

## Kanzimbi or Pereka ng'ombe

(A red day mask from the Mua and Dedza areas)

### Themes

- 1) Assisting transition of deceased to spirit world
- 2) Chewa – Ngoni relations
- 3) Infertility – impotence
- 4) Promiscuity
- 5) Sexual taboos (mdulo)



### Etymology

**Kanzimbi** means, 'the small cowlick', referring to hair.

**Pereka ng'ombe** means, 'Give a cow.'

### Description

The Dedza mask has a small red face with white lips, round eyes and female eyebrows (depicted by a series of short sun rays). The mask is enhanced with a wig of black-dyed sisal and a long cowlick made of chicken feathers. The cowlick is fixed on top of the head and falls in different directions following the dancer's movements. The character wears a tattered suit and carries a whip or a small ceremonial axe. **Kanzimbi** is related closely to the Kapoli and the Kasinja families and performs like them. His red face emphasises sexual prohibition.

The Mua region has another type of **Kanzimbi** nicknamed **Pereka ng'ombe** belonging also to the Kapoli family. His head cover is made of feathers, but sometimes a tiny wooden white face is added. The mask is topped with a cowlick made of feathers like the Dedza character. The dancer wears the outfit of Kapoli (kilt, leglets and armlets) but he dances differently. He does not swerve his feet, but lifts them one after the other while slowly moving forward. He displays little vigour, and his dancing does not involve any movement of the hips, as if his pelvis were dead. He holds pieces of rags at waist height, and sluggishly and indolently moves his hands downwards.

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Sometimes he supports himself with two sticks or branches. Both these actions symbolise pushing down the spirits of the dead, who no longer have sexual relations.

**Kanzimbi** and **Pereka ng'ombe** used to perform on the occasion of funerals and the commemoration rites of a chief. Elders say that they entered the graveyard and assumed the role of undertakers (*adzukulu*). The Dedza version of **Kanzimbi** ('the small cowlick') would sing: 1) "**Kanzimbi** used to say, I have dreamt that I begot a child, with a cowlick on its head (a boy). *Dream, dream, (this kind of) dream is only for those who can have children! You there, impotent man!*" The song points out that the small hair cowlick of **Kanzimbi** signifies impotence. It symbolises a penis that has no strength. That is why it moves to left and right. **Kanzimbi** dreams that he has had a child of his own, but when he wakes, there is not one there. He knows that this dream can only be a reality for those who are potent. The symbol of the hair lick seems to trace its origin from the Ngoni headdress (*nyoni*), which was given a sexual connotation.

The Mua version of **Kanzimbi** also emphasises infertility. His song shows that **Kanzimbi** has tried to prove his potency: 2) "*You have misbehaved, Jere! Mr. Cowlick had to pay a cow (as a fine).*" One presumes from the content of the song that **Kanzimbi** had tried to seduce the wife of the chief. For this, **Kanzimbi** had to pay the fine of a cow, even if his foolish behaviour carried no danger of pregnancy, since he was impotent. The imposition of this heavy fine made him twice a victim, and gave a touch of ridicule to the story. The fine of a cow is unusual. A Chewa would normally pay a goat, not a cow, for such a case. The mention of the cow again suggests an Ngoni bias. What is the link between Ngoni and impotence? Did the Ngoni chiefs have a custom of castrating their servants to prevent them from mischievous behaviour with their wives? This custom, if it existed, could be the origin of mocking **Kanzimbi**'s infertility and giving him such an important role at the funeral of a chief. Because of his impotence, he could not be involved in sex and could thus be extended the privilege of being an *mdzukulu*, who should always be ritually 'cool'. He would never compromise the journey of the deceased chief (*kudula maliro*) to the spirit world.

## Songs

1) "**Kanzimbi amanena** (2x), *ndalota nditabereka mwana, tumba lili pa mutu! Maloto, maloto de maloto ...! A chiumba!*"

2) "*Ede mwatero ede mwatero a Jere ae! **Kanzimbi pereka ng'ombe.***"

## Source

Interviews in 1986, 1991 and 2000