

VIMBUZA OR MASHAWE: A MYSTIC THERAPY

by

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Malawi is remarkably rich in traditional dance varieties. In a country with a population less than a third that of New York or London City there are well over 60 different kinds of dances. Dancing, one might say, is a nerve centre of the rural Malawi life where it serves multi-functions. These functions range from joy to hate. People dance for both joy and grief. There is an array of dances for work; hate; prosperity; praise; socialisation and invitation; entertainment; grief and for healing. Some dances have multiple roles and functions such that one dance may serve different purposes to the dancers, the organisers and the spectators.

One of these dances is Vimbuza or Mashawe¹. The term carries two meanings; the first refers to the illness, and the second to the dance. Mashawe as an illness has a curious mystery around it. It is more of a mental than a somatic illness. Careful study of patients of Mashawe show a constellation of social causes; Mashawe often attack individuals who have lost a social contact point with their social map or a set of social relations; people who have had glaring derangement of social relationship. Such loss of one's proper orientation with the world around may result from a number of causes. The patient may have serious family problems due to various reasons; may suffer from structural, social or psychological tensions and conflicts, may be under intense frustrations arising from social problems or may believe he has been bewitched.

Such environmental disturbances seem to constitute conditions which cause Mashawe. It is likely that people who suffer from Mashawe have somatic tendencies and that the social causes only provide the necessary conditions for the illness to mature into full force. Mashawe is found among the rural people, people who live in the traditional setting where face to face relations are important, and smooth social relations are indexed in strong group and community sentiment, all of which provide situations favourable to stability and sanity of personality. Disturbance in the social cosmos may lead to personality disorders.

There is a higher rate of Mashawe among females than among males. A Mashawe patient professes to experiencing hallucinations, seeing terrible dreams, both in sleeping and in waking state, groans frequently when Mashawe is in its acute stage, develops a taste for unorthodox foods, may lose his identity, may forget his name and call himself by one of the culturally accepted Mashawe names.

With very rare exceptions the therapy for Mashawe is the Mashawe dance. The healer or the medicine man is often a former patient of Mashawe. Although specialising in healing Mashawe he also heals other illnesses. In healing Mashawe, dancing is a major therapy but he also gives various medicines to exorcize and expel the evil spirits which are believed to cause hallucinations, to counteract the witchcraft and to remove other factors which are believed to be the root cause of the illness. The efforts are intended to re-orient the patient and to bring him back into his social map.

The Mashawe dance is a public dance. It is often held at night in the house of the healer. The healer who is often a female, is herself an expert Mashawe dancer and singer.

¹It is danced by the Tumbuka and Tonga people of the Northern Region, and the Chewa people of the Central Region.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mashawe possession is found over a large area, through the Nsenga of Zambia to the Sena of Central Mozambique, the Shona of Rhodesia and the Ndaou of Rhodesia and Southern Mozambique. It is generally supposed to have come from the Shona. (See also the article by Thomas Johnston about a closely related phenomenon on p. 10 of this issue, and the reference to mashawe and the mbira among the Shona on p. 94).

On the day of dancing, which is always at night, many people come to watch the dance in which there may be several patients. Former patients may also take part as a reinforcement of the cure.

The Vimbuza dance has other functions. While to the Vimbuza patient, it is a medication, to the spectators the dance is an entertainment, a pastime, it offers an occasion for meeting friends. In the dance and through its actions, both the patients and the spectators experience joy and relief. Occasionally the Vimbuza dance provides occasions for the sufferers to find lovers and even wives or husbands. Once a lover is found a patient may become cured.

When dancing Vimbuza a dancer wears a special costume. This consists of a headgear made of birds' feathers and hairy animal skin; on the shoulders there are long feather straps and long strings of beads intermeshed with charms; in one hand he carries an axe, in the other a fly whisk; around the ankles he wears bells fixed to straps, and straps of animal leather are worn around the waist. Women dancers wear the same costume as male dancers.

There are often two or three drums. One of the drums is larger than the others and all the drums are played by expert Vimbuza drummers. The drums, which are held between the knees, are beaten by the palm of the hands.

Vimbuza dance is performed at night. As night approaches people begin to gather at the hut where the Vimbuza dance will be performed. As the dance is about to begin, some people enter the hut. Many of these are women, a few of whom carry sleeping babies on their backs. Outside the hut is a fire, where people gather, walk around, and chat to each other. It is often a big night in the village and the surrounding villages. The atmosphere is expectant and jubilant.

The performance begins at about 8 p.m. and may last the whole night. Often the dance is performed on several consecutive nights. In the hut, men stand on one side, the women on the other side and the drummers are placed in the far corner of the hut. The performance of the dancers, who may take the floor singly or in groups at a time, begins without any formal announcement. The dancers, in co-operation with a Vimbuza healer and the drummers, break into a rhythmic motion and the audience joins with the rhythmic clapping of hands, singing, tapping of feet and shaking of their bodies. Everyone in the audience knows the songs by heart.

The dancers take the floor in turns. In the dance although the movement involves the whole body, the dancer's most active part is the waist. The wriggling of the waist is particularly observable in women dancers. Both hands and legs also move in unison with the song, hand-claps, the sound of drums and bells worn around the legs. When tired a dancer sits on one of the drums and water is brought to him. He washes his hands, drops the sweat from his face into the water and drinks the sweat-water. This is part of the ritual.

Vimbuza songs are not just ordinary songs. They are songs which pass on to the audience certain messages reflective of the feelings and the tensions experienced by the dancer who sings the solo part. Vimbuza, through its songs, offers a structural and socially sanctioned means for the expression of tensions, without leading to consequences which disrupt social relationships within the family or community. It is the structural outlet for tensions.

A co-wife may find in the Vimbuza dance and songs a means of expressing her inner feelings. Here is a typical song often sung by frustrated wives:

Galu galu
Mwagaruka Mwawonachi
Mwawona Mwatola walero
Ghanoni malayilano
Ayo ayo

Ziduke zizamkwenyula mwembe

The transliteration of the song would read:

A 'Rebel husband'

Why have you rebelled?

Is it because you have married another wife?

If so, then I am bidding you farewell.

But time will come when the graces of your other wife will have gone and that will be the time when you will remember me.

This a song by a first wife in which she expresses her feelings to her husband who neglects her after marrying a new wife. Although polygamy is accepted sometimes this brings a number of problems and husbands tend to neglect the first wife who then becomes frustrated.

A frustrated husband may equally use the Vimbuza dance to his advantage. Here is a song sung by a husband about his lazy wife:

Pokelerani walendo awoli wane

Yaye nalwala nagona

Muluti cingowe gombetale pa sima

Gombetale pa dende.

Translated this reads;

A lazy wife who cannot welcome visitors in a proper traditional way (Malawi) by cooking food for them. When I ask you, my wife, to prepare food for visitors you always say you cannot cook because you are ill and hence you must sleep. But when another women prepares food for the visitors you get out of bed and extend your long, clumsy, lazy fingers to the dishes.

The song is about a lazy wife who fails to fulfil her social wifely obligation of entertaining visitors by giving them food.

In the Vimbuza dance, there are no passive spectators. In the process of dancing both the dancers and the spectators get emotionally, physically and mentally involved in the dance as the night wears on and the actions increase in intensity and emotional excitement. Each of the Vimbuza dancers, as he takes his turn, responds with an individual pattern of rhythm, all of which, however, revolve around a few patterns — the culturally conditioned motions — the motions of the Vimbuza dance.

In the action one notices the solidaristic-volatile action of both the dancers and the spectators. In the heat of the excitement, the performance is marked by orgies and ecstasies, in which a number of ex-Vimbuza dancers, as if possessed 'catch fire', dart out of the crowd, enter the dancing ground with motions so disconnected as to seem involuntary. The dance has reached its climax. At this stage it becomes a dance in which emotions take full control. Dancers dance themselves frantic, some may even be foaming at the mouth, others may groan, making utterances as if possessed with spirits or as if under the control of the supernatural forces. They are in trances. Through these orgies, the dancers are brought into the realm of emotions. Through this 'total' involvement patients find a cure.

When the patient feels cured, then the dance moves towards a culmination; a stage of *kumva Chilopa* — blood drinking by patients, which marks the end of the treatment. This fresh blood may be of a white chicken, of a goat or of a cow. The ceremony of blood drinking takes place in the early morning of a night of Vimbuza dancing.

The healer, who is the medicine man, does not have formal power other than that of being a healer to the patients. In the society the healer occupies an esteemed status as a result of his role, since mostly he is also a diviner and can cure several other diseases. This may confer upon him special status in the society and if he is a successful healer he may become relatively 'wealthy' from the fees he collects from the patients.

In Vimbuza the spectators are active. Everyone has a part to play in the dance. The patients do most of the singing while the audience provides a chorus, clap hands, shake their bodies and tap their feet. The drummers, patients and the spectators in the course of the dance get emotionally excited. Vimbuza dance is a dance without pure spectators.

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