

# Mlamba

(A day or night structure from the Mua area)



(miniature model, day version)

## Themes

1) Infertility – impotence 2) Caution against infertility in marriage/marriage not for infertile people

## Etymology

**Mlamba** is a catfish. As opposed to other fishes, the **Mlamba** is scaleless, smooth and slippery.

## Description

**Mlamba** is a small structure measuring one metre and a half long by half a metre high and wide. This allows a single dancer to operate the structure from a crawling position. The shape resembles a catfish. The bamboo frame is horizontal and approximates the anatomy of the fish (the head, the body and the tail). The material used for its construction varies for the day and the night appearance. The night version presents **Mlamba** dressed in maize husks. The head husks are black, so as to stand out from the body. The mouth and the eyes are made visible by similar means. A line of darker husks, woven and standing upright highlights the backbone of the catfish. The edge of the structure is camouflaged with a fringe of woven maize husks, which hides the dancer's hands and feet. The day

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representation makes use of jute to disguise the frame and to emphasise better the details of the catfish. The head and the eyes of the fish are painted. The mouth is wide open and decorated with the 'moustache' (barbels) that characterises catfish. A cut mat represents the backbone. A fringe (made of husks) furnishes the border of the structure, just as the night representation.

The dancer carries the structure on his back. He crawls on his hands and knees, following the sound of the shaker held by the guide. **Mlamba** circles the *bwalo* forward and backward. It swerves sideways, turns, and changes direction inspired by the rhythm of the *chisamba*. The male singers call: 1) *"This is the catfish that sleeps in the pools, the pools!"* or 2) *"Lend me an axe, so that I can strike the fish (or the pregnancy). My husband has come. Does the catfish not sleep in the pools? Oh."* The **Mlamba** structure was performed especially on the occasion of commemoration of funeral rites. Today it is unknown and it has probably been defunct for the last three or four decades. Senior informants state that **Mlamba** is a smaller version of the Chikuta catfish structure, and that the songs and meanings are very similar. The second song (that of Chikuta) emphasises that a male (the axe) has been borrowed because the husband has failed to make his wife pregnant and appears unable to beget children. *"Here is a catfish that sleeps in the pools, the pools"* mocks the infertile husband. This is a smaller structure representing a weak male sexual organ in order to ridicule the impotent man. He should stay unmarried owing to his handicap. The third song comments on **Mlamba's** return to his own family group. The senior women of his group sum up their reactions in the following song: 3) *"Mlamba has come back! He finds the dam empty. Mlamba has come back!"* The image of the empty dam suggests the end of his marriage and also his failure to create children. This means that he will remain a child and will never be able to sustain a marriage. The message of **Mlamba** thus resembles that of Chikuta. It instructs the infertile man not to engage in marriage. He will be stigmatised in public, and most importantly, he will cause great distress for his partner and family.

### Songs

- 1) *"Suwo Mlamba wogona m'maiwe (2x) m'maiwe!"*
- 2) *"Bwerekeni nkhwangwa, n'katemere chikuta. Amuna anga abwera. Si Mlamba kuti ugonam'maiwe? Oh."*
- 3) *"Mlamba wabwera e! Waona damu laphwa eae. (2x) Mlamba wabwera!"*

### Source

Interviews in 1991 and 2007