

Chiphaninji?

(A red day mask from the Dowa area)



Themes

- 1) Murder
- 2) Thirst for power
- 3) Witchcraft to maintain/enhance one's position (*kukhwima*)

Etymology

Chiphaninji? means, 'Why is he killing?'

Description

Chiphaninji? portrays a person red with envy. In some respects, the narrow and oval mask (25 cm.) resembles an insect. The top of the head is concave and crowned with two long curved horns (also 25 cm.) pointing outwards, which resemble antennae. Scornful eyes in the shape of a half moon suggest envy and disdain. High cheekbones correspond to his swollen eyelids. The puffed up cheeks make him look like a monster affected by the *tsempho* disease. His slim nose is disproportionately elongated and his ears stand at an unusual height, close to the top of the head. The bottom part of the face is rather plain, except for the heavy moustache and thick goatee surrounding a small toothless mouth. The expression is one of meanness and contempt. The face shows no tribal marks. The headgear is made of sisal dyed in black that looks like hair. A bunch of



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rags tied together hides the neck of the dancer. The dancer wears a long kilt, leglets and armlets made of sisal or bark.

Chiphaniji? performs during funerals, commemoration rites and ceremonies connected with the healing of spirit possession. The dancer carries a long knife and a heavy club on his way to the arena, while swerving his feet with exceptional speed. After entering the *bwalo*, he shakes his entire body as if he is possessed and collapses in the dust. The male members of *gule* carry him out of the arena to the dressing room, while the men sing for him: "**Chiphaniji?** *the one who (always) wishes to be the first!* **Chiphaniji?** *what is it?* **Chiphaniji?** *what is it? what are these crimes? We have experienced bad luck (death)!*" The song describes the deeds of an envious person who is ready to supplant an opponent at any cost. He is prepared to commit murder with his dreadful weapons or to practise witchcraft in order to achieve his aim. He may cast a spell on his adversaries. This can apply to competition for women, for positions of authority or even over success in different communal activities. To become a top dancer for *gule wamkulu* rituals is also a high honour. The character, which simultaneously portrays the murderer and the victim, discourages the villagers from competition that is based on envy and jealousy. The Chewa are acutely aware that these vices have the power to destroy the community, and the resultant behaviour is strongly condemned by the ancestors. Those who engage in these types of antisocial activity are seen as outcasts by their own family group and their descendants. **Chiphaniji?** is condemned by the ancestors for a success that is achieved only at the cost of the lives of others.

Song

"A Chiphaniji? tate, amati apambane! Chiphaniji? n'chiani (2x) e tate de? A Chiphaniji?, Chiphaniji? n'chiani tate de izi n'zotani? Taonera malodza!"

Source

Interview in 1991