

## Guwa

(A skin mask or a black carved mask (day), and a dried palm leaf head cover (night), from the Mua area)



(day version)

### Themes

1) Luring appearances (beware of) 2) Choice of marriage partner (choice of *mkamwini*) 3) Marriage for money 4) Social changes/insecurity

### Etymology

**Guwa** means, 'an elevation', in this case referring to tall grass growing in an elevated cluster.

### Description

The mask is normally made of a dried skin painted black (for the day performance) or dried palm leaves (for the night performance). The skin is moulded to form an ugly face, which resembles that of a baboon. At times the face can be carved in wood and painted black. The features include a long snout, goatskin ears, piercing eyes made of old buttons, and teeth protruding out of the mouth. These teeth are created using glittering millet stalks. The headgear is made of banana leaves. For the day,

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

the dancer wears a full kilt made of baobab bark, and leglets and armlets made of the same material. For the night, his costume is made of dried palm leaves to reflect the light. His body is smeared with black mud. The dancer carries a typically male tool such as an axe, showing that he is looking for a marriage partner. He dances backward in the style of Pali nsabwe, the wretched one, demonstrating that his demand was turned down. The song of the male choir explains: *“Do not insult me with obscene language. My heart is only on you! **Guwa!**”* The song tells that **Guwa**’s proposal of marriage met with insult of the worst kind, despite the fact that his heart was burning with love. The woman he wished to marry refused him because of his ugly face and his extreme poverty, which is evident in his clothing. He does not present himself any better than an “elevated bunch of grass” standing in the field. **Guwa** comes from a poor family background and has no social standing despite his golden heart and his good behaviour.

The character of **Guwa** once performed at any occasion and opposed the changing mentality of villagers who had begun to focus more and more on money and tangible possessions. Marriage should not be based solely on looks, money and wealth. **Guwa**’s poverty is no reason for refusing him as a husband. Young girls who dismiss a marriage partner because of his looks or poverty should go beyond the person’s appearance and consider his reputation and qualities. The disappearance of **Guwa** around 1972 witnesses that his message had fallen on deaf ears. Material concerns seem to have defeated him. This may come to be regretted in the future. With the social changes that have followed democratisation, **Guwa**’s insights may be needed now more than ever.

### **Song**

*“Usanditukwane, mtima uli pa iwe **Guwa!**”*

### **Source**

Interviews in 1991 and 2007