

Pagwanji? or Pagwa nkhalamba

(A pink day mask from the Kasumbu or Pemba areas)



Themes

1) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change) 2) Responsible leadership 3) Recent politics 4) Selfishness/self-centredness 5) Witchcraft

Etymology

Pagwanji? means, 'What is happening (has befallen)?'

Pagwa nkhalamba means, 'The old man has collapsed (fallen).'

Description

The character of **Pagwanji?** was created in 1993 with the announcement of the referendum, and a year before the general elections. The character was introduced in support of a multiparty system and democracy, and appeared during political rallies. The pink mask (35 cm.) portrays an old Chewa (indicated by tribal marks), bald with a crown of white hair, white eyebrows, a white drooping moustache and a goatee. He has wrinkles on his forehead and deep labial lines. The man has small, apprehensive and slanting eyes and a fearful expression, as if anticipating ill fortune. His nose is long and pointed, and his gaping mouth with long teeth shows surprise or fear. The chin is pointed, and his advanced age is emphasised by sagging jowls. Even the pricked ears have sunken low on his head, showing his inability to listen. The headgear of the mask is made of wild animal skin to reinforce his antisocial character. Like a wild animal, his head is

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topped by two long, slender and drooping black horns with white tips, which suggest that he is losing his status. The character wears a plain dirty outfit of shirt and trousers made of jute bags to emphasise that he has been downgraded socially. He uses a walking stick to support himself because of his advanced age, but nevertheless brandishes a flywhisk to recall the high status he once held. The reddish tone of his skin alerts the crowd that he is a bloodthirsty person, a witch.

Pagwanji? appears frail when he enters the *bwalo*, supporting himself on his walking stick. The women flock to him and surround him as if expecting an answer to their call: "**Pagwanji, what is happening in this village?**" In reply, **Pagwanji?** stares at them and shows surprise. He walks a few paces and then starts wiggling his pelvis lewdly while the women join in his erotic dance. After a short period of energetic hip dancing, he slows down, showing signs of weakening, but then suddenly throws one leg forward as if he is regaining energy. Once again, the women gather around him, and continue to question: "**Pagwanji, what is happening in this village?**" While the drummer beats the rhythm of the *chisamba*, the male choir sings: "Yes, yes, what is happening (or, who has fallen) in this village? Yes, the election (*chisankho*). The election, not for me! It will not be in favour of the old man, the old man, the old man, who is full of favouritism, my friends. The old man who terrorises us is resentful, like a witch. Yes, let him go! Let us see what others will promise to do! Maybe their deeds will be more agreeable to everybody. Yes, what is happening? What is happening here? There will be an election to remove (from office) the old man, the old man, the old man, who is full of favouritism! Oh."

The song refers to the elections that are about to take place. The traditional hierarchical structure of the village is not based on an election system, but rather on the consensus of those who share the same bloodline. However, elections for various committees have been introduced in villages by Westerners, either through the Church or during the colonial period. After Independence, elections continued to be practised throughout the country to choose office-bearers for the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), but no presidential elections were held during the thirty years of Kamuzu Banda's reign. The song focuses on the national political scene described in terms of a parable of a village election. It is a common device in *gule* to refer to the President as the chief or "*the old man*". The term "*election*" refers to the referendum of 1993. The song predicts that the referendum and the general elections that followed in 1994 would not support the MCP and the ruling government. Their defeat is shown in the mask by the drooping horns and the dirty clothes. The song explains the reasons for his defeat. His sins are enumerated: discrimination (*watsankho*), tyranny (*wampandira*), resentment (*wadumbo*), and his womanising tendencies are made apparent through his dancing style. The song then concludes that Kamuzu Banda no longer qualifies as a leader because he has changed into a witch in his old age. He is now an antisocial person (reddish colour of his face), who works only for his own profit and ambition and is no longer concerned with the wellbeing of his people. The song takes advantage of the example of Kamuzu Banda to give a piece of advice to all those who are in a position of leadership at any level. There is nothing wrong with a leader growing old. Maturity should blossom into wisdom for the Chewa. Yet when it leads to self-centredness and autocracy, it is a problem. The community is not well served by such a leader.

The character of **Pagwanji?** describes the reaction of Kamuzu Banda who has come to the end of his career as President and who questions why he has lost power. The Chewa give an unmistakable answer. Ponder the *mwambo*, test one's own heart and realise your own selfishness and intolerance. The nation has made up its mind: "*The old man has fallen.*"

Song

*“Inde, inde, tate **Pagwanji** pa m’dzi pano? Inde chisankho. Chisankho ae toto ine! Chada nkhalamba e nkhalamba, nkhalamba, zatsankho, anzanganu. Zampandira tate, zadumbo ngati mfiti tate. Indetu zichoke! Tione enawo amene ati achite tate. Mwina zokonda onse. Inde **Pagwanji** pano? Pagwa chisankho chochotsa nkhalamba ye, nkhalamba, nkhalamba, zatsankho! Oh.”*

Source

Interview in 1993