

Kuipa n'kwanu or Kuipa kuombola

(A red day mask from the Dedza area)

Themes

- 1) Handicaps as a pretext for bad behaviour
- 2) HIV/AIDS & sexual diseases
- 3) Selfishness/self-centredness

Etymology

Kuipa n'kwanu means, 'Ugliness is yours.'

Kuipa kuombola means, 'Ugliness saves (face).'

This refers to the fact that a person might use his physical ugliness as an excuse for not confronting his moral failings.



Description

The word *kuipa* is used for both physical and moral ugliness. The mask is red, and shows a person with an ugly distorted face. The nose is crooked, the mouth is lopsided and the teeth protrude. The headgear of the mask is made of tatters, and the character wears the customary tatter suit. He walks with a stick to portray being crippled. He dances on one leg, leaning on his walking stick. When he is in the *bwalo*, he swerves both feet, but still pretends he is lame. When he leaves the arena, he jumps on the crippled leg as if he has never suffered from any handicap. The men sing for him: 1) "*Ugliness is yours. She abandoned her sick child (and rushed to the beer party). She abandoned her sick child.*" Everyone feels pity for the poor sick child who was abandoned by his mother and for **Kuipa n'kwanu's** life story. However, the performance of the character convinces us that his handicap is not as debilitating as it may seem.

A second song gives us more insight into the case: 2) "(People argue:) *Ugliness is yours.* (Kuipa n'kwanu:) *As ugly as I am... it is God's gift.* (People argue:) *No! No! This is your character. Ugliness saves (face), ugliness saves (face). This is the way he has always been! It was not given by God, but this is his character! Mr. Ugliness saves (face) does not know this.*" Here the song points out that ugliness can be less about appearance – God's gift – than about one's behaviour. The women in their song keep shedding more light on **Kuipa nkwanu's** case: 3) "*Ugliness (depends on) your own character. To create, to create... Even Chauta (God) would not have done this, Mr. Ugliness saves (face)!*"

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

The character performs for funerals and commemoration ceremonies. The red colour of the mask emphasises that **Kuipa n'kwanu** is a fraud. He is an outcast by choice, and profits from his own physical defects. A physical handicap is no pretext for bad behaviour. That is why his songs stress, "**Kuipa kuombola**", Ugliness saves (face). God does not create people selfish. A Chewa proverb says, "*Wopunduka m'Chauta, m'pembedzeni – A handicapped person is God himself, worship him.*" **Kuipa n'kwanu** warns people who are disabled that they should not use their handicap as an excuse for their moral inadequacy or bad behaviour.

Conversely, in the modern climate of promiscuity and premarital relations which prevails in Malawi, "**Kuipa kuombola**" has acquired another sense: those who have been spared the scourge of HIV/AIDS through a physical ugliness which makes them unattractive to the opposite sex should not derive any self-satisfaction from their good health, which is not necessarily associated with any superior moral quality.

Songs

1) "**Kuipa n'kwanu** tate de (2x). *Adasiya mwana ali gada, tate de. Adasiya mwana ali gada.*"

2) "**Kuipa n'kwanu** tate de. *Kuipa ndaipa ineku n'kondipatsa Chauta. Ai ai sidero ae de koma kubadwa kwanu tate. **Kuipa kuombola, Kuipa kuombola** tate de, uko n'kukhala kwake! Sikopatsidwa n'Chauta tate de, koma kukhala kwake... Chosadziwa **Kuipa kuombola.***"

3) "*E tate kuipa, e tate uko kukhala kwanu. Kulenga, kulenga tate de, chikhala Chauta satero tate de, **Kuipa kuombola!***"

Source

Interviews in 1991 and 2012