

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

13 Years of Open Access

Vol. 13 Issue-IV AUGUST 2022

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Ecocinematic Representation of Animals in the Globalised Context of Ecological Crises

Witness Mdoka

Department of English and Communication Studies,
The Catholic University of Malawi.

Article History: Submitted-06/07/2022, Revised-19/08/2022, Accepted-22/08/2022, Published-31/08/2022.

Abstract:

This paper seeks to show how the representation of animals in traditional masks among the Chewa of Central Malawi from ecocinema and ecocriticism perspectives reflects not only the people's environmental embeddedness but also their environmental consciousness and the need for environmental restoration. Animals play important roles in the religious, political, economic, social and cultural lives of the people. In an era of environmental crises, traditional performances of animal masks are called upon to dramatize the role of coexistence despite each organism's ecological niche. This paper seeks to examine traditional African masks in *Gule Wamkulu* and the symbolic representations of animals in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha: Mvula ndi Madzi Khwakhwalala* (2015), a DVD play by Claude Boucher. The play re-enacts the Chewa creation myth in which humans and animals harmoniously coexisted until humans invented fire that disrupted the primordial harmony.

Keywords: ecocinema, ecocriticism, coexistence, ecological niche, primordial harmony.

Introduction

Among the Chewa of Central Malawi, the spirits of the ancestors are represented in the form of animal masks in what is locally referred as *Gule Wamkulu*, *Nyau* or *Zilombo*. Good behaviour among the people, *miyambo* and/or *nzeru* (wisdom) are reinforced through recourse to animal masks. The belief that animal masks are sacred help people to conceptualise them in the religious and non-material realms of life. Because of their sacredness, animal masks symbolise power and the spirits of the ancestors that participate in the drama of the living. *Gule Wamkulu* masquerades constitute dramatic forms. Finnegan (2012) observes that “[t]he masquerades – dances of masked figures of various kinds [...] all seem to include certain elements of drama and

are often referred to as ‘plays.’ There is generally the idea of some kind of enactment or representation by the masked figure with great emphasis on costume (especially masks) and on music and dancing” (494). The masquerade dramatic performances take a religious solemnity with masks as costumes and the content is represented in songs. Finnegan further notes that “though different elements of drama are stressed in different African cultures, one theme that seems to run through almost all these African performances is the overriding significance of music and dance and the secondary importance of the spoken word” (500). From time immemorial, the rain-calling rituals and performances in Africa in general, and Malawi in particular, consisted of singing, dancing and incantations.

Therefore, it is no surprise that *Gule Wamkulu* dramatic performance joins the debate in contributing to the contemporary environmental discourse. Thus, as Okpewho (1992) explains, “we may safely discuss traditional African drama under the broad subdivisions of the *ritual* and the *popular*, with the guiding understanding of drama *as an entertainment conveyed basically through suggestive or symbolic action and movement and defining an experience*” (262, original italics). *Gule Wamkulu* theatrical performances in which the dead are involved in the drama of the living through masks dramatize human experience. The experience being dramatized in the present study is environmental degradation and the spirits of the dead are involved through the re-enactment of the creation myth because the land they bequeathed to their children is threatened by destruction and pollution. The play, *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* (2015) can be categorised within what Ivakhiv (2012) refers to as “ecocritical film studies, green film studies, ecomedia studies and ecocinema criticism” (144). What this implies is that the application of ecocriticism defined as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii) is open to various texts including films.

The play, *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* (2015), is an ecocinema aimed at what Willoquet-Maricondi (2010) describes as “consciousness-raising and activist intentions, as well as responsibility to heighten awareness about contemporary issues and practices affecting planetary health” (45). The play is divided into six scenes. The first scene begins with the portrayal of the current state of deforestation largely due to charcoal production. Then it plunges into the past, reminding the audience that humans, animals and plants were created by *Chauta* (God). This scene re-enacts the human-animal relationship in Kaphirintiwa creation myth. In this

myth, *Chauta* created humans and animals and made them land on a huge rock on Kaphirintiwa Mountain. Upon landing on the rock which was still soft, the humans and animals left their footprints there as a mark of their primordial harmony and interconnectedness as creatures of the Supreme Being. In the third scene, the human being's accidental invention of fire that ignited after rubbing two sticks together set the forest ablaze.

The people lack rains because the land has no trees after the fire incident and this is the fourth scene. In the fifth scene of the film, *Chauta* gives people another chance to save themselves by sending the Chameleon that carries *Chauta's* message about afforestation. The sixth and final scene sees the people taking Chameleon's message from *Chauta* about planting trees seriously. It is also worth noting that after the fire incident in the Kaphirintiwa myth, most animals ran away from the human being and became wild animals and those few that remained with the human being became domestic animals. The spider through its web helped *Chauta* to escape into the sky. The play was produced to commemorate Pope Francis' *Encyclical Letter* (2015).

Deforestation, pollution and the re-enactment of the Chewa creation myth

The play opens at the market place where through mime local traders sell an assortment of forest resources such as firewood, hoe handles, timber and charcoal. Imaginary trucks arrive at the market place and the drivers buy the forest resources, load them into their trucks and drive away. In its opening scene, the play therefore premises the challenge of deforestation in Malawi on "keep cutting the trees and this is the end of our forests" (Boucher 2015). The culmination of this is that "the rains will fail and there will be water shortage on our planet." The play could be referred to as "indigenous theatre" defined by Kamlongera *et.al.* (1992) as "those dramatic performances which have their roots in traditions of this place, but not at the exclusion of interference or borrowing from others. This is theatre we could classify as 'folk theatre'" (15-16). *Gule Wamkulu* originates in the people's traditions and how they are cosmologically linked with animals. *Gule Wamkulu* as indigenous drama is ritualistic and it is the dramatization of the spirits of the ancestors reincarnated in the form of animals and their performances take the form of mystery plays. *Gule Wamkulu* performances constitute different forms of the people's theatrical productions.

The title of the play suggests that deforestation in Malawi leads to insufficient rainfall and water. The forest products such as timber, logs of wood and charcoal sold at the market and some of which find their way to Tanzania, Zambia, Mozambique, and China are examples of key factors leading to deforestation in the global context. Willoquet-Maricondi (2010) observes that “the crucial function of the emerging genre of eco-cinema [is] to ‘challenge and broaden audience’s perception and understanding of the complex world that surrounds us’” (43). *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* locates the causes of deforestation in capitalist perspectives and consumer culture. The expressions used in the play create awareness about the state of the environment, for example, *kokotakokota nkhalango zatha* (forests have been denuded), and *mvula ndi madzi khwakhwalala* (rainfall and water driven away). Deforestation is a serious problem in Malawi. Mulwafu (2011) observes that:

Notable among the challenges to sustainable natural resource management is deforestation currently at an alarming rate across the country. Most mountains and hills have been denuded and it is an eyesore to see only patches of forested areas in the country. Malawi has one of the highest rates of deforestation in southern Africa, currently at 2.4 percent (226 – 227).

The denudation of the once forested areas stripping them of their trees is what *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* first dwells on before it draws the attention of the audience into the Chewa heritage of oral literature with masked animal performances. The role of animal masks in the play is to raise consciousness among the audience that in the current state of deforestation, wild animals (*zilombo*) have their habitats destroyed besides the challenges human beings face due to deforestation. The presence of the animal masks reminds the audience that they are the spirits of the ancestors coming from the forests (*dambwe*), culturally preserved. Deforestation adversely affects animal habitations and biodiversity. Deforestation has disturbed not only the hydrological cycle, *mvula ndi madzi khwakhwalala*, but it has also affected human and animal lives. *Gule Wamkulu* helps in environmental conservation for the institution’s closeness to forests/bushes where wild animals (*zilombo*) live. Ikeke (2013) notes that that “[a] key area of the environment is forest. Forests hold great value in every local community and in the global world. Without forests, trees, shrubs, and other plants, which are part of every forest, the only

thing you will see before you when you look ahead of you will be bare sand, stones, mountains, and the natural landscape without the beauty of forests and trees” (345). Forests are habitats of animals besides being the warehouses of traditional ecological values. The play emphasises the roles of forests in regulating climate, protecting biodiversity and sustaining human health and thus, it is in line with cinematic ecocriticism.

Willoquet-Maricondi (2010) asserts that “cinematic ecocriticism urges us to incorporate ecological considerations into the study of our experiences as producers and consumers of cinema and, in this way also to acknowledge our role as co-participants with the nonhuman world in the complex symbiotic process we call evolution, a process that includes cultural evolution” (xviii – xiv). The interactions between humans and animals including the supernatural elements represented in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* broaden the audience’s cosmovision. The play creates a unified totality in which the audience are attendants in the drama of the masked dancers existing in the liminal space between the living and the dead in order to bring about positive changes towards the way people treat the environment.

The song that forms the background to the opening scene of *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* demonstrates cultural activism in contextualising environmental degradation in human-induced causes:

<i>Kokotakokota mitengo yatha!</i>	Keep cutting trees and this is the end of forests!
<i>Ndimanga bwanji nyumba mitengo yatha,</i>	How can I build a house, there is no timber,
<i>Ndiphika bwanji nsima nkhu ni zatha.</i>	How can I cook, there is no firewood,
<i>Owononga achoke-e!</i>	Plunderers must leave!
<i>Ndigona pati, ndidyanji, ndimwanji?</i>	Where can I sleep, what can I eat; what can I drink?
<i>Mvula khwakhwalala.</i>	There is no water.
<i>Ndi mudzi womwe-e!</i>	Our village has vanished!

The song bemoans the loss of trees in Malawi's forests. The loss of implies that people have no timber and other construction materials that use trees. There is also no firewood for cooking. The song demands that plunderers of forests must leave God's earth because they have betrayed their trust (*Owononga achoke*). The song then laments about climate change that results in unpredictable rains. For a country that depends on rain-fed agriculture, this situation is a great concern. The play creates a local ecological discourse that reflects the gravity of environmental degradation in Malawi. Katz (2001) says that the remedy to environmental restoration is through the reorientation of "human social institutions [...] so that they can exist in harmony with the processes and life forms of the natural world" (159). Malawi has had such institutions like *Nyau* long before deep ecological formulations.

The play problematises the question of survival for both humans and animals in the current state of deforestation and the vanishing of the rains. The unavailability of forests and water makes life agonising for humans and animals and the animal masks introduced in this play are intended "for the ancestors to communicate with the people" (Morgan 2) the implications of human behaviours and actions towards the environment/nature (*chilengedwe*). Willoquet-Maricondi (2010) asserts that "as a specific type of environmentally oriented cinema, eco cinema can offer us alternative models for how to represent and engage with the natural world; these models have the potential to foster a healthier and more sustainable relationship to that world" (44). In line with Pope Francis' *Encyclical Letter* (2015), Boucher represents humans and animal masks (*zilombo*) mourning for the loss of the primordial harmony. Animal masks symbolise the cycles of life, death and rebirth among the Chewa and for Moto (1994) "the original harmony of creation is the key to the meaning of the *Nyau* [which] affects the whole life cycle from birth to death" (25). The loss of forests signifies death for which the animal masks mourn in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha*, a play informed by an ancestral environmental memory.

In the play, the extermination of wild animals and exploitation of the earth have their roots in capitalist greed as the following song portrays:

<i>Ndikutseka mvula ndine,</i>	I am the one who prevents the rain,
<i>Ndikudula mitengo ndine osati chakusowa,</i>	I cut down trees not because I am needy,

Chifukwa cha madyera.

But because I am greedy.

Ndawononga chilengedwe,

I have destroyed the
environment/nature,

Chifukwa cha madyera aye-e!

Because of greed!

The song suggests that climate change is human-induced, that is, it is anthropogenic. Humans are responsible for environmental degradation and climate change. The song also attributes climate change to capitalist greed and monopolistic tendencies. The song also suggests that deforestation leads to shortage of rains. Wanton cutting down of trees is metaphorically bewitching the land. The song then puts emphasis on *madyera* (greed or corruption) with its roots in capitalism as a key factor that has aggravated the destruction of forests. On corruption, May *et.al.* (2017), have observed that “Malawi is ranked 120 of 176 countries on the Corruption Perception Index, that is, it falls within the top $\frac{1}{3}$ of most corrupt countries in the world” (1). It is through corruption that forests and wildlife have disappeared. According to the song, it is covetousness that informs the lack of environmental sensibility. Animals and forests have become either personal or corporate assets and/or commodities.

Human destruction of nature because of covetousness has resulted in people being alienated from nature. The rise of ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary approach to the study of literature is closely linked to efforts to stem the environmentally destructive tide of capitalism. Nayar (2010) observes that “[e]cocriticism originates in a bio-social context of unrestrained capitalism, excessive exploitation of nature, worrying definitions and shapes of ‘development’ and environmental hazard” (297). Capitalists’ desire for increased production that exploits natural resources entails insatiability for growth. Boggs (2012) argues that:

The global crisis reveals the extent to which the classical industrial model has run its course, even as ruling elites scramble to mobilise resources in support of the corporate growth system over which they preside – a system giving rise to rampant material exploitation, vast inequalities of wealth and power, wasteful use of natural resources, militarism, and warfare not to mention escalating

habitat destruction on the road to possible ecological collapse
(153).

What this passage means is that environmental sustainability is difficult to achieve in the capitalist framework and the developed countries' superficiality in approaching the environmental challenges speaks volumes. Global warming, climate change, deforestation, extinction of animals, overfishing, siltation of rivers, air and water pollution and waste management, *inter alia*, constitute key environmental challenges or problems brought about by an exclusively capitalist approach to development. All these have negatively affected indigenous systems and the people's survival mechanisms. The expression *Ndawononga chilengedwe* (I have destroyed the environment) sums up the various ways through which humans have interfered the normal functioning of *chilengedwe* (nature). *Nda-* in *Ndawononga* which stands for the singular, "I" is generally plural because it refers to all humans as destructive of nature. The play reflects the concern for the larger world of all living things through the participation of different animal masks symbolically representing the real animals and their concerns about environmental degradation. In order for us to restore the environment to its former glory, it depends on the choices we make.

Because humans are responsible for environmental degradation, it implies human failure to be responsible as trustees of nature and natural resources. The structure of the play is such that there is no hero because all human beings have failed to conserve the environment, *Chatikanika ife kusunga chilengedwe*. Human behaviour greatly affects the environment. The following song demonstrates lack of human trusteeship of nature that has culminated in the overexploitation of natural resources:

<i>O, Chatikanikafe-e! (x2)</i>	We have failed!
<i>Chatikanika kusunga chilengedwe,</i>	We have failed to conserve nature,
<i>Nsomba, nyama zatha!</i>	Fish, meat (game) depleted!
<i>Chimanga chogula chadula!</i>	Maize is selling at high prices!

Exploitation to the point of diminishing returns has greatly affected the availability of natural resources. The song blames anthropogenic causes of the environmental crises. *Ife* (We), collectively as human beings, have failed to conserve nature. The song highlights the fact that over-exploitation of natural resources has affected the availability of animals and fish. Maize, which people used to harvest in abundance before the acidification of soils with chemical fertilisers and acid rains, is now scarce. The expressions *Nsomba*, *nyama zatha* and *Chimanga chogula chadula* (fish, animals have been depleted and maize is expensive) employ concord based on word relations as underlined. Overfishing based on “capture fishery” defined as “fish exploitation from the naturally existing water bodies” (Yaron *et.al.* 33) means that the few different fish species available at the market become expensive just as maize has become expensive. With deforestation, rivers have silted up affecting the breeding of fish. The production of maize fluctuates depending on the amount of rains received. All this is suicidal and the play calls upon us to rethink our habits towards the environment in order for it to regain its previous glory.

Boucher takes an ecocentric approach to the environmental challenges of deforestation and pollution. In watching an ecocinematic play, it is worth noting that “our interest, then, is not only in *what* [plays] show us, but also in *how* they show us these things and how this affects our ‘ways of seeing’ ourselves and our relationship to the nonhuman world” (Ivakhin146, original italics). In the play, the songs *Ndikutseka mvula ndine* (I am the one who prevents rains) and *Chatikanika ife kusunga chilengedwe* (We have failed to conserve nature), have demonstrated people’s ecological awareness. This creates empathy in the audience by sharing a common understanding with the singers. Willoquet-Maricondi (2010) asserts that “ecocentrism denotes a shift in values that takes into consideration the well-being of the whole ecosphere, which includes humanity. There is no paradox, then, since humanity is part of the biotic community, one of the components of the ecosphere” (47). This means the interrelatedness of the biotic and abiotic entities in nature. Humanity, as an integral part of nature, is responsible for environmental restoration.

The first animal mask to appear in the play is Mr Plastic, *Kwanga Nkupha* (My Trade is to Kill). The facemask of this plastic therianthropie figure is gloomy, sunburnt with an elongated nose and the whole body is covered in different shades of colours and layers of plastics. The

mask, Mr Plastic, *Kwanga Nkupha* (My Trade is to Kill) informs how *Gule Wamkulu* responds to contemporary environmental challenges and its religio-economic and health concerns. The mask, Mr Plastic, as opposed to “Mrs Plastic,” also informs male aggression towards nature that tampers with the health and conservation of the land and aquatic habitats understood through ecofeminism. In the Chewa patriarchal society, *Gule Wamkulu* is a male dominated theatrical performance that constitutes the core values of their culture instituted by men while “women are closer to nature” (Davion 241). *Gule Wamkulu* reflects the correlation of sexism and nature considering that the bulk of the animal structures are male except *Maria* and *Kasiyamaliro* and masks that represent wives of some male masks like *Chadzunda*. *Kasiyamaliro*, the most important female mask among the Chewa’s *Gule Wamkulu*, is central in focusing on its feminine attributes to teach moral values. It is worth noting that “[i]f we are to enter a sustainable environmental era, we must acknowledge the ways in which human relationships with the land are mediated by cultural norms and practices, including the practice of cinema, and are bound to power dynamics in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, and class” (Willoquet-Maricondi 57-58). The importance of the mediatory roles of animal masks in environmental sustainability in *Gule Wamkulu* cannot be overemphasised because they determine the Chewa people’s affiliation to their environment because for them humans, land, water, animals and plants constitute the sanctity of nature (*chilengedwe*) which had its primordial harmony at Kaphirintiwa.

In responding to the contemporary environmental challenges of pollution, the people focus on the non-biodegradability of plastics represented by *Kwanga Nkupha* (My Trade is to Kill). Plastics do not only pollute the soil but they also pollute rivers. Vegter *et.al.* (2014) observe that “increased occurrence of plastics in marine ecosystems mirrors the increased prevalence of plastics in society, and reflects the high durability and persistence of plastics in the environment” (225). The plastic mask, *Kwanga Nkupha*, reveals the influence of modern environmental knowledge on traditional practices and the people’s observations of key challenges that corrode the environment. It is worth noting that globally, the “production of plastics increased by more than twenty-fold between 1964 and 2015, with the annual output of 322 million tonnes, and [it] is expected to double by 2035, and almost quadruple by 2050” (Barra and Leonard 2018:4). What this entails is that the health of humans and animals, including soil microorganisms, is affected by the life suffocating effects of plastics. Turpine *et.al.* (2019) have observed that:

Malawians probably generate more than 0.20 kg of plastic waste per person per day. Plastic still makes up a relatively small proportion of the solid waste that is generated in Malawi, estimated to range from about 8% in low income areas, to about 30% in high income areas. However, Malawians are producing more waste per capita than sub-Saharan counterparts, and waste management systems and public awareness are inadequate to cope with waste in general. The four largest cities in Malawi together generate over 1000 tonnes in solid waste per day (ii).

Waste management is a very serious environmental challenge in Malawi. Plastic bags and bottles have no proper disposal and they are heaped in any place including in streams or rivers. This infringes on ecocentric and geocentric approaches of protecting the environment from pollution and destruction. Turpine *et.al.* (2019) note that “Malawi is characterised by low waste collection rates and cities lack formal waste management systems. This has serious implications for the amount of plastic waste that remains uncollected and ends up in landfill or the environment” (8). It is a common sight that landfills in Malawi are heaped with plastics of different colours, types and sizes. Slowly, they find their way into rivers. Turpine *et.al.* (2019) also note that the “Zambezi River, into which Malawi’s rivers drain, is ranked 23rd in the world, carries some 476 000 tonnes of mismanaged plastic waste into the sea every year. While research and monitoring has focused on the oceans, inland lakes such as Lake Malawi are also being seriously impacted” (11). Therefore, the Chewa’s response to the contemporary challenges of plastic by constructing a mask, Mr Plastic, *Kwanga Nkupha*, described as “My Trade is to kill,” is timely.

The gloomy and sunburnt face of the plastic mask *Kwanga Nkupha* in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* is a therianthropic figure (half-human and half-animal) and it symbolises the negative implications of plastics. With this cultural awareness of the environmental challenges emanating from the use and disposal of plastics including those problems that arise after the disposal of plastics – carried in local expression *Kwanga Nkupha* (My Trade is to Kill) – community participation in environmental conservation and natural resources management become unavoidably crucial. It is significant to note that “[p]lastics stay in the environment for a

long time; some take up to 500 years to break down; this causes damage, harms biodiversity, and depletes the ecosystem services needed to support life” (Barra and Leonard 8). Although the message about plastics in the play emphasises on *Tiyeni tisamale m'makomo mwathu, titole mapulasitikiponse, tipewe uve* (Let us keep our surroundings clean, let us pick up all plastics, let us avoid dirt), disposal of used plastics remains an unresolved problem in Malawi, especially in the major cities and towns. The different layers and colours covering the body of the plastic mask (Mr Plastic), *Kwanga Nkupha* (My Trade is to Kill) and the accompanying performance to the tune of a song and drums are symbolic of the dangers of the plastic culture in Malawi:

<i>Eh! Kwanga nkuphane-e,</i>	My trade is to kill,
<i>Eh! Kwanga nkuphane-e Pulasitiki!</i>	My trade is to kill, I am Mr Plastic!
<i>Eh! Kwanga nkuphane-e, nthaka!</i>	My trade is to kill the soil!
<i>Eh! Kwanga nkuphane-e, nyama!</i>	My trade is to kill animals!
<i>Eh! Kwanga nkuphane-e, anthu!</i>	My trade is to kill humans!

The song suggests that Mr Plastic is specialised in killing, like the Angel of death, my specialty is to kill, emphasises the dangers of plastics to the environment. The recognition of the dangers of plastics in the context of cultural symbols, signs and codes through the mask, *Kwanga Nkupha* (My trade is to kill) and calling upon members of the community to regulate their use is constitutive of identifying a solution to this environmental challenge. *Kwanga Nkupha* (Mr Plastic) performance uses cultural codes in calling upon people to change their behaviour towards the environment in order to avert catastrophe. In doing this, culture employs “an earth-centred” approach. Animal representations in *Gule Wamkulu* are in the form of structures from which we derive their meanings. Jane Turpie *et.al.* (2019) explain the dangers of plastics that:

Plastic litter blocks drainage systems and leads to flooding as well as environmental pollution. Left in the environment, plastics break down into fragments and ultimately into microscopic particles.

[...]. Plastic debris washed into rivers, lakes, seas and oceans has entered every conceivable food chain [...] (i).

Because of the interconnectedness of ecological entities in food webs and food chains, plastics are a health hazard to living organisms, both human and nonhuman. In response to the modern environmental challenges, the *Gule Wamkulu* plastic mask creates awareness about the dangers of plastics in line with contemporary ecocriticism. Mr Plastic, *Kwanga Nkupha* (My Trade is to Kill) presents the dangers of plastics when he says he kills *nthaka* (soil), *nyama* (animals, both wildlife and aquatic life) and *anthu* (humans). In “Plasticenta: First evidence of micro-plastics in human placenta,” Ragusa *et.al.* (2021), explain with scientific evidence based on experiments that “several micro-plastic fragments were detected [...] in human placenta samples collected from six consenting patients with uneventful pregnancies (3)” at Fatebenefratelli Hospital in Rome.

Out of six samples collected, four placentas had micro-plastic fragments, and, “once present in the human body, micro-plastics may accumulate and exert localised toxicity by inducing and/or enhancing immune responses and, hence, potentially reducing the defence mechanisms against pathogens and altering the utilisation of energy stores” (Ragusa *et.al.* 15). This implies that with micro-plastics and dioxin in human bodies, pregnant “[w]omen are affected twice: in their own bodies, and – trans- or inter-corporeally – in their babies’ bodies” (Iovino 46). The film’s representation of the dangers on plastics in killing the soil, animals and humans (*kupha nthaka, nyama ndi anthu*) has scientific proof. In this connection, Morton (2012) argues that “relationships not only constitute beings as they relate ‘between’ one another: there are relationships all the way down, affecting the very core of entities. Beneath supposed disconnections between things, there is a deeper level at which things are intricately connected – nay entangled, which is a technical quantum-theoretical term. Entanglement implies a connection so deep as to be a kind of identity” (60). The ineluctable interconnectedness and interdependence of ecological entities entail that even small quantities of micro-plastics affect many terrestrial and aquatic organisms.

Thus, there are several ways through which plastics kill the soil, animals and people (*kupha nthaka, nyama ndi anthu*) as Mr Plastic exhibits. The role of animal masks like Mr Plastic is to demonstrate that “[t]he human environment and the natural environment deteriorate

together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation” (Pope Francis 21). The dirty plastics covering the body of Mr Plastic are symbolic of poverty and low social standing that correlate negatively with suffering from the effects of environmental challenges in line with Nixon’s (2011) postulation about “the environmentalism of the poor” (1). In addition to plastic pollution, chemical fertilisers, insecticides, pesticides, fungicides, bactericides and fumigants among other chemicals used in agriculture, have negative effects on both the environment and living organisms including humans.

Having analysed the environmental challenges of deforestation and pollution portrayed in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* and having mobilised and discussed relevant sources on the same, I now turn to the Chewa Kaphirintiwa creation myth from which the play largely utilises the human-animal interaction. The play re-enacts the Kaphirintiwa myth and this scene opens with the question: *Zinayamba bwanji?* (How did it begin?). In response to this question, the play chronicles that in the beginning, “God our Mother gathered the clouds in lightning and thunder. She poured down the rain and the earth was. God the Creator soaked the soil and sowed plenty of seeds and they germinated” (Play’s Documentary).

According to Ott (2000) “all the creation events are framed by a stylised forest, which recalls the original place of peace between God, man, animals, and nature. In the first creatures – animals, human beings, and plants – live together in harmony at the foot of Kaphirintiwa. The whole scene is arranged in two sets of polarities: God above and humankind below; male on left and female on the right” (288 – 289). This arrangement explains the *Chauta/Chiuta* (female/male God) in the Kaphirintiwa myth and the primordial harmony is symbolic of “*logoi* – the purposes or harmonies of creation” (Siewers 26). Among the Chewa, *Chauta* has different names all of which are important in *Gule Wamkulu* as a religio-cultural and political cult of animals.

After creating plants, the Kaphirintiwa creation myth continues, *Chauta* came down to the earth on the spider’s thread/web. *Chauta* then made people and animals step on the soft rock on Kaphirintiwa Mountain where they left their footprints. In this primordial harmony, *Chauta*, people and animals lived peacefully together. The Chewa *Chauta* who comes down to the earth using a spider’s web reveals the flimsy transport provided by one of *Chauta*’s creatures. At this point in the play, several animal masks appear and they perform to the song:

<i>Nyamanyamaye-ee! Nyamanyamaye-ee!</i>	Animals, animals!
<i>Nyama mdondo!</i>	Animals in the bush!
<i>Namalengaye-ee! Namalengaye-ee!</i>	God, the Creator, God, the Creator!
<i>Wasangalala!</i>	He is pleased!

The song uses the words *nyama* to mean animals and *mdondo* to refer to forest which overall means animals in the forest or bush. That said, however, *Mdondo* is also the name of an elongated animal mask which requires a *dambwe* of its own for its length, 5-6 metres, and hugeness, 2 metres high and 1 metre wide (Boucher 113). This theriomorphic animal mask “has two meanings: “the bush or men’s territory” and also derives from *kundondozana*, meaning “to follow each other like a train” and it represents power and chieftaincy (Boucher 113). To the performance of the song above, three animal masks appear in this scene and these are *Chimbwala* (Dog) *Kalulu* (Hare) and *Mkango* (Lion) and they are theriomorphic figures (completely in the animal form). I will return to the analysis of these animal masks in the next section. A significant aspect in this part of the play is the jovial interaction of the animal masks and humans as they perform to the song and beats of drums. The reference to *Namalenga wasangalala* (the Creator is pleased) in the song and the jovial performances of the animal masks entail primordial harmony between the physical and the divine environments. The representation of the human-animal interaction reflects the prelapsarian bliss as the animals perform in ecstasy of a religious solemnity of *Gule Wamkulu*. DeMello (2012) explains the roles of animals in “religious thought” saying, “[a]s symbols, animals help us to understand important religious concepts such as purity, sacrifice, morality, and creation. [...animals] play important roles in the myths of cultures around the world” (301). The masked dancers, regardless of their economic status in society, are able to draw respect from the society while enjoying “the sublime aspects of life” in their symbolic realm as the spirits of the dead. Okpewho (1992) argues that “[t]he appeal and popularity of African masquerade theatre is supported by the sheer sense of spectacle inspired by the physical form of the masquerades and the feats they perform. Apart from being colourfully decked out and dressed, masquerades are often adorned with features that inspire terror as befitting the beings of the spirit world whom they represent” (269). Interestingly, among

the Chewa, the masquerades include mammals, reptiles, birds and trees (like the baobab tree mask) as the reincarnations of the spirits of the dead. The art that goes into the construction of these masks and how they perform to the beat of drums accompanied by songs reflect indigenous people's dramaturgy.

In *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha*, animals and animal masks are used as religious symbols that connect and disconnect humans with God. The invention of fire by humans disrupts the primordial harmony previously enjoyed by God, humans and animals in the Kaphirintiwa creation myth. With the fire, the human being makes tools (spears and arrows) and having set the bush ablaze, he goes hunting. Fire made the animals wild and they threaten the humans marking the beginning of enmity. The song in this section of the play is:

<i>Zilombo, zilombo!</i>	Beasts, beasts!
<i>Ziopsa eniŵake-e!</i>	They threaten their owners!

As the core of the Chewa religious belief, animal masks are venerated just like in zoolatry, and their anger in this scene of the play is dramatised by theriomorphic animals. As the fire rages on, demonstrated by the burning of grass placed in clay pots, the theriomorphic animal masks in the play go wild. *Zilombo ziopsa eniŵake* (Beasts that threaten their owners) signify the anger the animals display in the midst of the fire and dizzying smoke in the land. Previously, there was peace between humans and animals but the fire that burns the forest marks the beginning of animals threatening humans, *eniŵake* (entrusted as the custodians of animals). The animals that angrily perform here include *Chimbwala* (Dog), *Gandali* (Rhino), *Bokho* (Hippo) and *Njovu* (Elephant). Like the Greek creation myth in which Prometheus gives fire to humankind in order to thwart “all the best qualities [given] to the animals [by Epimetheus] – strength, swiftness, courage, cunning – until nothing good was left for man” (Harty 1999:5), the fire in the Kaphirintiwa myth is also a symbol that paradoxically, makes humans trustees of animals because through it they demonstrate power over the animals.

In the disharmony that ensued, *Chauta* went back to heaven by means of the spider's thread that symbolically disconnects humans from *Chauta*. The re-enactment of the Chewa Kaphirintiwa creation myth and the celebration of the Encyclical of Pope Francis on the Environment (*Laudato Si'*) reflect a common “confluence” that “Mother Earth” is “our common

home” (3). The seeds that germinate into plants when “God our Mother” pours rains in the Chewa Kaphirintiwa myth, and humans and animals leaving their footprints on the surface of the rock at Kaphirintiwa Mountain in Dzalanyama, reflect an entirely inclusive ecosystem. The indelible footprints on the Kaphirintiwa rock symbolise the sense and beauty of belonging, for both humans and animals. *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* represents the environmental challenges of deforestation, pollution premised on human control of nature that began with the invention of the fire and the making of agricultural and hunting tools. Although the play represents only mammals such as dog, hippo, rhino, lion and elephant among others being wild in the aftermath of the fire, there are many flying and crawling animals that suffer in the fire.

In the Kaphirintiwa myth, when animals are alienated from humans due to the fire, humans lose both *Chauta*'s presence in their midst and the primordial friendship with wild animals. The myth employs biologically oriented indigenous knowledge that sees the rains *Chauta* sends as essential for the seeds to germinate and grow. The accidentally invented fire has many positive effects for development of human communities and environmental restoration. According to Windhager (2009), “[f]ire can open up space for plants to regenerate; return nutrients in dead plant tissue to the ground; and aid germination by triggering seed release, re-sprouting, and flowering. In some ecosystems, fire is essential to the maintenance of species composition, plant density, structure, and regeneration” (425). The fire provides for autopoiesis through which there is renewal of life in the ecosystem.

The re-enactment of the Kaphirintiwa myth in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* demonstrates that when *Chauta* goes back to the sky after the fire by means of the spider's thread, the “Mother Earth” is rich in biodiversity. Etiologically, the myth also shows that the separation of domestic animals that remain with humans and wild animals that run away from humans is based on the choice the animals make according to their physiological needs.

Among the Chewa, the sacredness of animals is symbolised by animal masks. Animals are culturally loaded to carry “roles in proper behaviour” and for providing “instructions” (Zubieta 2016) at different stages in the cycle of the rites of passage that emphasise an ecocentric ethic and altruism. The ritualised animal masks in *Gule Wamkulu* dramatize in the context of the primordial harmony of the Kaphirintiwa myth and the cyclical view of the human existence among the Chewa in which the dead return in the animal form. This serves to illustrate

Okpewho's (1992) postulation that "[i]n discussing African drama, it would be useful to draw a line between drama that is based in a ritual or religious environment or context and drama that has a broad popular appeal or setting" (261). *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* is a ritual play that retells the primordial harmony and eulogises the present state of the environment. The representation of the harmony between animals and humans before the invention of the fire and the disharmony thereafter in the Kaphirintiwa myth help to contextualise the functions of myth. These are "(a) to reconcile one to the mystery of the universe; (b) to render a cosmology for interpreting it; (c) to reinforce a moral order; and (d) to unveil the psyche" (Harty, 1999:1). The animal masks in *Gule Wamkulu* are a means of reconciling humans with animals and the spirits of the ancestors. Forests with their different resources such as plants, animals and rivers constitute the core of life for indigenous peoples. Different kinds of mysterious spirits are believed to dwell in forests, caves and trees and they play crucial roles in conserving forests. Because of the indigenous people's ecocentric values, forests remained intact, their autopoietic processes (self-renewal) undisturbed. It is worth noting that:

If we look back over the total course of planetary development, we find that there was a consistent fluorescence of the life process in the larger arc of its development over some billions of years. There were innumerable catastrophic events in both the geological and biological realms, but none of these had the distinguishing characteristics or could cause such foreboding as Earth experiences at present" (Berry 10).

This passage refers to the advantages of recognising the role of indigenous ecological knowledge in environmental conservation and natural resources management. Disasters have happened in the past but the gravity of the present environmental challenges is overwhelming. The rate at which forests are disappearing to charcoal production in Malawi overwhelmingly surpasses the past geological and biological catastrophic events. The current state of the environment, sickened by global capitalism, knows no remedy. Unfortunately, due to economic pressures, indigenous values that protect the environments have become insipid, recent recognition notwithstanding.

Traditional masks, animals as cultural symbols, images and environmental consciousness

The play's combination of the re-enactment of the Chewa Kaphirintiwa myth with the celebration of the *Encyclical Letter* by Pope Francis (2015) emphasises the religious aspect of *Gule Wamkulu*. Omonzejie (2013) argues that "African peoples believe that their lives are directly connected to and narrowly reliant on the flukes and fortunes of nonhuman forms (animal and vegetation). They believe that a shared sacredness connects animals and humans" (73). Since, animal masks are symbolic of the reincarnated spirits of the ancestors, animals are, among the Chewa, sacred. The Kaphirintiwa creation myth demonstrates the separation of both *Chauta* and animals from humans. The dramatisation of death and the reincarnation of the spirits of the dead in animal masks constitute the mystery play in *Gule Wamkulu* performances. The masks in their animal forms play mediatory roles between the world of the dead and the world of the living dead and thereby acting as reconciliation agents between humans and animals.

The presence of animal masks presupposes the presence of the spirits of the ancestors. Animal masks therefore, facilitate human-animal reconciliation and the harmony that existed before the fire episode. This also includes humans reconciling genealogically with their ancestors re-embodied as animals (*zilombo*). Van Bruegel writes, "Nyau are *zilombo* (wild animals) reincarnating the *mizimu* [the spirits] of the departed" (132). In this section, I select key animal masks represented in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* for the ecocritical analysis of the "cinematic representations of nature and of environmental issues" (Willoquet-Maricondi 7). *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* is the first play in Malawi to portray the challenge of environmental degradation in the context of the relations of culture (*Gule Wamkulu*) to nature. Exploring this play through the lens of ecocriticism which, according to Buell *et.al.* (2011), "converges with its sister disciplines in the humanities: environmental anthropology, environmental history, and environmental philosophy" (417), is worthwhile.

The first set of theriomorphic animal masks to which I now turn consists of *Chimbwala* (Dog), *Kalulu* (Hare) and *Mkango* (Lion) that appear in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* during the primordial harmony before the invention of the fire. Usually, in folklore, dog, hare and lion are not portrayed together as friends but in the play they are happy in their coexistence. After the fire episode in Kaphirintiwa myth, the dog remained with man. When man named all the animals, he forgot to name dog. All the animals laughed at dog for being forgotten to be named

and in anger, the unnamed animal said, “What are you laughing at? Do you take me for your dog” (Schoffeleers and Roscoe 18) and that became his name, *galu*; a name with negative connotations.

In indigenous communities, attack dogs are used for both hunting and security and they attack on command. In the play, *Chimbwala* (Dog) performs affectively in the *bwalo* (dancing arena) and interacts with the men and women who sing, beat drums and clap their hands in the play. In *Gule Wamkulu* the dog animal mask carries different thematic concerns such as sexual taboos because a man who does not control his sexual appetite is symbolic of a dog. The dog also portrays the theme of patience for patiently guarding and protecting masters/mistresses properties. A person who fails to regulate his or her anger is a dog. Drug addiction is a social problem and a drug addicted individual is a dog as well. Animals are important in what Gwengwe entitles his book *Kukula ndi Mwambo* (1965) as a reprehensive view of the Chewa, which encapsulates growing up with both wisdom and traditional knowledge. Animals play important roles in bringing up children with *mwambo*, for example, *anthu ophedwa ndi zilombo* (people killed by animals) (Gwengwe 94) means misfortune. People’s fortunes and misfortunes are explained by their encounters with animals. It is a fortune if a person dreams about collecting flying insects (*inswa*), fishing or *kuwonjola chinzi pa msampha* (removing a buttonquail from a trap) but it is misfortune if one dreams about being chased by a lion (*ibid.* 97).

Dogs have different symbolic meanings among the Chewa. According to Boucher, “[t]he image of a dog (*galu*) is very derogatory in Chewa society” (156). This is in spite of the dog being the first animal to choose to remain with the human being for protection after the fire episode in Kaphirintiwa myth (Schoffeleers and Roscoe 1985). Dependence on the human being and the myth surrounding its naming have, perhaps, earned the dog its negative image. Despite the important security and hunting services that the dog provides, it remains a symbol of lack of appreciation in humans; *galu wosayamika* (a dog does not appreciate).

Despite the Chewa’s use of dogs in hunting and in guarding their homes, their relationships with dogs remain oxymoronic, love/hate. The restlessness of *Chimbwala* (Dog) as the animal mask performs in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* reflects the negative attitudes, mostly associated with “evil,” that the Chewa have towards the dog. Besides *Chimbwala* (Dog), another animal structure that depicts the madness of a dog among the Chewa is *Galū wapenga*,

(the dog is mad). This animal mask “portrays a husband who has to keep sexual taboos because a child is sick or his wife has recently had a baby. He has been deprived of sex for a long time and cannot bear it any longer” (Boucher 156). The dog, therefore, is a symbol of impatience in *Gule Wamkulu* though ambivalently, the dog is also a symbol of fidelity in folklore.

However, it is worth noting that “*Nyau* emphasises social reversal by the constant use of obscene language in which most of the things are expressed in terms of male and female organs, and by the performance of acts which go against normal behaviour and would provoke sharp reactions in ordinary circumstances” (van Bruegel 154). Since humans share similar “male and female organs” with animals (mammals) and that such “organs” have similar physiological functions, *Gule Wamkulu* utilises them to teach human moral values. Human-animal relationships are not fixed and their symbolic significations are dependent on context. As for dogs, Sherman (2008) observes that “they were among the first domesticated animals and are descendants of a more mysterious canine, the wolf. This duality may explain the mixed folklore and myths that exist about dogs. They are variously presented as friends to humans, supernatural entities, or even dark, menacing creatures” (118). In Malawi, for example, the expression *galu wakuda* (black dog) means hunger/famine or something is ominous. Accordingly, Bekoff (2010) observes that:

Our relationships with nonhuman animals are complicated, frustrating, ambiguous, paradoxical, and range all over the place. The growing field of anthrozoology [...] is concerned with reaching a more complete understanding of how and why we interact with animals in the many different ways that we do (xxx – xxxi).

Folklore is replete with the various ways through which humans and animals interact like the prey/predator and other symbiotic interrelationships. Because by means of human interactions with animals people find meaningful interpretations of life through animal stories, sentient and non-sentient beings become rich sources of ecological wisdom. The Kaphirintiwa myth makes *Chauta* appear on earth via the spider’s thread and disappear from the earth by means of the same spider and thus, human identity is tied to animals. Sax (2001) notes that “[t]he spider symbolises archaic mother-goddesses, the weavers of fate” (238). Animals have symbolic and instrumental values through which humans understand natural phenomena. The representation of animals in *Gule Wamkulu* in interacting with humans in order to celebrate the

primordial harmony against the backdrop of the contemporary challenges of environmental degradation shows that “[c]ulture is more than what we have inherited from the past; it is also, and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment” (Pope Francis 64). The knowledge and values shared by a society do not merely consist of those inherited from the ancestors, but they also include those a society generates and practices depending on society’s adaptability.

The flexibility of *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha*, is reflected in employing animal masks for environmental activism. Because animal masks in *Gule Wamkulu* are “performance specific and develop through cultural understanding” (Korpela 40), their flexibility entails that culture can adapt to the changing environmental conditions. Sutton and Anderson (2010) have observed that “the primary mechanism by which humans adapt to their environment is culture, probably ‘the most potent method of adaptation’ available to humans. [...]. In traditional societies, the cultural system one is born into tends to be more influenced by the natural environment” (97). The Chewa ontological and metaphysical being and knowledge are inseparably interrelated with animals and it is through cultural specific animal performances that they draw from the physical environment to show cultural adaptability to the changing environmental conditions.

Another animal that performs in the play is Hare, a popular trickster in Malawian folklore. The characters of hares and rabbits are not easily distinguishable. People refer to them interchangeably. *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha, Kalulu* (Hare or Rabbit) performs to the beat of the drums and tune of the song in a manner that demonstrates his role as a trickster in Malawian folklore who dupes many animals. The theriomorphic structure of *Kalulu* is covered with sisal or leaves of cobs of maize coloured in brown and white, lifting his head up and ears raised. *Kalulu* is symbolic of the roles of powers and powers of the chief, unity and harmony, guardianship of *mwambo* (appropriate conduct and living well with the community’s set values and wisdom), promptness (Boucher 101). These attributes of *Kalulu* regulate human conduct and actions and thus, humans would more than willing to protect animals that inform their behaviours.

According to Boucher (2012), “the hare symbolises the ability of the Chewa chief to listen (*akumva*) to the voice of the ancestors and to the complaints of his people” and “the long erect

ears of the structure” (101), reflects the chief’s eagerness to listen and serve the community and to work shrewdly. The Chewa in *Gule Wamkulu* utilise the cleverness of the hare in folklore to confer the hare’s attributes to a good chief. Sax explains that, “all across Africa, the hare is an important trickster figure, and he often matches his cleverness against the size and strength of a hyena or a lion” (138). With the attributes of *Kalulu*, the age of the chief does not matter insofar as he can cleverly handle people in his community of the “hyena” and “lion” calibres. In *Animals and Ancestors* (2000b), Morris explains that *Kalulu (the scrub hare)* “is an important figure in *nyau* performances, invariably opening the ceremony” (144). The animal structures reflect indigenous art’s interest in drawing from the environment in order to generate ethical values.

Buell *et.al.* (2011) summarise “six specific centres of interest” in ecocriticism. The last two are “(e) ecocriticism’s evolving interest in indigenous art and thought, and (f) ecocriticism’s no less keen and complex attentiveness to artistic representation and the ethics of relations between humans and animals” (417). The artistically constructed animal structures in *Gule Wamkulu* and the complex human-animal relations reflect these two interests in ecocriticism. The *Kalulu* animal structure in *Gule Wamkulu* symbolises the qualities of a leader whose cunning helps him ably manage social, cultural, political, economic and environmental challenges in his community. Besides symbolic meanings, animals in *Gule Wamkulu* have instrumental implications involving taboos to be avoided and acceptable practices to be praised.

Besides the attributes of *Kalulu* in *Gule Wamkulu*, *Kalulu* is also the hero of Malawian folklore represented as a trickster and cunning, the qualities that people admire. Ezra Chadza’s book, *Kokha Mcheperawakalulu* (1986), and the protagonist’s courageous acts in interacting with animals testify to the high esteem in which *Kalulu* is held. The title of the book draws from the proverb *Mchepera wa kalulu, mtima unga phiri* (The hare is small, but his heart is as big as a mountain) (Chakanza 190). Malawians, therefore, compare the hare with great-minded people. The metaphor of “thinking like a mountain” that emulates hare’s cleverness in finding solutions to problems energises people’s indigenous ecological knowledge.

The lion is recognised as the king of beasts or king of the jungle. It is a carnivorous mammal with different symbolic meanings among Malawians. *Mkango* (Lion) has also mixed interpretations among the Chewa with such themes as guardianship of the *mwambo*, roles and

powers of the chief, royalty and fertility (Boucher 2012). Malawians described Kamuzu Banda as *Mkango wa Malawi* (The Lion of Malawi) and the following song was sung in his praise:

A Kamuzu ndi mkango eee! Kamuzu is a lion!

Ndi Mkango! He is a lion!

This association of lion with Kamuzu Banda was linked to his oppressive rule and despotism and created an imagery of Malawi as a jungle dominated by one man. Kamuzu Banda's attracting of attention as a lion including Malawians treating him as a lion is due to the reverence accorded to lion in folklore and how humans identify themselves with animals. *Mkango* (Lion) in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* is represented as a big theriomorphic structure about two metres long artistically constructed from grass and sisal fibres with an elongated nose, bright eyes and open mouth revealing its dangerous teeth. Generally, the lion is commonly associated with power and chieftaincy besides symbolising brutal strength. In *Gule Wamkulu*, *Mkango* (Lion) theriomorphic structure also represents "bad spirits" (*chiwanda*) (Morris, 2000b:145) as well as symbolising the "terrible power of *mizimu* [spirits]" (van Bruegel, 159). With rapid deforestation and the subsequent disappearance of animals, animal masks in *Gule Wamkulu* remain a significant point of reference to the real animals in what Buell *et.al.* (2011) refer to as "pre-modern peoples as offering alternative or supplementary recourses for reimagining Earth's environmental future. [...indigeneity offer] insights into the challenges of sustaining or restoring eco-cultural identity" (429) and "Nyau – the heart of Chewa identity" (van Bruegel 126) provides a significant entry into a worthwhile ecocritical interpretation. In terms of symbolising fertility, the lion is the father of the pride and is therefore, connected with a large progeny. Among the Chewa in *Gule Wamkulu*, the lion is responsible for *kupisira anamwali* (ritual sexuality that ends a chief's sexual abstinence)" (Boucher 116). Animals, therefore, play important roles in the cycles of human lives.

After the fire episode of Kaphirintiwa myth represented in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha*, several animal masks perform in anger and these are *Gandali* (Rhino), *Bokho* (Hippo) and *Njovu* (Elephant). The play works upon the emotions and feelings of the animals in the fire episode that destroys their habitats and this informs how "[b]odies, human and nonhuman, are perhaps the most salient sites at which affect and ecocriticism come together" (Bladow and Ladino (2). Elephants and rhinoceroses are important megafauna that are endangered.

African rhinoceroses are important animals that are on the verge of extinction. Their representation as animal masks in *Gule Wamkulu* enlivens people's memories of their structures and configurations. James (1991) explains that “[b]lack rhinoceroses numbered about 65,000 in Africa twenty-five years ago; unfortunately, senseless exploitation of these magnificent animals has reduced the number to about 4,000” (11). Globalisation is key in aggravating illegal wildlife trade and the reduction in the number of rhinos. Trump (2017) notes that “[t]he high demand for wildlife products like ivory and rhino horn is booming in various Asian countries and is the driving force behind poaching in Africa. [...]. Demand for rhino horn is particularly high in Vietnam and China. Historically, it has been touted in *traditional medicine* as a fever reducer and antispasmodic” (15, emphasis in the original). The therapeutic roles of animals cannot be overemphasised and various animals have been and they are still being used as medicines. In the play under discussion, *Gandali* (Rhino) is a therianthrope animal structure of a red-faced mask with a baldhead to reflect old age.

The introduction of this animal mask in the play is to represent the voice of the generation of old people in the community about the challenges of environmental degradation. Boucher's description of *Gandali* is that he is “depicted as a senior man, a chief, signified by a white spot at the centre of his baldhead. The middle of that spot is topped with a black protrusion like a mushroom: it represents a penis without strength” (156). The symbolic representation of *Gandali* (Rhino/*Chipembere*) is that in occasions like funerals married couples should strictly observe sexual taboos; neither a husband nor a wife should force a spouse into it. According to van Bruegel, “*Gandali* represent[s] the *mizimu* of wise men, former councillors of a chief. The animal has a white spot on top of its head which symbolises the baldness of an old man” (160). According to Sax, the rhino is “one of the most important cult animals in the world” (208), and its horns are a symbol of “invincibility” (209), that is, it cannot be subdued. The Chewa in *Gule Wamkulu* draws from these symbols of the rhino and load them with sexual innuendos because *Nyau* is an institution that is hardly separable from obscene language.

The hippopotamus¹ is a herbivorous animal known for its massive thick skin. It is a significant animal in folklore and its thick and heavy body is a lesson for humans to learn from.

¹ This animal is probably the one described in the Bible at *Job* 40:15-24: “Look at the Behemoth, which I made just as I made you; it eats grass like an ox. Its strength is in its loins, and its power in the muscles of its belly. It makes its tail thick like a cedar; the sinews of its thighs are knit together. Its bones are tubes of bronze, its limbs like bars of

In the play, the *Bokho* (Hippo) that makes its performance is a therianthropic animal structure that takes the form of a hippopotamus only in its head. *Nyau* employs animals or parts of animals in various symbolic significations. The presence of the hippopotamus from the river or lake into the human community symbolises a stranger among humans. This stranger with a stiff tail disproportionate to his/her body symbolises, among the Chewa, promiscuity (Boucher 177 – 178) in either a man or a woman whose male/female organs the tail represents. The *Bokho* depicted in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* performs with a lot of energy and affectation in the direction of the women. There are different versions of *Bokho* (hippo) in *Gule Wamkulu* but generally, according to Boucher (2012):

The Chewa portray hippo's behaviour as promiscuous. They argue that the bull shows preference for the female young, as the mother shows the same towards the male offspring. They reckon that the bull kills the male young or chases them out of the herd because of jealousy. This is the reason why the hippo is described as [...] an incestuous father. In Chewa life, incest is perceived as a severe breach to the moral code. It is identified with witchcraft because it is conceived as an attempt to acquire hidden powers (213).

The attitudes that people have towards real animals, have significant bearings in the representations of animals in *Gule Wamkulu* and they draw parallels with human life. The father hippo's sexual "preference for the female young" and the mother hippo's sexual advances "towards the male offspring" as observed in *Nyau* is the reversal of Sigmund Freud's "infantile sexuality" and "Oedipus complex" where the male and female children express their "libido" towards the mother and father, respectively. Interestingly, this view about the hippo's behaviour in *Gule Wamkulu* agrees with what "wildlife specialists say" (Boucher 213) and it is here explored in eco-cultural literature and indigenous ecophilosophy of *Nyau* where animals are spiritualised as carriers of moral values.

For Morris (2000b), "God and spirits of the dead (*mizimu*), for the Chewa, are distinct beings. But *Chiuta* seems hardly to play a role at the *nyau* rituals – focused as these are on

iron. It is the first of the great acts of God – only its Maker can approach it with the sword. For the mountains yield food for it where all the wild animals play..."

animals, sexuality and human fertility” (155). The representation of animals in *Gule Wamkulu* carries the instrumental value of instructing humans in various societal norms but the emphasis on “sexuality and human fertility” based on animals could also be demeaning the animals. The human-animal relationships demonstrated among the Chewa in *Gule Wamkulu* are therefore, not without ambiguities. The *Gule Wamkulu* focus on the external features such as protrusions, colours, tails, ears, teeth and horns, among others, of the animals in their symbolic representations reflect how human-animal relationships are tinged with complexities. Van Breugel (2001) observes that “[a]ll the animal structures represent wild animals (*nyama za ku tchire*). [...] They are the symbolic representation of something powerful and frightening. [...] these animal structures represent powerful spirits [as well]” (156 – 157). Through the traditional animal masks the Chewa believe in the immortality of the soul since the dead still exist in the form of masks as spirits and their closeness to graveyards, rivers and streams reveals their environmental consciousness not only by revering animals but also by their association with forests and water.

While the hippopotamus described in the previous paragraphs, has small ears, the elephant has enormous flapping ears and ivory tusks and it is the largest land animal. Elephants are an endangered species because many of them are killed for their ivory. Trump (2017) observes that “[t]he great demand for ‘white gold’ has its price, especially in China: Over the last years, more African elephants have died than were born; the population is in rapid decline. Between 2007 and 2015, around 110,000 animals disappeared – which represents a good 20% of the estimated Africa-wide population of 395,000-570,000 elephants” (5). What this implies for indigenous lore is the death of oral discourses about such animals because there will be no point of reference to real animals. *Njovu* (Elephant) is a theriomorphic animal structure that participates in the performances in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha*, especially after the fire episode in the Kaphirintiwa myth.

Among the Chewa in *Gule Wamkulu*, animal masks represent the spirits of the ancestors re-embodied in animal forms. Thus, animal masks constitute a pantheon of the spirits of the ancestors hierarchically organised from the greatest to the lowest. The *Njovu* mask depicted in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* is of medium size covered in black with two white tusks, a long trunk and it performs in a dignified manner deserving its status among the spirits.

According to Morris (2000b), *Njovu* “is the senior and most important theriomorphic structure and its appearance marks the climax of the *nyau*” (145). The appearance of *Njovu* in the play after the fire episode in the Kaphirintiwa myth testifies to Morris’ observation. Van Bruegel explains that, “*Njovu* represent[s] the *mizimu* [spirits] of important chiefs [and it] is considered the king of the animals because of its massiveness” (157). With the reverence given to the *Njovu* (Elephant) in *Gule Wamkulu*, this animal has a lot of symbolism.

According to Boucher (2012) the “elephant’s trunk symbolises the male organ and the power of fostering life as father and chief. [...] two tusks protrude forward [...] symbolise the male organ and the two lips of the vagina” (124) and the whole animal is a symbol of power and fertility. The representation of animals in *Gule Wamkulu* in one way or another also abuses the welfare and rights of the animals despite the moral overtones of the *Nyau* institution. As Buell *et.al.* (2011) observe, “the relationship between people and animals is sometimes juxtaposed with or metaphorically superimposed on social relations between unequal social groups, at the service of both progressive and reactionary political thought, and advocacy of animal rights is sometimes at odds with environmental thought in spite of considerable overlap” (430 – 431). In indigenous perspectives of the unitary view of the cosmos in which humans and animals are integral parts in the people’s cosmovision, animal rights are implied because human trusteeship of animals/nature entails responsibility. In *Gule Wamkulu*, the Chewa jealously guard and protect animal masks at the *dambwe* and during their performances and this entails that animals have rights to protection just as they have rights to find shelter and food. Animals also have rights to life.

The exploitation of animals in order to construct a religio-political and cultural identity culminate in constructing a cult of animals. Re-embodying the spirits of the dead through animal masks (*zilombo*) entails that humans recognise themselves as wild animals as well and thereby belonging to the same ontological level. Furthermore, the Chewa are also hunters who consider the animals they hunt as dangerous and demanding thorough preparations by means of observing taboos and having right medicines before they embark on hunting. It is worth noting that “Hunter-gatherers tend to see animals as rational, intelligent creatures just like themselves, with the same spiritual importance as humans” (DeMello 67). This is a significant perspective where

the Chewa *Gule Wamkulu* institution achieves highly. Many animals find their representations in traditional masks. Morris (2000b) cites the following theriomorphic structures among others:

Chigalu (large dog), *chilembwe* (roan antelope), *chimbwe* or *fisi* (spotted hyena), *gwape* (grey duiker), *kasenye* (Sharpe's grysbok), *mbawala* (bushbuck), *mphalapala* (sable), *ntchefu* (eland), *ngoma* (kudu), *ng'ombe* (cattle), *nguluwe* (bush pig), *njati* (buffalo), *nkhandwe* (jackal), *tsanchima* (blue monkey), *songo* (the black mamba), *nsato* (the python), *kakowa* (egret), *nang'omba* (ground hornbill), *ng'ongwe* (saddle bill stork) (148).

The richness in the mental lexicon of the names of different kinds of animals bears testimony to the Chewa's environmental embeddedness. The Chewa via animal masks identify themselves with these and many other different species of animals in ways similar to transpersonal ecology's identification. Eckersley explains that "transpersonal ecology proceeds by way of a cosmological and psychological route and is concerned to address the way in which we understand and experience the world. The primary concern of transpersonal ecology is the cultivation of a wider sense of self through the common or everyday psychological process of *identification* with others" (61). For Fox (1990), "identification should be taken to mean what we ordinarily understand by that term, that is, the experience not simply of a sense of *similarity* with an entity but of a sense of *commonality*" (81, original italics). The human-animal relationships represented in *Gule Wamkulu* animal masks reflect Fox's view of "similarity" and "commonality" and thereby creating a sense of human/animal solidarity, though not without ambiguities.

***Kasiyamaliro* (Antelope) and the message from *Tonkhwetonkhwe* (Chameleon): Religio-cultural significance of animals**

Animals are venerated, as in zoolatry, among the Chewa traditional religion because they play important roles as intermediaries between humans and *Chauta*. As "the heart of Chewa identity" (van Breugel 126), *Gule Wamkulu* "has a specific religious significance, namely it is the symbolic representation of the invisible spirit world" (*ibid.* 147). When *Chauta* goes to the sky through the spider's web/thread after the fire episode in Kaphirintiwa creation myth, chameleon brings the message of life to the people from *Chauta*, but it is already too late because

the blue lizard has already brought the message of death to the people (Schoffeleers and Roscoe 1985:23-4). Thus, people have mixed attitudes toward chameleon and blue lizard in explaining life and death. However, the Chewa's interest in interacting with animal masks as the spirits of the dead entails their interest in the quest for rebirth. The play then concludes with songs calling upon Malawians to be actively involved in planting trees and avoid wantonly cutting down the remaining trees in our forests so that the environment regains its previous glory. Several animal masks perform such as *Matako alingana* (the buttocks are the same, Baboon), *Chilembwe* (Roan Antelope), *Kamba* (Tortoise), *Tonkhwetonkhwe* (Chameleon) and *Kasiyamaliro* (The Great Mother of all Mankind) among others.

Boucher (2012) explains that *Kasiyamaliro* is “one of the oldest and arguably the single most significant of all *Gule* manifestations, is a mother figure, a symbol of the womb” (37). This animal mask plays a central role in the Chewa conceptualisation of the cyclical nature of human existence. *Tonkhwetonkhwe*, on the other hand, is considered not only as the ancestor of both humans and animals, but also as a bringer of the good tidings of life and a message of hope.

The Chewa venerate *Kasiyamaliro* as the symbolic Mother spirit of the invisible world. It is also worth noting that when the Kaphirintiwa myth explains the origin of death after the fire and *Chiuta* ascends into the sky on spider's thread, chameleon is the messenger of life while lizard is the messenger of death. Ott (2000) observes that “[i]n many African myths, including one ancient variant from Malawi, the chameleon is considered to be the original ancestor of humankind” (305). This significant role of chameleon as the progenitor of humankind illustrates why *Tonkhwetonkhwe*, the Chameleon carries the final message from *Chauta* about environmental restoration in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha*. I propose to briefly analyse the animal masks of *Matako alingana* (the buttocks are the same, Baboon), *Chilembwe* (Roan Antelope), *Kamba* (Tortoise) for their symbolism and instrumental value in *Gule Wamkulu* before embarking on a lengthy discussion of *Tonkhwetonkhwe* (Chameleon) and *Kasiyamaliro* (The Great Mother of all Mankind).

Matako alingana (Baboon) is a theriomorphic animal figure of a baboon with dark face, hairy head and its body covered in sisal smeared with dark grey mud. The performance of the *Matako alingana* structure involves quick and energetic movements enabling him to cover a lot of ground of the dancing arena while behaving like a baboon in every way. Symbolically, the

masks' name, *Matako alingana* (the buttocks are the same), implies that women are different only in "their characters, talents, and the qualities that make up their personalities" (Boucher 171), but their anatomic and physiological functions are the same, likewise, men. Therefore, it is immoral to eye for and grab someone's wife/husband because "the buttocks are the same" (*matako alingana*). Used with a touch of euphemism, *matako alingana* means female genitalia is the same in configuration and constitution. In this sense, therefore, the proverb *Chigololo ndi mwini thako* (literally, a sexual activity is only possible if the owner of the buttocks gives consent) and this is the woman and in which case *kuperekerera thako* or *kumupatsa thako* (to give one's buttocks, is a woman's acceptance to make love) with a man.

Matako alingana (Baboon) mask is a fitting symbolic representation of being satisfied with one's wife because folklore attributes to the baboon immoral behaviour that should discontinue for the proper health of the community. *Matako alingana* dramatizes that women are the same or similar in their physiological configurations and therefore, there is no need for a man to go about "tasting" different women. Finnegan (2012) observes the "existence and supposed nature of drama [in] mimetic dances, or masquerades in Africa" (485) in which the masqueraders "make themselves up to resemble the animals represented by using paint, or the skins or horns of animals" (488). Every animal mask that resembles a particular animal carries the moral embodied in that animal. The song about *Matako alingana* also points to the importance of self-restraint in matters of sexuality:

<i>Kuona akazi, anzanga,</i>	When you look at women my friend,
<i>Matako alingana pasiyana n'pa moto,</i>	The buttocks are similar but their performance on the fire differs,
<i>Matako alingana!</i>	The buttocks are similar!
<i>Matako alingana!</i>	The buttocks are similar!
	(Boucher 172)

The expression *Kuona akazi, anzanga matako alingana pasiyana n'pa moto*, that women are the same but their performance on the fire differs, could also be interpreted to mean that

women perform differently not only in the way they cook their food but also to mean that they perform differently in bed (*pasiyana n'pa moto*) despite sharing other similarities as women. The lexicon every animal mask carries is linked to the moral attached to it. Another animal mask is *Chilembwe* (Roan Antelope), a theriomorphic animal structure “that resembles the shape of an antelope. The details of the roan are missing owing to the rarity of this species today” (Boucher 2012:142). The dance of *Chilembwe* (Roan Antelope) in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha*, like that of *Njovu* (Elephant) is dignified, but for its fertility symbolic significance, the animal insists on remaining in touch with the women in the dancing arena. The performances of the different animal masks in the play point to one central concern for the Chewa and the *Gule Wamkulu* myth, that of “fertility” they pray for from the spirits of the dead re-embodied as animals. Weisser (2001) argues that “our identities are always already ecological; we are who we are as a result of people, places, things, animals, and plants that have touched our lives. It is only for us to realise these connections and incorporate them into our discourse” (93). The bulk of indigenous discourse is replete with ecological overtones as folklore testifies. In the face of the current environmental degradation, the *Gule Wamkulu* prayer for fertility is needed more than ever before in order to resuscitate the environment. Ott (2000) observes that “it is from the *mizimu* in their intercessory role, that the Chewa expect fertility for humans and animals” (181). The belief in the spirits of the dead as intercessors between the living and *Chiuta* is crucial in the *Nyau* traditional religion where the question of fertility reigns high.

Kamba (Tortoise) or *Mkulemetza* (to be tired from carrying something heavy with reference to tortoise' shell; Boucher 160), is a significant animal in Malawian folklore. The tortoise's carrying of its shell means life is burden that every individual bears like the Yawo proverb *Likoswe lyangapela kuwuta mapwisi gwakwe* (A rat is never tired of pulling the pouch that contains its own testes). Thus, from animals, humans learn to accept responsibilities and responsible behaviours. For *Gule Wamkulu*, the *Kamba* (Tortoise) animal mask is a model for expressing sexual symbolic meanings, which in my view, abuses the animals rather than assuming the roles of the ancestors as spirits reincarnate in animal masks. Boucher (2012) explains the symbolic significance of traditional mask, *Kamba* (Tortoise):

The head and neck of the tortoise are obvious sexual symbols.
[...]. The shell symbolises the testicles [...] if the tortoise does not

manage to show the head then this husband cannot be called a man and he cannot beget children. [...] the withdrawal of the neck of the tortoise teaches sexual abstinence on the occasion of death and other transition rites [...]. Chewa tales inevitably stress the wisdom of the tortoise. The *Nyau* members reinforce that such wisdom comes from the ancestors (161).

The Chewa people's keen interest in animals and their experiences about animals make them not only construct animal masks for display, but they also attach symbolic meanings to the animals. The Chewa people's environmental consciousness is therefore, seamlessly connected with animals from which they generate indigenous ecological wisdom. Their understanding of human existence from the world of the unborn, the world of the living and the world of the dead, is interpreted in terms of their closeness to animals and therefore, symbolic of both the physical environment and the spiritual environment.

While these animal masks, *Matako alingana*, *Chilembwe*, *Kamba* or *Mkulemetisa* and others are dancing in the *bwalo* (arena), the song that carries the key message in this scene of the play is:

<i>Chauta akunena kuti (x 2),</i>	God says,
<i>Tibzale mitengo,</i>	Let's plant trees,
<i>Tilimbitse nthaka,</i>	To conserve the land,
<i>Mvula izibwera!</i>	And bring about rains!

The message in the song comes from *Chauta* but relayed to the humans by *Tonkhwetonkhwe* (Chameleon), "so says the Chameleon." The chameleon is a revered animal in Malawian myth not only as progenitor of humans and animals as in "Horned Chameleon and the Origin of Life (Chewa)" (Schoffeleers and Roscoe 1985), but also as the messenger of life. After the fire in Kaphirintiwa myth "chameleon escaped by climbing to the top of a tree. [...] called God to follow him, but *Chiuta* answered that he was too old to climb" (Schoffeleers and Roscoe 19). Animal and human lives are recycled but the chameleon's role is that of bringing the message of life to humans contrary to lizard who brings the message of death from *Chiuta*.

Chauta akunena kuti tibzale mitengo, tilimbitse nthaka, mvula izibwera (*Chauta* says let's plant trees to conserve the land and bring about rains) reflects the play's environmental activism with the message from the chameleon. This also demonstrates, how in the people's view, the chameleon has the welfare of the people at heart.

Tonkhwetonkhwe (Chameleon) brings from *Chiuta* to the people the message of life, *Chauta* says, "Plant trees, in our land in order to conserve the land and bring about rains." The message about planting trees that comes from *Chauta* through the Chameleon puts a religious dimension to environmental conservation in the play. Houghton (2004) supports the integration of scientific and religious approaches to environmental conservation, because, "[a] religious person would want to be more specific and say that we are stewards on behalf of God. The religious person would also argue that to associate the relationship of humans to God with the relationship of humans to the environment is to place the latter relationship in a wider, more integrated, context – providing additional insights and a more complete basis for environmental stewardship" (208). The message of life that was upset by lizard's message of death in Kaphirintiwa myth, finds its signification in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* where humans accept environmental trusteeship.

Chauta akunena kuti tibzale mitengo (*Chauta* says we should plant trees), is the message of environmental activism that Chameleon communicates from *Chauta* to the people as trustees of the environment. As an indigenous theatre, the virtuosity with which animals are represented in the play being probed concurs with Marchiorlatti's (2010) observation that "indigenous cinema is, at its roots, an activist endeavour that looks to the past in order to make visible the enduring effects of colonisation, to reclaim annihilated ways of being, and to envision an affirmative future for contemporary [indigenous] peoples" (65). The play under discussion makes a power statement about environmental activism through recourse to indigenous myth.

The chameleon as the progenitor of humankind (Schoffeleers and Roscoe 1985), carries the message that encourages people to plant trees *kuti tilimbitse nthaka* (so that we conserve the soil) and *mvula izibwera* (rains should come). This is a powerful message especially considering the mediatory roles of animals between humans and the divine world. Despite the positive view of the chameleon in most Malawian myths, Morris (2000b) observes:

Yet the overwhelming connotations of the chameleon in Malawi is a negative one, and it is the focus of numerous folk beliefs. [...]. Throughout Malawi, chameleons are held in fear and awe, [...]. Indeed, chameleons seem to be more feared than snakes and the fact that the chameleon is able to inflate its body and hiss quite loudly adds to its fierce reputation (180).

In *Gule Wamkulu*, however, Chameleon is accorded high respect not only because of his message of life, but also because in the Kaphirintiwa myth, it was chameleon who first attempted to rescue God from the fire before spider's intervention. The representation of *Tonkhwetonkhwe* (Chameleon) in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* carrying the message of life from *Chiuta* about the roles of humans in replenishing the land with trees re-establishes chameleon as the bringer of good tidings about life previously frustrated by lizard when he brought the message of death. In *Gule Wamkulu* the Chameleon is held with admiration as the bringer of good tidings.

In the closing scenes of the play, God comes down through the spider's thread in order to restore the lost harmony on earth. *Kangaude* (Spider) lands in the dancing arena to demonstrate the coming of *Chauta*. The play then leads the audience into witnessing a parliamentary caucus where:

The people and Government of Malawi make a pledge to conserve the environment and make it a better place for all who share this country of ours. We the people, and you the Government, let us work together to restore the environment. Let us work together for our wildlife is threatened, has nowhere to live. Our forests have vanished.

This is the core message in the play and it seems to be in agreement with the last objective (d) of Government of Malawi's *National Environmental Policy* (2004), "to promote cooperation between Government, local communities, and women groups, non-governmental organisations and the private sector in the management and sustainable utilisation of the natural resources and the environment" (iii). The film's message in the closing episode, *Ifeyo, inuyo a boma tigwilire ntchito limodzi, kuteteza chilengedwe* (We, and you in the government, let's work together to preserve the environment) attests to the people's recognition of this objective.

Marchiorlatti (2010) notes that “[w]hen humans gain an awareness of our disconnection from self, from each other, and from the environments that sustain us, we may begin to experience a phase of remembering and recuperation” (64). In its agendum of environmental recovery, the film, *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha*, brings the audience to celebrate a rich array of the harmonious past, to mourn for the contemporary environmental degradation and to hinge the audience’s hopes for the future on behavioural change. In this connection, Cohen (2004) argues that “[e]cocriticism focuses on literary and artistic expression of human experience primarily in a naturally and consequentially in a culturally shaped world: the joys of abundance, sorrows of deprivation, hopes for harmonious existence, and fears of loss and disaster” (10). By adapting animals from the natural world to the use in human life, and by applying knowledge and power of animals to practical purposes, *Gule Wamkulu* is a great art.

The message in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* is clear in calling upon Government and local communities to work together to restore the environment. Mulwafu (2011) observes that “[t]oday, the issue of sustainable natural resource management has become central in environmental discourses in Malawi, to the extent that it has produced a certain measure of environmentalism” (215). However, as I have highlighted before, corruption, although this is due to government’s failure to provide alternative sources of empowering the people economically, continues to warp whatever efforts put in place concerning environmental and natural resource management in Malawi. The people have no alternative and renewable sources of energy and the government is numb to what the people are going through. The final scene in the play closes with the cryptic language of *Nyau* in a song:

Kamtsinje dede-ee! A small river, as it flows despicably!

Kang’onong’ono, Very, very small,

Kamtsinje dede-ee! A small river, as it flows despicably!

Katulutsa nyama! It has produced an animal!

This song is understood in terms of its meaning rendered in the film as “the small stream has generated a huge river; a mother has given birth to a genius, the saviour of tomorrow.” *Kamtsinje kang’onong’ono katulutsa nyama* (a small stream has produced an animal) infers the rebirth archetype. What the song cryptically entails is that the animal masks (*Nyau* or *zilombo*)

are fished out from the river that is symbolic of a grave yard. A small grave yard has the potential of producing a huge animal like an elephant or *Nyama mndondo*. What this means is that as humans we should not belittle ourselves in terms of combatting the environmental challenges we are facing. One of the key messages in the play is that since environmental degradation is human-induced, it is humans who are responsible for the environment to regenerate. The film provides for the possibility of autopoiesis. Then with the song that concludes the film, *Kasiyamaliro* (The Great Mother of all Mankind) appears and performs alone carrying the message of rebirth:

Tiyemo tibadwenso, Let's accept to be born again with a new life,

Ndi moyo watsopano, tatiye-e! New spirit of unity towards all the living beings!

This last part of the play emphasises on mind-set change towards the environment in order to restore it to its previous harmony after raising the audience's consciousness about the gravity of destruction humans have caused. *Kasiyamaliro*, whose performance concludes the film, is, according to Morris (2000b), "the most important *chinyau* [animal mask]. [...]. Its name means 'to leave the funeral'" (144), the euphemism for "to bury the dead" (*kusiya maliro* or *mtembo m'manda*, to leave the dead person in the grave). Thus, from birth to death, the Chewa's lives are inseparable from animals. Animals are not only represented in folktales, fables, proverbs, riddles, folksongs and burial rites, but they are also represented in indigenous ecocinema as symbols and images loaded with cultural meanings. In *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha*, the description of *Kasiyamaliro* is that of "the great mother of all mankind." This theriomorphic animal structure is both high and long and its dancing style involves spinning and squatting in the arena. Ott (2000) describes *Kasiyamaliro* as an "awesome mask," "an antelope" whose "colour and huge round belly suggest a pregnant animal" (475) and that its "structure [...] has a quintessentially female structure" (477). By making "the most important *chinyau*" female and symbolic of "a pregnant animal" the Chewa are very much concerned about the future as a matrilineal society.

As the last to perform in the play, Boucher makes *Kasiyamaliro* a symbol of hope and the child she carries is symbolic of this hope for the future. The masquerade performances do not only rely on authorial commentaries and the various colours of the masks, but they also rely on the protrusions of the animal masks as symbols of the oral culture. Finnegan (2012) argues that the "greater reliance on auditory forms is something which would not seem at all strange to those

brought up in the traditions of *spoken* literature characteristic of Africa. Indeed this reliance on the spoken word – and thus on oral forms of expression – may well increase rather than decrease in Africa in the future” (506, original italic). In this frame of things, the oral culture in Africa paved the way for the reading culture but now it glides to the oral culture in which people are more interested in listening/watching than reading.

Boucher (2012) describes *Kasiyamaliro* as “an antelope of unidentified species” (106), while van Breugel (2001) calls her an “antelope” and “a symbol of *mizimu*” (158). The persistent imagery of *Kasiyamaliro* as an “antelope” and that this animal mask is crucially important in the baptism of both female and male initiates into the *Nyau* traditional religion makes Ott (2000) to draw parallels with the Christian “dove” as “symbols [that] evoke a flood of interrelated associations” (479). The antelope figure of *Kasiyamaliro* that concludes the dramatisation of animal masks in the film, for example, has the “basic shape of the body [which] is abstract and portrays the female pubis and her sexual organs in her inverted position. [...]. She is the maternal womb that conceives, nourishes and tends the Chewa from birth to death and even beyond death itself. It is from her womb that the Chewa is born and to which he [she] must return regularly during each stage in his [her] life in order to mature into a full human being” (Boucher 107). In view of the reverence that the Chewa accord to *Kasiyamaliro*, the film logically concludes with the performance of this animal mask as a mother figure.

The *Nyau* focus on sexual fertility of animals in relation to humans provides an area of positive comparison of *Kasiyamaliro* with the “Greek demigod Comus” whose roles Meeker (1996) describes as “a god of fertility in a large but unpretentious sense. His concerns include the ordinary sexual fertility of plants, men, and animals, and also the general success of family and community life insofar as these depend upon biological processes” (159). *Kasiyamaliro*’s performance in the film to the song *Tiyemo tibadwenso ndi moyo watsopano* (Let’s accept to be born again with a new life), alludes to the interests in the continuity of life.

According to Boucher (2012) *Kasiyamaliro* is “the great mother who gives birth and rebirth [...]. [The] concept of fertility is all embracing and permeates the entire world of nature: the coming of the rain, the productivity of the land and the livestock. The women’s cycle is seen to be part of this natural pattern of fertility [...] their hierarchy and their unity with nature and the animal world” (107). Like the Greek Comus, *Kasiyamaliro* takes great interest in “the

maintenance of the commonplace conditions that are friendly to life” (Meeker 159) and thereby maintains “equilibrium among living things, and restoring it once it has been lost” (Meeker 159). The call for the audience to be reborn again with the new spirit of unity towards all the living beings and the performance of *Kasiyamaliro* in the closing lines of the play emphasise humankind’s potential to work towards environmental restoration.

Human-animal relations in rituals and the performances of the archetypes of rebirth and sacrifices as in *Gule Wamkulu* reflect the interconnectedness pragmatically oriented rather than merely blossoming in idealism. It is significant to note that while “ecocriticism [...] examines the manifold significance of nature (treated as a reality rather than as a construct) and the environment in literature” (Habib 772), conflating the natural world in various philosophical constructs from misunderstood Eastern religions reflects deep ecologists’ fatalistic view after denouncing Judeo-Christianity for its ‘anthropocentrism.’ Animal masks in *Gule Wamkulu* are cultural symbols through which the Chewa remain in touch with their environment. The portrayal of the anatomy and/or physiology of the animal structures reflect the Chewa’s environmental embeddedness. The various ethical values attached to animals in *Gule Wamkulu* reflect how among the Chewa animals are morally considerable.

Conclusion

Although the message in *Kokota-Kokota Nkhalango Zatha* calls upon people to restore forests through afforestation or re-afforestation in order to bring about rains and provide for animal habitats, it requires concerted efforts between local communities and the government for them to realise their goals. Rigby (2017) observes that “but neither can works of the creative imagination, nor for that matter, eco-spiritual practices of whatever ilk, transform the world in the absence of socio-economic and eco-political changes that would enable new ways of living, within which such works and practices might make sense” (306). The Government of Malawi is therefore, key in providing alternatives that can avert further environmental degradation. The local communities on their part have demonstrated their environmental consciousness and knowledge of the environment and that their willingness to utilise the environment sustainably cannot be doubted. *Gule Wamkulu* animal masks reflect the various ways in which the people are environmentally conscious. Despite the people’s environmental embeddedness and ecological

knowledge, insofar as Malawi lacks environmental leadership, and the country is irreversibly plunged into corruption, apocalypse hovers over the future of environmental restoration.

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