

Chimphepo

(A red mask from the Salima and Nkhoma areas)



Themes

1) Chewa identity 2) HIV/AIDS & sexual diseases 3) Dangers of modernity 4) Sexual obsession 5) Witchcraft through sex

Etymology

Chimphepo is 'a big wind'. The word is used as a euphemism for a person, either male or female, of dubious sexual morals, a sexual profligate.

Description

This large mask (60 cm.) is red to indicate heat and portrays a person of loose sexual morality. The mask depicts that person as a male and a Chewa; the tribal marks and the scarification show this. **Chimphepo** has lost his identity and his sense of traditional values. His promiscuous behaviour demonstrates that he is a stranger to his own people. The colour red indicates both sexual heat and

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being a stranger to his people. He has been swollen by the 'big wind' of foreign influence and has become a sexual libertine. He has bushy eyebrows and sideburns and a heavy moustache, and his features highlight that he is sick, burnt out and has aged before his time: black wrinkles on the forehead, languishing eyes, and missing teeth resulting from fights or from diseases. His tiny ears express his deafness to the advice of others. His smile is ambiguous and appears to be a tactic to entice women. **Chimphepo**'s headgear, made of sisal, shows his liking for foreign fashion. So too does his dress, a heavy army coat acquired during his numerous journeys to the outside world on employment. He wears underneath jute trousers revealing that he has expended all his money on women and is left with nothing. **Chimphepo** carries two whips to emphasise that he wishes evil to others and that the ancestors repudiate his depravity.

Chimphepo can perform at any kind of ritual, including political party meetings. In the arena, **Chimphepo** sweeps people before him like a whirlwind. He swerves his feet (in the style of Chadzunda, the village chief) and tries desperately to impress the women and to make sexual conquests. He gathers them all as if he was the only male; they all belong to him. The male singers recount: "*The strong wind has carried, has carried him, (the wind) has carried him, my friend, right over everywhere. He was carried, was carried! The wind (of modernity) has carried him! He was carried off (he is gone, he died)!*" The song tries to explain the reason for his behaviour and blames modernity for it. **Chimphepo** has lost his mind, his sense of purpose and identity. He has become a sexual maniac, obsessed with his own sexual desires. Like a cyclone, he sweeps up everything and leaves destruction behind: broken hearts, ruined families, quarrels, fights and sexual diseases. He has lost his reputation and this does not worry him. He spreads sexual diseases and contaminates others. This does not bother him either. **Chimphepo** is now a witch who kills purposely, a third explanation of the colour red. Eventually **Chimphepo** will be swept away by his own wind and leave the village for the graveyard ("*he is gone, he died!*"). Through the character of **Chimphepo** (ancient for the Nkhoma region and more recent for Salima area), the ancestors warn the Chewa of the dangers of foreign influences. They try to rekindle the fire of their own Chewa identity and to dissipate the storm of change that sweeps away everything, including the people themselves.

Song

*"A **Chimphepo** chanyamula, chanyamula a e toto de, anzanganu kutsidya konseko chanyamula e tate chanyamula! **Chimphepo** chanyamula e toto de chanyamula!"*

Source

Interviews in 1992 and 2007