

Gundale

(A palm leaf night mask from the Mua area)

Themes

1) Sexual taboos (*mdulo*)

Etymology

The word **Gundale** comes from *kugundala*, 'to pound the hard grain in the bottom of the mortar', or 'to pound away with the pestle'. Among the Chewa 'pounding' is often a euphemism for sex. The word *gunata* also qualifies a stupid person. The character **Gundale** plays on these different meanings.



Description

The character of **Gundale** only appears at night rituals, but it is not associated with any specific context. The mask resembles that of the night Ajere, the elephant hunters. It consists of a mitre-like hat (60 cm. long), made of bamboo on which palm leaves are woven in a zigzag pattern. Bamboo is bent in the shape of a gothic arch and attached to a bamboo ring circling the head of the dancer. The arched space is divided with strings, on which the palm leaf pattern runs vertically. A line of rags dangles from the head ring of the hat and hides the dancer's face. His body is smeared completely with red clay (*katondo*). Bands of dry palm leaves form horizontal stripes around his body at regular intervals (four for the arms, four for the legs and four for the chest and waist). A one and a half metre long, fat, mat-like tail made of reeds is attached to his waist. The mat-like tail is striped with rings of red or black mud. The tail narrows to an end and is divided into two, also like the shape of a mitre. At times, the mitre and the tail are made of cut-out reed mats. In other areas, such as Khwidzi, there are slight differences in **Gundale**'s costume, such as a palm woven tail, a woven maize husk band criss-crossing the chest, a maize husk woven belt at the waist and maize husk leglets and armllets.

The dancer carries a long stick for support. He walks bent forward like an old man. As soon as he reaches the arena, he is transformed into a young rooster. He wiggles like a worm, moves his pelvis frenetically and shakes his long tail like a wagtail bird. His buttocks move forward and backward, mimicking sexual intercourse. During the funeral rite, **Gundale** goes to the funeral house (*masiye*), enters it and acts as if he is looking for his partner. The men sing, "**Gundale, are**

www.kasiyamaliro.org

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

you asleep? The child has now fallen asleep.” The song describes marital relations between husband and wife. Relations occur when the young children who sleep in the same bedroom are asleep. The song indicates that **Gundale** is eager for sexual satisfaction and can be unreasonable in seeking his pleasure. The red colour of the dancer’s body suggests a context of sexual prohibition. The mitre-like headdress recalls Kasiya maliro’s shape, and thus suggests the female sexual organs. The white stripes on the red body paraphrase the secret language of *gule*, via the colour of the guinea fowl’s spots. During the night performance black and red are seen as one. The colour code used here refers directly to the female cycle and the sexual code it commands. **Gundale**’s long tail ending with a fork symbolizes the male organ in coitus. The red stripe of the tail indicates that sex is banned. The long stick used by the dancer demonstrates that one can only reach old age if he abides by these rules of sexual abstinence (*kudika*).

The character of **Gundale** belongs to the category of ancient masks, rarely seen today, which seem to address the original focus of *gule wamkulu*. Its message belongs to the period when *gule* may have been owned by the women, and its teaching was confined to women’s affairs. **Gundale**’s message focuses on married life. described as having its own dynamics of pleasure and abstinence – to tie and to untie (*kumanga, kumasula*). This double condition is represented for the Chewa by the two colours of the guinea fowl’s feathers (black and white). White equates to pleasure and sex; black or red conveys transition and sexual abstinence. Both conditions constitute the sequence of sexual life with its pleasure and its restrictions. Sexual taboos are encountered at the time of menstruation, after birth or at any other moment when the couple is exposed to a period of crisis or transition, such as funerals. At such periods, rules of solidarity override the pleasure of the individual. One must abstain in order to keep in tune with the community for fear of being seen as an outcast. The mystical disease of *mdulo* sanctions these rules. Married and sexual life comprises a succession of black and white phases. If one wants a successful marriage and good health, one has to put up with these rules for fear of being labelled a fool or, worse, becoming the victim of *mdulo* and dying suddenly.

Song

“**Gundale**, kodi mwagona? **Gundale** (2x), mwana wagona.”

Source

Interviews in 1990, 1992, 1999 and 2001

Reference

Scott, D.C. (1892). *A Cyclopaedic Dictionary of the Mang’anja Language spoken in British Central Africa*. Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland: Edinburgh.