

## Chimkwapulo (Mchanja)

(A red day mask from the Mchanja area)



### Themes

1) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change) 2) Faithfulness to the *mwambo* 3) Respect for human rights

### Etymology

**Chimkwapulo** means, 'the big whip', embodying the ancestor's power of castigation.

### Description

The character of **Chimkwapulo** from Mchanja differs from that of Golomoti with regard to its appearance and emphasis. However, its colour remains red, the royal colour symbolising chieftainship or blood. The Mchanja character displays dreadful features, full of horns erupting from all over the face and the head (40 cm.). Three scary horns protrude forward from the

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forehead, replacing the eyebrows. Another set of horns, on either side of the face, projects outward in front of the ears. Two more horns protrude forward from his massive jaw and chin, reproducing the 'v' sign for multiparty politics. The pointed nose projects from the face as an additional horn. Two tiny drooping moustaches flow from the nostrils. The eyes show suspicion and threat. The angular pointed lips project outward and develop into a huge mouth displaying aggressive teeth. The tiny ears suggest the deafness of the population to **Chimkwapulo's** message. The scary look of **Chimkwapulo's** features is reinforced by his headgear: this is made of tatters from which two long horns (30cm) stick out. The beastly appearance of **Chimkwapulo** is further rendered by a tatter suit embodying the dead and a person of high rank. This is made more explicit by the fact that **Chimkwapulo** carries whips and flywhisks. All of these insignia convey that our character stands for the ancestors' castigation and the chiefly position he claims.

The **Chimkwapulo** character appeared for the first time at the *bwalo* of Mchanja toward the beginning of the 1990s, when multiparty politics was introduced in the country through village rallies. It was a major shift for Malawi to move away from a one party state and to adopt multiparty politics. The members of the MCP party, the only party known so far, were campaigning against multiparty politics through these political rallies and were drawing a horrible picture of what was to come. The dreadful appearance of **Chimkwapulo** reflects this at first sight. Besides discrediting the multiparty system during such rallies, the MCP (in agreement with the ruling government) was responsible for creating unrest in chosen public places. Mua market witnessed robbery and recorded two victims in October 1991. Furthermore, two individuals were shot dead by AK 47 bullets provided by the Young Pioneers. Such disturbance was arranged to prove that multiparty politics would bring the country to war, as it was commonly said at that time (*Matipate ndi nkhondo*). The local party chairman of the MCP, responsible for the Mtakatika and the Mua areas, said publicly, during one of these rallies near Mua, that anyone sympathetic to the multiparty system would be dealt with by the ruling government of the time. Such talk and disturbance were part of the policy of the one party state and of the government of Kamuzu Banda: they were intended to instigate fear and to deter the population from adopting the new political system and democracy. In this context, the beastly look of **Chimkwapulo**, with horns protruding everywhere, conveys also the wickedness of Kamuzu Banda himself, who was addicted to power and could not care less about the wellbeing of his citizens. He would not allow anyone else to take over from him. This dark episode of the 1990s eventually led to the referendum in June 1993 and the general election in May 1994 in which democracy and the multiparty system were officially adopted by Malawi. The reign of terror of Kamuzu Banda and the one party state of the MCP were once for all brought to an end. The symbolic climax of this period was reached in the public burning of the black cockerel of the MCP in one of the local cities.

**Chimkwapulo's** appearance in *gule* is by privilege reserved for political rallies. Nevertheless, he produces himself also during initiation rites, funerals and other important ceremonies in the village. **Chimkwapulo** enters the *bwalo* with supreme aggression, swerving his feet with the self-

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confidence of Mandevu, the bearded one, the impudent colonial who cannot be shaken. Then **Chimkwapulo** breaks loose and starts chasing and threatening the women with his whips, dispersing them to the four corners of the arena. He impersonates the very behaviour of the government and of the MCP in using force instead of persuasion. The male choir sing for him an enigmatic song: 1) "*Achimkwapulo* (big whip), *shave your moustache which frightens the children!*" To this song the women answer with their own comment: 2) "*Achimkwapulo, go away from here, you frighten children! Let him go!*" Both versions of the song are identical in effect. The male version talks about shaving the moustache as an allegory for giving a facelift to the government whose evil frightens the young generation. The women's song is more explicit and demands that Kamuzu Banda should step down immediately. Under the appearance of an anti-multiparty character, Chimkwapulo enforces the general attitude of the Malawians, who at the beginning of the 1990s were ready for change and were eager to welcome a new party system. They were tired of the thirty years of Kamuzu Banda's rule and of his "iron fist" dictatorship. **Chimkwapulo** was one of the many *gule* characters that were born at that period. The oppression of the Malawi people had lasted too long. The ancestors with their whips were enforcing a new political system that would reinstate the *mwambo* and respect people and their rights.

### Songs

- 1) "*A Chimkwapulo tate, mumete ndevu, mutiopsezera tiwana!*"
- 2) "*A Chimkwapulo chokani pano, mutiwopsyera ana! Achokee!*"

### Source

Interviews in 2012