

Mapulanga or Kulankhula kuwawa

(A day mask from the Mua area)



(night)

Themes

- 1) Discipline & good behaviour
- 2) Faithfulness to the *mwambo*
- 3) Greed



(day)

Etymology

Mapulanga stands for '*Mwaphula ana anga*' – 'You have taken my children from the hot fire.'
Kulankhula kuwawa means, 'to say harsh (painful) words'.

Description

Mapulanga is a variety of Kapoli. His headgear sometimes resembles that of Kapoli or, at other times, the mask is made of cloth over a wire structure or carved in wood. It can have an elongated snout, which resembles the beak of a ground hornbill or a hoe painted red or white. The mask could also represent a distorted human face covered in tattoos striped with black, red and white colours. The rest of the costume is that of Kapoli (a kilt made of fibre, and the body is painted with mud).

Mapulanga dances at initiation rites. He enters the arena with two hoes or knives, which he knocks together following the rhythm of the drums. He raises one leg at a time and knocks the hoes against each other in between his legs while pointing to his sexual parts. The song says: 1) "*Your words are harsh, **Mapulanga!***" The knocking of the hoes against each other expresses **Mapulanga's** impatience and annoyance with teaching the *mwambo*. **Mapulanga** was formerly a blacksmith who made hoes, razors and other items forged with iron. He removed the hot iron from the fire (*kuphula*) and hammered it into artifacts of various kinds. The hoes that he knocks

www.kasiyamaliro.org

Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art, Mua Parish, P. O. Box 41, Mtakatika, Malawi

against each other evoke the sound made by the smith. The razors he made were used for making incisions and tribal marks (*mphini*). They were also for shaving the female initiate at the time of puberty.

The character of **Mapulanga** was introduced into *gule wamkulu* from early days and was indispensable to the girls' puberty rites. A senior man from the chief's family, who had to be initiated into the girls' ceremony, danced **Mapulanga**. On this occasion he had to shave the initiates and to make tattoos on their lower abdomens while he instructed them in the *mwambo* of the female cycle (*kafunde*). He gave these lessons with the *namkungwi*.

"Your words are harsh, **Mapulanga!**" referred to the demands of the *mwambo* and the pain of tattooing. **Mapulanga** was taking the initiates away from childhood and forging them into real women. The madness of **Mapulanga**, shown in his red eyes and by knocking his hoes together, comes from the fact that he has seen the nudity of the young girls. His family group and the *namkungwi* rewarded **Mapulanga** for his service at the initiation with a goat. He shared the meat with them, but kept the tripe, a delicacy, for himself. The women's song has caricatured the complaint of the *namkungwi*: 2) "You have killed a goat and you haven't shared the tripe with your mother-in-law, **Mapulanga!**" In this context, the word 'mother-in-law' is given a derogatory meaning, suggesting avoidance. Though the initiation belongs by right to the *namkungwi*, she is treated as an outsider by **Mapulanga**, who refuses to share the tripe with her. **Mapulanga** is seen as odd and mad because his role intrudes into the female secrecy. Moreover, his position puts him in competition with the *namkungwi* in terms of rewards. Though he belongs to the female line of the matrilineal clan, the women run away from him, avoiding him because of his association with the *mwambo* and because of the pain that he causes in tattooing them.

Mapulanga's involvement in girls' initiation has ceased but he can appear in other rituals, although he rarely performs today. Now he portrays a master of discipline involved in teaching the *mwambo* and discouraging greed.

Songs

- 1) "Kulankhula kuwawa, **Mapulanga** (2x) kuwawa, **Mapulanga de e a e!**"
- 2) "Kupha mbuzi osagawa matumbo kwa apongozi, **Mapulanga!**"

Source

Interviews in 1990, 1992 and 2000

Reference

Scott, D.C. (1892). *A Cyclopaedic Dictionary of the Mang'anja Language spoken in British Central Africa*. Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland: Edinburgh. p. 547