

Life in Matapila

Muli bwanji? I live in Matapila, a village on the outskirts of Lilongwe, the capital of the Republic of Malawi. I am here as a part of JICA's Overseas Cooperation Volunteers to organize and advise on arts education. I spend my days bicycling around different primary schools spread across the district. My days are busy, organizing art club activities for children using drums and other instruments, crayons, and natural materials, and working with teachers to put on events like hand-made fashion shows.

Malawi is known as 'the warm heart of Africa,' because of its friendly people and peaceful society. It really lives up to this name, too, as my neighbors here have kindly taught me all I need to get by, from how to hold a hoe to ploughing the fields.

I'm the only foreigner in the village, so everyone knows me. My name is Yukino, but some people call me *Chikhulupiro*, a Chewa language name given to me by a colleague. Everyone calls out to me when they see me, "Yukino, come here!" "*Chikhulupiro, Bbobho?*" It's good manners in this village to go to who's beckoning you, even if they are quite a distance away. Crossing the ridges in the fields to who called me, we ask each other "*Muli bwanji? How's your house? How's your family?*" – as a rule, greetings here are long. Even if we don't really have anything important to discuss, these long greetings are an essential part of communication in Malawi. When I go to school, go to buy vegetables, or to fetch water from the well... it all involves these long greetings. Each one takes time, but that's fine. That's the way of life here.

One day, when I was heading to school as usual, I noticed the children seemed restless and fidgety. It turns out there was going to be a *Gule-Wamkulu* in the neighboring village. Translated directly, *Gule-Wamkulu* just means 'big dance,' but it is actually a secret society of masked members who arrive for funerals, or whenever a new village chief is appointed. The *Gule-Wamkulu* then dance to the sound of drums in eccentric hand-made costumes of flowing cloth.

My colleague, Mr. Banda told me that the members of this secret society are like messengers from the other world, and that at funerals they are meant to send the dead happily to the 'other side.' Because *Gule-Wamkulu* is a secret society, its members' identities must not be revealed. So, we don't know who is under the masks, but it's probably someone from the neighborhood. Within the society, they are said to share secrets like 'how to fly without using an airplane,' and other types of sorcery. So, the *Gule-Wamkulu* is both traditional art and indigenous religion.

In Matapila, there are also many Christians, and a few Muslims, especially amongst the teachers and medical professionals. There is also a church near Matapila Primary School. The Christians say they do not believe in *Gule-Wamkulu*, but it is nevertheless deeply intertwined with the people's lives as a traditional art form.

The biggest joker at school, a sixth-grade boy called Frackson, is a big fan of the *Gule-Wamkulu*. In arts class, he constantly draws *Gule-Wamkulu*, and in traditional dance class, he always takes the initiative to be the drummer. During a project to paint a mural on the school wall, Frackson tried to paint a huge picture of the *Gule-Wamkulu*, but the teachers stopped him. Frackson was the one who told me about *Gule-Wamkulu* near Selengo Primary School in the neighboring village.

Gule-Wamkulu is an important pastime in this village, where entertainment is scarce. Few houses have TVs, and many don't have electricity to begin with. There's nothing that could be called a movie theatre, only a straw hut with an old CRT TV where the drunken men would gather. That's why, on the *Gule-Wamkulu* days, the children get excited and restless – the spectacle of the dance is also a great entertainment event.

In the afternoon, after school, we all headed to Selengo Primary School, about a 40-minute walk away. There was to be an inauguration ceremony for the new chief of the village. When we arrived, we could already hear the sound of the drums.

Wearing masks and adorned with handmade wigs and decorations, the *Gule-Wamkulu* members stood out amongst the crowd. They look a little comical, but also somewhat frightening. As the

drummers beat the drums and the village ladies sang beside them, they danced with every fiber of their being. The members each have various names depending on their type; some are called ‘*Nyau*,’ others are ‘*Makanja*,’ especially tall members on stilts, and others in banana peel costumes are called ‘*Kwakwase*.’ The audience tosses money to members who dance particularly well.

As the dance reached its climax, a large lion, called *Mkango*, appeared. Not a real lion, of course, but a costume with two people inside. Also kind of comical, it still seems powerful, with its eyes and mouth drawn on with an oil pen. Everyone was entranced by the lion, waving its fluffy mane as it danced.

After a round of dancing, the members begin chasing children and women and demanding money. Everyone runs away to avoid being caught, but many children cry in fear as they are chased. *Gule-Wamkulu* are objects of not only admiration, but awe and fear, too.

Once the *Gule-Wamkulu* was over, we all walked back to Matapila before dark. When I closed my eyes, the excitement was still in my body, and I couldn’t fall asleep.

The next day, I got up at sunrise like usual, and began my rounds of the schools. The teachers knew I had gone to see *Gule-Wamkulu* and asked me how it was. They all seemed happy to hear that I had a good time.

When I arrived home exhausted after work, about 50 children were waiting for me in our yard. “Lend us your drums! Dance with us!” The children’s enthusiasm had not cooled off. No matter how tired I was, I couldn’t ignore the anticipation shining in the children’s eyes. We lost ourselves in the dance, and by the time we noticed, it was getting dark.

The moon is bright today. The children can walk home without a torch.

Questions, Answers and Hints:

1. Where is the narrator originally from?

Answer: Japan.

Hints/Clues: The narrator mentions she is in Malawi as part of JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency)’s Overseas Cooperation Volunteer, and that she is the only foreigner in the village = not from Malawi herself, and JICA is a Japanese organization.

2. What is Malawi’s main industry?

Answer: Agriculture.

Hints/Clues: Amongst the things that the villages taught the narrator, that she “need[s] to get by” includes “how to hold a hoe” and “ploughing the fields,” suggesting that agriculture is not only the main industry, but is essential to life in the village.

3. Does Matapila village have running water?

Answer: No.

Hints/Clues: The narrator mentions going to a well to “to fetch water.”

4. Does Matapila have streetlights?

Answer: No.

Hints/Clues: Near the end, the narrator describes a lifestyle of waking with the sun and getting home before its dark. Also, she mentioned that she had stayed out in her garden with the children until after dark, but because the moon was bright that night the children could “walk home without a torch,” suggesting that there is only natural light.

5. Why did the teachers stop Frackson from painting a mural of the *Gule-Wamkulu*?

Answer: (Because they are likely a Christian school) They don’t want to be thought of as

believing in and/or teaching about *Gule-Wamkulu*.

Hints/Clues: The narrator mentions that there is a church near the school, and that many of the teachers are Christian, and from that it is also likely that it is a Christian school. Thus, the school would likely not want to be associated with indigenous religions or things considered to be sorcery. (It is interesting, however, that the teachers were happy that Yukino enjoyed *Gule-Wamkulu*, which at the least demonstrates a local understanding of its importance, even if overt recognition is difficult for religious reasons).

6. On the day after *Gule-Wamkulu*, why did the children come to dance at Yukino's house specifically?

Answer: Because she has the drums and other accessories for the art club activities.

Hints/Clues: The narrator states at the beginning that she has “drums and other instruments, crayons and natural materials,” for club activities. Also, as she later states that Matapila is “a village where entertainment is scarce,” and that many people do not have TVs or even electricity – so it can be imagined that very few households have such luxury items as musical instruments. Thus, the children visit Yukino for them.