

Adagwa ndala

(A cloth mask from the Mua area and a red day mask from the Kapiri area)



Themes

- 1) Death of an elder is a great loss
- 2) Lack of continuity in leadership

Etymology

Adagwa ndala means, 'The old man fell,' meaning that he died.

Description

The character of **Adagwa ndala** originated in Mua in the late 1980s, across the Nadzipulu River toward the Songwe. The **Adagwa ndala** of Mua is featured as a type of Kapoli or more precisely as a type of Hololiya. His mask consists of a head cover of jute or canvas to which various details of the face have been stitched (nose, eyes, mouth). The headgear is topped with two tufts of feathers, one on the forehead, the other on the back of the head. The dancer wears a tatter shirt, a kilt, and leglets and armlets made of fertiliser laces. He carries a whip to manifest the castigation of the ancestors. He dances in the Kapoli style. He swerves his feet, jumps and then sits down and rests for a while showing the weight of his old age. He sings (with a high pitched voice) his own song, which the men and women take over. *"He fell (died), the old man. I am mourning. I am mourning. He fell, the old man."* The song conveys that an elderly person has died and the people are mourning. **Adagwa ndala's** performance is not bound to any type of ritual but has become popular mostly on the occasion of funerals of senior people and the commemorations that follow.

The Kapiri version portrays **Adagwa ndala** with a large mask measuring 40 cm. It shows an old man who has reached the end of his human journey. The red colour points to his uncompromising

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attitude toward the *mwambo*, since he is fully committed to his positions as caretaker of the community. He might at times be slightly hot tempered, rejecting stupid criticism and refusing to turn a blind eye to extended family matters. The face is conical and ravaged by wrinkles, especially his narrow forehead. There are two deep labial lines bordering a strong African nose, below which droops a long moustache. The mouth is wide and toothless, and displays narrow lips, which emphasise the advanced age of the person. Despite his age, the eyes are still bright and alert (they are made from silver paper), reminding us of his perseverance and faithfulness to the *mwambo*. His features display no aggression, as he awaits his death with peaceful resignation.

Despite being an elderly person, he still displays a full head of hair, which is made of black goat skin. The ears are set high on the head, and witness to a person who is willing to listen to others. The chin is strong and pointed. The headgear is made of tatters to convey the ancestors. He dresses in a worn out army greatcoat, like those worn by chiefs in the 1960s. Underneath, he wears the customary pair of jute trousers stitched with tatters of a wide assortment of colours and two leglets to hide his feet.

As he enters the *bwalo* he does not carry any insignia, which manifests that he is no chief but fulfils the position as head of the family group (*mwini mbumba*). Despite his age, he dances with great vigour, swerving his feet with energy. The male choir sings for him for the same song as accompanies the Mua character. Toward the end of his performance, **Adagwa ndala** collapses, wearied by the fullness of his life and attesting to his total dedication to the community.

The character of **Adagwa ndala** in both Mua and Kapiri pays tribute to the senior people who are becoming a rarity. The population growth that Malawi experienced from the 1970s resulted in a greater disparity in ages. Elders are the custodians of the culture and of the *mwambo*. Their death leaves the younger generations like orphans without a real sense of direction. As the Chewa proverb says, “*Ali ndi amayi, adala! Ayenda modzitama - Those who have a mother are lucky! They can walk with pride.*”

Song

“**Adagwa ndala ndikulira ine, Adagwa ndala.**”

Source

Interview in 1990