

Kachala

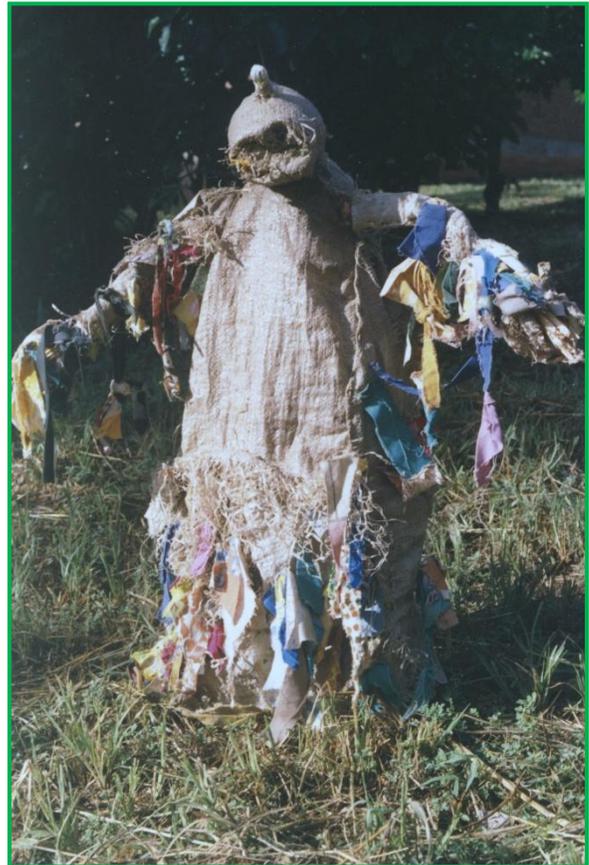
(A day or night structure from the Mua area)

Themes

- 1) Dishonesty, theft & robbery
- 2) Social changes/insecurity

Etymology

Kachala means, 'the small finger'. It conveys the opposite: a person with long fingers, a thief. Back in oral history, chief Kachala was one of the lieutenants of chief Mazengera from Nkhoma area. He was given land at the confluence of the Lilongwe and the Linthipe rivers.



(miniature model, day version)

Description

This large structure is four metres high and one metre wide. It is constructed with a bamboo frame and looks like a granary at the base. It is slimmer at the waist and becomes larger towards the shoulders. The general shape is that of a colossal man, a giant. Two outstretched arms and hands with five fingers are attached at the height of the shoulders. The arms are made of bundles of grass, which are wrapped with bark to form the fingers. They are dressed with cloth as sleeves. Curved thorns are affixed to the fingers and look like hooks. This tells the audience that **Kachala** has a propensity to grab what is not his own. For the night performance **Kachala**'s body is covered with dry grass or banana leaves. The day model is covered with jute or with blankets and the bust is dressed with a white cloth stitched in the shape of an oversize shirt. The head is fabricated with maize husks tied together like a ball or, in the case of the night version, a broom. It hangs downwards like falling hair. No details of the face are seen.

Kachala appears at funeral, commemoration and initiation rites. The structure is reckoned to be very ancient, and its origin points to the Lilongwe plain. It seems to have been well known on the lakeshore by the 1930s. **Kachala** enters the arena towards the end of each respective performance. It

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normally closes the dance. When it appears, it dominates the *bwalo* with its huge height. It is like a gigantic ghost. It races around the *bwalo*, swaying sideways. The audience disperses in all directions. Then **Kachala** intensifies its chase, swiping people with the long arms and stiff fingers. The thorns grip whomever they touch and leave traces of blood. The audience scatters. **Kachala** is back to the charge, hunting both men and women and sparing not even the drummers. **Kachala** drives the crowd home and this marks the end of the ritual.

This very explosive event is punctuated with a sequence of three songs, sung by both men and women, which unveil his personality. The onlookers talk among themselves: 1) "**Kachala** has started this commotion! The long fingers (thief)! Leave him alone! Let me tease him! **Kachala** has started this commotion!" As **Kachala** reaches the peak of his chase, people provoke him by singing: 2) "*This one, this one, he does not get along well with his friends!*" As people disperse and the performance is close to the end, both men and women enter into frenzied singing: 3) "**Kachala** is a beast, a wicked beast!" The three songs reveal an antisocial person whose bad habits are like those of a wild beast that bites indiscriminately. **Kachala**'s long fingers leave wounds that take a time to heal. **Kachala** cannot be trusted as a relative, a friend or a neighbour. He shows no respect for other people's property. He enters the houses of his relatives and neighbours in order to grab what does not belong to him. He takes their hard earned cash. He harvests the crop that he has not cultivated. He takes advantage of the closeness and the trust they share.

Until the 1930s, people did not feel the need to lock their houses. They merely barred the reed door with a bamboo stick (*mpiringidzo*), since they were bonded by mutual respect and common blood ties. With the advent of the money economy in the 1920s and 1930s, and the intensification of labour migrations to South Africa and neighbouring countries, the attitude of villagers toward property shifted dramatically. This change of mentality affected the youth more significantly because they had been exposed to the western life style outside the country. Property was not to be shared, but was being privately and selfishly owned by a few. **Kachala** was conceived and created in order to react against this mentality and shift in values. Incidences of theft increased, and villagers felt that mutual trust should be restored. Robbers were perceived as immature persons who had lost track of the *mwambo*, especially if they dared to target and to exploit their own blood relations. Such persons must be called back to a community spirit and to social maturity. The Chewa proverb addresses them as, "*Zitalika zala ngati nkhoneje wakhobwe – The fingers as long as unripe cow-pea creepers.*" Many *gule* characters were created in that period to fight a weakened sense of community and the growing insecurity among villagers.

Forty years later, **Kachala** had disappeared from the arena all together. Community values and mutual trust had not been restored. On the contrary, more masks were created to cope with the problem of growing insecurity. Villagers were forced to abandon reed doors and to replace them with solid wooden doors equipped with security locks and padlocks. They had to barricade themselves behind fences and walls in order to protect their meagre possessions. They had to defend their fields, cattle and food stores with an arsenal of protective medicines. Today, many villagers fear to store their maize in the granary outside the house. They prefer to keep it in bags inside their home. In this situation far too much maize is lost to pests such as rats. The **Kachalas** have become a greater threat than ever as property multiplies and community spirit vanishes. Inkata youth and police units have

become a necessity for the villagers who feel powerless in the face of the monstrous ghost that threatens their economic prospects and harmonious living. The behaviour of **Kachala** and the villagers in the arena emerges as a parable of rural anxiety. Although no longer a performer at the *bwalo*, the omnipresent shadow of **Kachala** still falls over the villagers.

Songs

- 1) "**Kachala** de (4x) wayamba mkangadza! **Kachala** de tamlekani! Ndisewere naye! **Kachala** de, wayamba mkangadza!"
- 2) "Uyotu uyo sasewera ndi anzake bwino!"
- 3) "**Kachala** de chilombo cha mphulupulu!"

Source

Interviews in 1987, 1992 and 2007

Reference

Ntara, S.J. 1973 [1944 original]. *The History of the Chewa (Mbiri ya Achewa)*. Translated in English by W.S. Kamphandira Jere. Notes by Harry W. Langworthy. Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH: Wiesbaden. p. 42