

Mafumu achuluka

(A coffee day mask from the Mua area)



Themes

1) Abuse of power 2) 'Big chief' syndrome 3) Lack of community spirit 4) Compassion & kindness 5) Decentralisation 6) Drought, famine & food security 7) Greed 8) Justice prevails 9) Unity & harmony

Etymology

Mafumu achuluka means, 'The chiefs are too many.'

Description

This character was created at the end of 2008, near the south end of the lake (Kafulama village) and spread to the Mtakatika – Mua areas. The circular face of 50 centimetres wrestles with change and foreign identity. Therefore, it is depicted in tones of reddish coffee. The details of the face feature a local man. He has large eyes emphasising foresight and eyebrows made of human hair conferring the image of authority. The caricatured pointed nose conveys the likeness of a particular chief. The chin is

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assertive and topped with a goatee made of human hair: it dominates the baggy jowls. The open mouth showing no teeth displays a mocking smile, implying sarcasm. A human hair moustache underlines the upper lip. The large pricked ears convey that the man captures the talk of the day. The headgear of the mask is rendered with tatters. The character wears a carved hat painted white to give the likeness of a chief (Mphonda from Kafulama). The dancer is dressed in a tattered suit, embellished with a white kilt made of fertiliser bag laces.

Mafumu achuluka brandishes a flywhisk and a sceptre to convey his authority as a chief. He appears on the *bwalo* with ostentation and pride, and dances to the beat of *Kulipire*, the one who claim a fine, on the occasion of chieftainship, funerals and commemoration ceremonies. He parades around the *bwalo* swerving his feet and waving his flywhisk. He pays respect to the women (*kuyangala*), to which they respond by flocking to him, manifesting their support and acknowledging that he has won the contest. The men sing for him: 1) *"The chiefs are too many in this village! The chiefs are too many!"* The women answer with: 2) *"Go and get crowned! The chiefs are too many! Go and get crowned! Enter (and see for yourself the misery it implies)!"*

This new character appeared at the period when the local T.A.'s were multiplying the number of chiefs in each village along the lakeshore. A large village was split into five or six units, and each segment was given its own chief to satisfy the principle of decentralisation. People from each segment were requested to give their local contribution in the form of cash, heads of goats and cattle. The cost of such an operation followed standard prices dictated by the T.A. of each locality. Villagers who had to meet this cost struggled and even complained in order to raise the amount required. Though it was difficult, the villagers complied because they saw advantages for themselves, such as having access to fertiliser coupons allocated to members of their own group. The character of **Mafumu achuluka** reacts to the sudden multiplication of chiefs in their area and to the impact it has on the general welfare of their village. Up to then, the chiefs were in the habit of favouring their own blood relatives instead of distributing the fertiliser coupons to all. Many villagers complained that they were by-passed as they did not have access to the "miracle" working product for their garden. Therefore, there was an advantage to multiplying chiefs: it would give them a chance to be favoured by new chiefs related to them by blood. Moreover, the process of creating new chiefs increased the power of the T.A., enhanced his prestige by multiplying his government salary (following a specific quota), ultimately adding to his personal income in the form of cash or livestock. As the number of chiefs increased, the number of fertiliser coupons available for distribution diminished. The villagers who had hoped to have access to coupons through a chief of their own bloodline were also sidelined on account of the government, in its turn diminishing supply drastically. More chiefs created a monopoly over the available coupons and also meant more nepotism on behalf of the chiefs. The general population did not profit from the system, and as a result became poorer. They had to grow crops without fertiliser, or they had to buy it at a very high price that they could not afford. Before the multiplication of the chiefs, farmers used to belong to farmers' clubs, which provided them with credits for fertiliser. Farmers could give back the loan at the time of their harvest.

Seen under this light, the multiplication of chiefs was no longer a positive move, and appeared to be a disadvantage for the villagers. As the number of chiefs increased, so their respective authority diminished. Everyone hoped to be a chief, and hoped to free himself from the chief's authority

through accessing financial independence. The rule of acceding to chieftaincy used to follow very precise tradition in the past.

The character of **Mafumu achuluka** was created at the end of 2008 after chief Mphonda had been seriously ill for a full year and was approaching his death. During that year of illness, his relatives spent their time speculating about who would replace him as a chief. Several candidates were already emerging, and were engaging in campaign before Mphonda's death. Few of them were eager to show their support and compassion while the chief was awaiting his end. Such a lack of sympathy horrified Mphonda's close relatives and motivated a grandchild, who was a carver of the *mzinda*, to create **Mafumu achuluka** during that span of time. He decided to give the mask Mphonda's likeness, and topped his head with the very white hat he was wearing during his lifetime. When Mphonda died the character was ready to officiate at his burial and to complete the remaining funeral rites. The character of **Mafumu achuluka** was first of all a protest against the lack of compassion for his grandfather before his death. Members of the village were more interested in his position than in his person. They had lost their humanity and had turned into wild animals ready to snatch the little he owned, and above all his chieftaincy. This loss of humanity was not only applicable to his grandfather's case but had become commonly accepted behaviour, which needed to be straightened up.

The character of **Mafumu achuluka** protests against the fact that the chiefs no longer strive for justice and have no genuine commitment to their people. They are too often motivated exclusively by their own selfish interests and their dream of having access to coupons to earn an income. Through **Mafumu achuluka**, the spirits of the ancestors protest against the lack of cohesion, compassion and unity among the villagers. It reprimands those Chewa who use their high position in order to achieve their economic independence and to dominate those they should serve. The character confronts those who suffer from the "Big chief" syndrome and monopolise the resources of their country for themselves and exploit those they govern. For the cunning Chewa it teaches that to harvest what one has not cultivated is criminal. Profiteering is against social justice.

Songs

- 1) "**Mafumu achuluka** pam'dzi pano! **Mafumu achuluka!**"
- 2) "*Eae kaloweni!* **Mafumu achuluka!** *Kaloweni!* *Eae kaloweni!* *Ndalowe!*"

Source

Interviews in 2011 and 2012