

Bola akufawa

(A red day mask from the Mua area)



Themes

1) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change) 2) Faithfulness to the *mwambo* 3) HIV/AIDS & sexual diseases 4) Promiscuity

Etymology

Bola akufawa means, "The dead are better off" (since they do not have to face painful diseases resulting from promiscuity).

Description

The red mask (30 cm.) portrays a Malawian who is infected by sexual diseases. He/she has aged quickly because of ill health. He has a receding hairline, wrinkles on the forehead, pointed chin painted black forming a goatee and painted moustache on the upper lips. Agonised eyes manifest his condition. The distorted mouth showing teeth indicates insecurity and discomfort. The small ears, flat to the head, portray deafness. The mask headgear is made of tatters and so

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is his outfit that displays no other ornament. **Bola akufawa** carries two flywhisks, recalling his chiefly status.

The character goes back to 1981. His presence in *gule* is closely associated with funeral and commemoration rites. **Bola akufawa**'s dancing style is cast on the model of Wali, the stranger from Tanzania, a slave trader, or M'dzopendeke, the chief who has allowed his village to tilt because of poor leadership. **Bola akufawa** swerves his feet with reduced energy and waves his flywhisk with little conviction. The men sing for him: "*The dead are better off (than the living), what can I do, my friend? To my surprise, the dead are better off.*" The women continue with a song from their vast repertoire.

Bola akufawa voices how things were in the 1980s. Sexual diseases such as VD, gonorrhoea and others have been well known since the First World War. HIV/AIDS was discovered in Malawi as late as 1986. The period of the 1980s marked a high peak for the Malawi political regime of Kamuzu Banda and his one party state (the MCP). As the politicians followed the President all over the country attending various functions, the women, who were enrolled in the *mbumba*, had to follow suit and dance for such occasions. They had to leave their families behind for days or weeks in order to show their dedication to the regime and their unwavering support toward the party. They braved the weather, on the back of lorries, from the North to the South. They suffered hunger and fatigue and had at times to engage in prostitution in order to find food and shelter. The villages were to experience the dreadful consequences of such practices as they witnessed the spread of sexual diseases among them. Indirectly, they were accusing the President for letting 'his village' tilt by allowing such practices. The character of **Bola akufawa** comes as a warning to the local population against the spread of sexual diseases through growing promiscuity. Those who were contaminated were killers and were responsible for the increase of mortality in the villages. They died a painful death that their predecessors had never experienced before. The spread of sexual diseases had to be stopped if the villages were to survive. **Bola akufawa** carries a strong message coming from the spirit world, which invites the local population to return to the *mwambo* and to follow the rule of life, if they are to opt for a future. This message was reinforced and repeatedly given in the 1990s with the advent of HIV/AIDS, which could not then be palliated. Many other characters of *gule* were introduced later in order to deal with the issue.

Song

"Bola akufawa, ndichite chiani amzanga? Ndadabwa e e Bola akufawa."

Source

Interviews in 2012