

## Mai mtama nyanga

(An orange day mask from Salima)

### Themes

- 1) Hypocrisy/split personality/duplicity
- 2) Witchcraft



### Etymology

**Mai mtama nyanga** means, 'Mrs. Trust in the horn.'

### Description

This orange mask (30 cm.) portrays a senior woman who practises witchcraft. She hides her activity, pretending to be an honest person. The orange or red of the mask reveals her antisocial character. Her tribal marks and scarification show that she is a local Chewa. Her eyes are shifty and dishonest, and her eyelids are swollen because of her night activity. The eyebrows are pompous and resemble sunrays. Her nose is long, hideous and broken. She has a false smile, and the front teeth of the lower jaw project, a common attribute of witches. Deep jowls separate her ugly nose from the low, baggy cheeks. More wrinkles appear on her bare, broad forehead. Her balding head has greyish hair made of dyed sisal. Her ears are tiny, to stress her deafness to the elders' advice. She has no earrings. Her neck is adorned with strings of beads, on which small bags of medicines (*zithumwa*) and spiky wild fruits are attached (for curing heart problems). She wears a nice blouse and a smart *chitenje*. A cow horn full of oil is hidden in a scarf fastened to her buttocks.

She arrives in the *bwalo* with good manners and keeps greeting the audience. She claps hands, scrapes and bows. Then at the rhythm of the *chisamba* she starts moving her hips in a wanton fashion and waving her handkerchief. She then bows again to the men and to the women. She claps hands with exaggerated politeness, like an honest and well behaved person. As she dances,

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she drops her hidden horn. She pretends to cast it away, just as a person of good reputation would do, to show that she knows nothing about witchcraft. Then she grabs the horn and runs out of the *bwalo*, shamed and mocked by the crowd. During this sequence, the men sing, “*Do not provoke me unduly, Mrs. Trust in the horn! The one who (pretends to) fear the wilderness of the grave leads her friends to that very place. This is (the work of) Mrs. Trust in the horn! Yes, (we have spotted her) with a horn in her hands, Mrs. Trust in the horn, Mrs. Trust in the horn, oh!*”

The song certifies that **Mai mtama nyanga** is a witch who causes great damage in the village because of her spells and her evil medicine. This character performs during the initiation rites or on the occasion of rituals performed for spirit possession, when this particular character is requested. It is danced by a senior woman who is past child bearing age and has been initiated into a male secret society. The person involved in performing this character must keep ritual coolness before her performance.

The character of **Mai mtama nyanga** warns the community to be cautious about people like herself who present themselves as honest but who practise deceit and cast spells on their neighbours. Despite their good manners, it is envy, jealousy and ambition that may motivate them. They may take advantage of disputes (such as over property or ownership of fields) to take revenge. When someone is wronged, this person seeks evil medicine (horns and spells) to harm and kill their rivals, instead of going to court for the case to be resolved. The character of **Mai Mtama nyanga** has been created by the Chewa to unveil hypocrisy. Her message is directed at all who practise witchcraft.

### Song

*“Musandiyambe dalatu ine, dalatu ine, dala a **Mtama nyanga!** Awa ku manda aopa kuwirira, atsogoza anzawo chotere edede edede. Awa ndi a **Mtama nyanga!** E a de taonera nyanga ku manja, a **Mai mtama nyanga, a Mai mtama nyanga.**”*

### Source

Interviews in 1992 and 2000