

Zembo

(A black day mask from the Pemba area)

Themes

- 1) Inevitability of death
- 2) Evil reaps its just desserts (*choipa chitsata mwini*)
- 3) Inequality
- 4) Responsible leadership
- 5) Recent politics
- 6) Witchcraft to maintain/enhance one's own position (*kukhwima*)

Etymology

Zembo means, 'avoidance'. Here it conveys that no one can avoid the grave.



Description

The tall oblong mask (45 cm.) portrays an old Chewa with tribal marks, who carries a flywhisk to manifest his high status but also reveals a witch. The mask is black to emphasise deeds of darkness. Two white horns (30 cm.) stand on top of the head to convey the use of medicine to maintain power. The person is portrayed as bald, wrinkled and fearsome. His deep-set eyes are hidden under drooping eyebrows expressing fierceness. His elongated angular nose and his protruding cheeks converge toward a wide sadistic mouth displaying two teeth. A heavy greyish moustache and a well-furnished goatee cover the entire chin. All these details reinforce the threatening look of **Zembo**. In contrast, **Zembo** wears a dirty pair of jute trousers and a torn shirt that has once been white. **Zembo** carries a walking stick and a mock sisal flywhisk implying that he aspires to royalty.

Zembo was introduced in *gule* rituals at the end of the 1960s. By the 1990s, **Zembo** regained popularity by joining political rallies. His dancing style is similar to that of Simoni, the colonial administrator, who was once popular in the 1920s. **Zembo** differs from Simoni in the way he swerves his feet. He moves in a reserved fashion and keeps jumping, waving his flywhisk as if he is afraid of death. At a certain moment, he falls on his belly in the arena, and then crawls to the audience, which throws tokens to him such as small coins. When **Zembo** departs, he limps as if he has been injured.

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

The male singers shed light on his behaviour: *“But you, people, do not play with horns! When the chief (the ruler) plays with horns, he does not grow old! He does not grow white hair, he does not need a walking stick! The dead are not jealous! When it comes to this one (Zembo), despite his good behaviour and his God fearing attitude, this is why he encountered these (misfortunes). The dead are not jealous, are not jealous! No one can avoid the grave (death)!”*

The song brings the wisdom of the elders who advise younger rulers and the population at large not to use evil medicine and crimes to maintain their position and power. Their ruthless leadership will precipitate their own downfall and death. They will be dethroned, poisoned or even killed by their own witchcraft. The song contrasts the world of the dead with that of the living. In the graveyard, the dead are quiet and do not seek revenge. This logic is analogous to the Malawian political scene after Independence. There were countless murders and suspicious activities that allowed Kamuzu Banda to retain power and to clear the way for his thirty years of ‘wise leadership’. When **Zembo** regained popularity, at the beginning of the nineties, history was seen to repeat itself with the advent of multiparty democracy. Some heads would have to fall. The dead remain silent but the living, who were motivated by their own selfishness, began to fear for their safety.

Zembo, under the parable of the traditional leadership of the village, warns young politicians in the making that their success depends much more on ruling fairly than on putting their trust in the power of horns. They should invest their energy in serving their people’s needs instead of serving their own interests and pursuing their own personal agendas. One has to meditate on **Zembo**’s words and to avoid turning the population into martyrs who remain quiet in the graveyard while the living use any type of horns to hold on to power. One day the tide will turn and evil will point back to its owner: *“No one can avoid the grave.”*

Song

*“E tate (2x) koma ana inu musagwire nyanga tate! Mfumu ikagwira nyanga sikalamba tate! Simera imvi, sigwira ndodo iyayi! Akumanda alibe mseche! Chikhala awa, n’kukoma kwawoko n’kuopa kwawoko, ndi chifukwa aona izi tate. Akumanda, akumanda alibe mseche tate! Ku manda kulibe **Zembo!**”*

Source

Interview in 1992