

Mamveramvera

(A pink day mask from the Kasumbu and Diamphwi areas)

Themes

- 1) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change)
- 2) Gossip(ing)
- 3) Weak leadership
- 4) Lies, trickery & deception
- 5) Manipulation/exploitation
- 6) Recent politics

Etymology

Mamveramvera means, 'rumour' or 'gossip'.



Description

The character was introduced in *gule* in 1991, and it was not linked to any ritual context.

Mamveramvera appeared principally at political rallies. His message was applied to the changing face of Malawi and predicted the downfall of Kamuzu Banda and his government.

The 35 centimetre mask is pink, and the face is rather effeminate. Both the colour and the female characteristics emphasise that he is a husband, an outsider (*mkamwini*), under the influence of his wife and her family group. **Mamveramvera** has a shiny pate with a crown of fancy black hair, clean eye brows, a thin dandy moustache and a smart goatee, all painted in black. These details suggest his seniority. Tribal marks feature on his short forehead, his flat cheeks and his round chin, confirming that he is a Chewa. His eyes are small and appear credulous, portraying that he is eager to believe any rumours. His aquiline nose leads to labial lines encircling the open mouth of an old man showing teeth only on the top jaw. The open mouth shows teeth on the upper jaw. The ears are pricked, suggesting that he is eager to pick up any rumours. The headgear of the mask is made of tatters to portray that he is entrusted with a message from the spirit world. **Mamveramvera** wears a dirty jute shirt and a pair of trousers, over which is a heavy army coat. His head is covered with a palm woven hat imitating a bowler hat, identifying him with the first President of Malawi, Kamuzu Banda. He carries a walking stick and flywhisk. These details highlight his chiefly status. The soiled clothing predicts that he will soon be demoted.

At the rhythm of *chisamba*, **Mamveramvera** enters the *bwalo* and spins around like Chinsinga, the unruly child. He swerves his feet aggressively, and shows a predilection for performing in the midst of the ladies. As he dances, the male choir comments: “Some say that the position of the old man and his friends is about to end because of listening to their wives (gossip)! This is a problem, my friends!” A man leads the following line with a high pitched voice, “As for rumours, he says, no! Start first by enquiring before you believe rumours!”

The end of the song admonishes villagers for confusing facts with rumours. One cannot act on rumours or hearsay, for fear of compromising peace and trust among people. The relationship between the village and the family can easily be destroyed when people believe rumours. This is even more destructive when those rumours influence a person in a responsible position. Villagers know that false information can be fed purposely to a person in authority. The village and the political scene are full of such examples. Reckless competitors can pursue a secret agenda, which ends ultimately with the manipulation of power. The so-called advisors may provide information that is biased or prejudiced. They may lavish praise instead of voicing constructive criticism. They are jealous and envious. Their false representations serve the purpose of increasing their own importance. This is particularly true when the wife of a ruler takes an active part in politics.

The song here targets the official hostess of the country, Mama Kadzamira, who is ironically called by the population the ‘wife’ of the president. Our character of **Mamveramvera** is a caricature of Kamuzu Banda but, through the androgynous features of the mask, targets Mama Kadzamira as well. **Mamveramvera** tells leaders of this country that they should be cautious in welcoming advice for fear of being judged biased and unjust by their people. A wise leader does not hurry in making a decision. First he conscientiously studies any issue before taking action. The song predicts that the reign of Kamuzu Banda is coming to an end because he has ceased to rule the country as an unbiased leader. Kamuzu Banda prefers to listen to rumours, and has allowed Mama Kadzamira’s clique of friends and relatives to become too influential. By 1991, Malawian citizens realised that their formerly beloved leader was weak, biased and unjust.

Song

“O tate ena akuti ikutha nchito chifukwa andala ndi anzawo de, chifukwa chomvera akazi awo tate! Mavuto anzanganu tate! Mamveramvera awa, tate toto ine. Dziyamba wafunsa usanavomereze ee ee Mamveramvera.”

Source

Interview in 1993