

# Mlosi

(A night mask from the Mua area)

## Themes

- 1) Greed
- 2) Owls as familiars of witches
- 3) Witchcraft

## Etymology

**Mlosi** means, 'the messenger of death'.



## Description

The small mask (20 cm.) made of cloth or cardboard crudely portrays an owl head, with large eyes, a beak and pointed 'ears'. The dancer appears in a Kapoli outfit of kilt, leglets and armlets made of fertiliser bag laces, and the body is smeared with mud or ashes. His neck is adorned with thick fertiliser bag laces. He enters the *bwalo* with his arms outstretched representing the wings of the owl, and pretends to fly. He swerves his feet one at a time, moving backward and stopping close to the spectators. This is a bad omen. The male choir sings, "*The messenger (of death) has come! (People will soon mourn.) Let's cry, let's cry! The messenger (of death) has come!*" **Mlosi** dances at funerals in order to explain the cause of death. Among the Chewa, any species of owl is a bad omen. Owls are the equals of witches. Ill-intentioned people borrow the form of the owl for practising necromancy in the village. People are filled with fear when an owl comes at night and sings near their houses. They believe that death will soon visit them. Someone from the community will die. If death coincides with the call of **Mlosi**, people are convinced that this person is the victim of an ambitious member of their own family who practises witchcraft to pursue his selfish interests.

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## Song

*“Wabwera **Mlosi** e a e! Talire ena, talire! Wabwera **Mlosi!**”*

## Source

Interview in 1991