

Disembala

(A red day mask from the Mua area)

Themes

- 1) Adultery & rape
- 2) Drought, famine & food security
- 3) Responsible parenthood
- 4) Avoidance of an early (illegitimate) pregnancy

Etymology

Disembala is Chichewa for December, the last month of the year. In Chewa country, this is the month that marks the beginning of the rain and the time for planting, for a harvest in March and April.



Description

This huge red mask (40 cm.) reveals a middle aged man with various swellings on the cheeks and around the mouth. The eyes are cheerful and the large mouth displays a smile of satisfaction. His hairdo is made of tatters or baboon skins. The details of the face vary according to the skill of the carver. **Disembala** wears a tatter shirt, over which he has a jacket or a white laboratory coat, a pair of trousers and leglets. He carries flywhisks in both hands to show that he is superior to others. His heavily padded stomach gives the impression that he is fat or 'pregnant'. When **Disembala** performs he hardly moves his feet. Instead he shakes his shoulders and tummy, expressing great satisfaction and showing that he is full. The crowd acclaims him with great cheers. The men sing: 1) "**Disembala** has come, **Disembala** has come!" or 2) "**Disembala**, come here! Without **Disembala** I would have died, **Disembala**!"

The men's song depicts **Disembala** as the month of salvation. There is rain, and the planting has commenced, with the promise of a plentiful harvest later in the year. For the present, mangoes are plentiful, and are the staple food throughout that month. The details of the costume, the mask and the dance, suggest that **Disembala** celebrates because his belly is full and there is no risk of famine. If this interpretation is accurate, then the mask should be black and not red. The women's song suggests another explanation. They say: 3) "*Did you see the illegitimate pregnancy? Go and report it to its owner (before) the child is born!*" The women's interpretation of the big belly is no longer connected with the season of plenty and eating but with adulterous relationships. They warn young girls who have neglected the elders' advice and find themselves pregnant without

being married. The women's song tells them not to take pride in their pregnancy but rather reveal the identity of the man who is responsible for it. They should not conceal the identity of their partner for fear that their own parents may withdraw their support. Once the child is born they will not be able to depend on anyone to look after the baby. The red colour of the mask then signifies promiscuity and sexual misconduct. The fact that the man is pregnant emphasises that the anonymous partner in the pregnancy is also to blame. His irresponsibility will have criminal consequences for the mother and the child. The name **Disembala** could also establish a connection between the case described here and the birth of Jesus from a single mother.

Disembala was introduced in the Mua area in 1997 (from the Kasumbu region, where a similar mask was observed in 1993). The Mua version is unique. Apart from its physical resemblance, the Mua version offers no connection with the Kasumbu one. The character was first introduced to perform on the occasion of funerals and commemoration rites. Its popularity and the consequent income it generates at public events have made it part of any ritual when *gule* is performed.

Song

- 1) "**Disembala** wabwera (2x)."
- 2) "**Disembala** ee tiyeni kuno! Popanda **Disembala** ndidakanka nawo **Disembala!**"
- 3) "*Kodi mwaiona mimba ya chigololo, mukauze eni ake, mwana wabadwa.*"

Source

Interviews in 1999, 2000 and 2001