

Ndirije mkamwini

(A day or night structure from the Mtakataka area)



(miniature model, day version)

Themes

1) Faithfulness 2) Irresponsibility in marriage 3) Promiscuity

Etymology

Ndirije mkamwini means, 'I have no *mkamwini*.' These words are spoken by the head of the family group (the *malume* or *mwini mbumba*, owner of the family). He complains about the unreliability of the husband of one of his sister's daughters.

Description

The community of Chatewa village near the lake has created a structure of its own that resembles a mudfish they call *nyanda*. People say that this type of fish is up to 30 cm long and is lacking scales. The fish has a small head, with protruding mouth and a sort of slanting tail. The structure imitates the anatomy of the fish or a worm. It allows one dancer in a crawling position to activate it. The oblong bamboo frame is two metres long and sixty centimetres wide. The frame is covered with grass and then woven with dry palm leaves, producing a zigzag pattern (for the night) or with maize husks,

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producing a plainer pattern (for the day). The small head with open mouth and visible eyes is smeared with black mud. The plain body is deprived of fins and ends up with a tail that is not pointed but bends in an oval shape, and it too is smeared with black mud. Two eyes are also visible on the tail. Visually, the structure gives the impression of some kind of creature between a fish and a phallus.

In the *bwalo*, **Ndirije mkamwini** dances to the *chisamba* rhythm. It slides on the ground in a forward-backward movement as if it has no sense of direction, unable to decide which of its two pairs of eyes to follow. The structure is lifted and dropped in an undulating movement to suggest sexual intercourse. Both men and women sing together the following: “*I have no mkamwini to cut the meat, the meat! The meat will rot!*” The song voices the complaint of the family head (*mwini mbumba*) that deplores the unreliability of one of his *akamwini*. The man fails to assist his father-in-law in the daily tasks such as cutting meat. Consequently the meat might spoil. This literal meaning hides a more subtle reality. The fish’s double pair of eyes on the head and the tail, the forward and backward movement and the suggestive dancing imply another interpretation, which is more in line with the phallus-like shape of the structure. **Ndirije mkamwini** discloses a promiscuous husband who has no real home. He moves from house to house wherever any woman might invite him. Our *mkamwini* is a sexual profligate who needs to be unmasked because his wife will never know the pleasure of having children. This is the meaning of “*The meat will rot!*” a euphemism for remaining childless.

It is within the context of funeral rites and commemorations that **Ndirije mkamwini** stamps out unreliability and unfaithfulness in marriage. Through this character, the voice of the ancestors is heard and echoed by the supreme authority within the family group. They condemn the immaturity of the husband or wife who is unable to value married life and to hold it sacred.

Song

“*Ndirije mkamwini wohekera nyama nyama ya tate, ya tate! Nyama iola!*”

Source

Interviews in 1992 and 2007