

Kherere

(A pink day mask from the Mua area)



Themes

- 1) Rights of/respect for the handicapped
- 2) Infertility – impotence
- 3) Prejudice/discrimination & do not judge by appearances
- 4) Rumours of witchcraft

Etymology

Kherere means, ‘to split irrevocably’ or ‘to kill’.

Description

This mask (35 cm.) features a man with a fat face, swollen cheeks and cone-like head topped by a crest of hair. The mask appears in various shades of red and pink. The headgear is made of tatter or jute. The dancer wears a kilt, leglets and armlets and carries a spear that he brandishes while dancing. He swerves his feet sideways, jumps and threatens the audience with his weapons. He performs at funerals, commemoration rites and even at initiation ceremonies.

Despite wearing a wooden mask **Kherere** sings for himself. He says: 1) *“Kherere, this is jealousy!”* or 2) *“It is a while since you started killing my children, Kherere. This is out of (sheer) jealousy!”* The songs suggest that **Kherere** is the head of the family group. He looks after his sister’s children. Whenever a child dies in the family, **Kherere** is accused of killing the infant by witchcraft, in order to increase his power (*kukhwimira*). He denies any responsibility concerning these deaths and says, in a joking way, as one of the songs suggests: 3) *“I do not kill them myself. I only share in their*

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feast! (Answer:) Nevertheless, you are a witch!" Kherere is unjustly accused of witchcraft because he is the head of the family group, but also because of his physical deformity: his pointed head. Often people are thought to be witches because they manifest deformity or a physical handicap, such as having protruding teeth. Here, the deformity of **Kherere** betrays something else. His fat face and his oblong head show that **Kherere** is impotent. He cannot have children of his own. The colour red or pink suggests that he is an outcast because of his impotence and his presumed witchcraft. **Kherere's** inability to have children forces his wife to have sexual relations with another man, who can beget children on his behalf. Another song emphasises this: 4) *"You who struggle (sexually), go away, let my daughter remarry! You are impotent!"* or 5) *"Today has come a young man. He was put to the test... a penis without strength."* A further song shows **Kherere** coming to marry a girl who had previously been married to an impotent man: 6) *"The time you see me (here) is the second time. Today I have come (to stay)!"* He proposes with pride and ostentation, not knowing that his impotence is public knowledge. Even when his wife has secret relations with someone else and pretends to be made pregnant by **Kherere**, he keeps quiet. When one of his wife's children dies, she accuses **Kherere** of killing her children, out of revenge. He is an innocent victim of prejudice. His double handicap causes **Kherere** to be a scapegoat, accused of being a witch and a murderer. Though the ancestors value fertility and large families, they sympathise with his stigma and beg the family not to judge him by appearances.

Songs

- 1) *"Kherere, dumbo!"*
- 2) *"Mudayamba kale kun'phera ana anga Kherere! Kherere dumbo!"*
- 3) *"Sin'kupha ndine, ndingodya nawo! Ndiwe mfiti!"*
- 4) *"Chimbulira choka, mwana wanga akwatiwe (2x)! Sukwata!"*
- 5) *"Wobwera lero kamwana. Kamuliza... mbolo lende."*
- 6) *"Munandiona ndi kano n'kachiwiri ae ae. Ndabwera lero!"*

Source

Interviews in 1992, 1994 and 2000