

Kuli mtendere

(A red day mask from the Mua area)



Themes

- 1) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change)
- 2) Relations with Christian church
- 3) National interests



Etymology

Kuli mtendere means, 'There is peace.' In the context of the period under discussion, it implies also, 'Peace is coming back to the country.'

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Description

The red round face features a stranger, a youthful and healthy person, full of energy and the promise of a great future. His narrow forehead displays two red horns (30 cm.) pointing forward and evoking the multiparty sign of the 1990s.

This sign took the form of two outstretched fingers, indicating support for multiparty-ism. The roundish, healthy and youthful face displays no moustache or beard. It is dominated by two wide bright eyes representing a man of great vision. His nose is that of a Malawian. His mouth shows no teeth and displays an inviting smile of serenity with no suggestion of any propensity for harassment or coercion. There is the promise of a new beginning, a new era, based on mutual understanding and a greater ability to listen to each other. This is the meaning of the two large ears of the mask. The two healthy cheeks and the firm pointing chin convey the promise of prosperity for all. The mask displays no tribal marks, since this 'saviour' of great vision has not yet appeared and could arise from any part of the country. He could also be born into a humble and unknown background: this is why the headgear of the mask is adorned with fertiliser bags and a baboon skin (which represents the bush). Tatters complete the headgear, conveying the concern of the ancestors for their descendants during the traumatic period of the 1990s. **Kuli mtendere's** youthful character is highlighted by the conventional dress of Kapoli, the protector of women and the *mbumba*. He wears a bright red singlet, white leglets and armlets, and a kilt made of fertiliser bag laces. Underneath, there are green banana leaves, like those worn by Nankwanya, embodying the power of life inherited from former generations. **Kuli mtendere** carries a knife signifying his readiness to fight for the right cause and a walking stick like that of Chadzunda, the father and chief of the entire community.

Kuli mtendere enters the *bwalo* with assurance, showing no sign of aggression. He swerves his feet with full stamina and great dignity. He is confident in himself and welcoming to all, particularly the women. The male choir introduces this mask by singing joyfully: "*In Jesus there is peace!*" This song echoes an old Catholic hymn and makes indirect reference to the Pastoral letter of the Bishops in March 1992.

Kuli mtendere is relatively new to the world of *gule*. He does not belong to the older characters that perform for specific ceremonies and transition rituals. **Kuli mtendere** was created toward the end of 1993 when multiparty politics were proposed and when Malawi was preparing for the referendum that would determine whether the country would remain with the single party system of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and the dictatorship of Kamuzu Banda or opt

instead for multiparty politics and democracy. **Kuli mtendere** delivered his message during political rallies that lobbied for change, so this character was short lived. Its popularity in *gule* lasted as long as his service was required to encourage change. The referendum of May 1993 confirmed that Malawians had indeed opted for multiparty politics and democracy. The general elections of June 1994 gave a majority to Bakili Maluzi and the United Democratic Front (UDF). The thirty years of dictatorship of Kamuzu Banda had ended, and the MCP had been relegated to the opposition. **Kuli mtendere** no longer served a purpose and vanished around 1995, to be replaced by other characters of protest more in line with the current political situation.

Kuli Mtendere's youthful appearance in 1993 introduced multiparty-ism to the village population around Mua. It was represented as a friendly option by the device of replacing the red horns of *gule*, which normally express threat, medicine or witchcraft, with the well known two finger salute. Symbolically the horns of the old *gule* characters became a parable for the Kamuzu Banda dictatorship, which was being replaced by freedom and democracy. Together with many other *gule* characters from elsewhere in the Chewa country, **Kuli mtendere** was created in order to propagate a philosophy of tolerance, introducing democracy and multiparty-ism. They have been credited with introducing the political change in 1993 - 1994 which heralded the triumph of democracy over dictatorship. **Kuli mtendere** is exceptional among these characters in emerging from a Lakeshore village known to be a conservative MCP stronghold.

Indirectly, **Kuli mtendere** was pointing to the positive involvement of the Catholic church and the other churches that had joined in the struggle for political change in Malawi and was praising their great achievement. In this character the *Nyau*, the old enemy of the mainstream churches, had become an ally in proclaiming a message of general peace and well being for the nation, setting aside the petty clashes of the past over alleged immodesty and immorality. The Chewa ancestors (represented by the tatters) had used the churches to free their people from the bondage of the great 'liberator and patron' of the 'gule' of 1964: Kamuzu Banda himself. The political mood had changed for the better by 1994, with greater tolerance marking relations between the churches and the *Nyau* societies. The ancestors and the churches were moving tentatively toward dialogue and the possibility of mutual recognition of Chewa and missionary values.

Song

"Kuli mtendere kwa Yesu!"

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Source

Interviews in 2012

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