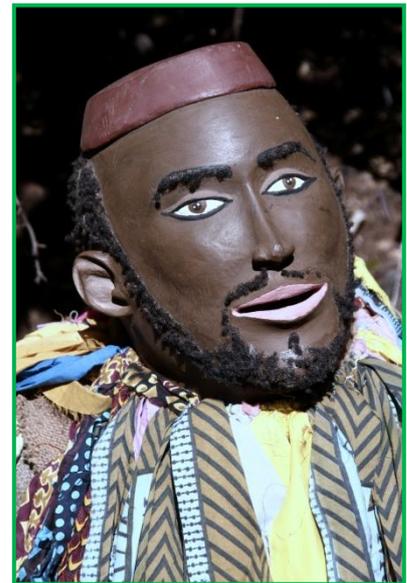


Mwalimu or Chiuli

(A brown day mask from the Kapiri area)



Themes

1) Chewa identity 2) Deafness to advice/stubbornness 3) Deafness as a handicap 4) Greed 5) Rivalry for authority

Etymology

Mwalimu is a Swahili word for a teacher who performs several functions in the Yao Islamic community, such as teaching in the madras, baptising (*kusingula*) initiates after circumcision and overseeing the proper slaughtering of animals. **Chiuli** is a honey badger, well known for its small ears (deafness) and its ability to endure bee-stings in order to secure honey for itself.

Description

Mwalimu portrays a Muslim teacher, either with an Indian-Muslim head or an African face (brown). His head shows half-baldness, conveying seniority and status. It is topped with a small Muslim cap (*mzuli*). His features display cleverness and cunningness, together with pleasing traits such as slanting eyes, well formed nose, salient cheeks and a toothless mouth showing protest. His ears are small to express deafness, like those of the honey badger. The wooden mask (35 cm.) is an oblate

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spheroid, with real hair used for the head and the beard. It differs from most other day masks, which comprise only a hemisphere. A strong *makonde* influence from southern Tanzania is prominent. There is no headgear as such: the tatters hide the neck only. The dancer wears a tatter suit and carries flywhisks and a book, signifying his chiefly status or his religious role.

The character dances at funerals, at the giving of commemorative rites and at rituals of chieftainship or eldership. In the *bwalo* he swerves his feet with great energy, like Mandevu, the colonial ruler who shows no respect for his people but rushes headlong after what is new. From time to time he falls down, in order to demonstrate that he fails in his responsibilities as a president or as an MP. The male choir sings for him: 1) "**Mwalimu** (the one who does the ritual slaughtering of animals) *has come!*" 2) "*He fell with the knife* (rushing to get his reward), **Mwalimu!**" 3) "*The honey badger (Chiuli), my honey badger is mad. My honey badger is deaf, the honey badger (Chiuli)!*" As an answer to these songs, the women give their own comment: 4) "**Mwalimu, you Mwalimu. He has forgotten his cap going to the graveyard! Don't you dare to come here!**" The first song emphasises the duty of **Mwalimu** as the one who performs the *hallal* and slaughters the animals ritually according to Muslim practice. The second song focuses on **Mwalimu's** failure to take up his responsibility. "*He fell with the knife*" while slaughtering the animals because he was rushing to get his reward in the form of meat. The song unveils **Mwalimu's** spirit of competition and greed instead of doing his duty with dedication. The third song reveals the deafness of **Chiuli** and states that he is mad with power and deaf to his own people. The women's song states that their teacher is a fake since he left his *mzuli* behind. A genuine *mwalimu* does not go to the graveyard without his cap. Their teacher was so preoccupied with securing meat for himself that he forgot his very responsibility as a *mwalimu*.

The character of **Mwalimu** focuses on the divergence of political allegiance between the Yao and the Chewa and comments on the political scene of the years leading up to 1999 in the southern Lakeshore region of Malawi. This is the year in which the character of **Mwalimu** reappeared at the *bwalo* with a face lift: during this period MP's were chosen to represent the different parties. People in the villages were already predicting that the reign of President Bakili Muluzi was about to end, even though he was financially supported by the Asian community and had the vast support of the Yao people. The Chewa suggested by this *gule* character that they would like to change president. Bakili Muluzi is featured here as a honey badger who does not listen and who is deaf to his people. The result of the election of 1999 saw, to the disappointment of the Chewa, the victory of Bakili Muluzi for his second term and confirmed the support of the Asian community. On the local scene candidates for MP in that area were also competing: Mr. Esau Phiri from Kapiri was the MP for Bakili Muluzi's UDF but was succeeded by Mr. Muonjeza Maluza, who became the new UDF representative. The unsuccessful candidate for the MCP was Mr. Severiano Moto, who was succeeded by Mr. Dzanjalimodzi: he was elected in 2004. At the national level Bakili Muluzi was succeeded as president by Bingu wa Mutharika. The hope of the Chewa was defeated, as they favoured the MCP candidate J. Z. U. Tembo. They realised that whatever party led the country, politicians were more concerned about their own wealth than the welfare of the people. The greedy **Mwalimu** was determined to take his own share of reward instead of performing his duties for the community in a spirit of service.

A version of **Mwalimu** was first created at Msukwa village as early as 1978 but it had originally a different focus. The mask was black instead of brown and wore an *mzuli* and a red robe. He came

into the *bwalo* with a book and two flywhisks. One of the *gule* officials would read a passage from the book while **Mwalimu** pretended to preach. Another *gule* official gave the interpretation in his place. During that period, **Mwalimu** was cast in the role of the Old Testament figure Aaron, the brother of Moses, who conducted the Jewish liturgy. The message conveyed by the interpreter was to reclaim the rightful position of *gule* as an ancient liturgy. The Dedza *gule* group had already established itself as a “recognised church” (the Church of Aaron), equal to the many denominations present in Malawi. After this mini pantomime, the character of **Mwalimu** proceeded to dance with pride and ostentation, in the style of Mfumu yalimbira, the chief’s rival. He moved backward and forward, demonstrating that this new church was equal to any other denomination in Malawi.

It is interesting to see that the **Mwalimu** who portrayed Aaron in 1978 became the pathway for a new version of **Mwalimu** featuring the political events of 1999: the presidential and local elections. It is not uncommon in the world of *gule* that ancient characters are recast into new character to convey more recent and burning issues.

Songs

- 1) “Wafika **Mwalimu**, wodula nyama!”
- 2) “Anagwa ndi chipula **Mwalimu**!”
- 3) “**Chiuli, Chiuli** changa n’chopenga eae o **Chiuli! Chiuli** changa n’chosamva eae **Chiuli!**”
- 4) “**Mwalimu** iwe! Wayiwala chipewa m’njira ya ku manda! Usadzabwere kuno!”

Source

Interviews in 2004 and 2012