

Chitedze

(A fertiliser bag laces head cover from the Mua area)



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Themes

1) Marriage, preparation & instructions 2) Sexual taboos (*mdulo*)

Etymology

Chitedze is the Chichewa word for 'buffalo bean'. This wild bean causes extreme itching of the body. It was sometimes smeared on the bodies of thieves in order to deter them from stealing.

Description

Chitedze's costume consists of fertiliser bag laces woven into a head cover that hides the dancer's identity and a simple loincloth or plain underpants. No other ornaments are worn. The dancer's body is smeared with red or black mud. This is an ancient character, which appeared at initiation rites and funeral rituals that incorporated initiation. **Chitedze** did not dance, but kept chasing women, men and even drummers from the arena. **Chitedze** was a dramatic and influential character and appeared at initiations in order to reinforce the respect for the *mdulo* rules. As the drummers played the *chisamba* rhythm, the choir sang, "**Chitedze** (the itchy beans) *irritates me!*" It kept repeating these words. The cryptic song delivered a hidden message only understood by married people. The song stresses sexual prohibition when women have their menstrual period. When in this condition the wife refuses to share her bed with her husband. The song of **Chitedze** portrays a husband who has been contaminated by the *mdulo* disease because he flaunted these rules. The song describes menstrual blood as itchy. The Chewa believes that those people who engage in sexual relations during menstruation put themselves at risk of sickness and death. The husband slims down or swells and eventually wastes away if he is not treated promptly. The initiates who are being instructed about marriage have to be made aware of these rules. Wives have the duty to protect their future husbands when they enter married life. **Chitedze** appears at the initiation, and his stirring performance is to remind the people of the importance of these rules and to inculcate fear of the *mdulo* in married people.

Song

"**Chitedze** *chandiyabwa (xxx)!*"

Source

Interview in 1991