

**A Guide to 'Dominus Illuminatio Mea':  
A Commission for the New Library at Douai Abbey**



**Work by Fr. Claude Boucher MAfr. and Mr. Thomas Mpira,  
KuNgoni Centre of Culture and Art, Mua Mission, Malawi**

**Description by R. L. Hewitt,  
Kamuzu Academy, Malawi**

**2011**

## Malawi and the Kamuzu Academy

Malawi, which was known under colonial rule most recently as Nyasaland, is a country located in Central Africa: it is surrounded by Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia. It owes its origins to the heroic labour of Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian missionaries: the most famous are Dr. David Livingstone and Bishop Charles Mackenzie.

Among Malawi's more unexpected institutions is the Kamuzu Academy, which was established by Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda, the first post-independence President, to offer a Classical education to Malawians at the site of the tree under which he had learned his first letters from Scottish missionaries. His foundation has allowed the author to make his living as a teacher of Greek and Latin in Malawi for the past seven years.

The Kamuzu Academy has a web-site at <<http://www.kamuzuacademy.org>>.

The MV Ilala II was built in Glasgow in 1951 and remains the only means of communication for many communities living along the shores of Lake Malawi.

The MV Ilala II, which is photographed here at Monkey Bay, is named after the district in what is now Zambia in which Dr. David Livingstone died.



## Fr. Claude Boucher MAfr. and the KuNgoni Centre of Culture and Art

Malawi is also the home of the KuNgoni Centre of Culture and Art, which was established in 1976 at Mua Mission, Dedza district, by Fr. Claude Boucher, a White Father who arrived in Malawi from Canada in 1967. Fr. Boucher has devoted the four decades of his residence in Malawi to ethnographical research among the Chewa, Yao and Ngoni peoples which inhabit the area around Mua Mission. He is also an accomplished artist.

Fr. Boucher paints while Mr. Joseph Kadzombe Gama, his assistant, and Miss Vimbai Msindo, Kamuzu Academy, look on.



The KuNgoni Centre is the pre-eminent centre of cultural and artistic endeavour in Malawi: quite possibly, in Africa. Its carvings, for which it is renowned, decorate churches across Malawi and as far afield as England: one forms an illustration to the popular English-language edition of the new Catechism. The ethos of the Centre is informed by the doctrine of inculturation which was emphasized at the Second Vatican Council: Dr. Martin Ott (*vide infra*: p. 26) adapts Fr. Aylward Shorter MAfr. (*Toward a Theology of Inculturation*) to define inculturation as 'the ongoing and critical dialogue between faith and culture'. Some of the most interesting of its work is that which seeks to discover authentic Malawian expression for aspects of the Catholic faith which are, perhaps, more familiar under the guise of other cultures.

The KuNgoni Centre has a web-site at <<http://www.kungoni.org>>. Among published material, there are introductions to its work by Dr. Martin Ott (a scholarly study): *African Theology in Images* (Blantyre, 2000) and by Fr. Serge St.-Arneault MAfr. (a more popular account): *KuNgoni: When Water Falls Sand Becomes Crystal* (Mua Mission, 2007).

Fr. Claude Boucher MAfr. describes the frescoes of the Chamare Museum in *Digging Our Roots: The Chamare Museum Frescoes* (Mua Mission, 2002) and the Missio Banner, which hangs in Munich and attempts an intriguing syncretism between Chewa traditional religion and Catholicism, in *The Gospel Seed: Culture and Faith in Malawi as expressed in the Missio Banner* (Mua Mission, 2002). There are a biography and a full account of how Fr. Boucher came to establish the KuNgoni Centre in his forthcoming book, *When Animals Sing and Spirits Dance*, which is the seminal study of *Gule Wamkulu*, the Great Dance of the Chewa people of Malawi (Mua Mission, 2011).

The Chamare Museum (which is named after the Chewa pronunciation of Fr. Jean-Baptiste Champmartin MAfr.) was opened in 2000 to accommodate Fr. Boucher's researches and collections on the intellectual and material cultures of the Chewa, Yao and Ngoni peoples of Malawi. It is the foremost ethnographical museum in Central Africa.

Photographs of some of the frescoes which decorate its walls are reproduced in this guide.



### **Mr. Thomas Mpira**

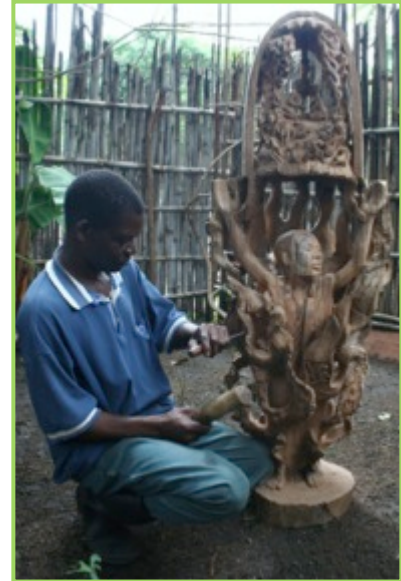
Mr. Thomas Mpira is one of the longest-serving and most skilled of the carvers who have learned their art at the KuNgoni Centre.

Mr. Mpira was born in 1964 in Kalindiza village, Dedza district. He was compelled by the necessity to support his family to leave school after only six years of primary education. In 1986 he started his apprenticeship at the KuNgoni Centre, where he has been active ever since. He lives near Mua School for Deaf Children with his family of three sons and three daughters. His maize garden is close by.

Mr. Mpira is equally at home with subjects drawn from Christianity and from Chewa and Ngoni traditional religion. Photographs of further examples of his work are to be found at the end of this guide.

Mr. Thomas Mpira works on the commission for Douai Abbey.

December, 2010



### **Douai Abbey**

The Benedictine Community of St. Edmund was formed in Paris in 1615 but was re-established at Douai, in Northern France, in 1818: it retains the name of Douai. The Abbey found a new home at Upper Woolhampton, in Berkshire, in 1903, where it was for many years the home of Douai School. After the closure of the school in 1999, the community now devotes itself to the living of the monastic life and to work which includes the parochial ministry, the provision of a programme of retreats and lectures, prayer, study and hospitality. The heart of the community is the Abbey church, which combines in spectacular fashion architecture from either end of the twentieth century.

In September, 2010 Dr. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, opened and blessed a new library which will accommodate the sixty thousand volumes of the Abbey's own collection together with the collections of Benedictine and other religious houses from across England and Wales. By kind permission of Abbot Geoffrey Scott OSB, Mr. Mpira's work has found a home in the new library.

Douai Abbey has a web-site at <<http://www.douaiabbey.org.uk>>.

The new library is photographed against the Abbey church.



## **Dominus Illuminatio Mea:**

### **Introduction...**

*Dominus illuminatio mea et salus mea: quem timebo?*

*Dominus protector vitae meae: a quo trepidabo?*

*The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?*

*The Lord is the protector of my life: of whom shall I be afraid?*

*Psalm 26 (27): 1*

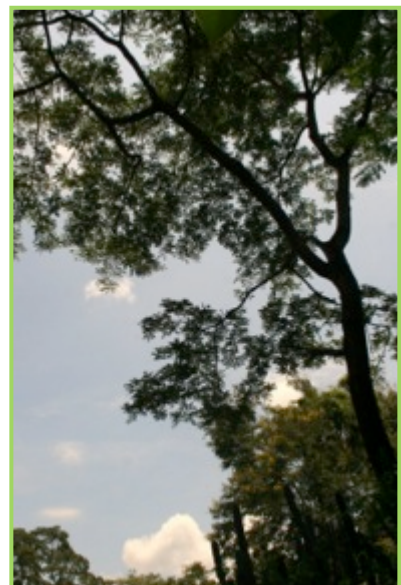
KuNgoni carvings begin life as a dialogue between Fr. Boucher and the carver to whom the commission is entrusted. In this instance, the conversation turned on the matter of how best to translate an institution so central to the story of Christendom in Europe as a Benedictine library into terms which might relate to the reality of life in rural Malawi, where only a small minority completes its primary education and books apart from the Bible and school text-books are rare.

Malawi means 'flames': when a Malawian kindles fire, he says 'Malawi amoto', 'the flames of fire'. Accordingly, Mr. Mpira was inspired to meditate on fire in two of its aspects: the destructive fire, born of ignorance and sin, which divides the unity of Creation, and the creative fire, divine in origin, which drives out ignorance with knowledge, of whatever sort, and restores Man to fellowship with God's creatures and with God.

Mr. Mpira draws on the synergy of cultures which generates the best KuNgoni work to bring together elements of traditional Malawian belief and Christianity. It is, therefore, not inconsistent to name the work after the motto of the University of Oxford, which is close to its new home: the Psalmist speaks in similar terms of the light of knowledge and its power to dispel the fear which destroys fellowship.

Mr. Mpira's work is carved from the wood of the *ntangatanga* tree: *albizia gummifera* or the flat crown tree.

Photographed here is an *ntangatanga* tree growing in the botanical garden of the KuNgoni Centre.



The Chewa Myth of Creation and the Fall of Man.

The Chewa are the dominant tribe in the Central Region of Malawi: they extend West into Zambia and East into Mozambique.

There are general introductions to Chewa myth and tradition by J. M. Schoffeleers and A. A. Roscoe: *Land of Fire: Oral Literature from Malawi* (Limbe and Likuni, 1985) and by J. W. M. van Breugel: *Chewa Traditional Religion* (Blantyre, 2001).



At the top of the carving we see a representation of the Chewa account of Creation and the Fall of Man. When the first Man and Woman came down from heaven to earth on Mount Kaphirintiwa, they lived in harmony with God and the rest of Creation. However, succumbing to wickedness, they invented fire, and began to hunt animals: God returned to heaven and the animals learned to fear Man, with the exception of the dog and the goat, who remained his friends. The scene is surrounded by *Chauta*, the Great Rainbow, which is one of the Chewa names for God.

Christ leaps amidst the divine fire.



The movement of the carving, like that of the fleeing animals, is now downwards. For from the base of the carving arise the flames of a very different fire: a divine fire which will purify the destructive fire of Man. This fire, which represents knowledge and reason, allows Man to reflect creatively on what is good and what is bad in his fallen nature and to communicate wisdom to his descendants. Leaping up together with this divine fire is the figure of Christ, its consummation, whose Gospel perfects natural reason and serves to unite Man to God once more: Christ embraces, quite literally, in his outstretched arms, fallen Creation.

Perhaps it is not fanciful to discover in Mr. Mpira's work a reflex of a sentiment which found very different expression in the fourth of Mr. T. S. Eliot's *Quartets*, Little Gidding:

*The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre –  
To be redeemed from fire by fire.*

... and Detail

### i) The Chewa Myth of Creation and the Fall of Man

The first Man and Woman kindle fire atop Mount Kaphirintiwa with *mpeko* (fire-sticks)...

Mount Kaphirintiwa lies to the South-west of Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi, in Dzalanyama Forest Reserve on the Malawi – Mozambique border.

It is said that it remains possible to see the footprints, impressed in the rock, of the first people and animals. The story is that they were begotten with the onset of the rains.



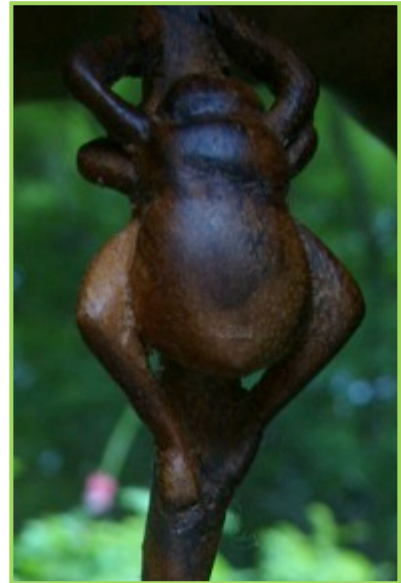
However, an expedition to Dzalanyama Forest Reserve on the weekend of 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2011 did not discover any elder who either knew or was willing to reveal the site of Creation.

Photographed here is the road to the North Gate of Dzalanyama Forest Reserve. Mozambique lies beyond the range of hills.





... which makes the *kalulu* (hare) to flee in terror, hunted by *Anthu* (Man) with the *galu* (dog) which has remained loyal to him, and *Chauta* (God) to return to heaven on the thread of a *kangaude* (spider).



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**Adakhoma mutu wa kalulu**

**He has struck the head of the hare**

**(Chewa Proverb)**

**'He has had it! The hare's head is so tender that it breaks on a touch. This expression is used to mean committing a crime.'**  
*Wisdom of the People: 2000 Chinyanja Proverbs*, J. C. Chakanza (Blantyre, 2000)

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The frescoes of the Chamare Museum relate the same story:

The unity of Creation is disrupted as Man chuses wickedness and chaos...



... and generates a divorce which endures to this day.

St. Augustine's conception of 'original' or 'ancestral' sin offers a striking parallel: *voluntarium peccatum hominis primi originalis est causa peccati* (*De nupt. et concup.* II xxvi 43).

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Chikomekome cha nkhuju, m'kati muli nyerere

Oh! the beauty of the fig, but inside there are ants

(Chewa Proverb)

'Don't let mere appearance of things play its dazzling game in your heart. Go for substance. All that glitters is not gold!'  
*Wisdom of the People: 2000 Chinyanja Proverbs*, J. C. Chakanza (Blantyre, 2000)

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ii) **The Divine Fire**

The flames are carved, in miniature, with scenes which reflect on the acquisition of knowledge and the transmission of wisdom and learning: they extend from the traditional instruction of *Gule Wamkulu*, the Great Dance of the Chewa people of Malawi, to the formal education of the primary school; from the great cultures of the ancient world, such as Babylon and Egypt, to the rural Malawi which is Mr. Mpira's home; from rock art to the monastic scriptorium in which so many brethren of the Community of St. Benedict have laboured to preserve the learning of the past for the present. Douai Abbey too finds a place among the illustrations.

The photographs below reflect a study of the flames in an ascending clockwise spiral, from the feet of Christ to his upraised arms.

1. From the wounds in Christ's feet arise flames which are decorated with images of primitive Man: he struggles to assume physical form in a manner which reminds us of Michelangelo's *Schiavi*.



5. A monastic scriptorium of the European Middle Ages.



2. The Batwa or Akafula are the earliest known inhabitants of Malawi. They were a pygmy race who practised hunter-gathering and painted rocks.



6. The language and culture of China.



3. *Kulowa chinamwali* is the Chewa initiation rite for girls. A *pungu* (tutor) watches over a girl who wears a headpiece called *chingondo*: it bears the image of *kasiya maliro*, the antelope figure which is the great mother of *gule wamkulu*.



7. The language and culture of Egypt.



4. *Kulowa gule wamkulu* is the Chewa initiation rite for boys. A *kapoli* (guardian) *gule wamkulu* figure (top right) guards the entrance to the *dambwe* (graveyard), to which the initiate is being brought (bottom left).



8. Ocean-going vessels open up knowledge of lands 'across the Lake' and further afield.



9. Babylonian mathematics.



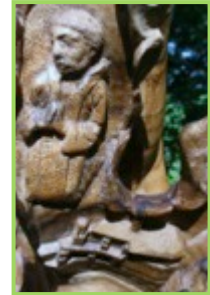
14. ... and the heavens above.



10. The telescope opens up knowledge of space...



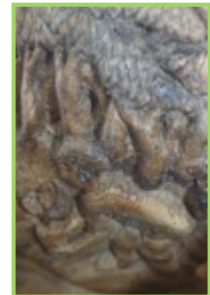
15. A monk of Douai prays against a representation of the Abbey church.



11. ... while back in Malawi the Agricultural Development Division (an important institution under Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda) instructs villagers in the proper application of fertilizer.



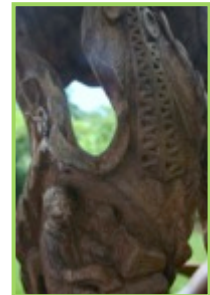
16. Forestry.



12. People listen to the wireless.



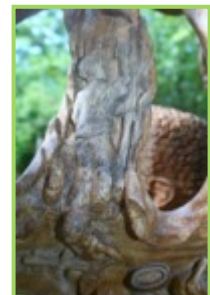
17. The age of the computer and the cellphone.



13. Exploring the depths of the sea...

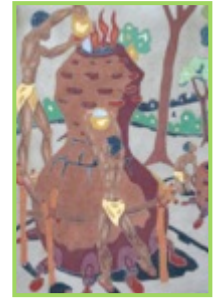
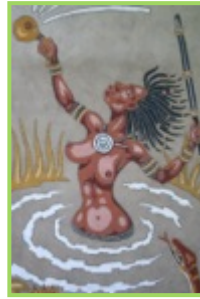


18. A primary school teacher works amidst a happy scene of village industry: we see makers of pots, hoe-handles and baskets at work, together with tin-smiths and, of course, carvers.



The frescoes of the Chamare Museum also have the acquisition of knowledge and the transmission of wisdom and learning as their theme: they bear interesting comparison with Mr. Mpira's work.

From left to right we see an elder teaching the children of the village; communication of the *mwambo* (moral teaching) through *Gule Wamkulu* and its performance in the ritual action of *Mwali* (the Rain Priestess); iron smelting such as Dr. David Livingstone saw it in what is now Kasungu National Park; the rock painting of the Batwa or Akafula and a mission school.



From the wounds in Christ's hands arise flames which suggest the powerful effect of Christian civilization to call out what is best in people: hospitality towards strangers and love within the family. We might compare the inhumanity of the brute and formless figures at Christ's feet.

At this point, the divine fire purifies the destructive fire which was kindled by Man when, in his pride, he acted according to his own selfish and divisive will. We see the smoke of this fire, now quenched, billowing up and through the scene of Creation and the Fall of Man: the cycle of creation, fall and redemption is complete.

On Christ's left:

*kulandira alendo*  
(to welcome travellers)

and...



... on Christ's right:

*chikondi*  
(love).



iii) Christ Leaps Amidst the Divine Fire



Christ is depicted as a Chewa in the flower of his manhood, leaping amidst the flames of the divine fire which purges ignorance and wickedness: he brings harmony through knowledge and wisdom and restores unity to Creation.

We are reminded again of Little Gidding:

*All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one.*

**Other works by Mr. Thomas Mpira**

Holy Rood Church, Oxford holds presently two other works by Mr. Thomas Mpira: a lectern which depicts Christ crucified and rising with the green shoots of the new maize; and a sculpture group which depicts Our Lady of Africa receiving Cardinal Newman as Gerontius into the Communion of Saints.



The KuNgoni Lectern, Holy Rood Church, Oxford

This piece was commissioned in token of thanksgiving to Hinksey Parish for its contribution to the rebuilding of Mbonekera Primary School and St. Mary's Outstation, Chiphaso Parish, Kasungu district, Malawi from 2007 to 2010.



Jesu, Maria - I am near to death, Oxford Oratory

This piece was commissioned to celebrate the beatification of John Henry Cardinal Newman in September, 2010 and in support of the Reaffirmation and Renewal Campaign of the Oxford Oratory. It will find a permanent home in the Oxford Oratory in due course.

## Enquiries

The KuNgoni Centre of Culture and Art is a non-profit organisation: it relies solely on donations and income from activities which include its hostel, cultural programmes and the sale of its carvings and publications to continue its work of preserving and enhancing the wealth of Malawi's heritage.

Please contact the KuNgoni Centre at <admin@kungoni.org> for further information.

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**'Faced with the great challenges of our time, Christian hope neither dwindles nor weakens. Catholic cultural centres are the outposts of Christian hope and with their prophetic charge and their educational bravery, know how to make a cultural offering that is truly alternative to the dominant models of life and culture, in which trust and hope seem to be reduced to useless and forgettable accessories.'**

*Guide to Catholic Cultural Centres, Pontifical Council for Culture and the Central Office for the Cultural Project of the Italian Episcopal Conference (Rome, 2006), p. 29*

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### ***When Animals Sing and Spirits Dance: Gule Wamkulu: The Great Dance of the Chewa People of Malawi, Claude Boucher Chisale (Mua Mission, 2011)***

Fr. Boucher's forty years of research into one of the most remarkable cultural spectacles of Central Africa are in course of publication. As an initiate into *Nyau*, the secret societies which are responsible for *Gule Wamkulu*, he has acquired unparalleled knowledge of the *mwambo* (moral teaching) which the dancers, who are considered to be the ancestors incarnate come to visit and advise the living, seek to convey.

The book, which is fully illustrated with photographs and original artwork, introduces some two hundred *gule* characters: their appearance, dance and song are described; and their teaching is discussed. It makes accessible, for the first time, the culture of the Chewa people, who inhabit also Zambia and Mozambique.

Copies of the book, which is being designed and printed in Oxford, are available from the KuNgoni Centre.

This striking image, which is painted on cloth, forms one of the illustrations of the book. Fr. Boucher depicts *gule* characters submerged in the lake in the land of the dead from which they are said to emerge. They are gathered around *Mwali*, the spirit wife of *Thunga*, the mystical snake of *Chauta*, God the rain-giver: from their union will come the rain to bring fertility to the land.

God is present also as the Great Rainbow, which is seen through the surface of the water. Just visible are fishermen: they are hoping to catch a *gule* character by casting with eggs from the shore.

The symbols which surround the painting are drawn from the rock paintings of the Batwa or Akafula, who are the earliest known inhabitants of Malawi.

The painting forms one of a triptych: the other two paintings reflect the iconography of the Yao and Ngoni cultures.

