

# Mwanyanya

(A brown day mask from the Diamphwi and Dedza areas)

## Themes

- 1) Abuse of power
- 2) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change)
- 3) Recent politics

## Etymology

*Kunyanya* means, 'to itch', and can suggest intolerable discomfort. In the context of human behaviour it could be translated as, 'You have become unbearable,' or 'You have gone beyond acceptable borders.'



## Description

The brown oval mask (34 cm.) portrays an old Chewa. Tribal marks and scarification are seen on the forehead, chin and cheeks. His head is bald with a little hair made of wild cut fur appearing at the temples. The advanced age of the character is depicted using fur eyebrows, a long moustache and an elongated goatee made of dyed grey sisal. The eyes are deep-set and squint, while the nose is elongated and aquiline. The mouth holds a false smile, and the bared teeth give the impression of a snarling dog. Small round ears, set very high on the head, emphasise deafness to others and convey something of a comical air. The jaws are swollen and deep labial lines border the mouth. The chin slants downward. The headgear of the mask is created using tatters. The general expression of the face is that of cunning, deceitful person, and suggests that the old man is using his power to exploit others. **Mwanyanya's** costume reveals that our character portrays a prominent individual who is being made fun of. He wears jute trousers dyed black, a white tattered shirt conveying 'honesty', and carries a mock staff.

**Mwanyanya** is recent in *gule*, introduced at the beginning of the 1990s. His performance is not linked to any specific ritual, and takes part in political rallies. In the arena, **Mwanyanya** is apathetic. He swerves his feet sluggishly, and spends his time roaming about looking for the company of women

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and seeking their support, as if clinging to them. As the drummers beat a quick version of the *chisamba*, the male choir sings the following: “*At some one else’s village one does not behave like that, my friend, monopolising all the women, all the wives, even those who are married. To clothe them all yourself, to feed them all yourself! And you pretend that they are all yours. You command them all. As for mine, no, (you’re not having her). Mr. You have become unbearable! Mr. You have gone beyond acceptable borders!*”

The song and the mime refer to Kamuzu Banda, the first President of Malawi, and his ‘*mbumba*’. During Kamuzu Banda’s political regime from 1964 to 1993, he was described as ‘*nkhoswe number one*’, the guardian of all the women of the country according to the Chewa family system. His position as President was cast as a clever manipulation of the Chewa family system, as the maternal uncle (*malume*) responsible for the welfare of his sisters and particularly their female children. Having decreed this prerogative, Kamuzu Banda was pressuring the women of Malawi to accompany him on his countless visits and official functions throughout the country, and even abroad for the leading women. The women were forced to desert their husbands and children, and were packed into the back of lorries, exposed to inclement weather, and expected to dance for the President and to ‘entertain’ his entourage for days or weeks. Some returned sick, some were victims of accidents, while others had to resort to prostitution in order to find food and boarding during the duration of those prolonged journeys from the north to the south of the country. When Kamuzu Banda travelled, school children were organised to border the roads and to cheer their President, inevitably missing classes. At the time of the crop inspection tours, the fields that Kamuzu Banda was scheduled to visit and those in the vicinity had to be boosted with chemical fertiliser so that they looked perfect for the presidential visitation. The fertiliser was charged to the owners of the fields without their consent, and if they could not cover the cost, the crops or any other possessions were confiscated as a compensation for the fertiliser. Moreover, money was extorted from the villagers to provide ‘free gifts’ to their dear leader. These abuses and exploitations of the rural population resulted in Kamuzu Banda’s title of ‘*nkhoswe number one*’ being quickly coupled with another name, that of an *mkamwini* (a stranger in the village set up). This is expressed in the song with the first line: “*At someone else’s village, one does not behave like that, my friend!*” The song states clearly that Kamuzu Banda’s prerogative over the title of *malume* is withdrawn from him, and changed for that of a stranger and a person with no real blood ties.

The song makes reference to such practices, and rebels against the abuse of power in the form of forced labour, slavery and the disruption of family life. The discordant voice, “*As for mine*”, protests against the abusive rule of the Kamuzu Banda dictatorship, which had become unbearable. By the beginning of the 1990s, Malawi’s population was secretly wishing for political change, though the time had not yet come for open and frank discourse. The members of *gule wamkulu* still wrapped their protest under the parable of an abusive village authority or unjust employer, who exploits his subjects or employees and profits of their submission. Malawians suffered long and silently, for fear of being held in custody in the grim prisons of the country. The character **Mwanyanya** is not a faithful physical portrait of Kamuzu Banda: the climate of the 1990s forbids it. Their leader’s image had still to be cloaked. It was in the village communities of Diamphwi and Dedza that change began, followed by the publication of the Pastoral letter of 1992, the referendum in 1993 and the 1994 general elections.

## Song

*“Kwa eni wake satero tate ye mzanganu, tate n’kuchita kutenga akazi onsewa, nda’weni ake omwe ye dee. N’kuveka nokha, n’kudyetsa nokha! Koma inu mukuti ndi anu, mukutuma ndinu! Toto ine angawa, **Mwanyanya Mwanyanya!**”*

## Source

Interview in 1993