

Tole and Mai Tole

(Brown day masks from the Dedza area)



(male)



(female)

Themes

1) Banda – Phiri relations 2) Decency & good manners 3) Sharing of information about rituals

Etymology

The name Tole is an abbreviation of *Atule mthenga*, meaning, ‘Let him deliver the message,’ or *Tola ine*, ‘Listen to me.’

Description

Tole and **Mai Tole** always appear together as husband and wife. **Tole** is a senior man with a wrinkled oval face (25 cm.), bald head, moustache and goatee. The forehead displays a tuft of chicken feathers. The nose is flat and the eyes are striking. The mask shows no tribal marks. The headgear is made of tatters or bark strips. The dancer wears a kilt, collar, armlets and leglets, all of baobab bark. His body is smeared with black mud. He carries a whip. **Mai Tole** has a rounder face (30 cm.), a curved nose embellished with a nose plug and numerous tribal marks and scarifications. Her hair is made of sisal dyed black and is partly covered with a scarf of the same colour. On top of her black scarf she wears a white mourning headband to indicate that she is in

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grief. She displays a variety of jewels: earrings, necklaces and bangles. Her body is covered with a long dark cloth from the breasts to the knees. A smaller cloth is tied around her hips and falls back on her buttocks. She waves a handkerchief while she dances with her husband to the rhythm of the *chisamba*. She moves her hips like Mariya but in a less provocative manner. Her husband's style of dance resembles that of Chadzunda.

The couple performs only during puberty rites and funeral rituals that incorporate initiation. The whole choir sings for **Tole** the following song: 1) "**Tole, Tole, that one (Tole) when he comes says, Oh, oh! That one when he comes (usually) brings plenty (of news) about what is happening. Is it good news? I don't know what that one has come with now. Let us follow him and hear what is happening at his place, Tole, Tole.**" The scene now shifts to the following day at **Tole's** house. The women answer in **Mai Tole's** name: 2) "**You old man, (Tole), come out of the house and see what is going on here. Visitors have come! You must talk with them so that you can hear what is happening at their place. Tole, Tole, let us hear, let us hear. Tole, Tole, these ones have come with a small problem. Oh, oh!**"

The songs reveal the role of **Tole** as a messenger. The character of **Tole** stresses the need to send a message (a letter or a person) before any official visit or a visit of courtesy. Messages have to be sent to a chief, a village or family members on the occasion of funerals or initiation rites. The Chewa code of courtesy emphasises the need for such procedure and encourages the community to take this custom seriously to maintain harmonious relationships.

Informants recount that in the past, **Tole** was the official messenger of the *mzinda* and rain shrine. His origin dates to the pre-Malawi days. His function was to inform the people of the rain and puberty rites. **Tole** was sent to the neighbouring *mizinda* (pl.) together with Nyangagwe or other *gule* characters. **Tole** was also sent out to bring messages of the death of important members of the Banda aristocracy. He also took part in their funeral and commemoration rites.

Besides being an official messenger and representative of the Banda and the spirit wives, **Tole** seems to have played a political role after the arrival of the Phiri/Malawi. He assisted Nyangagwe in the drowning of some initiates at the sacred pool of Malawi. His role of messenger puts him at the very centre of the defence of Banda interests after the rising of the Malawi. The sacrifice of some of the maidens, possibly from the Phiri aristocracy in the sacred pool of Malawi, would have supported this cause. Later, after the Malawi took control of the shrines, the role of **Tole** as a messenger seems to have declined and to have become less relevant.

Today, the character is rarely performed and his purpose has been reduced to enforcing the Chewa code of politeness, teaching courtesy and good manners. A similar phenomenon seems to have happened to the messenger Ajere, who accompanies the elephant structure during the initiation rites. **Mai Tole** acts very much like the chief's wife. She shares in the chief's responsibility by welcoming the guests and forwarding matters that are relevant to his authority.

Songs

1) "**Tole (6x) eee aye tola ine! Uja amati akabwera yawa, oh oh... Akabwera yawa tate de atula zinthu. Kodi kuli chiani tate de? Kodi n'kwabwino? Kaya iwowa tate e auza pano Tole, Tole aye! Talondole tikamvere zomwe zili kwawo tate Tole, Tole!**"

2) *"Inu andala tatulukani tate mudzaone zili kuno tate. Kwadza alendo! Ngofuna kuti mutolere nawo kuti mumve zomwe zili kwa anzanu tate. **Tole, Tole**, titole nawo tate, titole nawo. Iwowa tate de **Tole, Tole**, adza n'kankhani, oh oh!"*

Source

Interviews in 1993