

Aroma

(A yellow or orange mask from the Golomoti and Mua areas)



Themes

1) Chewa identity 2) Relations with Christian church 3) Dangers of modernity 4) Relations between Christian churches

Etymology

Aroma means, 'the Romans'. The name refers to the Roman Catholic Church.

Description

The orange or yellow mask (30 cm.) portrays a foreigner in middle age. The character is depicted as either bald or as having a black hairline made of goatskin. He has wrinkles, suspicious eyes and a strong nose. Other features include the moustache, a salient chin and a mournful mouth manifesting discontent. No teeth or tribal marks are apparent. The headgear of the mask is made of jute and tatters. The Mua version is dressed in a sort of white cassock reaching the knees and a mock rosary made of reeds. The Golomoti area has opted for the conventional tatter suit with a kilt, leglets and armlets made of fertiliser bag laces. The **Aroma** character in the Mua area carries a cross, a Bible and sometimes a flywhisk emphasising his power. The Golomoti region assigns him a flywhisk only. He enters the arena with great determination and swerves his feet with passion, marking the rhythm with his flywhisk or presenting the cross. He is not aggressive and disports himself like a gentleman. At the end of his performance, he commonly falls down inside the *bwalo*

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to reveal that within his strength lies a weakness. The male choir sings for him the following: 1) “*Who killed Jesus? They are the Romans!*” Sometimes a second song is heard: 2) “*Who is the owner of this school (this church)? They are the Romans (the Roman Catholic Church).*”

Aroma tends to perform at funerals and commemoration rites. He sometimes takes part in enthronement ceremonies. These are the occasions on which he voices publicly his discontent toward ‘the Romans’. The character of **Aroma** started in the 1930s when the Chewa secret society came into contact with the Roman Catholic mission at Mua. The character copies the habit of the Missionaries of Africa, nicknamed the White Fathers after their white habit. The first song betrays the antagonism between various churches competing for the area. The slogan, “*Who killed Jesus? They are the Romans!*” reveals Presbyterian propaganda against the Catholic presence at Mua, especially beyond the Livulezi River, where the character of **Aroma** was born. The second song talks about schools. Most early mission stations (both Protestant and Catholic) attached great importance to schools as a means of establishing their churches. When the White Fathers started establishing schools beyond the Livulezi and elsewhere, they provoked the anger of the Presbyterians. The competition between churches reached the ears of the Chewa traditionalists and gave them an opportunity to voice their grudges against both foreign churches. The Mua mission enjoyed early success in attracting villagers to the church and newly built schools. The period of the 1930s and the following years up to the 1950s is marked by a series of clashes between the mission and Chewa culture, particularly with respect to *gule wamkulu*. Many children were enrolled in school and were not active members of *gule wamkulu*. Traditional society lowered the age for the boys’ initiation in order to snatch them from the hands of the mission and to prevent them from going to school.

Beginning in 1909, the fathers placed a ban on initiation ceremonies and *gule*. Any defaulters were cut off from the life of the church and had to do penance in order to be readmitted. The fathers also exerted pressure on the colonial government in Dedza, and on King Kachindamoto, the local authority of the area, to have *gule wamkulu* totally banned. This series of clashes and the climate of hostility provided the background for the creation of the character of **Aroma**. After Independence in 1964 the school became the responsibility of the new government and, in general, the churches had less control and influence over the schools. The church refocused its priorities toward pastoral and development issues and started to retreat from its attitude of intolerance toward local culture. The church thought it best to reconcile its views and attitudes toward *gule* ceremonies so as to align more closely with the new government that kept affirming local culture and local identity. This marked the beginning of the end of cultural colonialism.

After Vatican II (1962 – 1965), the face of the Catholic Church was to change all over the world. By the beginning of the 1970s, the reform of Catholicism was starting to reach Africa, and Malawi in particular. The liturgy was performed in the vernacular. The book of hymns (especially for Christian funerals) was being revised and often composed with traditional music. Drums and other traditional musical instruments were being cautiously introduced into churches. Mua was no exception to this. At the beginning of the 1970s, the parish church was renovated, refurnished and decorated by local artists who made their first artistic excursion into the field of adaptation and inculturation. Toward the end of the 1970s, the Kungoni Centre for Culture and Art was opening its doors to the training of local artists whose main inspiration came from the local cultures, and *gule wamkulu* in particular. At the level of the pastoral, efforts were made to ‘baptise’ many areas of culture, promoting respect for the local traditions. By then, the critical purpose of **Aroma**

became less urgent and relevant and the character performed infrequently, eventually falling into disuse in Mua around 1980. The Golomoti area however, under the influence of the Presbyterians from Mlanda mission, has continued to perform it to the present day. Nevertheless, **Aroma** has lost his cassock and with it the virulence of its hostility. The youth performs **Aroma** without deep understanding of the conflicts that inspired its conception.

The grievances expressed in the songs belong to history. Today they are interpreted as an invitation for the Church to continue her work of inculturation and to become more localised in terms of personnel and policies. This is particularly true with regard to the Chewa Christian mentality that often trivialises and denigrates its own culture, especially *gule wamkulu*. Their attitude represents a major stumbling block for the traditionalists. The advent of democracy in 1994 and a greater opening to the western world became a growing concern for Malawian culture. Western values and modernity present a powerful attraction to the youth. The church was slow to side with local values and culture and as a result was seen as 'foreign' (reflected in the orange and yellow masks). Locals often preferred this 'foreign' church to the church rooted in the traditional African culture. While the missionaries have moved on and developed tolerance and dialogue with African Traditional Religion, the Christian community remained rooted in its prejudices of the past and refused to create an African Christianity. It preferred, and still often prefers, to copy the model of a western Christianity that is dying out. Ironically, the Chewa fear was justified. The Romans with their schools were powerful and capable of destroying Chewa culture and identity.

Songs

- 1) "Anapha Yesu ndani kodi? Ndi **Aroma**."
- 2) "Eni ake a sukuluyi ndi **Aroma** toto (2x) eni ake a sukuluyi."

Source

Interviews in 1992 and 2007