

Gung'ung'u

(A brown day mask from the Pemba and Linthipe areas)



Themes

1) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change) 2) Deafness to advice/stubbornness 3) Recent politics 4) Thirst for power 5) Stupidity

Etymology

The word **Gung'ung'u** derives from *kugunda* (to bang) and evokes the sound of one object striking another, like knocking at the door or beating a drum. The repetition of the sound 'gun' suggests that there is no response, and therefore either deafness (*gon* or *gonthi*), a refusal to answer (stubbornness), or inability to answer (stupidity). The combination of sounds, **Gung'ung'u**, can also suggest the idea of something hard, strong, or unshakeable. The name of the character plays on these multiple meanings.

Description

The smallish brown mask (25 cm.) portrays a senior Chewa with tribal marks, partially bald and with wrinkled brow. Two short horizontal red horns droop on either side of the head, suggesting a formerly strong and unshakeable person who has now become weak and vulnerable. The face is

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broad and shows a crown of whitish hair and whitish whiskers. The chin is heavy, the nose thick and flat. The mouth displays a forced smile and small standing teeth. The expression seems to be one of bewilderment. The jowls are emphasised; and the ears are small and round to convey deafness. The attachment of the mask is made of tatters, indicating a character sent by the spirit world. Similarly, he wears a tatter suit and carries a flywhisk to denote his prominent position in society.

Gung'ung'u was introduced to the Pemba and Linthipe areas in 1992, just before the announcement of the referendum. During this period, the character appeared at the numerous political rallies that were held. When **Gung'ung'u** performs, the drummers beat the rhythm of the *chisamba*. In the *bwalo*, **Gung'ung'u** hardly dances and spends his time flirting with the women. They entice him, and he responds by moving his pelvis and hips provocatively while the men sing: *"Stupid one, what can you do? The stupid one is deaf. Even if we say, Go away! Go away! Resign! We are fed up with you! the stubborn one does not hear (does not listen). But he keeps imposing his leadership and keeps ruling all and everything by himself. For us, no! He has failed, Mr. Unshakeable."*

This biting political song points the finger at a well known 'old man' who moved about with crowds of women. Our old man is unquestionably Dr. Kamuzu Banda, the former President of Malawi, followed by his female entourage (*mbumba*) who, by then, were the only ones still loyal to him. Many women followed Kamuzu Banda willingly and supported him politically. As they rarely leave their villages, women tend toward conservatism and may be slower to respond to political change. Kamuzu Banda was able to remain leader for over thirty years by destroying his political rivals, through exile, imprisonment, suspicious car accidents and unjust death sentences based on clever manipulation of the law. However, in 1992 Kamuzu Banda was facing unpopularity and opposition. Mid-1992 marked a loosening of the rules governing freedom of speech. Many *gule* masks passed judgment on the ruler.

The song of **Gung'ung'u** ridicules Kamuzu Banda's stubbornness and determination to remain in power, and voices the sentiments of the majority for a change of government and party. **Gung'ung'u** mocks Kamuzu Banda's insensitivity to his people and his deafness toward their needs. The song indicates that the people have been silent for too long. When the election comes, they will not give him their votes. They have endured for too long the rule of a man who, in their traditional wisdom, is described as 'the fool' (*Wanzeru za yekha* or **Gung'ung'u**), the one who only takes advice from himself. The appearance of the **Gung'ung'u** character announces that Kamuzu Banda's days are over, and that the 'unshakable' is about to fall (the drooping horns). The Chewa village tends to consider leadership as a lifelong position, and their wisdom teaches them to respect their leaders. Nevertheless, the same village organisation encourages leaders who have reached old age and can no longer lead their people effectively, to step down (*chatuluka*) and to leave their positions to younger people. Moreover, Chewa traditional wisdom acknowledges the incompatibility of leadership with a lack of sensitivity and respect for the people.

Song

"Gung'ung'u atani tate e? Gung'ung'u sakumva; chingakhale tikuti choka! choka! choka! tatopa nawe, Gung'ung'u de! Sakumva Gung'ung'u. Ndiye kuumirira tate e... ungokhala nazo wekha. Ife toto, tate e! Walephera Gung'ung'u!"

Source

Interviews in 1993 and 2001