

Fisi

(A day or night structure from the Mua and Khwidzi areas)



(miniature model, day version)

Themes

1) Adultery & rape 2) Cowardice 3) Dishonesty, theft & robbery 4) Surrogate husband for children or ritual (*fisi*) 5) Witchcraft

Etymology

Fisi is the Chichewa word for the hyena.

Description

The hyena is a common mammal of Malawi and features prominently in its folklore. Many tales portray it as a coward, a thief, a witch or an adulterer (as we see also for the character Dzimwe). The *gule* character of **Fisi** embodies all these characteristics. The structure is about two metres long and a metre and a half high. It is covered with dry banana leaves, has a short tail and the head is moulded with the dry skin of a black goat. Two dancers activate it. Their legs are hidden by the same banana material as the outer covering. The hyena enters the *bwalo* with a fierce aspect. It runs about and jumps high making its typical cry, which the men imitate in the song: 1) "*Uwi, Uwi, the Hyena cries when it sees game.*" In this Chewa play on words, the hyena is happy when it finds meat. The animal has the reputation for stealing the goats of the villagers at night. People who steal other villagers' property at night are also called '*fisi*'. Their intention may be not only to steal

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but also to kill. They are said to disguise themselves as a hyena with the help of evil medicine. They are believed to be witches hunting human flesh. Witches are held responsible for sudden death, the death of children and for the loss of all those who die in the prime of life. These 'abnormal' deaths are understood to be the work of evil people (*afiti*, ie. witches) who kill in order to satisfy their base instincts.

The Chewa culture also uses the name *fisi* in a sexual context. In the past, at the initiation ceremony, when the girls had completed their transition and were about to be restored from coolness to sexual heat, which was regarded as an essential step, they ended the ceremony with sexual intercourse with their future husbands. If they did not have a promised husband, a stranger could be provided for the occasion. The selection of this man was carefully made, based on his qualities and attributes. The Chewa called the partner responsible for performing the ritual intercourse the *fisi*. The women's song echoes this meaning: 2) "*Catch, catch, here is a goat! Hyena, catch!*" A married couple with an impotent husband would secure a secret partner for the woman, who would beget children in order to safeguard their honour. This surrogate husband was also called the *fisi*. Great confidentiality had to apply in order to safeguard the identity of the biological father. As a negative dimension, the character **Fisi** evokes the image of the rapist, who violates a woman's home and forces her to commit adultery.

Fisi represents the animal of darkness, sent by the spirit world to invite the people of darkness to abandon their works of darkness and to come into the light. The behaviour of the thief, the witch, the murderer and the rapist clashes with the *mwambo*. They go against the values taught by the ancestors, and they are ultimately seen as destroying the Chewa community.

Songs

- 1) "*Uwi uwi Fisi amalira akaona nyama (2x).*"
- 2) "*Gwira, gwira toto de, pali mbuzi gwira, Fisi gwira!*"

Source

Interviews in 1992, 1994 and 2000