

Tsala uzione

(A black day mask from the Pemba area)

Themes

- 1) Limits & restrictions of *chikamwini* system
- 2) Homelessness
- 3) Residing at husband's home (*chitengwa*)
- 4) Leadership from the mother's line

Etymology

Tsala uzione means, 'Stay behind and you will meet misfortune.'



Description

This black mask (30 cm.) shows the features of an old man, covered in tattoos and with wrinkled forehead. Bushy eyebrows and moustache are made of white hair and the long beard is grey. His mouth has large square teeth. The eyes are vivid and admonishing. The headgear is made of tatters and white sisal. He wears a sleeveless vest stitched with tatters, a kilt made of white sisal and leglets and armlets made of the same material, expressing his wretchedness. He carries heavy luggage in his hands and a traveller's stick. He says in his song: "*My child, I am going, stay behind with these strangers (if you want)! (3x) But since you don't want to listen...*"

This character of **Tsala uzione** is very ancient to the world of *gule*. It was already performing at Makankula village around 1958. **Tsala uzione** features at initiations, funerals and any other traditional village rituals. It has never been part of political rallies, since the character is sanctioned by sexual taboos for the dancers.

This old man portrays the secular wisdom of the Chewa concerning their tradition of uxori-local marriage (*chikamwini*) and the right of the mother to custody of the children. The song offers advice to wives who have taken temporary residence at their husband's home (*chitengwa*) and have brought up their children there. When a crisis erupts, the wife is chased away but the children remain behind because they are used to the surroundings. The wife complains bitterly because her children do not want to follow her to her own village. She warns them not to stay at

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their father's village. Later, these children will have no rights of their own. They will be denied gardens to cultivate and properties since they neither belong officially to their father nor live in their mother's village, where they would be granted these rights. They will remember the advice of their mother but it will be too late. If they decide to go to their mother's home, they will be sent back to where they do not belong. They will lack both roots and a future.

The dancer expresses the uncertain future of the children through his brisk jumping movements in the Chadzunda style. He runs after the women in the arena, grabbing their *chitenjes* and scarves and throwing them away, just like the parents who refuse to welcome the child to their respective homes. Moreover, the dancer carries a heavy bag to express that he is homeless. He is welcome neither at his father's nor his mother's village. He has become a homeless wanderer. The Chewa think that it is unwise for children to be in the custody of their father and see dangers in the *chitengwa* practice that has become prominent over the *chikamwini* system since the 1950s.

Song

*"Mwana wanga, inetu ndapita ine, utsale uzione ndi alendowa! Koma kusamvako e tate **Tsala uzione** ndi alendowa! (3x) Koma kusamvako."*

Source

Interview in 1999