

## Wanya mphwerere

(A night head cover made of feathers from the Mua area)

### Themes

- 1) Women's hygiene cycle
- 2) Concealment of the woman's period

### Etymology

**Wanya mphwerere** means, 'You had diarrhoea' (a euphemism for an initiate experiencing her menses). 'You' is in the grammatical form appropriate to informal address among children and among people who are not fully grown up.



### Description

The dancer is disguised with a feather head cover. Sometimes, a small face made of skin is added, showing a few details for the eyes, the ears, the nose, the mouth and even the teeth. The dancer wears a jute or a banana fibre kilt. His costume is completed with leglets and armlets. His entire body is smeared with black mud. In the past, fresh cow dung was also added. **Wanya mphwerere** carries a two-metre stick or a whip to emphasise the power of castigation and the importance of his instructions.

**Wanya mphwerere** is a type of Kapoli but his dancing style differs. He moves one step forward and three steps backward and does not swerve his feet. He only performs during the night vigils of initiations, funerals and commemoration rites. His role is to instruct the initiates during such events. He can even be a substitute for Chiwekuweku, when the instructress has overlooked the preparation. **Wanya mphwerere** sings for himself with a high-pitched voice and the women join in the song: "*You had diarrhoea! You also had diarrhoea!*" The song uses a rather figurative language and focuses on the rules of hygiene required during the women's cycle. The girls are taught to conceal their periods and wash regularly so that no odour can be detected. **Wanya mphwerere** emphasises the ancestors'

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concerns for feminine cleanliness in general and particularly when the mother cares for young children.

In the past, discipline was stricter. Young girls who had hidden their first menstruation were severely punished and underwent a special initiation (*chimbwinda*) with many hardships. One of those required the presence of **Wanya mphwerere**. He would dance with the naughty maidens and would smear them with mud and fresh cow dung from his body. They endured this humbling experience to remind them to behave in a more mature manner.

### **Song**

*“Wanya, **Wanya mphwerere!** Nawe e (2x) **Wanya mphwerere!**”*

### **Sources of information**

Interviews in 1985 and 1991