

Tatchipa lero or Akapolo alerofe

(A red day mask from the Mua area)



Themes

1) Dishonesty, theft & robbery 2) Greed 3) Human trafficking 4) Recent politics 5) Sale of land and land grabbing 6) Slavery

Etymology

Tatchipa lero is corruption of the English for, 'We have become cheap today.' **Akapolo alerofe** means, 'We the slaves of modern days.'

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Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art, Mua Parish, P. O. Box 41, Mtakatika, Malawi



Description

The character of **Tatchipa lero** features a double personality: the aggressor and the victim of the aggression. The red face depicts an ugly person: distorted and leering features, puffed out cheeks, an aggressive mouth with threatening teeth and large tusks which protrude from both jaws. Red symbolises violence and the fact that he is antisocial: he transgresses the *mwambo*, which is the code of behaviour prescribed by the ancestors. A bald head and a wrinkled forehead denote a person who is senior both in age and in position. The deformed nose with a prominent nub on the bridge displays cruelty, perversity and untrustworthiness. The squinting, fiery, half-closed eyes suggest blindness and a definite lack of vision. The wart-like protrusions on the temples and on the ears manifest that the person uses tricks, hidden means and even evil medicines for perpetrating his evil deeds and his illegal transactions. The false enticing smile disguises cunningness and hostility. The teeth and the tusks betray aggression and a warlike tendency. The ill will is further emphasized by the black bristling moustache and a pointed black goatee, which covers the strong chin. The large, hairy and pricked ears highlight his deafness to any advice and criticism. The bald head at the back of the mask bulges out into a pair of buttocks and reveals that our character is

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involved in human trafficking for the sex trade. The headgear of the mask is made at the back with long human hair, which suggests the pretty girls who are sacrificed in the sex trade as sex workers and prostitutes. The front of the headgear is dominated by tricolour tatters in black, white and red, which embody the reprimand of the spirit world: black stands for a person of the land or evil deeds; white suggests the false show of honesty and a person of good reputation covering up crime and blood (red). Around his neck hangs a yoke, which suggests the traditional picture of a slave. The character wears a smart shirt, a tie and a stylish jacket. The pockets of the jacket are filled with dollar notes. In contrast, under the jacket, he wears only a dirty loincloth and leglets, which encompass his legs smeared with mud. This portrays the poverty and the wretchedness of the victim.

The character is recent (2012) and appears on any occasion where *gule* is performed except funerals and initiation rites. **Tatchipa lero** carries a club. He enters the *bwalo*, and starts taking money out of his pocket and distributing it to the ladies. He hands out pieces of paper which represent dollar bills. He dances in the style of Madimba, the gardener who exchanges vegetables for sexual favours. Then suddenly his dancing style changes to that of Kondola, the migrant labourer who travels to other countries where he contracts a sexual disease by pursuing the local women aggressively for sex. **Tatchipa lero** starts chasing the women and even the drummers to the four corners of the *bwalo*. The male choir sings for him: 1) *"We have become cheap today. We are for sale, oh! We have become cheap today. We have become cheap today like a wet cockerel, oh! **We the slaves of modern days!**"* (A wet cockerel has no value because it appears smaller than it really is.) To this song the women answer with the following: 2) *"Greed, greed. (We don't want to go) to America, no! Greed, greed. (We don't want) to run after others, no! (We don't want) to be deprived of our fields! Greed, greed. (We don't want) to have no nest of our own! Greed."* A different version runs: 3) *"Greed, greed. To trade children! Greed, greed. To take a fortune in money! Respectable people close their eyes! Greed, greed. A fortune in money has disappeared! Greed."*

The men's song tackles the lack of respect given to the poor and uneducated Malawian, who has become the slave of modern days. He can be traded and sold against mere cash. Irrespective of his appearance, like the wet cockerel appearing smaller than it really is, he can be sold at any price.

The women's songs are more explicit and deal with practical issues concerning modern slavery. In many districts young people are lured with the promise of bursaries for studies, or recruited for attractive jobs overseas, but frequently they end up being employed as sex workers in these foreign countries. This song comments on the people's propensity to accept meagre amounts of

money in exchange for land, in the hope of alleviating their poverty without realising the long term consequences. This scenario benefits only a small minority of big business interests. A similar scenario exists in relation to the trade in children. Often families cannot afford to provide for the basic needs of their children. Because of this predicament various districts have recorded the disappearance of children from their villages. It is believed that this trade in children goes on across the border into Mozambique. However, such issues are rarely published in the media.

The government and the general public regularly turn a blind eye to this practice owing to their obsession with accumulating personal wealth, and they ignore the misery which lack of education or employment inflicts on these children.

Lastly, the song provides a commentary on the poor economic performance of the previous government (of Bingu wa Mutharika), which claimed to have no money to alleviate the poverty of villagers, but was able to spend large sums on the petty, personal projects of ministers

“A fortune in money has disappeared” – “Tatchipa Lero” – comments sarcastically on the fact that poor people and even children in Malawi have little value. They have become expendable for the advantage of a few who can enjoy the valuable resources and secure a prosperous future.

“Greed” is the sin of the new generation of Malawians and others who have forgotten the advice of the ancestors. They have become greedy witches that survive from the life blood (red) of their relatives and their fellow Malawian. The character of **Tatchipa Lero** provides a reflection on the old slave trade that continues even in modern days under a more subtle guise.

Songs

- 1) *“Tatchipa lero, ndife malonda, eae Tatchipa lero, Tatchipa lero, ngati tambala wobumbwa, eae. Akapolo alerofo!”*
- 2) *“Dyera dyera. Kwa Merika toto! Dyera dyera. Kutamanga toto! Kulandidwa minda! Dyera dyera. Kusaona mbutu! Dyera.”*
- 3) *“Dyera dyera. Kugulitsa wana! Dyera dyera. Dzindalama tengu, makosana phuthi! Dyera dyera. Dzindalama sowu! Dyera.”*

Source

Interviews in 2012

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