

Samveratu

(A brown mask from the Pemba area)



Themes

1) Abuse of power 2) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change) 3) Deafness to advice/stubbornness 4) Recent politics

Etymology

Samveratu means, 'The one who does not hear (listen).'

Description

The brown mask (30 cm.) portrays a middle aged Malawian. He has greyish hair with a cowlick and a moustache surrounding a wide toothy mouth. The headgear of the mask is made of dark goat skin. His big ears suggest deafness to advice. He is well dressed in a clean shirt, expensive trousers, jacket, tie and at times a 'bowler' hat. He brandishes a flywhisk and carries a walking stick to demonstrate that he is a man of status.

In the *bwalo*, he swerves his feet with energy while the women surround him. The men sing:
"Look at **Samveratu** (the one who does not hear/listen)! We repeatedly told him about his ugly

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behaviour and how it started. As you know, he clings to the position of chief's assistant. The position of chief's assistant is at stake! He promises that he will go (resign), my friend! Oh, oh, oh! From the time (we gave him) a warning, he keeps clinging to his position of chief's assistant! Let him go, Samveratu (the one who does not hear/listen)!"

Samveratu is a recent character, born in the Pemba area in 1993, the year of political transition from dictatorship to democracy. The 1993 referendum allowed people to express their dissatisfaction with the one-party state and to choose a multiparty system. At that time, a large body of new masks appeared in *gule* which were related to political issues. **Samveratu's** appearance is not linked to any specific ritual but usually performs at political rallies. His role of assistant to the chief (*nyakwawa*) is a thin disguise. **Samveratu's** dress code (suit and bowler hat), his insignia of power (flywhisk and walking stick) and his entourage of women (*mbumba*) obviously reveal Dr. Kamuzu Banda, then President of Malawi, who is read as chief's assistant. This gives us an insight into the inner politics of the day, when Kamuzu Banda was perceived as not exerting power himself but as having yielded it to someone else acting on his behalf. The song recalls how the population struggled for years to find the courage to warn their leader to be more attentive to their needs and to criticise his leadership. The very name of **Samveratu** implies his unwillingness to listen to their concerns. Thirty years of Kamuzu Banda's legendary stubbornness, personality cult, egotism and iron-fisted style of government had brought the people to the limit of their endurance. The period of 1992 – 1993 marks the decline of the ruling Malawi Congress Party (MCP) government. Harsh repercussions for open criticism of the government were no longer effective and people could now voice their opinions through any means at their disposal without fear of retaliation. **Samveratu's** song dares to use the metaphor of a stubborn assistant to the chief to voice the dream of seeing the President resign. **Samveratu** tackles the political issues of the country with the wisdom of rural peasants.

Song

*"Taonani a **Samveratu** (2x) tate kuwauzira muno za kukhala kwao kolakwa tate ndi chiyambi chake tate. Paja akuumirira unyakwawa tate. wavuta unyakwawa! Akuti achoke tate ye oh oh oh anzanga. Chiyambireni kuwauzako koma chiumirire unyakwawa tate ye achoke **Samveratu**."*

Source

Interview in 1993