

Chisambwaira

(A red mask from the Mitundu area)

Themes

- 1) Alcoholism/alcohol does not solve problems
- 2) Disloyalty to friends and neighbours
- 3) Drug addiction
- 4) Familiarity between brother- & sister-in-law (*chilamu*)
- 5) Labour migration
- 6) Dangers of modernity
- 7) Playboy

Etymology

Chisambwaira can mean a number of things, including 'habit', 'custom', 'routine', 'tamelessness' or even 'hobby'. All of these meanings are reflected in the description of our character.



Description

The red 40 centimetre mask features a stranger married in the village (*mkamwini*). He is a Chewa since his face displays prominent tribal marks. He is depicted as a modern young man, with black hairline, narrow forehead, painted sideburns, thin elegant moustaches and an emerging goatee beard on the chin. The chin is disproportionately large for the rest of the face and suggests that the character is naïve or stupid. **Chisambwaira's** eyes are those of a seducer. The smiling mouth is ambiguous, and his words are sweet, calculating and self-serving. The few missing teeth on the lower jaw suggest that **Chisambwaira** received a beating as a consequence of his criminal offences. His long straight nose with two black lobes resembles a male organ to emphasise that he is promiscuous. **Chisambwaira's** headgear and costume, both made of tatters, show him to be well dressed and to have access to cash. He carries a bag full of bottle caps to portray that he is prosperous and has plenty of disposable money.

In the arena, **Chisambwaira** is the consummate exhibitionist. He walks with arrogance. He turns swiftly on one leg to demonstrate his smartness. He swerves his feet ostentatiously. He rings the coins in his bag, and ends his performance by throwing his fortune to the womenfolk who run after him as if enchanted. **Chisambwaira** loves to impress the women by showing them that he is a 'real man' and

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wealthy. The men's choir describes his behaviour in the following song: "**Chisambwaira**, (his hobby) is with other people's wives. As a stranger, one does not act like this! With this kind of behaviour, people go to their graves prematurely, Mr. Hobby." The song emphasises **Chisambwaira's** foreign status as a husband who has taken up residence in his wife's village. His behaviour is irresponsible, and he fails to be a loving husband. Instead, he is in the habit of luring other people's wives and of cultivating love affairs. **Chisambwaira** uses his sex appeal, his modern look and his income to seduce women. The women are easily persuaded by the opportunity he presents, and he is quick to exploit the situation. He tramples their feelings, ignoring their cries and their tragic future (his small ears). He shows no respect for his wife's relatives, friends and neighbours. He flirts and even has sexual liaisons with his own sisters-in-law and with his neighbours' wives. He violates the sacredness of family relationships and loyalties within the community. **Chisambwaira's** behaviour has estranged himself from his own kind (thus the red colour). He is a playboy, who leaves behind broken hearts, disappointments and husbands bent on revenge. He breaks up families and moves on to new conquests. He believes that money can buy everything and everyone. The song acknowledges that he is lucky to be alive. Cheaters like him ought to be in their graves. Humiliated husbands could have easily murdered **Chisambwaira**.

The character of **Chisambwaira** is ancient and certainly extends back to colonial days. It appears in all kinds of *gule* ceremonies. It reacts against the corruption of the youth influenced by foreign values and the so-called 'modernity'. It protests against the deterioration of family values, particularly the *chilamu* (brother/sister-in-law) relationship. The Chewa encourage a playful (joking) relationship between brothers and sisters -in-law. This informality is not to be confused with licence. Sexual relations between them are perceived as a capital offence described as witchcraft. It contravenes the ancestors' advice and the moral code for which they stand. Above all, **Chisambwaira** comments on labour migrations and paid employment as upsetting the traditional social order by inflating the individual ego at the expense of community values. Social status should depend on age, gender, wealth and hereditary positions. Wealth acquired too easily undermines this order. This was well known to the elders and the senior members of *Nyau*. During colonial days, a large number of *gule* characters were created to hold in check the negative effects of labour migration, paid employment and the emerging money economy. The *gule* performances targeted sexual irresponsibility and sexually transmitted diseases. This state of affairs did not diminish after independence in 1964. On the contrary, Kamuzu Banda's policy was to promote agriculture, cash crops, local employment and foreign labour migration until the mid-1980s. With the advent of the second millennium, obsession with cash and consumerism reaches a climax never before seen, to the extent even of compromising food security and risking alcohol and drug addiction. The Chewas' perception was right: money has the power to destroy both the individual and community. This was obvious in the irresponsibility of **Chisambwaira**, the husband whose hobby is to trade money for sex. This permanently damages family relationships and the loyalties between friends and neighbours.

Song

"Chisambwaira aye oh (2x) ndi akazi a eni tate, Chisambwaira ndi akazi a eni, tate Chisambwaira. Kwa eni ake satero tate! Kukhala kotereko, wena adalowa pa mcholo osafuna tate Chisambwaira!"

Source

Interview in 1992