

Makuponi avuta

(A day face cover mask from the Mua area)

Themes

- 1) Abuse of power
- 2) Drought, famine & food security
- 3) Injustice
- 4) Nepotism

Etymology

Makuponi avuta means, 'The coupons are difficult to get,' or 'There are no more coupons.'



Description

The mask consists in an empty fertiliser bag hiding the head of the dancer inside and topped high with material filling the bag. The head resembles a bag full of fertiliser. The dancer wears a kilt, armlets and leglets made of fertiliser bag laces. He carries two panga knives in his hands, which he knocks together producing the sound "ngwi", symbolising war against injustice on the occasion of fertiliser distribution.

Makuponi avuta enters the arena with his pangas. He swerves his feet sideways and knocks his pangas against each other. The drum beat resembles that of Mbonongo, the wild spirit from the bush. The men sing: 1) "*The coupons are difficult to get!*" or "*There are no more coupons!*" To this song, the women reply: 2) "*Jere, you would do better to give a reward, since he has a knife in his hands!*" Both songs and pantomime incite to violence and bribery. The character of **Makuponi avuta** is not linked to any central ritual; it can be performed on any occasion during which *gule* dance.

The character of **Makuponi avuta** is recent. It appeared in 2007, during the dry season following the controversy over the distribution of coupons for accessing bags of fertiliser. In 2006, in one of the villages around Mua, a chief had received a limited number of coupons, so he did not share them with one of the segments (*limana*) of his village. The leader of the segment disfavoured became unhappy

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and tried to beg of the T.A. his independence from the village that had denied him fertiliser. He dreamed of becoming a chief in his own right. He was crowned chief by the T.A. in 2009.

The issue of fertiliser distribution goes back to the political change in Malawi in 1994. During the Kamuzu Banda era (1964 – 1993), people had to buy their own fertiliser at the price prescribed by the government of the time. When Bakili Muluzi succeeded Kamuzu Banda in 1994, he introduced starter packs of fertiliser of 10 kg. They were given freely to all villages. This lasted till 2004. Then, the next president, Bingu wa Mutharika introduced the coupon system. A coupon would be allocated to a farmer in order to purchase a fertiliser bag of 50 kg at a reduced price (the government would subsidise the rest). Not all villages were entitled to such a favour: large villages received coupons but smaller villages did not. The number of coupons was proportional to the size of the village. The result was that there were not enough coupons for everyone. Complaints were many: hence the name, **Makuponi avuta**, 'There are no more coupons'. The distribution was conducted at district level according to government allocation. The selection of villages eligible for coupons was made by the T.A. and Group village headmen surrounding him. This process invited nepotism and the use of bribery.

The character of **Makuponi avuta** unveils the open injustice related to food security through this method of coupon distribution. Politicians, T.A.'s and chiefs are enriching themselves at the expense of subsistence farmers. Fertiliser is a commodity which farmers in Malawi cannot do without in the third millennium. Their survival depends on overcoming the changing pattern of the rainfall, the impoverishment of the soil through monoculture and the scarcity of land. They need to boost their fields heavily with fertiliser in order to produce the yield needed to survive the next dry season. As nepotism increases among their leaders, people are tempted to use bribes in order to secure their needs. Only the wealthier succeed. The poor cannot feed their large families depending on subsistence farming. Bribery has become a way of life instead of the old pattern of living harmoniously with one another and supporting each other. The ancestors are saddened by the sudden loss of mutual concern and surrender to selfishness, the opposite of the *mwambo*. Sharing used to be their rule of life in the past; today it has been replaced by self-centredness and egotism. This is especially true when it comes from those who have been made the ancestors' representatives, those who have been entrusted with the custody of the *mwambo*.

Songs

- 1) "E e **Makuponi avuta!**"
- 2) "*Oh supa a Jere, chimpeni ku manja!*"

Source

Interviews in 2011 and 2012

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