

Phwiti

(A day or night feather head cover mask from the Mua area)

Themes

- 1) Becoming an adult/sexual maturity
- 2) Sexual taboos for funerals
- 3) Unity & harmony

Etymology

Phwiti is the Chewa word for a finch.



Description

(night)

The finch character is a type of Kapoli, dressed in a short white sisal kilt. The dancer's body is smeared with grey ashes and his head is covered with the conventional feather headdress that characterises Kapoli. A wooden beak has been added to this costume. **Phwiti** performs exclusively for funeral rites and commemoration ceremonies that can at times incorporate initiation rites. In the *bwalo*, he jumps and swerves his feet alternatively left and right. While he dances, he holds his stomach in and pretends to have a very slim waist. He sings in a high pitched voice: 1) "*The finch has laid eggs! (2x)*" The chorus of women takes up his song to show that the advice concerns their gender. During the female initiation, the initiates are compared to the finch. The girls' bodies are spotted with white dots to resemble the finch, and they are carried on the shoulders of their tutors while the senior women sing to them: 2) "*The finch is beautiful!*" This signifies that the young maidens have experienced their cycle for the first time, and that they will soon become mothers.

The **Phwiti** character is presented in a funeral context when the village is under strict sexual taboos while the deceased undergoes transition to join the ancestors. The sexual ban for the family members is compulsory in order to ensure the smooth transition to the spirit world. Sexual relations can compromise the deceased's welcome to the world of the spirits and his or her new status as an ancestor. Another song of the women highlights this for married people: 3) "**Phwiti, Phwiti, he is inside the house, having food with his wife. Phwiti!**" The song plays on the

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euphemism of eating in order to convey that **Phwiti** and his wife are having sex when it is forbidden for the funeral. One partner should sleep at the funeral house during such occasions. **Phwiti's** songs state that the finch has laid eggs, meaning that a young woman in the family group has become pregnant despite the fact that no sexual activity should take place. Her first reaction is to conceal her condition, since she knows she will be blamed for risking the journey of the deceased to the spirit world. **Phwiti** hides the pregnancy by holding in the muscles of the stomach and swerving his feet backward as if he were erasing the traces of the pregnancy.

Phwiti's teaching enforces the importance of sexual taboos. It stresses that sexual abstinence ends when the funeral rites are over. This is signified by the white colour of the kilt and the ashes smeared on the dancer's body. **Phwiti** criticises those who infringe these moral rules. Such infractions disturb the continuity between the living and the dead.

The **Phwiti** character has disappeared from the Mua area in recent times. It was last seen around the Mua area in 1971. This is related to the community's changing attitude toward sexual taboos. The duration of the taboos has been shortened, and they are observed mainly by the older generation. Younger people prefer to create new *gule* characters more in line with today's preoccupations.

Songs

- 1) "**Phwiti** waikira mazira! (2x)"
- 2) "**Phwiti** ali n'dama!"
- 3) "**Phwiti, phwiti!** Ali m'nyumbamo akudya ndi akazi ake, **Phwiti.**"

Source

Interviews in 1994 and 2007