

Chakana

(A yellow day mask from the Dedza area)

Themes

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

Etymology

Chakana means, 'He was not accepted.'



Description

This yellow mask (30 cm.) portrays an *mkamwini* (the wife's husband, or son-in-law) who is considered a stranger in his wife's village, even though he has been a long term resident there. In spite of his qualities and seniority, he is reduced to keeping a low profile and having little influence. He may aspire to chieftainship or to a leadership position in the community or in the church but he is bypassed because of being an outsider, a foreigner coming from another village. A small tuft of hair on top of his head mocks his false power. An otter or a monkey's skin at the back of his head shows his position of outsider, like the animals of the river or the bush. The mask features a mature face, a bald head and a long beard made of sisal, portraying that the person has lived in the village of his wife for a long period. The character wears a white cassock with an imposing rosary around his neck, and carries a Bible in his hand. His energetic dancing attempts to convince the audience of his capacity and his talents. He goes around the *bwalo* and flips through his book blessing the crowd, but they roar with laughter, refusing to take him seriously. The men sing this song in his name, "Mr. **Chakana** (the one who is not accepted) used to say, 'Look at me, my friends, in my old age. For me, I would have liked to be a chief, but for your chieftainship you choose only young people and not old ones (like me). You choose within the family group and not an *mkamwini*. What can an outsider say?' (**Chakana** said:) 'Let me go away! Mr. **Chakana**, the one who is not accepted!'"

The song refers to the role of the village headman who is chosen according to his maternal bloodline. For the Chewa, a man's family group is determined through his maternal uncle.

www.kasiyamaliro.org

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

Succession to the chieftainship is not possible in the place where a man resides, since a husband follows his wife to her village (*chikamwini*) and he does not belong to the same bloodline as the family group into which he has married. His link to the village where he marries serves only to put him in the position of an outsider. He is eligible to become a chief only at his home village, which he left when he married. **Chakana**'s cassock, the rosary he wears and the book he lectures from, suggest the possibility of participation in a parallel leadership structure, which is separate from that of the village. When the mainstream Christian churches appeared in the country, they trained local leaders in the form of catechists and elders of various kinds, who then took charge of the different communities and villages. Their choice of church leaders was partly dictated by the village structure and by the influence they could have on the community. The Christian principles that missionaries applied for their selection were not based on bloodlines. Nevertheless, the community in charge of selecting these leaders often linked leadership to the place of birth (*mbadwa*). **Chakana** as a church leader is a failure. He is not taken seriously because he is seen as a stranger. The only choice open to him is to return home, where the opportunities of authority are open to him. Provided that his wife and his wife's family agree, he may take his family to his own village (*chitengwa* in contrast to *chikamwini*). If permission is refused, he will have to move back as a bachelor. Following the Chewa thinking, one can hardly be a leader if unmarried. Under the preacher's white cassock, **Chakana** spells out this dilemma of the Chewa matrilineal system and the uxori-local pattern of residence of the husband. Through **Chakana**, the stranger, the spirit world of the Chewa is ready to back up their social order and their leadership policies.

This character is exclusively performed at the ceremony of the enthronement of a chief and at his funeral rites. As these occasions are infrequent, this character is rarely seen. Owing to the heavy sexual taboos the dancer must follow, the character was reserved for senior dancers. Younger dancers were excluded from performing it. The onerous cost of securing a cassock for **Chakana**'s performance may have contributed to his vanishing from the arena of *gule wamkulu*.

Song

*"A **Chakana** amanena tandionani anzanganu, ndakalamba. Koma ine ufumu ndimachita kuufuna, ufumu mupatsa anyamata, asali akulu tate. Kadzinguona eni ake **Chakana** mkamwini amati anenenji, tate de? Ndingochoka ndine **Chakana Chakana**."*

Source

Interview in 1992