

# Chitheka

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

## Themes

- 1) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change)
- 2) Deafness to advice/stubbornness
- 3) Responsible leadership
- 4) Recent politics

## Etymology

**Chitheka** means, 'to be half empty'. It is used here as a personal name, 'Mr. Half empty'.



## Description

The coffee-coloured 30 centimetre mask portrays an old Malawian, identifiable as a Chewa from his tribal marks. He is a very old man, half bald, and his forehead is covered with wrinkles. His eyes, deeply set in their sockets are bright and alert. They are partly covered by long drooping eyebrows. The nose is that of an African. Two pronounced labial lines highlight **Chitheka's** advanced age. The mask displays pricked ears eager to collect people's reactions. The sad mouth lacking teeth and the frowning forehead convey surprise and disappointment. **Chitheka** has a low jawbone and a pronounced drooping chin. Two long grey moustaches reinforce his age. The headgear of the mask is made of tatters with a layer of goatskin on top. **Chitheka** wears a white shirt and a pair of black trousers. He sometimes dons a jacket to emphasise his position of authority, also symbolised by the flywhisk he carries.

**Chitheka's** appearance in *gule* is recent, dating from 1992. He takes part in any ritual, and even party meetings. His dancing style resembles that of Bongololo, the millipede. He wiggles his pelvis lewdly in the company of women. He excites them and merges with them. The women imitate his movements, and join in his suggestive dance following the rhythm of the *chisamba*. The male choir helps us to understand his personality: 1) "*Chief Chitheka* (Half empty) *leads the women to the field. Today I said*

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to myself, I want to see **Chitheka**. Oh **Chitheka** oh! As a matter of fact, he failed to fill the granary! What is the reason? His ruthlessness is his big problem. This is his character, **Chitheka, Chitheka!**" The song reprimands the chief or his assistant or anyone else in a position of authority for his character and behaviour, which are antisocial.

To this, the womenfolk reply with the following: 2) "*The old man has come with little in his tiny basket. It is not full. This old man! Yes, it was bound to happen, it was bound to happen because of his character; he is deaf to others, without mercy, my God! What has happened? **Chitheka** has come back (with his basket) half empty, **Chitheka.**"* The women's song is more explicit in describing **Chitheka's** behaviour. Besides being cruel, he is merciless and deaf to his subjects. As he shows no respect for the population, people feel that they are not obliged to show him respect.

The two songs set the scene of the village harvest, in which the village authority leads the women to the field to collect the harvest. **Chitheka** fails to fill the granary. It is only half full because the women could not tolerate their leader's temper and his lack of consideration for them, his collaborators. The parable of the harvest is clever. The half empty basket and the granary represent the referendum and the general election of 1993 and 1994 respectively. They predict that Kamuzu Banda, the first president of Malawi, would lose the referendum and the general election because of his arrogance and his lack of concern for the population of the country. Though a Chewa, Kamuzu Banda had lost sight of his people and had become a stranger to them (the reddish quality of the mask). For decades, people had been forced to offer gifts and to buy Malawi Congress Party cards against their will. If they refused, their property and possessions were confiscated. They suffered persecution under a thirty year regime of fear, and risked imprisonment and death. They traded their freedom against the right to remain barely alive. Now for the first time, they were asked to give their personal opinion and to vote fairly. Kamuzu Banda's ballot box would definitely remain half empty. The majority of the population was utterly fed up by his dictatorship and of his lack of respect for the people. At that period, political rallies were a means of fighting Kamuzu Banda's intrusive rule and of seeking a glimpse of hope. **Chitheka**, the village chief, was attempting to bring about political change in the apparently innocuous ground of *gule wamkulu*. The Chewa had rediscovered their voice of protest and the possibility of reaffirming the *mwambo*. It had been trampled by the very one who was pretending to be the saviour and the guardian of *gule wamkulu*. **Chitheka** was able to demonstrate that the *mwambo* is greater than the individuals who patronise it.

## Songs

1) "*Afumu a **Chitheka** atsogola azimai ku munda de tate ye. Lero ndimati ndione a **Chitheka** oh oh. A **Chitheka** oh oh. Paja alephera kudzaza nkhekwe! Kodi chifukwa? Ndi nkhanza zawo tate ye aye ndi mavuto awo tate ye. Ili ndi khalidwe lawo tate ye **Chitheka, Chitheka!**"*

2) "*Andala abwera, pang'ono tate ye n'chitete tosadzaza, andalawa tate ye ee aa. Indetu zidzitero tate ye zidzitero oh! Ndi khalidwe lawo, osamva za anzawo, wopanda chisoni ogo. Zatani de e? Abwera n'**Chitheka, Chitheka.**"*

## Source

Interview in 1993