

Chimaimba

(A red day mask from the Dedza area)

Themes

- 1) Limits and restrictions of *chikamwini* system
- 2) Reconciliation & mediation
- 3) Separating husband & wife (dangers of)
- 4) Troublemaking

Etymology

Chimaimba means, 'He keeps singing.' This is a euphemism for shouting or talking nonsense.



Description

The medium sized red mask (35 cm.) features an old man with a shameless face, mostly bald, wrinkles and grey eyebrows and moustache. The colour of the face suggests that he is a stranger who married into the village. The nostrils are flared, the eyes are angry and the mouth holds sharp teeth, suggesting aggression. His ears are small in proportion to the head, and this tells us that the character is unable or unwilling to listen to others. His chin is heavy and prominent, and the jowls are thick. **Chimaimba's** face has tribal marks on the forehead and chin. Five black protrusions are seen on his forehead, which indicate that he is the father of five children. The headgear and the body outfit are both made of tatters. He holds a flywhisk to demand respect and to claim power. Completing the outfit are white and grey skins hanging from the back of the head to remind us that he is self-righteous.

Entering the *bwalo*, **Chimaimba** dances with self-assurance. He swerves aggressively on the left foot and strikes the left arm with the flywhisk held in his right hand. He repeats the sequence on the right side. He projects great power and comes across as a dominant individual. He appeals to the audience to grant him respect and status despite residing in his wife's village. **Chimaimba** is a troublesome person, who is short tempered and prone to shouting and talking nonsense. He spends his nights

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drinking, and returns to his home angry and ready to quarrel. The situation is captured in the song of both the men and the women: 1) *“Mr. Keep singing roams around at night! This is not right, Mr. Keep singing. One should not keep roaming around at night! If it was me, I would inform the chief, I would even inform the mediator of (my) marriage, that my husband keeps singing! For me, I cannot sleep because of Mr. Keep singing!”* To this accusation the women add more grievances: 2) *“For me, Mr. Keep singing, a husband should not behave like this! I do not sleep at night (because) he keeps shouting (and arguing). If it was me, I would inform the chief or the mediator of (my) marriage.”*

Both songs present a dialogue between **Chimaimba**'s wife and a friend or family member. The husband neglects his responsibilities as a parent and is not contributing to the care of the five children. The wife has become frustrated and complains about her husband. After drinking every evening, he becomes abusive to his family and the whole community. This behaviour has gone on too long. The wife is advised to take her case to a mediator. The mediator (*nkhoswe*) is given to the couple at the time of their marriage and is usually the brother of either the bride or the groom. The wife has the second option of taking her complaints to the chief of the village. This is an example of the traditional approach to mediation, where pre-appointed individuals will be called upon to intervene in a marital dispute and attempt to reconcile the situation between feuding partners.

Chimaimba's wife wants a divorce. Her husband's behaviour cannot be forgiven and the marriage cannot be salvaged. The husband is struggling with the *chikamwini* (matrilineal system) and the loss of power and status in his life, and is acting out in a most inappropriate manner. The character of **Chimaimba** delivers his message at the occasion of funerals, commemorations and initiation rites. The character does not perform at political meetings or rallies. Elders of Dedza confirm that **Chimaimba** is an old timer of *gule*. His message is central to family life and the *chikamwini* system of the Chewa. The loud behaviour goes against the Chewa definition of husband: *“Kwa eni kulibe mkuwe – At someone else's home one does not raise the voice.”*

Songs

1) *“Chimaimba tate (2x) kuyenda usiku! Satero Chimaimba tate (2x) kuyenda usiku satero! Chikakhala ine, n'kanene ngakhale kwa mfumu n'kanene, ngakhale kwa ankhoswe n'kanene, kuti wamuna Chimaimba! Ine tate, ine tate sindimagona tatede Chimaimba (3x)!”*

2) *“Ine a Chimaimba, amuna satero de! Usiku sindinagone tate de kuchezero kulankhula tatede. Mchikhala ine, ndakanena tetede ngakhale kwa mfumu, ngakhale kwa ankhoswe.”*

Source

Interviews in 1992