

Mwachokera ku mzinda?

(A black day mask from the Mua area)

Themes

- 1) Lack of community spirit
- 2) Compassion at funerals



Etymology

Mwachokera ku mzinda means, 'Do you come from town?'

Description

This 30 centimetre mask portrays an elderly man. The colour black signifies that he is a local man, a Chewa. The ugliness of his features signals a clash with the accepted code of morality. His crooked, sideways pointing nose and the few isolated teeth in his mouth highlight his distorted personality and behaviour. A heavy flat face exposes his laziness in attending the funerals of his relatives and neighbours. The large ears stress his deafness toward any criticism over his lack of solidarity with the community. The baboon skin headgear of his mask indicates his lack of compassion and marks him as an outsider to the villagers, 'a creature from the bush'.

Mwachokera ku mzinda? wears a worn and dirty blanket to cover his chest and a skin or rag loincloth around his waist. His body is smeared with ashes. He carries a branch as a walking stick, like an old man or person incapacitated by alcohol or drugs.

The character was introduced to the Mua area around the mid 1950s. Today, he has completely vanished and is forgotten. He performed at funeral rites and at shaving ceremonies when the house of the deceased was pulled down. In the *bwalo*, **Mwachokera ku mzinda?** hardly swerved his feet but showed the sluggish movements of a drunkard. The men sang for him: "Do you come

www.kasiyamaliro.org

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

from town? Has the chief come?!" The song reflects the question put to a person who behaves like a stranger to the village and does not join in community events such as grave-digging and funeral feasts. 'Do you come from town? Why do you hide and behave pretentiously as if you were a chief?'

The name of the character betrays a tone of mockery, suggesting that the person is a stranger in his own community. His selfish attitude cuts him off from the group. His isolation identifies him with a stranger from town who is ignorant of the customs (*mwambo*) of the village. People who absented themselves purposely from funerals were fined in order to remind them of their duty. If such behaviour becomes a habit, the villagers could boycott the funeral of any of their relatives or his own funeral when he dies.

Mwachokera ku mzinda? reminds the Chewa community of their sacred duty of solidarity concerning funeral rites. Sympathy at the time of death is a duty, and all villagers must mourn together (*maliro n'kulirana*).

Song

*"Dede **Mwachokera ku mzinda** dede? Kodi amfumu abwera?!"*

Source

Interview in 1992