

Chibale sakumbira

(An orange day mask from the Diamphwi area)

Themes

- 1) Justice prevails
- 2) Manipulation/exploitation
- 3) Recent politics
- 4) Rivalry for authority
- 5) Thirst for power

Etymology

Chibale means, 'blood ties' or 'kinship'. *Kukumbira* is, 'to be envious', 'to covet' or 'to dig'. The character's name plays on both meanings, making the issue ambiguous. One might covet brotherhood or dig for or discover bloodlines.



Description

The orange colour of the mask (30 cm.) indicates a stranger. He is middle aged, and the dominant features of the head and face include receding black hair, long sideburns, a moustache and a goatee. The face is somewhat curved and wrinkled, which are signs of maturity. The eyes are especially expressive, very large and wide open, conveying an incredulous or surprised look. The nose is broad and flat like a Malawian, although no tribal marks are present. The mouth is missing teeth, a sign of protest and disappointment. The rounded ears suggest a kind of exaggerated attentiveness. **Chibale sakumbira** has a large rooster-like comb on top of the head, which symbolises blood ties. The comb is an attachment and not part of the body of the mask, meaning that the blood relation is coveted and not genuine. The headgear of the mask is made of various coloured tatters, proving to the audience that the message is authentic and sanctioned by the spirit world. **Chibale sakumbira** dresses in clean black trousers and a smart dress jacket and carries a staff and flywhisk. The character presents himself as an educated, prominent and upper class individual, and the flywhisk shows he is ambitious and aspires to power, including the throne.

Chibale sakumbira is a recent *gule* character, who first appeared in the Diamphwi region in 1989 and can perform at all events where *gule* is involved. He dances enthusiastically and with determination in

www.kasiyamaliro.org

Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art, Mua Parish, P. O. Box 41, Mtakatika, Malawi

the style of Pombo, the taproot of the village. He swerves his feet, jumps, swings around and strikes his flywhisk with great authority and confidence. The male choir adds its voices: *“If you happen not to be related and to covet brotherhood (with the chief) you will be in trouble! But the problem arises with Mr. Do not covet blood ties! (The chief will say:) He is not my brother! He is not my brother!”* The message is that blood ties come through birth and are not a title that one can buy. If brotherhood is coveted and pursued by covert activities, the outcome cannot be fully trusted. Such ambition is motivated by envy, jealousy and self-advancement. The envious ‘brother’ will compete with the real blood brother and undermine relationships with the chief.

The character **Chibale sakumbira** dramatises the controversial political events that occurred in Malawi in the 1980s. The song refers to Minister Aaron Gadama who, with three other ministers in the Kamuzu Banda government, died under mysterious and unexplained circumstances in a car accident in Mwanza in 1983. Originally from Kasungu district, Mr. Gadama appeared to be a blood relation of President Kamuzu Banda. The Diamphwi community was convinced that Mr. Gadama met with foul play orchestrated by other ambitious politicians. It is no secret that many senior politicians perceived Gadama’s closeness to Kamuzu Banda as a threat to their own leadership aspirations.

There was much speculation about motives and murder as rival politicians positioned themselves to improve their chances to succeed Kamuzu Banda. The official government explanation left the victims’ families and the nation unconvinced and wanting the truth about how the four politicians died and who was culpable. In the aftermath of the accident, suspicious behaviour from both the police and government officials left the families of the deceased convinced of a cover-up and that a crime had taken place. Why were family members and relatives prevented from mourning their dead according to custom? Why were the victims’ remains quickly put into sealed coffins and family members forbidden to view the bodies in keeping with the customs?

The character **Chibale sakumbira** warns against unbridled ambition and subversion. It is wrong to covet blood ties and to manipulate their sanctity to gain position and to grab properties. This is contrary to the Chewa sense of community and the *mwambo* (the moral code). Such behaviour fractures and divides the community and fuels suspicion and distrust. The character asks the audience to consider a more popular and believable interpretation of the Mwanza incident. The character **Chibale sakumbira** provides an explanation taken from the Chewa interpretation of causality, which is a comment on jealousy between relatives or competitors. It is interesting to note that the Diamphwi community, up until 1989, still refused to implicate Kamuzu Banda himself in the Mwanza case.

Song

*“Ukakhala mlendo, n’kudzikumba mtundu tate de n’chovuta! Koma chikabwera tate **Chibale sakumbira!** Siwako siwako!”*

Source

Interviews in 1993

www.kasiyamaliro.org

Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art, Mua Parish, P. O. Box 41, Mtakatika, Malawi