

Lekani kutamba anthu adatha

(A red day mask from the Mua area)



Themes

1) Responsibility of family heads 2) HIV/AIDS & sexual diseases 3) Responsible leadership 4) High mortality 5) Witchcraft

Etymology

Lekani kutamba anthu adatha means, 'Stop bewitching others; people are on the point of extinction.'

Description

The red mask (45 cm.) portrays a witch exposed within the family leadership. He appears as a man who is senior but has not reached decrepitude, and with ferocious features. His head shows shabby, bushy and neglected hair, moustache and goatee made of Samango monkey fur. His features are completely covered with wrinkles and furrows over the forehead, nose, cheeks and the area surrounding the mouth. His face manifests mistrust and aggression. His frowning eyebrows convey

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duplicity. His eyes, inset with foil, glitter like fire and bulge out of their sockets. His broad and flat nose betrays that he is African. His vociferous mouth displays an ambivalent smile and conveys anger and jealousy. Threatening teeth on both jaws reinforce **Lekani kutamba**'s cruel appearance. His exceptionally large and pricked ears suggest his eagerness to listen to the complaints of his family members, but in fact he only pretends; he is in fact deaf to them. The face of **Lekani kutamba** does not show tribal marks though he is obviously a Chewa. His propensity to witchcraft activity is not portrayed with horns, as is the norm in many other masks, but in this particular case is rendered with the colour code red and his revolting features, which emphasise his bloodthirstiness, disguised under the image of an honest citizen. The headgear of his mask is made of rags that contrast totally with his smart jacket and trousers. These convey a gentleman's look, that of a person of status and wealth, and reveal that he has enriched himself at the expense of the family group he heads. **Lekani kutamba** carries a staff and a flywhisk, signs of his important position within the family, but also conveying that he uses his stick to ill-treat his family members and to impose on them an abusive rule.

Lekani kutamba's selfish character hides behind his position of authority. He cheats his family members by making them the victims of his secret powers (witchcraft). His own dancing style and the rhythm of the drums played for his choreography copy those of Mfumu yalimbira, the chief's rival (refer to that entry). In the arena, he is rude and uncouth. He spins around, changing direction and swerving his feet with unrivalled aggression. He flaps his flywhisk with savage movements. The male choir spells out his wild behaviour in the following: 1) *"Yes, yes, stop bewitching others! People are on the point of extinction!"* To this song, the womenfolk add some more details: 2) *"Here is the (nasty) old man who is coming. Ignore him! Here is the (nasty) old man who is coming!"* The old man of the song refers to the family head who has degenerated into evil and selfish behaviour. As the head of the extended family group (*mwini mbumba*), he has the responsibility for his sisters and their children and grandchildren. He should have at heart their welfare, health and security. Any mishaps and failures in these fields will be attributed to his lack of responsibility and care. The song from the men deplors the increase of the mortality rate and attributes it to witchcraft, the common explanation for the cause of death of people who are still in their prime and have not reach full maturity.

The character of **Lekani kutamba** was introduced to the Mua area by the year 2001, and is performed on the occasion of funeral and commemoration rites following burial rituals of people who have been affected by the HIV pandemic. Informants state that, though the character of **Lekani kutamba** is new to the Mua area, it takes its origin in the hills above Mua (the Bembeke region). They emphasise that in the villages surrounding Bembeke, **Lekani kutamba** goes back to the mid 1920s and 1930s, and was introduced there as a response to the advent of the *magawagawa* disease and syphilis. The Mua Mission diary of that period corroborates this. Already by December 1921 and in several entries in 1925 – 1926, there is mention of numerous cases in various villages where men and women were infected. The local district doctors came to examine them and experimented with various drugs prescribed for the infection. The *magawagawa* disease was known as an ulceration of the limbs and seemed to have been contagious. It is interesting to observe that HIV/AIDS was also called *magawagawa* or *magawagawa* at the time HIV was first discovered within Malawi's borders.

The character of **Lekani kutamba** wrestles with the issue of death causality within a context of epidemics. This was the case for the Bembeke region in the mid 1920s and 1930s, and for the Mua

area in 2001. In both cases, they explain the cause of sudden death through the involvement of the family head, the maternal uncle, who is thought to be a witch and is held responsible for the ill health of his family members. The 70 or 80 years span does not seem to have affected the village thinking with regard to causality. Moreover, the increasing disparity (the smart jacket and trousers) with regard to wealth and the advent of the money economy and consumerism have increased the acuteness of the problem. Today, there is if anything more jealousy and suspicion.

Lekani kutamba's message stresses that those who practise witchcraft have to be held in check for fear of causing the villagers' extinction. Besides, the character renews for the modern world the demand for leadership qualities free of selfishness, greed and profiteering. Leaders in any type of position should uplift the community and increase its well-being: this is the wish of the ancestors they represent.

Songs

1) *"E a e Lekani kutamba e anthu adatha!"*

2) *"Andala abwerako. Aleke, aleke, aleke! Ndi andala abwerako!"*

Source

Interview in 2001

Reference

Mua Mission diary. Unpublished manuscript. Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica: Roma. December 1921 (p 28), 22 August 1925 (p 86), 9 February 1926 (p 105), 2 May 1926 (p 112)