

Magwiragwira

(A dark brown day mask from the Mua area)

Themes

- 1) Dishonesty, theft & robbery
- 2) Faithfulness to the *mwambo*
- 3) Support for traditional medicine & *sing'angas*



Etymology

Magwiragwira describes a person who “touch touch”, referring to a thief or a robber.

Description

Magwiragwira is a person whose face (35 cm.) has been atrophied because of evil behaviour and transformed into some kind of beastly creature. The forehead is over prominent and bulges out to show a highly intelligent individual who uses his clever brain for planning evil. At the back of his skull two protrusions erupt from his head, developing into the beginning of two horns. The swollen eyes bulge out of their sockets, expressing a loss of control as the individual becomes overpowered by a mysterious disease. The broken pointed nose dominates the face and seems to be growing longer and longer under the influence of the sickness. So are the pointed lips, which keep extending and changing into a sort of snout or beak. The chin sticks out to form an apex that rivals the nose in length. The ears are unusually large and are pricked up like those of a wild animal. The headgear of the mask is made of tatters to convey the presence of the dead and of the ancestors. The character wears a clean shirt, a pair of khaki trousers and a white jacket. He displays a swollen stomach signifying a new symptom of his sickness. He enters the *bwalo* holding a walking stick, which indicates that he is weak.



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The character of **Magwiragwira** is recent to the world of *gule*. It appeared for the first time at Kafulama village for the commemoration of the dead (*dambule*) in June 2006. **Magwiragwira** takes an active part in funerals and commemoration rites. The concept of this character was inspired by the events that happened in the neighbouring village to Kafulama a few months earlier. A young man, of dark complexion, who used to wear a white jacket and a pair of khaki trousers, made his living from setting fish traps in the nearby rivers. He sold the fish to the villagers as a way of getting an income. One day, when he had failed to find fish in his own traps, he ventured into the fish traps of his neighbours and took the fish that were not his. This was a risky enterprise since the owner of the fish traps could have protected his properties with medicine (*chiwindo*), which would result in the thief falling sick. After a while, the thief started to experience discomfort: his stomach was swelling and he began to notice deformity on his face. His discomfort turned into a serious illness that proved to be fatal. His death and funeral brought his case to public awareness. His mysterious sickness prompted the members of the *mzinda* to create a new character, which they called **Magwiragwira**. They gave to the character the very likeness of their neighbour who died from the *chiwindo* disease.

As **Magwiragwira** enters the *bwalo*, he contorts his pelvis frenetically, holding his stick, to express his pain. The male choir greets him with the following song: 1) "*Touch touch, my son! My son, you never listen.*" To this song the women reply with the reproach: 2) "*I told you, my child, that to steal is evil. You have contracted the chiwindo disease!*" The message expressed by the women is clear. Stealing is an unacceptable behaviour for the Chewa who live a very communitarian life and share in each other's resources. Nevertheless, personal or communal ownership is protected with a mystical sanction and medicine (*chiwindo*), which serves to secure individual rights. The dreadful effects of this mystical disease deters the thief from taking what is not his and gives to the owner a psychological and social security. To steal is wrong. One should beg instead. This is the message of the ancestors.

Songs

- 1) "**Magwiragwira** mwanawe! Mwana wanga sukumva."
- 2) "*Ndakuwuzwa mwana wanga kuba n'koyipa. Watenga chiwindo!*"

Source

Interviews in 2012