

Mau msamatha and Mai Mau msamatha

(Orange day masks from Diamphwi)



Themes

1) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change) 2) Recent politics 3) Pride/arrogance

Etymology

Mau msamatha means, 'hurtful, injurious and boastful talk' (expressing pretension and pride). It is also a proper name.

Description

The two characters dance as a pair on the occasion of political party meetings. Both masks (35 cm.) are orange. The pair was introduced around the 1990s. **Mau msamatha** is portrayed as a senior man with a haughty face, moustache, tribal marks and a mouth full of teeth. He appears arrogant. The dancer wears a tatter suit and carries a flywhisk to symbolise his position of importance. **Mai Mau msamatha** is portrayed with sour features, local tribal marks, round eyes and a tiny disdainful mouth. The mask has long, black hair made of dyed sisal. The hair is partly covered with an elaborate turban, like those of the Malawi Women's League. The ears are decorated with sophisticated earrings and assorted necklaces hang from her neck. The dancer

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wears a smart blouse with high, puffed sleeves and a *chitenje* of the same type as the party uniforms. Numerous bangles cover her arms. **Mai Mau msamatha** dances the *chisamba* with her partner. **Mau msamatha** swerves his feet with arrogance while **Mai Mau msamatha** moves her bottom with dignity as she circles her partner. The men sing, *“Some are full of injurious words. They say, Go away! Whether you want it or not, go away! Go away! Go away!”*

Some people enjoy a position of honour or wealth. They may have been chosen for such a position or they may have struggled for it. They do not realise that one day the advantages due to their affluence may come to an end. Such people tend to inflate themselves, praising their own achievements, their work, their wealth and their position. They look down on other people and think no one can replace them. A Chewa proverb expresses this well: *“Ukakoma leka tonyo – If you are handsome do not act proudly.”* If they are supplanted they lose face and suffer mightily. They are so ashamed that they go into hiding for fear of being mocked by their neighbours. The criticism behind these characters is directed to people in authority at the village or at the government level. For instance, the wife of a chief can behave as if she were a chief herself, but the day her husband divorces her she disappears from the village because of her shame. She becomes a stranger to her own people. (The orange colour of the mask suggests the stranger.)

These characters comment on the political scene, which was moving towards change in the early 1990s. The pair portrayed here personifies the pride and preciousness of the Malawi Women's League (CCAM) and the leaders of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), who lived with the conviction that their positions were eternal, like that of the 'Life President' himself. Nobody could ever remove them from their office or start new political parties. They behaved with arrogance and boasted about their powers and privileges. As another Chewa proverb says, *“Ukapha tonde wonona musamatha mau – When you slaughter the fat ram, do not despise others and boast about yourself.”* The masks predict the downfall of the MCP and the MWL that was to come less than a half-decade later. They mock the awful shame that befell the formerly mighty. Another proverb says, *“Ng'oma yolira sikhaira kudooka – The drum that is beaten loudly bursts easily.”*

These characters warn village and political leaders of the dangers that come with a sense of entitlement. They stress the importance of humility and simplicity for people in high positions. The Chewa express this attitude in the following words: *“Zamwini sakulira mwendo – With other people's property, one can't make one's leg thicker.”*

Mai Mau msamatha was a prominent member of the MCP in the 1990s. She fulfilled a leading role in the Malawi Women's League (CCAM). She was responsible for composing the songs of the *mbumba* which performed for Kamuzu Banda at political rallies and refuted Kamuzu Banda's political opponents. She shared her position with many other well known women: Mrs Kankodo, Mrs Manjamkhosi and Mrs Tsamwa. During the secret meeting of the MCP at the Lilongwe headquarters, after the Pastoral letter of 1992 (a meeting that discussed the future of the Catholic Bishops), she was renowned for having said “that she was ready to pee in the mouths of the Bishops” as a way of returning the insults that they had done by writing the Pastoral letter. Later on, in a mass rally in Lilongwe, she was credited to have broken her rosary in front of the crowd commenting that “this denomination [RC] should be wiped out”. After the downfall of the government and the MCP in 1994, the youth movement (MYP) was disbanded, the CCAM dissolved and everyone else among the “triumphant ladies” had to go back in shame to the anonymity of the crowd.

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Song

“Angoŧha mau ena (3x) choka choka! Kaya mufune kaya musafune. Akuti choka! e tate choka!”

Source

Interviews in 1993 and 2012