

# It Takes an Initiation to Make a Yawo Chief

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## Introduction

The Yawo of South Eastern Africa are well known for their initiation practices of *jando* and *msondo*, which are distinctive rituals that mark the entry and incorporation of Yawo boys and girls into Yawo adult life. Less known are *litiwo*, the initiation ritual for expectant mothers, which is in decline, and *kutawâ lina*, which is the ritual process for enthroning village headmen and women. *Kutawâ lina*, like *jando* and *msondo*, is still widely practiced and is significantly important to the act of becoming a village headperson and traditional authority in Yawo society. In this article, I will describe the way a Yawo village headperson is chosen, the ritual process for becoming a village headperson, the reasons for, and the means by which they are strengthened for their role and some examples of teaching advice typically given during this rite of passage.

## A rite of transition

According to Arnold van Gennep, the four main Yawo initiation rituals have essentially one thing in common, despite their apparent differences – they are all rites of transition.<sup>1</sup> They all provide the means by which a person changes in the eyes of the community from one social position to another. *Kutawâ lina* essentially marks the passing, socially, from being an ordinary person, to being a village headperson in regard to their social standing. However, the change is more than ‘social’ as it also involves a “change of condition”.<sup>2</sup> Through the ritual the headperson-in-waiting receives spiritual power for protection against sorcery and witchcraft and receives knowledge, both exoteric and esoteric, which enables them to fulfill the role of headperson in their community.

## The village headperson

There are several levels of headperson-ship recognized in Yawo society.<sup>3</sup> The most senior headperson in Yawo society is known by various titles including *mcimwene*, *mwenye*, *sultan*, traditional authority, T.A. or senior chief, *siniyo cifi*, if he or she has been given this rank by the government. The rank of ‘traditional authority’, *mcimwene* (known by its shortened form of T.A.), is the most senior position in the clan<sup>4</sup> and the person who has this title has responsibility for oversight of the clan in his/her traditional authority’s area.<sup>5</sup> A traditional authority, *mcimwene*, is supported by a number of group village headmen and women (GVH), *aciwênnye*, each of whom has authority and responsibility for a number of villages, which are overseen by village headmen and women, *aciwênnye*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, pp. 10-12. Brian Morris, however, says that all initiation rites in Malaŵi are “essentially maturity rites”. He prefers the term “rites of transformation,” because he sees the process as a metamorphosis from one form of living to the next. Brian Morris, *Animals and Ancestors. An Ethnography*, Oxford: Berg, 2000, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this article I have chosen not to look at levels of authority below that of *mwenye*, village headperson, for example *asyene mlango*, owner of a household, *asyene mbumba*, owner of a sorority group and so forth.

<sup>4</sup> By clan here I refer to a commonly held notion of a clan as an extended unilineal kinship group, consisting of several lineages, whose members are descended from a common ancestor, although this ancestor may not be known and may be legendary or mythological. W. Haviland, H. Prins, D. Walrath, B. McBride, *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge*, Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, <sup>12</sup>2008, p. 230.

<sup>5</sup> Currently in Malaŵi there are four levels of Traditional Authority, T.A. 1) Chief Sub-Traditional Authority, 2) Chief Traditional Authority, 3) Senior Chief Traditional Authority and 4) Paramount Chief Traditional Authority.

<sup>6</sup> *Mwenye* is the singular term for village headperson or chief, *aciwênnye* is the plural form.

The main differences in the process of enthroning a village headperson, a group village headperson or a traditional authority is really only a matter of magnitude, and perhaps a time lapse between ‘tying the name,’ *kutaŵa lina*, and ‘making the name known’, *koposya lina*.

### **Choosing the right headperson**

Succession to the chieftainship and village headship amongst the Yawo is hereditary. Normally the successor is the eldest son of the deceased headperson’s eldest sister, or the son of another sister of the ruling headperson. If no son is available, then a daughter of the headperson’s eldest sister or the full brother of the deceased headperson may succeed him.<sup>7</sup> The choice of headperson, however, is not only made on hereditary lines, but the qualities of the person are also taken into account. If the hereditary successor is of dubious character, the village may bypass them for another relative.<sup>8</sup>

The process of installing a new headperson begins on the day of death of the incumbent village headperson. The first part of the process of installing a new village headperson is called either ‘to enter the name’, *kwinjila lina* or to ‘tie the name’, *kutaŵa lina*. The ceremony, *kutaŵa lina*, as I shall refer to it, has several aspects, which include tying the crown, *cilemba*, onto the head of the headperson-in-waiting, as well as receiving their name and spirit.<sup>9</sup>

The second stage of installing a new village headperson is the instruction stage, which is conducted by special initiators, *acinamkungwi* or *acinakanga*, who are themselves headpersons, and who teach the headperson-in-waiting about the way to deal with people, govern a village, and deal with the difficulties of leadership.<sup>10</sup>

The final aspect of installing a new village headperson is the ceremony commonly known as ‘to make known the name’, *koposya lina*, at which the headperson-in-waiting is officially sanctioned as the village headperson in front of the village and other chiefs.

### **Tying the name: *Kutaŵa lina***

On the death of an incumbent village headperson, the village elders will consult each other as to who should become the next village headperson. At the same time a message regarding the death of the headperson is sent to the group village headperson, who in turn sends it to the traditional authority. The traditional authority will usually then send one of his initiators, *namkungwi*, to ask the village if they have a person who will enter the name, *kwinjila lina*, (the headperson-ship); if they do, this person’s name is sent back to the group village headperson and to the traditional authority. The initiator, *namkungwi*, will either remain at the funeral or return the following day to officiate the ceremony of ‘tying the name,’ *kutaŵa lina*, on behalf of the traditional authority, at the funeral.<sup>11</sup>

During the initial part of the funeral the headperson-in-waiting is secluded in a house away from the other mourners. Once the prayers are finished the funeral pallet, *jenesa*, is brought out of the house, where

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<sup>7</sup>Hugh Stannus, “The Wayao of Nyasaland”, *Harvard African Studies III*, E.A. Hooton and Natica Bates (eds), Cambridge, Mass., 1922, p. 277.

<sup>8</sup>Noel Q. King and Klaus Fiedler (eds.), *Robin Lamburn - From a Missionary’s Notebook: The Yao of Tunduru*, Saarbrücken: Breitenbach, 1991, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup>The notion of the headperson receiving the spirit of his/her predecessor is contrary to Mitchell’s understanding of the event. I, however, find the evidence in support of this idea to be convincingly strong. Mitchell also notes that the new chief inherits his predecessor’s wives, property, house and clothes. J.C. Mitchell, *The Yao Village; A Study in the Social Structure of a Nyasaland Tribe*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966, p. 121.

<sup>10</sup>One of the enthronement rituals, which I attended, was that of a female group village headperson. From my observations, I saw no difference with it structurally to the enthronement rituals of male headpersons.

<sup>11</sup>In T.A. Jalasi, the traditional authority does not usually tie the *cilemba* on the head of a new village headperson himself. Rather he delegates this responsibility to one of his initiators, *namkungwi*, who is a village headman or woman. Interview #: 1, *Namkungwi 2*, “death of headman,” 2007, p. 1.

the deceased headperson's body was being washed and prepared for burial, and is placed on the ground in order to commit the deceased to God, *kuswalila jenesa*. At this point the headperson-in-waiting is brought out and in front of the funeral pallet, *jenesa*, he/she is pronounced the new village headperson 'So and So'. Then he or she is crowned; literally they are tied around the head with the *cilemba*, a small piece of cloth, taken from the burial cloth, *sanda*, of the deceased village headperson.<sup>12</sup> This ritual symbolizes that the headperson-in-waiting enters into the name of the deceased headperson. From this point on they will no longer be called by their given name, which they were given at initiation, instead they will now be known as *ce Nyono*, Mr. or Mrs. So and So, the name of his or her predecessor and the name of the village over which he or she presides. Secondly, the ritual of 'tying the name' symbolizes the passing on of the spirit of the deceased headperson to the headperson-in-waiting. This can be seen in the following comments by an initiator, *namkungwi*, who initiates village headpersons:

We choose the successor for the deceased headperson. The burial cloth that the late headperson wears is cut and is then tied around the successor's head. This is to prove that the spirit of the late headperson is passed onto the successor.<sup>13</sup>

The new headperson receives the spirit of the deceased on the day of tying the *cilemba*.<sup>14</sup>

If elders of the community choose someone to be headperson whom the spirit of the deceased headperson does not approve, the spirit will become upset and return via the cloth (crown/*cilemba*) and cause that person to go insane. If, however, they choose the right person, the spirit will enter them and their character will be good, like that of the previous headperson.<sup>15</sup>

In agreement with this, a group village headperson when interviewed said that on the day that he was crowned with the *cilemba* he also received his mother's brother's spirit, *msimu wa mjomba*.

I received the spirit of my mother's brother. All the things are with me. If I die then my young brother or my sister's son will enter the name.<sup>16</sup>

After the ritual the headperson-in-waiting functions as the village headperson. However, the process is not yet complete, as there is still the process of instruction and ritual strengthening required, as well as the day of 'making the name known', *koposya lina*.

### **The day of advice giving: *Lisiku lya kuwunda misyungu***

The process of instruction and ritual strengthening occurs during the night, prior to the day of 'making the name known', *koposya lina*. The celebration of 'making the name known' usually occurs some months after the tying of the *cilemba*. Once a date is agreed upon by the elders of the village, they notify the group village headperson, who in turn notifies the traditional authority, who then notifies his initiators, *acinamkungwi*. The instruction of the headperson-in-waiting, *kuwunda misyungu*, is an all-night event and takes place inside the fenced area of a house in the headperson-in-waiting's village.<sup>17</sup>

The initiators arrive in the afternoon and make final preparations, including agreeing on the place of initiation and the preparation of the flour oblation, which will be used to anoint the new chief. This is usually prepared by one of the elder women of the village, typically one of the elder sisters of the

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<sup>12</sup>One group village headman, with whom I spoke, has kept the *cilemba* with which he was tied in a suitcase in his house. He said that he cannot let his wife or any woman see it or even come near it, as otherwise they will suffer from a continual flow of menstrual blood or leprosy. Interview, Group Village Headman #: 1, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup>Interview #: 1, *Namkungwi* 1, "mwanye wakupocela," 2007, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup>Interview #: 4, *Namkungwi* 1, "clarification of the spirit entering into new headman & secret teaching sessions," 2010, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup>Naga wāndu wā mbumba nganasagula cenene ni atawile nguwo pa mtwe wa mundu jwanganondeka, msimu wa wajasice wala wukusadandawula ni kuwaja kupitila mu nguwojo ni kwapengasya masoka wājinjile sampanowo. Nambo, naga watawile cilemba wasyesyene, msimu wa wajasice wala wujinjile mwa wasambano ni catame cenene mpela wakuwa. Interview #: 4, *Namkungwi* 1, "clarification of the spirit entering into new headman & secret teaching sessions," 2010, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with Group Village Headman #: 1, 2007, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup>In some Traditional Authorities the instruction, *kuwunda misyungu*, of the new chief takes place inside a house, rather than in the open.

deceased headperson.<sup>18</sup> Early in the evening the headperson-in-waiting and his wife or wives are secluded in a house, together with some close relatives, and the winnowing basket, *kaselo*, containing the oblation, *mbopesi*, which will be used to anoint the headperson-in-waiting. The headperson-in-waiting is in a liminal state and is considered uninitiated and vulnerable. In Yawo terms, he or she is considered a novice, *mwali*,<sup>19</sup> which is the term for all novices in Yawo life cycle initiations, including *jando* and *msondo*, and therefore needs to be protected. The whole process of enthronement to headperson-ship is a liminal activity, and as Arnold van Gennep so rightly points out, “a rite of passage”, “whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally defined”.<sup>20</sup> Because liminal events are considered dangerous periods, protection from opposing forces is required. The winnowing basket, *kaselo*, containing the oblation, *mbopesi*, plays a significant role in giving this protection, as it is central to the activity of seeking the help of the ancestral spirits who empower and protect the headperson-in-waiting from the evil machinations of people. The presence of the *kaselo* containing the flour symbolizes, as well as materializes the presence of the ancestral spirits, *acinangolo*, in the minds of the participants and therefore a high priority is placed on protecting the *kaselo* of flour at all times during the enthronement, as it can be open to abuse.<sup>21</sup>

The oblation, *mbopesi*, is cared for at all times during the enthronement, because many people want to take some of it and make medicine with it that will cause problems for the headperson, make him sick, even die. Therefore, the winnowing basket, *kaselo*, of flour remains with the headman and his wife all of the time during the enthronement.<sup>22</sup>

One of the final roles of the headperson-in-waiting, during this liminal event, is to dispose of the flour oblation in a secret place once the process has ended and it is no longer required, so that people cannot use it in unscrupulous ways.

At around 10.00 pm the initiators, *acinamkungwi*, together with the villagers proceed to the house in which the headperson-in-waiting is being hidden to anoint them with the oblation, *mbopesi*. On the way to the house the initiators, *acinamkungwi*, and the villagers sing a song about the oblation, *mbopesi*, and then other songs about the coming of their new village headperson.

*Ajanganlile-e Ajanganlile-e Ajanganlile lina lyawo*  
*Ajanganlile-e ngondo Ajanganlile-e Ajanganlile lina lyawo*  
*Ajanganlile-e Ajanganlile-e Ajanganlile mbopesi jawo*  
*Ajanganlile-e Ajanganlile-e Ajanganlile mbopesi jawo*<sup>23</sup>

Rejoice, yes rejoice, rejoice for your chieftaincy  
 Rejoice, war rejoice, rejoice for your chieftaincy  
 Rejoice, yes rejoice, rejoice for your oblation (*mbopesi*)  
 Rejoice, yes rejoice, rejoice for your oblation

*Mwenyewo, mwenye aŵa, yeya yeya mwenye aŵa*  
 Look our chief, look our chief. Yes, yes, look our chief.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Interview #: 2, *Namkungwi* 1, “every village *mbopesi*,” 2007, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup>*Mwali* has several meanings, including a young girl, or any person who is undergoing initiation including boys and men.

<sup>20</sup>Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup>Flour, particularly sorghum flour is what Victor Turner calls a *Dominant* symbol in Yawo culture and worldview. It appears in many Yawo rituals, and its meaning is emphasized separately in many episodes. Victor Turner, “Symbols in African Ritual”, *Symbolic Anthropology. A Reader in the Study of Symbols and Meanings*, J. Dologin, D. Kemnitzer and D. Schneider (eds), New York: Columbia University Press, 1977, p. 186.

<sup>22</sup>Interview #: 2, *Namkungwi* 1, “caring for the *mbopesi*,” 2007, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup>Interview #: 1, *Namkungwi* 3, “*mbopesi* song,” 2007, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup>Interview #: 3, *Namkungwi* 1, *misyungu ja ucimwene*, English translation, “*the chief’s procession*,” 2007, p. 9.

The headperson-in-waiting is anointed by one of the *namkungwi*, on behalf of the traditional authority, by wiping some flour of the oblation, *mbopesi*, across his or her forehead.<sup>25</sup>

Some scholars, including Clyde Mitchell and Claude Boucher, report that the anointing of the flour oblation is preceded by a ritual blow to the head with a fist, which symbolizes the headperson-in-waiting's death and rebirth.<sup>26</sup> From my investigation of the Amacinga Yawo in the Mangochi District, the ritual of the fist, *suwâ*, to the head does not take place anymore in enthronement ceremonies.<sup>27</sup>

Another variation with other reported enthronement rituals is the location and method of teaching or advising the headperson-in-waiting. It has been reported that the teaching takes place primarily inside a house, out of sight and unheard by the uninitiated, that is, those who have not themselves undergone initiation as a headperson. It is my belief, however, that there are local variations of enthronement ceremonies. Boucher has reported that after being anointed with the oblation, *mbopesi*, the headperson-in-waiting enters seclusion to be taught the important aspects of being a headperson.<sup>28</sup> This, I believe, is a regional difference, with most people whom I have interviewed suggesting that this occurs in other areas, especially towards Machinga, in T.A. Kawinga, and not in the Mangochi District.<sup>29</sup>

Some teachings of a more esoteric and secretive nature, however, are given to the headperson-in-waiting in private. These are usually given toward the middle of the night and are associated with the test for being a witch and other rituals, which ensure the village headperson's future security.

After being anointed with the oblation, the headperson-in-waiting is led to the enclosure where they are seated with their spouse on the porch of the house, together with the winnowing basket, *kaselo*, containing the oblation, *mbopesi*. After some initial speeches of welcome the process of teaching begins. The advice giving, commonly called *kuwunda misyungu*, is led by a group of initiators, *acinamkungwi*, who are themselves village headmen and women.<sup>30</sup> Like all other forms of initiation in the Yawo life cycle, enthronement advice is taught largely through song, dance and explanation.

In the compound, which is open to the public, village headpersons and group village headpersons from the area, and the traditional authority, gather to sing and dance throughout the night and encourage the headperson-in-waiting in his or her new role. In the centre of the compound is a large fire called a *cilangali*.<sup>31</sup> Around the fire are several musical instruments, including drums and the *ngwasala*, which is an instrument made from long pieces of bamboo, and which is beaten with sticks by a large number of people in rhythm with the drums.

Following the speeches of welcome and introduction, an initiator, *namkungwi*, will start to sing a refrain of one of the many advices, *misyungu*, that will be sung throughout the night. After his initial introduction of the song, other people will join in with him. Then the drums and the bamboo instrument, *ngwasala*, begin and the people, particularly headpersons and elders, begin to dance in a circle while

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<sup>25</sup>At the enthronement ceremonies that I have attended no prayer was said at this point in the ritual. The ancestors were exhorted when the oblation was prepared.

<sup>26</sup>J.C. Mitchell, *The Yao Village; A Study in the Social Structure of a Nyasaland Tribe*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966, p. 121. See also Claude Boucher, "Yao Chieftainship", unpublished, p.1.

<sup>27</sup>One group village headman and a *namkungwi* reported that this was something that was done a very long time ago, but is no longer practiced. Moreover, of the four enthronement ceremonies, which I have witnessed I have never encountered the ritual killing with the fist.

<sup>28</sup>Claude Boucher, "Introduction to the Yao Spiritual World". *Kugoni Yao*, [http://www.kugoni.org/images/pdf\\_files/Yao.pdf](http://www.kugoni.org/images/pdf_files/Yao.pdf), p. 25.

<sup>29</sup>Interview #: 1, *Namkungwi 2*, "different at *ce Kawinga*" 2007, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup>Yawo women headpersons and group village headpersons are also *initiators*. For example in T.A. Jalasi, group village headwoman *ce Balakasi* is a *namkungwi*. She is the sister of the current Traditional Authority Jalasi and she plays a role at initiation events. At one enthronement ritual, which I attended, *ce Balakasi* anointed the novice, *mwali*, with the oblation flour, *mbopesi*.

<sup>31</sup>A *cilangali* is a large fire made with large pieces of timber, especially for celebrations and dances.

singing the advice song, *msyungu*. Typically an advice song, *msyungu*, is just one single refrain which is repeated, such as,

*Sigele jika akatemangu akatemangu*  
*Sigele jika akatemangu akatemangu*<sup>32</sup>

I am left alone, Mr. Worm in his cocoon, Mr. Worm in his cocoon

I am left alone, Mr. Worm in his cocoon, Mr. Worm in his cocoon

Following the song and dance, which goes for about 15 minutes, the *namkungwi* leading the song will then speak publicly about its meaning. While the *namkungwi* does this, people give money to him as a way of showing their approval of what he is saying. Throughout this performance the headperson-in-waiting is silent and remains expressionless.

The *misyungu* of *kutawā lina* are relatively short stanzas, compared to the *misyungu* of *jando* and *msondo* and they can be both literal and highly metaphorical. Understanding the meanings of the *misyungu* given publicly is relatively straightforward, as each song of advice and its interpretation are given together by the initiator, *namkungwi*. Moreover, unlike *jando* and *msondo*, where the novices are hearing the advices for the first time, the performances of the *misyungu* at *kutawā lina* have been heard many times before as they are performed semi-publicly. Many of the songs are therefore, known by the novice prior to enthronement. But, if for some reason the headperson-in-waiting has never attended another enthronement ritual (which is highly unlikely), by the time the *namkungwi* has finished plying his trade and imploring him or her to learn from the song, they will be fully conversant with its meaning.



*Anointing a village headperson-in-waiting with the flour oblation, mbopesi*

The number of songs varies per enthronement, with apparently none being sung twice. One initiator estimated that he knew about 80 enthronement songs of advice, *misyungu ja ucimwene*.<sup>33</sup>

The themes of the *misyungu* vary. Some common themes include: the importance of respecting everyone; the need to understand that people can be dangerous to the headperson; the importance of attending to important matters first; the importance of not treating people badly, the need to seek the wellbeing of all people and not just one's own close kin relatives.

For example the following *msyungu*, advises a headperson-in-waiting not be rude to people, particularly children saying, “Get away! Go away. You snotty face. Look, you with the big head”. The chief does not do this because the lame people are his, the blind are his, the mentally disturbed are his.”<sup>34</sup>

*Ambuje akatugamba*

Lord don't swear and curse<sup>35</sup>

Another *msyungu* warns a headperson-in-waiting that people are dangerous and they can destroy them and their chieftaincy if they so desire.

*Wandu kogoya*

People [are] dangerous

<sup>32</sup>Interview #: 3, *Namkungwi* 1, “*misyungu ja ucimwene*,” English translation, 2007, p. 2. This advice teaches that the headperson must not chase people away from the village. If the headperson does not look after the people of the village, it is just like chasing them away. If they chase people away, then they will be alone, just like the worm.

<sup>33</sup>Interview #: 3, *Namkungwi* 1, “*misyungu ja ucimwene*,” English translation, 2007, pp. 1-9.

<sup>34</sup>Ian D. Dicks, “Toward an Understanding of a Yawo Muslim Worldview: A Study of the Amacinga Yawo”, PhD. University of Malawi, 2008, p. 584.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 584.

This *mysungu* teaches that in order to avoid meeting a grisly end, a headperson is supposed to live well with people. He or she is not supposed to be proud, or rude or speak badly to people, or treat them as if they are stupid. The village headperson-in-waiting is told that the people who gave the blessing and seated him or her on the throne can also remove it from them if they want.

Other *miysungu* teach the headperson-in-waiting to be patient with all the people in the village, even those who are opposed to his or her authority. The following *mysungu* advises the village headperson-in-waiting not to chase troublesome people away from the village as one would chase a rat, which destroys things.<sup>36</sup>

*Mbilile ce Likoswe*

I have been patient, Mr. Rat

Other *miysungu*, advise the headperson-in-waiting to avoid undertaking activities which will destroy relationships and that will make people angry. This includes having sexual relationships with the wives of younger men in the village, something, which will lead to the destruction of the village and even the loss of the headperson's life, as can be seen in the following *mysungu*.

*Ayice Amecelala*

He came Mr. Penetration

Rather, other *misungu* advise the village headperson-in-waiting to undertake positive practices, which build a village such as attending people's funerals and visiting the sick, which is the subject of the following *msyungu*.

*Ambuje kuleka malilo*

The chief leaves the funeral

If the headperson doesn't attend to problems in the village, it is like they are destroying the village themselves. Therefore, if the headperson knows of a problem in the village, they should first go to that home before going to work in their garden.<sup>37</sup>

A common Yawo proverb sums up the headperson's relationship with people in the village. *Umwenye, w'andu*; Chieftaincy, people. The headperson must function in a way that seeks the wellbeing of the people and not just the headperson's own needs or the needs of their extended family. If he or she does not adhere to this advice then there may well be no one to lead the village, as the headperson will not remain long in the position.

The ritual of *kutawâ lina*, however, is not merely for didactic purposes. It is not just about learning the right and wrong way to lead. It is also about receiving what Victor Turner calls, "life giving power", which is essential for being a village headperson.<sup>38</sup> Turner says ritual is not,

Just a concentration of referents, of messages about values and norms; nor is it simply a set of practical guidelines and a set of symbolic paradigms for everyday action, indicating how spouses should treat each other, how pastoralists should classify and regard cattle, how hunters should behave in different wild habitats and so on. It is also a fusion of the powers believed to be inherent in the persons, objects, relationships, events, and histories represented by ritual symbols. It is a mobilization of energies as well as messages.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, an important part of the Yawo enthronement ritual, *kutawâ lina*, involves testing the headperson-in-waiting to see if he or she is a witch and strengthening them against the machinations of others.

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 585.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 583.

<sup>38</sup>Victor Turner, "Symbols in African Ritual", in J. Dologin, et al (eds), *Symbolic Anthropology. A Reader in the Study of Symbols and Meanings*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1977, p. 189.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

## Securing the village headperson

At around 2.00 am, two chickens, a male and a female, are killed secretly and prepared with special medicine for a ritual meal of which the headperson-in-waiting, his wife(s) and the initiators, *acinamkungwi*, partake. The meal has two traditional purposes. First, it is a test to see if the headperson-in-waiting is a witch, *msawî*. Second, it is another part in the process of protecting the headperson-in-waiting for their role ahead.

After the ritual slaughter, the chickens are medicated, cut into pieces and fried, *kukalanga*, in a clay pot.<sup>40</sup> At around 3.00 am, the headperson-in-waiting, his wives and some of the initiators, *acinamkungwi*, leave the compound to eat the chickens, together with other food, including the food staple, *ugali*, green leaf vegetables, *liponda*, beans, *mbwanda* and usually a red meat, *nyama*, of some sort.<sup>41</sup> The headperson-in-waiting eats together with his wife and his initiation assistant, *mkamusi*, from one plate, while the initiators, *acinamkungwi*, eat from another. Before they eat, the headperson-in-waiting is given instructions that he or she should not chew any of the chicken bones.<sup>42</sup> During the meal the headperson-in-waiting is observed to see if they will pass the first test, the test of witchcraft, which is conducted by observing the meat they prefer the most.<sup>43</sup> At the end of the meal the headperson-in-waiting is asked, “What did you eat here? Did you taste human flesh?” To which they are supposed to reply, “I ate goat, chicken, leaf vegetables and beans”.<sup>44</sup> One group village headman explained to me that when he was enthroned he was too scared to even taste the red meat in case he was accused of being a witch.

They tested me [witchcraft]. They put in front of me different kinds of meat, but I refused to eat it. It wasn't human flesh, but I said that I wasn't hungry and that I would eat in the morning.<sup>45</sup>

Then, while I was eating the chicken, they said we give you a teaching advice, *msyungu*. “If you have not eaten anything associated with witchcraft then you are a real person, one that will care for people. But, if you were one that ate the flesh of a person then we would say you would not lead people, you would kill them. Now we know that you will care for people. You are not a witch”.<sup>46</sup>

The instructions about not chewing the chicken bones are given to the headperson because firstly they have symbolic meaning.

To break the bones means the chief will be always sick, and if he is not lucky even die.<sup>47</sup>

Breaking the bones, says one initiator, *namkungwi*, “Is a symbol of the chief being broken, or of him breaking himself”.<sup>48</sup> Boucher says that breaking the bones is a symbol of breaking or splitting the village.<sup>49</sup>

The chicken bones have another important function, apart from symbolism, they are also the medium for the medicine, which together with the protection of the ancestral spirits is the means by which a headperson is made secure during his rule. After the meal the bones of the chickens are collected. The

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<sup>40</sup>The name of the medication is *cipitikulo*, which, in this case, has the meaning of reversing the effect of an attack onto the attacker. Interview #: 2 with *Namkungwi* 1, “medicating the chicken,” 2007, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup>It is said that the red meat is often served uncooked with blood remaining in it. The thought behind this ritual is that people believe that witches like to feed on the bodies of the dead. Therefore, if the new headperson eats the uncooked meat, without revulsion, then it shows them to be a witch.

<sup>42</sup>Interview #: 1, *Namkungwi* 3, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup>The group village headman and the initiator, *namkungwi* whom I interviewed said separately that in the past the red meat was real human flesh. But now some other kind of meat is used instead. Interview with Group Village Headman 2, p. 2., Interview #: 4, *Namkungwi* 1, “clarification of the spirit entering into new headman & secret teaching sessions,” 2010, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup>Interview #: 1, *Namkungwi* 3, “eat, shaving disposing,” 2007, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup>Interview with Group Village Headman 2, 2007, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>47</sup>Interview #: 2, *Namkungwi* 1, “medicating the chicken,” p. 2.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>49</sup>Claude Boucher, “Introduction to the Yao Spiritual World”. *Kugoni Yao*, [http://www.kugoni.org/images/pdf\\_files/Yao.pdf](http://www.kugoni.org/images/pdf_files/Yao.pdf), p. 25.

head of the new village headperson is then shaved and the hair is bundled together with the bones and the flour of the oblation, *mbopesi*. The headperson is then told to bury them in a secret place. In the area of my investigation, within the Mangochi District, the headperson-in-waiting is told to bury the bundle in the bathing area, where they are then instructed to dig a hole about 15 cm deep, in which they place the bundle of bones, hair and flour.<sup>50</sup> Following this they are instructed to undress and bathe over the hole using specially medicated water.<sup>51</sup> The medicated bones, the hair, the flour and the medicated water are all to protect the headperson, *kusilika* and *kuwinda* from evil forces and people who will try to destabilize them.<sup>52</sup> Together, these rituals show the significant role that the ancestors and the practices of the ancestors continue to play in the life and power of a village headperson and the life of the village. Boucher strengthens this idea saying that “one of the first duties of the chief as a leader is to look after the spirits of the dead, the ancestors. They have to be placated, honoured and remembered.”<sup>53</sup>



*The nguwo dance at dawn after the night of enthronement*

Although the practice of ritually eating the chicken occurs in enthronement ceremonies in many Amacinga Yawo areas, it is at the same time diminishing in other areas, this is due, says one initiator, to a greater understanding of Islam as presented in the Qur'an.<sup>54</sup>

The ritual killing and eating of the chicken still occurs today, however some have started to leave killing the chicken, they just send it to the sultan instead.<sup>55</sup>

We are leaving doing this ritual for religious reasons. For we see in the Qur'an that we should leave doing it.<sup>56</sup>

Once dawn breaks, the night of ritual is complete. People then retire to rest and wait for the final aspect of the enthronement, which is that of ‘making the name known’, *koposya lina*.

### **Making the name known: *Koposya lina***

The event of ‘making the name known,’ *koposya lina*, starts around noon the following day. The headperson-in-waiting continues to be kept in seclusion until all of the dignitaries are in place at the celebration area. Once this has been finalized, the headperson-in-waiting is brought out into the open with much singing, dancing and clapping. The final role of the *acinamkungwi* in the ceremony is to dance the headperson-in-waiting to the site of the final ceremony. In the same way, the previous evening, that the headperson-in-waiting was danced and sang into the initiation, the liminal period, so now the headperson-in-waiting is danced out to enter into the world again, to celebrate with his or her subjects and other

<sup>50</sup>There are several variations on where the bones and hair are buried. In T.A. Katuli they are either disposed of in a hole dug in the mud of a riverbed or, if there is no river nearby, in a hole somewhere else. Interview #: 1, *Namkungwi* 3, “eat, shaving, disposing,” 2007, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup>Other practices in the enthronement process are much less observed or are no longer practiced, such as the ritual intercourse performed by the village headperson-in-waiting and his wife. The sexual fluids from this ritual are wiped on a cloth and this cloth is tied together with the bones and the hair and disposed of in the hole. Interview #: 2, *Namkungwi* 1, “ritual intercourse,” 2007, p. 4. Claude Boucher reports the occurrence of ritual intercourse in the enthronement event. Claude Boucher, “Yao Chieftainship”, Mua Mission, unpublished, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup>Interview #: 2, *Namkungwi* 1, “why the shaving and *kuwinda*,” 2007, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.* See also N.Q. King and K. Fiedler (eds), *Robin Lamburn - From a Missionary's Notebook: The Yao of Tunduru*, Saarbrücken: Breitenbach, 1991, p. 35.

<sup>54</sup>The practice of killing, medicating and eating the chickens ritually is diminishing in T.A. Jalasi. However, several initiators said that the practice still occurs to varying degrees in other areas of the Mangochi District, including *ce* Bwana Nyambi, T.A. Katuli, T.A. Mponda, T.A. Chowe, T.A. Makanjila.

<sup>55</sup>Interview #: 1, *Namkungwi* 3, “stopping ritual chicken,” 2007, p. 3.

<sup>56</sup>Interview #: 1, *Namkungwi* 3, “chicken ritual, *din*,” 2007, p. 3.

headpersons and chiefs. The symbolism of the whole event, the death of the previous headperson and their rebirth in the new headperson can be seen in the following two songs:

The previous evening they sang,

*Mwenyewo, mwenye aŵa, yeya yeya mwenye aŵa*

This is the chief, this is the chief, yes, yes, this is the chief.<sup>57</sup>

But in the daytime, at the coming out, the initiators lead the people in the song,

*Mkundi wusipwice lelo, mkundiwo, mkundiwo, mkundi wusipwice lelo, mkundiwo, mkundiwo, mkundi wusipwice lelo.*<sup>58</sup>

The *mkundi*<sup>59</sup> tree is sprouting today, the *mkundi* tree, the *mkundi* tree, the *mkundi* tree is sprouting today, the *mkundi* tree, the *mkundi* tree, the *mkundi* tree is sprouting today.<sup>60</sup>

The meanings of the songs together, as given by a *namkungwi*, are as follows:

The chief that is being received is the chief who has returned. The day before yesterday he was in the grave, and today the new chief has appeared. Mothers rejoice, be happy for the chief, let us all be happy. The chief died and rose again. Yes, the *mkundi* tree, which was cut down, has sprouted, it has risen. One is sprouting like the tree sprouts. Was it not cut down and now is sprouting again?<sup>61</sup>

The rest of the day is one of great celebration and the community dances and sings at every opportunity. After the arrival of the new headperson, the event is blessed with a prayer in Arabic by a *sheikh*, requesting God's blessing on the occasion and for God to protect and assist the new leader. Much of the celebration that follows is taken up with speeches by various household-heads, dignitaries, village headpersons, group village headpersons and the traditional authority, as well as the giving of money as a sign of joy and acceptance of the occasion.<sup>62</sup> The transition from ordinary person to Yawo village headperson is now complete.

## Conclusion

The process of becoming a Yawo village headperson remains largely unchanged and is considered by a majority of Yawo to be an essential part of making a village headperson today. Although the Yawo are Muslims, there is little in the ritual process, which reflects this, apart from prayers given on 'The day of making the name known', *koposya lina*. This is not to say the ritual has not been affected by Islam, it has, and there is pressure from some quarters for more changes to be made to the ritual. There is, however, resistance to change as there continues to be strong belief that the ritual process is essential for the making of a village headperson. For as long as people believe that the dead affect the lives of the living and as long as the Yawo continue to fear the attacks of unscrupulous people through sorcery and believe that the most reliable means of protection is via their ancestral spirits and through traditional medicine, then the current process of becoming a Yawo village headperson will continue in this way.

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<sup>57</sup>Interview #: 3, *Namkungwi* 1, "misyungu ja ucimwene," English translation, *The chief's procession*, 2007, p. 9.

<sup>58</sup>Interview #: 3, *Namkungwi* 1, "misyungu ja ucimwene," Cingamila ce Mwenye, p. 8.

<sup>59</sup>*Parkia filicoidea*. Humphrey Chapama, Herbarium Technician, Forestry Research Institute of Malawi.

<sup>60</sup>Interview #: 3, *Namkungwi* 1, "misyungu ja ucimwene," English translation, *The chief's procession*, 2007, p. 9.

<sup>61</sup>Interview #: 3, *Namkungwi* 1, "misyungu ja ucimwene," English translation, *The chief's procession*, 2007, p. 9.

<sup>62</sup>Contrary to what Stannus (1922, p. 278) and Mitchell (1966, 124.) experienced, the date of 'making the name known' is set by the village and not by the traditional authority and the flow of money these days is in reverse. The traditional authority and the group village headpersons are the beneficiaries when a new chief is enthroned. Interview with Group Village Headman 2, p. 7. Mitchell, however says, "In the case of the enthronement of a village headman, the traditional authority, *mcimwene* or *mwenye* will endorse the candidate by setting a date for the enthronement, by attending the enthronement, by speaking at the enthronement and through the giving of a gift." J.C. Mitchell, *The Yao Village; A Study in the Social Structure of a Nyasaland Tribe*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966, p. 124.