

Chinzongo

(A day structure from the Mua area)

Themes

- 1) Women's hygiene cycle
- 2) Women's cycle instructions

Etymology

Chinzongo derives from *kuzonga*, 'to cut into strips', and means, 'a long narrow strip of meat or of cloth', a euphemism for hygienic towels.



(miniature model)

Description

Chinzongo is a three metre long structure with the features of an animal of unknown species. It is built of a bamboo frame with maize husks stitched over it. The mammal is recognisable as female since it does not have horns. Two large round ears complete the head. The back is flat and the teeth protrude from the mouth. Two dancers activate the structure, which performs at funeral ceremonies of important people that are enhanced by initiation rites. The structure moves forward and backward, chasing the women in the *bwalo*. The male choir sings, "**Chinzongo** has come. You children (young girls), let us be careful, **Chinzongo** has come."

The song and the dancing style of **Chinzongo**, especially the chasing of the women, emphasise that one has to be careful with women and young girls undergoing their cycle. The structure addresses the mistress of initiation and reminds her that the initiates who are experiencing their menstrual period should not enter the *bwalo*, nor should grown women who share the same condition.

The name **Chinzongo** ('long strip of cloth') becomes a euphemism for the hygienic towel. The cryptic name allows grown-ups to talk openly in front of children about adult matters. A menstruating woman entering the *bwalo* is described as 'spoiling' the dance. This is a transgression on a par with dancers losing their balance during the dance or a breach to the secrecy of *gule*. The cryptic language conveys that it is improper for a woman in this condition to

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participate in the Great Dance. The 'long strip of cloth' may fall off into the arena, revealing her condition. This is not acceptable in Chewa society. These are private matters for each woman and shared only among women.

Song

*“Wabwera **Chinzongo**, ana inu tisamale ae, wabwera **Chinzongo** tate e wabwera **Chinzongo**.”*

Source

Interview in 1991