

## Adasiya mwana m'mbande

(A night structure from the Mua area)



### Themes

1) Childcare 2) Responsible parenthood 3) Sexual taboos for children's health

### Etymology

**Adasiya mwana m'mbande** means, 'She left a child behind, in the field of green beans.' For the Chewa, who eat beans only when dried, green beans are those that are not yet ready for harvest. They refer (here) to children who are still of tender years.

### Description

**Adasiya mwana m'mbande** belongs to the family of Kasiya maliro. This structure resembles the mother ancestor but is larger and more bulky. It is three metres tall and long, with a width of about a metre; and it is animated by a single dancer. The structure appears primarily during night vigils of funerals, commemoration rites, initiations and of the remembrance of the dead (*dambule*). Day performances on such occasions can occur but require a similar structure made specifically for day appearances. They differ in the materials used in their construction. The night structure is made with a bamboo frame larger than that of Kasiya maliro but arches in a similar manner, creating a deep curved back with two apices. The front apex features the head of an

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Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art, Mua Parish, P. O. Box 41, Mtakatika, Malawi

animal of unknown species that resembles an antelope. It displays curved horns with earrings, ears and an open muzzle with no teeth. The back apex ends with a long tail (60 centimetres) woven on a string with dry palm leaves. The characteristic curve of the front of Kasiya maliro, portraying pregnancy, is absent. **Adasiya mwana m'mbande**'s shape widens towards the ground both at the front and at the back. It has the likeness of an inverted funnel. The bamboo frame is covered with dry grass and decorated with woven palm leaves in a zigzag pattern laid vertically. A fringe of woven palm leaves is also attached to the base of the structure to hide the dancer's feet. The day version of the same structure differs slightly from the one described above. Maize husks are woven closely over the grass and replace the palm leaf pattern. The effect of the white maize husks is striking and creates a texture more effective for an appearance in full daylight. Details like the eyes, ears, horns and teeth are treated with greater realism. Kudo or other antelope horns and glittering silver paper (for the eyes) are commonly used. Often a black stripe (made of mud) appears at the bottom of the structure above the fringe (made of dyed sisal).

In the arena, **Adasiya mwana m'mbande** circles around and around at a modest speed. It gyrates like Kasiya maliro but does not show the same agility since the big structure is heavy and difficult to manoeuvre by a single dancer. When he is exhausted, he makes the structure wave sideways in order to recover his strength. The men beat the drums following the rhythm of the *chisamba* and the male choir sings: 1) "*She left a child behind... in the field of green beans!*" The women reply with their own chorus: 2) "(The husband says:) *Joy today!* (The wife answers:) *The children are away at the playground with their friends. (Let us not indulge in sex.) They are not yet back home. (No) joy today!*" The two enigmatic songs refer to matters that cannot be disclosed in front of the children. The second song presents a dialogue between husband and wife, admonishing parents who enjoy sex when their young children are away from home. They are reminded of the rules of *mdulo* that forbid sex when children of tender years are away. This applies for children up to the age of around nine years. The *mdulo* complex provides rules that regulate sex and protect the unity of the family. These rules are expressed both with a colour code (opposing white and red) and with a thermal code (opposing cool and hot). Young children away from home are seen as vulnerable and therefore cool. The parents indulging in sex are perceived as hot. Cool and hot cannot coexist according to Chewa morality. What results from this coexistence is described with the word *mdulo*, meaning 'to cut', in this instance, 'to cut the children'. By disobeying the rules of the *mdulo* the parents expose their children to the slimming or the swelling disease, which is believed to lead inevitably to death. The Chewa concept of *mdulo* provides an explanation for the high mortality rate among children. The expression of the song, "*She left a child behind...*", is a useful metaphor to reveal the parents' lack of care for their young children. They should keep an eye on them instead of letting them go without supervision. Small children can easily fall prey to all kinds of dangers and accidents, such as insects, snakes, fire, water and even wild animals. Chewa morality teaches parents that they should care for their small children consistently instead of behaving selfishly. They should keep a watchful eye over them instead of profiting from their absence by enjoying sex. The fierceness of **Adasiya mwana m'mbande**'s performance in the arena and the prominence of the teeth emphasise the importance of the *mwambo* and the seriousness of the rules of *mdulo*. The character's message is an invitation to mutual care and greater harmony. In the same spirit, the dancer who performs this structure in the arena is bound to keep sexual continence before dancing it.

For the last two decades **Adasiya mwana m'mbande** has been totally absent from *gule wamkulu* performances. The reason can be found in the disappearance of the annual ceremony of

remembrance of the dead (*dambule*), where **Adasiya mwana m'mbande** was prominent. This ritual was performed to honour the ancestors and was the great festival of *gule*: it was an occasion for resurrecting a great variety of masks and structures to please the dead. Beer was brewed by each individual homestead and was shared freely between the villagers and their ancestors. Today this is no longer the case. Economic hardships and constraints mean villagers cannot afford to express this solidarity and generosity. The second reason for **Adasiya mwana m'mbande's** disappearance might be explained by reduced child mortality and the improved health services of the area. Lastly, the breach of the *mdulo* rules is no longer the sole explanation for ill health and child mortality. The Chewa have become more aware of the devastating effects of malaria, meningitis, diarrhoea and other sicknesses affecting their children. Families are quick to rush to the hospital and to the local clinics for help. This does not mean the end of the *mdulo* belief for all the other areas of daily life. Sexual taboos remain compulsory with regard to the female cycle, the time of birth and a period of time afterwards, and at the time a child is seriously sick. The observation of the rules of *mdulo* is especially important on the occasion of the death of a close relative. At such times sexual abstinence is enforced everywhere in the Chewa village. The great majority of rural Chewa looks on *mdulo* as a major obligation and fundamental to living by the moral code. The reason behind this obligation is found in the need for solidarity and the importance of communal spirit, despite the growing presence of individualism brought by outside influences.

### Songs

- 1) "**Adasiya mwana m'mbande, lere mbande , lere mwana lere Adasiya mwana m'mbande.**"
- 2) "*Yerere yerere iya, ali kwaawo anyamata. Sanabwere anyamata. Yerere iya.*"

### Source

Interview in 1987