

Chitonde

(A black day mask from the Salima area)

Themes

- 1) Choice of marriage partner (choice of *mkwamwini*)
- 2) Potency
- 3) Redeeming (*kulongosola*)
- 4) Model of ideal husband
- 5) Sexual taboos (*mdulo*)

Etymology

Chitonde means, 'he-goat (Billy goat)'.



Description

The black mask (36 cm.) depicts a husband described as a he-goat. The mask combines human and goat features. The face is elongated, displaying a long goatee made of natural sisal, pointed ears standing erect on the head and two straight black horns. The headgear is made of black goatskins except for a fully white skin on the back. All this adornment emphasises the characteristics of a goat. The human features are seen in the narrow forehead, white hair, thick white moustache and a long straight thin line for the nose. Tribal marks appear on the mask. The eyes are bright, and the mouth is open and appears mournful. Two goat-like teeth appear on the bottom jaw, and deep labial lines are present. **Chitonde** wears a kilt of white rags. The knees are smeared with black mud. He carries two white handkerchiefs, one for his child and one for the mother.

Chitonde performs at initiation rites and at the funeral of chiefs. The dancer chosen to perform **Chitonde** needs to be a senior man (older than his forties) and is one of the few males fully initiated in the female *chinamwali*. During these interactions with female puberty he is committed to ritual coolness and sexual abstinence, like the mistresses of initiation themselves. In the *bwalo*, **Chitonde** crawls on four legs like a goat. As he stands on two feet, he wiggles his waist and mimes sexual intercourse to the *chisamba* rhythm. The senior women surround him and wave their *chitenjes*. One

www.kasiyamaliro.org

Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art, Mua Parish, P. O. Box 41, Mtakatika, Malawi

of the *anamkungwi* places a *chitenje* cloth between her thighs and simulates giving birth. With the other cloth on her shoulder she pretends to wrap the newborn baby. The women sing the following: “If God allowed, if God allowed! What kind of child did she give birth to? She delivered a he-goat with white legs (meaning healthy). She gave birth to a he-goat with white legs.”

The song praises the progenitor and the preparations he made to welcome the newborn, a baby boy. This is the meaning of the two white handkerchiefs that **Chitonde** carries to the *bwalo*. He cares for both the mother and the child. As soon as **Chitonde** was welcomed to the family of his wife, he was tested to assess whether he was a real ‘he-goat’. Initially, his ability to cultivate, build a house and care for his wife was scrutinized. Above all, his potency was being tested. As soon as the pregnancy is visible, the members of his wife’s family are relieved. However, the crucial moment, with the birth of the child, is still to come. **Chitonde**’s wife gives birth to a baby boy without complications. Both the couple and their family rejoice, welcoming the gift of God. The final test still remains. Several months after the birth, the *kulongosola* occurs, with the redemption of the child and its socialisation into the family group of his wife. In the period following birth the couple have to keep sexual abstinence, and particularly the father is to display his strength of character by respecting the imposed taboos. The dominance of black and white in the mask and the absence of red is tantamount to the message of the character. This colour scheme has been purposely chosen to emphasise the importance of ritual coolness, which will allow the child to grow strong, protected against the influence of *mdulo*. This is for **Chitonde** the supreme examination, which will determine whether he qualifies as a progenitor and a good father. **Chitonde** is purposely portrayed as old (white hair) to emphasise that he will remain married and enjoy family life into his old age if he retains the fine qualities he displayed as a young man. Both his wife and her relatives appreciate him and consider him a man of honour and a respected husband. The white goatskin on the back of **Chitonde**’s headgear signifies this. All have a ‘white neck’, meaning that they have no grudge against him and are happy with his good qualities as a progenitor and father. **Chitonde** provides a role model for the Chewa village. He is praised publicly for the service that he performs for the village.

Chitonde’s character dates back to the 1930s. In recent times he rarely performs in *chinamwali* and *gule*. At the time the interview was conducted, the dancer of **Chitonde** was more than 75 years old. It is doubtful whether his son took over the impersonation of **Chitonde**. **Chitonde**’s performance was witness to the richness of the past and to the ability of the Chewa and the ‘Great Dance’ to convey the sacredness of sex and life. In the last three decades, *gule wamkulu* has lost much of its spirituality and has become more pragmatic, or simply a means to secure an income. A character like **Chitonde** generates a low income and is heavily protected with sexual taboos. The younger generation of *gule* members show little interest in dancing **Chitonde** and are not fond of keeping sexual taboos. The character of **Chitonde** belongs to the elders, the custodians of the *mwambo*, and to the past. It is unlikely that this character will survive to advise the village community of the modern Malawi.

Song

“Malinga moyo (2x)! Waberekanji ku mzinda? Wabereka tonde woyera miyendo. Taleka n’taona aye. Wabereka tonde woyera miyendo.”

Source

Interview in 1992