

N'chini ukalira

(A cream or pink day mask from the Mua and Dedza areas)

Themes

- 1) Dishonesty, theft & robbery
- 2) Hypocrisy/split personality/duplicity
- 3) Injustice
- 4) Murder
- 5) Witchcraft

Etymology

N'chini ukalira means, 'when the maize mill is running'.



Description

This medium-size pink mask (25 cm.) portrays a middle-aged man with a few wrinkles on the forehead and with a moustache. His nose is straight but shows a little protrusion toward the tip. His mean mouth reveals tiny teeth on the upper jaw. His small ears suggest deafness to others. His chin slants abruptly toward the neck which is covered with a tiny piece of cloth. The mask displays two black and white striped short horns. The headgear is made of Samango monkey skins. These details imply antisocial behaviour associated with the wilds and witchcraft. The character wears a shirt and a pair of trousers made of jute and tattered with rags of various colours. His costume is often enhanced with fertiliser bag lace armlets and leglets. For his performance, the character carries weapons (such as a ceremonial axe) to portray an ugly and aggressive personality and a flywhisk to show that he is a man of status. He also wears a headband, signifying that he performs mainly during funeral and commemoration rites or similar rites that incorporate initiation ceremonies.

The dance of **N'chini ukalira** is a demonstration of power and pride. In the arena he behaves like Mfumu yalimbira, the chief's rival, pretending to be in the highest position. He swerves his feet with arrogance and anger, slapping his flywhisk on the ground. He brandishes his weapon savagely. At the end of his performance, he falls with one knee on the ground to signify that he fears nobody and is ready to commit murder in order to execute his plans. While our character is busy showing off, the men sing the following riddle, "*When the maize mill is running, what is most*

important is that you have milled. In the mouth, there is no lump which can't be chewed (if left unground), when the maize mill is running." The song seems to praise the achievement of having a maize mill in the village, but in fact it implies that flour from the maize mill is no better than maize ground in the mortar, since both leave particles of unground maize and lumps of flour.

The maize mill mentioned in the song voices the reaction of the people of Njuchi village of Dedza district at the introduction of the first of these machines in their village. The negative tone of the song is to be matched with the bad character of **N'chini ukalira**, reflected in the pink colour of the mask and the fearsome look of horns and wild animal headgear. All these details suggest an equivocal attitude toward its owner. The maize mill of Njuchi was installed in 1994 by Ernest Phiri, the second-born son of Mlombwa Phiri, District Chairman of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) in Dedza. Mlombwa Phiri had been the right hand of John Tembo and the ruling government for a long time. He had enriched himself during the period that Mozambican refugees sought a home around Dedza in the 1980s. He acquired houses, a garage, lorries and cars. Mlombwa was involved in plotting subversive activities to sabotage the introduction of a multiparty system, for which the ruling party generously rewarded him. These secret activities included intimidation, organised robbery, manipulated car accidents and murder. Such an incident occurred at Mua market in October 1992. Two innocent women were killed by mercenaries employed by Mlombwa Phiri to discredit a multiparty system.

Toward the end of 1992, Mlombwa was charged and jailed for killing a policeman at his home near Dedza. With the referendum and the general elections of 1993 and 1994, the MCP and the ruling government were in no position to obtain the release of Mlombwa and he was sentenced to life imprisonment. He was only released under the new regime in 1998 because of poor health due to diabetes. He died at the beginning of the following year. During the years he spent in jail he left his wealth to his sons. Ernest invested his share in buying maize mills. He installed a number of mills around the villages of Dedza district using money from his father.

The reaction of the people of Njuchi toward their maize mill (installed by Ernest in 1994) reveals deep fear of a machine that has been purchased with blood money and witchcraft. That is why they preferred pounding their own maize instead of taking advantage of his mill. They believed that Mlombwa had learned witchcraft and that this had increased his power and wealth. They felt he had passed on the art of witchcraft to his son, who had become a witch as dangerous as his father. This is why Ernest's mask shows the hostile features of two horns and a mane made of wild animal skins. The monkey skins reflect the people's belief that **N'chini ukalira** is a thief. His mask is pink or red to represent its owner as a stranger and a witch. His antisocial behaviour makes him a stranger to his own fellow Chewa. Moreover, the people of Dedza district trace his origin across the border to Mozambique. His black horns striped with white tell of his murderous behaviour, which is disguised under an honest and honourable appearance. The mask is adorned with a funeral headband to reveal his false sympathy for the relatives of those he has killed through his sorcery. So the people of Njuchi prefer to pound their maize because they are afraid of falling under his influence. They fear being reported to the party and becoming the victim of his political machinations. They may end up in gaol, hanged and their souls made slaves in his many maize mills throughout Dedza. They know their maize mill has been acquired at a very high cost in terms of lives and the misery of their tribe and countrymen. This is the reason why such a machine cannot function properly and leaves particles of maize unground.

The mask that represents such an evil person is perceived as dangerous, even to the dancer who performs it. He has to protect himself with ritual coolness and to abstain from sexual activity, since the character is seen as hot with the blood of the innocents. Ultimately our character teaches that development achieved through antisocial behaviour is not development at all. It cripples the population with fear and suspicion and prevents harmony from flourishing in its midst. The ancestors cannot bless the evil doers and they end up miserable like the most Honourable Party Chairman, Mr. Mlombwa Phiri.

Song

*“O tate **N’chini ukalira** ee n’chikulu mwagaya. M’kamwa mulibe mseche... **N’chini ukalira.**”*

Source

Interviews in 2000 and 2001