

Chalera

(An orange day mask from the Dedza area)

Themes

- 1) Dishonesty, theft & robbery
- 2) Infertility – impotence
- 3) Jealousy/envy
- 4) Promiscuity

Etymology

Chalera means, 'that which is lost or weak'. It is also a play on the word *kucherera*, which refers to the movement of the cock that circles the hens.



Description

This orange mask (30 cm.) portrays a senior man. He has wrinkles on the forehead and is bald. A white painted circle tops his bald head, showing the reflection of the sun on his scalp. His face is swollen and his nose wide with flared nostrils. His mouth has missing teeth and turned-in lips. His headgear is made of white tatters and black sisal. He wears the regular tatter suit and carries a whip or a flywhisk. **Chalera** dances aggressively sideways and swerves his feet, imitating the movement of the cock that circles the hens (*kucherera*). He strikes his arms as if he is fighting, posing to the women.

Chalera is known in Chewa history as a Phiri chief who left the kingdom of Kalonga, situated on the plain, and settled on the plateau near Bunda. He was the brother of Chief Mwase Mkwagwawala from Kasungu. **Chalera** gave Mwase hospitality when he left with Chadza Phiri for the Mchinji hills. Mwase is reported to have quarrelled with **Chalera** before leaving Bunda. The songs sung for Chalera make allusions to such quarrels: 1) "**Chalera** is fighting for the land as if it were his own, like the cock around the hens," or 2) "Some are full of pride because of chieftainship, as if their small throne were made for **Chalera** to sit on." The song sung by the women shifts the quarrel from ownership of land to ownership of women: 3) "Have you seen the illegitimate pregnancy? Joy! But is it from this one? is it from that one? (Yes,) the child is born!" or 4) "A husband was fed with *mkweteko* (love medicine). She fed (her husband) with *mkweteko*. **Chalera** ate it (and became strong) without his knowledge. **Chalera**, my dear, died with a swollen belly, **Chalera**, because of the *mkweteko* given by his wife. He died, **Chalera**! You woman, what did you

*think you were doing? He died with a swollen belly, **Chalera**. Her doings killed him, **Chalera**. He died because of eating mkweteko. He went on his way, **Chalera**."*

The first women's song talks about the promiscuous behaviour of **Chalera**, who is responsible for an illegitimate pregnancy. The second describes **Chalera** as a playboy who seeks women's favours and becomes the victim of his own sex appeal. He is given love medicine (*mkweteko*) by one of his numerous lovers. He dies from it; or he becomes impotent. *Mkweteko* is a well known love potion which is put in food in order to bind a man and a woman together and to discourage a man's interest in other women.

The character of **Chalera** has a long history in the Dedza region and was brought down to the Mua region in 1951. The character was popular for funerals (especially those of the chiefs), commemoration rites, *dambule* and initiation ceremonies. Today, this character is rarely seen.

Chalera is a thief, an intruder (Phiri) as indicated by his orange face. He desires what is not his, including land, women and properties. In his old age, he behaves like a young rooster who wants to impress women and to steal other men's wives. His promiscuous character attracts a just punishment: swelling, impotence and death. One of his girlfriends gives him *mkweteko* so that he will abandon his wife and love her only. The play on the words 'cherera' and **Chalera** suggests that his cock-like behaviour has made him weak and useless.

The character of **Chalera** expresses the ancestors' advice discouraging theft, promiscuity and coveting a neighbour's wife. The song sung by the women of Dedza aims to deter women from using *mkweteko* in order to bind their men, inviting them to reflect on the evil consequence of such a medicine.

Songs

- 1) "**Chalera** alimbira dziko monga n'lake cherera, cherera, cherera."
- 2) "Wena akunyada ndi ufumu ngati ali ndi kawo kampando koti a **Chalera** akhalepo tate."
- 3) "Mudaiona mimba ya chigololo! Koka ine, koka ine ea! Mwana wabadwa!" or "M'taiona mimba ya chigololo! M'taiona! M'taiona! M'taiona mimba ya chigololo," or "Mudaiona mimba ya chigololo! Kaione! Kaione! Kaione aye! Kaione! Kaione aye!"
- 4) "Anadyetsa mkweteko ena de, anadyesta mkweteko tate e. Wamuna n'kudyadi tate e, chosadziwa **Chalera** tate e. Adanka otupa a **Chalera** diyere, chifukwa cha mkweteko wa akazi. Iwo tate adanka **Chalera**. Amai mumati mutani dee dee? Anka otupa mimba, a **Chalera** tate, chidawapha okha tate de. Abambo a **Chalera** apita tate. Anapatsa tate de mkweteko tate. Ananka **Chalera**."

Source

Interviews in 1990, 1991, 1997 and 2001

Reference

Ntara, S.J. 1973 [1944 original]. *The History of the Chewa (Mбири ya Achewa)*. Translated in English by W.S. Kamphandira Jere. Notes by Harry W. Langworthy. Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH: Wiesbaden. pp. 27 - 28, pp. 55 - 58, pp. 65 - 66, p. 78

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