

Saopa nyanga

(A red day mask from the Salima and Dedza areas)

Themes

- 1) Recent politics
- 2) Wisdom
- 3) Witchcraft

Etymology

Saopa nyanga means, 'A person who does not fear horns.'



Description

This red mask (30 cm.) depicts a middle aged man. He is half bald, wrinkled and has a moustache and a goatee. A tuft of feathers stands erect on the forehead. The eyes and the mouth are wide open, expressing surprise. The nose is smallish and aquiline. Tribal marks prove that he is a Chewa. The headgear of the mask is made of wild animal skins to stress that his provocative behaviour makes him an outcast to the village. The dancer wears the regular outfit of *gule* made of jute, but without the customary tatters. He also carries a walking stick and a flywhisk, expressing that he is fearless and his fearlessness confers a certain status on him.

Saopa nyanga performs to the rhythm of the *chisamba*. He chases people in the *bwalo* and repeatedly falls down. He does not swerve his feet. During his dance the male choir sings: "*How obstinate is the person who does not fear horns (evil)! Oh, tell me the truth! Because of (lies) some have gone to their graves! Because of (arrogance), my friends, some have gone (died), as a result of (selfishness), you, the person who does not fear horns! Some people are like beasts, real beasts. (Their obstinacy) leads them (to their death), (you) the person who does not fear horns!*"

Saopa nyanga started appearing at the end of the 1950s. It performed for the funerals of chiefs or for commoners who died suddenly, victims of an accident. These so-called accidents are often seen as the consequence of having tampered with evil forces that can kill. The character **Saopa nyanga** admonishes people who behave as though they fear nothing and have no respect for

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others' property or rank. They steal. They undermine authority without fearing the repercussions. They do not even fear witchcraft. The Chewa believe that these people do not live long. They soon become the victim of witchcraft or are killed because of their evil deeds. A Chewa proverb expresses this: "*Mbawala ya mantha idapota nyanga – Only a bushbuck that shows fear grows long horns (lives long).*" The fear of the law protects and stretches one's days. Those who do not fear anything meet with bad luck and die young. Fear is the beginning of wisdom for the Chewa.

The character could have a political undertone as it was created at the period when the Malawi nationalist party was struggling for independence of the country. This has not been made obvious in the interviews. This character offers strong similarities with *Tiopa wa nyanga* (refer to the Book).

Song

*"A **Saopa nyanga** khama lawo lotani tate de? Oh! Iwe udzinena zoon! Mau oterewa ena anapita nawo ku manda tate! N'chifukwa cha makani wotere, anzanganu ndi thuku lotereli tate adanka nazo, a **Saopa nyanga!** Anthu ndi zilombo, zilombo! Ananka nawo, a **Saopa nyanga!**"*

Source

Interview in 1992