

# Akuchilekwa

(A day mask from the Mua area)



## Themes

1) Rights of/respect for the handicapped 2) Madness 3) Poverty

## Etymology

**Akuchilekwa** means, in effect, 'the person who dances when the drummers stop'.

## Description

This simple mask belongs to the category of Kapoli. It is made of cloth, rags and feathers. His costume consists of a dirty kilt with odd objects attached to it, such as empty jute bags and rags, signifying the strange behaviour of the character. Both his body and his kilt are covered with ashes. As he moves, clouds of ashes fall from his clothes. He enters the arena with a stick in his hand, looking lost. He starts a song but is confused and does not know how and when to sing. The women continue for him, "**Akuchilekwa**, *he dances when the drum has stopped.*" When the drums are beating the rhythm for him to dance, he seems not to hear. He keeps moving around entertaining the audience with his comical and silly behaviour. As soon as the drumming stops however, **Akuchilekwa** starts dancing in an energetic and uncoordinated manner. He falls down on his bottom and provokes roars of laughter from the crowd.

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**Akuchilekwa** portrays a person who has lost his wits, a madman. He is a misfit who does not know how to sing or dance and is out of step with the community. He is lost and confused. His handicap has made him a stranger in the village. Yet even if he behaves oddly, he is genuine and completely innocent. He means no harm to anyone. Although his ragged outfit features his wretchedness and his lack of hygiene, the ashes that fall from his costume manifest the ancestors' presence. They identify with the lame, the poor and the unfortunate. Through this character, the ancestors want to teach that the community should accept him as one of their own. They should not get cross with him. They should put up with him and show him kindness, following the Chewa proverb: *"Wopunduka n'Chauta, mpembedzeni – A handicapped person is God himself. Worship him."*

### **Song**

*"Akuchilekwa, akuvina ng'oma italeka."*

### **Source**

Interviews in 1985 and 1989