

# Nkhunda m'gowa

(An orange day mask from the Dedza area)

## Themes

- 1) Infertility caused by promiscuity
- 2) Infertility – impotence
- 3) Caution against infertility in marriage/  
marriage not for infertile people

## Etymology

*Nkhunda* is a domestic pigeon or a dove. *Gowa* refers to the traditional hunting practice by which hunters form a long line to encircle the animal in their 'horns' as they advance. The expression suggests that the catch, in this particular instance, is only a small pigeon, an animal of no value, and not worth hunting.

## Description

This orange, medium sized, oval mask (30 cm.) depicts a stranger. The character portrays an *mkamwini* (husband), despised and unwelcome in the village. The caricatured face displays a narrow forehead that stresses stupidity and raised, crescent-shaped painted eyebrows. The eyes are large and confused, and the long nose is broken. The mouth is open and expressing wonder, and pointed teeth are situated on the bottom jaw. The cheeks exhibit a double pair of black protrusions, conveying infertility. The colour black suggests that the testicles are deprived of potency and appear withered. The upper jaw bears a long, narrow, curved moustache and a smart goatee (both painted in black) on an enlarged angular chin. A tiny black line is featured below the nose depicting, in a stylised way, a short male organ without strength. The tiny ears on the sides of the mask suggest that our *mkamwini* does not learn: he has experienced several marriages, but has failed to recover his potency. He keeps marrying without learning his lesson. The tribal marks on the mask identify him as a Chewa. The double set of scarifications on the cheeks suggests to us that he has been treated by the local medicine man (*sing'anga*), but in truth he has failed to get help for his shameful infirmity. A small, weak hairlick made of pigeon feathers is placed on top of his head and falls over the face. This conveys that he is identified with a pigeon, the victim of the hunt. The tiny domestic bird has been taken instead of a more impressive bird. This is hardly worth the efforts of the hunters. The image of



the little pigeon euphemistically describes the minute size of the husband's sexual organ. Strips of goatskins adorn the headgear of the mask to associate the character with a domesticated animal. Instead, he should take his origin in the bush like an authentic hunter or a capable and potent male. The material used for the headgear testifies to his infirmity and impotence. **Nkhunda m'gowa** wears a tattered shirt and a pair of tattered shorts reaching just below the knees to convey that he has never grown up but has remained a 'child'. **Nkhunda m'gowa** carries a knobkerrie without a head to signify his handicap and a mini ceremonial axe, a mock weapon, to reveal that he is fake hunter.

The drumbeat invites him to the *bwalo* where he leaves behind his mock weapons. He swerves his feet with energy and stamina, rotating around the arena while he dances, and he keeps raising his arms alternately. The raised hand shivers while the other disappears behind his back. If he dances at night events, each of his fingers is bandaged with rags and set on fire. The alternate movements up and down with his hands in flames cause tremendous excitement in the audience. The audience knows that he has burned his fingers (sex) through sexual diseases and that he hides his infirmity. The male choir sing for him the following: 1) *"Mr. Pigeon, trapped in the horns of the hunt, was made a cripple! A big man (an adult) with a tiny penis! He was made a cripple all over his face (his sex). He was made a cripple, he was made a cripple. Mr. Pigeon, trapped in the horns of the hunt!"* The song reveals the cause of his handicap and the reason behind his special dancing style. The womenfolk add their own comment: 2) *"This is an impotent man, Mr. Pigeon, trapped in the horns of the hunt. This is an impotent man!"*

**Nkhunda m'gowa** is an ancient character in *gule wamkulu*. Today he rarely appears in the arena because very few dancers can master his skill or are eager to risk the burning of their hands. At the time **Nkhunda m'gowa** enjoyed popularity, he performed during funeral rites and the commemoration ceremonies that followed. These occasions provided a unique opportunity to ridicule infertility. It also served the purpose of cheering and entertaining the mourners while drawing a moral lesson. Despite the fact that **Nkhunda m'gowa** is seldom seen today, the anti-promiscuity element of his message remains relevant, especially at a time when sexually acquired diseases have multiplied and have become omnipresent.

In a first instance, **Nkhunda m'gowa** discourages infertile people from marrying for fear of ruining the life of their partners who desire to have children. In a second instance **Nkhunda m'gowa** unveils that infertility is sometimes the consequence of misbehaviour and promiscuity. Young people, who neglect the advice of the elders and the ancestors and who start early to indulge in sex, often contract sexual diseases that can lead them to infertility. If one plays with fire, one risks getting burned.

## Songs

1) *"A Nkhunda m'gowa tate (2x), iwo adapundola tate de! Bambo wamkulukulu kambolo kang'onong'ono tate de! Adapundula ku maso konseko! Adapundula, adapundula tate de, a Nkhunda m'gowa!"*

2) *"Ichi n'chumba, a Nkhunda m'gowa tate! Ichi n'chumba!"*

## Source

Interview in 1991