

Dziko latha

(A coffee day mask from the Mua area)



Themes

1) Faithfulness to the *mwambo* 2) HIV/AIDS & sexual diseases 3) Orphans 4) Responsible parenthood
5) Promiscuity

Etymology

Dziko latha literally means, 'The world is over,' referring to life. The song completes the sentiment by adding 'together with its joy' to create, 'Life is over, together with its joy.'

Description

The large mask (35 cm.) is portrayed in tones of light brown to depict an elderly Malawian who is pale and weak (anaemic). It displays a wrinkled forehead, a straight ('western') nose and a clenched pouting mouth, expressing sadness. The hair is made of vervet monkey skin, spread thinly to convey that the person is losing his hair. He has a long, hanging moustache (made of goatskin). The headgear of the mask is made of tatters. The character wears a tatter suit, distributed sparsely to emphasise his thinness. He has lost a lot of weight, and has become skin and bone. The stomach is tied to the body

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with a scarf to demonstrate that he has wasted away through diarrhoea. He carries two flywhisks to convey how strong he was before he fell ill.

Dziko latha is recent in *gule* ritual. He was created at the end of 2003. He appeared for the first time on the occasion of the funerals of two sons of an elderly woman who had both died of AIDS, despite their mother's warnings against promiscuity. The character of **Dziko latha** was created to admonish the community at the time of burial and at the following commemoration rites when AIDS is suspected to be the cause of death. **Dziko latha**'s pantomime enacts the progress of the disease on a person's body. As he enters the dancing ground he swerves his feet with alarming energy, moving forward. He brandishes his flywhisks and strikes them, following the rhythm of Mwalimu, the teacher. The first sequence of his pantomime recalls the period when he was well and was sexually potent, living a promiscuous life. After this display of supreme stamina, **Dziko latha** collapses on his knees and fixes his eyes on the sky. At this very moment, **Dziko latha** realises that he has contracted HIV, and he prays to God for protection and safety.

As **Dziko latha** is busy delivering his silent message the male choir interprets the mime with the following song: 1) *"The world is over, oh oh oh! Life is over, together with its joy!"* To this song, the women reply: 2) *"To eat Rozina, my (only) child, as if I had given birth to two! My lot is to ponder."* The first song talks about the imminence of death and the end of earthly pleasures. The song of the women mourns the death of a mother's only child, Rozina, owing to HIV/AIDS, and expresses her inconsolable grief. However, this song not only states that Rozina died from AIDS but also implies that she was the victim of witchcraft (*"To eat my only child"*). The sudden death of young people is commonly interpreted as the consequence of witchcraft. At any funeral of an AIDS victim one might overhear in conversation these two interpretations concerning the cause of death. Strangers and more distant family members state frankly that the person died from AIDS, whereas the closer relatives often deny AIDS to be the cause and assert instead that the person was the victim of witchcraft in order to hide the cruel reality and to avoid social stigma. The latter explanation is more acceptable to them since it denies responsibility and assigns the blame to someone else. The women's song reflects this popular interpretation based on scapegoats. The stigma of AIDS is still very pervasive in rural life, and particularly among women, who have less exposure to the outside world and have a more limited education.

Dziko latha's western features are intended to talk about the local scene without directly implying the Malawian context, because AIDS was a taboo subject at that time. The pigmentation of the skin highlights the opposite: the person *is* a Malawian who has become weak and without blood.

Dziko latha was invented by a male secret society to oppose the witchcraft theory and to stress the importance of personal responsibility. Its aim was to fight the pandemic and to bring awareness into the community that people are responsible for their own death if they play with sexual fire. The character also provided an explanation for the frequency of death in their village. Joy and pleasure are short lived compared to grief and sorrow. These *gule* members give AIDS a new name: *"Dziko latha – The world is over."* Informants explain that the song shows that, if people continue to behave irresponsibly, there will be no one left in the land, and the country will revert to nothing. The village has become infected with HIV/AIDS through the promiscuity of the youth and the loss of faith by the

community in the ancestors and the *mwambo* they represent. Parents are exhorted to keep on admonishing their children in the name of the ancestors, if they want to stop death taking them one by one; otherwise, soon the village will come to an end. Many children will become orphans and will be under the charge of grandmothers who not only have brought up their own children but now are also forced to bring up their grandchildren. The song indicates that the younger generation is cheating itself by indulging the joy of this world, but tomorrow everything will come to an end, and its parents will be left mourning without any future.

Songs

- 1) "***Dziko latha*** oh oh oh tate e'oh! ***Dziko latha*** n'chimwemwe chake!"
- 2) "*Kun'dyera mwana m'modzi Rozina, ngati alipo awiri, kwanga malingiro.*"

Source

Interviews in 2004 and 2011