Kwakwase

(A black day mask from Mua and Dedza)

Themes

1) Selfishness/Self-centredness 2) Forbidden sex 3) Sexual obsession

Etymology

Kwakwase derives from the Chewa verb kukwakwasa, ‘to sweep’. It is an example of onomatopoeia, describing the noise of the broom that sweeps. Kwakwase stands for somebody who cannot control his sexual instinct.

Description

The black mask (25 cm.) of Kwakwase shows an androgynous face, with tribal marks and the three lines characteristic of women’s makeup (mchome). The hair is grey. Two grey horns like those of a goat protrude from his head. These show that he was made to pay a fine of goats because of his perverted behaviour. His elongated red eyes manifest avidity for sex. His small mouth and nose are intended to give him a sexy appearance. The round face is deprived of beard or moustache. His headgear is made of sisal dyed grey. The dancer wears a dark kilt on top of a loincloth, leglets and armlets. He moves around the bwalo with a mini broom and a flywhisk. He is sexy, and likes to move his hips, shaking his pelvis erotically. He runs after any woman while the men sing, “Sweep, sweep, sweep!”

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Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art, Mua Parish, P. O. Box 41, Mtakataka, Malawi
The character once performed at funerals to warn people against promiscuity. Today Kwakwase is rarely seen. More recent characters teaching about sexual irresponsibility and abuse have replaced it.

When Kwakwase sees somebody from the opposite sex he cannot resist his urges: his brain stops functioning. His sexual misconduct goes beyond what is acceptable and reaches perversion. Such a person is blind to traditional sexual morality. He overlooks the rules of affinity, avoidance, minority and status. He is eager to have sex with one of his in-laws, with a child who is not sexually mature or with someone who belongs to a higher status, such as the chief’s wife. Any sign of kindness and sympathy from a woman is interpreted as an invitation. That is why Kwakwase’s dance is so blatant: he chases the women, looks under their chitenjes and thrusts his hips, desperate for a partner. His reputation is that of sweeping up all the women on the way, leaving none behind. Kwakwase portrays someone with a sexual addiction, who is corrupt and selfish. His behaviour is so ugly that he makes himself an outcast, an antisocial person to fear and avoid at all cost.

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Song

“Kwakwa kwakwa Kwakwase!”

Source