**Chalera**

(An orange day mask from the Dedza area)

**Themes**

1) Dishonesty, theft & robbery  
2) Infertility – impotence  
3) Jealousy/envy  
4) Promiscuity

**Etymology**

*Chalera* means, ‘that which is lost or weak’. It is also a play on the word *kucherera*, which refers to the movement of the cock that circles the hens.

**Description**

This orange mask (30 cm.) portrays a senior man. He has wrinkles on the forehead and is bald. A white painted circle tops his bald head, showing the reflection of the sun on his scalp. His face is swollen and his nose wide with flared nostrils. His mouth has missing teeth and turned-in lips. His headgear is made of white tatters and black sisal. He wears the regular tatter suit and carries a whip or a flywhisk. **Chalera** dances aggressively sideways and swerves his feet, imitating the movement of the cock that circles the hens (*kucherera*). He strikes his arms as if he is fighting, posing to the women.

**Chalera** is known in Chewa history as a Phiri chief who left the kingdom of Kalonga, situated on the plain, and settled on the plateau near Bunda. He was the brother of Chief Mwase Mkwagwawala from Kasungu. **Chalera** gave Mwase hospitality when he left with Chadza Phiri for the Mchinji hills. Mwase is reported to have quarrelled with **Chalera** before leaving Bunda. The songs sung for Chalera make allusions to such quarrels: 1) “**Chalera** is fighting for the land as if it were his own, like the cock around the hens,” or 2) “Some are full of pride because of chieftainship, as if their small throne were made for **Chalera** to sit on.” The song sung by the women shifts the quarrel from ownership of land to ownership of women: 3) “*Have you seen the illegitimate pregnancy? Joy! But is it from this one? is it from that one? (Yes,) the child is born!” or 4) “*A husband was fed with mkweteko (love medicine). She fed (her husband) with mkweteko. **Chalera** ate it (and became strong) without his knowledge. **Chalera**, my dear, died with a swollen belly, **Chalera**, because of the mkweteko given by his wife. He died, **Chalera**! You woman, what did you...”

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think you were doing? He died with a swollen belly, Chalera. Her doings killed him, Chalera. He died because of eating mkweteko. He went on his way, Chalera.”

The first women’s song talks about the promiscuous behaviour of Chalera, who is responsible for an illegitimate pregnancy. The second describes Chalera as a playboy who seeks women’s favours and becomes the victim of his own sex appeal. He is given love medicine (mkweteko) by one of his numerous lovers. He dies from it; or he becomes impotent. Mkweteko is a well known love potion which is put in food in order to bind a man and a woman together and to discourage a man’s interest in other women.

The character of Chalera has a long history in the Dedza region and was brought down to the Mua region in 1951. The character was popular for funerals (especially those of the chiefs), commemoration rites, dambule and initiation ceremonies. Today, this character is rarely seen.

Chalera is a thief, an intruder (Phiri) as indicated by his orange face. He desires what is not his, including land, women and properties. In his old age, he behaves like a young rooster who wants to impress women and to steal other men’s wives. His promiscuous character attracts a just punishment: swelling, impotence and death. One of his girlfriends gives him mkweteko so that he will abandon his wife and love her only. The play on the words ‘cherera’ and Chalera suggests that his cock-like behaviour has made him weak and useless.

The character of Chalera expresses the ancestors’ advice discouraging theft, promiscuity and coveting a neighbour’s wife. The song sung by the women of Dedza aims to deter women from using mkweteko in order to bind their men, inviting them to reflect on the evil consequence of such a medicine.

Songs

1) “Chalera alimbira dziko monga n’lake cherera, cherera, cherera.”
2) “Wena akunyada ndi ufumu ngati ali ndi kawo kampando koti a Chalera akhalepo tate.”
3) “Mudaiona mimba ya chigololo! Koka ine, koka ine eal! Mwana wabadwa!” or “M’taiona mimba ya chigololo! M’taiona! M’taiona! M’taiona mimba ya chigololo,” or “Mudaiona mimba ya chigololo! Kaione! Kaione! Kaione aye! Kaione! Kaione aye!”

Source


Reference

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