

Mbobo

(A day or night structure from the Khwidzi area)



(miniature model, day version)

Themes

1) Role & powers of the chief 2) Fertility 3) Rebirth

Etymology

Mbobo is a variety of mamba (snake) with a reddish belly and a black crest, known to be absolutely deadly.

Description

The snake-like structure is two metres long and fifty centimetres wide. It is used for instructing a chief (*mfumu*), a chief's assistant (*nyakwawa*), elders (*manyumba*) and the mistress of initiation (*namkungwi*) during their enthronement. The bamboo frame structure is covered with sack and painted with spots. The structure is high at the head and slants down to a tapering tail. The shape is that of an elongated triangle. The carved painted wood head is activated with a long stick by the one dancer inside. This structure is similar in terms of meaning and function to the elephant structure, Njovu. Firstly, it is constructed at a *dambwe* of its own, like the elephant. Secondly, **Mbobo** is used as an alternative for the elephant. Thirdly, the shape of the snake's neck and head resembles the elephant's trunk, and their symbolic meaning is similar.

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This fearsome reptile represents the power of life and death invested in the territorial spirits. Any candidate elevated to a leadership position depends on the territorial spirits to fulfil his/her role as provider of rain and fertility for the community. The leader's performance depends ultimately on faithfulness to the *mwambo* and his/her devotion to teaching it to the people. That is why the territorial spirits are invited to come and to assist in the training.

The enthronement of leaders presupposes a preparation for their new function. They spend the entire night listening to instruction given in the seclusion house (*tsimba*). In the early morning, before dawn, the candidates are visited by the **Mbobo** structure. Before anyone wakes, the candidate is taken inside the structure and given advice by his own tutor (*phungu*), who animates the snake for this occasion. A few initiators accompany the reptile and sing, "*Here is Mbobo! It comes from the spirit world, it comes from the spirit world!*" During the rite for a *namkungwi*, it is accompanied by a few *anamkungwi* ululating to express their eagerness to welcome their new leader. The reptile carries the new leader around the village from house to house to meet all the people. At the end of the tour, the leader is returned to the seclusion house, where the instruction continues until noon. Then he/she will face the entire community and receive the final instruction before entering into office.

Mbobo symbolises the maternal womb, in which the candidate transforms and is reborn as a leader. In this it is like *Kasiya maliro*, like the cloth which covers the initiate and like the seclusion house which shelters the initiate. Its association with the elephant structure and the territorial spirits emphasises the male shift in leadership that developed after the arrival of the Malawi. It stresses also the role of the chief as the priest who 'redeems' his community through ritual intercourse on various occasions. Because of this profound identification with both mother and father, the **Mbobo** structure has to be protected by sexual taboos that guarantee the safety of the dancer.

Song

"Suwo Mbobo! Wachokera ku matsano, wachokera ku matsano!"

Source

Interview in 1992