

## Kunali njala

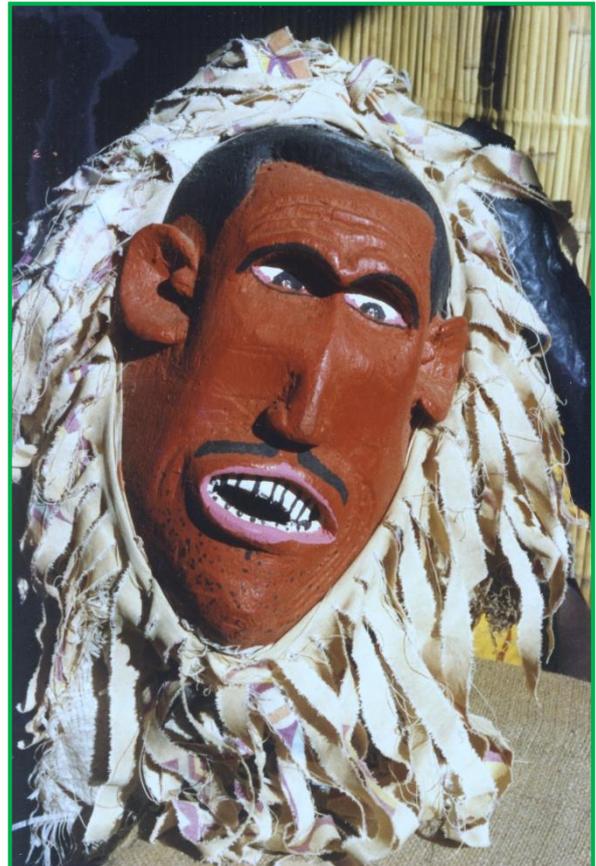
(A dark red day mask from the Mua area)

### Themes

- 1) Drought, famine & food security
- 2) Laziness
- 3) Responsibility for one's own actions/life

### Etymology

**Kunali njala** means, 'There was famine.'



### Description

This red mask (27 cm.) portrays the wrinkled face of a hungry man. The eyes are deep set, the mouth wide and distorted, with teeth on both jaws. There are a crooked nose, high thin cheekbones, a slender black moustache and a twisted chin. The mask is surrounded by a black hairline made of goatskin. The headgear is made of tatters and black plastic strips. **Kunali njala** wears a jute suit that is not tattered. In some places the trousers are padded at the back in order to create the contrast with the front of the shirt, so the person looks hungry. He comes into the arena either empty handed or with an axe. He dances with outstretched arms while he swerves his feet. He crosses his arms on his belly to demonstrate that he is starving. **Kunali njala** appears at funerals.

Drought is endemic to Malawi. Important dates are remembered through recalling major droughts and famine. With this character, the Khwidzi area commemorates the famous drought of 1949. The tremendous suffering and shortage of food are still remembered today. Since 1949 many more droughts have been recorded throughout the Chewa country. Fear of drought is palpable before the start of each rainy season.

The Mua version of **Kunali njala** questions the reasons for hunger and famine, and promotes self-help. The song says, *"They say there was famine! For me, I will go and sleep (climb the hill early in the morning in order to get food) at Ngonoonda village. It is dawn, **Kunali njala** (There was*

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famine)!” The mask shows a face tormented by hunger. The dancer’s outfit is very tight around the waist but loose around the buttocks portraying that the person is too lazy to go up the hill to search for food (*kusuma*). The message of **Kunali njala** emphasises that if a person helps himself and works hard, he only hears from others that there was famine.

### **Song**

*“Ati kudagwa njala tate e! Ine n’kagona kwa Ngonoonda tate de. Kwacha e **Kunali njala!**”*

### **Source**

Interviews in 1992