

# Wedemu

(A red day mask from the Dedza area)

## Themes

- 1) Infertility – impotence
- 2) Caution against infertility in marriage/  
infertile people should not marry

## Etymology

**Wedemu** means, 'that which hangs loose without strength', a euphemism for impotence.



## Description

The red oblong mask (35 cm.) shows the face of an owl. It has two pricked 'ears' and a headgear entirely made of feathers. The eyes are small and swollen as if the person is crying. The red beak is in the shape of a penis at rest and has a black tip. The mouth is wide and toothless. A yellow funeral band can be added to the mask on the occasion of mourning rites. The dancer wears a tattered jute shirt, a fibre kilt, armllets and leglets. **Wedemu** is a type of Kapoli; and the dance is typical of Kapoli. The men sing, "**Wedemu**, the impotent, thought he could have intercourse, but no! He failed, **Wedemu**. (His wife says:) No, no, no, no! I am fed up! Alas, I am going back to my own home!" The song describes an impotent man who disguised his handicap under a false appearance (nice feathers) and married. He even took his wife to his own village (*chitengwa*) instead of following her to her own village.

**Wedemu** resembles the owl that sleeps during the day instead of working. At night, he spends his time chatting with neighbours instead of being in bed with his wife. He does that precisely because he is afraid that his handicap will be noticed. He comes back late when his wife is already asleep. One day he wakes up and finds his wife has left him for her own home. This is the end of their marriage. **Wedemu** weeps (his small swollen eyes). He mourns (the funeral band around his head) over the departure of his wife. His large toothless mouth depicting his lack of virility voices his complaint.

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The character tries to discourage infertile people from marrying. Such marriages end up in divorce and trauma for both partners. However, despite not marrying, a person will still remain the object of mockery of the village and be seen as an outcast, as the red colour of the mask suggests.

### **Song**

*“Tate tate de tate de tate de **Wedemu** e tate e tate **Wedemu** amati akwate, amati akwate! lai iai!  
Chalaka e tate de e e tate de ai a **Wedemu**! lai iai iai iai! Ndalephera ndine! Ine kwathu, kwathu  
ndapita!”*

### **Source**

Interviews in 1991