

Masked Dances and Ritual in Tanzania, Mozambique and Zambia



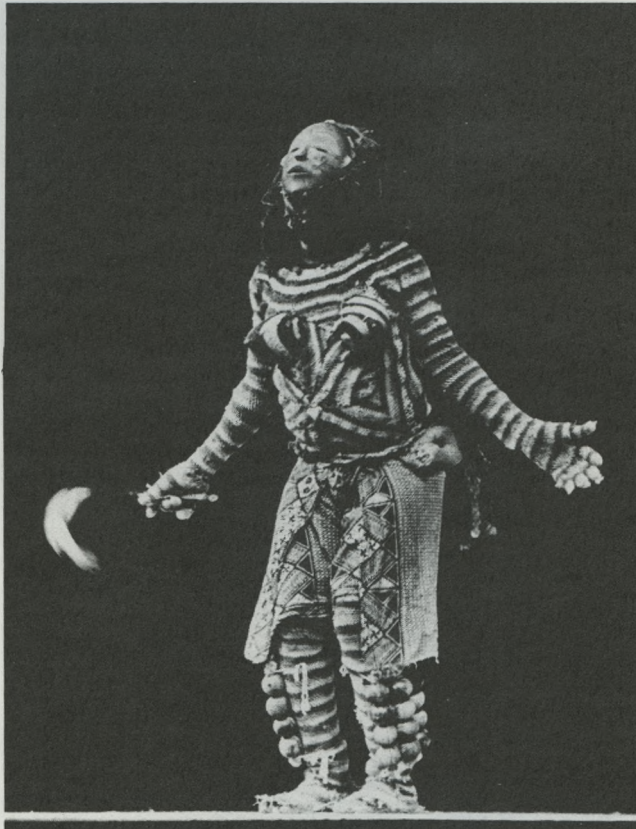
by *Francoise Gründ-Khaznader*

The **Makonde people** live in Tanzania in the regions of Newala, Mtwara and some areas of Lindi, as well as in the **Tunduru region of Mozambique**. Originally they lived in several regions of Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The migration of this large population into the areas where they live now has been taking place in successive waves over the past three hundred years.

Surrounded by tropical vegetation and subtropical forests, the Makonde cultivate corn, sorghum and cashew nuts and a few vegetables in small family plots. Some villagers keep sheep and goats, others live by hunting or fishing. The wet season (from November to May) is devoted to work in the fields, while the dry season is taken up by artisanal work, feasts, dances and ceremonies. It is only in this period, therefore, that the masked dances take place.

Between June and October, during the dry season, some of the men who live in the Makonde villages tell their families that they have to go away, that they have been "called" to make a long journey. A farewell ceremony is held in public, and then, for ten to fifteen days, the men disappear. While they are away, various danced and masked ceremonies take place, including those known as the "Midimu."

The **Midimu ceremony** begins at night during the period when the moon moves from the quarter to its half phase. It usually follows some felicitous event such as a bountiful



Mwanapwebo, symbol of femininity

harvest, a large haul of fish, a good hunt, or the preparation of new farmlands, but principally, the Midimu celebrates the termination of the initiation period of both the boys and the girls. (In the Makonde villages the initiation period lasts for three years.) Torches burn; drums resound. All the villagers come outside to join in the festivities. In general, the feast continues without stopping for three days and three nights. At the end of the third night, the masks visit the house of each new initiate and, after having performed various danced myths on the threshold, are given honey, meat, jewelry and sometimes money. The feast is over. The Midimu spirit leaves the village; the masks return to the forest.

During the Midimu, the micro-society gives itself over completely to the dramatic play. However, although this ritual exorcises epidemics and other disasters, its primary focus is on the coming together of the world of the living with the world of the dead. The masked dancers represent spirits and express the solidarity of the ancestors with the young initiates. The spirits join with them at the joyful time of their entrance into adult life and, therefore, into society.

Although they appear at the initiation rituals of both boys and girls, the Midimu masks are always worn by men. The masked dances convey a subtle message directed at the women, prompting them to accept a strict patriarchal society. These rituals also justify the harshness of the initiation training and forge a bond between elder initiates, new initiates and non-initiates. The theatrical manifestation becomes a formative element of the social

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structure and perpetuates cultural values from one generation to another. Professional dancers and musicians participate in the masked dances of the Midimu that, over a very short period of time, are given consecutively in six or seven villages. At the end of their "tour" the dancers, who must never be recognized, "return" home. In their villages everyone knows why they have been away, but nobody ever brings up the question.

The masked dancers are accompanied by singers and percussionists:

<i>Msondo</i>	<i>master drum</i>
<i>Ngoma Makuti</i>	<i>closed drums beaten with both hands</i>
<i>Nganga and Nakandunda</i>	<i>closed drums beaten with drumsticks</i>
<i>Manyanga</i>	<i>scraping instruments</i>

The dancers use two different types of mask depending on whether or not they are mounted on stilts. The masks of the stilt dancers, used especially in Tanzania, are smaller than a human head. They are carved out of soft wood, painted and then covered with either the skin or the fur of a monkey. This mask is not worn over the dancer's face but over his forehead. Attached to the mask is a circular piece of material that hides the face



Myamabunda, the Mother-Earth

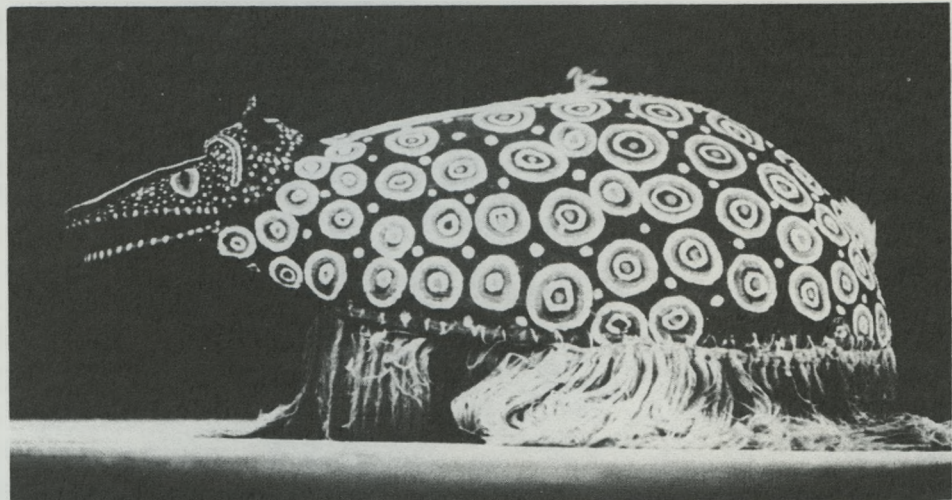
but through which the actor is able to see. The sight of this small mask, perched high on the bowed head of the dancer, and the dancer himself jumping about on stilts more than five feet high, makes the spectators almost dizzy: the distortion of perspective has been taken to extreme limits. The angle of the head and the continual movement of the dancer that help him keep his balance bring about a tension that increases as the dance progresses.

Some of the masks represent spirits of the dead or spirits of mythical animals such as the great monkey, Linawere. The costumes that go with the masks are quite simple—a shirt and a long piece of fabric shaped into a pair of pants that cover the stilts down to the ground. The costumes of all the masks are similar.

Other masks or mask-helmets cover the head completely. They represent characters or animals, and each of them has a different costume. These masks, too, are made of wood and are carved to the size of a human head. Openings are cut into the sides and the back of the mask to allow for the circulation of air. The dancers wear cattle-bells around the neck and the legs and on the chest. One of the most important of the helmet-masks is "Lingdi"—a mask of an old man, painted black, who represents the ancestors of the new initiates. (The Makonde who live in Mozambique do not use this type of mask.)

A very unusual mask is that of the Pregnant Woman. This mask, also carved out of wood, is in two separate parts—one that covers the face, and another, painted red and carved in the shape of heavy breasts and protruding abdomen, that covers the body. This mask, called "Amwalindembo" (the young, pregnant woman), is worn by a man whose languid, suggestive movements mime the pains of pregnancy. The dancer is usually accompanied by a partner who wears a male mask.

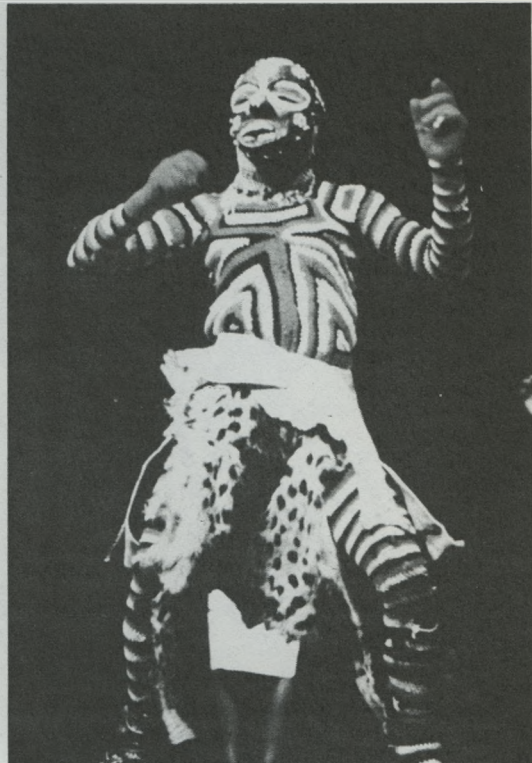
In general, all the masks made by professional actor-dancers are destroyed after having been used for three seasons. In the past, women and non-initiated children were not allowed to witness masked performances but, nowadays, they take part in the chorus. The whole community becomes involved in the masked dances.



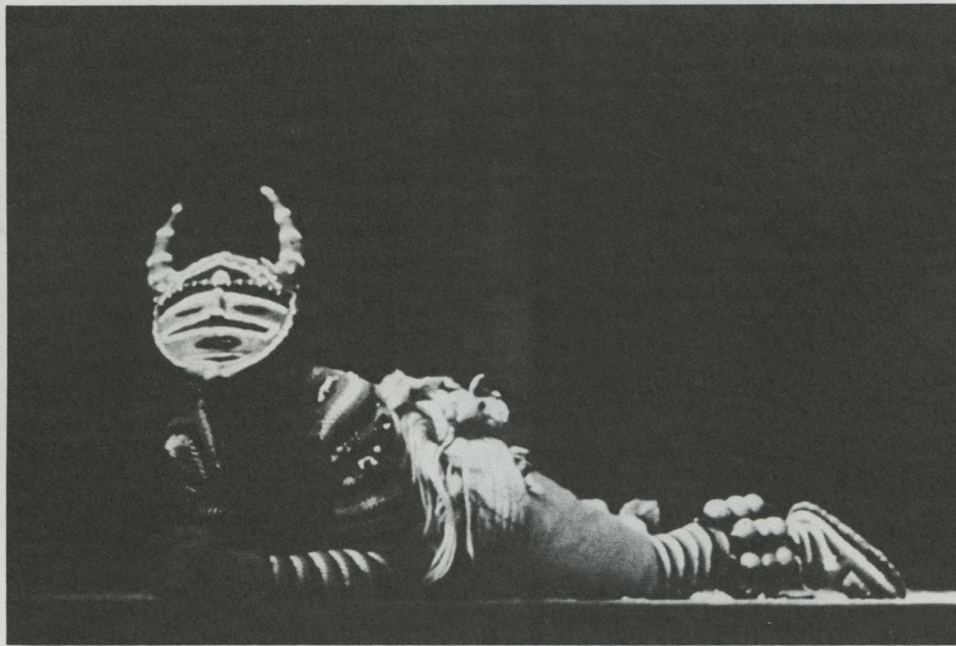
Munguli, the hyena



Kanyolo, an old fisherman



Chizaluke, symbol of virility



Chikuza, camp captain



Mwanapwebo in performance



Katoyo, the monkey

In traditional African societies, and particularly in Zambia, secret cults play an important part in upholding the economic and social values of the community. Although they are established in different geographical regions, the Makishi and the Nyau rituals have this same function. In both the Makishi and Nyau rituals, masked characters play a dominant part by making their appearance on specific occasions associated with the initiation ceremonies of boys.

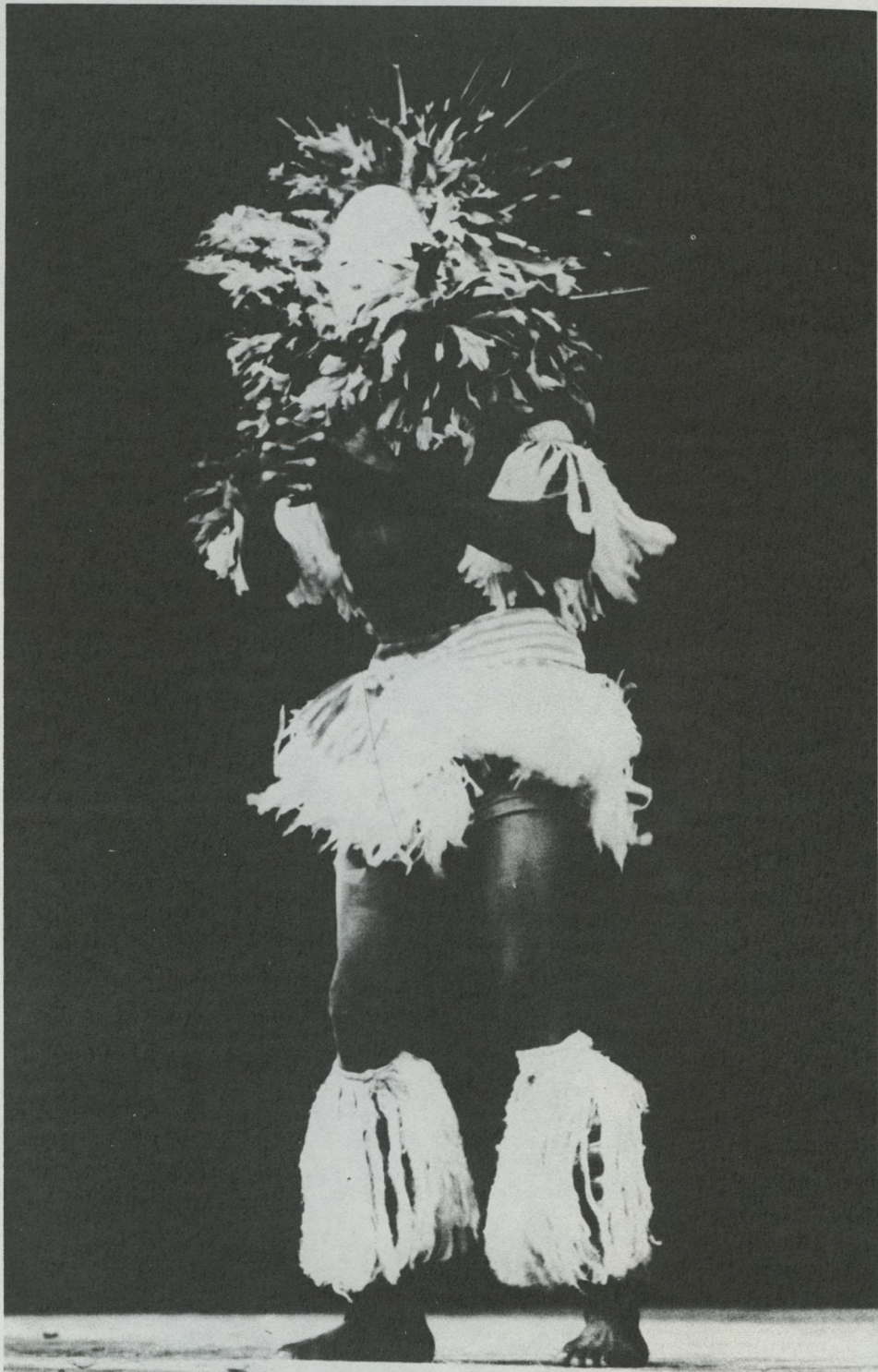
The Makishi ritual is practiced in an area that extends from Zaire in the north to Zimbabwe in the south and includes some parts of Angola and Barotseland, the western province of Zambia. The people of this region share a common language and a common culture, but they belong to different tribes—the Lunda, Luvale, Chokwe, Mbunda, Bakangala and Luchazi. In general, these societies are matriarchal and follow very strict rules of discipline. Women, however, are excluded from the ritual itself; they are allowed to sing or beat time to the dances by stamping the feet or clapping, but they are forbidden to wear masks. **The Nyau ritual is performed by the Chewa people who live in eastern Zambia and in some parts of Malawi and Mozambique.**

Formerly (about twenty years ago), boys were secluded in initiation camps for long periods—three to eight years. During this time, they remained completely isolated. The boys underwent a special training and followed a very strict diet. If, as a result of the rigorous treatment, one of the boys died, this information was withheld from his parents. Nowadays, the period of seclusion is reduced to three or four weeks in August or September, between the cool season and sowing time. In the "initiation camp," the boys learn history, arts and the moral standards of their culture as well as having practical training in hut building, work methods, harvesting techniques, animal breeding, care of stock, hunting methods, elementary medicine, sculpture, music, dance, speech, etc. At the end of the training, the boys are circumcised by the elders of the village, who are also, for the most part, the masters of the initiation camp. The boys leave the camp as soon as the circumcision wound is healed.

Initiation is not at all compulsory. However, initiated men are esteemed as responsible members of the community to which they belong. In this way, the initiation ritual functions as a powerful social control and influences all aspects of communal life.

On the last day of the training, when the boys leave the "Mukanda" (initiation camp), a joyful celebration begins in which the whole village participates. The most important event of the feast is the appearance of the masked dancers. The dancers follow a fixed route before showing themselves to the crowds and then make their entrance into the village in a preestablished order. At the beginning of the dance, the masks almost always parade about the village, and, as they do so, the spectators mingle with them, shouting and cheering them on.

The masks are composed of a head piece, a body costume and, usually, some kind of symbol that helps to distinguish the characters. They represent animals, spirits of the dead or sometimes a special function related to initiation. They always have a moral or symbolic significance that is further emphasized by the costume, the dance movements and the accompanying music and songs. The masks are either carved out of wood or constructed on a frame of branches covered by bark. The costume, which covers the whole body, is also made of bark and may be supplemented with animal skins, feathers, grass fibers, etc. Often, mask and costume are an inseparable entity. Various vegetable dyes are used to color the masks. The most prevalent colors are red, white and black. There is a lot of rivalry between the mask makers of the different villages and, while they still follow the traditional design codes, each of them tries to create masks that are the most effective and the most esthetically pleasing. Most of the masks are reconstructed each year. Some mask designs have secret meanings, and the right to use the design may belong to the men of a specific tribe.



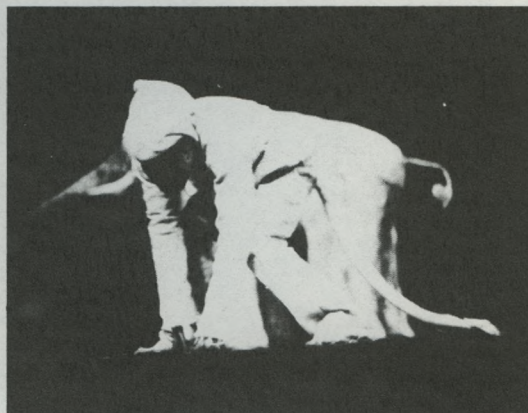
Gaga, first Nyau dancer

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Elephant mask with one man
in each leg



Monkey, symbol of mockery

Although no written records exist pertaining to the Nyau and Makishi rituals, the traditions have remained almost the same for several hundred years. Some aspects, however, have changed. In the past, the Makishi masked dances could only be watched from a distance. Between the savanna and the first huts of the village, the masks appeared in a cloud of dust or above the topmost branches of the trees (dancers on stilts). Seen this way, they gave the powerful impression of a sudden opening into another world. Nowadays, the masked dances take place on the central village square.

The Makishi songs have been part of the ritual for about fifty years. Formerly, only drums accompanied the dances. The musical rhythms, very closely associated with each dance movement, have remained unchanged. Sometimes a master-drummer will create a new rhythm. The other drummers respect his "ownership" and will only play that rhythm after he has died.

A number of taboos are connected to the Nyau and the Makishi rituals, and the masks are held in great respect by the village people. New initiates and women are forbidden to touch either a dance mask or a costume. It is considered very dangerous to even point a finger at a masked dancer. Any non-initiated person who stands in the way of a "Likishi" (Makishi masked dancer) is being irreverent and may be forced to undergo the ordeals of initiation. Only initiates know what is hidden behind a mask. If others—non-initiates—obtain this information, the mask loses its power and will eventually die. In order to protect these secrets, masks and costumes are usually burned after the ceremony.

In the Nyau and Makishi rituals, the musicians play a variety of different drums. Usually the length of the drum is three times its diameter. The drums are open and narrower at one end than the others. The height of the pitch is determined by the size of the drum and by the thickness of the wax that is applied to the drum skin. Nowadays, the percussion instruments are often accompanied by choruses of men and women.

MAKISHI DRUMS

Ngoma Yantagi Known as the master drum, it closely follows the dance movements and has the lowest pitch.

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Cihimpululu Consistently maintains the rhythm.

Nyangolenge Intermediate pitch.

Machakili Highest pitch.

Ngoma Pwita Full-toned friction drum. Functions as master drum in association with the Machikili.

Ngoma Makika Four drums with different tones played by one musician; associated with the Machikili.

The Nyau percussion ensemble includes:

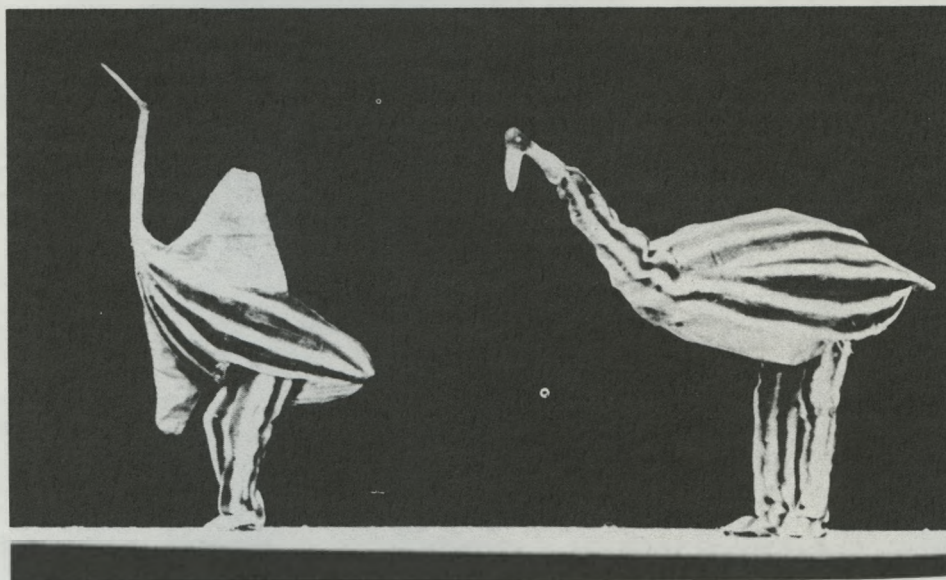
Mbalule Master drum, rather short, open at both ends and with a very deep tone.

Ngunda Pair of drums that maintain the rhythm.

Gupagupa and Kelemu Accompanying drums beaten at a constant rhythm.

SOME MAKISHI MASKS

Myamabunda Mask-costume with a relatively small head carved out of wood and painted; mouth open, grass fiber hair, short skirt. It represents an old woman whose numerous sons have all been through initiation. She symbolizes Mother-Earth. As always, the mask is worn by a male dancer, who moves with small steps through concentric circles. This mask is always one of the first to appear.



Ostrich, symbol of persistence

Liveluvela The ostrich—pliant character with graceful, flowing movements. It represents the virtues of intellectual adaptability and a well-developed sense of humor. This small mask is made of bark stretched over a frame. The costume is made of bark that has been tanned until it resembles a stiff type of fabric.

Munguli The hyena. During the initiation period it goes outside the village and collects food (chicken, baby goats, pots of soup) prepared by the families of the boys who are in "camp." This wooden mask is fairly large. The costume is made of knitted grass fiber.

Mbongo Dancer on stilts. In the hierarchy of the Makishi ritual, Mbongo represents supreme authority. The stilts symbolize his elevated position. He often appears during the funeral ceremonies of village chiefs. The head of the mask is small, carved out of wood and painted white. The close-fitting red and black costume is made out of knitted fiber.

Kanyengenyengo The pelican, endowed with the same meaning as the ostrich—humor and flexibility.

Mupala Another chief of the initiates, spirit of the dead. The large head of the mask is constructed by a frame of branches over which is stretched material made of fiber and painted with thick black strokes. The dance is composed of leaps and crouching movements.

Chikuza Fierce captain of the "initiation camp." Carries a knife both to maintain order and as a symbol of circumcision. The mask of knitted fibers fits closely to the head and is coated with a type of black tar. The eyes are wide open and surrounded by bulging rims. The wide mouth opens to reveal sharp pointed teeth made of fish and animal bones. The dance is composed of large arabesques and alternating slow/fast steps.

Chizaluke A great leader—symbol of virility. The costume is made completely of knitted fiber and includes an enormous phallus. The head, which is slightly larger than human, moves to and fro with the rhythm of the dance.

Mwanapwebo or Malindele A spirited young woman who symbolizes femininity. In order to protect women, she is ready to take many risks. The head of the mask, carved out of dark wood, has heavy, half-closed eyelids, a slightly open mouth and a delicate, straight nose. A thick mass of curly hair made of natural fibers falls to her shoulders. The costume of knitted fiber (red, black and natural colors) reveals two pointed, elongated breasts. The skirt reaches to mid-thigh, and open mesh stockings made of fiber cover the legs down to the ankles. The rhythm and the execution of the lewd, flowing dance movements must be completely controlled. Some parts of the dance are actual demonstrations of sexual technique. Mwanapwebo sometimes gives solo performances on occasions unrelated to initiation ceremonies. The actor may travel from village to village to perform his dance piece. He represents one of the few traces of professionalism in the Makishi tradition.



Amwalindembo, the young pregnant woman



Stilt-dancers

Kanyolo An old fisherman—he carries a fishing net and smokes a pipe. He is a symbol of happiness and self-confidence. He teaches the adults how to be patient and how to help young people. To the youth he teaches respect for their elders. Sometimes he contradicts himself by making fun of the old fishermen of the village. Like Mwanapwebo, he sometimes performs alone and on other occasions not associated with initiation rituals.

Katoyo The monkey—makes fun of people who act without thinking. The shape of the mask (an enormous frame covered with tanned bark in a non-realistic shape) and the peculiar rhythm of his dance allow the performer to create many movements that are very effective and amusing.

In general, Nyau masks are much more realistic than those worn in the Makishi rituals.

SOME NYAU MASKS:

Gaga The first mask to appear in the dance. The delicately shaped wooden head is covered with feathers. Gaga movements are at the same time amusing, violent and frightening. His function is to clear the ground before the arrival of the other Nyau masks. In his hand, he carries branches or a whip made of horse hide—a traditional symbol of authority.

Kanyela-Mhonde The master of the initiation camp, who directs the novices. The head of the mask is made of material stuffed with horse hair and is painted pink. The costume is also made of material. He carries a stick or a spear.

Kasinja Symbol of virility. (The Chewa people who practice Nyau rituals are patriarchal.) This painted mask in the shape of a serpent is about twenty feet long. Three men can fit inside it. The dance movements are varied, symbolic and complicated. However, Kasinja is free to improvise and to introduce his own creative movements into the traditional dance.

The Elephant Symbol of dignity and royalty. In former times members of the royal family wore ivory bracelets as a sign of their social position. Ivory is also given as a wedding present. The elephant mask is extremely large and requires four men—one for each leg.

The Giraffe Symbol of grace. Mask constructed of branches and material. During the dance it is animated by two men.

The Antelope Symbol of bravery. Mask made of branches and material. Animated by two men.

The Ostrich Symbol of persistence and the will to live under the most adverse circumstances. Made of branches and material, this mask is quite different from the Makishi ostrich.

The Monkey Symbol of mockery. Mask constructed of wood and material. Has no resemblance to Katoyo, the Makishi monkey.

In the Nyau ceremony, after the ritual clearing of the ground and solo dances by various leaders of the "initiation camp," all the animal masks appear at the same time with Kasinja, the serpent, leading the way. As they advance, the music and the dances take on a mimetic quality suitable for each kind of animal.

The big animal masks are hardly ever burned. The dancers store them in a hut, and each year they are repaired and improved.

The Nyau ceremony is structured principally around the benefits to be derived from liberating laughter, whereas the Makishi initiation ritual is based on rigorous training methods reinforced by terror and intimidation.

Francoise Gründ-Khaznadar is a French writer and designer who has been artistic director of the Festival des Arts Traditionnels in Rennes since 1974.

Translated by Marguerite Oerlemans

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