

Nkhunda

(A day structure from the Mua area)



(miniature model)



Themes

1) Childcare 2) Love 3) Sexual taboos for pregnancy

Etymology

Nkhunda is the Chewa word for pigeon.

Description

The pigeon is a one metre high structure activated by one dancer. It is very similar in construction and material to that of Chivuwo/Vuwo, the pelican (refer to that entry), except that the neck and

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the beak are shorter and fixed. It has wings and a long tail reaching down to the ground, which can be manipulated. The dancer lifts his feet high. He jumps and goes backward three paces. He jumps again, shakes the whole body and then bends sideways close to the ground, rotating like a pigeon and swinging its tail around. The women follow the bird with great enthusiasm while the men sing, "*The spirits have come! The pigeon has come!*" The pigeon is seen as the messenger of the spirit world, which comes to the village to survey people's activities. The dance imitates the behaviour of pigeons billing and cooing. The Chewa would appear to associate spirits with birds. Many masked characters in *gule* wear bird feathers, drawing perhaps on the obvious symbolism of the ability of birds to fly and to move quickly to suggest what is not earthbound but rather spiritual.

Pigeons are symbols for lovers who bind themselves into one family. The words "*The spirits have come*" depict the fruit of their love. The spirits have granted a child that needs to be cared for by both parents. During the dance, the pigeon moves up and down to symbolise the sexual relationship leading to pregnancy and childbirth. The presence of the women around the pigeon structure refers to their work as birth attendants. The pigeon concludes his dance by swinging his long tail downward close to the ground. This signifies that after birth the couple are forbidden sexual relations and have to keep sexual abstinence. They are told to direct their attention and all their energy to caring for the baby. The pigeon structure provides the couple with clear rules of sexual conduct, which guide them from the beginning of their marriage until and well after the birth of a child.

In the name of the spirits, the pigeon accompanies the couple with the *mwambo* and blesses their union with a child. The spirits also support them during the long period of sexual taboos that ensure the child's health until it becomes fully integrated into the family group.

Song

"Kubwera kwa mizimu tate! Nkhunda yabwera!"

Source

Interviews in 1987, 1991 and 2000