

M'tu wa nsomba

(A day or night banana leaf or cloth head cover from the Mua and Golomoti areas)



(Golomoti, day version)



(Mua, night version)



(Mua, day version)



(Golomoti, day version)

Themes

- 1) HIV/AIDS & sexual diseases
- 2) Beware of luring appearances
- 3) Choice of marriage partner (choice of *mkamwini*)
- 4) Playboy

www.kasiyamaliro.org

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

Etymology

M'tu wa nsomba translates as 'fish head'. It is a euphemism for a male organ infected with venereal diseases.

Description

M'tu wa nsomba features a dry banana leaf (or cloth) head cover smeared with black mud, representing a rotten fish head. The dancer's body is similarly daubed with black mud and wears a kilt made of dry banana leaves. **M'tu wa nsomba** is from the villages around Mua and comes to the arena empty handed. He rotates his pelvis obscenely and wriggles like a worm, exhibiting his sexual urge. He supports his head with one hand and holds his hip with the other. The Golomoti version of **M'tu wa nsomba** shows him carrying green leaves as a flywhisk and a small basket to transport fresh fish, but his merchandise has decayed and reeks. To create this effect, the dancer carries some dead frogs in his basket in order to attract flies. As he mimes selling his product to the womenfolk, he swerves his feet alternately and chases away the flies with his mock flywhisk made of green leaves. The women come to investigate the contents of his basket but soon hurry away in disgust. Both men and women sing the following: "*Come! Fish head, come! Fish head, come!*" The two versions of **M'tu wa nsomba** are closely related except in their dancing styles. The meaning of their pantomimes is more explicit in the Golomoti version. The song is common to both areas and the women's voices call to **M'tu wa nsomba**, but they are repulsed by the contents of the basket.

Under the parable of the fishmonger, the adults in the Chewa village discuss the issue of sexual diseases. **M'tu wa nsomba** profiles promiscuous men who are infected with sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhoea and syphilis and do not take precautions to avoid transmitting them to others. The head cover made of dried banana leaves soiled with mud indicates that the character carries the infection. The character attacks selfishness and irresponsibility. The Golomoti fish salesman portrays young men who propose marriage to young innocent girls. They are lured by an attractive appearance and false manner. **M'tu wa nsomba** is a playboy who hides his promiscuous character and his infectious diseases. The flies following the salesman depict his true nature. **M'tu wa nsomba** teaches that young girls about to embark on the journey of family life should spend some time noting 'the bad smell and the presence of flies'. This means that they should be careful to investigate the reputation of their future husbands. They should not be carried away by shallow impressions and false appearances. The pantomime of the ladies investigating the fish basket and their haste in running away highlights this in a graphic fashion. **M'tu wa nsomba** is performed at funeral rites and commemoration ceremonies that often incorporate puberty rituals. Through him, the ancestors of the Chewa warn young girls that they should look beyond appearances and build their future married life with a person of good reputation and behaviour and who is hard working.

The character of **M'tu wa nsomba** has appeared occasionally in *gule* in the last decade. His teaching is more necessary than ever, with the impact of HIV/AIDS and the relentless advances of materialism and consumerism. The rising cost of living and the increase in the price of soap have curtailed the popularity of *gule* characters smearing mud like **M'tu wa nsomba**. Moreover, the creations of more dramatic masks and more fashionable characters have largely taken over the function and the

message of **M'tu wa nsomba**. Such characters have gone beyond the scope of the familiar sexual diseases of the 1920s and have addressed the more burning issue of HIV/AIDS. One has only to think of Kadzioche... 'Go and burn yourself'.

Song

*"Bwerako **M'tu wa nsomba**, bwerako **M'tu wa nsomba**, bwerako ee!"*

Source

Interviews in 1973, 1985, 1994 and 2007