

# Mkhala wawo

(An orange day mask from the Diamphwi area)

## Themes

- 1) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change)
- 2) Deafness to advice/stubbornness
- 3) Recent politics
- 4) Slander

## Etymology

**Mkhala wawo** means, 'his own way of behaving', implying that it is ugly.



## Description

**Mkhala wawo** features a long oval face (30 cm.) in orange, the colour of a stranger. The face is that of an old man, despite the fact that he is not bald and does not have wrinkles. The mask shows eyebrows, a moustache and a goatee painted in white. The grey hair and the long sideburns are made of Samango monkey skin. The head is crowned with a sisal lock of white hair, which stresses his maleness. The nose, aquiline in shape, is cut angularly from the face. Deep labial lines drop from the corners of the eyes, along the nose and curved around the clenched teeth and the grimacing mouth. The face has the tribal marks of a Chewa who has made himself a stranger to his tribesmen because of his own way of behaving. The headgear of the mask is made of tatters. **Mkhala wawo** wears the regular tatter suit and carries a walking stick.

In the arena, **Mkhala wawo** moves like an old man, supporting himself with his walking stick. He slips one foot after the other following the style of Sirire, the one who is to be envied. The men sing for him the following lines: *"His way of behaving (is suspicious)! Moreover, look at how many people tried to advise him, the old man, (but with no result)! It is because of his (ugly) behaviour! This is the one who makes up stories about the younger generation (of politicians)! The old man says it is their*

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*problem! For me, no! Had it been me, I would have listened to them (but not interfered)! It is because of his (ugly) behaviour. He is the one who stirs things up! His (ugly) behaviour stirs things up!"*

The song elucidates the behaviour of a senior man whose prominent position and status forbid public criticism. The *Nyau* members of the Diamphwi area nickname him in the song "Gogo", meaning grandfather or old man, for fear of being accused of instigating political unrest. They protest, on behalf of the community they represent, against the old man's obstinacy and his inability to move along with change. The population resents that he is anchored in his ways and clashes with the aspirations of the younger generations, which he misrepresents by making up stories about them. Since the beginning of the 1990s they perceive that his popularity is declining and his reputation is damaged. They fear that his unfairness toward population should generate political instability for the country. The creators of the mask cleverly and intentionally fail to identify the subject. **Mkhala wawo** is symptomatic of the period at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. The politics of the country was then poisoned by intolerance and the absence of freedom of the press. Delicate issues concerning Malawian leadership could only be tackled with coded language and cryptic metaphor. It was obvious then that the *gule* members of the Diamphwi community could not portray "the old man" as bald, wrinkled, wearing a bowler hat and a smart jacket, or carrying a flywhisk. All of these details were typical of Kamuzu Banda, the first President of Malawi. Some of these had to be omitted for fear of being too obvious. Instead they had the option of introducing him as an anonymous old man who displayed injustice, disrespect and dishonesty. They emphasised his anger and his tendencies to slander, to lie and to fabricate propoganda. They camouflaged his leadership behind the image of a commoner or a chief failing in his duties and causing confusion.

**Mkhala wawo's** appearance in *gule* at the beginning of the 1990s and his involvement in political rallies manifest that the Diamphwi community was open to political change and was largely dissatisfied with the political leadership of the day. After thirty years of dictatorship and repressive rule, the population was eager to consider the leadership qualities prescribed by traditional morality and wisdom. Whether the leader is a chief, a pastor or a president, his care for the population cannot be dictated by *nzeru za yekha* – his own wisdom – but instead by that of those who have preceded him, the ancestors. A leader should not alienate the people and remain aloof. He should not inspire fear and divide his people. The prospect of political transition and multiparty government at the beginning of the 1990s promised positive change. Whether people would be cheated of their aspirations is another question, which the future would answer.

### **Song**

*"Kukhala kwakeko oh tate! Ndipotu taonani ena adzudzula agogo! Inu tate ndi **Mkhala wawo!** Yawa tate ndiye waputa zitopotopo kwa anyamata ye! Agogo akuti izo ndi zawo! Ine ayi tate, chikhala ine, kwanga kumva kokha tate! Uwo ndi **Mkhala wawo!** Ndiwo woputa zinthu tate! **Mkhala wawo** ndiwo woputa zinthu!"*

### **Source**

Interview in 1993

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