

Tsenga

(A black day mask from the Khwidzi and Salima areas)

Themes

- 1) HIV/AIDS & sexual diseases
- 2) Responsibility for one's own actions/life
- 3) Witchcraft not the cause of illness

Etymology

Tsenga is a word for a surprising magic trick.



Description

The black mask (30 cm.) portrays a witch responsible for the misfortune or the death of younger people. The face is that of an old man. He is bald with patches of white hair on the temples and two long white sideburns. The glaring and menacing eyes are made of silver paper. The nose is that of an African. The mouth is wide, displaying aggressive clenched teeth on both jaws. A fluffy white moustache conceals the upper lip. The chin is strong and slanting. The ears are situated high on the face and are eager to investigate the cause of death. The headgear of the mask and the character's suit is made of tatters to suggest that the person has accumulated wealth. **Tsenga** holds a club and whip, which stand for aggression and reprimand.

In the *bwalo*, **Tsenga** dances like Simoni. He swerves his feet with a forward movement, striking his whip. Then he changes direction but does not show aggression. **Tsenga** takes part in all kinds of rituals. The chorus of men sing for him: *"Oh you witch...he died from sickness (venereal diseases). You witch, confess! (Otherwise you will die.)"* In the Chewa world, any serious illness and most misfortunes are perceived as the consequence of witchcraft. People administering to a patient, especially a younger one, will consider them victims of a senior relative who practises witchcraft. The song notes this belief but also discusses that another cause of death is real sickness. Sickness can

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imply sexual diseases, like syphilis and gonorrhoea. In the context of the 1970s, when the character was created, labour migration was at its zenith in Malawi. Many young men went to the mines in neighbouring countries and behaved promiscuously. They contracted venereal diseases. Out of shame, they refused to acknowledge their sickness and eventually died. The character of **Tsenga** reacts against this mentality and encourages young people to be more open about such issues. Death would not have come if they had admitted their problem. They could have been treated promptly and returned to health. **Tsenga** protests against the pervasive interpretation that all illness can be explained by witchcraft. In effect, they are 'witches' to themselves. They die because of their own witchcraft since they conceal their sickness and do not seek treatment. **Tsenga** provides a seminal change of mentality with regard to witchcraft and causality. Not all sicknesses come from evil medicines. Some are of one's own making and involve personal responsibility.

Song

*"Oh iwe tate **Tsenga** adafa n'matenda, **Tsenga** ulula!"*

Source

Interviews in 1992