

Chimzonzo

(A day or night structure from the Mua area)



(miniature model, day version)

Theme

1) Hygiene in marriage 2) Sexual taboos (*mdulo*) 3) Women's cycle instructions

Etymology

Chimzonzo literally means, 'the pecking one', and refers to the grey heron.

Description

This structure is a metre and a half long and less than a metre wide and portrays a heron. The bird's body is one metre high. A bamboo frame is bent in an oval shape rather like a duck swimming on the water. The neck and the head are fixed and extend for a metre and a half above the body. For the night version, the bamboo is covered with grass and decorated with palm leaves in zigzag patterns. For the day version, the bird's feathers are rendered with cotton wool or maize husks of two colours: red and white. The head displays the beak and the eyes. The neck is striped with red and white bands. Neither the legs nor the wings are featured on the structure. The structure is activated by a single

www.kasiyamaliro.org

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

dancer and moves forward and backward rapidly and spins around. **Chimzonzo** used to appear at initiation rites, particularly when the initiates were bathing at the river early in the morning. The song stresses that the heron comes from the lake: *“The bird from the Lake, **Chimzonzo**, the grey heron!”* The structure with its white and red colour scheme stresses the importance of hygiene and washing at the time women experience their menstrual periods. This teaching is inculcated in the initiates during puberty rites. The grey heron goes to the water early in the morning. So too does a woman who experiences her cycle. The red markings demonstrate her condition. The dominance of white features the normal state of women when they are not menstruating. This is when there are no restrictions on sexual activity. The long beak and the long neck allow the bird to feed (to peck) and to grow fat. The anatomy of the heron is presented here as a symbol for sexual activity and the pregnancy that follows. **Chimzonzo** was commonly a part of initiation rites until the 1990s. In 1991 the informant feared that the structure would not pass to the next generation, since the artisan who used to construct **Chimzonzo** died in that year. His skill disappeared with him.

Song

*“Mbalame ya ku Nyanja, **Chimzonzo**, **Chimzonzo!**”*

Source

Interview in 1991