

Talerere

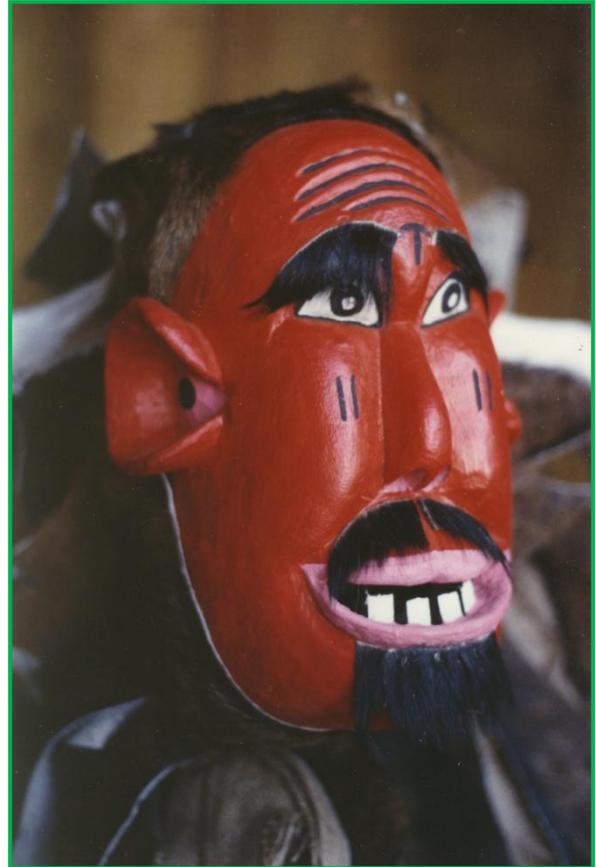
(A red day mask from the Mitundu area - Chimera Village, T.A. Msinja)

Themes

- 1) Faithfulness
- 2) Residing at husband's home (*chitengwa*)
- 3) Caution against infertility in marriage/infertile people should not marry
- 4) Orphans

Etymology

Talerere means, 'Let us care for the child.' It can also be translated, 'caretaker'.



Description

This medium size red mask (35 cm.) portrays a senior man with many wrinkles on his broad forehead. He has a long narrow curved nose, thick lips and a wide naively smiling mouth with only four teeth on the lower jaw. The smile and the plump face indicate his success. The eyes are slanted and appear deceitful; and they are partly covered by thick eyebrows made of goatskin. The same material is used for his short goatee under the lower lips and the thick clean moustache. The mask has Chewa tribal marks. The large, pricked ears indicate that he is deaf to his wife's complaints. The headgear of the mask is made of goatskins to symbolise that he belongs to the village and his progeny is his own. The character wears a plain jute shirt and trousers stitched with tatters of various colours. He carries a flywhisk to show that he is not an *mkamwini*. He lives at his parents' home where he is his own master. This is where he has taken his wife to live with him (*chitengwa*).

While dancing he spends time flirting with other women and looking under their *chitenjes*. He roams around them and moves his hips lasciviously to seduce them and to obtain sexual favours. He performs at most rituals and party meetings, but he does not join in the *chinamwali* because of his bad example and his appalling family life. The song sung by the men expresses the complaint of his wife, who has had enough of his poor performance as a husband: "*Is he going (again) to fetch another child (to have an affair)? I just keep caring for them, because I have gone to reside at his home (chitengwa), a servant, me! There he goes again to fetch another child, my friend! That's why I cannot find sleep with such a husband. This is not the way to behave, the way he does! To be*

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*the caretaker of children five times! I am the one who is fed up! I will simply leave! There are many (other) women! Let me not be a caretaker of children, **Talerere**, Mr. Let us care for the child!"*

Talerere was created in the 1940s, corresponding to a rise in economic prosperity due possibly to tobacco farming around Lilongwe. Men who had a better income could put pressure on their wives to reside at their own homes (*chitengwa*) rather than move to their wives' villages (*chikamwini*). Above all, helped by an income, they could secure the right of ownership over their children (*chiwongo*).

The song of **Talerere** focuses on one of these women who was confronted with such a choice. She has fallen in love with a man who looked prosperous (a tattered suit with rags and the red colour of the mask, which identify him with someone of high status like a westerner). She married him and moved to his village where she was promised a happy life. The reality proved to be very different. Soon she discovered that she was barren and could not have children. Disappointed with her, **Talerere** became unfaithful and was involved in countless affairs. He used his wealth to attract girls and to promise them marriage. He gave them children but then abandoned them. After he had paid the adultery fine required by the court, he bribed the chief and the family head to secure rights over the children. He then brought them to his home for his barren wife to care for. This had already happened five times and now **Talerere** is involved in his next love affair, so his wife knows that the sixth child is on the way. She has no peace of mind. She wants to leave him and his children. She wishes to go back to her home, refusing to care for the children who are not hers. **Talerere's** behaviour is irresponsible and selfish. He enjoys the status of father but refuses to care for his own children. He dumps them on his 'servant' who receives no gratitude for her service. She lives alone most of the time, deprived of the companionship of a husband, even a husband who does not love her.

This character of *gule* suggests that a marriage without children will ultimately break up. The children suffer most for having nobody to care for them. The character also evokes sympathy for **Talerere's** wife and for the women who have to live in the *chitengwa – chiwongo* set up. The mask reaffirms the importance of the *chikamwini* institution for the Chewa. It also teaches mothers who have had children (even outside marriage) not to abandon them. More laterally, the character warns husbands that they should not marry a woman who has already had children. When these children get bigger they will not look to him as their real father. In a family where love is absent, children can be orphans even when their parents are still alive.

Song

*"Apitanso kodi (2x) kuti akatenge wina mwana de? Ndingolera ndine chifukwa ndakhala kwao tate de, ndzakazi ndine! Uko apita atenga mwana, anzanganu! Mchikhala ine sindikugona tulo ndi abambowa! Sikukhala komwe akuchitako! **Talerere** mwana kasanu tate de! Ndatopa ine! Ndingochoka! Akazi ngambiri! Ine ndisakhale **Talerere** mwana tate de! **Talerere**."*

Source

Interview in 1992

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