

Chimphama

(A red day mask from the Mua area)



Themes

1) Drought, famine & food security 2) Laziness 3) Responsible parenthood 4) Social changes/insecurity

Etymology

Mphama is a type of tuber that is highly poisonous and is edible only after cooking several times.

After each cooking, the residue of water has to be thrown away to remove the toxic product.

Mphama is food eaten only at the time of famine when there is nothing else available. The particle *chi* indicates amplification: 'the big tuber'.

Description

The red mask (35 cm.) presents a middle aged man whose family, because of his lack of foresight, is being ravaged by the famine of 2001 and 2002. Red emphasises the ancestors' wrath and the danger of death through malnourishment. The face is, ironically, fat, in order to express the swelling caused

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by malnutrition. It displays a narrow and wrinkled forehead, signs of worry and lack of planning. The broad nose, the thick lips and the small moustache cast him as a parody of destitution not to be imitated. **Chimphama**'s ears are minute to convey his deafness to food security warnings. The headgear is made of shaggy tatters, which give witness to his wretchedness. Over his hairdo he has tied a headband to demonstrate that he is suffering from a headache because of carrying heavy loads of big tubers back to his home from the hills where he has sought food for himself and his family. **Chimphama** wears a torn jute bag instead of a shirt and trousers. This unkempt clothing manifests his distress and poverty. He carries a hoe and a knife, which he uses for digging tubers.

The character of **Chimphama** is recent in *gule* rituals, dating from 2002, and appears particularly at funerals and commemoration rites. He reflects a reaction to the 2001 and 2002 food crisis in which the country experienced severe maize shortages. **Chimphama** enters the arena, jumping and then falling on one knee. He keeps repeating this movement in order to express that he has discovered the wretched tubers and is digging them out with rapacity. He then stands and swerves his feet to show his glee while holding some rags that represent the tubers. The male choir describes his mood: 1) "*Ee ee (joy) Chimphama, ee ee (joy)!*" The women answer back with their own song, stressing the reaction of the hungry family members waiting for their saviour: 2) "*The old man is coming! Don't mention it, don't mention it. The old man is coming!*" The comment from the family members carries a tone of mockery and implies negligence with regard to the previous harvest. **Chimphama**'s unhealthy look derives from a poor diet. His apparent fatness (expressing that he is full of tubers) is a symptom of malnutrition rather than good health. The problem of the villagers is not food shortage but food security. People sell their food supply as soon as the crop is collected and then later on during the year they suffer hunger. The income generated from such sales is not saved for very long. After democratisation and the change of political regime in 1994, Malawi suddenly opened up to the outside world. The country was flooded with new 'needs' that people had never experienced before (fashion, beauty products and the world of electronics such as television, radio, cellular phones). Malawi was overnight a society of consumerism. Villagers were assaulted with publicity via television, radio, shops, travelling traders and market places urging them to buy material goods. Within days or weeks, the money from selling food reserves vanishes. It has become very difficult to make the right choices and to resist the temptation of consumerism and the attraction of the outside world. People sacrifice their food security in order to satisfy immediate needs that appear real and promise happiness. **Chimphama**'s character embodies the ancestors' call, which encourages the population to be vigilant over food security and to work harder in the field instead of climbing the hills and digging poor quality food tubers.

The trap behind consumerism is that it requires one to work harder in order to achieve one's goals and wishes. This message has not yet reached the village. For centuries people have worked hard during the rainy season and spent the dry season in leisure of various kinds. Traditional culture used to forbid beer brewing and festivities during the working season. Today, these rules have been relaxed or forgotten and people choose to celebrate instead of going to the field. Idleness and a hedonistic life style seem to have taken the lead. The emergence of economic and social classes and the competition between people of different social standing have put extra pressure on the villagers. **Chimphama** reacts to such change and fights the misuse of food supply, the primary reason for hunger. **Chimphama** aims at correcting attitudes that are the root cause of the food security problem:

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irresponsibility, laziness and the desire only to enjoy life. **Chimphama** invites people to revive the old priority of saving enough food in order to reach the next harvest. He also encourages villagers to increase production through better methods of farming in order to achieve greater economic freedom.

The history of Malawi and the Chewa is punctuated by the recurrence of drought and famine. The world of *gule wamkulu* is filled with characters cautioning the Chewa population to the problem of food security. Masks bear various names like Kunali njala –‘There was hunger,’ or the names of the month in which food supply is low, such as December, January and February. Some are named after alternative foodstuffs by which people overcome famine: Kadanga, **Chimphama**. All preach to fight hunger and famine through foresight and hard work: “*Njala imatha ndi khasu – Hunger ends with the hoe.*” Among them, **Chimphama** is one of the most recent. His message focuses directly on the irresponsible husband who makes the rest of the family suffer because of his carelessness, neglect and lack of foresight.

Songs

- 1) “*Ee ee a **Chimphama** e a e a **Chimphama!**”*
- 2) “*Andala abwerapo! Aleke aleke. Andala abwerapo!*”

Source

Interview in 2002