

Meliya

(An orange women's day mask from the Dedza area)

Themes

- 1) Body preparation for marriage
- 2) Sexual taboos (mdulo)
- 3) Women's cycle instructions



Etymology

Meliya is a woman's name.

Description

Meliya is portrayed as a Chewa woman with tribal marks. She has a broad orange or red face (35 cm.) to warn the community about her condition: she is experiencing her menses. She displays bright and enticing eyes, painted eyebrows in the shape of sunrays. Her nose is delicate. **Meliya's** chin is cut angularly to manifest the feature of strong women. Her wide-open mouth shows her teeth on both jaws, and seems to advise or admonish. This feature suggests the seriousness of a professional sex initiator who clearly believes in her own teaching. **Meliya's** hair is black, partly carved and completed with a wig made of black sisal. She wears earrings. She usually covers her head with a white headscarf, indicating that her cycle is over. On the occasion of a funeral, she wears a funeral headband (*n'dakalira*) to convey that she is one with the mourners and that, on this occasion, sex is prohibited. She dresses with smart feminine clothing and holds a dandy handkerchief in her hands, which she waves at the rhythm of the *chisamba*.

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The character of **Meliya** is danced by one of the female sex educators (*namkungwi*), and accompanies Juba (a version of Chadzunda), performing as partner. In this regard, she fulfils the role of Mariya but gives more specific admonition. She appears at funeral and shaving ceremonies that complete the burial rites. When those are performed for senior members of the community, the rites are often enhanced by scheduling initiation of young girls (*mpindira*). In the arena, **Meliya** moves her hips in the dancing style of Mariya. In the *bwalo*, **Meliya** is welcomed by the women singing the following: 1) "**Meliya**, let us go! Let us go! Let us go! Let us go to see the initiates! This is what it means to grow up! Indeed, keep pulling your clitoris. Keep pulling your clitoris." As a female initiator, **Meliya** has the duty to advise the initiates. She is helped by the other *anamkungwi* in this regard. They demonstrate how girls have to prepare their bodies in order to enhance the sexual pleasure of their future husbands. In a second song, sung by the womenfolk, **Meliya** concentrates her teaching on the rules that regulate the woman's cycle. She is advised: 2) "*When your husband does like this (wants you), turn and face him, **Meliya**. If you refuse him, saying no, no, no, no! This means, my child, My menses are not yet over!*" The second song teaches the initiates that when menstruating they should resist the advances of their future husbands for fear of endangering lives with the *mdulo* disease. Within a funeral context, women are also expected to refuse their husbands and to remain cool for fear of endangering the transition of the deceased and diminishing the effect of the ritual. These are also prescriptions relating to the *mdulo* complex that have to be taken seriously during any rites of passage.

Traditionally, women are the guardians of life, health and harmony at home. They are the ambassadors of the ancestors in keeping the *mwambo*. The character of **Meliya**, common in the past, has today become a rarity in rituals. To a certain extent, her role has been taken over by Mariya, who is a more popular and more constant feature of *gule*. Mariya fulfils a very similar function as the mother of *gule* and the head wife of Chadzunda, the chief. She is the most senior *namkungwi*, who encompasses **Meliya**'s teaching in her own.

Songs

1) "A **Meliya** tiye! (2x) Tiye de, tiye de tiye! Tikaone anamwali tate de! Uko n'kukula! Ndithu tate de. Mudzikoka mkongo e yede ae, mudzikoka mkongo!"

2) "Wamuna akatere de, udzitembenuka a **Meliya**! Ukana: Toto, toto, toto, toto! Mwana wanga, san'namthere!"

Source

Interview in 1991