

## Akupa aononga

(A coffee day mask from the Mua Area)



### Themes

1) Inequality 2) Jealousy/envy 3) Dangers of modernity 4) High mortality 5) Witchcraft

### Etymology

**Akupa aononga** means, 'Those who kill leave destruction behind them.'

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## Description

The **Akupha aononga** character portrays a murderer responsible for the death of many prominent and important members of the community. Their sudden disappearance from the village is perceived as a great loss for the area, where their contribution to the functioning of the village was highly valued. The coffee tone mask (45 cm.) shows a sinister head. **Akupha aononga** is half bald with many protrusions visible through the sparse hair. These lumps suggest that he has made use of evil medicines (*kukhwima*) in order to gain power and the boldness that allows him to take the lives of others. **Akupha aononga**'s forehead is wrinkled and frowning. The skin surrounding the eyes is creased and the eyes are cruel. The high angular cheekbones and the deep labial lines stress his fearlessness. A wide avid mouth protrudes and dominates the face and the lips are heavily lined. A strong chin topped with a black goatee reinforces the appearance of a criminal. The neck is hidden with sackcloth and tatters. The character may even assume a simian appearance, with sinister associations, as he does in the second mask photographed above. The dancer wears a tatter suit, armlets and leglets and carries weapons like a knife and a club. He dances with aggression, following the style of Chimbano, the uncontrolled loose bull, as if he owns the *bwalo*. He swerves his feet with arrogance and chases the women and the children. The male choir sings for him the following: "*Those who kill leave destruction behind them.*" These words convey an ominous meaning as they are sung in a context of funeral and commemoration ceremonies where the cause of death is often investigated.

The character of **Akupha aononga** is recent (2005) but the themes are as old as the Chewa themselves. **Akupha aononga** wrestles with the issue of the causality of death and the sudden death and disappearance of young people without obvious reason. From the 1980s onwards the incidence of death has risen due to drug-resistant malaria, meningitis and the pandemic of HIV/AIDS. The character of **Akupha aononga** states the Chewas' secular explanation of premature death as being caused by the jealousy of evildoers and their involvement in the field of witchcraft and magic. The rural Chewa believe that such deaths are unnatural and are not willed by God and the ancestors. The Chewa find explanations in their complex social relationships within the matrilineal system and the inequality that has existed since the cash economy and labour migrations were introduced in colonial times. Recently the situation has been aggravated in the village as more farmers are being trained in new methods of agriculture. Surpluses are often produced, adding to income, lifting many families from the subsistence level. The growth of small businesses and greater opportunities for employment have changed the face of the Chewa rural village with its uniform huts and life style. Mass communication and the media have broken the fence of isolation. Today, corrugated iron roofs and brick houses indicate more prosperous homesteads. Houses are better furnished and often display a wireless or a TV antenna. Inequality is clearly exhibited in the way certain people eat, live and dress. Disparity within the same community and particularly within the same family group presents a new challenge. The gap between the have's and the have-not's is inevitably transposed into the field of causality and may provide an explanation of ill health and misfortune. These issues are consequences of the envy between blood related members of the family group who use magic and evil spells on the more successful members of the community. Poor hygiene, basic health facilities and rudimentary knowledge of sickness among the villagers encourage an explanation for ill health in magic. The emerging middle class at the rural level has its own health problems due to excessive intake of sugar, salt, fat and alcohol. These are responsible for increased incidences of high blood pressure, diabetes, cirrhosis of the liver and coronary problems. Access to money increases promiscuity and

sexual infections such as HIV/AIDS. Many of these problems can lead to sudden death, and villagers look to witchcraft as an explanation. Insecurity and theft are a relatively new problem for the egalitarian society of the Chewa. Villagers are seen to be attacked and murdered for their possessions, but through the hidden means of witchcraft. These recent changes deeply affect the lives of the Chewa, whether they are Traditionalists (ATR), Muslims or Christians. Issues like incurable diseases and the sudden death of young people do not seem to have met with a meaningful response from villagers. The mainstream religions seem to have failed in informing, in a practical manner, this important area of the Chewa worldview. The sole explanation that the Chewa community has retained is articulated by their traditional faith. The jealousy of a close family member or a neighbour, motivated by hate, greed and ambition can, through the use of magic, ravage another's life. A more fatalistic approach to these problems takes precedence over the affirmation of personal responsibility. The Bantu tendency to personalise the cause of evil and misfortune and to seek a scapegoat remains a strong feature of the Chewa outlook, ignoring individual responsibility.

### **Song**

*"Akupha aononga tate de e."*

### **Source**

Interview in 2007