

Ndadabwa

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



Themes

1) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change) 2) Recent politics 3) Rivalry for authority

Etymology

Ndadabwa means, 'I am surprised,' or 'I was taken by surprise.'

Description

This brown mask (35 cm.) portrays a senior Chewa with tribal marks, moustache and small goatee. The face and the nose are long and narrow. The staring eyes and open mouth show surprise. The ears have been placed high on the head, so that they are obscured by a hat (representing a bowler) decorated with ribbons. The headgear is made of tatters. **Ndadabwa** does not wear the usual *gule* tatter suit but rather a smart jacket worn over a tatter kilt around his waist. The combination in his costume makes him look ridiculous. He holds a staff to show status in his old age.

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He enters the *bwalo* and dances with all his strength, swerving his feet sideways. He then stops for a while and leans on his staff. He straightens up and stares at the audience, looking bewildered and confused. He takes his hat and tries it on the heads of several women while everybody giggles. The men's song explains the reason for his pantomime: "*I am surprised, I am really surprised.* (People answer:) *Do not be surprised! Ask your own heart!* (He replies:) *I am surprised, I am really surprised, that people grumble and slander me.* (People answer:) *Ask your own heart! You say, People know it's me, it's surely not me, their (beloved) chief, who does these (nasty) things (to them)! Mr. I am surprised, I am really surprised!*"

The character was introduced around 1989, at the time when the political leadership of Kamuzu Banda was losing popularity. The character was launched at Diamphwi and then spread around Dedza. It was performed mainly on the occasion of political rallies.

Ndadabwa was meant to be a warning to politicians about the growing dissatisfaction with the leadership in the country. Villagers had become aware of their oppression. They knew that they were ruled with an iron fist, unreasonably condemned and thrown into prison without proper trial. This was seen to be happening because of patronage and nepotism within government. Positions of authority were granted to ignorant and uneducated people. They misused their family connections in order to achieve these posts. Their sole motivation was to enrich themselves at the expense of the rest of the population. The song warns the ministers and the entourage of the President to test their own hearts and to question their motives and actions. The President himself neglected the men and favoured the women. He favoured the *mbumba* (his following of women). This is why **Ndadabwa** keeps placing his hat on the heads of the women surrounding him. Here it is suggested that Kamuzu Banda was not the president of the whole nation but only of the womenfolk.

Through the character of **Ndadabwa**, the Chewa suggest that their matrilineal social structure had become the model for the entire country and was being imposed forcefully on the other tribes. This imposition of Chewa standards on the rest of the country could lead to tribal conflicts and, ultimately, to the rejection of their culture, particularly with regard to the place of males in the society. Kamuzu Banda's disregard for half of Malawi's population justified the decline of his popularity.

Song

"Ndadabwa Ndadabwa ine! Musadabwe tate, funsa mtima wako tate! Ndadabwa ine, Ndadabwa oh! Ndadabwa anthu achita kundidzuma, kundinena tate. Funsu mtima wako! Ukuti anthu andidziwa kuti ndine, si amfumu achita izi! Tate Ndadabwa, Ndadabwa!"

Source

Interviews in 1993 and 1999

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