

Januwale

(An orange-red day mask from the Mua area)



Themes

1) Drought, famine & food security 2) Responsibility for one's own actions/life 3)

Etymology

Januwale, the first month of the year.

Description

This large orange-red mask (40 cm.) features an almost flat head, half bald, surrounded with a mane of tatters. The face is shiny and compressed toward the chin. The eyes are small and half closed, and the nose tiny. Two slim moustaches highlight the slit-like toothless mouth. The character wears a conventional tatter suit, a large belt, white leglets and armlets, and a kilt around his waist. He carries a walking stick and at times he wears as a hat an old damaged empty basin.

Januwale was introduced in the Mua area dance around 1995. His appearance is not connected with any specific ceremony or ritual. **Januwale** appears weak, using his stick for support. But he is also erratic, swerves his feet in an uncoordinated way and chases the women while the men sing:

www.kasiyamaliro.org

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

1) "**Januwale**, the first month of the year, **Januwale**." The women scatter and enjoy being chased, singing: 2) "Go away! Go away! **Januwale** is coming! I have seen his head." His persistence in chasing women and his reddish colour signify that he is burning with hunger (*kupsya ndi njala*) and that his message is primarily for the womenfolk, who take care of the food supply for the household. The slim face, the empty basin of food, and the wobbly movements of his dance emphasise the problem of food security.

January is typically the most difficult month of the year for the Chewa farmer. This is the period when the food supply is low and people live with the expectation of the new green maize at the beginning of March. **Januwale** warns the women that hunger and malnutrition are coming soon if they do not take care of their remaining food supply. Another song of the women states: 3) "You, the terrible **Januwale**! He has come with a child who can't walk!" They should not sell their maize or convert it into cash. If they use it without measure, they will experience famine. Food shortage can become a tragedy for the children. The scant food supply during the month of January must last until the new crop is harvested.

In former days, February used to be the critical month. The same message conveyed by **Januwale** today was transmitted through a character called Kunali njala (refer to that entry), identified with the month of February. Today, the problem of food security has become acute as early as January. Changes in the rainfall pattern, population explosion, land shortages and growing inflation often force the farmers to sell their excess food in order to cope with other basic needs. The villagers' survival depends on managing their little food production and yet also generating some cash to meet the increasing demands of life. The spirit world continues to warn its descendants not to place their own life and that of their children in danger (*kuika moyo pa chiswe*) with the changing circumstances in the country.

Songs

- 1) "**Januwale** e e, mwezi woyamba, **Januwale**."
- 2) "Chokatu choka **Januwale** akubwera! Ndaonera mutuwo."
- 3) "A **Januwale** ti inu....! Abwera n'mwana wosayenda!"

Source

Interviews in 1997 and 2001