

Kalichero

(A night mask from the Mua area)



Themes

1) Impotence can be cured 2) Marriage, preparation & instructions

Etymology

Kalichero means, 'a small winnowing basket'.

Description

The character of **Kalichero** is danced by Kapoli at the vigil of the girls' initiation ceremony, the *chinamwali*. For the night performance Kapoli is dressed in a maize husk head cover, kilt, leglets and armlets. He carries several small winnowing baskets made of dried palm leaves that are articulated with strings. He holds one string in his hand, to which he has attached the remaining baskets. The other string is tied to the wrist of the shaker (*silambe*) player. As he shakes the *silambe*, following the rhythm of the *chisamba*, the baskets dance in different directions. The male choir sings, "*Small winnowing baskets!*" three times over. The senior women (*anamkungwi*) lead the initiates and their tutors into the centre of the arena, and bring them close to the dancing baskets. Each initiate is told to grab one of these baskets. The girls, one after the other, attempt to take hold of them. When one

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of the initiates is successful, she holds the miniature winnowing basket, and her tutor must pay a fee to the dancer in order to claim her back. Once redeemed, the *namkungwi* spells out the teaching behind the small baskets. The winnowing basket, in an initiation context, symbolises the female sexual organs or the womb. The girls are taught that, after entering into marriage, the encounter with their husbands should develop into a pregnancy. Once the newly wed woman experiences the first signs of being pregnant, she should leave a small winnowing basket face up at her door in order to inform the mistress of initiation that she will soon be with child. If after several months the young wife realises that she has not achieved pregnancy, she will place the basket face down. This will be an indication for the *namkungwi* that the young couple is experiencing some difficulty. Then, the mistress of initiation will visit them and try to help them with advice. Depending on the nature of their problem, the couple might be referred to a medicine man (*sing'anga*). He will use his skill and knowledge to help them in conceiving a child. The character of **Kalichero** acts as a non-verbal communication about the need for seeking advice and assistance in order to find happiness in marriage. Prolonged infertility can be the cause of dispute and misunderstanding between the couple.

The character of **Kalichero** has been linked to female Chewa *chinamwali* for centuries. By the time of the interviews in the 1990s, it had disappeared for some time. The reason is that female initiation in recent years is conducted over a shorter time span. While in the past it lasted several days or weeks, today, the ritual occurs in a day or two, owing to the economic pressure of feeding the numerous helpers and participants. A consequence of this is that many details of Chewa pedagogy are left behind and forgotten. Moreover, with changing times, women have become freer to talk about sexual matters. Non-verbal communication has become less relevant.

Song

"Kalichero de Kalichero de ae Kalichero!"

Source

Interviews in 1991 and 2007