

Bonya

(A red and black day mask from the Mua area)



Themes

- 1) China
- 2) Drought, famine & food security
- 3) Economic security
- 4) Manipulation/exploitation
- 5) Overpopulation

Etymology

Bonya is a type of very small fish in the *usipa* family.

Description

Bonya is portrayed with a very small mask (25 cm.) that resembles a fish head. The face is filled with wrinkles and small dots to suggest either the scales of the fish or that the person suffers from ill health. The red eyes are slanted and elongated like that of a Chinese. The mouth is wide open and displays three small teeth. The mask is divided into two segments not really distinct: one side is red while the other is black, resembling *Chiwau*, another old character of *gule* conveying being burned or experiencing discomfort. The eyes are swollen like those of a fish, the nose is tiny and flat, the small ears stand up like fins. The headgear of the mask is made of tatters. The dancer wears a tatter suit and carries a whip in his hands, with which he threatens the audience.

Bonya is youthful. His dancing style resembles that of *Simoni* or *Lambwe*: the drumbeat takes from these two characters. He keeps changing style by swerving his feet following the change of drumbeat. But at the end of his performance, he threatens his audience with his whip and then the women scatter and run away from him. The men introduce him with the following song: 1) "**Bonya has come! Bonya has come! He has come to create great damage!**" To this call the women reply with the following song: 2) "**Bonya, come that I may sprinkle some tobacco on you in the pot (instead of salt)!**"

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The character of **Bonya** is new to the world of *gule*. It appeared in 2010 when the local markets were flooded with this kind of small fish. At the lake, the fishermen were collecting large quantities of *bonya* fish in their nets and they were able to provide the local markets with cheap fish affordable to all. **Bonya** was introduced to celebrate the abundance of cheap food available at the time. But since the character carries a whip, with which he threatens the women, **Bonya** unveils a more subtle and controversial message. **Bonya** was a type of relish that had negative side effects on the life of the local population: cough, diarrhoea and allergies were symptoms experienced by the villagers. Cheap food and purchases did not necessarily mean bliss for the people. Recently, the Malawi market has been flooded with cheap products such as food, clothing, wirelesses, tools etc. All these commodities are appealing because of their low price but have proved to be useless and often have a negative effect for the life of their buyer.

Bonya's mood changes as he dances in the *bwalo*. At the beginning, he appears happy, relaxed and youthful. He then becomes authoritarian and eager to dominate, take over and rule, as Simoni does. Toward the end of his performance he manifests aggression like Lambwe by threatening the crowd as a warning: 'Be careful! What has made you happy today, will not last long. It will soon become the source of problems and ill health for you.' As the character with a half red and half black face takes over the show, the audience realises that it has been exploited by people with a red face and small teeth. After 2009, the monopoly of trade in Malawi, and particularly in remote localities near the villages, had been taken over by the Chinese. They sold cheap commodities that were appealing but did not last. After a short while, people realised that they had been cheated. Their income was gone and they were left with more problems than before. The joy that they encountered in purchasing the goods had vanished and they were left even poorer.

Why are the people of Malawi forced to buy cheap and useless products? It is because they rely on a low income and are the victim of the poor economic performance of their country. The Chewa state that it has to do with overpopulation. Families are too large and are not in proportion to the income per capita. Child spacing and family planning are therefore required. The sudden multiplication of *bonya* in the lake has transformed them into food for humans. Commodities, infrastructures, employment and medical care cannot be provided adequately for all. The character of **Bonya** emerges as a social criticism and an assessment of the economic situation in Malawi. People of this country cannot be fed on *bonya* and cannot be the victims of foreign exploiters, like the Chinese, if they are to enjoy a realistic social security system. Prosperity should be for all. The Chewa, with their acute critical mind, delegate their ancestors to unmask the problem of the day and sort out the future of their descendants. They employ the *bonya* fish as a symbol instead of pointing to foreign powers that rape the villagers of their future on account of their poverty and marginality. The Chewa are no fools. Their wisdom guides them despite their appearance of ignorance and rusticity.

At first site, the character of **Bonya** looks as if it had been introduced by the youth which dominates the *mzinda* today and shows a superficial understanding of *gule*. But further investigation reveals that a group of elders near the lake (Mthembanji village) are responsible for its creation. They propose a shrewd explanation focused on today's reality.

The character of **Bonya** is not linked to any specific ritual but can be performed whenever there is a *gule* performance. Nevertheless, his appearance has been closely related to the funeral context.

Bonya is appealing to the younger members of *gule*, who welcome change and approve of an update of their dance as a source of entertainment. **Bonya** praises the availability of cheap food – but at what cost? The meagre meal of a day opens a wide rift of insecurity for tomorrow, and raises many questions that need to be answered.

Songs

- 1) "**Bonya wabwera! Bonya wabwera! Wabwera n'kuwononga!**"
- 2) "**Bonya tabwera ee aa ee ndikutsire fodya (mchere) mu mphika!**"

Source

Interviews in 2011 and 2012