

Chinsinsi chawo

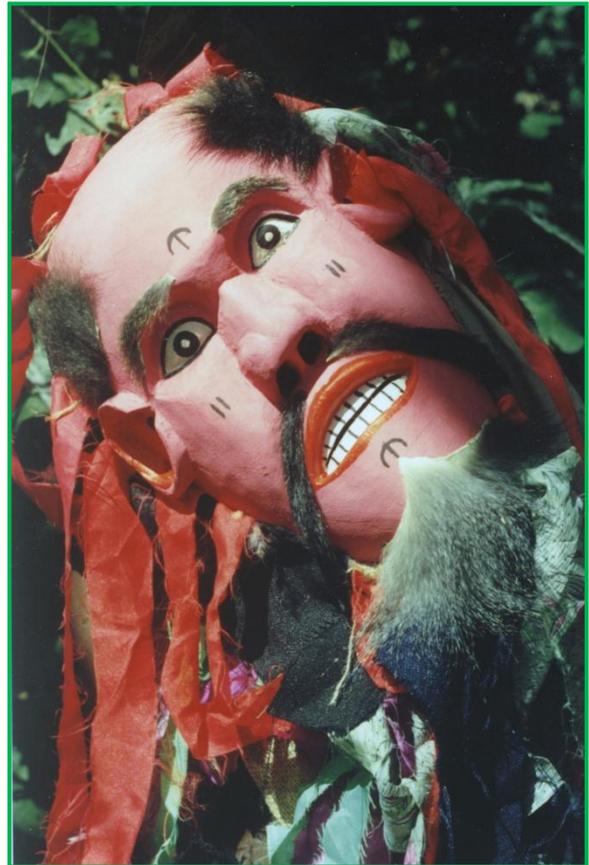
(A pink day mask from the Dedza and Diamphwi areas)

Themes

- 1) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change)
- 2) Evil reaps its just desserts (*choipa chitsata mwini*)
- 4) Responsible leadership
- 5) Murder
- 6) Recent politics

Etymology

Chinsinsi chawo means, 'his own secret'.



Description

The pink mask (25 cm.) portrays an old Chewa with tribal marks, scarifications and broad nose. His advanced age is seen in the fluffy hair around his bald head and a long moustache. His face betrays an anxious look in the eyes, and the half open mouth reveals clenched teeth. The mask displays pricked ears. The headgear of the mask is made of tatters and so is the suit that the character wears. He carries a whip and a flywhisk. The concern expressed in his face is reflected in his performance. He chases people and is rude with the crowd because he fears that people will discover his secret. He hides among the womenfolk and dances obscenely with them, wiggling his hips. He appears at any ritual and enjoys dancing the *chisamba*. The men sing for him the following song: *"Some do their own thing! Maybe they think it is hidden away, Mr. His own secret! His own secret is out in the open today! Mr. His own secret! Mr. His own secret, the murderer, who used to kill people with hidden means! Today (his secret) has come out into the open, since his friends have become enemies and have argued. They have said without saying his secret."* The song states that the mysterious and unexplained murders from the past have been solved. The murderer has been discovered. The deaths are the work of someone who has become a stranger to his own people and a bloodthirsty person (indicated by the colour pink). He was naïve to believe that he could remain undetected. His enemies have emerged and revealed the truth.

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Chinsinsi chawo appeared in *gule* in the 1990s when President Kamuzu Banda's popularity was declining. By that time, Kamuzu Banda no longer controlled the foreign media. The BBC, South African radio and other stations overseas were beginning to focus on Malawian politics in the international news. After Pope John Paul II's visit in 1989, the President and the Malawian regime became topical and well discussed on foreign stations. Such issues were obviously never publicised within the country. Amnesty International and the International Committee of the Red Cross were putting pressure on the government concerning Malawi's prisons and the conditions of political detainees whose number was growing daily. Only in 1992 was the Red Cross allowed access to carry out an official inspection. Reports were publicised and broadcast in June 1991 and September 1992. Up to this time the government continued with mass arrests of suspected government opponents. Very few were granted a fair trial. If they did have a trial, as in the case of Orton Chirwa and his wife Vera, their case dragged on interminably and was judged unfairly. These cases also made the headlines of foreign media. Despite the aloofness of the government, slowly Kamuzu Banda's deeds were coming out into the open.

Chinsinsi chawo clearly describes the political situation of Malawi, by casting it carefully in the rural set up. 'His own secret' talks about a village headman who has a broken relationship with his assistants. Their disagreement leads to revelations concerning their administration. Bribes, confiscations of property, witchcraft, injustice and even murder became common occurrences. Once the headman had lost his popularity and support, his own petty secrets became public knowledge. Beginning in the 1990s the Chewa of the Dedza and Diamphwi areas were able to assess what was happening to their big village of Malawi. Their chief, a so-called fellow Chewa, had become a stranger to his own people and was increasingly subject to paranoia when anyone tried to challenge his authority and to demand the truth. Malawian prisons were too small to silence all the critics. The Shire River had run out of crocodiles to gobble them all! The secrets were finally to be told and to be proclaimed through the theatre of *gule wamkulu*.

Song

*"Wena amachita zawo, de! Kaya amati ndi zamseri tate tate n'chinsinsi chawo tate de **Chinsinsi chawo** lero chaululika ede ye. **Chinsinsi chawo! Chinsinsi chawo** tate tate ee, adapha anzawo, ankapha anzawo mosadziwika tate e! Lero zadziwika, pakuti ndi anzawo anadana, nalongolola tate, adanena posanena a **Chinsinsi chawo** tate de, **Chinsinsi chawo**."*

Source

Interview in 1993

Reference

Schoffeleers, J.M. (1999). *In Search of Truth and Justice: Confrontations between Church and State in Malawi 1960–1994*. Kachere Book 8. CLAIM: Blantyre.

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