

# Thengo liweta

(A red day mask from the Kaphiri area)

## Themes

- 1) Bad company
- 2) Dishonesty, theft & robbery
- 3) Evil reaps its just desserts (*choipa chitsata mwini*)
- 4) Social changes/insecurity
- 5) Witchcraft to steal

## Etymology

**Thengo liweta** means, 'The bush has formed you,' implying, 'You belong to the bush.'

## Description

**Thengo liweta** features a red mask (35 cm.) that portrays a senior man and a stranger. The character is half bald, wrinkled, with long drooping moustaches and a wild bushy goatee. This is the face of a thief, but one who conceals his crimes. One can observe below his dishonest eyes the numerous scarifications that reveal his use of medicines. **Thengo liweta's** ears are large and erect and his eyes are sharp, manifesting that he is always on the lookout and eager to listen to any stories that will lead him to acquire properties that are not his. The tattered headgear of the mask is concealed by a bunch of grass positioned on his head. This is to emphasise that the bush has become his home, where he retreats to camouflage and hide his suspicious behaviour. **Thengo liweta's** tatter suit is smart and gives the façade of his being an honest person. The sticks he carries, he uses to assault people and this betrays his true intentions.

The character of **Thengo liweta** was introduced in *gule* at the southern end of Lake Malawi in the mid 1980s, as a response to an increase in theft in the fishing communities. Dugouts, fishing gear and other assets disappeared during the night. Such robberies were new to those villagers and they suspected the strangers who came to the area to seek employment. Their unknown identity contributed to their reputation as outlaws who lived in the wilds and used secret medicine to hide



their crimes. **Thengo liweta** was introduced on the occasion of funeral rites and commemoration ceremonies as a way of explaining the cause of mysterious death and as a means of stamping out their growing economic insecurity. The stranger in red is believed to be active at night and to rely on witchcraft. He conceals his features under a heap of grass. He is synonymous with a wild animal and the bush. In the arena, **Thengo liweta** displays aggressive behaviour, damaging the fences of his neighbours and trespassing on other people's properties. He chases women and threatens villagers with his weapons, which reveals his covetous and greedy intentions. The male choir introduces him with this proverb: 1) "*The bush has formed you, oh! (The bush is your home.) The bush has formed you, oh!*" To this song, the womenfolk add: 2) "(He was not like this.) *He became like this (overnight)! He changed for the worse.*" Both songs witness that **Thengo liweta** used to be a different person. Bad company has transformed him into a villain. He moved his home to the bush, where is free from the rule of the village, and able to hide the bounty of his robberies and to dispose of the spoils.

By the mid 1980s, the southern end of the lake was seeing important economic change. The soil of this area was reputed to be poor and low rainfall added to the problem of food security. For the villages close to the lake, fishing had always been an alternative, at least at a subsistence level. This period witnessed the beginning of a mini industry among the more prosperous villagers who were able to spare some of their income for purchasing boats, dugouts and fishing equipment. They employed local fishermen, some of whom took advantage of the situation. They stole the very equipment responsible for feeding them and providing them a livelihood. They ate the original capital and eventually were responsible for the collapse of the local business. **Thengo liweta** also wrestles with the issue of causality with regard to death. Sudden death is frequent for fishermen who are exposed to abrupt changes of weather and southerly winds. Deaths of this kind are often perceived as the consequence of stealing items that were protected with medicine by their owner (*kutsirika*, to protect; *chiwindo*, medicine). **Thengo liweta** discourages stealing and emphasises that a dishonest person becomes unknown to his own people. He becomes a wild animal that feels more at home in the bush than in the village. **Thengo liweta** reaffirms the traditional morality of a premature death caused by stealing but also aims at issues that are new to the Chewa world. These include respect for communal property and cooperation between people sharing in the economic benefits through collaborative effort. He opposes self-interest that kills initiative, collaboration and economic development.

## Songs

- 1) "*O tate **Thengo liweta** oh! **Thengo liweta!***"
- 2) "*Ae ae anachita kutero! Anachita garauza!*"

## Source

Interview in 2007