

Afumu aitana

(A red day mask from the Golomoti area)



Themes

1) Role & powers of the chief 2) Muluzi/UDF 3) Recent politics 4) Rivalry for authority 5) Unity & harmony

Etymology

Afumu aitana means, 'The chief is calling.'

Description

The 30 centimetre red mask presents a non-Chewa in a position of authority. The colour red conveys both royalty and foreignness. The mask features a middle aged man with receding hair, side burns and missing teeth. The nose is unmistakably that of an African. His eyes reflect cleverness and vision. The mouth outlines a smile of satisfaction. The tiny ears articulate that a person in a position of authority should give priority to executing orders rather than listening to gossip. The headgear of the mask is made of tatters or fertiliser bag laces. As a person of high status, **Afumu aitana** wears a tatter suit and carries a flywhisk.

His dancing style resembles that of the character *Mfumu yalimbira*, the chief's rival. He swerves his feet with authority, striking his flywhisk and bowing reverently. The male singers explain: "*The*

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chief is calling! The chief is calling!" The song refers to the chief gathering his people to meet to discuss education, development and political issues. The chief's role is to provide a centre of unity that rallies the entire community. The song encourages the population to respond positively. People should put aside their prejudices and their political allegiances and fully accept the authority of the ruling government. They should follow popular wisdom, "*A chief is a chief,*" and not be critical of the person who assumes the position. People should show respect for the authority invested in this person through the power of the ancestors. In practice, this means fully supporting the chief's causes in the development of the region or the country at large. It is seen as selfish to boycott a meeting because one dislikes a particular leader.

The character of **Afumu aitana** is recent in *gule*. It was introduced to the Golomoti area in 2005. Its creation was not connected with any particular ritual, though it has been appearing at chieftainship, funeral and commemoration rites. Its introduction in *gule* coincided with the political changes put in place under the government of Bakili Muluzi before the election of 2004: the policy of decentralisation. This policy was to influence chieftainship directly. Each district and area was to be subdivided into smaller units that would be granted a chief and a head. The result was a dramatic increase in the number of chiefs and local authorities. The character of **Afumu aitana** wrestles with such divisions because villagers were reluctant to rally behind newly created chiefs who had never had a claim to authority before. People questioned the validity of this recent policy and the new positions which it created.

On the political scene, President Bakili Muluzi had lost the presidency in the election of 2004 and had been replaced by Dr Bingu wa Mutharika who became the third president of the country. The character of **Afumu aitana** reflects this political change in his dancing style, that of the chief's rival. Muluzi had lost his position but the people anticipated that a power struggle between the former president and his successor was likely. Muluzi intended to continue ruling behind the candidate of his own choice, Mutharika. By 2005, the year that **Afumu aitana** appeared, Bingu had already parted with Bakili and was trying to consolidate his political power. Bakili had turned into the rival chief. **Afumu aitana** invites the Chewa and the population at large to rally behind their new president and to respect his authority for the sake of unity and the wellbeing of the country. Through **Afumu aitana** the ancestors recall the *mwambo* and reinforce the concept of authority. The chief remains their main representative and the focus of unity and harmony between the living community and those who have preceded them. The multiplication of chiefs is seen as a weakening of their authority.

Song

"Afumu aitana! Afumu aitana!"

Source

Interview in 2007