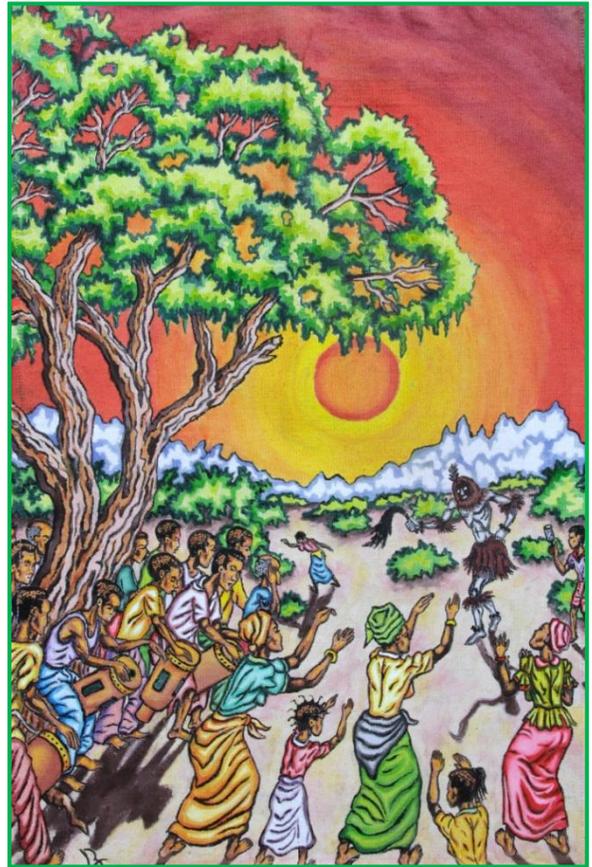


# Kamundi

(A day or night head cover from the Mua and Dedza areas)



(night)



(day)

## Themes

- 1) Lack of community spirit
- 2) Compassion & kindness
- 3) Responsible leadership
- 4) Sexual taboos (*mdulo*)

## Etymology

**Kamundi** is a 'night ape', the lesser galago (Allen's galago). It belongs to the lemur family and is one of the smallest of the species of bush baby. Chewa oral tradition also remembers an important chief of the name Kamundi who resided near the Msinja shrine (Lilongwe). He was the consort of the spirit wife *Makewana*. He was guardian of the young girls who came to the Msinja shrine as emissaries of rain (*matsano*). Kamundi also embodied the mythical snake *Thunga* of the *Chisumphu* cult, who mated with *Makewana* at the end of the girls' initiation ceremony in order to mark the end of their coolness and to unlock their fertility. For this occasion, Kamundi was wrapped in blackened bark cloth to resemble *Thunga* in appearance. Kamundi was required to keep sexual abstinence all the year around, except for this special ceremony, which took place at the end of the puberty rite. Failure to keep sexual taboos and abuse of the young maidens were punishable by the death penalty. The Dedza area also knows another chief of the same name who was renowned for his cruelty. The two chiefs from Msinja and Dedza appear at first impression unrelated, but chieftaincy of Dedza most likely took its origin at Msinja.

## Description

The character of **Kamundi** wears a head cover made of bark cloth dyed black and a skin painted black for the face. A small cowlick of cooked feathers stands at the front of his head to express his masculinity. Bells tied to his wrist and ankles emphasise his movements and his importance. **Kamundi** appears exclusively for funeral and commemoration rites. The character takes its origin from the Dedza plateau and it was imported around the lakeshore in the late 1930s, only to vanish from the arena around the mid 1950s. **Kamundi's** dancing style resembles that of Kapoli. He swerves his feet, but also jumps on one leg and makes the bells around his ankles ring. His dancing style portrays him as a handicapped person: he limps. Both men and women announce his appearance with the following: "*This is the one who has come! (The cruel) Kamundi has come!*" **Kamundi's** presence is noteworthy for his syncopated movements and the distance he keeps from the audience. He does not dance at the centre of the *bwalo*, but rather to one side, reflecting his ruthless behaviour. He is hard, bitter and lacking compassion. His black face expresses this. As a chief (the flywhisk) he is unpopular with his people because he refuses them access to the graveyard. He is proud, selfish and cruel. The character of **Kamundi** was created in order to mock and to repudiate his ugly attitude as a leader of his community. The song alludes to the infamy of the cruel chief: "*Here he comes, (the cruel) Kamundi!*" The cowlick on the head of the mask is a clear sexual reference and evokes the connection with the **Kamundi** of Msinja. Also, the theme of sexual prohibition is obvious in the blackness of the mask and the bark cloth of the costume. **Kamundi's** unpopularity with his community could well be referring to the fact that the chief, incumbent at the shrine, has infringed the sacred rules prohibiting sex with the young maidens (*matsano*) or with *Makewana* herself, who could not have a human husband as the spirit wife of *Chisumphu* (God). Moreover, **Kamundi** had to keep celibacy for fear of compromising the efficacy of the rain rituals and the transition of the initiates. In this perspective, the character of **Kamundi** will be addressing the issue of the *mdulo*. The teaching behind **Kamundi** would be reinforcing the importance of sexual taboos on the occasion of rites of passage such as those of puberty and death.

## Song

*"Suyo wabwerayu eae! Suyo wabwerayu Kamundi!"*

## Source

Interviews in 1989, 1991 and 2007