

Wakhuta mbatata

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



Themes

1) Modesty 2) Pregnancy instructions & childbirth 3) Sexual taboos for pregnancy

Etymology

Wakhuta mbatata means, 'She is full of sweet potatoes,' a euphemism for being pregnant.

Description

The feather head cover conceals the dancer's identity. His only costume consists of a simple *chitenje* at his waist, the cloth being padded to convey the impression of an expectant mother.

Wakhuta mbatata performs as part of the female initiation (*mkangali*) that takes place during the vigil of a chief's funeral. Together with the *namkungwi*, the character of **Wakhuta mbatata** dances to the *chisamba* rhythm. He moves the pelvis with restraint, suggesting that the expectant mother is

www.kasiyamaliro.org

Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art, Mua Parish, P. O. Box 41, Mtakatika, Malawi

approaching the time of delivery. The senior women sing the following: “*What did you eat, child?* (The answer is:) *No! She is full of sweet potatoes.*” The song utilises a coded language to discuss pregnancy in public circles. The crux of the teaching is to be found not in the song but in the choreography and in the costume. Through the character of **Wakhuta mbatata**, the initiates are taught about the condition of expectant mothers. Through the dancing style of **Wakhuta mbatata**, they are encouraged to restrict their movement and to slow down their activity when they reach the last month of pregnancy. They are instructed to abstain from heavy duties and to stop sexual activity (pelvic rotation) for fear of compromising the life of the child they carry. The other important instruction comes from the costume of the dancer, which covers only the waist and thighs. An expectant mother is advised on modesty. After her fifth month of pregnancy, she is told to cover her stomach from the breast to the lower legs. **Wakhuta mbatata** embodies the ancestors’ advice in the *mwambo* and prepares young women to become mothers.

Song

“*Wadyanji mwana? (2x) Toto! Wakhuta mbatata.*”

Source

Interview in 1992