

Mafutso

(A reddish mask for women from the Dedza and Mua areas)

Themes

- 1) Sexual taboos (*mdulo*)
- 2) Women's cycle instructions

Etymology

Mfutso (plural **mafutso**) refers to vegetable leaves that are sun dried and kept for the dry season when vegetables are rare.



Description

Mafutso belongs to the category of female masks danced by the mistress of initiation (*namkungwi*) or her assistants on the occasion of the female puberty ritual (*chinamwali*). The function of **Mafutso** resembles that of Namwali tiye (Mua) and Chinkhombé (Dedza). The mask (25 cm.) is reddish or dark in colour to emphasise sexual prohibition and uncleanness. The mask itself can be improvised with fibres or carved from wood. When it is wood, the face is that of an unhappy husband who is pouting because his wife is unavailable (sexually). He shows wrinkles on his forehead, deep labial lines alongside an African nose and a small moustache. The expression is severe and the face portrays discontent. The mouth shows protest. The headgear of the mask comprises feathers, a sisal wig (dyed black) or fertilizer bag laces. The hairstyle is topped with a short hair lock made of similar material, feathers or green leaves, suggesting the male organ. In contrast, the head is partly covered with a decorative scarf. **Mafutso** wears a woman's dress and waves a handkerchief. From the navel to the groin, she exhibits numerous strings of beads, just like those Chewa women wear under their outer clothing. On her pubis, **Mafutso** wears a construction that resembles a hygienic towel, symbolising her condition.

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She dances the *chisamba* with other senior women and the initiates on the occasion of female initiation. The women sing: "**Mafutso**, *this is why he forces you! He is always ready (to have sex). He wants to have sex all the time.*" The song reprimands Mafutso for her dress code that is provocative to men. She should be more careful since she is undergoing her menses. She should dress more soberly and avoid drawing attention to her body. The double personality of the character shows up, in its face, in the eagerness of the husband who wants to have sex. The costume and the dance emphasise that the wife is experiencing her cycle and that sex is forbidden. The timing is not absolutely predictable. The mere presence of **Mafutso** at the initiation and her hip dance provide women with rules of conduct sanctioned by the spirit world. During their periods, women have to refuse their husbands and are not to indulge in sex for fear of killing their partners with the *mdulo* disease. The advice forwarded by **Mafutso** belongs to an important body of instructions tantamount to the Chewa way of regulating sex. It is called the *mdulo* complex, whereby 'cool' (women in menstruation) and 'hot' (sex) are considered to exist in a situation of mutual avoidance of each other. Their encounter results in the 'slimming disease' by which the person in the hot condition eventually dies by wasting away if he is not treated promptly.

The character of **Mafutso** is rarely seen today. Many of the female masquerades of the *chinamwali* are appearing with less frequency than in the past. The two main reasons seem to be found in the time factor and the economic pressure of modern life. Formerly, the initiation would extend over a period of weeks, but thereafter was reduced to three or four days. Today, it lasts only one or two days, which does not allow the full ritual to unfold. Shortcuts are made and significant sequences of instruction are dropped. Besides, the rising cost of commodities needed for feeding the participants has become prohibitive. Today hardly any family can afford to feed a large party of people for so many consecutive days. Consequently, a character like **Mafutso** is increasingly forgotten. Nevertheless, the *mdulo* rules are still very much at the heart of most of the rural Chewa population, even though at the beginning of the third millennium they have been relaxed somewhat. Despite the disappearance of **Mafutso**, the ancestors continue to teach the importance of mutual concern within marriage.

Song

"Mafutso, eae m'kuona alimbira! Alibe nthawi yake. Amatha kulowa nthawi iliyonse."

Source

Interview in 1991