

Ndakudziwani

(A pink day mask from the Diamphwi area)

Themes

- 1) Abuse of power
- 2) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change)
- 3) Recent politics
- 4) Witchcraft & old age



Etymology

Ndakudziwani means, 'I have known you for a while.'

Description

Ndakudziwani was introduced in *gule* with the political rallies that became more frequent after 1992, the year of the Pastoral letter of the Catholic bishops of Malawi. **Ndakudziwani** covertly criticised Dr. Kamuzu Banda's leadership, wrapping its message in the conventional symbolic codes of *gule wamkulu*.

The pink mask (35 cm.) depicts an old man, partially bald and wrinkled. His receding hairline is white, as are his bushy eyebrows and moustache. Though the colour of the skin suggests a foreigner, his features are those of a local man. His mouth is toothless, stressing his advanced age. The headgear of the mask is made of any type of animal skins, identifying him with a beast. This significance is reinforced by the song. Instead of a proper suit, the character wears a type of jacket and a pair of trousers made of jute and dyed black or muddied. The shift of material seems to emphasise that the character's image has changed, his fame having diminished. Like Kamuzu Banda, the character carries a walking stick and a flywhisk. At times he also wears a 'bowler' hat, made of woven palm leaves.

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Ndakudziwani enters the *bwalo* supporting himself on his walking stick. He walks with difficulty and waves his flywhisk at a group of women fans who represent his *mbumba*. As soon as **Ndakudziwani** reaches the centre of the *bwalo*, he becomes energised by the rhythm of the *chisamba*. He transforms into a wiggling worm, undulating the waist and thrusting his hips like a young gigolo. His female partners are revitalised with him, also dancing and swinging their hips. Carried away, **Ndakudziwani** keeps losing his hat, whereupon the women pick it up and put it back onto his bald head. The mime of the old man is supported by the song of the male choir: *“Mr. I have known you for a while, what is your future, old man? From the time I have known you, old man, you have been a beast, a beast that kills in secret (because of) your cruelty! We people have known for a while that you are a beast, a beast! Mr. I have known you for a while, you can’t deny it, Mr. I have known you for a while, old man!”*

The Pastoral letter openly criticised the Kamuzu Banda government’s abuse of freedom and liberty of association. It precipitated frank discussion of his totalitarian regime and the hidden atrocities committed in this country. Both inside and outside of Malawi, there was a ground-swell of reaction. News and reports were broadcast by foreign radio stations such as SABC (South Africa) and the BBC (UK). The government could not filter the information or prevent it from reaching the ears of the people. Anonymous letters were distributed in the streets and spread among the public. Soon the truth of Kamuzu Banda was exposed to all. The song of **Ndakudziwani** echoes the reaction to these revelations: *“From the time I have known you, old man, you have been a beast.”*

Under Kamuzu Banda, any criticism was judged an act of treason and an attempt to overthrow the regime. The names of the critics were kept in secret files. Many were arrested and jailed without trial, and some were kept in custody for the rest of their lives. Even their relatives and friends were harassed and persecuted. In spite of the secrecy and Kamuzu Banda’s imposed personality cult, the population became increasingly aware of their leader’s greed, cruelty and obsession with power. Within the Chewa village, when children discover any antisocial behaviour in their grandparents, they continue to show them respect because of their advanced age. Nevertheless, they start whispering and wondering if some of their behaviour is dictated by witchcraft. They question why these elders are still alive despite their very advanced age. They commonly conclude that their prosperity and long life result from the handling of secret devices connected with witchcraft. Such people become feared more than respected. Often enough, their relatives and neighbours secretly wish their death. In the case of Kamuzu Banda, people wished for his reign to end. He was at once revered and feared because of his semi-divine status. He was considered as eternal (*wamuyaya*). His tyrannical powers were considered to have a satanic origin, related to that of witchcraft. This dreadful fear hovered over the whole country. At this particular period of Malawian history, the population could only dream that their leader’s reign would come to an end.

Song

*“Ndakudziwa, ukuti utani mdala tate ye? Chikhala **Ndakudziwani** tate ye, andala n’chilombo, n’chilombo chophera m’chinsinsi de, m’chiwembu chanu tate ye! Anthufe takudziwani kuti inu n’chilombo, chilombo tate ye. **Ndakudziwani** simusowanso mboni yanu, tate de ndakudziwa, andala!”*

Source

Interview in 1993