

Akuzambezi

(A red mask from Mozambique and from the Dedza and Kaphuka areas)

Themes

- 1) Dishonesty, theft & robbery
- 2) Hospitality & sharing
- 3) Refugees
- 4) Selfishness/self-centredness
- 5) Tolerance of differences

Etymology

Akuzambezi means, 'from the Zambezi' (that is, 'the stranger from the Zambezi').



Description

The large red mask (35 cm.) features a stranger. He is a senior person, who is portrayed with receding hair, baldish head, wrinkles and moustache. The mask has a patch of beard below the lower lip and missing teeth on the upper jaw. The red colour of the face indicates his foreign origin. His long straight nose, his pierced ears with wooden plugs, his headgear made of wild animal skins and above all, his tribal marks (*zitopole*), are typical of the Ngoni. His eyes have heavy dark bags underneath, and his mournful mouth tells us that he is exhausted from having travelled a great distance and is apprehensive and uncertain about his new home. The dancer wears a plain jute suit and carries a huge Ngoni flywhisk. The flywhisk reveals his contact with the Ngoni and the simple jute outfit suggests that he is very poor, possibly homeless, perhaps even a slave escaped from Ngoni masters.

Akuzambezi enters the *bwalo*, following the *chisamba* rhythm and dancing in the Greya style, the determined porter. He swerves his feet with great determination and then pauses. This suggests the great importance of getting away from the land of slavery and finding peace. The male choir sings for him with one accord: *"The stranger from the Zambezi does not want to hold grudges. He has refused (by saying,) Let them take (what they want). I do not know if it is out of stupidity... but why bother? The stranger from the Zambezi does not want a heart that holds grudges, the stranger from the Zambezi."*

The song talks about refugees from the Zambezi region. They came as runaway slaves, escaping the cruelty of oppressors. They were dressed in rags (jute), with few belongings, looking for a home and a better life. They eventually crossed the Malawi border and came to settle in Chewa country. In time the male 'strangers from the Zambezi' settled and married local Chewa women and became *akamwini*. The foreign womenfolk became at times second wives to chiefs or married affluent farmers. At first, the villagers where they settled did not show unfriendliness or hostility. They kept a respectful distance, and remained cool to their presence. They feared their patrons and the families into which they had married. Later however, the distrustful villagers began to take advantage of their precarious conditions and started stealing their food supply, their cattle and their meagre possessions. The words of the song, "*Let them take (what they want). It is their stupidity, but let them fail,*" show that the stranger from the Zambezi did not protest or take defensive action. He remained quiet and suffered his fate silently.

This is the story of the *Nthumba* people captured by the Maseko Ngoni around the 1850s. The Maseko crossed the Zambezi around 1845 and came through Angonia province, which is adjacent to the Malawi border, near Dedza. There they conducted wars and took captives (the *Nthumbas*) among the local population. The situation revealed by the character **Akuzambezi** cleverly moves from past history to more recent events. The audience is reminded of the Mozambique wars of independence and liberation (1964 to 1974) and the civil war (1976 to 1992). The first phase was marked by Mozambique seeking freedom from Portugal. Independence was granted on 25 June 1975. The second phase was that of the civil wars that followed independence, during which all sides of the Mozambique conflict suffered under the two factions of Renamo and Frelimo. This is the period during which thousands of refugees from Angonia crossed the Ntcheu – Dedza borders to find asylum in peaceful Malawi. **Akuzambezi** refers to those refugees as 'the people from the Zambezi'. Numerous NGOs and international organisations were active in the area providing food relief, clothing, blankets and so on. The details collected concerning **Akuzambezi** suggest that our *gule* character was born in this context or may even have been imported from the Chewa community of Mozambique. The Mozambican Chewa brought their dances and their own *gule* characters, with the result that Dedza district experienced a revival of *gule* at that period. That is why the Dedza and the Kaphuka communities could copy this new character in their respective areas. The character is very prominent and holds an elevated status in the *gule* world to the point of sometimes taking the place of Kalulu (the hare) during the dancing of the *njedza* (the opening dance of *gule*). This character replacement is highly unusual among the Chewa secret societies of Malawi. Furthermore, the dancer who is to perform **Akuzambezi** is bound to sexual abstinence before performing it. This abstinence has become a rarity today among the Malawi *Nyau*.

Akuzambezi is intimately linked to funeral rites and commemoration ceremonies both in Malawi and in Mozambique. These situations are ideal for the ancestors of the Chewa to voice critical messages with regard to abuses within their communities. Through the character of **Akuzambezi**, the members of *gule* and the ancestors have found an unique opportunity to reaffirm the *mwambo*. They admonish the selfishness of the villagers and their lack of hospitality. They unveil the lack of concern for the refugees and scold unethical behaviour, such as stealing and property grabbing, toward strangers. Such crimes embarrass the ancestors and cause shame. They are reminded of two of their proverbs summing up their secular wisdom, philosophy and morality: "*Mlendo ndi mame - A stranger is like dew,*" (meaning that a stranger is delicate and, just as the dew evaporates, does not stay long), and "*Mlendo ndiye ayenda ndi lumo lakuthwa - The stranger*

gets around with a sharp razor,” (meaning that a stranger may have new talents or offer new possibilities for improving the community). **Akuzambezi** praises the refugees for their tolerance and determination. Strangers can sometimes display a more genuine attitude than the Chewa themselves.

Song

“E Akuzambezi, ee Akuzambezi safuna nsanje de e adakana Akuzambezi. Alekeni atenge de e! Kaya n’kupusa... chalaka. Akuzambezi n’gosafuna mtima wa nsanje ede, Akuzambezi.”

Source

Interviews in 1991 and 2007