

Nyama nyama

(A day or night head cover from the Mua area)



(day versions)

Themes

- 1) Communion with the ancestors
- 2) Compassion of ancestors for the living
- 3) Discretion in keeping the secrets of *gule*
- 4) Sharing of beer

Etymology

Nyama nyama literally means, "Beast! Beast!" It can also be interpreted as referring to spirits, the ancestors.



Description

Nyama nyama appears at a variety of rituals including initiation, funeral and commemoration rites. These ceremonies can be combined, and all include beer brewing as part of the ritual. The presence of **Nyama nyama** usually brings a ritual to its completion, marking the ancestors' return to the spirit world. Commemoration rites, often incorporating initiation (*mpindira*), are always performed in honour of a particular individual who has settled or is in the process of settling into the spirit world.

Nyama nyama is commonly present at night rituals and on occasion appears during the day. His mask and costume vary accordingly. The night disguise is sketchy, comprising a head cover made of dry

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banana fibres topped with a sugar cane bloom, and a banana fibre kilt. The day costume is with a head cover of skins and occasionally a carved mask. Features like the eyes, nose and mouth are rudimentary. The head is fringed by a headgear of banana fibres or fertiliser bag laces. He wears a kilt, and the body is smeared with mud. **Nyama nyama** carries weapons such as a club, spear and a knife, and occasionally a large sack, in which he collects maize husks from the village to take to the *dambwe*. These are used in the fabrication of costumes and structures. On his way, he shouts with a high-pitched voice: 1) *“Beast! Beast! Something for sale!”* Then **Nyama nyama** chases the women, brandishing his weapons. He fears that the women will follow him and discover the male secret, that masks and *gule* structures are made with maize husks. At the night vigil of funerals, **Nyama nyama** circles the funeral parlour showing sympathy. He also acts as a joker and entertainer. He cracks jokes that make the mourners forget their grief.

When beer brewing accompanies the ceremony, a particular type of **Nyama nyama** makes his appearance at the brewing place (*chikhuthe*). He dresses in a white outfit that includes a white plastic head cover, a sisal kilt, and palm leaf bands crisscrossing his chest and fixed around his arms and legs instead of armllets and leglets. He holds a mini whip, with which he blesses the beer. He roams around the beer jars in order to ask for blessings for the success and the protection of the events unfolding. **Nyama nyama** distinguishes himself with a special call: *“Beast e.”* The women respond to this call with a song proper to the character: 2) *“The beast (spirit) has climbed upward. It (he) left the hunters (all the strangers) behind!”* The song expresses the departure of the spirit. As the women sing the song, **Nyama nyama** starts swerving his feet sideways, lifting the right leg and the right arm and then the left leg and the left arm in a similar manner. These dancing steps portray that the invoked spirit is climbing and vanishing from the village. It marks a return to the spirit world. **Nyama nyama**’s performance concludes the rituals. As he moves back to the spirit world and the bush, the male choir sings their last farewell: 3) *“Let us follow where the beast has been eaten (vanished). Halloo! Let us follow (its foot prints), it has passed through our village. Halloo!”* This song closes the ritual and marks the return of the spirits to the bush and to the world of the dead.

The character of **Nyama nyama** portrays a peaceful spirit of the dead, eager to console, entertain and support the village community. He enforces discipline with regard to women not trespassing outside their own zone of influence and mixing with the male secret society. He offers his protection and blessing over the beer and the celebration in which the spirits and the living share in communion. Ultimately, he guarantees his assistance and care over their future wellbeing until they will meet again.

Songs

- 1) *“Nyama nyama e! (2x) Malonda!”*
- 2) *“Nyama yakwera mtunda. Yathawa alendo!”*
- 3) *“Tilondole nyama yadya eae. Chikuwo! Tilondole yadutsa muno. Chikuwo!”*

Source

Interviews in 1987 and 2007

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