrine priest: “burn it down”. Well, that was Matthew’s version. I was never very convinced by his “one legged” God theories of bodily asymmetry, despite trying, but these were the days when the facts had to fit the theories.

It was also the time after the Second Vatican Council when everything seemed to be moving. Matthew was teaching at Nguludi Seminary and soon had a coterie of clever young Malawian Catholics who were absorbing his passionate interest in inculturation and his almost obsession with unravelling the mysteries of the M'Bona cult. The Lower Shire Valley for me, on free verbal association, would always elicit the word Schoffeleers followed by M'Bona. But, of course, even as a rich Malawian Catholicism was being born, counter-forces were conspiring to make sure it did not stray too far from an Italianate model.

He was absolutely clear that the Catechetical Training Centre in Likulezi that he led from 1970-1971 was preparing a new married Catholic clergy imbued with an inculturated faith. But Rome was throwing on the brakes and going into reverse. No married clergy and strict limits to inculturation. His priesthood and his anthropology were not going to be allowed to form an integrated whole. I cannot remember him expressing bitterness about this, but I cannot remember ever talking much about theology or the Church with him. For a Catholic, his faith was strangely private. Like many priests I sensed a hidden disappointment and de-centring as the Church he clearly wanted to see in Africa encountered roadblock after roadblock.

I interpreted his hypersensitivity at times as the product of this tension forced on him by combining the identities of priest, missionary and academic anthropologist. But at other times he could be the most relaxed and congenial of companions. I have a clear picture of him drawing on a paper napkin at a dinner the rather complex *liaisons dangereuses* of university staff like some branching kinship network, giving throaty chuckles all the while. Dutchmen often sound to me as if they smoke a prodigious number of cigars even when they don't smoke at all. He had a very Flemish, cigarish laugh. Humble prudish village curate he was not.

It would be hard to find a more impressive, pioneering and dedicated study of a country's pre-Christian religion and culture than that achieved by Matthew. His *Guardians of the Land* gives some glimpse into the richness of the Malawian culture that for decades he mined. But he also wrote painstakingly about Catholicism and the colonial and independence politics of Malawi. As a teacher, he has left an indelible intellectual mark on a generation of Malawians and not only Malawians

Like all true missionaries finally going back to their home country can represent a profound personal loss. I suspect his academic work in Netherlands mitigated this but loss there has to have been. We last met in London a few years before he died and he seemed sad and subdued. I often think that the sanctification of the human intellect, the action of Grace on Reason, is the most difficult, opaque dimension of Christian spirituality. Matthew was not helped by his Church in this struggle. He had, I suspect, to go it alone with very little *communitas*. I am so grateful he opened up the jewel box of religious anthropology for so many to get a glimpse. We will remember him as a teacher. May he rest in peace that integrity of mission and intellect so long denied is at last restored.

## MATTHEW SCHOFFELEERS: 'THE WHITE MAN WHO LAUGHED LIKE A NATIVE'

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**Professor of Rural Sociology, University of Malawi and Director of the**  
**Centre for Social Research.**

*Former Student of Fr. Schoffeleers.*

### **Introduction**

Dr Matthew Schoffeleers joined Chancellor College as a Senior Lecturer in Sociology in 1971, the same year I entered the college as an undergraduate student in the general degree programme intending to specialize in the social sciences. I never got to meet him until the 1973/74 academic year when the three university colleges then in Blantyre, that is, Chancellor College (at Chichiri), Soche Hill College (at Soche) and the Institute of Public Administration (at Mpemba) moved to Zomba to form the new Chancellor College. I was then in my third year of undergraduate studies and opted to major in Sociology with public administration as a minor. Dr Matthew Schoffeleers was a regular participant at staff and student seminars. It was during these seminars that I came to know that the pipe-smoking, rather hefty gentleman with a booming voice and a penchant for high sounding words was a Senior Lecturer in Sociology and also a Catholic priest. There was also a rumour that this Catholic priest had incurred the wrath of the Pope in Rome by getting himself initiated into *gule wamkulu*, the Chewa secret society. Why the leaders of *gule wamkulu* allowed a white missionary to be admitted into the secret society and the priest's motivation for joining were the subject of debate among students. These questions were to be answered later when I took two courses taught by him in the 1974/75 academic year.

### **Learning anthropology under Dr Schoffeleers**

In my final year of undergraduate studies I enrolled for two half courses that were taught by Dr Schoffeleers: Sociology of Religion and Economic Anthropology. I reluctantly took the Sociology of Religion course and could have opted for another course if the choices for a Sociology major had been wider. I feared that the Catholic priest-cum-lecturer would use the course to proselytize and try to save our souls from eternal damnation. I was relieved that nothing of the sort happened. His analysis of religions was entirely objective. Under his guidance we were able to analyse religions, including traditional religions, in terms of their origins, structure and social function. It was in the Sociology of Religion that I became aware that the Chewa *gule wamkulu*, much maligned by Christian missionaries, and into which he had been initiated embodied religious elements. Those of us who had been brought up to believe *gule wamkulu* was heathen began to see it in a new light: there was more to *gule wamkulu* than masks, drumming and dancing.

It was remarkable to me that a white Catholic missionary chose to accept *gule wamkulu* for what it was and what it meant to its practitioners rather than condemning it. We were later to learn that he had joined the secret society in order to experience and learn what *gule wamkulu* meant to its practitioners.\* The insights that he gained through participant observation could not have been gained otherwise. The Catholic priest-cum-scholar apparently did not see any contradiction between being an

accredited member of *gule wamkulu* and his priestly role. Although he never said it, it is possible that he might have concluded that the Chauta of the Chewa celebrated in *gule wamkulu* and his Christian God were not competing entities.

Dr Schoffeleers' lectures are memorable to me and my classmates for the laughter that characterized them. During one class one of my classmates said something that we all thought was funny. Dr Schoffeleers laughed so much prompting one of our female classmates to exclaim: 'taonani mzungu waseka chi native!'<sup>1</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Dr Schoffeleers' favourite admonition to us as young sociologists was to look behind the obvious to find the hidden reality and never to impose our own interpretation of reality on social situations. This admonition, reinforced later by my Sociology professors at Hull University in the United Kingdom, guides me in my own research. My interest in Anthropology, which I had previously associated with colonialism, can be attributed to my encounter with Dr Schoffeleers.

### **\*Editors' Note:**

Schoffeleers did not hide the fact that he had been initiated into the *gule wamkulu* secret society. The Chancellor College students in this account believed that this secret society was *gule wamkulu* of the Chewa of the Central Region. This is incorrect. Schoffeleers was initiated into the *gule wamkulu* (then commonly called *Nyau*) of the Mang'anja of the Lower Shire Valley. His curiosity had been aroused after he had run up against members of the secret society. For Catholics, membership of such societies led to excommunication. Here I will let Schoffeleers speak for himself on how he came to be initiated into the *gule wamkulu* of the Mang'anja of the Lower Shire Valley and why.

First why: 'I had two clashes with them. The first one was over a little school I set up in the village one day. The next day it was burned down. And it was the work of the (*Nyau*) society. The second clash I had over an old lady who had come to me for baptism. I baptized her. She died, and she had a Christian burial. And I thought 'how beautiful, people come and see how an old person is being buried in the Christian way, full of honour.' Then I went home and the following night she was secretly taken out of the grave and buried somewhere else by the *Nyau* society.... through that I learnt a lot. From then on it was: 'If you can't beat them, join them.'

Then how: "I had befriended a village headman in the area who was a *Nyau* member and a Catholic as well. He had a son who worked for me as an informant. We decided that we should be initiated together. His father was, as it were, my guardian who proposed my name to these people. But first there were objections. Why? Because I was going to betray their secrets. I said: "Not at all, because I know most of your secrets already." "Oooh?! Where did you find them?" I said: "In the National Archives, it is full of your stuff." Because there were so many conflicts between the missions and the *Nyau*, the District Commissioners had to intervene and they were always on the side of the *Nyau* against the missions. "I know so much, ask me and I will tell you. So it is not a question of getting much more knowledge, but a question of trying to talk together and see what you can learn from me and what I can learn from you. Because I can tell you quite a few things that you will be glad to hear." Well, we were initiated and I got a *Nyau* name....Chakulakale. Cha is a prefix, Kula is to grow, Kale, long ago. All *Nyau* names start with 'cha', and that is neither 'human', nor 'animal'. It is the spirit prefix. Thus Chakulakale means, this spirit here was already an adult before he came here in the *Nyau*. So I signed my letters with Chakulakale.'

Schoffeleers was able to find common ground between traditional religious beliefs and Christianity. He convinced his Bishop not to fear *gule wamkulu*. He became a real game-changer when he finally brought the Bishop to the *gule wamkulu*; not the *gule wamkulu* to the Bishop! This was head-spinning stuff.

Source: Meyer Reis, Schoffeleers 2005 ETNOFOOR, 15-2, p.30

The headman's name in this account was M'Bande and that of his son, Schoffeleers' initiate brother, was Stephen. (Professor Elias Mandala in a Private communication to Dr Louis Nthenda.)

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<sup>1</sup> Translated loosely as 'Look, the white man has laughed like an African!'

## LAND OF FIRE: REFLECTIONS ON A LEARNING CURVE

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*Schoffeleers' colleague at Chancellor College and co-author: "By teaching me the extraordinary complexities of oral literature, its functions and forms, Matthew also taught me to reconceptualise my view of literature as a whole."*

If Malawi soon after independence was materially poor, expatriate academics arriving to work there found the country intellectually stimulating and culturally wealthy. Their local colleagues must have felt like Europeans immediately after the French Revolution. Freedom had produced innovative thinking and an eruption of optimism about new horizons and new grammars of national life. Though a few political clouds were visible over the Shire Highlands, the nation's buoyancy looked set to delay any swift descent into postcolonial disenchantment.\*

Free Malawi wanted a university. And, as earlier with Ibadan, Ife, Makerere, Khartoum, Dar es Salaam and Nairobi, foreign governments rushed to assist with finance and personnel. At the new university's colleges in Blantyre, Lilongwe and Zomba a vibrant community of local and expatriate scholars emerged dedicated to creating a national culture of teaching and research and to setting standards recognisably international. Faculty and students were alike in their drive and diligence, with new scholarship soon appearing in Geography, History, Economics, Sociology, Philosophy, Religious Studies, Chemistry, Law, Linguistics and Agriculture. In weekly workshops a rising generation of writers was already crafting a new literature in English and Chichewa. A highly progressive journal of medicine appeared, though the university's medical school was scarcely on the drawing board. Pioneering work was afoot in curriculum design and pedagogy, with Chemistry, for example, attracting many takers at a time when students globally were avoiding this subject and science generally. Further, in an initiative swimming bravely against current world opinion, it was even decided to open a Department of Classics.

With teams of external examiners excited by what they found, in their wake came eminent visiting scholars keen to see things for themselves. In English one recalls Michael Echeruo, Andrew Gurr, Chenjerai Hove, Francis Berry, Angus Calder and Tom Gorman; in Classics Harold Guite; in Biology Colin Dickinson and Athol McClachlan.

Into this vortex of new thinking and scholarly dreams came Dr Matthew Schoffeleers. Unlike most expatriates, he already knew Malawi well from his work as a missionary – work producing both close acquaintance with the country's ancient traditions and material for seminal publications. I, as an uninformed newcomer in the early Seventies, was surprised one day when an introduction to Matthew by a Nankhunda priest brought an invitation to co-author a book on Malawi's oral literature. He envisaged a volume that would critically examine a body of texts from the twin viewpoints of an anthropologist/ sociologist and a student of literature.

The invitation, it must be said, caused elation and apprehension. On the one hand, here was a chance to work with an academic ten years my senior and internationally respected. On the other hand, Matthew epitomised a form of continental scholarship whose austerity and theoretical underpinning I found daunting. Consider. With a rigorous seminary training in sociology, anthropology and theology, his Oxford D.Phil. had further acquainted him with all the leading-edge

work in modern scholarship. He knew his Barth, Rahner, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr and Tillich. He knew Adler, Adorno, Althusser, de Man, Foucault, Heisenberg, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Derrida, Barthes, Levi-Strauss and Malinowski. He was as conversant with phenomenology and existentialism as he was with the liturgy of the Mass! And to hear him soaring over this intellectual landscape with someone of equal standing – as I recall happening once with John Finnis over tea on my Zomba khonde - was an unforgettable experience.

By contrast, my British and North American training had given me skills in close reading and little else. Philosophy, theology, sociology and anthropology were to me closed books. Even the explosion in linguistics under Saussure and Chomsky had passed me by. And my work on Africa's written literature certainly lacked the theoretical rigour Matthew would take for granted. Yes, I knew something of Babalola's and Beier's work on oral forms from West Africa, but my solitary venture into local literature was a tiny book of tales urgently compiled simply to begin the Malawi Writers' Series - and quite without scholarly pretension. Matthew's book, in which a great weight of modern scholarship would be brought to bear, was to be something entirely different.

Thus, given our different training, the division of labour was predictable. Matthew would select the texts and provide in-depth critical analysis. I would simply proof-read and edit, adding literary comment whenever possible.

As a newcomer to Central Africa, I found the project highly instructive. Texts and commentaries revealed key features of Malawi's life – its traditional culture and economy, its ethnic and linguistic variety, its geographical environment and status as a damp sliver within a semi-arid region. The people's rain shrines, the Nyau society, the Mbona cult, Gule wamkulu, Malipenga – Matthew's analysis of such phenomena was always illuminating. And I could see that his enthusiasm that such material should inform the new national literature was infecting a range of writers working in prose, verse and drama.

Importantly, too, the project was compelling examination of literary features for the first time. Astonishingly, during eight years of university training I had found no instructor who had addressed what literature really *is*, its origins, its complex societal identity and functions. Dictionaries defining this verbal art only as a written form (*pace* Professor Walter Ong) were patently misleading. If human script appeared only 4,500 years ago, then oral verbal art, I realised, must date to the moment our ancestors first prayed and sang. On such a calculation, written literature emerged as a parvenu. Within the colonial context, the rider to this, in terms of a people's psychological rehabilitation, is obvious enough. To state now that literature was not brought to Africa by colonialists sounds absurdly trite; but in colonialism's early aftermath this was not so.

Also revealing was how literature in the deepest sense (because intertwined with complex survival strategies) is an organic part of human activity. When Chenjerai Hove says that to understand a society he goes directly to its literature, he is saying, as it were, that every item of a society's verbal art – whether myth, folktale, fable or song - is like a cell in the local genetic code carrying a seminal essence from which the people's values, instincts, and survival strategies will emerge.

The project also highlighted oral literature's extraordinary skills with semiotics – with myth, archetype, metaphor in its widest sense - and economies of expression, scene and event were more akin to the compressed synthesis of poetry than to the norms of narrative prose. Furthermore, while I had begun with something of the outsider's view of African oral texts as perhaps simplistic, Matthew was swiftly

demonstrating that *nothing* at all in this material was simple. Apparently plain surfaces hid deep resonance and signification. Ten lines might carry issues ringing with cosmic importance. A two-headed python story was the perfect metaphor for an exploration of chieftaincy. Texts about hyenas demanding to eat newborn babies hid instrumentation for distancing fathers in matrilineal societies.

The banana tree story so familiar to Malawians was particularly exemplary, Matthew revealing a layered text which, with economy, raised major existential concerns. At one level there was the banana tree's botanical provenance and symbolism for the popular mind. Then arose a knot of reflections around gender, polygamy and its potential for wifely conflict. Nature and culture, seen in the vegetal and metallic, clashed elementally when the jealous wife's knife cut into the tree producing blood. Finally, there was the bereft husband's clear-eyed rationality - pre-scientific man, seeing rain revive plants dead from drought, asking why this shouldn't happen to humans and thus deciding to irrigate his first wife's grave.

Matthew seems to have drawn censure for his enthusiastic suggestions about the Mbona legend. But his attention to the text's martyrdom associations, highlighting a motif in the literature of many Bantu-speaking societies (and witnessed in the modern writing of, say, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Grace Ogot), was in itself a contribution to contemporary scholarship.

Given my debt of gratitude to Matthew, it is sad to relate that our collaboration in one respect was unhappy. Let me explain. I felt so privileged to be co-authoring *Land of Fire* with this distinguished colleague that I was determined the published book would be not only special in content but also in its presentation as an attractive and eminently readable text. Thus, in the summer before publication I flew to Canada especially to have the manuscript typed. These were pre-computer days and the work was done by the late Mrs Barbara Colleary, whose family had strong links with Africa. In sweltering heat, and without the benefit of air conditioning, she typed away, and so diligently that I brought back to Malawi a "perfect" text, which I immediately submitted to our publisher. My satisfaction about a job well done would be hard to exaggerate.

Imagine, then, my horror, and sickening sense of disappointment, when, on opening the published book, my gaze fell instantly on typographical errors! Someone had destroyed the pristine purity of our text. When I asked the publishers to explain, however, they were not disposed to be sympathetic. Indeed they cast the blame back in my teeth. What could I expect, they asked, given the badly taught English students I had sent them from Chancellor College?

My efforts to explain matters to Matthew fell on deaf ears. The unspoken response was simple: my part of the task had been ill done. Sadly, he never again sought contact with me - his disappointment perhaps being too painful. For readers of *Land of Fire* anyway his lofty scholarship is manifest; but so too is my failed attempt to give that scholarship first-class presentation.

In terms of intellectual growth and expansion, my debt of gratitude to Matthew remains enormous and I pray that, with the full facts now before him, he has learnt to understand my role in a publication of which he could not in the end feel proud. *Requiescat in pace.*

**\*Editors' Note:** The few political clouds over the Shire Highlands – the 'Cabinet Crisis' – soon obscured the sun entirely, enveloping the country into what any reader of Arthur Koestler's would have recognised as *Darkness at Noon*.

## SCHOFFELEERS AND *THE RAINMAKER*

**Professor Steve B M Chimombo, BA Malawi, MA Leeds, MA Columbia, MEd Columbia, EdD Columbia, DipTEFL Wales, Dip. Journalism, London School of Journalism. Emeritus Professor of English, University of Malawi**

*Colleague of Fr. Schoffeleers' at Chancellor College. Of Schoffeleers: "Matthew Schoffeleers provided the raw material for the play, The Rainmaker, and the epic poem, Python! Python!"*

*Dr Matthew Schoffeleers permitted the playwright to use his original research material to dramatize the martyrdom of M'bona, now regarded as the guardian spirit of the Mang'anja. The Rainmaker, the play, not only mentions, but makes use of props like spears, drums, and the chief's staff, which were provided by Schoffeleers for the première at Chancellor College, Zomba, in 1975. The playwright acknowledges the significance of their use and the subsequent donation for future performances of the play.*

### **Introduction**

The dedication page in *The Rainmaker* (1978) reads:

“Gratitude is expressed to all who directly or indirectly helped the existence of the play, especially to Dr M. Schoffeleers for permission to use original research material.” (p. 4)

The above dedication should also have referred to the use of the props which could only have come from Schoffeleers, who had actually lived in the area the play covers, and collected them while in the field.

Schoffeleers' spears, bows, arrows, chief's staff and other paraphernalia that went into *The Rainmaker* production are in my garage storeroom, thirty-six years after the première at Chancellor College, University of Malawi, Zomba, in 1975. Schoffeleers gave the props personally to me as a farewell gift: “You might need these for future performances,” he said, handing me the bundle.

He knew neither the première performance nor his going away would be the last to be heard of the play. This recollection, years after his departure from Malawi, is just one way of reliving the events that led to the donations. I will talk about the play and Schoffeleers' involvement in it. First, my preliminary forays with the M'bona myth.

### **The M'bona Myth**

When I was in secondary school in the early 1960s, I visited my brother, who was a policeman, when he was transferred to Nsanje. While I was there, he told me about M'bona's shrine a few miles away from the district centre. He described briefly the transfer of the Salima with great pomp and ceremony from the village to the shrine. I was mystified.

In the early 1970s, when supervising Chancellor College education students on teaching practice, I stayed at a resthouse in Nsanje again. I enquired about the M'bona story from the staff there. They gave me what they knew and asked why I just didn't go there, “there” being the shrine. The schedule we had didn't permit a visit there. So there was another opportunity missed.

I was teaching Oral Literature, too, and took refuge in reading about the M'bona myth as part of the course of study. I read W.H.J. Rangeley's "Two Nyasaland Rainshrines," in *The Nyasaland Journal* (1952/53) and then J.M. Schoffeleers' "M'bona, the Guardian Spirit of the Mang'anja," B.Litt thesis (1966). I attended Schoffeleers' talk on Malawian oral literature.

This was a time creative writing at Chancellor College was in great ferment. Draft plays were being performed and short stories and poems were discussed at The Writers Workshop. I had tried my hand at the last two. I tried the first one, too, and started writing a play about the rainmaker from the readings of Rangeley and Schoffeleers. I was inspired.

Briefly, my play is a dramatisation of the story of M'bona, the rainmaker himself, how he made rain where other rainmakers failed, how he was pursued across the Maravi country and killed in Nsanje for his exploits. This was in the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries, a crucial stage in the history of the Chewa/Mang'anja of Central Africa, and it resulted in a rearrangement of the ruling classes and even the spread of the people over whom they ruled.

This was material not only for a full-fledged play, but also for an epic, and even for short stories and poems, all of which I did as it turned out.

### **Producing *The Rainmaker***

#### **The cast**

Fortunately, James Gibbs, playwright and producer, was in the English Department at that time. All we needed were the actors, for whom we canvassed on and off the college campus. From Education, we were lucky to get Peter Chiwona to act as Kamundi, the python priest. From the student body, Sam Mpechetula (now Sam M Samu) was M'bona; John Bisika, Mlauli; and Marvin Kambuwa, Tsang'oma. Two staff members, Mupa Shumba, English Department, and Fr Joseph Chakanza, Department of Religious Studies, and Exxon Kamkwatira, a student, were trackers. The shrine builders came from the student body, too. Furthermore, the crowd scenes were made up of students.

We had several actresses from off campus. Mrs Patience Gibbs, the wife of the producer and an accomplished Nigerian actress, was Makewana, the mother of all children. The Matsano women came from two sources: Mrs Moira Chimombo and Mrs Thombozi from Masongola Secondary School, and two ladies who were working in the National Bank, Zomba Branch, at the time.

#### **The props**

Since the main emphasis here is on the props, I will now concentrate on their acquisition and employment. In writing the play, I had blithely referred to *kadranga* rain-calling knives, sacred drums, and even spears, without having the faintest idea where I could get them. The theatre section of the English Department (now the Department of Fine and Performing Arts) certainly didn't keep rain-calling apparatus, even on an ordinary day! None of the ordinary staff would keep *gule wa mkulu* apparatus at home. None had witch hunters for relations from whom they could borrow horns. None even knew any of the props he or she would need.

There were too many props for me to even think I could walk into a shop or go to the market place to get them. But I had to get them, if the play was to get underway. So we started from scratch, asking those who knew. For example, we had people like Joseph Kuthemba Mwale and Francis Moto among the student body, to work on the *gule wamkulu* scene: no one else could.

Some props were part of the day-to-day wear and use of the actors and actresses. For example, the tie-and-die cloth for the Matsano, although we had to go to great lengths to get them; and also the black *biriwita* for Makewana. The props for the witch hunter, e.g. the *nsupa*, and the costumes for the *gule wa mkulu* (the elephant, aJere, and Kang'wing'wi), could only come from the *cognoscenti*. They were what I might call unscripted, or part of the characters' work then and there, which is not the special focus of this article.

Other props were scripted, that is, they were integral to the plot. They were part not only of the action but also of the dialogue: M'bona's spears for one thing. And this is where Schoffeleers came in. We laid our problems on his door step, as if he hadn't done enough already. The answer came in a bundle of spears, bows, arrows, sticks, and the various items we could safely use as props for the play.

### **The uses of the props**

The props were of various degrees of importance and appeared in the play for different durations. For example, the *kadranga* knife appears in both Kamundi's and M'bona's rain dances. However, it disappears textually after the rainmaking ceremony, in the first scene. In other words, it is not mentioned after the two have performed their rain dances. M'bona might have carried it with him on his flight but it is his rainmaking tail that is sung about textually by the Matsano:

MATSANO: His rainmaking tail is from the zebra  
Look, the shaft has four horns  
They contain his magic potions  
A piece from the bark of the *mugholoka*  
Taken from the eastern side  
And a piece from the root of the *ndzadza*  
Dug during the first rains  
Another from the *mpondanyama*  
Dug in the last rains  
And the *fefentha*  
In the dry season  
The grass that smokes  
To keep the rains away  
These, burnt and ground on the *mphero*  
And mixed with *mtsatsi*  
Make the *msupa* for bringing rains. (pp. 29-30)

In the play, the "rainmaking tail" gathers enough importance to be sung about in flight. The same could be said about the spears, both the trackers' and M'bona's. They only become visible after the ceremony and on the track, southwards. However, they receive different kinds of attention. The trackers' spears only appear textually in the end, but mostly in the stage directions:

*(Enter the pursuers)*

CHINGALE: There he is. Kill him.

*(They rush upon him and stab him. Nothing happens. They draw back and test their spear points.)*

CHIKANGA: This man is indeed a magician. Our spears can't pierce him.

CHINGALE: They can. Let's try again.

*(They rush upon him again and again, draw back astounded.)* (p. 36)

It is important to state the fact that during the rehearsals the pursuers' spears became a cause for concern for the owners' health. Several times the spears were

thrown in space at the assumed target. Of course, they hit the walls of the stage. The producer had to warn the pursuers that it was dangerous to do that for two reasons: the obvious one, as well as the belief that they might actually have had the *ulembe* poison applied to them by the original owner! So the actors were using the spears with this double knowledge.

We now turn to examining the spears' appearance in relation to M'bona. Again, it is while M'bona is in flight that they are referred to in the text. First, attention is drawn to them by the chorus. They come upon his sleeping form and exclaim:

MATSANO: Even his two spears  
Left a deep impression. (p. 30)

The pursuers remark upon this fact later, too, when they are arguing about M'bona's nature.

KANJIRU: Haven't we seen where M'bona reclined and his whole  
body made the rock give way? Even his spears, at  
Mwala-Umodzi. (p. 33)

Here it is M'bona's magical powers that come to the fore. Although this is mentioned, M'bona himself is cognizant of the spears as tools only. Man-made tools are useless against him. When the pursuers come upon him and fail to kill him with the spears, he scoffs at their lack of power over him:

M'BONA: Our elders said: Your opponent is like someone  
standing on an ant-hill; do not say, "I shall kill you!"  
First you must get on top.

CHINGALE: Don't talk in riddles.

M'BONA: Spears, knives, arrows are all man-made weapons, and  
will never harm M'bona. (p. 36)

This scene is important in other ways too. It shows that M'bona tells his enemies more or less what will not kill him. This sets the men thinking and working out how they could kill him. What could kill him is contrasted with the spear:

*(Enter Chikanga)*

KANJIRU: What use will that reed be?

CHIKANGA: You'll see. This alone can kill him.

M'BONA: I told you a reed could kill me.

CHINGALE: We've got you now.

CHIKANGA: *(pushes point of reed into M'bona's throat)* Die,  
sorcerer.

M'BONA: You are wrong, witchhunter. I die because I am a  
prophet of Chiuta. *(M'bona dies. Pursuers flee from the  
scene in horror.)* (p. 39)

The contrast between the spear and the reed can be seen in the uses the two can be put to in daily life. A spear is a dangerous weapon. It is carried as a weapon of both defence and attack. Above all, it is forged, that is man-made. A reed, on the other hand, is obviously natural and apparently not dangerous. It has local usefulness, when cut and taken home for fencing and other uses in the village. Children use parts of it as a flute. However, the outer hard cover is sharp and can cut flesh. Hence, when the point is sharpened, it can cut or pierce flesh. M'bona's end is from such a "weapon." The audience is made to see the contrast, and one might say the irony.

After this comes the greatest scene in the play: the reconciliation between man and animal which brings harmony to everything created. M'bona's spirit had wandered and haunted the person who had instigated the murder.

The spear image appears again in stage directions.

*(Drumming. Enter Masks: Jere (or Abwenzi) stalking Njobvu, who moves out of range each time the hunter comes too close. Njobvu also tries to attack Jere, who runs out of the way. The hunter then makes as if to stab the animal with a spear. Stops in mid air. Drops the spear. The two meet and "embrace". Ululation, clapping. Drumming throughout. The two dance together. Exeunt Jere and Njobvu)* (p. 47)

It is then left for Mlauli, the diviner-prophet, to make the most telling, closing speech of the play:

MLAULI: Now, M'bona, you have received the most honourable rites a great man can ever have. May your anger subside and your spirit leave Kamundi. (p. 47)

After this Mlauli offers libations and the Matsano close the play.

It is seen from the foregoing that the spears are more than a stage prop. Although essential to the warriors they become even more significant as they are handled by the major characters, in particular M'bona.

### **The Published Version**

The first performance was on 13<sup>th</sup> June 1975, at the Chirunga Open Air Theatre, Zomba. It was attended by all the top officials of the university. They included, therefore, the then Chairman of Council of the University of Malawi, Mr John Tembo, the Vice Chancellor, Dr Gordon Hunnings, the Principal of Chancellor College, Dr Peter Mwanza, most of the heads of departments and their spouses, not to mention the staff and the student body. Zomba town and the environs were also part of the audience, too.

The première had other follow ups. The immediate one was in Blantyre a week later. A few years later, Zangaphee Chizeze produced the play again, with a performance at the Gymkhana Club, I hear (I was overseas at that time). The school system has seen its share of the play, too. The Junior Certificate anthology for English, edited by Wales Mwanza and Christopher Kamlongera, included an excerpt. For the benefit of the students, Kaphirintiya Drama Group of the French Cultural Centre took it up and performed it for some time for the secondary schools around Blantyre.

The Fine and Performing Arts Department has *The Rainmaker* on its reading lists. The publishers used to send copies to a US College that had comparative epics on the syllabus.

As if the stage version and the published version were not enough, I could not resist writing a poetic version. *Python! Python!* was first published in 1992. This was the first and, up to now, the only epic poem in the country. What led to this step was hinted at in the Acknowledgements:

I wish to express my gratitude to Dr Matthew Schoffeleers for making available to me his research material, as he did for *The Rainmaker*, but this time four manuscripts from oral narratives on the subject. I appreciate deeply his encouragement to me to write "something" out of it, too. (p. viii)

### **In Closing**

The question of going to M'bona's shrine keeps coming back to me down the years. Zangaphee, my son, bought the published version of Schoffeleers collection of M'bona myths. I have read the book but it is my son's visits to the shrine that really touches me. He is now an official of the traditional religion and prays at Lunzu some of the time. He asked me to go with him to Nsanje to pay my respects. I couldn't at that time. I was unwell.

Meantime, I keep coming back to the bundle of spears, bows, arrows, sticks and other paraphernalia that lies in my garage storeroom. The donation has not been left alone. Although different gardeners have gone away with one or two pieces the major ones are still there. I use some of them for other cultural events. For example, I have photographs of one of the gardeners on an anthill posing with bows and arrows. The photographs accompany an article on traditional self-defence.

When donating the bundle, Schoffeleers told me to be careful with the spears and arrows as they might contain the lethal *ulembe* the traditional poisonous application, as mentioned above. I warn my gardeners and my family the same thing. But, as for me, it is *ulembi*\* not *ulembe* to which I attribute my inspiration.

#### **\*Editors' Note:**

1. Secretarial work; 2. Clerical work. (Dr. Paas' Chichewa/Chinyanja/English Dictionary). But here presumably refers to the writer's craft; the Muse of Drama.

## **DEFINING ACADEMIC STATURE: REFLECTIONS ON MATTHEW SCHOFFELEERS**

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University.**

I did not know Matthew Schoffeleers personally, nor did I take any classes from him while I was a student at the University of Malawi's Chichiri Campus. For one thing, he arrived to teach in the University when I was about to graduate; one of several accidents of history that prevented me from taking the type of courses that would have drawn me into closer contact with him.

However, even after I graduated from college, wherever I turned there was something to remind one of, or someone talking about, this exciting Dutch padre who had dared delve into the Mang'anja *Nyau* cult and lived to talk about it! But, as a student typical of the student population that Dr. Schoffeleers found when he walked into the corridors of the University of Malawi, I would like to share some personal reflections on the prevailing political, socio-cultural, and academic atmosphere, both more local and broader, that formed the context to his subsequent presence and work in Malawi, and his ultimate impact on the creation of knowledge and its dissemination.

I frequently came across Schoffeleers' name in my capacity as an editor of various student journals, which published many articles, short stories, plays and poems inspired in various ways by his research and scholarship on African culture. As a founding member of the Malawi Writers' Group (MWG), I also came across many instances of how the creative and imaginative expression was influenced by Schoffeleers' scholarship. I may add, also, that after I left college and was teaching at Malosa, I once accompanied Paul Kishindo on a Schoffeleers' research assignment to interview a Yao rainmaker in the Ulongwe area of the Upper Shire River. I remember being struck by the Islamic interpretation of the rainmaking cult, as opposed to what I thought was Schoffeleers' Christian one.

For example, Schoffeleers defines the concept of territorial cult as "an institution of spirit veneration, proper to a land area, whose primary concern is the material and moral well-being of its population" (Schoffeleers, ed, 1978: 3), and interprets the Mbona spirit possession associated with its rain-calling as similar to the Christian doctrines of baptism and resurrection (Meyer & Reis, 2004: 29). Among the Mang'anja, therefore, rain-making is a public ritual in which people themselves are the actors as they celebrate their relationships to one another.

The Islamic version Paul and I witnessed, traced the rain-maker's own genealogical descent from the Prophet Muhammad and his pilgrimage to Mecca as the real sources of his power; emphasized the fertility and rain making rituals as symbolizing relief and good year, especially for the farmer and fisherman, and rain as a sign of God's mercy and the proof of the truth of the Holy Quran.

The Islamic rain-maker said rain also symbolizes plagues and scourges that come from the sky, like swarms of locusts, and that the rain-making ritual is not like a communion or a ceremonial act that brings the community together in theatrical performance, but rather a secret undertaking by the rain maker who mediates between the people and the spirit world. Rain-maker is thus the guardian of the sanctuary.

Much later still, I had the great privilege of reviewing Matthew Schoffeleers and Adrian Roscoe's book on Malawi oral traditions, *Land of Fire: Oral Literature from Malawi* (1985), for *Research in African Literatures* (Mphande, 1987:88).

What was the prevailing socio-political landscape in rural Malawi when Matthew Schoffeleers arrived as a missionary? What were the dominant political and cultural atmospherics under which he worked? What were the contemporary challenges; political, cultural, and religious that may have influenced his scholarship, academic pursuits and pastoral obligations? How did Matthew Schoffeleers' scholarship impact on Malawi's subsequent intellectual history and discourse? How did his audience and adherents apply or appropriate his works, and what legacy has he left in the field of expressive imagination? These are some of the topics I will mull over and reflect upon in this essay.

After ordination in the Netherlands in 1955 at the age of 27, Matthew Schoffeleers was immediately dispatched to Malawi as a missionary. After a 3 year stint at Limbe Catholic Mission, he was sent to join two older priests as a missionary at a parish in the Lower Shire Valley. He had already shown interest in African cultural institutions in general and the Mang'anja culture in particular but in the Lower Shire he came face to face with the Mbona cult and he eventually got himself initiated into the *Nyau* mask society. In 1963 Matthew Schoffeleers went to the Jesuits' Lovanium Catholic University in the Congo on sabbatical to study anthropology, from where he proceeded in the following year to Oxford University where in 1968 he obtained his D.Phil. in anthropology. During his studies at Oxford he was, in 1967, simultaneously appointed back in Malawi to a teaching position at Nguludi Roman Catholic Seminary. He was later transferred to Likulezi Catechetical Training Centre. He joined the University of Malawi as Senior Lecturer in 1971. In 1976, he returned to the Netherlands.

Given the duration of his time in Malawi (1955-76), and the historical period in which he lived there, Matthew Schoffeleers' life touched so many people in diverse ways. Since this is a reflection on how Matthew Schoffeleers touched those lives at a particular moment in history, we have to reflect on what the interjection into a rural Malawi landscape meant to a young Dutch priest.

The first things I would like to reflect on is Father Schoffeleers' famous induction into the Mang'anja *Nyau* cult, which seems to have attracted peoples' initial attention to his presence in the country, but which, in my opinion, has often been misinterpreted or taken out of context.

Schoffeleers says that he was very happy in rural Malawi: "I felt very much at home in Malawi. I was very, very happy. I immediately started collecting traditional customs and already at the very beginning of my stay near my mission I came across an initiation camp for boys" (Meyer and Reis 2004: 23). Thrust deeper into a rural Lower Shire setting, Schoffeleers admits that he did not understand the Mang'anja culture; "I didn't understand a thing. ... I didn't understand the symbolic language, and therefore I didn't get most of the meaning" (Meyer & Reis, 2004: 25), and therefore saw his *Nyau* initiation as a way of "penetrating the mystery" of the conflict between the approaches of the church and what he saw in the field (Meyer & Reis, 2004: 27). After going through the *Rite de Passage*, he contends, he could "fully recognize" not only the essence and meaning of the fundamental Christian doctrines of "[s]eparation, transition, and re-aggregation," but also the concept of resurrection and apply them to his daily pastoral work among the rural folk.

Schoffeleers is here not challenging the Church dogma, as some have interpreted it – he is shocked to learn that one of the catechetical older students had procured three abortions. In the Catholic Church, he says, abortion is a mortal sin: “Three times a mortal sin! You have done that, and you are the leader of the church and you preach and you receive Holy Communion”(Meyer & Reis 2004: 32). This quotation shows that Father Schoffeleers’ induction into *Nyau* society was not aimed at challenging the Church dogma, but a practical approach to his ministry the way he saw it.

The political atmosphere in the country was also characterized by the conflict and frequent clashes between the African nationalists and European settlers, particularly on the Shire Highlands, and frequent frictions within the various Christian congregations that often resulted in the setting up of independent churches. In many instances the missionaries were transformation agents and instigated social change.

This was more so with the Scottish missionaries, but less so with the Catholics; although at the time of Matthew Schoffeleers’ arrival almost a quarter of all Christians in the country were Catholic (Linden & Linden: 1974: x). With pastoral practice heavily influenced by centuries of French Catholic values, the priests brought to rural Malawi values of loyalty and obedience, filtered through French peasant culture, that resonated well with Malawi’s rural hierarchical social structure.

Dr. Schoffeleers oft cited disagreements with his Church should be viewed from this perspective – the Church sent him to Africa as a missionary to overcome pagan cultures like *Nyau*, not to absorb them! Schoffeleers was thus fully aware of the “absolute divide between the Nyau and church” (Meyer & Reis, 2004:30), but his desire to “penetrate the mystery” in order to aid his missionary work set him on a collision course with his superiors.

It is ironic that within the Catholic Church, Schoffeleers’ interpretation of his ministry and his advocacy for the protection of the indigenous cultures met with resistance from the emerging African clergy: “I was consciously trying to install a new appreciation for traditional religion. But that couldn’t last. ... Then we got an African archbishop. And we met and he voiced his objections (Meyer & Reis 2004: 33).

But perhaps of more direct relevance to Schoffeleers’ scholarship was the collaboration with Terence Ranger, which started in 1968 after Ranger read Dr. Schoffeleers doctoral thesis. Their contact continued with Ranger’s visit to Schoffeleers at Likulezi, and the latter’s subsequent involvement in a series of conferences on the historical study of African religion that ended in book publications that helped profile his scholarship – for instance, *The Historical Study of African Religion* (1972) and *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa* that Ranger edited (1978).

Dr. Schoffeleers joined the University of Malawi to teach anthropology in September 1971, after resigning from his catechetical job with the Church at Likulezi following disagreement with his Bishop over curricular content. Who were Matthew Schoffeleers contemporaries at the University of Malawi, and what was his relationship with them?

This is a question for his contemporaries to answer, but in the preface to their book, *Catholics, peasants, and Chewa resistance in Nyasaland, 1889-1939*, Ian and Jane Linden acknowledge the contribution to their research by, among others, “Rev. Dr. J. M. Schoffeleers, Dr. Martin Chanock, Dr. Leroy Vail, Lois Chanock, and Professor Margaret Kalk, whose encouragement, company, and intellectual stimulation, partly covered its emotional and intellectual costs.” (1974: vii). In other

words, when Matthew Schoffeleers joined the university there was already a team of rigorous academics with similar research interests as his – i.e., the study of African cultural traditions.

The Lindens say that Schoffeleers’ “painstaking and anthropological research ... provided [them] with the social framework” for their research. But what may be missing from such a listing is the intellectual, national, ideological and religious diversity that these academic luminaries brought to the field of research and academic pursuit at the new university. Leroy Vail, for example, was an American, Malcolm Reed Australian, Professor Som Sri Lankan, Lady Swanzie Agnew a British aristocrat, and George Kalk a devout Marxist and founding member of the South African Communist Party. Martin Chanock, George and Margaret Kalk, Bridglal Pachai, Swanzie Agnew, and, later, James Stewart all had South African connections, some having been born there and having either left or been thrown out of that country because of their opposition to the apartheid regime.

There was also Dr. Bhila and others who had been kicked out of the then Rhodesia. As if to out-stage the apartheid regime, Hasting Banda also deported many of these luminaries, including Ian Linden, Landeg White, Swanzie Agnew, and Jim Stewart! What is equally important was the presence, among the community of international academics at the University of Malawi, of a significant number of local luminaries, most of them new graduates just returned from overseas, that included Felix Munthali, Peter Chiwona, Chifipa Gondwe, James Chipasula, Barnard Harawa, Peter Mwanza, and many others. However, by 1974 the majority of the local academics and university administrators had been carted away to fill up Banda’s jails!

Soon after Schoffeleers’ arrival, there was an international history conference organized by Professor Pachai at the Malawi Polytechnic to showcase new research on Malawi, which was opened by President Hastings Banda. One participant, a Mr. Gray, was bundled up and hustled away from the conference room and instantly deported after the President had singled him out from the gathered international historians (Langwothy, Alpers, Nurse, etc.) for having hair too long for a man according to ‘Malawi culture!’

This then was the academic atmosphere which Schoffeleers found at the new university, and under which he worked.

What about the student landscape – beyond the individual student who took his class or received his spiritual guidance - what was the overall student canvas on which Dr. Schoffeleers left his intellectual and priestly imprints? In other words, what type of students did Schoffeleers find at the university, and what did the intervention of his trajectories leave with them?

The area of academic endeavour where application/appropriation of Matthew Schoffeleers research and scholarship into African oral forms has been most manifest is creative art, and the fine and performing arts. Short stories, poems and plays too many to enumerate have been written or produced based on Schoffeleers’ interpretation of Malawi history and cultural heritage, including the *Nyau* cult. Schoffeleers said that the objective of his scholarship was to make Malawians proud of their heritage (Meyer & Reis, 2004). From all available evidence, I think he succeeded in this endeavour.

As editor of *Expression* and *Odi*, the then prime University of Malawi literary student journals, I witnessed many occasions of literary and creative works feeding generously on Matthew Schoffeleers’ scholarship. The plays *Rainmaker* by Steve Chimombo and *The Banana Tree* by James Ng’ombe, that explored the religious role of rainmaking and the intersection between politics and gender, are good examples of

this. These plays were performed to full audiences and with great accolades from the general public, indicating, no doubt, that they struck a chord of resonance with the national psyche.

Themes of the creation myth contained in Schoffeleers and Roscoe's collection of Malawi oral traditions, *Land of Fire*, have inspired the composition of many poems and the study of theology in Malawi. The interrogation of the *Nyau* mask as a representation of the religious essence in society, as interpreted by Schoffeleers, is most visually articulated in sculptures, particularly in the works of Berlings Kaunda, Willie Nampeya, and Alice Kaunda. Berlings Kaunda (1939-2010), in particular, who once headed the Fine and Performing Arts Department at University of Malawi, Chancellor College, and was also Curator of the National Museum of Malawi, joined the university a year ahead of Matthew Schoffeleers. His sculpture depicts the same aspects of the spirit possession and the *Nyau* mask cults that Matthew Schoffeleers had expounded in his work.

Schoffeleers interpreted spirit possession practiced by the Mang'anja people as similar to the Christian doctrine of baptism; as a symbol of transformation: "you are dead and a complete transformation happens to you and then you come out of it and then you are prepared," he said. Schoffeleers also equates *Nyau* with 'male theatre,' and possession cults with 'female theatre,' and he contends that once "you look at it in that way, lots of things become clear to you" (Meyer & Reis, 2004: 29). He describes spirit possession as not only providing theatrical entertainment, but also lessons of baptism and transformation, and sees baptism as a symbol of healing and reconciliation (Meyer & Reis, 2004: 31).

This approach to spirit possession has been used to study and treat psychological disorders, and is based on an anthropological structuralist paradigm pioneered by Gluckman and Victor Turner. Victor Turner was Matthew Schoffeleers' 1966 examiner at Oxford and became one of his lifelong friends (Meyer & Reis, 2004: 37). Turner's (1982) theory on performance is based on his social drama model that projects traditional ceremony as not only articulating and reasserting bonds between members of the community, but also simultaneously expressing underlying tensions within society. Similarly, Schoffeleers adopted this approach in his analysis of *Nyau* mask and *gule wamkulu*: as theatre or processually structured public action, and as metaphors for social meaning. This is what propels the efficacy of a dramatic presentation in plays like the *Rainmaker*.

Schoffeleers, however, resisted the interpretation of ritual as power struggle between contending parties because he thought this interpretation robs ritual drama its soul and essence (Meyer & Reis 2004: 38). He applied this interpretation not only to theatre, but even to his collection of folktales and myths, saying they all originate in social drama and draw their meaning and force from it. According to this interpretation of theatre, performance is not only the primary site for the production of knowledge, but also where philosophy is enacted and where multiple discourses, often simultaneously, are employed. It is a means by which the community reflects on its current condition, particularly people's relationship with each other and their environment. It enables them to define and/or re-invent themselves and their society and either re-enforce, resist, or subvert prevailing social orders. This is the anthropological thrust of Matthew Schoffeleers' fieldwork research and interpretation upon which his followers' subsequent studies of Malawi performance genre, drama, theatre, literary imagination, and the fine arts draw. He said he found it "exhilarating" that he could leave us that legacy (Meyer & Reis, 2004: 32).

In his sculpture, Berlings Kaunda too portrays the themes of transformation, healing and reconciliation, all central to Matthew Schoffeleers' interpretation of theatrical values as stated above. Kaunda's sculptures adorn the halls of the presidential palace at Sanjika (the portrait of a man and woman carrying the scales of justice), Bunda College of Agriculture, Mzuzu High Court, Chancellor College, and Development House in the commercial city of Blantyre. Today these sculptures stand as powerful witness to the celebration of the legacy and achievement of both Matthew Schoffeleers' scholarship and Berling Kaunda's depiction of that monumental legacy.



**A wooden Nyau mask carved by Berlings Kaunda (centre) at a Malawi Heritage Centre ceremony in 1970 attended by the Mayor of Blantyre, John Kamwendo (left) and the American Ambassador Marshall P. Jones (right).**

In the “Woman in Pain,” for example, Kaunda visually depicts a fascinating side of the human condition: that love and beauty can be attained only through or with suffering. It thus depicts the imperfection of humanity and resultant conflict in the human condition arising from the necessity for peace and tranquillity and inevitability of the forces of war and turmoil – you cannot have one without the other, Kaunda seems to be saying; and neither peace nor war can exist in a pure monogamous form without the intervention of the other. This is very much in line with Schoffeleers' interpretation of the creation myth present in the various oral forms he collected in *Land of Fire*.

The same is true with the sculpture entitled “Woman plaiting Hair,” where the same element of imbalance is presented: of love and a certain amount of suffering. The woman doing the plaiting seems to be larger and stronger, and her standing position makes her look aggressive, while the woman in a sitting position having her hair plaited seems to be clenching under the hair-pull. However, the suffering looks minor (and tolerable and temporal) compared to the love, grace and womanhood implied in the work (Soule 1971: 8-12). This sculpture is another enforcement of Berlings Kaunda's thesis that peace and conflict, love and suffering do not exist exclusively but in co-existence.

Berlings Kaunda sculpted both from wood and stone, and although a sculpture is carved out of a dead tree, the act of sculpting turns it into a living entity that is alive and can communicate – thus revealing the power of the artist who creates and yet at

the same time becomes part of the form he/she has created. Since in his work Kaunda, like Schoffeleers, links mask to the living and the dead, art is not only an enabling facilitator in the duality of communication to the body and soul, but also an important dimension of culture, as well as an indicator of how knowledge about culture is produced and utilized.

In Berlings Kaunda's work an artist (particularly the one working in wood) can be viewed as a performer, at the same level as a traditional masked dancer, and that art causes the artist to self-reflect and look inward so as to see both the crude in his/her emotions and thought, and the graceful and dignified in himself/herself as a human being. Thus, like a mask, a sculpture reflects the vibrancy in African traditional culture, and a portrayal of the fabric of society's moral values.

In conclusion, therefore, Matthew Schoffeleers not only left us a rich legacy of his pastoral work, research, and scholarship; but also profiled Malawi traditional culture with a capacity to affect many aspects of human life as an art form worth celebrating.

The contest for the right to interpret Matthew Schoffeleers' research findings on African traditions that implicate a Malawi collective psyche has also taken many forms well beyond the university rostra and lecture halls, with appropriation and counter-appropriation. Faculty and students in the arts and humanities, for example, have constantly lobbed intellectual discourses drawn from their research and practicum over the media bandwidth aimed at generating a more open society.

By moving from a liturgical base to the university in 1971, Matthew Schoffeleers seems to have predicted, correctly as it turns out, that the university is the site on which the contest for influence on the nation's destiny, which his scholarship promoted, will be fought, won or lost. It is not necessarily the output, though this is considerable, but the application of his scholarship that ultimately defines his academic stature.

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## **THE MATTHEW SCHOFFELEERS I REMEMBER**

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Of Schoffeleers: “Friend, colleague, confessor.”

I would like to pay a brief and informal tribute to the achievement of a renowned anthropologist, a dear priest, and a family friend, whose passing early this year we deeply mourn. I knew Matthew Schoffeleers well. His reputation preceded him whether he worked from a remote Catholic parish in the Lower Shire, as a teacher in a Catholic Seminary, or as a Senior Lecturer in anthropology at the University of Malawi.

I first heard of Fr Schoffeleers after our family had moved from Mangochi district to Chikwawa district, where I spent many years of my youth. A Catholic priest, dedicated to his vocation, Fr Schoffeleers commanded respect among his fellow priests and the congregations to whom he preached. His pastoral influence throughout the Lower Shire Valley was such that almost every Catholic parishioner talked about this brave but rather eccentric Dutch priest who had allowed himself to be initiated into Malawi’s Nyau society in order to study and understand the institution which, throughout the country, Catholic and Protestant churches alike considered inimical to Christianity.

Members of “Gule wa Mkulu”, as they preferred to call their society, were the last to convert to Christianity in the history of such conversions in Malawi. Because its members refused to have anything to do with European missionaries and their religions and culture, both Catholics and Protestants claimed that the organisation was stubborn, secretive, evil and satanic. Gule wa Mkulu itself begged to differ. Its members did not consider themselves or their society secretive, evil or satanic. They claimed that membership was open to all, locals or foreigners alike. Of course, they conceded that the organisation was indifferent to Christians, Muslims and those who despised Nyau and the African way of life in general.

Fr Schoffeleers was one of those missionaries who believed that the best way of converting African peoples to Christianity was to study even the so-called unacceptable aspects of their traditions. When he joined Nyau he began to understand the virtues of the organisation, which he often shamelessly defended when challenged. That might be where his eccentricity lay. The perceptive research on Malawi religions, largely centred on the Mbona cult of the Lower Shire Valley, brought Schoffeleers enough accolades as a priest and a scholar to disarm his enemies. It definitely got him the Oxford University doctorate degree, which his fellow priests coveted.

Fr Schoffeleers was a rebel priest. Some observers in the Lower Shire Valley often feared that his research in African religions, his initiation into Nyau and the various masks he used to collect and analyse would soon incite the wrath of Rome to the point of excommunication! But he was never excommunicated. Throughout his career as a distinguished anthropologist Fr Schoffeleers performed his pastoral duties with diligence and humility. He saw no contradiction as a practising Catholic priest in assiduously engaging in research in African oral traditions, religions and masks.

When I entered college after my school certificate, Fr Schoffeleers was already a legend, influencing student research in the Seminaries and the University where he held teaching positions. Students flocked to his lectures.

I was introduced to him and to his research almost by accident. Members of the Writers Group at Soche Hill College, the University's Chichiri Campus, and Mpemba Institute of Public Administration and Law were invited to a workshop on African religions and culture where Schoffeleers' ideas on Malawian myths were going to be discussed. As I recall, the workshop was organised by Larry Soule of the English Department at Soche Hill College, not by Matthew himself.

Berlings Kaunda, the finest artist and sculptor at the time, Lupenga Mphande poet, critic and linguist, Innocent Banda (now Makaka Kasiya Phiri) poet, short story writer and playwright, myself, and other budding writers and artists, gathered at Soche Hill College to analyse the various aspects of Schoffeleers' collection of myths. The following sequence of short verses from my humble pen was inspired by Schoffeleers' creation myths at the workshop. The original myths were obviously reconstructed so that the verses could be imbued with the politics of the cabinet crisis which was ongoing at the time of crafting:

### **If Chiuta Were Man**

#### **I The Soft Landing**

Woman, hold my shoulders  
We'll drift and drift until  
We reach the promised Nsinja  
Forest and river of life.

When our safari is done  
We'll tell all animals and  
Chiuta of our soft landing  
Imploring them to follow suit.

Meanwhile, hold on woman,  
Let's glide and glide  
On our pioneer project –  
Hope is our only hope.

#### **II The First Fire**

Hard wood upon soft wood twirling  
Sparks a sudden riot of mother and babies.

Corrosive flames devour Nsinja Forest  
Chiuta's abode belches and blazes.

When frenzied lions storm out, jackals  
Crackle gaping at man's invention.

The stampede thus whacked thuds away  
Free from the hissing eggshells.

Only dogs, tails between legs,  
Cower under the Man's fiery arm.

#### **III On Chauta's Ascension**

When you, disgruntled, spiralled  
On Spider's frail thread,  
Swearing you'd see us die to feel  
The pain of our own invention,  
When you, thundering angry voices

That still send us scurrying for  
Shelter, promised your urine to save us  
From our unquenchable fire,

When you, on your multi-coloured  
Bow on Ntiwa Hill declared  
You'd stop your bleeding urine  
If we did not improve,

Why, Chiuta, scampering on  
Spider's thread to your Ivory Tower,  
Why didn't you also warn  
Our eyes would forever be smoky?

#### **IV So Chiuta Became A Chameleon**

A muezzin  
With gelded  
Tongue  
Slunk in  
Celibacy

A politician  
Empiric  
Muffing  
Easy balls  
Fearing fear.

The verses that came out of the workshop, some of them obliquely inspired by Schoffeleers' retelling of the myths, were later published in *MAU: Thirty-nine Poems from Malawi* (Hetherwick Press, 1971).

Schoffeleers' work inspired some of Berlings Kaunda's memorable sculptures in stone, including the lions that decorated President Hastings Kamuzu Banda's Sanjika Palace. His other carvings, equally influenced, were erected in several institutions throughout the country. Sociologists and historians like Elias Mandala, Kings Phiri, Owen Kalinga, Yusuf Juwayeyi were intrigued and inspired by Schoffeleers' keen observations about Malawi culture and these young scholars went onto further inquiry and study and have since produced a significant body of original research.

Perhaps the creative work of Steve Chimombo, poet, short story writer and playwright, epitomises Schoffeleers' influence on the generation of writers, artists, sociologists and historians of the time. *The Rainmaker* (Montfort Press, 1975), the most ambitious of Chimombo's plays, was patently a reworking and dramatisation of Schoffeleers' original research - a point that the writer himself abundantly acknowledged. Those who enjoyed the wonderful performance of the play directed by James Gibbs at Chirunga Open Air Theatre testify that its success was due largely to the sparkle of Schoffeleers' original subject matter; the play's relevance to the politics of the time was brilliantly circuitous.

Schoffeleers' work on Malawi creation myths was particularly exciting to those of us budding writers and artists. As we practised our craft, there were times when we felt that the authenticity of our work was being hobbled by our adoption of foreign, largely European, images and metaphor, mostly acquired through our university studies. Schoffeleers' research opened to us a vision of the deeper roots of our society. Some of us adopted and reinterpreted his research in order to make our

creative efforts authentic. Others used his work as metaphoric or symbolic representation of life under a most repressive dictatorship, a dictatorship that was entirely a new experience for us; for which we had never been prepared.

Schoffeleers has, therefore, left an indelible legacy on the Malawian cultural landscape. Even the collection of folk tales, *Land of Fire: Oral Literature from Malawi*, (Montfort Press, 1985), which he co-edited with Adrian Roscoe, still looms large in the repertoire of Malawi literature in schools and colleges today. I am not a fan of the thematic structuring of anthologies; the way Schoffeleers and Roscoe organised their tales according to themes clearly oversimplifies the relevance of some; but writers, critics, academics and educationists still dip into *Land of Fire* for inspiration for their own work or to illustrate their lessons or to justify their representation of an oral-based Malawian culture.

I have one confession to make. I sometimes found Schoffeleers' research methodology in orature (oral literature), unnecessarily rigid. When he read my London University M.Phil thesis, and discovered that I had included the version of the story of 'Kalikalanje' which my mother had told me at the fireside, Schoffeleers was not happy that his two versions of a similar story he had gathered were slightly different from mine. He intimated that I should take his versions as the more authentic. I recall our having a cheerful academic argument over the matter, though I cannot remember who won in the end!

There is one secret that Dr. Alifeyo Chilibumbo, Dr. John Kandawire and Dr. Matthew Schoffeleers shared under the state of siege in which they worked in the University of Malawi. These three shared with those of us they could trust the methods they used in order to deal with Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda's Censorship Board. When they were invited to international conferences to present their research on African class systems in despotic societies, for example, and the Censorship Board insisted on vetting their papers before they were presented, as the Board was wont to do, these scholars sent watered down versions of their papers to the censors. After these dummy papers were cleared, they took the originals and presented them at the conferences uncensored!

Finally, there is something delightfully ordinary and perhaps too personal for which my family will forever be immensely indebted to Fr Schoffeleers. In the seventies it was difficult for a Catholic to marry an Anglican without going through a mass of bewildering rules and regulations. Fr Schoffeleers simplified all that for us. On 5 April 1975 this legendary priest eventually married my wife and me in the chapel of St. Mary's Secondary School, Zomba. It was a simple but moving ceremony, where the priest said the mass, blessed our marriage, and sent us into the world to reproduce and multiply!

And when I was later imprisoned without trial or charge, Schoffeleers was one of the many friends and colleagues who mobilized Dutch friends and human rights activists to send postcards to the relevant authorities in Malawi demanding my liberation.

Many years later, our three children surprised us with a unique gift for the celebration of our silver wedding anniversary in England by inviting Fr Schoffeleers. And wasn't he happy to come from the Netherlands where he had retired from his Chair at Leiden University after his time in Malawi! I can think of very few eminent academics and dignified priests who are able to reduce themselves to the level of ordinary mortals as Emeritus Professor Schoffeleers did. And to hear that he has passed away is simply shocking.

We have lost an irreplaceable Catholic priest, an academic and a special friend of Malawi. May the good Lord preserve his soul for us. I should like to conclude by presenting the following photographs, which tell the rest of the story of this priest, academic, colleague and family friend better than my descriptive or explanatory words.



**Fr Matthew Schoffeleers preparing the altar for the celebration of Mass at our Silver Wedding Anniversary in St Aelreds Roman Catholic Church, York, UK, 8<sup>th</sup> April, 2000.**



**Lunda Mapanje, our second daughter, welcoming guests to the reception and celebrations of our Silver Wedding Anniversary at the Folk Hall, New Earswick Village, York; with Fr Schoffeleers on the left and Fr O'Malley on the right of the table.**

## **CHEWA MIGRATIONS AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MARAVI STATE: A CHRONOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE.**

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### **Abstract**

In the absence of archaeological data, historians and other scholars in Malawi have used oral traditions to estimate the date of arrival of the Chewa into Malawi and of the establishment of the Maravi state. Of all the scholars who have attempted to do this, Schoffeleers' estimation has shown greater congruence with archaeological dates now emerging from the excavation of the site of Mankhamba, the reputed capital or headquarters of the Chewa. Using archaeological data and the chronological framework proposed by Schoffeleers, this paper concludes that the first Chewa settlers arrived at Mankhamba at least two to three centuries before the establishment of the Maravi state in the fifteenth century AD. Later expansion of the state was related to coastal trading activities that became more pronounced when Portuguese and Arab traders began to infiltrate inland in the sixteenth century.

### **Introduction**

The term Maravi has been used by scholars to refer to original Chichewa-speaking groups of people who inhabited the south-western shore area of Lake Malawi and their descendants who, by the mid seventeenth century, had spread to various parts of central and southern Malawi. Their centre was at Mankhamba near Mtakataka in Dedza district. A significant amount of literature detailing their history and culture exists. It includes Ntara's (1973) much consulted book called, *Mbiri ya Achewa (History of the Chewa)*, documents and papers written by various colonial administrators and scholars (Rangeley 1952, 1953, 1963; Nurse 1969; Schoffeleers 1971, 1973, 1974, 1979, 1987; Newitt 1982; Alpers 1968, 1975; Linden 1972); and doctoral dissertations (Langworthy 1969; Phiri 1975; McFarren 1983). Oral traditions collected among the Chewa are the major source for this literature. Scholars have also uncovered some few documents written by early Portuguese officials, missionaries and traders. (Gamitto, 1832. See also Alpers 1975; Schoffeleers 1971, 1987; and Newitt 1982). These documents have helped scholars outline some aspects of early Chewa history particularly after 1550 AD.

While this body of scholarship has helped build a picture of this history, there are still some issues related to the origins of the Chewa, their migrations, and chronology that have yet to be fully clarified. Relying on linguistic evidence and oral traditions for instance, various scholars have readily accepted the view that the Chewa were members of Bantu groups of people originally domiciled in the Luba/Lunda area of the Shaba region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Marwick 1963: 378; Ntara 1973; Langworthy 1969: 108; Phiri 1975: 41; McFarren 1983: 23-24; Linden 1972).

At some point in their history, two related clans decided to move out of the area. They were the Banda and Phiri clans. The nature of their migration is however, based more on speculation than fact. The impression given by oral traditions is that their migration was well organized and that it involved fairly large groups of people with a recognized leader. According to Ntara (1973), the Chewa passed through northern and eastern Zambia and parts of Mozambique, and entered modern Malawi

through Kaphirintiwa which is on the border of Malawi and Mozambique. Eventually, they arrived at Mankhamba where they decided to settle permanently.

They called the area surrounding Mankhamba and the entire southern Lake Malawi area “Malawi” (“flames”) because it is a very hot area; and when the air rises the heat and the intensity of sunshine creates an illusion of flames. The early Portuguese spelt it “Maravj” or “Maravy” and referred to the people as “the Maravi.” (Schoffeleers, 1971: 93; Ntara 1973: 15). It is not clear whether or not the word “Chewa” was in use at the time. It does not appear in Portuguese records until the early nineteenth century (Bruwer 1950: 33; Gamitto, 1960; Marwick 1963: 378).<sup>1</sup>

The idea of large groups of people migrating together is viewed with some scepticism by some historians who believe that a migration such as that of the Chewa must have involved small groups of people possibly families (anonymous reviewers). In their view, it is more likely that individual families established settlements which eventually expanded due to new births and by being joined by other migrating families. If that view is correct, then the Chewa may have arrived in small family groups over a long period of time.

Chewa oral traditions contain two contradictory stories of their origins and therefore, it is unclear if the Banda and Phiri clans really left the Luba/Lunda area at the same time. The first one is a well-known myth of creation. It claims that the Chewa were created at Kaphirintiwa (Schoffeleers 1973: 48). The other states that they originated from some northerly areas (Marwick 1963: 378; Schoffeleers 1973: 48). Hamilton (1955: 18-20) was the first scholar to attempt to make sense of this contradiction by suggesting that the creation myth most likely referred to indigenous people of the area and the migration story to invaders. Since the Banda clan has always been credited with ritual powers such as rain calling and the Phiri clan with political authority, it is the Banda clan that is generally viewed as the indigenous one (Marwick 1969: 378). Rain calling rituals are a response to drought and the Chewa may have adopted them because they had control of the land before the Phiri clan arrived. Schoffeleers has referred to the Banda as the Proto-Chewa.

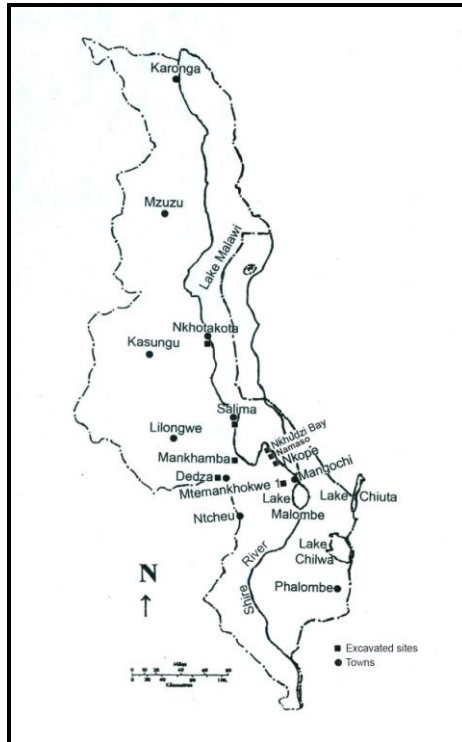
The Phiri clan on the other hand was led by kings whose title was Kalonga. When they arrived in central Malawi they imposed their political authority over the Banda clan but allowed them to retain control over ritual activities. This clear separation of authority between the two clans still exists in Chewa culture. Members of the Banda clan rarely occupy senior political positions (Schoffeleers 1973: 54). Due to their late arrival and the fact that they controlled secular power, the oral traditions of the Phiri clan tend to be better remembered than those of the Banda.

Archaeology on the other hand has the capacity to clarify, confirm or dispute some of the evidence generated by oral traditions. The archaeological evidence obtained at Mankhamba has therefore been used in this paper to help clarify, and in some cases confirm the chronology of the early history of the Chewa. Similar efforts elsewhere have proved helpful. For instance, for a long time, the evidence for the spread of the Bantu people from their homeland in what is now Cameroon and eastern Nigeria, to central, eastern, and southern Africa before the turn of the first millennium AD, was based solely on linguistics (Dalby 1975; Vansina 1984; Nurse 1982). In recent times, the linguistic evidence has been supported by archaeology which has gone further to confirm a second migration of the Bantu from secondary or tertiary dispersal areas (Phillipson, 1977a, 2000). The archaeological evidence has shown that

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I have used the term “Chewa” to refer to the Maravi people; and the term “Maravi” to refer to the state that the Chewa established.

the later migrations from these areas began at the turn of the second millennium AD and the Shaba area may have been such a dispersal point (Huffman 1989; Phillipson 2000). Archaeological research in northern and eastern Zambia has yielded a type of pottery called Lwangwa, which appears rather suddenly in the archaeological record and thus strongly suggesting that it was a product of new arrivals; possibly those who were migrating from the Shaba area. Lwangwa pottery is dated to the eleventh century AD (Phillipson 2000). It has significant similarities with a type of pottery called Mawudzu which appears also rather suddenly at Iron Age sites in southern and central Malawi (Robinson 1970, 1973, 1975, 1979).



**Figure 1. Map of Malawi showing Mankhamba and other excavated sites in the southern Lake Malawi area.**

### **Chronological implications**

Other than Schoffeleers, no scholar of early Chewa history has dated the arrival of the Chewa in central Malawi to earlier than the fourteenth century AD. Chronological speculations by various scholars have often been based on the cue provided by Donald Abraham (see Newitt, 1982: 148). Apparently, while working among the ‘Piri-Chirongo’ Chewa who live in Mozambique, Abraham learned that they were clan-fellows of the vaMbire of the Soko-Chirongo people who seem to have founded the ‘Rosvi monarchy at Zimbabwe during the fourteenth century’ (Newitt, 1982: 148). Abraham took the similarity in names and assumed or imagined that they were indeed related and therefore, must have migrated to their respective places at about the same time (Newitt, 1982: 148). Subsequent scholars, such as Alpers, accepted Abraham’s dating without critically examining his sources. Even Schoffeleers initially accepted this date. He acknowledged that Undi, a relation of the Kalonga who eventually broke away from his authority to establish his own state in eastern Zambia, ‘‘may have come to the country in the early fourteenth century’’ (see Newitt 1982: 147). Other scholars were rather ambiguous. Langworthy for instance simply stated that ‘‘it is probably safer to say that they (the Phiri) arrived sometime long before the middle of the 1500s’’ (Langworthy 1969: 117, 126); Phiri (1975: 52)

states that the Maravi kingdom “was established sometime before or after 1480, and Newitt (1982: 156-158) believes that the Chewa did not appear in Malawi until the mid-sixteenth century.

Thus Schoffeleers became the exception. He re-examined the oral traditions and Portuguese written records and came up with a four-phase periodisation of the early history of the Chewa. He referred to the earliest period as the Proto-Chewa period and he dated it to 1200-1400 AD. He suggested that the Banda clan must have arrived in central Malawi during that period.

The second period was when the Maravi state systems were formed. Schoffeleers dated this period from the beginning of the fifteenth century to the early seventeenth century AD. This is nearly a century later than the period suggested by Abraham. At about the mid-point of that time period, southern Africa witnessed the arrival of the Portuguese. They had a big impact on events in the area from the sixteenth century onwards.

Schoffeleers called the third period the classical Maravi era and he dated it from 1600-1750 AD. Expansion of the Maravi state system which had started in the previous century continued during this period. It extended from the southern Lake Malawi area to the Zambezi valley (Schoffeleers 1987).

Schoffeleers dated his fourth period from 1750 to 1892. He indicated that it was characterized by “foreign intrusions and the decline of the Maravi states” (Schoffeleers 1973: 47). The impression given by Schoffeleers is that the foreign intrusions were a factor in the decline of the Maravi state. This period ends with the colonization of Malawi by the British.

### **The chronological evidence from archaeology.**

I conducted five separate excavations at Mankhamba, but currently I have published results of only the largest of the five excavations (Juwayeyi 2010; Scott et.al 2009). Initial carbon-14 dates are now available. More chronological evidence has also been obtained from the analysis of some artefacts recovered at the site such as local pottery, glass beads, and Chinese porcelain.

Carbon-14 dates: Charcoal samples were collected from hearths observed during the excavations and three of them were sent to the University of Arizona radiocarbon laboratory where they were processed and calibrated using OXCAL at 2 sigma. The following dates were obtained:

Level 3. (Lab. code A-14663)  $365 \pm 45$  BP calibrated to 1448-1636 AD

Level 3. (Lab. code A-14859)  $625 \pm 95$  BP calibrated to 1218-1448 AD

Level 4. (Lab. code A-14940)  $425 \pm 110$  BP calibrated to 1295-1797 AD<sup>2</sup>

Local Pottery: A total of 45,850 pottery fragments were recovered from the excavation of that one locality at Mankhamba. They were dominated by Mawudzu pottery. This pottery was the first pottery type to be made in Malawi after 1000 AD, a period generally known as the Late Iron Age period. Pottery from sites in the southern Lake Malawi area can be placed in a pottery sequence. The Early Iron Age is represented by Nkope pottery which was first described by Robinson at Nkope Bay (Robinson 1970). It is dated from the fourth to the eighth century AD. It was replaced by two pottery types, Kapeni and Namaso pottery. Kapeni pottery was first identified in the adjacent Bwanje valley and later, at several sites in central and southern

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<sup>2</sup> The dates in levels 3 and 4 are reversed. The date in level 4 should have been older than the date in level 3. As there were no signs of disturbances that could have shifted material from upper to lower levels, the reversed dates are probably due to the relatively short period of time (about 6 centuries) that the site was occupied.

Malawi. It is dated from the eighth to the tenth century AD (Robinson, 1973, 1975; Mgomezulu, 1978; Juwayeyi 1981). Namaso pottery was identified by Davison at Namaso Bay (Davison 1991, 1992). It is dated from the ninth to the twelfth century AD. Eventually, both Kapeni and Namaso pottery were replaced by Mawudzu pottery. This pottery was in turn replaced by Nkudzi pottery sometime during the eighteenth century. Nkudzi pottery was still in use until the mid-nineteenth century when it was replaced by modern pottery (Inskeep 1965; Juwayeyi 1991).

At Mankhamba, the earlier pottery types of Nkope, Kapeni and Namaso were represented by a total of 9 sherds only.<sup>3</sup> Nkudzi pottery was present but in minor quantities. Some of the Mawudzu sherds at Mankhamba were decorated by stamping and that decorative motif suggested affinity with Namaso pottery which phased out in the twelfth century.

Glass beads: The Mankhamba excavation yielded 5,335 glass beads. A representative sample was analysed by Marilee Wood then at the School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. The bead assemblage was dominated by beads referred to as Khami series glass beads. They originated in Asia in the fifteenth century and are common at archaeological sites in southern Africa. Their arrival in the region is credited to fifteenth century Muslim traders (Arkeel 1936: 299). Currently, the importation end date for the Khami glass beads is unknown (Wood 2009). There were also a few European glass beads at Mankhamba. They were made in Venice around 1600 AD (M. Wood, pers. comm.).

Chinese porcelain: The site of Mankhamba yielded 31 fragments of Chinese porcelain. They represented 23 plates and two cups or bowls. This was the largest amount of Chinese porcelain ever excavated at any site in Malawi. Professor Bennet Bronson, Curator Emeritus of Asian Anthropology and Ethnology at the Field Museum in Chicago identified the material. It came from Jiangxi and Fujian provinces of China. The kilns that made this type of porcelain were in operation only from 1540 to 1600 AD (B. Bronson, pers. Comm.).

## **Discussion**

The carbon-14 dates processed at Mankhamba should have been sufficient to clarify the chronology of the early history of the Chewa. Unfortunately, not all the dates proved useful. Therefore it became necessary to resort to artefacts which had the potential to shed some light on the chronology. The artefacts were Mawudzu pottery, glass beads, and Chinese porcelain.

The resemblance of Mawudzu and Lwangwa pottery, their age, and the fact that both appear rather suddenly in their respective areas suggests that they were made by new arrivals to those areas. Carbon-14 date number A-14859 shows that the makers of Mawudzu pottery settled at Mankhamba during a two hundred year span from the early thirteenth century to the mid fifteenth century AD. Considering that the site was occupied for a relatively short period, a two-hundred year time span for the initial occupation is, in this case, not good enough. Fortunately, Mawudzu pottery at Mankhamba had a decorative motif that helped clarify the chronology and that was stamp decoration.

The presence of stamp decoration on this pottery has been important in determining the date of arrival of the Chewa in central Malawi. Apparently, this type of decoration is very rare on Mawudzu pottery found at sites located south of

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<sup>3</sup> The presence of these earlier pottery types at Mankhamba is considered due to intrusion. It is an indication of the existence of early Iron Age sites in the area.

Mankhamba in the southern Lake Malawi area (Fig. 1). However, it is present on Namaso pottery which is found in the area and has ninth to twelfth century dates (Davison 1991: 4; 1992: 74). Stamp decorated Mawudzu pottery has also been observed at sites located on the Dedza highlands and areas to the north of Mankhamba through Salima to Nkhotakota (Davison 1992: 136; Mgomzulu 1978; Robinson 1975; 1979). It is also present on Lwangwa pottery in eastern Zambia (Phillipson 1976: 213). This gives stamp decorated Mawudzu pottery geographical localization. In this area, stamp decoration also links Mawudzu pottery to Namaso pottery and that suggests that stamp decorated Mawudzu pottery represents a cultural transition over time from the makers of Namaso pottery to makers of Mawudzu pottery. It means that the makers of Mawudzu pottery made their way to Mankhamba when Namaso pottery was still in use. Since Namaso pottery phased out in the twelfth century AD, that date represents the latest time that the Chewa could have arrived at Mankhamba. As the existing evidence suggests that no other groups of people other than the Chewa settled in central Malawi during the first half of the second millennium AD; and since Chewa oral traditions agree that the Banda clan arrived before the Phiri clan, it was Members of the Banda clan who settled at Mankhamba from the mid twelfth century AD. That date is close enough to Schoffeleers' dating of his proto-Chewa period. By the thirteenth century AD, the Chewa were well established at Mankhamba and had probably started expanding northwards.

Similarly, glass beads and Chinese porcelain have confirmed the date of arrival of the Phiri clan and of the establishment of the Maravi state. The abundant occurrence of these materials at Mankhamba was also significant because they are rare at other Late Iron Age sites in Malawi. The only sites to ever yield large amounts of glass beads were Nkhudzi Bay and Mtemankhokwe 1 in Mangochi district (Inskeep 1965; Juwayeyi 1991, 2008). However, both were burial sites and some of the human remains still had beads on them. At Mankhamba, there were no burials. Therefore, the beads were brought there to be traded. The Chinese porcelain on the other hand may not have been traded. In Zimbabwe for instance, Chinese porcelain is present at major ruins only. Garlake (1968: 30) has suggested that the reason for its presence at the major ruins is that it was used more as offerings or gifts to obtain the good will of kings and chiefs. The same may have been the case at Mankhamba (Juwayeyi 2010: 198). It would explain why Chinese porcelain is almost non-existent at other sites in Malawi.

The imported goods were exchanged with iron implements, cotton cloth, raw ivory, ivory bangles, animal skins and shells. The Mankhamba excavations shows that the Chewa were active traders of animal products. The excavation yielded 38,663 bone fragments of which only 1,044 or 2.7 per cent represented domestic animals. The wild animal specimens were dominated by those of elephants with a total of 4,748 or 12.6 per cent. A majority of the elephant specimens however, were manufacturing residue from the production of bangles. The minimum number of elephant individuals was four. Other large animals represented were hartebeest and impala each with a minimum number of ten individuals, and eland and buffalo with a minimum number of eight and seven individuals respectively. There were also two lions, one leopard, one cheetah or leopard (could not be easily distinguished), two crocodiles, six Zambezi soft shelled turtles, five terrapins and five tortoises. Such an abundance of wild animals in a culture with domestic animals suggests that the main reason for hunting was to harvest their skins or shells for trade. Trade in animal products between coastal traders and people of the interior dates to the tenth century AD (Phillipson, 1977b: 161).

The Chewa were also well known by traders at the Indian Ocean coast for the good quality of their iron implements particularly hoes and for their cotton cloth (Alpers 1975: 26). Hunting large animals including carnivores, metallurgy, and cloth making for the export market requires good organizational skills and supervision. With time, Mankhamba became a very prosperous trading centre. These activities suggest that a new way of doing things had been introduced at Mankhamba as early as the fifteenth century AD. It also suggests the presence at Mankhamba of strong leadership within a centralized political structure. Among the Chewa such a structure was provided by the leaders of the Phiri clan as no members of the Banda clan seem to “have occupied the position of king or provincial chief” (Schoffeleers 1973: 54). Thus the Phiri clan must have arrived early in the fifteenth century AD. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, they took advantage of Portuguese trading activities to enrich themselves and expand their political authority. Those dates are consistent with Schoffeleers’ second period of the early history of the Chewa.

By about the mid-sixteenth century AD, this trade-based prosperity at Mankhamba apparently encouraged some senior relations of the Kalonga such as Undi and Lundu to break away and establish their own states (Ntara 1973; Langworthy 1969, 1973). In that way they too would be able to control trade independent of Kalonga. It was this breaking away of some leaders that helped extend the Maravi state system to the Zambezi valley and to eastern Zambia. For a time, four leaders existed in the Maravi State system. The Kalonga himself remained strong at Mankhamba while Undi went to eastern Zambia (Ntara 1973; Langworthy 1969). Lundu established his state in the lower Shire valley and extended it to the Zambezi valley. His invasion of the area was recorded by the Portuguese (Newitt 1982). Muzura established his headquarters in the Mwanza-Neno area (Schoffeleers, 1987: 328).

By the second decade of the seventeenth century however, Muzura had become the sole ruler of the three states that were within what is now Malawi. Trade related conflict between him and Lundu; and Portuguese meddling in local affairs led to war which resulted in Lundu’s defeat (Newitt 1982; Schoffeleers 1987). Kalonga’s role in the war is not clear. However, he too must have been dethroned by Muzura. Portuguese documents of the early 1620s show that, by then, Muzura had shifted his headquarters from the Mwanza–Neno area to Mankhamba. His influence was considerable. In his 1624 report to his religious superiors at Goa, the Portuguese missionary Luis Mariano referred to Lake Malawi as the “lake of Mosura” and that the chief’s headquarters was only half a league (less than three miles) from the Lake (Schoffeleers, 1971: 93; Killick, 1990: 53).<sup>4</sup> These seventeenth century events are consistent with Schoffeleers third or classical Maravi period.

By the end of the eighteenth century however, the Maravi State appears to have been in decline. Schoffeleers implies that the decline was due to foreign intrusions (Schoffeleers 1973). However, the foreign intruders, the Ngoni, Yao, and the Scots, did not arrive in Malawi until the nineteenth century. By then, the Maravi State had been slowly disintegrating for many decades. A Portuguese traveller who passed through the area in 1798 scarcely mentioned a Kalonga (Burton 1873). A Yao chief called Nenula eventually killed the last Kalonga in the 1870s (Linden 1972: 11). The absence of very high quality burnishing (Inskeep 1965; Juwayeyi 1991) on Nkudzi pottery at Mankhamba suggests that by then, the site had been abandoned.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Also see Newitt 1982 and Schoffeleers, 1987 regarding the true identity of Muzura which is beyond the scope of this paper).

## Conclusions

Although archaeological research at early settlements of the Chewa has had a very late start, archaeological evidence from the excavations at Mankhamba has started to clarify the chronology of their early history. The range of dates obtained from carbon-14 and from the analysis of various archaeological artefacts shows that Schoffeleers' chronological sequence of that history, which was based entirely on oral traditions, was quite sound. The evidence suggests that in his critical analysis of the oral traditions of the Chewa, Schoffeleers was well ahead of his peers. As oral history informants die out, it is my hope that more archaeological research will be undertaken particularly at other ancient Chewa settlement sites such as Kaphirintiwa and Msinja. That will help bring out a more complete history of the Chewa.

<sup>5</sup> Late Nkudzi pottery from other sites in the southern Lake Malawi area is so well burnished that it is comparable to Samian ware of the Roman period in Europe. Such kind of burnishing does not exist at Mankhamba. It is an indication that the site was abandoned probably in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century before high quality burnishing became popular.

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# **RELIGION AND POLITICS IN THE EARLY HISTORY OF MARAVI PEOPLES: MATTHEW SCHOFFELEERS' CONTRIBUTION**

**An Essay in Memory of Late Father Prof J.M. Schoffeleers**

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I was privileged to have been one of the early graduates of the University of Malawi Fr. Prof Schoffeleers mentored. I first encountered him in 1969, as one of the undergraduates at Chancellor College, Chichiri Campus, to whom Schoffeleers then came to lecture on part-time basis. He took special interest in me in 1971 when I won a Fulbright Scholarship for graduate-level studies in the USA, and indicated interest in pursuing the historical study of Chewa Oral Tradition, in line with a similar study of Tumbuka Oral Tradition undertaken by the late Prof H. Leroy Vail. Through many letters, Schoffeleers supported me while I was in graduate school from 1971 to 1975 and thereafter when I was a young historian plying a career at Chancellor College, University of Malawi, at Zomba.

## **Introduction**

Fr Prof Matthew Schoffeleers was a religious anthropologist who contributed significantly to the study of traditional African Religion and para-religious institutions in Malawi and Central Africa in general.<sup>1</sup> He was a specialist on the traditional religious systems of the people formerly known as 'Maravi' but currently differentiated into groups who include the Chewa, Nyanja and Mang'anja. In a research and scholarly career which extended over fifty years, he especially focused on the traditional religious systems of the Chewa in Central Malawi and Mang'anja in the Lower Shire Valley of Southern Malawi, whom he defined as having been affiliated to the vast territorial cults of Chisumphu and Mbona, respectively, in pre-colonial times.<sup>2</sup> And, in his numerous publications he presented a dynamic picture of how the Chewa and Mang'anja had interacted with the territorial cults in question over time and through changing political dispensations.

My interest in this essay, however, is in the contribution Schoffeleers made to our knowledge and understanding of the early history of Malawi in general and Maravi people in particular. Of special interest is the way Schoffeleers interpreted the determinants and configurations of political change in early societies of Malawi. His unique contribution was to draw attention to the role which non-political factors and agents would have played in the political processes and developments concerned. More specifically, he drew attention to the role which religious and cultural factors had played in the process of political development and change at given points in time.

## **His View of the Pre-Dynastic Dispensation**

One of the issues Schoffeleers addressed quite early in his research on the Chewa and Mang'anja branches of the Maravi people pertained to the authority structure that existed amongst these peoples in pre-dynastic times i.e. prior to the rise of the great Maravi dynasties and states that dominated Maravi country from the 16th to 18<sup>th</sup> Century AD. He coined the term 'Proto-Chewa' to define the political era in question, and advanced the view that whatever authority existed then was rudimentary when compared to what would emerge in the heyday of the great Maravi states. It was authority that was wielded by custodians of rain-making cults and Nyau initiation societies, most of which institutions could be associated with the Banda and Mbewe

clans.<sup>3</sup> He saw the Banda clan in particular as having been closely associated with rain-making and the performance of crucial rites of passage like those which marked the coming of age among girls. As for Nyau, Schoffeleers was struck by the fact that this was a semi-religious cultural institution that had always been closely linked to lower level echelons of Chewa and Mang'anja political authority in the form of village headmen (eni mudzi or eni mzinda) and site chieftains (eni mtundu). The authority of any such lower level political leaders in the Chewa-Maravi political organisation was apparently deemed incomplete without Nyau, because Nyau was the principal guardian of Chewa culture.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, my own findings based on intense study of Chewa oral tradition in central Malawi in the 1970s appeared to corroborate Schoffeleers' argument about the nature of political authority that had existed in pre-dynastic or proto-Chewa times. The research in question pointed to the existence of an early, rudimentary system of chieftainship that was ritual-based and closely associated with female members of the 'Banda' clan. The female chiefs and ritual specialists in question were all viewed to have been descendants of Mangadzi, the custodian of the mother rain-making shrine at Msinja in the western part of Lilongwe district. They included Salima near the Linthipe delta, Mwali at Mankhamba or Mtakataka, Bimbi near Lake Malombe, Chauwa at Chilenje in the southeastern part of Lilongwe district, Matsakamula at Ntchisi, and Kafulama at Mchinji. They all presided over elaborate subsidiary shrines of the Chisumphu cult, that were geared to rain-making and the redress of national calamities.<sup>5</sup>

### **On Growth of Maravi States**

Schoffeleers was also able to shed considerable light on the issue of how the Maravi, whose royal clan was 'Phiri', constructed their political dominance over central and southern Malawi following their immigrations into the country in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. His major contention here was that the power and influence of the great Maravi dynasties which emerged in the period from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century largely depended on the principle of exchange which then characterized the relationship between state and religion. The arrangement was one in which the ruling dynasty provided protection and material support to territorial cult officials under its jurisdiction, and in return the cult officials concerned rendered the ritual services through which the cultural heritage was safeguarded and the moral as well as material well-being of the community guaranteed.

In central Malawi, for example, the Chisumphu cult is said to have played a prominent role in consolidating the dynasties of Kalonga, Chinsamba, Nyanda, Mazengeru, Chadza, Mwase, etc, as they enhanced their political and material strength in pre-Ngoni times. Chisumphu cult officials appear to have played a supportive and legitimizing role vis-à-vis presiding dynasties, by rendering counsel and ritual services. In return, the cult and its shrines or ritual centres were able to benefit from royal protection and material support.<sup>6</sup>

This reciprocal and mutually enhancing relationship between dynasty and cult was quite evident in the Lower Shire Valley, southern Malawi, where Schoffeleers was able to demonstrate that it was by marrying secular and religious patterns of authority that the Mang'anja built a powerful state, the Lundu Kingdom, which completely dominated the Lower Shire Valley and the adjacent highlands to the east and west in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. To that effect, he argued that:

'It was through the operations of Mang'anja political and religious institutions that peoples of the Lower Shire Valley were integrated into a powerful kingdom presided over by the Lundu dynasty.'<sup>7</sup>

It was apparently at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century or beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that the Lundus established their hegemony over the Mang'anja, by gaining control over the Mbona Cult. This would have been a great boost to the authority of the Lundus at that time, because the cult was associated with 'spirits of the land' through which national calamities like drought, floods, locust invasions, epidemic diseases, etc., could be managed.<sup>8</sup>

### **Religion and Politics during 19<sup>th</sup> Century Crises**

Schoffeleers also made a significant contribution to our understanding of how religion and politics interacted over crises Maravi peoples encountered in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, in the face of incursions by several groups of well armed invaders, some of whom came looking for new settlement areas while others arrived in order to hunt for ivory and slaves. They included the Chikunda, Ngoni and Swahili-Arabs in Central Malawi; and the Chikunda, Yao and Kalolo in Southern Malawi.<sup>9</sup> Irrespective of their motive for coming, they all came to pose a serious threat to the political and socio-economic stability of pre-existing Maravi people. It is to Schoffeleers' credit that he contributed a fresh analysis and interpretation of the manner in which the invaded peoples tried to cope with the incursions of the period.

He demonstrated that in Central Malawi the counsel of Chisumphi shrine officials at such places as Msinja in western Lilongwe, Chilenje in eastern Lilongwe, Mchinji, and Ntchisi was usually sought by Chewa chiefs and headmen in the face of crises posed by Ngoni attacks and raids. It was thus in consultation with religious authorities that the chiefs and headmen concerned were able to devise strategies for Chewa political survival. These included advising their besieged followers to seek refuge in caves and on summits of whatever high or rugged mountains existed in their vicinity. Alternatively, harassed communities were advised to abandon their settlements and go and seek protection in the fortifications (Machemba) of those Chewa rulers who emerged invincible from Ngoni attacks, such as Mwase at Kasungu, Mamba in the hills of southwestern Dowa, and Kachigunda at the confluence of the Lilongwe and Linthipe rivers in eastern Lilongwe.<sup>10</sup>

In the Lower Shire Valley, southern Malawi, so Schoffeleers highlighted, the incursions of the Chikunda and Yao slave hunters and Kalolo colonists in the 1850s and 1860s coincided with the incidence of a severe drought and famine which resulted in massive deaths. As in central Malawi, secular authorities in the form of Mang'anja chiefs and headmen tried on their own to address the problem but in vain. They despairingly turned to officials of the Mbona Cult, whose shrine on Thyolo Mountain at least provided a haven where the desperate among the harassed local people could seek refuge.<sup>11</sup>

### **In Conclusion**

In his numerous writings and publications which had a bearing on historical knowledge about Malawi, the late Fr. Prof Schoffeleers revealed the benefits historians can derive from anthropological analysis of oral historical data, and from inter-disciplinary approaches to their units and subjects of study.

He was particularly helpful in getting some of us to see that political events and processes might have had non-political determinants and causes. His particular achievement relative to political change among early Maravi peoples was to underline the role and contribution which could have been made by religious and cultural brokers whose interest in the well-being of their people was as significant as that of the political leadership.

And, he had a powerful message to share with us about leadership in the early political development of our peoples: that, contrary to the prominence given to secular rulers and military leaders as initiators of innovation and change, it was sometimes religious and cultural leaders drawn from the common people who helped their societies to improve or survive.

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<sup>1</sup> JM Schoffeleers (ed), Guardians of the Land: Essays on central African Territorial Cults (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1979); J Mathew Schoffeleers, River of Blood: The Genesis of a Martyr Cult in Southern Malawi (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992)

<sup>2</sup> JM Schoffeleers, 'The Chisumphi and Mbona Cults in Malawi: A Comparative History' in idem (ed), Guardians of the Land, pp. 147-186.

<sup>3</sup> JM Schoffeleers, 'Towards the Identification of a Proto-Chewa Culture: A Preliminary Contribution', Malawi Journal of Social Science, vol.2 (1973), pp. 46-60.

<sup>4</sup> NE Lindgren and JM Schoffeleers, Rock Art and Nyau Symbolism in Malawi (Limbe: Montfort Press, 1976), pp. 40-41.

<sup>5</sup> Kings M Phiri, 'Chewa History in central Malawi and the Use of Oral Tradition, 1600-1920' (PhD Thesis, University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1975), pp. 47-51.

<sup>6</sup> JM Schoffeleers, 'The Chisumphi and Mbona Cults in Malawi: A Comparative History' in idem (ed), Guardians of the Land: Essays on central African Territorial Cults (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> J Matthew Schoffeleers, 'The History and Political Role of the Mbona Cult among the Mang'anja' in T.O. Ranger and I.N. Kimambo (eds), The Historical Study of African Religion (London: Heinemann, 1972), p.75.

<sup>8</sup> Schoffeleers, 'The History and Political Role of the Mbona Cult', pp. 76-77.

<sup>9</sup> HW Langworthy, 'Central Malawi in the Nineteenth Century' in RJ MacDonald (ed), From Nyasaland to Malawi (Nairobi: EAPH, 1975), pp. 1-40.

<sup>10</sup> Schoffeleers, 'The Chisumphi and Mbona Cult in Malawi', pp. 170-173.

<sup>11</sup> Schoffeleers, 'The History and Political Role of the Mbona Cult', p.83.

## NDIWO AND GENDER IN SOUTHERN MALAWI

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*Former employee, student and friend of Fr. Schoffeleers: “He was an inspiring teacher .....Schoffeleers was deeply committed to his research, particularly the Mbona cult, and had the uncanny ability to stir other people’s interest in his discoveries. He opened my eyes to the cultural riches of the Mang’anja and taught me to respect African history as a field of intellectual investigation. I am what I am today largely because of his influence”.*

- *Even the sick [and powerless] have a right to that which is in the pot.* (Chewa Proverb).<sup>1</sup>
- *[My daughter]...take these bones, [and] give them to your husband, but come back to eat the steak.* (Part of a Chewa Song).<sup>2</sup>

I hope to demonstrate the relevance of the historical approach with regard to the Mbona myths....It can be demonstrated that they have their roots in different historical periods and that they can be made to yield substantive information about these periods; that, taken as a whole, they express a crucial development in people’s thinking about the social order (Schoffeleers, *River of Blood*).<sup>3</sup>

### **Introduction**

Matthew Schoffeleers did not write anything specifically on food and/or gender, but anyone familiar with his work will easily recognize some of his interests in the following essay. The essay is about the Mang’anja and Sena of the Lower Shire Valley, a region that his research introduced to the international community of scholars. But his inspiration goes beyond geographical location. As a researcher who came to most of his important conclusions using oral literature, he taught me to respect this kind of evidence the same way I treat written sources. The second part of this essay, which outlines rural ideas and ideologies of sharing, is entirely dependent on oral information. The third section, which explores the relevance, in real life, of rural ideals of food distribution, extends Schoffeleers’ work as a leading voice in the debate about the relationship of oral literature with history.<sup>4</sup> His intimate knowledge of the region’s oral traditions allowed him to tease out the historical meanings of the

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\*I would like to express my gratitude to Jesse Moore and Thomas Slaughter, both of the History Department here, for their thoughtful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft.

<sup>1</sup>African Way of Life Club (Kachebere Major Seminary) “Bantu Wisdom: A Collection of Proverbs,” (Unpublished MS, n.d.): 20, item 142. Another variation of the same theme: “It’s the sick who distribute food from the pot” (Odwala agawa mphika).

<sup>2</sup> Part of a song that was recorded by and reproduced here with the permission of Dr. Enoch Timpunza-Mvula. Oral history does, of course, offer another picture of a mother-in-law, who brews beer to thank her hard-working son-in-law: E. Chafulumira, *Mbiri ya Amang’anja* (Department of Education, Zomba, 1948), 23-24.

<sup>3</sup> J.M. Schoffeleers, *River of Blood: The Genesis of a Martyr Cult in Southern Malawi, ca A.D. 1600* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 141.

<sup>4</sup> “Myth and/or History?: A Reply to Christopher Wrigley.” *Journal of African History* 30, 3 (1988): 385-90; *River of Blood*, 140-142.

legends of Mbona and to date the peopling of Malawi with a high degree of accuracy, as archaeologists now acknowledge.<sup>5</sup>

There are two other aspects of this essay, whose lineage to Schoffeleers' work may not be immediately obvious. In relating the ideologies of sharing to economic change, the essay follows Schoffeleers' lead in re-interpreting the religious history of southern Africa with reference to the region's economic developments.<sup>6</sup> Finally, in the background of all this looms large the example of Schoffeleers the anthropologist of the Mang'anja, the participant observer who joined the all-male *Nyau* secret society, earning the name "Chakulakale" ("was already grown up").<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, like most of my academic work, this essay would not have been possible without his pioneering work; I hope the essay reflects in some ways the spirit of Schoffeleers, the man I had the privilege to know in various capacities over the years. As a high school student in the late 1960s, I typed "Mang'anja Religion and History," his collection of oral materials; as a student at Chancellor College, I took several of his anthropology classes during 1971-74 and, as an academic in my own right, I enjoyed his friendship and kept exchanging ideas with him until about a year before his death on that Easter Sunday, 2011.

Following in his footsteps as a chronicler of contemporary norms and practices, I outline in the first two sections of this paper the foods available in the Lower Shire Valley today and the region's ideas and ideologies of sharing in the forms of the "golden-age theory" and the "alternative vision" — I will sometimes loosely refer to both of them as the "charter" or "idiom" (of food sharing), and to the alternative vision alone as the "*ndiwo*-charter (the English "relish", which some scholars call "side-dish")." The essay then goes on to ask whether and to what extent the charter is relevant to the existing eating practices in the region.

The article makes three statements about the charter's relationship to everyday life, besides the obvious point that social action can only be an imperfect reflection of a society's ideals and aspirations. First, as a native of the region I was raised on a good dosage of the two theories, especially the alternative vision. I knew at a very young age what parts of the fish, chicken, and occasionally meat to leave for the elders. Then, returning to the region as a researcher in the mid-1990s, elderly women brought back the memories of my youth when they loudly complained about the dictates of the idiom. Second, I argue that it would be a mistake to expect to find, at any point in time, the distribution of nutrients in the population as a mere derivative of the principles of the charter. Villagers and particularly women, also eat outside the formal meal, often consuming food items they are not supposed to at the organized meals. Formal meals existed and, to some extent still exist, side by side with informal eating. Finally, as a set of social norms, the golden-age theory and alternative vision today point to a food economy significantly different from that of the nineteenth century. Behind the relatively enduring vocabulary of the charter are, first, an unstable

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<sup>5</sup> Yusuf M. Juwayeyi, "An Archaeological Chronology of the Early History of the Chewa," (Unpublished Essay).

<sup>6</sup> "A Martyr Cult as a Reflection of Changes in Production: The Case of the Lower Shire Valley, 1590-1622," *African Perspective* (Leiden) 2 (1978):19-33; "Economic Change and Religious Polarization in an African Rural District." In W. Beinart, et. al. , eds., *Malawi: An alternative Pattern of Development* (Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, 1985): 187-242; "Theology and Relations of Production: The Case of Southern Africa." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 61 (1987): 14-26. See also his "Trade, Warfare and Social Inequality: The Case of the Lower Shire Valley of Malawi, 1590-1622." *The Society of Malawi Journal* 33, 2 (1980): 6-24.

<sup>7</sup> *The Lower Shire Valley: Its Ecology, Population Distribution, Ethnic Divisions and Systems of Marriage* (Blantyre [Malawi]: Montfort Press, 1968).

food regime and, second, evolving methods of teaching the two theories of food sharing.<sup>8</sup> There may be a greater divergence today than in the past between the region's eating practices and norms.

As a form of technical division of labour, the distribution of *ndiwo* stew between women and men does not necessarily tell us much about the power relations between the two sexes. To understand gender, one would have to relate the food-sharing system to women's position in politics, economics, religion, etc., on the one hand, and their relations with other actors besides men, particularly social juniors of both sexes, on the other. The inclusion of social age produces some startling hypotheses: the terms "women" and "men" in the eternal vocabulary of the *ndiwo* charter did not then denote the same social categories as they do today.

### **Foods and their Social Biographies**

Food (*chakudya*) assumes different social identities on its journey toward the eating-place, although this trip varies in nature with the food in question. Most undomesticated foods start the journey as the property of the entire community before becoming the private asset of the hunter or collector. Regular food shortages, *njala*, become *chaola* famine, when some of its victims invert the above logic, using physical prowess to deny others access to the fruits of nature. Foods from the market have an analogous beginning from the perspective of the buyers. They are there for anyone with money or other exchange goods before falling into the private domain of the buyer. By contrast, cultivated foods start their life as the private goods of the household. But regardless of their origin, most foods tend to become social assets of the community after going through fire. Cooking is a key event in the transformation of *chakudya*.

At the centre of this process are women, who assume more and more responsibilities soon after food has left the market place, the bush, and the fields. Each day rural women organize their lives around food processing. And though largely ignored by even feminist historians, the pounding of grain, cooking, and related activities define what it is to be a village woman as distinct from being a man. Quite understandably, women have shown more willingness than men have done to embrace new food processing technologies that, like mechanical grinding mills, reduce a wife's toil and indirectly compel husbands, as providers of money for the service, to share the work of transforming the social identities of food.

As elsewhere in Southern Africa, in Malawi the formal meal has two components: the *nsima* porridge or its substitutes and *ndiwo*. *Ndiwo* is the more diversified and variable group, consisting of meat, fish, legumes, and vegetables, which give each meal its distinctive character. By contrast, members of the *nsima* group are relatively few, featuring mostly cereals on a regular basis and roots and cucurbits during the hungry season. Finally, while villagers get *nsima* items from the market mostly in times of hunger, the procurement of *ndiwo* sends them to the bush and markets on a regular basis. Getting *ndiwo* for the next meal is not always an easy task, although its preparation is generally easier than the processing of grains into *ufa* flour for making *nsima*.

The *nsima* group features cereals, roots and cucurbits. More labour-demanding than the preparation of roots and cucurbits,<sup>9</sup> the processing of cereals falls into two

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<sup>8</sup> See S. Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 3-45.

<sup>9</sup> Unlike in other parts of the country, in the Lower Shire Valley villagers do not make flour (for *nsima*) from cassava, which is a more laborious task. In fact, cassava is not as popular here as it is elsewhere in Malawi. The colonial government tried but failed to popularize the crop.

stages. In the first, the aim is to remove *deya* bran from the *mphale*, the name for the grain selected for flour-making. In the second and last stage, women pulverize *mphale* into flour either by grinding it on the traditional *mphero* grinding mill or by pounding it in a wooden *mtondo* mortar.<sup>10</sup> Both methods are laborious, which help explain why the so-called “conservative” peasant woman has led the silent rebellion against the traditional ways of doing the order of the day, enthusiastically embracing new technologies in the form of mechanical as well as electric *chigayo* mills. Introduced in the 1940s, the machines have now penetrated even remote areas like the Dinde Marshes.<sup>11</sup> And in a clear indication of their dislike of old work habits, women travel long distances to reach the machines, wait in long lines for their turn, and spend the little money at their disposal for the service. Only poverty and custom explains the failure of the new technology to completely overtake the old pounding and grinding processes.

Custom once stood against the spread of *chigayo* because they were partial technologies. They could not, in particular, separate the bran from the grain, as women did in the first stage of flour making. Peasants had two options, one more radical than the other. The radical option saw women taking their whole maize, millet and sorghum to the *chigayo* before removing the bran. The result would be course flour and course *nsima* (*ngaiwa*), which men do not like, against the common wisdom among educated Africans and Europeans about the benefits of such *nsima*. Men prefer *nsima yoyera* and would have welcomed the findings of one study of the 1950s, showing how the cleaning and soaking of maize to make bran-less flour actually releases certain nutrients that remain “locked” in whole grains.<sup>12</sup> They would insist on the second and less radical option, requiring women to do the first “traditional” stage in the manufacturing of *ufa* before taking their *mphale* to *chigayo* mills. Women must have therefore felt great relief with the introduction of *chigayo* that can both remove the bran and grind the resulting *mphale* into refined flour. Those living close to the new machines can, in a matter of a few hours, get from their *mphale* of unprocessed grains *ufa woyera* and start cooking *nsima* — the final stage in the transformation of food. Women also make *nsima* from rice, although the more popular technique of preparing rice is to boil it whole after removing the bran in a *mtondo* mortar.<sup>13</sup> Boiling is also a common method of preparing roots and cucurbits, which people also roast.

Sweet potatoes, cassava, and Irish potatoes are the chief root crops of the Valley and, as substitutes for the cereal-based *nsima*, they rank higher than cucurbits, like pumpkins, loofah, and gourd. Villagers value the cucurbits mostly as hunger-breakers that mature earlier than cereals. But these plants quickly disappear with the end of the rainy season, and the few that flourish during the dry season serve mostly as snacks and as *ndiwo* ingredients, suggesting how thin the line between *nsima* and *ndiwo* can sometimes become. Many villagers in the marshes live for days on end subsisting on fish as both “*nsima*” and as “*ndiwo*.”

For the purposes of simplicity, one can divide *ndiwo* into four subcategories of meat, fish, legumes and vegetables. Collectively known as “leaves” or *masamba* among villagers, vegetables occupy the top rank among the four. Peasants consume a wide range of wild leaves, such as wild blite mushrooms, cats’ whiskers, and wild

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<sup>10</sup> Leni Pereira (Mrs.), Chitsa Village, TA Tengani, Nsanje, 5 November, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> There were mechanical grinding mills in the Valley in the 1910s already, but these only served the needs of private companies.

<sup>12</sup> R.T. Ellis, “The Food Properties of Flint and Dent Maize,” *The East African Agricultural Journal* (April 1959): 251-253.

<sup>13</sup> Leni Pereira (Mrs.), Chitsa Village, TA Tengani, Nsanje, 5 November, 1991.

okra. Then there are the leaves of cassava, haricot beans, cowpeas, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, and sesame, grown for other uses besides their *masamba*.<sup>14</sup> Finally, villagers raise cabbage, rape, and okra, and other plants exclusively for their leaves.

Nutritionists have noted with approval the popularity of vegetables because, though mostly made up of water, they are a valuable source of high quality (though generally small) protein, calcium, iron, Vitamin C, and vitamin A, and vitamin B-complex producing substances.<sup>15</sup> But these same scientists also think that villagers do not realize all the advantages of *masamba*, partly because some cooking techniques destroy vitamins (see below), and partly because peasants do not regularly eat the leaves in large quantities. The supply of leaves fluctuates by the seasons, and villagers have not developed successful ways of preserving them besides the *mfutso* method. Women make *mfutso* from the leaves of plants like pumpkins, kidney beans, and cowpeas by boiling and drying them in the sun.<sup>16</sup> Cowpeas are also important members of the second *ndiwo* sub-group: legumes.

Popular *ndiwo* legumes range from velvet (or Bengal) beans, cowpeas, kidney beans, groundnuts, pigeon peas, hyacinth beans, Bambara ground beans, to field peas. Not all of these pulses are grown in the Valley; some, like Bambara beans, come from the Shire Highlands, and disparities also exist within the Valley itself. Different sub-regions specialize in different types of legumes. For example, kidney beans do better under *dimba* conditions on the marshes than they do on *munda* fields on the rain-fed dry lands. The supply of beans is as ecologically sensitive as that of vegetables, and the only major difference between the two is that as a group, beans last longer than vegetables do under the current storage systems. As a result, there is a fair amount of trade in beans within the Valley and between it and the Shire Highlands, making it possible for those with money to obtain legumes almost any time during the year, which is good news given that beans are a good source of vitamin A, vitamin B1, and are rich in protein. About 20 percent of the content of the dried bean is protein.<sup>17</sup> Beans are in this regard second only to fish, which is the third most common *ndiwo* ingredient in the Lower Shire Valley after beans and vegetables. There are many kinds of fish in the Shire River, its tributaries, and marshes. In some localities the term *ndiwo* is almost synonymous with fish. Finally there is the meat group, which features the flesh of chicken, duck, goats, pigs, cattle and a variety of undomesticated animals like mice and which occupies a distant fourth position in the region's dietary regime.

The flesh of meat is an important source of protein, varying amounts of fat, mineral salts and vitamins A and B complex. Especially rich in minerals and vitamins are the internal organs like liver and kidney, whereas bones contain considerable amounts of calcium. Villagers who eat so little meat miss a valuable source of nutrients, although this may not necessarily translate into structurally deficient diets. The relative value of animal protein vis-à-vis that derived from

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<sup>14</sup> They call the leaves of sesame *umphedza*, while the term *nkhwani* denotes different things among the Mang'anja and Sena. Among the Mang'anja, *nkhwani* refers to pumpkin leaves: J. Williamson, *Useful Plants of Malawi* (Zomba, Malawi: Government Press [1956], 1972); D. C. Scott, *A Cyclopaedic Dictionary of the Mang'anja Language Spoken in British Central Africa* [Gregg International Publishes, 1968]. Among the Sena *nkhwani* means the leaves of *khobwe* cowpeas. The Mang'anja call the leaves of *khobwe* cowpeas *khwany* (Mrs. Rosta Msaka, personal communication, October 21, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> J. Barker, "Nyasaland Native Foods," *Nyasaland Times*, 1940: Malawi National Archives, Zomba (PAM/458), 8.

<sup>16</sup> They would sometimes flavor these with tomatoes, *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

vegetables, beans, or cereals is a hotly debated issue among nutrition scientists.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the nutritional value of *ndiwo* (and other foods) can also depend on cooking methods. Women prepare *ndiwo* by boiling as well as frying with factory and locally manufactured oils like those from groundnuts and sesame. They apply condiments to make *ndiwo* palatable and the list of condiments ranges from salt, peppers, shallots, tomatoes, to curry powder. They also use potashes to soften “hard” relishes, particularly okra and the leaves of pumpkins, hyacinth beans, cowpeas, field peas, and cassava. Some nutritionists think, however, potashes destroy the vitamins in the leaves.<sup>19</sup> But this is only one view, and peasants may have their own perspective on the matter. There can be little doubt, though, that the supply and preparation of *ndiwo* challenges the mental capacities of married village women on a daily basis. The so-called “side” dish of the academic world is not a side issue for village women, who have to be constantly creative to supply their families with this defining but variable component of the daily meal; *ndiwo* stands as the contested segment of the daily meal.

### **Sharing**

*The joys of being a community come to an end when you have to share ndiwo* (Chewa Proverb).<sup>20</sup>

*If you do not willingly share your food, your hungry neighbour will snatch it from your mouth* (Chewa Proverb).<sup>21</sup>

In Mang’anja oral literature one finds two different principles of sharing cooked food; I call the two the “golden-age” theory and the second the “alternative” vision.<sup>22</sup> The golden-age theory makes access to cooked food and the fruits of the bush an entitlement of every member of the community, regardless of his or her position in material production, while the alternative vision underscores the limited nature of that right. The two theories are, however, similar in that they both underline the social character of *chakudya*. Food is as much about people’s relationships to things as it is about their ties to one another. To eat is to get connected to other members of the community; food is about sharing.

The golden-age theory is remarkable for its lack of specifics and inclusiveness. All consumers stand equal before the meal, and villagers are supposed to apply the principle on a daily basis through the *chidyerano* communal meal, bringing together members of different independent households for the purposes of eating. Although important, kinship is not the only organizing principle; households share *chidyerano* meals primarily as neighbours. *Chidyerano* stands for the core ideals of the golden-age theory that defines food as an object for sharing.

While some traditions make *chidyerano* an outcome of hunger, many others locate its origins in the indefinite past of abundance, as Mr. Tiwongolera Bayisi did on 13 April 1995:

There is no *chidyerano* nowadays, but it ruled the day in the past, when rains were plentiful and there was no hunger. There was no reason for people to be stingy [*umbombo*]. Granaries were always full of food, and people were only too happy to

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>20</sup> This is a liberal translation of the following: “Ali awiri si mantha, kuipira kutha ndiwo m’mbale.” I am grateful to Mrs. Rosta Msaka for this proverb.

<sup>21</sup> African Way of Life Club “Bantu Wisdom,” 20, item 145.

<sup>22</sup> Although I use the definite article before “alternative vision,” I do not believe it is the only theory countering the golden-age theory.

share their food with others. No one was stingy those days and, indeed, it was difficult for anyone to be stingy because the granaries were always full.<sup>23</sup>

This classic statement of the golden-age theory of history rests on the view of the socio-political system as a stable and fully developed regime, allowing no room for conflict. Rains always came as expected; the granaries were always full, and no one had reason to be greedy. People shared food with their neighbours almost instinctively: “When women from this house, that house, and another house cooked food, they ate together under a tree like this one; that’s what they called *thando* [*chidyerano*].”<sup>24</sup> There was so much food those days that even the meanest did not think twice before sharing it with their neighbours. *Chidyerano* reproduced the generosity of the great feasts of the *masika* harvest season on a daily basis:

“It is true that in those days people shared their food and did not discriminate against others, as they do today. People ate together because they were united. And they also shared their beer, drinking together. When people brewed beer, they would take the pots into the open, invite their neighbours, who would happily come to enjoy the brew as a community.”<sup>25</sup>

This was a past without internal tensions, a time radically different from the present.

The golden-age theory is a two-part model, with the first extolling the past of abundance and the other deprecating the present of persistent hunger. Whereas the one era promoted *chidyerano* and sharing, the other did the opposite. There can be no mediating points between the two eras.<sup>26</sup> *Chidyerano* could not have survived the transition from the past to the present. The persistent hunger of the present era brought an end to *chidyerano*. There are no conditions to support it today. “*Umbombo* meanness and hunger rule the day nowadays” against the background of a new kind of decadence “that pits children against their parents.”<sup>27</sup> “Good morals and hunger cannot co-exist.”<sup>28</sup> Yes, *chidyerano* has become a powerful metaphor of what peasants view as the past glories and current maladies of their food and political systems.

As an integral part of the region’s myths and legends,<sup>29</sup> the golden-age theory is loud, powerful, widespread, and overwhelming, proclaiming an impenetrable system that degenerated only because of external forces. To repair it, one needs to return to the past. Short on details, the golden-age theory has the coherence of all simplifying ideologies, and can easily lead the unsuspecting researcher to think of it as the only theory of sharing in the region. It is not. If one listens to the voices of social inferiors and the underprivileged one hears a different narrative, however indistinctively.

Almost formless and never part of the dominant charter, the alternative vision is largely a female perspective on the food system. It does not divide time between the

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<sup>23</sup> Tiwongolera Bayisi, Njereza Village, TA Kasisi, Chikwawa, 13 April 1995.

<sup>24</sup> Benard Inesi Demba, Chapepa Village, TA Ngabu, Nsanje, 10 May 1995.

<sup>25</sup> Henry Genti, Maere Village, TA Mbenje, Nsanje, 8 June 1995.

<sup>26</sup> In this case, colonial anthropology might have exaggerated but did not invent the association between change and moral decay: See Henrietta L. Moore and Megan Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition, and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890-1990* (Heinemann, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> Washeni Semba, Khembo Village, STA Mbenje, Nsanje, 8 June 1995.

<sup>28</sup> Laisoni Musaika and Mrs. Musaika, Mtambo Village, TA Makhwira, Chikwawa, 26 May 1995; Jasten Nasho, Nyangu II Village, TA Makhwira, Chikwawa, 27 May 1995; Washeni Semba, Khembo Village, STA Mbenje, Nsanje, 8 June 1995.

<sup>29</sup> Schoffeleers, *River of Blood*, 140-255.

past of plenty and the present of hunger; rather, the theory rests on the distinction between *nsima* and *ndiwo* stew. Without much to say about *nsima* — the principal if unspoken target of the golden-age theory — the alternative vision focuses on the sharing of *ndiwo* that did and continues to divide the community along the lines of age and gender.<sup>30</sup> Today, differential rights to *ndiwo* continue to make male elders the more privileged members of the community during every meal.

Women do not deny the existence of *chidyerano* in the past or the fact that only few people practise it today. All they assert is that, like any other social value, *chidyerano* was something people had to fight for because there were equally strong forces against it. Its decline results not from some long-term decline in food availability, as golden-age theorists argue, but from day-to-day tensions over *ndiwo*:

*Chidyerano* comes to a halt when some people eat meat alone in their houses at the same time as they enjoy other people's meat at the communal meal. When others find this out, they too begin eating their meat inside their houses, and that marks the end of *chidyerano*.<sup>31</sup>

Not so much the absence as the presence of food, in the form of *ndiwo*, led to the end of *chidyerano*. Besides, *ndiwo* also strains intra-domestic relations, pitting the male elder against his wives and children. Every day it repudiates the equality of consumers.

Three principles guide the unequal distribution of *ndiwo* between male adults vis-à-vis women (and the young). The first bars women from certain types of *ndiwo*, but the list of such foods is very short today, limited under most conditions to eggs.<sup>32</sup> The more pervasive discriminatory practices follow the second and third principles. The second places *ndiwo* in different grades, starting with the meat group on top, and followed, in a descending order, by fish, vegetables, and salt (*mchere*). Villagers expect women to eat the lower grades in the event the more desirable cannot feed everyone. The third and probably most common form of differentiation categorizes some parts of fish and meat as distinctively “female” and “male.”<sup>33</sup>

The conventions regulating the division of beef — a newcomer to the Valley — are derivatives of the rules dividing wild and domesticated animals.<sup>34</sup> The men who kill the animal boil its blood together with the kidneys, heart, and the smaller intestines to make *nsiya*, which they may share with women, who cook the rest of the meat in preparation for the regular meal. After cooking, women are expected to allocate the choicest portions of the meat, such as the liver, as part of the men's *ndiwo*.<sup>35</sup> (Women and under-fives of both sexes ate separately from men and boys above five.) But even more intricate is the distribution of the popular fish and chicken.

Considered a delicacy more so than fish, chicken is the standard meat villagers use to entertain guests, serving it whole in the case of special visitors like “strategic” friends, a suitor, and the relatives of a bride or bridegroom. Otherwise, they cut the chicken into pieces, giving men the “best” portions: gizzard, liver, thighs, and the fatty *chinyophilo* “popo's nose.”<sup>36</sup> To women tradition assigns the less desirable

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<sup>30</sup> The last section of the essay takes up the question of social age and its relationship with gender.

<sup>31</sup> Arnold Kukhala (an employee of Cotton Ginnery Limited), Jambo Village, TA Mbenje, Nsanje, July 2, 1995.

<sup>32</sup> It seems that even this taboo against eggs may now be a thing of the past.

<sup>33</sup> Leni Pereira (Mrs.), Chitsa Village, TA Tengani, Nsanje, 5 November, 1991.

<sup>34</sup> In the past, chiefs and headpersons used to receive the hind leg of wild and some domesticated animals, but the practice seems to have died out.

<sup>35</sup> Leni Pereira (Mrs.), Chitsa Village, TA Tengani, Nsanje, 5 November 1991.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

lower breast and similar portions, and children are supposedly happy to receive wings, the neck, legs, and feet.

Equally stratified is fish — the most common source of protein in the Valley. According to the gender-driven classification, there are three parts to *mlamba* mudfish and other large fish. Village women are trained to load their own and their children's *ndiwo* plate with the fleshy, fat-free, and “tasteless” section between the head and the upper part of the belly. By contrast, men claim as their own the entire head, “tail,” and the blubbery section of the belly with reproductive organs and eggs. These are the “tastier” and fat-bearing portions of fish that men closely guard as their prerogative, making sure that their wives do not eat or give them away.<sup>37</sup> The alternative vision opens an entirely different, and uglier, peasant world than that provided by the golden-age theory.

From the perspective of the alternative vision, therefore, every organized meal, regardless of its format, emerges as a “feast” for male elders with their rights to *ndiwo* and “better” portions of meat and fish, and as “famine” for women and children without those rights. One does not, therefore, have to look to the past for “feast” and to the present for “famine.” Feast and famine co-exist. The protein-delivering *ndiwo* transforms the daily meal into a terrain of social struggle and contestation, acting as a more potent force of change than the cereal-based *nsima* does. Conversely, *ndiwo* acts as a better barometer than *nsima* of the degrees of congruence between, on the one hand, the rules and practices and, on the other hand, the present and past of the daily meal.

### **The Past and Present of the Daily Meal**

A good starting point in assessing the relevance of the golden-age theory and alternative vision might be to emphasize the obvious: The two are not descriptions of social reality, but mere models, standards, a charter of social behaviour that may or may not find an exact expression in everyday experience. Moreover, as timeless political idioms, the theories may point to social realities that have ceased to exist or exist in different forms. The language of sharing may continue unchanged despite big shifts in the overall food system and in the methods of transmitting the theories to the next generation, in the same way as the idioms of “healing and harming the land” have outlived the political realities of nineteenth-century Shambaa Kingdom in Tanzania.<sup>38</sup>

Do the eating practices of the Valley reflect the standards set by the two models of sharing food?

My instinctive answer is in the affirmative, but it is necessarily tentative because provisioning was not a key question of the original project, which focused on dramatic hunger.<sup>39</sup> The answer rests on my experiences as a native of the region, who learned elements of both theories as part of my upbringing; but came to appreciate

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<sup>37</sup>Wives who complained against this kind of behavior received unqualified support; the kitchen was a woman's domain. Women also resented and felt betrayed when their husbands monopolized meat and forced them to eat *masamba* vegetables in a supplementary meal couples took alone inside their houses; thus spoiling the spirit of the snack, which symbolized the couple's intimacy and unity against outsiders, particularly the members of the *chidyerano* meal. Such behavior on the part of the husband could constitute grounds for divorce: Damison Kulima, Tambo, Kolina Chipondeneni Tambo, Tambo Village, STA Mbenje, Nsanje, July 5, 1995.

<sup>38</sup>Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*, 3-45.

<sup>39</sup>See my “Beyond the ‘Crisis’ in African Food Studies,” *The Journal of the Historical Society* 3: 3-4 (Summer/Fall, 2003): 281-301.

that the seemingly well-choreographed daily meal was a contested terrain when I returned as a researcher.

While their male counterparts would spend hours on end on the virtues of the golden-age theory without the slightest hint of the dark world of the alternative vision, elderly women responded to almost every question about food with answers detailing the taboos and conventions regulating *ndiwo*. And even when they laughed, one could still detect a sense of dissent in their voices. Indeed, it seems that they expected me, as a sympathetic, “educated” and therefore more powerful person, to intercede on their behalf with their husbands, in the same way as disgruntled cotton growers thought I would bring up their complaints about low producer prices to the Malawi Government.<sup>40</sup> I was not, of course, able to deliver on either, except that the women’s voices finally imposed provisioning and *ndiwo* on my agenda.

Women’s resentment constitutes one kind of indirect evidence against the possibility of an exact congruence between the rules and practices of the daily meal. One would be expecting too much from these protesting women, who often procured and always cooked the *ndiwo*, not to develop over the years strategies of negotiating the worst abuses of the regimen. These are, moreover, the same women who successfully rebelled against the drudgery of the traditional grinding and milling techniques. And there is yet another reason, built into the system, why it would be naive to expect an exact correlation between the distribution of nutrients in the population and rules of the charter: Men and especially women also eat outside the organized meal, sometimes consuming some of the foods beyond their conventional limits as set by the *ndiwo* charter.

Informal foods fall into four categories, with the first two as mirror images of the *ndiwo* and *nsima* of formal meals. *Nsima* extensions range all the way from sweet potatoes, maize, millets to sorghums that people eat raw or roasted. Villagers also mix water with the flour of millet or sorghum to make stiff *chigodo* and soft *mperera* pastes, eaten raw. Moreover, as they grind or pound grains to make flour, women habitually nibble on tiny *misere* fragments of the broken cereals. When boiled, *misere* becomes *mitama*, which is eaten as a snack or as a substitute for *nsima*. *Mitama* becomes a component of formal and informal eating; thus, serving a role similar to certain types of bread and bread-like items.<sup>41</sup>

At the other end of the scale, in the second category, are *ndiwo* extensions, which are narrower in scope, limited for the most part to fried fish or barbecued meat like *kanyenya* that one buys on the market. These items also tend to enjoy a brief lifespan in the informal domain largely because people do not eat them raw, and soon after going through fire, they often become part of the organized meal.

By contrast, fruits - such as *malambe* (of the baobab tree), tiny *masau*, guava, passion fruit, lemon, grapefruit, pineapples, oranges, pawpaws, avocado pears, mangoes and bananas - which constitute the third category of foods eaten outside the formal meal, enjoy a secure tenure within the informal arena.<sup>42</sup> They are always eaten raw. Moreover, unlike members of the first two categories, most fruits are seasonal, available in any region during one but not another time of year. Finally, most fruits tend to flourish better in some ecosystems than in others. Thus, although the Lower

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<sup>40</sup> Elias Mandala, *The End of Chidyerano: A History of Food and Everyday Life in Southern Malawi, 1860-2004* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005), 142-159.

<sup>41</sup> J. Williamson, *Useful Plants of Malawi* (Zomba, Malawi: Government Press [1956], 1972), 53-54, 87-88, 92-93, 111-112, 127-133.

<sup>42</sup> Same as *nyama yabaya-baya*, which literally means meat you pick with a fork or something similar.

Shire Valley grows its own bananas, it still looks to the Shire Highlands, particularly Thyolo, for the best bananas throughout the year.

The Shire Valley has been an open economy also in temporal terms, as is highlighted by the fourth category of informal foods: beverages. Straddling uneasily the formal/informal divide, the traditional brew has undergone two types of changes. First, beverages, such as Coca-Cola and Fanta, now compete with and in some areas have supplanted *thobwa* sweet beer and other homemade soft drinks. A similar competition rages in the field of alcoholic beverages. The old hard liquors, like *kachasu* gin, have had to contend with factory-brewed gin, brandy, and beer, most of which are now manufactured in the country.<sup>43</sup>

But competition and/or replacement is not the only pattern of change in traditional drinking habits. Another change came with sugar, which has “revolutionized” both the social and technical conditions of the traditional brewery.<sup>44</sup> Sugar has made the distilling process so easy that a single woman can now brew most beers and liquors without the support of other women, as was the case in the past.<sup>45</sup> Thus, notwithstanding colonial attempts to ban the practice, *kachasu*-making has become a popular enterprise among poor women in both rural and urban settings.<sup>46</sup> Drinking has also lost some of the social functions it used to serve in the past. Today, women brew beer mostly for financial reasons.

Even this spotty outline of what I call the “informal” sector should spotlight four issues ultimately relevant to the discussion of *ndiwo* and gender.

First, villagers consume more foods than those appearing on the organized daily meal. Narrow in the range of items it makes available at any moment, the organized meal existed and still exists side by side with informal ways of eating. Thus, to rely exclusively on the organized meal for the “nutritional status” of a population, as surveyors must typically do, would invariably undercount the food intakes by these villagers.

Second, informal eating highlights the regional and global context of the food economy of the Valley more sharply than the organized meal does. Fruits, like bananas and mangoes, loudly proclaim the connections.

Third, to speak of connections in the contemporary world, brings into the picture money and class. Those with money in the farthest corners of the Lower Shire Valley can eat mangoes long after their poor neighbors, dependent only on local supplies, have done. High levels of humidity in the Valley “cook” mangoes so fast that by December the region has already exhausted its home-grown supplies and looks to the cooler Shire Highlands where the fruits thrive well into February.

Fourthly, implicit in the second (the seasonality of fruits) and third (money) issues, is the account of a widening gap which also existed in the pre-colonial era, between what Amartya Sen refers to as production-based and exchange-derived entitlements to food.<sup>47</sup> One’s garden work, fishing, and food collecting supply only

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<sup>43</sup> One good example is the Danish beer, Carlsberg, which is now brewed in Malawi and competes not only with traditional alcohols but also with imports from South Africa and Zimbabwe.

<sup>44</sup> According to J. Williamson (*Useful Plants of Malawi* [Zomba, Malawi: Government Press, 1956, 1972], 36-37, 78-80, 137), they also made *kachasu* from fermented juice of cashew nuts, cassava, and from a tree called “*kankhande*.” For sugar’s impact on the world stage, see S. W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (N.Y.: Viking Penguin, 1990)

<sup>45</sup> See also Barker, “Nyasaland Native Food,” 18-19.

<sup>46</sup> The independent state of Malawi, particularly the more tolerant post-Banda regime, has given up the fight, and villagers brew the liquor in the open.

<sup>47</sup> A. Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

one portion of the foods eaten in the villages these days. Peasants also rely on the capitalist market for the foods they eat informally and formally and for both *ndiwo* and *nsima*. The implications can be huge.

The increasing importance of the market in villagers' survival strategies during the past century has changed not only the food sector but also the rules of sharing it.

The market has attacked the very idea that food is an object of sharing, a principle that underwrites, though in different ways, both the alternative vision and especially the egalitarian standards of the golden-age theory. Only those with money, or with the labour or commodities which can be turned into money, gain access to food on the market. Villagers without money, or its equivalent in labour or goods, have become a burden to their more fortunate neighbours. It is more difficult to share food from the market than food from one's own field. The result has been a marked decline in the popularity of *chidyerano*, the epitome of the Mang'anja spirit of generosity.

In an unscientific survey during 1995 and 1996, only two of 158 meals taken in the region were *chidyerano*.<sup>48</sup> In other words, the market has generalized into everyday experience the seasonal and rare moments of the traditional hungry season, when neighbours made every effort to hide food obtained from distant places and when many individual *chidyerano* groups fell apart on a temporary basis. The golden-age theory predicts this outcome, though proponents of the alternative vision might add that conflicts over *ndiwo* formed an internal pressure.<sup>49</sup>

Any organized meal, with *ndiwo* as an integral component, contains in itself the seeds of its dissolution, although the ultimate collapse is not inevitable. Only social actors, under certain conditions, create new orders out of the structural disorders of yesterday. The market economy became part of the new context, which also created difficulties for the smooth operation of the alternative vision itself. Besides making the expensive *ndiwo* even more difficult to share than under the old economy, the market assaulted the alternative vision in other ways.

An important feature of the alternative vision's hierarchical order is in disarray. The language of the alternative vision may remain the same but an important shift has taken place in its point of reference. In family circles that have become heavily dependent on the market for *ndiwo*, it has become increasingly meaningless to tell women and children what parts they may and may not eat; *ndiwo* ingredients of the day may not come with any of those parts.

In the case of the charter, modernity has defied its central tenet: That men deserve the "better" sections of meat, chicken or fish, women the less desirable elements; and that children should rejoice at whatever they can get. This regime worked well with the chicken, fish, goat, beef, pork, and wild meat that villagers

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<sup>48</sup> It is important to bear in mind that the disappearance of *chidyerano* has not ended the subsistence ethic that seeks to protect vulnerable members of the community. *Chidyerano* was only one vehicle of this ethic and people can act generously even in its absence. For example, 29 percent of the surveyed meals that did not qualify as *chidyerano*, included people outside the immediate nuclear family that prepared and provided the meal. The "guests" were relatives and friends of the husbands or of wives of those households. Peasants still define food with reference to its dual character as a relationship between people in relation to food; and villagers can act on this definition even in the absence of *chidyerano*.

<sup>49</sup> Benard Inesi Demba, Chapepa Village, TA Ngabu, Nsanje, 10 May 1995. See also: Elia Mchawa, Erita Switi, Elizabeth Anthuachino, Dina Sabe and Selina Kanyenzi, Khembo Village, S. T.A. Mbenje, Nsanje, 8 June 1995; Arnold Kukhala ( an employee of Cotton Ginnery Limited), Jambo Village, TA Mbenje, Nsanje, July 2, 1995.

themselves killed or raised, but not with *ndiwo* from the market. Smoked fish may be sold without heads; chicken without legs, the bigger animals without all the preferred parts, and the “better” parts without the less desirable portions. Things have thus fallen apart.

However, the money market’s assaults on Mang’anja principles of sharing since the nineteenth century can be likened to “diseases of the skin,” to quote Chiang-Kai-Shek in a different context. The introduction of the money market reorganized the foods and ways of sharing it without necessarily weakening or making the idioms themselves less popular. That task was left to Christianity and Sena immigration, two of the capitalist economy’s companions in the Valley. These two historical actors have undermined the very transmission of the charter’s ethic, as well as that of the alternative vision’s; as Chiang-Kai-shek would say, Christian missionaries and Sena immigrants, in contrast, introduced “diseases of the heart” to the entire Mang’anja system of sharing.<sup>50</sup>

The attacks amounted to “diseases of the heart” because people are not born with the principles of sharing planted in their heads; they learn these ideals as they grow from the animal to the human status. Food conventions are an important component of the community’s *mwambo*: its accumulated knowledge about food, sex, and history. A matrilineal people practising matrilocal marriages, the Mang’anja formally introduce their new members to *mwambo* at the time of puberty (*chinamwali*), marriage (*chikwati*), and death (*nsembe*) and at other less celebrated turning points in between the three.<sup>51</sup> This process of developing the human potential the Mang’anja refer to as *kubvinira*, which literally means “to dance for.” The entire village gets involved in *kubvinira* during what anthropologists call “rites of passage.”

The most fundamental of these “rites of passage,” those of puberty, marriage, and death, came in both abbreviated (or “small,” “shortened”) and complete (or “big”) versions. People typically performed the shortened versions when they did not have enough resources or when, for some reason, they had to stage, for example, a *chinamwali* ritual for a single girl. There would be no drumming or *Nyau* masked dancers at such an abbreviated ceremony.

By contrast, both *Nyau* and drumming formed essential features of the complete versions. The entire village took part in a complete *chinamwali*, which was organized for all the girls of a village or group of villages. The rites, led by a *nankungwi* female instructress, took place in the bush during the *masika* season of plenty immediately following harvest.<sup>52</sup> Big versions of the last funerary rites and marriage were also performed during the *masika* season because these were expensive and required considerable amounts of food, which villagers were willing to spend because the complete formats were viewed as more effective in inculcating *mwambo*.

The Sena also had their “small” and “big” options, and the only significant difference was the absence, in the Sena repertoire, of the *Nyau* secret societies.

The *Nyau* became a key flashing point in the encounter between the Mang’anja and Christian missionaries, who began to infiltrate the region early in the twentieth century.

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<sup>50</sup> For Chiang-Kai-Shek the Japanese invaders were a disease of the skin and Mao’s Communist movement a disease of the heart.

<sup>51</sup> Villagers refer to a bad-mannered child as *mwana wopanda mwambo* (literally “a child without *mwambo*”) or *mwana wosabvinidwa* (literally a “child elders have not danced for”). But, people also use the same terms to describe an adult when they really want to despise a person. Applying the same terms to an adult is tantamount to calling her or him an “animal.”

<sup>52</sup> Mandala, *End of Chidyerano*, 54-61.

In the masked dancer the missionaries found the Prince of Darkness the proselytizers were looking for, and the result was a confrontation that occasionally turned physical, according to Schoffeleers.<sup>53</sup> But, judging by, among other things, Schoffeleers' own initiation into the society in the 1960s and the continued presence of the societies to this day, missionary attacks were largely ineffective.

Where the Europeans won, they did so in conjunction with other and more potent economic forces, which in places undermined not only the *Nyau* but aspects of other "big versions" of rites of passage like *magoneko* among the Sena. To stage those "big" ceremonies required lots of food and the participation of neighbours and relatives as providers of free food and free labour which, already scarce in the nineteenth century, had become harder to procure in the cash economy.<sup>54</sup> Thus, while bearing in mind important spatial and temporal variations, the narrative of decline, as a description of the effect of capitalism and colonialism on pre-existing institutions, appears to have negatively affected mostly the fate of the "big versions".

The next surge came in the mid-1960s and, quite paradoxically, from the missionaries themselves — thanks to the moderating influences of the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65 and to political independence in 1964. Dr. Banda celebrated "tradition" at public functions, bringing even the *Nyau* into the open; Vatican II encouraged the local Catholic clergy to initiate a dialogue with African religion; and other denominations followed suit. The resulting rapprochement required, on the one hand, toning down the anti-pagan rhetoric of earlier times and, on the other, incorporating some African religious symbols and ideas into Christian teaching and especially liturgies.<sup>55</sup> Thus, one sees by the early 1970s the birth of new Christian rites of passage: the sacraments, such as Baptism, the Eucharist, Marriage, now infused with African symbols and ideas.

It's the "small, abbreviated versions" of the traditional rites of passage which gained a new lease of life and a new momentum from being co-opted into the sacraments and the liturgy. To the narrative of decline, we must add the observation that modernity had actually multiplied options for "dancing for" the young.

But the new array constituted a less effective method of imparting *mwambo* for two reasons: first, they all fall within the range of the "small" versions; second, they stood alone without the support of the "big" techniques. A person would go through a series of abbreviated rites of passage without the interjection, as was in the past, of the more efficient ways of teaching *mwambo*, in all its full elaborate intricate panoply.

Thus, by the mid-1990s, knowledge of the charters was unevenly distributed among the villagers. Young women and men, the recent graduates of the abbreviated rites of passage, were either ignorant or only aware of the most rudimentary aspects of the *nsima - ndiwo* idioms. Only older women, who had gone through a balanced series of rites, were aware of the intricate rules of food sharing; they were the ones who steered me - much against my will - into the subject with their lengthy descriptions and protests.

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<sup>53</sup> J. M. Schoffeleers and Ian Linden, "The Resistance of the *Nyau* Societies to the Roman Catholic Missions in Colonial Malawi," T.O. Ranger and I. Kimambo, eds., *The Historical Study of African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1972): 252-273; see also J. M. Schoffeleers, "The *Nyau* Societies: Our Present Understanding," *Society of Malawi Journal* 29 (January 1976): 59-68.

<sup>54</sup> Mandala, *End of Chidyerano*, 53- 72.

<sup>55</sup> This concern led the Archdiocese of Blantyre to establish in the late 1960s the Likulezi Catechetical Centre for the training of a new breed of catechists. Schoffeleers was appointed first director of the institution.

## Conclusion

Given that provisioning was not the focus of the original project, this essay cannot draw hard conclusions about *ndiwo*'s relationship with gender. Instead, its contribution is to point to new areas of investigation to add to current studies about women in the region since the nineteenth century.<sup>56</sup> These other studies show how capitalism and colonialism have eroded the power of Mang'anja and other Chewa women. In contrast, this essay *seems* to arrive at a different conclusion, suggesting instead that economic and religious changes during the past century *might* have empowered women by liberating them from the shackles of the pre-existing food-distribution charters. Not only is it difficult to align the charters with the food system, but elders have also lost their ability to teach the order of food-sharing. Today's younger women know next to nothing about those intricate rules of dividing *ndiwo* that had burdened their ancestors in earlier times.

My interest in the present essay is narrowly focused on an aspect of the technical division of labour while scholars of gender address the larger question of power between women and men. Such gender studies might like to examine the extent to which such division of labour translates into power and influence during *different* epochs in the history of the Valley. What people eat does not necessarily tell us about a society's economics, politics, or religion. We can always start from where Matthew Schoffeleers left off.

Matthew Schoffeleers did not study women's relationships with men nor did he undertake the study of food as a distinct area of investigation. But the questions he wrestled with throughout his academic career were rich, fertile, and compelling enough to have acted as a benchmark of my research and the research of others. It is a mark, I think, of the brilliance of his work that scholars of different agendas and persuasions can relate to it. I hope that as a student of the Lower Shire Valley, I have not merely extended the reach of the master's interests, but that I may also have fine-tuned some of his conclusions on the fundamental relationship of oral tradition with history - but on this only the reader can make the final judgment.

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<sup>56</sup> See, among others, C. Brantley, *Feeding Families: African Realities and British Ideas of Nutrition and Development in Early Colonial Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002); Mandala, *Work and Control*; M. Vaughan, *The Story of an African Famine: Gender and Famine in Twentieth-Century Malawi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

## MATTHEW SCHOFFELEERS ON MALAWIAN SUITOR STORIES: A PERSPECTIVE FROM COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGY

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*Of Schoffeleers: “Matthew Schoffeleers was one of my closest friends and colleagues, but also my supervisor, officiant at my second wedding, and godfather to my eldest son; he had been a life-long example of intercultural scholarship.”*

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In the seminal work of Matthew Schoffeleers, the analysis of Malawian oral literature plays a major part. His passion for retrieval of the distant past led him to look with a keen eye at village stories in the hope that they would reveal glimpses of past religious and social institutions that had left few other traces in modern times. His reconstructions of South Central African proto-history are to a considerable extent predicated on attributing a historical core to local stories (Schoffeleers 1972a, 1973a, 1973b, 1978, 1980, 1985, 1992) – and it was in this pursuit that he and I worked closely together for years.<sup>2</sup> And even apart from such ulterior historiographic motives, Schoffeleers has made valuable and lasting contributions to the study of Central African oral literature in its own right (Schoffeleers & Roscoe 1985; Schoffeleers 1972b), has brought to our attention narratives parallels with other parts of the world (Schoffeleers 1999a, 1999b, 2000 – with Malawian parallels to the stories of Jephthah (cf. the Biblical book *Judges* 11, The Three Brothers, and The Egg), and along the lines of a structuralist approach inspired by his sometime supervisor Rodney Needham, has proposed a comprehensive analysis of the mutilated person, especially the unilateral being that has only one side to his body, as a world-wide epiphany of the sacred (Schoffeleers 1991a, 1991b).

It was therefore on the basis of a sustained and theoretically informed study of Malawian stories that Matthew Schoffeleers, in his paper on ‘Malawian suitor stories’ (1979a) presented an admirable pioneering attempt to penetrate as deeply as possible into the formal syntax and the symbolic structure of a limited number (ten) of twentieth-century folk stories from Malawi. In these entertaining and amazing stories,

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<sup>1</sup> This is the greatly revised and updated version of a hitherto unpublished paper presented at the Africa Seminar, African Studies Centre, November 1979, where it formed a commentary upon Matthew Schoffeleers’ Dutch-language paper: ‘Malawiaanse vrijersverhalen’ [Malawian suitor stories, which was subsequently published in English]. I am deeply grateful to Matthew Schoffeleers for inspiring the present argument and generously discussing its critical details with me when it was first conceived – shortly after I was the first to have the honour to obtain a doctorate under his supervision. In this argument I rely in part on my extensive ethnohistorical and ethnographic research on the Nkoya people of Western Zambia from 1972 onwards; I am grateful for the love with which they have welcomed me in their midst and made me one of them. Moreover, I am indebted to my family for sharing the research with me; to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for offering a stimulating environment in which to conduct my Nkoya studies and extend them into global long-range comparison especially in the field of mythology; and to Michael Witzel and the Department of Indian and Sanskrit Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge Ma., USA, for greatly stimulating, from 2004 on, my research into Comparative Mythology, and into Asian-African continuities, in the context of the annual Harvard Round Table meetings and of the International Association for Comparative Mythology.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Werbner 1977; Schoffeleers 1979a; van Binsbergen 1981; van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985.

village women are wooed by lovers from outside, who take fantastic shapes especially those of serpents or who may consist of nothing but a (White) head, and whose generosity tends to bring these women prestige goods usually far beyond their means. Schoffeleers was brought to interpret these stories in terms of the historical expansion of long-distance trade, after the middle of the second millennium CE. He himself regarded his analysis as preliminary, and ‘patently inadequate’. The purpose of the present comments is therefore not to stress such deficiencies in Schoffeleers’ approach as he himself was already aware of, but to try and contribute to the further development of his approach, on the basis of my personal acquaintance with Central African symbolic and social systems, and my own experience with similar types of analysis. When the present argument was first conceived, my approach to myth was still handicapped by the almost exclusive interest in socio-political relations then prevailing in European including British anthropology, but in the meantime my experience with the analysis of folk tales and with Comparative Mythology in general has considerably developed in ways amply reflected in the present, final version (cf. van Binsbergen 2006, 2010; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011, especially ch.5).

My comments on Schoffeleers’ stimulating and thought-provoking work on Malawian folk stories fall into the following sections:

- (a) Wider theoretical issues;
- (b) The possibility of formulating some kind of Deep Structure for this corpus of material
- (c) Additional and alternative readings of these stories
- (d) The historical dimension, interpreted in terms of the South Central African region since Early Modern times
- (e) The question of whether the Malawian folk stories can be claimed to contain some genuinely (proto-)historical core (as assumed in the previous section), or alternatively must be considered mythical narratives from distant provenances and without bearing on local protohistory
- (f) The transcontinental connection

### **Wider theoretical issues**

With characteristic humility, Schoffeleers presents his analysis as primarily emanating from two sources:

1. a common-sense analysis of the texts themselves;
2. a general knowledge of the social and symbolic world of eastern South Central Africa.

For the reader who has no background in symbolic anthropology, structuralism, etc., his decoding of the Malawian material may seem, therefore, much more idiosyncratic and gratuitous than, in fact, it is. The tradition within which this tentative analysis becomes meaningful, is only very slightly indicated by Schoffeleers, e.g. by reference to Hertz (1909 / 1960) and Durkheim (1912), and the use of Turnerian phrases as ‘betwixt and between,’ ‘liminality’, etc. (cf. Turner 1967, 1969).

Without a doubt, Schoffeleers’ wish to ‘understand’, ‘explain’, the ‘deeper’ content (the Deep-Structure, perhaps) of a collection of folk tales is legitimate. However, one major problem that has to be faced in this connexion, is that of the relationship between a literary product (such as a folk tale), and the society in which it is found. Schoffeleers implicitly suggests that this relationship may be indirect in this sense that the stories reflect a certain time lag: although told in the 1950s CE, for instance, they may relate to a past phase in the history of Malawi, say the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup>

centuries CE, when mercantile capitalism, long-distance trade etc. were still in the process of gradually penetrating towards the interior, and when such long-distance trading relations still represented the major links between local communities and the outside world – before effective penetration of the colonial state and the capitalist mode of production. However, under what conditions can we assume that such fundamental symbolic and normative elements as are found in society penetrate into the story without marked transformation? Or, to put it differently, what is the nature of the transformation of reality that justifies, or even necessitates, the existence of the story in itself? If the story is a comment, reflection, transformation, inversion, judgement, moral for reality, it is precisely because of some subtle admixture between real-life elements (people who live in village, pound maize, go mice-hunting etc.) and elements of systematically controlled imagination (White men posing as snakes, women giving birth to heads only, etc.). Where, and why, do we encounter a record of real life, and where, and why, do we encounter mere products of the imagination? Without a rather sophisticated theory on this point, it is impossible to arrive at a ‘common-sense’ close reading of folk stories, in an attempt to ‘explain’ their ‘deeper meaning’. And when we develop such a theory, we shall probably have to admit that the literary product has a lot of leeway, allows for free variation, for transmission across cultural and structural boundaries within and across geographical regions, and across historical periods, for individual alterations that tell us more (if anything) about the individual narrator than about his time and society, etc.

It is commonly claimed that underneath all this there exist fundamental contradictions, archetypal themes that are perennial and universal, but the problem is how to unearth these, and how to attach a presumably world-wide meaning to them when they finally appear before us, stripped of their anecdotal trappings. The question is not very different, in the case of folk tales, from the implications of attaching meaning and explanation to ritual and myths. Obviously these elements from the symbolic order are not just a set of simple and easily-decoded statements about the economic and political reality. What is interesting about them is not so much the ultimate message which they may be shown to contain in the end, but the very process of coding, decoding and transformation by narrators and participants, that becomes barely visible even when we try to analyse these narratives and rituals. In Schoffeleers’ analysis I found the section on ‘The ultimate message’ the least exciting, and I wondered why such a simple (and contentious) message had to be concealed, in the local cultural process, under so much narrative beauty and skill as the Malawian folk tales display. Even if his reduction of the symbolic structure of these stories, at the end of his complicated argument, to the simple formula of

*men can only achieve high status by being virtuous*                      whereas                      *women can only achieve high status by being non-virtuous*

would stand up to critical scrutiny, one yet has the feeling that there is **something** more essential about these folk tales, that is left entirely untouched by this type of analysis. How is such a content possible in a society that respects, if not actively propagates, high status, and whose value system embraces both men and women? What is the point in concealing and coding such a content, only for the foreign anthropologist, missionary or student of oral literature to come along and bring it to light – while the presumably culturally constitutive meaning remains hidden to the very participants in the local culture? Could it be that what makes local society tick is precisely the relegating such constitutive content to the level of unconsciousness? I would suggest that these stories (and probably all forms of art) are more about form,

about the manipulation of recognisable elements, than about content. This does not imply that looking for a deep structure of content is a waste of time. But it does not sufficiently address what perhaps needs most to be analysed: the relation between a stylised, man-created symbolic content, and

1. The reality from which this content was borrowed;
2. The reality in which this content subsequently functions, as embodied in a work of art.

In other words, folk tales are not to be identified with the ethnographer's field notes on local behaviour and meaning; they are not documents generated in some identifiable social setting and to be read against the identifiable perceptions and interests of that setting's actors. We must be aware that the glimpses of social life which folk tales may appear to contain, are most likely the skilful artefacts of an imagination that may be more creative than systematic or empirical.

The approach Schoffeleers presents in this paper implies a number of theoretical decisions on these points. By groping for common deep structure, he claims that there is in these stories an underlying systematic structure which may be so fundamental that it even eludes the individual narrator. He is right to a certain extent and has the whole of symbolic anthropology, myth analysis from Frazer (1911-1915) to Lévi-Strauss (1968, 1969-78, 1973, 1979), the eclectic Anglo-Saxon appropriation of structuralism in the hands of Leach and of Schoffeleers' own supervisor Rodney Needham, to back him up. Yet many excellent anthropologists have remained unsympathetic to structuralist myth analysis, and they would need an elaborate, explicit theoretical argument to convince them.

### **Towards a deep structure**

Searching for a common deep structure, Schoffeleers at times gives the impression of being easily satisfied with apparent similarities and systemic oppositions which, on closer scrutiny, may turn out to vanish. His set of ten folk tales, four having female protagonists, six male protagonists, is too readily treated as one corpus. Many of the tentative generalisations Schoffeleers comes up with may appear to be slightly overstated. The males, Schoffeleers tells us, invariably receive *local* wealth (e.g. cattle), along with a *local* bride, at the end of their quests. Yet Kansabwe ends up with 'fine clothes' (whereas cloth, far from being local, was, with guns and slaves, the major trade good in interregional trade in Malawi in the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries CE); and the Cattle-Swallower temporarily appropriated local wealth (cattle) prior to his marriage, but only to surrender this wealth again as payment of bride-wealth. Males, we are told, invariably display exemplary behaviour as suitors; yet the same Cattle-Swallower steals cattle, which he exchanges for a local wife (so that he gets her practically for nothing). Likewise the impression is given as if males always take the initiative in courting. Snake-Man does take the initiative, but Matola's husband (who is nothing but a head) is dependent on his mother, and only shows his full sexual intentions when prompted by Matola's brother. Part of Schoffeleers' method therefore appears to depend on claiming similarity, even identity, of themes where in fact another analyst might claim difference. This tendency can also be detected in regard of female protagonists. Pre-marital promiscuity is said to represent 'a confusion of the social categories of married and unmarried women' as if married women not only legitimately engage in sexuality which – throughout traditional South Central Africa – is forbidden to unmarried girls, but also engage so *promiscuously*, which is scarcely the case. In a next step, promiscuous unmarried girls are treated at a par with female protagonists whose only transgression appears to be that she goes mushroom-

collecting.<sup>3</sup> One of the dangers of structuralist myth analysis is that the analysts, on the basis of an abstract intellectual discourse that reflects global intra-disciplinary conceptualisation and has no empirical grounding in the local culture, may be tempted to project onto the narrative meanings of which the local narrators and recipients cannot be conscious. Take the story of a woman whose only stated transgression is that she went mice-hunting rather than pounding her maize, and who in the course of her expedition is forced to enter into a relationship with a snake;<sup>4</sup> in analysis, the lady is overstated to exhibit something as serious as disrespect of the moral order (defying her mother's instructions as to pounding), subsequently taking this disrespect to its extreme (mating with the un-matable).

It looks as if Schoffeleers was in some hurry to reach the deep structure, and believed (somewhat at variance with the doyen of structuralist myth analysis Lévi-Strauss) that it is the easier reached, the sooner we attach an abstract and comprehensive label to the elements we are analysing. The analytical equation of mouse-hunting with disrespect of moral order may still be acceptable in the light of the traditional significance of parental authority in Malawi. But when an unmarried girl takes a hunting initiative, or when a woman is a widow – do we then automatically have cases of inherently contradictory liminal positions, of Turner's 'betwixt and between'? By the same token, can we read inability to meet extravagant demands of bride-wealth, or illness of the chief's daughter, automatically as examples of a disturbance of the moral order, collapse of the 'proper functioning of the community', even if the stories (in their condensed form as presented by Schoffeleers) do not further indicate intra-community conflict and breakdown of social relations?

The stories show marked differences in the extent to which they are realistic. Even in its condensed form, the Hunter story appears much more factual, without freaks or wonders, as compared to the Cattle-Swallower or the head-marrying woman. Is this perhaps a reason to place this story in a different category? The question becomes crucial in the case of the Hunchback and the Blind Man. Only by considerable power of imagination can one construe such physical defects as being 'one-sided in the front / back sense'. The danger in this sort of argument is that one stumbles from one *ad hoc* interpretation to the next. The attempt to explain the details of folk stories is laudable, but all explanation is generalisation, of which the *ad hoc* argument is the worst enemy.

One problem in the analysis of the Malawi corpus is the relation between the stories with male and with female protagonists. Repeatedly Schoffeleers claims that they are on a different plane, at cross angles, yet at other times he compares them as if

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<sup>3</sup> The human body tends to inspire parallel and converging practices and meanings in cultures world-wide, on the basis that all humans now living ('Anatomically Modern Humans' – emerging in Africa c. 200,000 years Before Present and from there spreading globally) share the same (in certain respects gendered) anatomy and physiology. In this light one might explore the male sexual symbolism of the mushroom, which has been explicitly developed in other cultures (Allegro 1970). In this light mushroom collecting might be symbolic narrative language for promiscuity. However, perhaps more relevant is that, at least in other parts of South Central Africa than Malawi (notably in Zambia), the mushroom is the name of a clan and is intimately associated with the kingship – giant mushrooms growing on the royal graves of the Barotse. Could 'mushroom collecting' be a narrative idiom for the women's quest for power and status?

<sup>4</sup> In Ancient Mesopotamian and Ancient Greek mythology, Gilgamesh and Glaukos accidentally hit upon a snake in the course of their respective exploits, typically at a liminal point where they seem to enter the realm of the underworld. Are we tempted to think in a similar direction here? The comparative mythology of the snake is too extensive and has too deep roots in the remote past than that we are justified to interpret the snakes in Malawian folk tales within a narrow horizon of space and time.

they are within the same dimension. This brings him to overlook certain formal characteristics of the female stories. He claims that all female protagonists are depicted as physically inside the community (by contrast with the men). However, this is only true for Matola. All three other ladies go mushroom collecting, i.e. roam around outside the boundaries of the village, much like the male protagonists on their quests.

### **Additional and alternative readings**

Reaching so readily for common, abstract, general meanings behind what appear to be the symbolic elements in the stories, also has the danger that one overlooks the subtle but undeniable power elements that are explicitly built into them, and that render a human element to them. Schoffeleers rightly wonders why the White men in the story should have a secret, which can be revealed, betrayed or violated. But while this appears to put the White man in an unassailably superior category of his own, an equally important point is that in some of the stories the White man actually puts himself at the mercy of his African wife: she gains power over him, by knowing his identity and being able to disclose it publicly. The 'basic' female stories leave the wife successful, but helpless; departing from that basic pattern, the variants depict the wife as more powerful, but failing. In the Matola story it is the younger brother who forces the outsider's secret into the open; in two of the other stories it is a sister or young female friend who tries to infringe on the privacy of the Snake / White man, and is therefore severely punished. But what *is* the White man's secret? That he 'can fall in love as an ordinary human being', as Schoffeleers suggests? Or is the White man in himself only a symbol, and does he stand for something even more fundamental than modern race relations?

When these stories were recorded in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century CE, Malawi had known over half a century of colonial rule and had served as a migrant labour reserve for even longer; in these contexts fundamental power relations were expressed in White-Black terms directly corresponding with the respective somatic appearances of those with and without power. However, in South Central Africa the colour white has been associated with death, the ancestors, and spirits, for probably much longer than the onset of European involvement, and it cannot be ruled out that this is also the original connotation of 'white' in these stories – upon which subsequently the colonial colour-caste relations were projected in reflection of modern times. I suspect that the stories are less about Black and White as modern socio-political categories than about female power, creative and procreative functions, and the battle between male and female in general. If this is so, they are cosmological statements outside place and time, rather than decodable fragments of historical information.

It is impressive to see Schoffeleers carefully reduce the narrative symbolic content to abstract structure, in the best structuralist tradition. Thus the unilateral being's one-sidedness becomes merely a vertical axis, and the Head / Python a horizontal axis. The Zebra-Woman in the hunter story is very convincingly dealt with in this way.

Yet, before this structuralist transformation takes effect, I would like to dwell a little longer on the level where the 'halfling' (a term coined by Tolkien – 1975, 1990 – for a quite different purpose) is still a being of flesh and blood, albeit drastically reduced to one side only. In Western Zambia this halfling is one of the major spiritual beings, whose names (e.g. *Mwendanjangula*, 'Treetop-Walker', 'Who Goes at Exalted Height', or *Luwe*) are frequently mentioned in any context having to do with the deep forest, mysterious experiences, chance luck, healing and divinatory power,

the status of priest-healer (*nganga*), and the sudden accidents – often leading to mutilation – during hunting expeditions. Echoes of his presumed existence can be heard all over Africa<sup>5</sup> and worldwide. Many of the manifestations of this being are snakelike, and I am inclined to see him, among many other aspects, as a transformation of the rainbow snake which can be detected in the very oldest, Middle Palaeolithic layers of the mythology of Anatomically Modern Humans (van Binsbergen 2006). This transcontinental perspective throws a rather different light on the stories of the mutilated male suitors. Rather than having been victimised in their existence by being mutilated, they have passed onto a different, higher, order of existence, they became a local manifestation of Mwendanjangula himself (and as such eminently comparable to all those White men / Snakes / Heads). Little wonder that the Malawian narrators do not tell us that these transformed male suitors did not return to their normal physical condition. Being a halfling sums up, rather than destroys, their state of bliss. But if this is the case, then it becomes difficult to see in these halflings, with Schoffeleers, merely a standard symbol of liminality, of ‘betwixt and between’. Rather, or in addition, they seem to stand for the hidden, but hideous and capricious powers of the deep forest, out of which all vitality springs and which is the realm in and through which all extra-human forces manifest themselves. If these stories are about a gendered cosmology, the halfling as a symbol of vital force (restored to or tapped off by deprived women through expeditions into the forest – the very place where some women meet White men / Snakes / Heads when mushroom hunting) fit into this remarkably. In Western Zambia, the most likely place to meet Mwendanjangula is the deep forest, indeed – and if one is the first to pronounce a greeting, he may bestow endless wealth and healing power upon one.

Drawing on cultural material from Western Zambia, I think more could be done with the snake element that plays such a prominent part in most of the Malawian stories of our corpus. Just as the halfling is not necessarily a symbol of liminality, and may stand for a complex and widely-known body of ideas referring to the supernatural, and to Man’s relations with Nature, it would seem meaningful to look at the significance of the snake in a wider cultural context than these stories alone. Snakes are congenitally feared by humans, regardless of their being poisonous or not. They have, in addition to the connotations of masculinity and the sky which Schoffeleers mentions, strong connotations of *sorcery*. An important form of sorcery which people of Western Zambia believe to exist, is the raising of a snake with a human head in some hidden, dark place near a river; out of a secret combination of ingredients – to which the sorcerer gives his daily attention through secret visits to that place – develops a snake with a human head, which after a diet of eggs and chickens acquires a taste for human flesh, and to whom the sorcerer (increasingly

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Reynolds (1963), Melland (1923), Turner (1952), McCulloch (1951) and my own work (van Binsbergen 1981: ch. 4, and 2010, where – partly on the basis of von Sicard 1968-69 – I document and map out the distribution of the belief in this hybrid hunting / weather / metallurgy / cattle god in Africa and throughout the three continents of the Old World. There I propose that, far from originating in South Central Africa, and despite its extensive distribution all over Africa, this belief complex emerged in Western Asia in Neolithic times, and even has connotations of the celestial axis around which the constellations appear to revolve (often the concept of the celestial axis is considered an invention of Ancient Greek astronomy, but the empirical phenomena to which it refers are so evident and its symbolic elaboration so widespread and detectable, that it is more plausible to assume an origin for this concept in Upper Palaeolithic naked-eye astronomy; cf. Rappenglueck 1999). For further distributional and analytical argumentation, and empirical parallels e.g. in the distribution of the spiked wheel trap, of *mankala* games, and geomantic divination, in terms of my Pelasgian hypothesis, e.g. van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011; van Binsbergen, in press, and forthcoming (a).

dominated by the ever growing serpent) has to feed – through vicarious nomination – human babies and ultimately adults from his or her own village, in order to save his or her own life and newly gained, exceptional powers. The snake is the most common sorcery familiar, and particularly married women are reputed to engage in this sort of sorcery (*lilombo*) when they want to get rid of a hated husband. (Some discussion on this in: Melland 1923.) This seems to confirm Schoffeleers' ideas on the symbolic equation between snake and human head; it also suggests that in fact there is considerable continuity between the symbolic material employed in the folk tales, and that pervading real, contemporary life. Meanwhile the sorcery connotations which are very manifest here, suggest that something more is involved than the structuralist abstractions of vertical or horizontal axis, even if the latter can be taken to be indicative of the contradiction between morality and power. In the idiom of Schoffeleers' approach, the head / snake symbolism is rightly claimed to refer to power; but the sorcery connotations now add, to the dimension of wealth, trade, and achievement, one of wilful, reckless manipulation of human material, for evil individual aims.

Here again I submit that, at least at one level of analysis, these stories are really about universal aspects of male / female relations, where non-human or extra-human elements, and Black / White relations, only come in to stress certain more universal aspects in a coded form. Here the roles of the younger brother (Matola's case) or the rival sisters / age-mates may be further analysed. I submit that the younger brother of Matola represents that side of her being that is male-orientated; the boy affords her access to that part of the world of female desires that can only be satisfied by men. Matola is psychologically prone, not to marrying a White man, but to experience the secret of male/female relations in a way remarkable enough to be worth a story.

I am therefore not convinced by Schoffeleers' moralising diagnosis that 'communities which invent and/or enjoy such stories show quite a crack in their moral armature'. The rules of propriety and restraint he implicitly refers to, tend to be primarily male rules, which men try to impose on the women (without necessarily observing them themselves, as any research on Central African male patterns of sexuality may reveal). These rules define a cosy men's world, full of liberty, respect for being male, rights to women's productive and reproductive labour power, products, children, etc. There seems to be considerable variation, within Central Africa, in the extent to which the males can uphold this system without being challenged. In Zambia, there is a very strong counter-ideology among the women, who try and forge their own lives and to manipulate such claims and skills as their being female in that society accord them (cf. van Binsbergen 1987 / 2003; Rasing 2001). They may be loyal to individual males, but certainly do not identify with the male world and its 'moral armature'. The almost worldwide, *male* stereotypical image (cf. Kaberry 2004 / 1939) of the loose females as against the virtuous males, is to some extent an artefact of the excessive generalisation to which structuralist analysis of oral narrative tends to be prone, and for the rest may simply be an aspect of the confrontation between male and female elements.

### **The historical dimension**

I agree with Schoffeleers that we should also try to discuss and interpret the contents of these stories at a concrete historical level. Here the problem presents itself of tying the universal (the ultimate message) to whatever is regionally and historically specific: the articulation between domestic and mercantile-capitalist modes of production as encroaching upon the social formations Malawi and South Central

Africa as a whole from the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE onward. Now, if we agree that there might be some retrievable kernel of historical information in these stories, how to bring that out?

First, we should look for ways of dating the stories' contents. Perhaps some of them contain elements that definitely refer to archaic layers of early agriculture, or to the old hunting and gathering modes of production;<sup>6</sup> linguistic evidence along the lines of historical linguistics pursued by Christopher Ehret and his associates might help us here (e.g. Ehret 1967, 1982a, 1982b, 1984, 1998). But more important than any linguistic clues, we discover that, by and large, the stories with male protagonists and those with female ones refer to a fundamentally different process of articulation between modes of production. The penetration (in itself suggestive of sexual symbolism) of mercantile capitalism into the domestic communities of Malawi seems to relate to the *female* stories, as Schoffeleers rightly observes. Here perhaps the significant differences between the variants (in the extent to which the females are passive, are assimilated to the status of their White partners, live happily ever afterwards with them, etc.) may reflect regional variations in this penetration process. The male-protagonist stories are about a very different, and typologically much earlier, sort of articulation: about the superimposition of a tributary mode of production upon the domestic communities of South Central Africa, whose economies until that time revolved on hunting, gathering, agriculture and animal husbandry. It is amazing how strongly some of these male-protagonist stories resemble the myth of origin of the Luvale and Lunda peoples in Western Zambia.<sup>7</sup> Once this parallel has been recognised, it is difficult to read the stories of Kansabwe and of the Cattle-Swallower in any other way than as mirror-images of the same process: a chiefly dynasty trying to link up organically, and in accordance with locally prevailing notions concerning morality, the land, the supernatural, within a local domestic community. Kansabwe plays a major role in sealing the relationship between the chief (via his daughter) and the community. Cattle-Swallower himself acts as a raiding chief, who is accommodated within the local community at no other cost, ultimately, than a marriageable girl (the cattle is returned as bride-wealth).

From this perspective it is also clear why the male-protagonist stories must emphasise morality, whereas this is just not an issue in the female-protagonist stories. As I have argued elsewhere (van Binsbergen 1981, 1979), the rulers who tried to impose themselves upon the domestic communities of Central Africa from the 15th century onwards, often (in Zambia: invariably) did so within the limits of the cosmology and ritual already prevailing locally at the time. The chiefly cults they created were exalted cults of (royal) ancestors. They did not deny that political authority ultimately depended upon ritual links with the land; instead, they claimed such links, in rivalry with, or in collusion with, pre-existing land priests, who often ended up as senior court officials under the newly established, alien kingship. However violent, exploiting, amoral the tributary mode of production might have grown at times (cf. Schoffeleers 1978; van Binsbergen 2003b) it needed an ideological basis in the morality of the local community, and in that respect meant to read a world of difference vis-à-vis the capitalist and mercantile modes of production.

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<sup>6</sup> On the theory of modes of production and their articulation, with special reference to South Central Africa and its history since Early Modern times, cf. van Binsbergen 1981; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985; and extensive references cited there.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Turner 1955, Papstein 1978; White 1949, 1962; for the general model of such accommodation between incoming royals and pre-existing acephalous communities, see van Binsbergen 1981: chapter 3, and 1979.

For such a situation did not obtain in the case of the penetration of capitalism through mercantilism and subsequently the colonial state. Here the two confronting and articulating modes of production were too different, and the penetrating mode was too self-contained and self-reliant. Why this should be so falls outside our present scope – in order to answer that question we would have to look into the nature of a money economy, the circulation of trade goods, the competition for monopolies, the reasons why domestic communities adopted the outside commodities and allowed themselves to be pillaged from local products and human personnel, etc. But certainly the penetration of capitalism did not lean on local cosmology and morality to the extent the penetration of the tributary mode did, and that is why women representing domestic/mercantile-capitalist articulation, can shed all moral qualms. The circle closes itself, to some extent, since it is here that sorcery, with all its snake symbolism, comes in.

A genuinely (proto-)historical core, or mythical narratives from distant provenances and without bearing on local protohistory?

Meanwhile, exciting and perhaps even convincing as the historical vistas opening up in the preceding sections are, I have now, nearly a quarter of a century later, substantial reasons to question the validity of such an approach. In other words, I am now seriously doubting whether folk stories circulating in modern South Central Africa, do in fact contain identifiable and retrievable kernels of historical information concerning Early Modern history in that region. I now believe that these stories are mainly mythical narratives from distant provenances and without bearing on local protohistory. Let me briefly summarise these reasons (cf. van Binsbergen 1998-2006, 2010).

After specialising in North African popular Islam in the late 1960s, from the early 1970s to the early 1990s I almost exclusively identified as an Africanist ethnohistorian, anthropologist and political scientist, engaging in regional comparison within Africa, but largely heeding the dominant Africanist view that things African are to be exclusively explained by reference to African conditions, and not by transcontinental connections. Subsequently, however, extensive exposure to Assyriology, Egyptology, Biblical Studies and comparative mythology in the first half of the 1990s<sup>8</sup> made me realise that what I had considered, in my approach to Nkoya history (van Binsbergen 1981, 1992), to be a distorted traditional account of historical events in Iron Age South Central Africa up to half a millennium BP, did contain many highly specific parallels with the mythologies attested in the texts of civilisations extremely remote in space and time from Nkoyaland. Elsewhere (van Binsbergen 1998-2006, 2010) I have offered a detailed discussion of these possible specific mythological correspondences with Egypt, the Ancient Near East, Graeco-Roman Antiquity, South Asia, Central Asia, and even North America. So I had to face the possibility that my historical reconstruction in *Tears of Rain*, however acclaimed by the doyen of Central African protohistory Jan Vansina (1993), was yet largely fictitious and based on some sort of proto-historical *fallacy of misplaced concreteness* (Whitehead 1925: 52, 58). In other words, I now fear that at the time I had systematically mistaken for

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<sup>8</sup> In the context of the Working Group on Religion and Magic in the Ancient Near East, Netherlands Institute for Advance Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Wassenaar, 1994-1995. I am indebted to this institution, and to my colleagues in the Working Group, for welcoming me in their midst and for stimulating the expansion of my Africanist horizon both in space, in time, and in scholarly discipline.

- (a) distorted-but-retrievable facts of South Central African Iron Age history in the second half of the second millennium CE, what in fact were
- (b) mere resonances – devoid of all genuine historicity and spuriously localised – of widespread mythological materials percolating throughout the Old World and among other places attested in millennia-old texts from the outer fringes of the African continent, and beyond.

Let me give one example of what this may concretely mean for proto-historical analysis in the South Central African context:

*THE NKOYA KING AS DEATH DEMON.* The legendary Nkoya king Kayambila's throne name boasts that he thatched his palace with the skulls of his enemies. This cruel practice has, in the first place, local resonances. It is part of a violent skull complex that was quite central to Nkoya culture before modern times, and elements of which have persisted at least in the form of rumours – *e.g.* the rumour (as late as 1973 leading to a grim court case; van Binsbergen 1975 and 2003b) that the king routinely sends out his henchmen to kill stray children, because his life force – and that of the country – depends on consumption of their brains. Is Kayambila (perhaps not unlike the Cattle-Snatcher of our Malawian corpus) only an a-historical evocation epiphany of an underworld demon? And does the same apply to his overlord the Lunda king Mwaat Yaav, whose name means literally the 'Lord of Death' and whose very real though distant court at Musumba, far north of the Zambezi / Congo watershed, has long been known as the scene of great cruelty (*cf.* Frazer 1911-1915). Or could Kayambila yet have been historical? The political events in Western Zambia 1820-1950 make us read *as a counter-hegemonic claim, and hence as potentially mythical*, the account of Kayambila graciously extending Nkoya regalia to his alleged poor relative the Barotse king Mulambwa. However, some of the other traditions concerning Kayambila have a remarkable real-life flavour, for instance when he is depicted as naming his new-born grandson in the early morning light.<sup>9</sup> This grandson was explicitly claimed to be still alive in the early twentieth century CE, when Rev. Shimunika – his close kinsman, the first Nkoya pastor and historiographer / mythographer, who described the birth scene – was in his teens. I was therefore persuaded, in *Tears of Rain* (van Binsbergen 1992), to consider Kayambila as a historical figure, and to situate his rule shortly after 1800 CE. However, the skull motif (for which in van Binsbergen 2010 I trace the very extensive transcontinental parallels throughout the Old World and North America) makes him more than life-size. He has effectively taken on the features of a king of the underworld. The popular consciousness of common Nkoya villagers has retained this conception of the kingship to a great extent – in this society where sorcery and counter-sorcery constitute the routine imagination and discourse – though very rarely the practice – of the ongoing social process (*cf.* van Binsbergen 1981, 2001), the king is considered the greatest sorcerer of all. This also casts a different light on the Nkoya tradition according to which the founders of present-day royal dynasties came to their present homeland in western central Zambia in an attempt to escape from the humiliation (pig herding) they were suffering at the court of Mwaat Yaav at Musumba in Southern Congo. Now, when we consider the myth of Nkoya kings leaving Musumba, are we talking about historical migrations of

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<sup>9</sup> *Cf.* van Binsbergen 1992; Anonymous [J.M. Shimunika], n.d. The same birth custom existed in Ancient Egypt, *cf.* Stricker 1963-1989.

small proto-dynastic groups from Southern Congo in the second half of the second millennium CE? Or about man's eternal struggle with death? (Cf. Fontenrose 1980, who considers this the underlying motif of all combat myths worldwide.) Must we reckon, here and in the other cases of extensive ancient parallels in modern Nkoya traditions and institutions, with the possibility that old mythical themes were deliberately revived and enacted – by what were truly eighteenth and nineteenth century CE political actors in Nkoyaland – in an atavistic bid to create continuity with, and legitimacy in the light of, the very remote past of several millennia ago? (Much like, in Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, kings of the late periods claimed legitimacy by reviving the memory of their very distant, legendary predecessors: Sargon II (early 8th century BCE) naming himself after Sargon of Akkad across 16 centuries; and Sargon II's contemporary the 25th-dynasty Nubian pharaoh Shabaka claiming, likewise across one and a half millennium, a 6th-dynasty throne name for himself.) Or does the Nkoya skull complex reveal not only typological parallels but also genuine Eurasian continuities, to be explained by Nkoya and Western Eurasia sharing a common cultural source?

Although it had escaped my attention at the time, a similar objection had been brought by Wrigley against the work of Matthew Schoffeleers, who engaged in similar proto-historical research in Malawi in the 1960-1980s.<sup>10</sup> Wrigley's summary reads (1988; cf. Schoffeleers 1988):

'Debates over the "Zimba" period of Zambesian history prompt a new consideration of the mythical element in oral traditions. The work of M. Schoffeleers on Mbona, presiding spirit of a famous rainshrine in southern Malawi, is exploited in order to cast doubt on his reconstruction of 16th and 17th-century political history. It is suggested that Mbona was the serpentine power immanent in the Zambesi; that reports of his "martyrdom" at the hands of a secular ruler are versions of an ancient myth of the lightning and the rainbow; that his journey to, and subsequent flight from, Kaphiri-ntiwa, scene of the Maravi creation myth, is a variant of the visit made to the sky by Kintu, the "First Man" of Ganda tradition. It is not very likely that such stories attest the rise of a great military State c. 1600 and the ensuing suppression of religious institutions.'

Seeking to retrieve the recent proto-historical past of sub-Saharan Africa was very much *en vogue* among historians and anthropologists from the late 1960s onwards (cf. Ranger & Kimambo 1972). Confident in our use of a systematic method to extract fragments of historical fact from local myth,<sup>11</sup> we did not heed Wrigley's criticism, which meanwhile however I have come to consider as eminently well-taken. Yet even Wrigley's position still displayed the familiar, main-stream limitation of considering – in a splendid tradition of which Luc de Heusch (1958, 1972, 1982) has been the principal exponent – the Bantu world as the *exclusive* realm within which any mythological interpretation of South Central African oral-historical narrative would have to be set. As indicated above, from the perspective of mainstream disciplinary ideology, one of the greatest sins that a modern Africanist can commit is to try and explain things African by reference to phenomena outside the African continent. However understandable in the light of the hegemonic modern history of North Atlantic involvement with Africa and of African Studies' need to dissociate from that

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Schoffeleers 1985a, 1988, 1992; Wrigley 1988; van Binsbergen 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Vansina 1965, 1985; Schoffeleers 1979b, 1985; van Binsbergen 1981, 1985.

history, the condescending futility of this position is clear when we try to apply it, *mutatis mutandis*, to the study of Christianity as a largely European (but not Europe-originating) expression; to the explosive question of the autochthony or non-autochthony of Indian languages and of the Vedic scriptures, etc.<sup>12</sup> *African societies and cultures cannot be studied meaningfully by reifying their Africanity, but must be studied, like any other societies and cultures in the modern world, as part of the global constellation as a whole.*

The evidence of transcontinental comparative mythology is there to suggest that also in the case of Schoffeleers' approach to Malawi folk stories, what he interpreted in terms of cores of historical information concerning Malawi from the middle of the second millennium CE onward, may in fact have ended up in modern Malawi from provenances thousands of kilometres and thousands of years removed from that setting. To conclude my argument, let me back up that suggestion by looking at the impressive body of transcontinental elements in East and Southern African stories as adduced by the linguist and folklorist Alice Werner – one of the recognised authorities on the folk tales and mythology of the Bantu-speaking peoples of Africa.

### The transcontinental connection

Under the chapter heading 'stories that travelled', Werner in her classic *Myths and legends of the Bantu* (1933 / 1968) offers very extensive data, which I have summarised and tabulated in Table 1, and mapped in Fig. 1.

*Table 1. Werner on obvious transcontinental connections of selected African stories*

no.	plot / title	from...to, according to Werner
1	Many African stories about the hare	Not imported from India
2	Amazon valley tales of the Jabuti tortoise and his wiles	Not borrowed from trans-Atlantic involuntary migrants from Africa
3	Uncle Remus's stories	From Africa but Americanised
4	Æsop's fables in Africa	Derive from vernacular translations, which have circulated extensively since the 19 <sup>th</sup> c. CE
5	Grimm's stories in Africa	Manifestly taken from Grimm or similar European collections
6	'The Story of the King's Daughter and the Frog,'	Appearing a manuscript collection written by a Nyanja-speaker in the early 20 <sup>th</sup> c. CE, amidst authentic African material, unmistakably copied from European sources, probably in English
7	Cinderella / 'The Story of Siyalela and her Sisters,' in the Swahili collection <i>Kibaraka</i> <sup>13</sup>	The compiler either failed to recognize the Swahili text as Cinderella, or thought it sufficiently naturalized to pass muster with the rest of <i>Kibaraka</i>
3a	'Uncle Remus' stories	From Africa via America back to Africa, and now being translated into Swahili ( <i>Mambo Leo</i> ), where they may be confused with the more authentically local narrative material
9	'The Blind Man and the Hunchback' / 'The Man and his Blind Brother' <sup>14</sup>	From Assam to Nyasaland, India-East Africa trade providing the possible link, <sup>15</sup> but considerably altered in transmission

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Witzel 1989, 1997, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> However, the Cinderella story is so widely distributed in the Old World that Werner's conclusion appears to be premature; cf. Bascom 1982 (Africa); Dundes 1982 (general); Waley 1947 (China); Rooth 1980 (general); Mulhern 1985 (Italy, Japan); Cox, 1893; Ting Nai-Tung 1974 (China, Indo China), to which (as the very extensive literature brings out) could easily be added Korea, the Phillippines, Moroccan Jewry, etc. Although further discussion on this point is beyond our present scope, the Cinderella theme deserved to be added to the long list of 80 Pelasgian cultural traits I have listed elsewhere (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011).

10	The Washerman's Donkey / 'The Monkey who left his Heart in a Tree' <sup>16</sup>	The Buddhist <i>Sumsumara Jâtaka</i> (also found in the Sanskrit collection of stories called <i>Panchatantra</i> , under the title of 'The Monkey and the Porpoise.'), from South Asia to the East African coast
11	The Swahili story 'The Heaps of Gold' <sup>17</sup>	The Buddhist <i>Vedabbha Jâtaka</i> ), from South Asia coming down to us in the shape of Chaucer's 'Pardoner's Tale.' It was probably brought to Europe from the East by some returned pilgrim or crusading soldier, and embodied in that queer compilation the <i>Gesta Romanorum</i> . From South Asia it also reached the East African coast via Persia, undergoing Islamic and perhaps undergoing Christian influence on the way
12	The Ingratitude of Man ( <i>Kibaraka Velten</i> ) <sup>18</sup>	From India to both the <i>Gesta Romanorum</i> and to the East Asian Coast; there is a Persian story: 'The Colt Qéytas,' <sup>19</sup> quite close to 'Kibaraka'
13	The Composite Tale of <i>Kibaraka</i> : Common motifs such as the treacherous travelling companion, encounter with a demon ( <i>zimwi</i> ), cannibal feast Forbidden Chamber, <sup>20</sup> the captive horse as the protagonist's unexpected ally, treasure, containers with useful magical substances, flight; parallels with 'Orange and Citron Princess'; <sup>21</sup> stroll into town disguised as beggar; and announcement of imminent marriage of princesses; rival protagonists marked by the latter; further Persian parallels e.g. 'The Colt Qéytas'; protagonists effects sultan's cure.	Parts of this story seem to have spread wherever the Arabs have carried their language and their traditions (the final thirteen words of the story are pure Arabic). The lime-throwing incident occurs both in Somali and in Fulfulde (the language of the Fulani, in West Africa). The Somali story of 'Lame Habiyu' begins like 'The Colt Qéytas,' and goes on very much as 'Kibaraka'
14	The Merry jests of Abu Nuwâs.	Harun-er-Rashid (765-809), a certain poet at Bagdad, named Abu Nuwâs, who entered Swahili literature as a trickster figure and mixed up with the hare; Junod's claim of Portuguese influence rejected, although the Portuguese are depicted as his victims
15	The Three Words, a motif in a Swahili story called 'The judge and the Boy,' <sup>22</sup> where it is combined with parts of several other stories, imperfectly told.	No definite origin and path of diffusion are explicitly suggested, but Werner's next entry implies that she considers this story, too, to be 'imported from the East - whether from Arabia, Persia, <sup>23</sup> or India.' The story has parallels in the <i>Gesta Romanorum</i> , as well as in some old French <i>fabliaux</i> , and in A Cornish tale (SW England), <sup>24</sup> and was made use of by Schiller for his ballad <i>Der Gang nach dem Eisenhammer</i> ; also in a Persian story, <sup>25</sup> 'The Man who bought Three Pieces of Advice'

<sup>14</sup> Werner adds at this point: 'Rattray, *Chinyanja Folklore*, p. 149; cf. Posselt's *Fables of the Feld*, p. 6; and MS collection of Walters Saukila; the Assam version in: volume xxxi of *Folk-Lore* (1920), with, of course, considerable differences of local colouring. It was told to J. D. Anderson by a Kachari in Assam.'

<sup>15</sup> Werner: 'See Ingrams, *Zanzibar*, p. 33'.

<sup>16</sup> Werner: 'Steere, *Swahili Tales*, p. 1'.

<sup>17</sup> Werner: '*Kibaraka*, p. 89.'

<sup>18</sup> Werner: '*Märchen und Erzählungen*, p. 144'.

<sup>19</sup> Werner: 'D.L.R. and E.O. Lorimer, *Persian Tales*, pp. 38-42'.

<sup>20</sup> Werner: 'See *The Folk-lore Journal*, vol. iii (1885), pp. 193-242. The incident is found in several Swahili stories, in very different settings: e.g., 'Hasseebu Kareem ed Din' and 'The Spirit and the Sultan's Son,' in Steere (*Swahili Tales*, pp. 353 and 379), and 'Sultani Zuwera,' in *Kibaraka*, p. 5.'

<sup>21</sup> Werner: 'D.L.R. and E.O. Lorimer, *Persian Tales*, p. 135'.

<sup>22</sup> Werner: '*Kibaraka*, p. 35: 'Kadhi na Mtoto'.

<sup>23</sup> Werner: 'D.L.R. and E.O. Lorimer, *Persian Tales*, p. 269'.

<sup>24</sup> Werner: ' "John of Chyanorth" '. See J. Morton Nance, *Cornish for All* (Lanham, St Ives, n.d.), pp. 38-48 - I am indebted to Mr Henry Jenner, of Bospowes, Hayle, for directing my attention to this book'.

<sup>25</sup> Werner: 'D.L.R. and E.O. Lorimer, *Persian Tales*, p. 269.'

16	The Magic Mirror, the Magic Carpet, and the Elixir of Life, published by Junod [2] <sup>26</sup> under the title of 'Les Trois Vaisseaux'. It is also found on the Congo <sup>27</sup> and the Ivory Coast although these Western African versions may be independent from the East African one	Another story imported from the East - whether from Arabia, Persia, or India
17	The Angolan story of Fenda Madia: <sup>28</sup> one of the 'False Bride' class, involving a magic mirror-a distinctly non-African element.	The minority of narratives in Chatelain's <i>Folk-tales of Angola</i> must certainly have come from Portugal, while most are unmistakably of African growth. The story is current both in Portugal and in Italy, but in all probability originated farther east. Parts of it resemble the latter portion of the Persian 'Orange and Citron Princess.' [2]
18	A magic wishing mirror figures in a story collected by Father Torrend at Quilimane <sup>29</sup>	Portuguese and African elements mixed
19	'La Fille du Roi' (Mozambican Ronga but from colonial urban labour migration provenance) <sup>30</sup>	Junod took this to be a Portuguese story, and there are Grimm-derived elements in it ('Shoes danced to pieces', notably in 'Satan's House'), but other elements are untraceable, not recognisably African
20	'The Merchant of Venice' motif, written by Swahili teacher at Ngao, who said he had heard it from an Indian at Kipini (Kenyan coast)	Perhaps directly from Shakespeare via colonial influence, but more likely from Oriental/Indian source – appears also in <i>Gesta Romanorum</i>

When we map the information in this Table in Figure 1 below, we end up with the very strong suggestion that many of the motifs constituting modern African folk stories in fact have been drawn from a world-wide pool, whose contents can often be attested to be of considerable antiquity. The overwhelming pattern is that of motifs entering into Africa, with only one (Uncle Remus) recognised as emanating from Africa. However, this may reflect the Eurocentric and implicitly anti-African views of cultural initiative during the high tide of European colonialism, when Werner wrote.

Although, inevitably, the overlap between our Malawi corpus and the stories considered by Werner is only partial, it will be difficult to deny the transcontinental nature and great historical time depth of the Malawi corpus.

This is not to deny the existence of originally African narrative material – most of the corpus treated by Werner and other comparative mythologists such as Frobenius, Parrinder, Finnegan, Knappert, Okpewho, Abrahamsson, Scheub, Mbitu & Prime, is considered to belong to that category. Trickster tales and especially the tale of the origin of death in rival messengers, among others, constitute an unassailable African core. Moreover it has been argued (van Binsbergen 2006; cf. Witzel 2001, 2010) that in fact the core narrative complexes of Anatomically Modern Humans, circulating all over the world in dazzling variation and complexity, may be considered innovations and transformations of a handful of motifs developed inside Africa prior to the Out-of-Africa Exodus (60,000-80,000 Before Present). However, when it

<sup>26</sup> Werner: 'Chants et contes, p. 304'.

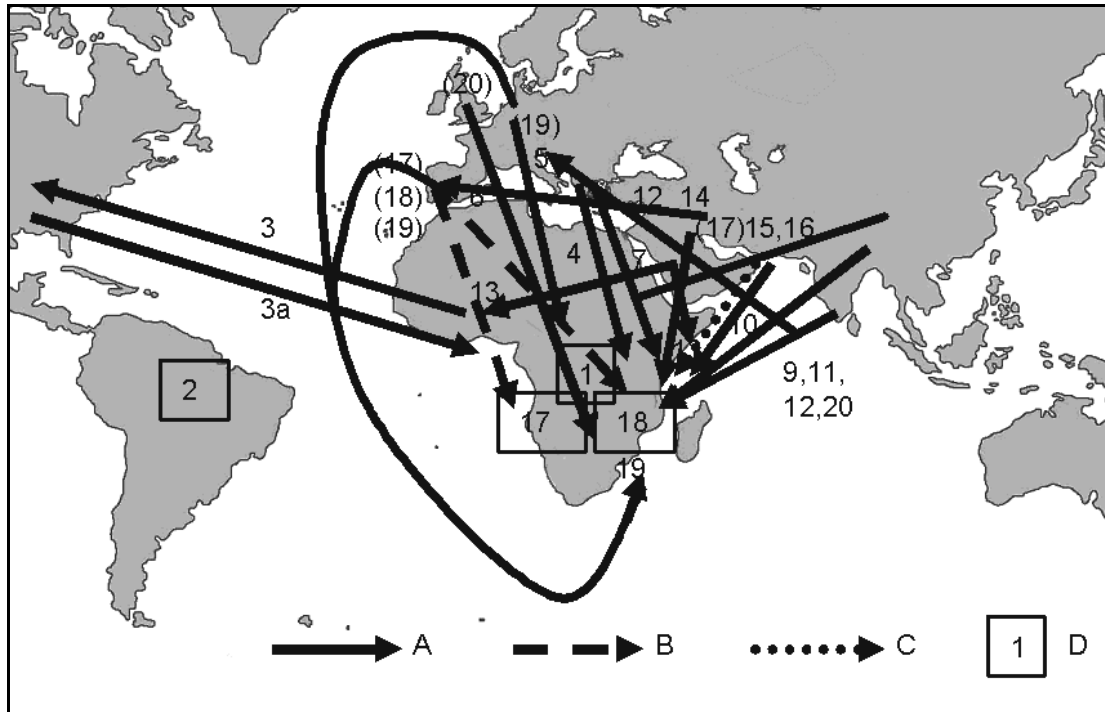
<sup>27</sup> Werner: 'Dennett, *Folk-Lore of the Fjort*, No. III.'

<sup>28</sup> Werner: '*Folk-tales of Angola*, pp. 29 and 43'.

<sup>29</sup> Werner: 'Seidel, in *Zeitschrift für afrikanische und ozeanische Sprachen*, vol. i, p. 247'.

<sup>30</sup> Werner: 'Junod *Chants et contes*, p. 317.'

comes to the articulation of African local rural communities to transcontinental economic and power structures, one can hardly expect pristine African narrative motifs – and even the imposition of a tributary mode of production focussing on kingship is likely to reflect such transcontinental continuities as comparative study would suggest attaches to the very notion of kingship.



**A: proposed direction of borrowing; B: only partial borrowing; C: conjectural; D: local motif; numbering as in Table 1**

**Fig. 1. African stories that have travelled: proposed directions of borrowing according to Werner**

### Conclusion

In this paper we have seen Matthew Schoffeleers at work as a pioneering analyst of the deep structure and historical message of Malawian folk stories. Taking the Malawian corpus very seriously, and addressing it on the basis of a profound knowledge of the relevant language and culture, we can only admire the force of his scholarship and of his eclectically structuralist, analytical mind. His work on folk stories raises important questions of theory, method and data, and will continue to inspire. Yet we cannot escape the conclusion that, partly as a result of his own endeavours, our approach to oral literature in Malawi and in Africa as a whole has meanwhile considerably advanced beyond the intuitive, narrowly structuralist principles applied by Schoffeleers, and has developed a more prudent and subtle approach both to deep structure, to history, and to transcontinental connections.

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