

Mwakhalitysa

(A brown clay mask from the Diamphwi area)

Themes

- 1) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change)
- 2) Recent politics
- 3) Thirst for power

Etymology

Mwakhalitysa means, 'You have stayed too long.'



Description

The 35 centimetre brown oval mask depicts a very old man with bald crown, hair only at the temples and a moustache and goatee made from Samango monkey fur. His bare forehead protrudes and is wrinkled. His cheeks are angular. His open mouth has missing teeth, which suggests disappointment. His eyes are glaring and appear questioning. His nose is that of an African, and his tribal marks reveal that he is a Chewa. The headgear of the mask is made of tatters. **Mwakhalitysa** wears a dustcoat and a pair of black trousers. He carries the insignia of power: a staff and a flywhisk.

In the arena, **Mwakhalitysa** adopts the dancing style of Kalumbu, but his performance is lethargic. He sluggishly swerves his feet while surrounded by a huge crowd of women. The men sing for him the following: *"You have stayed too long, old man! Chieftainship like yours does not have a great pension, for someone else is ruling (behind your back) who is unscrupulous! He does not want others to know (the truth), but acts behind your back. Our venerable chief is too old. You have stayed too long, old man, old man, my poor old man!"*

The song obviously criticises chiefs and leaders who have remained in their position for too long. They hesitate to embrace progress and development, and cause the country to stagnate. They are also

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closed to the possibility of new blood and succession. Because the aged chief exercises a weak leadership, ambitious assistants take advantage of the situation. They rule from behind the scenes for their own purposes. The population becomes restless for change, and wants new and younger people to assume authority. When the old leader becomes aware of this, he reacts with anger and becomes more despotic than ever for fear of losing the throne. Such regimes will use all manner of intrigue to retain power.

The parable of the chief and his assistant is obvious when set within the Malawian political context of the 1990s. Kamuzu Banda had been in power for thirty years and was seconded by John Tembo as vice president. People perceived that Tembo was the power behind Kamuzu Banda's throne. The beginning of the 1990s was marked by the advent of the opposition parties that tried to change the political scene and to introduce multiparty democracy. The song emphasises strongly that Kamuzu Banda should step down before things start getting worse.

The character of **Mwakhali** appeared in *gule* close to the Diamphwi area in 1991. It took part in a variety of rituals, but was often seen performing at party meetings of the Malawi Congress Party. In September 1992, some of the party officials became increasingly nervous about the presence of **Mwakhali** in the arena, suspecting that the character was subversive. Ten *gule* members were detained at the MCP office for interrogation. The *Nyau* members argued that the song of **Mwakhali** was ancient and contained the wisdom of the ancestors. It aimed at correcting the behaviour of the village headman and his assistant's and spoke against the abuse of power. After a month of detention, the *gule* members were released with no follow up to the case. By then, the political scene of the country was quickly changing. **Mwakhali** was introduced in *gule* as an instrument of change and to put pressure on the ruling party. The character demands that the time for younger politicians to take up the leadership of Malawi has arrived. At village level, the character of **Mwakhali** is meant to encourage chiefs, who are chosen for life, eventually to abdicate and to retire (*chatuluka*) and to pass the role to younger, more energetic incumbents, capable of looking after the interests of the people. Chiefs should promote the population's welfare instead of serving their own interest.

Song

"Mwakhali tate andala tate! Ufumu wotere salandira nawo chamwaka chabwino tate chifukwa wolamulira ndi wina wopanda mkhalo! Safuna ena kuti adziwe tate koma za mseri! Iwo tate afumu akalamba. Tate ee Mwakhali tate de andala, andala, andala anga mayo!"

Source

Interview in 1993