

# Bwatika

(A yellow mask from the Pemba area, Dedza)



## Themes

1) Supporting Kamuzu Banda/MCP 2) Chewa – Ngoni relations 3) Lies, trickery & deception 4) Troublemaking

## Etymology

**Bwatika** derives from the verb, *kubwatika*, meaning, 'to fool', 'to cheat' and 'to beguile'. The name also suggests the idea of unreliability and disloyalty.

## Description

**Bwatika** is portrayed in yellow, a colour of strangers. The oval mask (60 cm.) features a smart and cheerful young man with low hairline (made of black goat skin), clean eyebrows and dandified thin moustache. His eyes suggest that he is cunning and deceitful. His open mouth revealing teeth on both jaws betrays an ambiguous smile, as if **Bwatika** offers lies and false promises. His nose is narrow and

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the cheeks angular. His salient chin, forehead and cheeks display tribal marks that could be Chewa or Ngoni. His pointed ears protrude, as if **Bwatika** is eager to collect rumours. The headgear of the mask is made of sisal, dyed black to represent the hair. Red tatters accent the dancer's neck. **Bwatika** wears a plain jute suit with shirt and trousers but without tatters. This emphasises that he holds no real status yet. The black flywhisk that he carries suggests that he is ambitious for status and authority.

In the arena, **Bwatika**'s behaviour is ambiguous. He dances as if he is mad or under the influence of drugs, following the accelerated beat of the drums. He rotates his pelvis obscenely and runs after women with the intention of grabbing them (sexually). He waves his flywhisk, pretending to be their idol. The men sing for him the following: "*The time has come, you children, you my friends, to go on a journey. Mr. **Bwatika** (the man of false promises) keeps saying this and that. He likes to twist things in his favour, but people do not see it happening. They do not receive what they have been promised! Keep your eyes open!*" The song captures the words of a deceitful person who uses sweet talk and lies in order to save his reputation. He is cunning and makes promises that never materialise. People are warned not to take his words at face value since it is in his nature to cheat. Lies define his speech: empty words, false promises, half-truths and forged stories. He confuses issues and twists things in his favour. **Bwatika** is a fraud and a troublemaker. To trust in him can only lead to disputes, quarrels, enmity and court cases.

The character of **Bwatika** originates from the Mozambique border near Domwe Mountain, where the Ngoni settled after 1870s. The yellow colour of his skin suggests that he is an Ngoni. His sweet talk could reflect the old Chewa prejudice against the Ngoni. However, the yellow colour could also be referring to recent events. The informant stresses that people like **Bwatika** have multiplied in recent times. The scenario described here could reflect the recent political set up of Malawi in the 1990s, when the multiparty activists, particularly the UDF (United Democratic Front) (characterised by the colour yellow), began to campaign against the MCP (Malawi Congress Party) and the Kamuzu Banda government. In the context of those days, **Bwatika** could carry a political slant, opposing the multiparty system and voicing the propaganda of the ruling government and the Malawi Congress Party. This hypothesis has some support in the fact that **Bwatika** performed not only at funerals and other types of ritual or gathering but also at political rallies, where the pro-Kamuzu Banda view could be voiced to a larger audience.

### Song

*"Yafika nyengo, ana inu, anzanganu, yoyenda! **Bwatika Bwatika** angoti izi nenu, **Bwatika!** Awa akamba zokomera iwo ndipo ena saziona, osazilandira! Izo n'zonena **Bwatika!** Bapenya!"*

### Source

Interview in 1992