

Mtundu watha

(A coffee day mask from the Mua area)



Themes

1) Continuity of family line 2) Rivalry for authority 3) Witchcraft

Etymology

Mtundu watha means, 'The family line is finished' (eligible candidates have all died).

Description

Mtundu watha's face (30 cm.) is coffee coloured, roundish and portrays a senior man of chiefly status. It portrays a Malawian with a receding hairline, revealing his temples. The forehead is wrinkled and displays a deep vertical frown in the centre. The eyes have a confident expression: they show a man of vision. Wrinkles extend the line of the eyes. The nose is broad. From it extend two deep labial lines, highlighting a wide smiling mouth. The top lip is narrow while the bottom one is thicker and pointed. Teeth are displayed on both jaws. The rounded chin is covered with a beard made with human hair. A moustache (made of the same material) underlines the flat nose. Large ears stand pricked to listen to the latest developments in village politics. Black human hair, growing in the ears, stresses the person's senior position. The headgear is made of tatters, over which a wig forms the remainder of the hair on his head. The

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character wears a tatter suit, enhanced with a broad belt and a fertiliser lace kilt at his waist. He carries a flywhisk and a sceptre to convey his chiefly position.

His dancing style imitates that of the chief's rival (Mfumu yalimbira) and that of the hunter (Msakambewa) who chases the women. The male choir sings for him: 1) *"The family line is finished, what can I do my friend? I am surprised (that) the family line is finished."* To this song, the women continue: 2) *"Aletina oh, with whom will you stay in Madisi, oh?"* as they disband to the four corners of the *bwalo*.

The character of **Mtundu watha** is recent in *gule*. It was introduced to the *bwalo* at the end of 2009 for the enthronement of the minor chief Mbalame, a splinter chief from Ndelema village. Increasing segmentation of the villages was responsible for the multiplication of chiefs following the policy of decentralisation in Malawi. In the past each village was divided into *limana* ("family groups") and each one wanted its own chief. In the case of Ndelema village, three family groups meant three chiefs. Mbalame was one of these. Each group had to select a suitable candidate for the position. In some of these family groups competition was high and the elders were disputing the candidate's right blood line. While this was going on in the Mbalame group in the years leading up to 2009, many senior men and women from that group died unexpectedly. The verdict of the villagers was that they were the victims of witchcraft as they would have been competing for that same position of Mbalame. The one held responsible for all these deaths was the head of the family group. A relation of this particular family group who was a member of the *mzinda* created a character reflecting their rivalry. This character was also to enthrone Mbalame in his position once he had been chosen and had accepted. **Mtundu watha** can also appear at other types of rituals such as funeral and commemoration rites beside that of chieftainship.

The character of **Mtundu watha** unveils the hidden rivalry within the family group and stamps out the use of witchcraft in order to access chiefly positions. **Mtundu watha** acts as a warning, emphasising that if the villagers keep killing each other, the family line will soon die out and there will be no one to choose from to take up the position of leadership in the future. **Mtundu watha** confirms the suspicion of the Chewa that whenever there is serious competition, the conflict ends up with unexplained deaths, which to their minds are always caused by witchcraft. Competition should be discouraged, if one wants to live long.

Songs

- 1) *"Mtundu watha eae! Ndichita bwanji anzanga? Ndadabwa **Mtundu watha.**"*
- 2) *"E Aletina, e Aletina oh! Mukhala ndi yani ku Madisi, oh?"*

Source

Interviews in 2012

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