

Padza Achakoma

(A black day mask from the Mua area)

Themes

- 1) Banda – Phiri relations
- 2) Relations with Christian church
- 3) Greed
- 4) Jealousy/envy
- 5) Colonial period politics
- 6) Rivalry for authority
- 7) Selfishness/self-centredness



Etymology

Padza Achakoma means, 'Here comes Mr. Nice.'

Description

There is typical Chewa irony in the name of this character. The mask (60 cm.) is large and purposely bigger than that of Chadzunda, the chief of the spirit world. The mask is black except for a band of red that runs under the chin. The head is bald to emphasise that he is a senior man. The headgear is made of skins of wild and domestic animals. The face presents a bare forehead, a broad fat nose and a strong chin. **Padza Achakoma** smiles but reveals hostile-looking teeth. His eyes are cunning and boastful. His large and jutting ears express that he is eager to hear gossip. The patch of red under the chin betrays that the mask used to be red. At the beginning of the 20th century, **Padza Achakoma** was black. A few decades later it had turned red. A few masks of either colour are still kept in the villages but are rarely used. Changes have also occurred with regard to his costume. In the distant past **Padza Achakoma** was wearing a kilt made of skins or strips of baobab bark. He smeared clay or ashes on his body and wore leglets and armlets of various vegetable fibres. During the 1920s this costume was replaced by a heavy army coat over a tattered suit. This new outfit matched his red face. Similarly, **Padza Achakoma** used to carry a flywhisk to symbolise his chiefly status. It was replaced by a chief's record book (*kaundula*). In this book, the chief was to record the names of his people, their births, their deaths and the names of all tax defaulters.

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Padza Achakoma entered the arena limping like Chadzunda, whose chair he grabbed and sat on, to express his secret intention of dethroning him. He danced in a style similar to Chadzunda, though his dancing was inferior to Chadzunda's. He behaved arrogantly. Several songs characterise his attitude and his competitive behaviour. The men sang: 1) "*Who is inside the enclosure and wears a civet cat's skin (like that of the chief)? This is (he who is called) Here comes Mr. Nice.*" Another version of this song is: 2) "*Who is inside the enclosure frying the meat that is reserved for the chief? This is (he who is called) Mr. Nice!*" To this song, the women replied: 3) "*He has eaten the leftovers of the child's food! As if I had left it for you, 'chief Chadzunda'! Here comes Mr. Nice!*" All these songs reveal **Padza Achakoma's** covetous behaviour in competing with chief Chadzunda and envying his position. He steals the chief's royal skin, his insignia, his flywhisk or his book of village records, his food and his privileges. **Padza Achakoma** is jealous and greedy. He is also a glutton and selfish. He finishes all the food, leaving nothing for the children. He even eats what is left over for their breakfast of the following day. He steals the fried meat put aside for the chief. **Padza Achakoma's** greed manifests that he is planning to dethrone the chief. He plays the role of assistant (*nyakwawa*), but plots a coup. **Padza Achakoma** clearly is a rival of Chadzunda's authority, like Mfumu yalimbira. That is why he is portrayed with a larger head than that of Chadzunda. His dancing style and the insignia he carries confirm him as Chadzunda's rival. Elders testify that our character is as ancient as Chadzunda himself. In the past, his appearance was linked with funeral and commemoration rites and even spirit possession, but today he is rarely seen. In the Mua area his last appearance was in the 1970s.

The **Padza Achakoma** character was created in order to deter the power struggles that destroy the unity of the Chewa village. As an assistant of Chadzunda, he was supposed to support him and strengthen his authority. Instead **Padza Achakoma** uses his position in order to achieve the opposite. This theme is common and frequent throughout Chewa history. In the past, villages were prone to segmentation due to rivalry and jealousy. The rival of the chief broke away from the village and established his own.

The alteration of the colour (black to red) of the mask seems to reflect political changes in Chewa history. Before 900 AD, leadership belonged to the Banda clans, represented by the colour black. The Banda lost their position of leadership and ownership of the land with the arrival of the Phiri clan and the establishment of the Malawi state, represented by the colour red (the *Kalonga* being the custodian of fire). The Banda loss of power, reflected by the change of the colour black to red, was conveyed in the context of *gule wamkulu* through the personality of **Padza Achakoma**. The chief's rival was no longer a Banda (black) but the Malawi king himself (red). The shift of the mask colour plus a few alterations of costume and performance became a weapon for mocking the efforts of the Malawi to centralise power during that period.

As previously mentioned, the same phenomenon occurred at the turn of the 20th century. Elders report that **Padza Achakoma's** colour reverted to black and back to red a few decades later. The more recent use of western clothes and the chief's record book convey that Chewa leadership had received another blow with the advent of colonial rule and the missions. The villagers in the area of Mua had to cope with both groups: with Mua Mission (founded in 1902) and with the authority of the District Commissioner of Dedza. Soon the colonial government began intruding into village life by imposing hut tax collection, army recruitment, punishments for crimes of all sorts and, above all, fees and reforms, or even bans, concerning *gule wamkulu*. The mission also showed great intolerance for Chewa cultural practices and for the 'great dance' in particular. Missionaries

often tried to influence government policies in this respect and put pressure on the T.A. and chiefs. That is why a character like **Padza Achakoma** identified with the red intruders and dressed in European fashion. He carried the chief's book, which had been forced on the chiefs by the D.C. himself. **Padza Achakoma's** large head, his western clothes and his provocative dancing, demonstrate ostentatiously that he had supplanted Chadzunda, the head of the spiritual world and the Chewa native chiefs. At each of **Padza Achakoma's** appearances, both the colonial officials and the missionaries were mocked, and the Chewa voice of protest was heard. The 'western rival chief' was ruling their land and weakening the authority of their own chiefs. The Chewa were claiming back the ownership of their country.

Songs

- 1) *"Kuli yani ku mpanda wovala nguwo ya chombwe? Nd'a **Padza Achakoma!**"*
- 2) *"Kuli ndani ku mpanda wootcha nyama n'ya afumu? A **Padza Achakoma** o tate! (2x)"*
- 3) *"Wadya mkute wa mwana tate mwa iwe? Monga adaikira ine afumu a Chadzunda. **Padza Achakoma!**"*

Source

Interviews in 1990, 2001 and 2002