

Kulibe mkuwe kuno

(A pink day mask from the Diamphwi area)

Themes

- 1) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change)
- 2) Limits and restrictions of *chikamwini* system
- 3) Responsible leadership
- 4) Party cards
- 5) Recent politics

Etymology

Kulibe mkuwe kuno means, 'There is no shout here,' or 'No one can hear my cry.'



Description

The large 46 centimetre mask in tones of pink portrays a stranger to the village, a husband who has spent all his life at his wife's residence (*chikamwini*). He is a Chewa (tribal marks) who has reached old age and is now decrepit and sickly. He displays a bald head with a shiny white circle on top of his bald patch. His face is emaciated and angular, narrow and marked with wrinkles, deep labial lines and protruding jawbones. A little greyish hair (made of Samango monkey skin) borders his bald patch. He has slanting eyebrows on protruding eye ridges, drooping moustache and a goatee (all made with the same type of fur). His eyes are tired, and green with anxiety. His slender nose is elongated and aquiline. His sad drooping mouth, displaying teeth on the bottom jaw, voices complaints and seems to call out for help. A strong chin reinforces his miserable look. Large pricked ears high on the head are waiting for a reply to his plea. Two black protrusions on his cheeks, symbolising swollen bruises, give witness to his ill treatment at his wife's residence. The headgear of the mask is made of wild animal skins to stress that he is a stranger and an outsider to the village. **Kulibe mkuwe kuno** wears a tatter suit and carries a flywhisk and a whip. The flywhisk indicates that he is a king at his home village, and the whip that he is maltreated at his wife's residence.

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

Our man has lived at his wife's village all his life, though he found it difficult at the beginning and often felt like a stranger and an outsider. He worked hard to adapt to his new family and village, and finally settled in. He tried to be friendly to everyone, and shared food and drink with them. He even went so far as to forget his own home and to find his happiness where he settled. Yet now that he has become old and sick, no one thinks of taking him to the hospital or paying the cost of his treatment. Instead they suggest that he goes back to his home village. No one cares for him. He can protest, but no one listens to his plea. **Kulibe mkuwe kuno** now regrets having left his village and having invested so much time and energy in adapting to his new residence, while its inhabitants still consider him as an eternal stranger and are unable to welcome him as a full member of their community. **Kulibe mkuwe kuno** dreams of his home and of his own relatives, who could care for him and take necessary measures for him to be treated and to find his way to recovery.

Kulibe mkuwe kuno's dancing style re-enacts his life story. In the arena, he swerves his feet with unsurpassed energy. He jumps and is busy pleasing everyone. In front of the womenfolk, he rotates his flywhisk with all his skill and strength as he is calling for their help. In response, the women in a single file follow him, but do not acknowledge his call. They represent the *chikamwini* community; they do not hear his plea. **Kulibe mkuwe kuno** moves to the male section of the audience, swerving his feet and rotating his flywhisk with the same tenacity and desperation. The men symbolise his home community, and show their willingness to help him. They sing: 1) *"Here, no one can hear me! I am dying while people (my wife's family) just look at me, as if I had not been friendly to them and drunk beer with them! Alas, poor me! What should I do, since there is no one here to listen to my plea? At someone else's village I remain a stranger. Alas, poor me! There is no one here to listen to my plea!"*

The character of **Kulibe mkuwe kuno** is recent. He appeared in the Diamphwi region around the end of the 1980s / early 1990s. His presence at *gule* is not linked to any particular type of ritual and can even enhance political rallies. The theme of the misunderstood *mkamwini* is familiar to Chewa society and to the world of *gule*. However, the fact that our character is portrayed as well dressed (tatter suit) and carries a flywhisk (chiefly status) conveys a more subtle interpretation. His late appearance provides a key for a political interpretation. The Diamphwi area has generated many characters with a political focus and anti-Kamuzu Banda tendency. The fact that **Kulibe mkuwe kuno** is rejected because of his old age and his sickly look coincides with the declining popularity of the old Kamuzu Banda, the first President of Malawi. The character suggests a clever reversal, a duality of roles. The mask and the song of **Kulibe mkuwe kuno** may at one level voice Kamuzu Banda's dismay at public rejection, but could equally convey the cry of the victims of his regime of tyranny. The bruises on the face of the mask could also feature the brutality of Kamuzu Banda's political system, by which its citizens were jailed without trial. There, their pleas could not be heard. The tatter suit and the flywhisk of **Kulibe mkuwe kuno** convey his power and exaggerated wealth, and the whip stands for the violence of the regime. The pantomime of the women's refusal matches well the *mbumba* and Kamuzu Banda's entourage, who showed no mercy toward those who were crushed under Kamuzu Banda's thumb. The men's response reflects public sympathy for the politically oppressed.

The character cleverly weaves the familiar theme of the *akamwini* ill treated in their matrilineal set up into the case of their president portrayed as an outsider. Now that he is in his late 90s, frail and senile,

the people of Malawi manifest 'ungratefulness', and wish him to go back to where he came from, England. The personality cult and the reputation of the progressive leader that Kamuzu Banda enjoyed in the 1970s and early 1980s had long since waned. Discontent and restlessness were the order of the day. Kamuzu Banda and the government's partisans were becoming worried. Already in the second half of the 1970s, many academics from the northern region were detained without apparent reason. They were imprisoned on the word of people who were in Kamuzu Banda's confidence. This state of affairs attested to power struggles within the ruling clique, and blank pro-forma detention orders with Kamuzu Banda's signature were used for such detentions.

By May 1983 there were rumours of Kamuzu Banda's impending visit to Britain for a prolonged sabbatical. The visit appears to have been prompted by Kamuzu Banda's advanced age and state of health. Naturally, rumours erupted about who would succeed him. Suggestions were made that members of the 'royal family' (those close to him) were determined to take over. Kamuzu Banda had consulted with the central executive of the Malawi Congress Party about succession options, but these discussions are clothed in secrecy. People had speculated that Orton Chirwa might eventually succeed Kamuzu Banda as President, but by then Chirwa had been sentenced to death. Some younger Members of Parliament had petitioned Kamuzu Banda against Chirwa's death sentence, which was tarnishing Malawi's international image. Kamuzu Banda rejected their intervention as a challenge to his authority. Kamuzu Banda's collaborators perceived his reaction as a tacit death sentence for the protesting politicians, and saw a way of preventing their master plan with regard to succession. The four ministers were found dead on the Mwanza road, victims of a so-called car accident, the night following their plea to Kamuzu Banda on behalf of Chirwa.

The year 1987 was marked by the imprisonment of the Malawian journalist Mkwapatira Mhango and the famous poet Jack Mapanje, who had recently returned from studies in Britain to take up a lectureship at Chancellor College. The students protested their teacher's arrest with strikes and demonstrations. The broadcast of the events on the BBC was further damaging to Malawi's reputation and that of Kamuzu Banda's government internationally. May 1989 was famed by the visit of Pope John Paul II to Malawi. Were the recent human rights abuses going to be conveyed to His Holiness? Was the Pope going to make allusion to the Malawi reign of terror in his public addresses? Everyone was waiting, including the international community. Recognising the potential for criticism, the office of the President and Cabinet censored all of the Pope's admonitions.

The same year witnessed the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of international Communism. As a result, western diplomats started to develop a concern for human rights, democratisation and good governance. Western governments put more pressure on all African regimes, and Malawi became a particular target. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund began to threaten cancellation of all aid in the absence of good governance records. Kamuzu Banda's 'wise leadership' fell short of that expectation. His policies to date had served only to enrich a minority and to confirm Kamuzu Banda's tyranny. Serious social research done at that time was starting to filter down to the various diplomatic missions in the capital. Soon, international agencies were to realise that they had deceived themselves over the years. Their perceptions of the country and the picture they had presented to their home governments were now seen as grossly inaccurate. They could no longer present Kamuzu Banda and his regime as a model for the rest of Africa. Kamuzu Banda was a

multimillionaire, who controlled the commercial life of the country and recognised the legitimacy of the apartheid regime of South Africa. Moreover his commercial success and his personal wealth had benefited from his policy of contact and dialogue with the South African regime. By the mid 1980s, the compulsion to purchase party cards and to provide gifts for Kamuzu Banda's crop inspection tours had become utterly intrusive. Expecting mothers were forced to secure party membership cards for their unborn children. The population was denied access to the local markets and to public transportation unless they could produce a valid party card. Such drastic measures disgraced the party, the government and Kamuzu Banda himself. Kamuzu Banda now had a reputation for enriching himself by blatant exploitation of the poor.

The year 1990 witnessed more detentions of school teachers from the north, who were compelled to return 'home'. Within days, schools from the southern and central region were left without sufficient staff, and some schools had to be closed. In June 1991, Amnesty International was in a position to publish a detailed report on the conditions of prisoners in Malawi, which opened the eyes of many within and outside the country. On the African scene, the political power balance had altered dramatically. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela had been released from prison, and the apartheid regime was slowly crumbling. In Zambia, Fredrick Chiluba had won a victory in the multiparty elections over Kenneth Kaunda and his one party state. These events were having an effect on Malawi, eroding Kamuzu Banda's monolithic rule. Increasing numbers of supporters were rallying around Bakili Muluzi, and secret meetings were held in order to challenge Kamuzu Banda and the Malawi Congress Party. There was serious talk of a north – south alliance. It had become impossible to keep the plea of the victims unheard. The proclamation of the Pastoral letter of the Catholic Bishops of March 1992 was a death knell for the regime. **Kulibe mkuwe kuno**'s plea was everywhere on the streets, in every village, and was permeating the international press.

Song

*"**Kulibe mkuwe kuno!** Tate, ine ndifa, wanthu ali kundiona tate, ye ngati sindicheza nawo tate, timwera limodzi mowa, ogo! Nditani ine, chikhala **Kulibe mkuwe kuno?** Tate ye ndi kwa eni ndi kwa eni, ogo! Ine **Kulibe mkuwe kuno!**"*

Source

Interview in 1993