

Mazengera

(A brown day mask from Mua)

Themes

- 1) Danger of ambition
- 2) Justice prevails
- 3) Lies, trickery & deception
- 4) Improper behaviour of strangers

Etymology

Mazengera is the name of a Chewa chief of the 19th century.



Description

Mazengera was an unimportant Chewa chief from Banda stock who ruled around Nkhoma before Chiwere, the paramount of the Jere Ngoni, settled at Mvera. During the Ngoni raids, Mazengera and his people hid themselves in the Nkhoma hills, where Chiwere never subjugated them. In the 1850s, the fact that Mazengera remained undefeated and offered refuge to the surrounding Chewa villages conferred on him greater status. His success at remaining undefeated was attributed to the fact that he traded slaves for guns with the Yao and Swahili. Mazengera's new position in the area was perceived by the local people as usurpation of power, engineered by cleverness and profiteering. The name of Mazengera is sometimes used as a nickname for somebody who wins a case over an adversary.

The mask of **Mazengera** (28 cm.) is only thirty years old in the Mua area. Its origin is traced to Nkhoma. The features show an aged bald man with an asymmetrical face and ears at an uneven level. His face is twisted, especially the mouth, which shows aggressive teeth and an ambiguous smile. He bites his lower lip as a sign of shame that his dishonesty has been discovered. These details suggest that he has a distorted personality and lacks honesty. His eyes are set well apart and look outward, giving him a lost expression. His nose is heavy and flat. A thick moustache hides his upper lip. His half-bald head is encircled with an orange headgear made of dyed sisal. He wears the usual *gule* tattered suit. He carries a flywhisk in his hand to signify his chiefly status. He dances with it in such a manner as to pretend that all the people around are his. His song states

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that he is a winner: “He won, **Mazengera**, this year! He made history! He won, **Mazengera!** Everybody talks about him!”

The character of **Mazengera** dances at any ritual. His role is to warn of ambitious strangers who come to the village with their gifts and talents. They pretend to come (like **Mazengera**) to help but, in the end, through manipulation, they help themselves and take advantage of the situation. They steal property or women, and even seize power from the village authority. They become tyrants who perpetuate injustice and dishonesty.

Song

“Wawina **Mazengera** o tate, chaka chino! Mbiri ndi yawo tate de! Wawina **Mazengera!**”

Sources of information

Interviews in 1990 and 1993

Reference

Ntara, S.J. 1973 [1944 original]. *The History of the Chewa (Mbiri ya Achewa)*. Translated in English by W.S. Kamphandira Jere. Notes by Harry W. Langworthy. Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH: Wiesbaden. p. 28, pp. 61-63