

Kambani zithe

(A pink day mask from the Kasumbu area, Dedza)



Themes

- 1) Children inherit their parents' sins
- 2) Need for dialogue
- 3) Reconciliation & mediation
- 4) Unity & harmony

Etymology

Kambani zithe literally means, 'Tell your story and then it's over.' The words emphasise that once a case or dispute has been settled, it should not be revisited.

Description

The large 35 centimetre oval mask portrays a Chewa with tribal marks. He is a senior man with a bald head, wrinkles, a long black moustache and a goatee. The character is protesting against being the victim of his parents' bad reputation. His frown, the confused eyes and the startled look of the mouth indicate this to the audience. The inclined line of the eyebrows and parallel moustaches all highlight this look of astonishment and dismay. The slender nose features a black waxy cap on the bridge. Symmetrical to this black cap, a cleft appears on the upper lip. A black cowlick stands on his forehead, and the tone of his skin is pink. All these details emphasise **Kambani zithe's** atavistic characteristic: he is an illegitimate child. His father is unknown. The round ears express that he is being tortured by the comments of his own family members. The headgear of his mask is made of tatters to convey that in his torment he appeals to the spirit world for support. His clothing is that of a wretched person: jute vest, jute kilt, leglets and armllets. **Kambani zithe** carries a calabash of beer as an invitation to his neighbours to make peace and to reconcile.



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The character of **Kambani zithe** is considered to be very ancient, and the dancer who performs it has to be protected by sexual abstinence. **Kambani zithe** appears exclusively at funeral and commemoration ceremonies of chiefs and senior people. His dancing style resembles that of Gulutende, the polygamist. He swerves his feet, one leg at a time sideways far from his own centre of gravity and then prostrates himself on the ground, expressing shame. The male singers intone for him the following: *“Some carry heaps (in their heart), heaps...! Where can I go (to have) my case judged? What kind of case is this? So that people may come back to a good relationship, discuss cordially, reciprocate visits, share food and drink and be reconciled. (For this to happen,) one has to discuss the case so that (people) come to an agreement. If one does not take these measures, nothing will change! Mr. Tell your story and then it’s over. People will be on good terms with each other. Oh!”*

The song preaches harmonious living within a community. Villagers are not to be divided by misunderstandings or incidents of the past. Once a case has been judged, and compensation has been made via the chief, there is no reason to reopen the case and start arguing again. Here, **Kambani zithe** tells his own life story. He is the son of Nabanda, the shrine keeper. His father is unknown. **Kambani zithe** is an illegitimate child, who has suffered his entire life into old age because of the blunders of his parents. His heredity shows atavistic signs, which stigmatise his existence. His life in the village is difficult. **Kambani zithe** is singled out in the way he walks, acts and even thinks. He is constantly under scrutiny. **Kambani zithe** can hardly breathe; he is confused, bewildered and angry. As he moves about with his calabash, he pleads with his fellow villagers to reconcile with him. He cannot be expected to be responsible for the actions of his parents forever. He begs those who are eager to reopen his case to move on and to forget the past so that good relations may be restored.

The message of **Kambani zithe** is that little is to be gained by maintaining feuds, seeking revenge or using evil medicine. One should focus on building strong and lasting relationships. Daily struggles in the village are many. Scarcity of food, shortage of land and ill health are already difficult enough to bear without compounding things with poor social relationships. Harmonious community living is like the salt of life that keeps the morale of the village high in periods of turmoil. As the Chewa proverb says: *“Kukoma kwa mnzako ndi kamba wako – The helpfulness of your neighbour is your provision for your journey.”*

Song

*“Ee tate wena zakula ngawa dee aye ngawa dee! Kodi kokakamba mlandu n’kuti? Otani dee? Kuti anthu akondane tate e, kukambirana n’kokoma tate e, nayenderana, nadyerana, nauyana tate. Apa **Kambani zithe**, tikondane tate e. N’kupanda kutere aye de sikukhala tate de. **Kambani zithe**, wanthu akondane tate oh oh.”*

Source

Interview in 1993

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