

Nyangagwe

(A brown day mask from the Dedza area)



Themes

1) Banda – Phiri relations 2) Discouraging evil spells & wishes 3) Sexual taboos (*mdulo*) 4) Sexual taboos for funerals 5) Witchcraft

Etymology

Nyangagwe means, ‘horn(s) down’, or could be derived from *nyanga mbwe*, meaning, ‘full of horns’.

Description

The brown mask (70 cm.) depicts an animal-like head with a long canine snout. The open mouth is filled with fierce teeth. The protruding fiery red eyes are well adapted to detecting evil. The head is formed in the shape of a cone, with two long, striped, sharp and dangerous horns. Two erect ears collect the sound from the four winds. The headgear is made of rags to represent the dead. These replace the wild animal skins used in the past. The dancer wears a baobab bark kilt, leglets and armlets. He carries a gourd and a horn used for detecting evil doers.

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The character dances to the rhythm of the *chisamba*. He sways his hips while he stands at the gate of the village. Detecting evil doers with his long nose and instruments of power, he acts as a police officer. When he enters the arena, he searches the *chitenjes* of the women for horns. While he is doing so, the crowd sing, “*This is what you do when you live with a partner! As you may recall, you may be in need of a blanket to warm yourself. Irene, (your husband) spends (all his wealth) on buying horns (medicine). For a blanket he says no! Irene, (your husband) spends all his wealth on buying horns (for casting spells on others)! Irene, my friend, (your husband’s) chieftainship is surely safe from witchcraft! But his enemies are still alive, Nyangagwe, Mr. Horns down!*”

Today, the character of **Nyangagwe** is seldom performed and is unknown in most villages. The isolated village of Chilasamungo in Dedza makes use of this mask during the initiation rites at puberty. There, **Nyangagwe** reminds the villagers that they should not take part in the ritual if they have not kept the rule of sexual abstinence, for fear of putting the life of the initiates in danger. The character also advises against using evil medicine for increasing power or possessions. Jealousy can incite a person to use medicine (*kukhwima*) or spells (*kulodza*) to steal his neighbour’s qualities and possessions. To acquire possessions through the use of medicine (horns) creates disharmony and invites death into the village.

Oral tradition suggests **Nyangagwe** has a very ancient origin. Its history seems to go back to the pre-Malawi period (before 900 AD), when the spirit wives used to conduct initiation ceremonies combined with rain rituals. During those rites, **Nyangagwe** stood at the gate of the village as a watchdog of the spirit wife. He was to warn her against people who had failed to keep the rules concerning sexual abstinence or witchcraft, and would thus ruin the effect of the ritual. **Nyangagwe** acted as a diviner who had the ability to ‘smell’ those who defaulted in these matters. Their presence at the ritual or their involvement as officials could compromise the life of the initiates in transition and could spoil the effects of the rain sacrifice, bringing drought over the country. The success of the ceremonies ultimately depended upon the spirit wives’ ability to ensure that the community observed these rules. **Nyangagwe** was perceived as her prime assistant. His failure to detect any irregularity would be blamed on the spirit wives’ own inability to keep the same rules of conduct. At the end of the ceremony, the spirit wife (*Makewana*) and the Mbewe priest (*Kamundi*), her consort, had mystically to ‘redeem’ the initiates by performing ritual sexual intercourse together. This re-established the condition of normality for the community and brought back the necessary conditions for fertility. When rains were withheld or misfortunes fell on the initiates, the spirit wife and her consort were found guilty and put to death for not keeping the sexual taboos. The same applied when the spirit wife was found pregnant. *Gule* informants attribute the quasi-disappearance of this character today to the fact that, far back in history, **Nyangagwe** failed his duty by not revealing that the spirit wife and her consort had neglected sexual abstinence. Their transgression brought drought to the country and the initiates were drowned in the sacred pool in ritual sacrifice.

The same tradition states that **Nyangagwe** originally belonged to the women and their *Chisamba* ritual. He was an integral part of the Banda institutions. This conferred on him a political role in defending the Banda interest and identity after the arrival of the Malawi. The Banda opposed the Phiri efforts at centralising their political control. Several characters of *gule wamkulu*, dated from that period, seem to have been instruments of protest and played a determining role in curtailing the rising power of the Malawi. Kalonga always came from the line of Nyangu, the queen mother or the queen sister. Both titles belonged to the Malawi aristocracy. Any attempt to control Nyangu

would have major consequence on the position of King Kalonga. Oral tradition states that the Malawi gained control quickly over the shrines of the Banda. However, they seem to have been less successful with regard to the *gule* institution. The Phiri opposition to the Banda has been expressed in the stereotyped story of the drowning of the maidens in the sacred pool of Malawi. In this story, *Nyau* members drowned young Phiri girls as part of a ritual sacrifice for rain at the sacred pool. This so-called accident is considered the origin of the separation between the shrine and *gule*. Moreover, *Nyau* informants attribute to **Nyangagwe** the responsibility for drowning the maidens who underwent the initiation to puberty combined with rain rituals. Stones were tied to the girls' wrists and ankles. **Nyangagwe** was helped by Tole, another character belonging to that period (refer to that entry). Both had the duty to throw the girls alive into the sacred pool. These human sacrifices to Chisumphu were seen as the supreme placation of the High God and the spirits for the delay or failure of rainfall. One could interpret the so-called accident as an attempt by the Banda to eliminate the Malawi girls who might otherwise succeed to the position of Nyangu and continue the Kalongaship.

Today, **Nyangagwe's** political role in the dance has completely vanished. His first function, as a diviner, is the only one remaining. However, his ability to detect people who are 'sexually hot' has slowly given way to that of identifying those who practise witchcraft. During the post Independence period, Chewa culture was increasingly confronted with western values and the growth of individualism among its members. The desire for higher positions and wealth pushed the Chewa to stray from their solidarity rules. They ventured toward individualism and greed, using the short cuts of traditional medicine and witchcraft. The ancestors felt the need to exorcise envy and selfishness and to warn the community against the dangers of seeking power.

Song

*"Ukakhala ndi anzako umatero tate tate! Paja ena akusowa gola kuti adzifunda tate de. Ayerena tate okha kugula nyanga. Gola akuti iyai! O tate Ayerena tate de iwo akutha chuma chawo n'kugula nyanga! Koma ufumu wosalodzedwa tate! Ayerena **Nyangagwe**, anzanganu, koma anzawo akalipo tate! **Nyangagwe, Nyangagwe!**"*

Source

Interviews in 1992 and 1993