

Pirira

(A pink or red day mask from the Mitundu and Nathenje areas)



Themes

1) Failure to keep a job 2) Infertility – impotence 3) Marriage in church a curse 4) Persistence

Etymology

Pirira means both 'to persevere' and 'to endure'. The character of **Pirira** plays on both meanings.

Description

The pink or red mask (60 cm.) portrays an unfortunate *mkamwini* who cannot beget children and is failing to support his wife financially. He is tempted to resign himself to disappointment and despair. The mask depicts him as a senior Chewa, with tribal marks, bald head, wrinkled forehead, lost eyes, a soft nose and long greyish whiskers and goatee. The enigmatic sign between the eyes conveys large testicles and a tiny penis. His large open mouth dominates the face. The top jaw displays a full set of small teeth but the bottom has only four longer teeth, worn out on the edge, which suggest a baby or

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an old man. These details emphasise that **Pirira** is long married and is unable to produce children. The headgear of the mask and his costume are made of tatters. It is notable that his shirt is sleeveless, conveying his destitution. Leglets and armlets are added to his outfit. Despite his infertility, **Pirira** holds a ceremonial axe, which emphasises his pretention to potency.

Pirira's dancing style resembles that of Kapoli. He swerves his feet with remarkable energy, adopting the crawling position. This gesture suggests his determination to overcome his problems.

Pirira's appearance in the arena is not specific to any ritual. He can be present at any kind of event, even political rallies. His message fits any occasion. The male choir introduces him with the following: *'Endure, **Pirira**, oh, oh! Why should I not endure? Was (the infertility) not the consequence of chiwindo (a medicine), since the Romans (Catholics) blessed our marriage (in church)! The Romans have certified that it will (last) until (one of the two of us enters) the grave. Endure, **Pirira**, even if I have not known a child sucking (at my breast), even if I have not experienced (the power) of (your) semen! This is what I have experienced myself! Endure, **Pirira!**'* The song makes allusion to a couple that have had a very unhappy marriage. Though a Catholic priest blessed their union in church, their bond has become shaky and doubtful. They talk about separation and divorce, but they fear the church sanction. Their marriage has remained unstable. **Pirira** has never given his wife children. She knows that **Pirira** is to blame. Frustrated, **Pirira** left her and went to seek employment in town, where he found a job. His poor performance at work prompted the employer's criticism. **Pirira** became angered and immediately quit his job.

Pirira is facing a double dilemma. He lives with a sense of failure as a husband and as an income earner. His poor wife is also tired of waiting for a child and for some financial support. The song advises both. Their marriage has been blessed in church and is considered indissoluble. Their only way forward is through perseverance. In building a good relationship and an enduring love, they should work toward improving their situation. Married life requires commitment. Whatever problems they experienced, like infertility, they should be courageous and resolute to ensure that they remain together as married people. One has to choose wholeheartedly and never abandon the struggle. Endurance and perseverance will be rewarded one day.

Song

*"**Pirira, Pirira**, dee oh oh! Ndipandiranji kupirira toto de! Chikhala ichi n'chiwindo tate, adamanga ndi Aroma toto de! **Pirira, Pirira**. Aroma adanena toto de malire wina m'manda tate. **Pirira, Pirira** chosadziwa toto mwana adayamwa, tchende tate de, ndichosadziwa! Ndi momwemo ndaonera ine tate! **Pirira, Pirira!**"*

Source

Interview in 1992

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