

# Siwathu

(An orange day mask from the Kasumbu area)

## Themes

- 1) Kamuzu Banda's identity
- 2) Opposing Kamuzu Banda (supporting political change)
- 3) Recent politics

## Etymology

**Siwathu** means, 'He is not ours,' or 'He is not one of us anymore.'



## Description

The character of **Siwathu** first appears in 1992, at a period when Malawi was about to undergo major political changes. By then the popularity of Kamuzu Banda was in decline and the people were questioning the president's identity and performance. Some argued that he was not a Malawian but a stranger who came from West Africa or the United States of America and had bought the clan name of Banda. Others argued that he was a real Chewa but had left his country very young and therefore had forgotten his own culture, language and the way of his own people. These rumours were spoken during party meetings and supported by *gule wamkulu* performances.

The mask (30 cm.) of **Siwathu** appeared in orange, the colour of a stranger. It represents an old man with a bald head and a white shiny circle on the top of his scalp. A crown of grey hair (made of Samango monkey fur) descends into sideburns, moustache and a goatee, which associate his character with the bush and the thieving monkey. Two 35 centimetre upright orange horns, which reflect power, emerge from his head, giving him the look of an important chief. The forehead of the old man is narrow, wrinkled and prominent, accentuating a look of bewilderment. The forehead frowns under the accusation of being a stranger and a thief. His flat face contrasts with a pointed nose and the deep labial lines encircling a small, open, toothless mouth that expresses protest or sourness. The mouth seems to voice protest or disorientation. This expression of being a foreigner is accentuated by a long drooping moustache and a comical goatee on his round chin. His tribal marks seem to be counterfeit as they do not fit with his foreign look or strange behaviour. His jutting round ears suggest that he is irritated with the comments of his neighbours.

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The headgear of the mask is made of alternating white and coloured tatters, showing his ambiguous origin and questioning his integrity. **Siwathu**'s costume contrasts his unknown origin (tatter suit) with his high status (walking stick and flywhisk).

**Siwathu** shows self-assurance when he enters the *bwalo*. He swerves his feet with great determination, in order to impress the women. He flaps his flywhisk, demonstrating that he intends to rule the village. As he dances the male choir sings: *"He is not one of us! He is not one of us! So then, where is he from? Some say, He is not one of us! Others say, Yes, he really is one of us despite his questionable behaviour. Oh, oh! He is not one of us anymore! He is not one of us! He is a stranger, this gule! He is not one of us!"*

**Siwathu** realises he is being treated as a stranger. He becomes furious, chasing the women out of their arena. The performance, the look and the song of **Siwathu** all indicate that he is either a foreigner or a person who has stayed abroad for so long that he has forgotten the ways of his people and acts as a stranger. This type of estrangement to one's own people is characterised in the Chichewa language by the nickname of *mtchona* or, plural, *matchona*. (The *gule* characters, *Mtchona* and *Mai Mtchona*, emphasise this model.)

**Siwathu** was given a position of leadership in the land because he appeared to have the right qualifications of pedigree and education. His performance as Head of State will soon disappoint the people. He showed little attention to their concerns and instead pursued his own interests. Soon the villagers started doubting whether he was still one of them: *"He is not one of us anymore."* If he were a foreigner, they would perceive him as a clever opportunist who came to usurp power: *"He is not ours,"* he comes from somewhere else. Whether the clever foreigner usurping the throne or the native chief having lived away for a long period, the outcome is the same: he ends up having his authority removed. The people decide he should no longer rule. The Chewa popular wisdom teaches that a leader cannot afford to neglect his people's interests and wellbeing. Even if the ruler is a foreigner by birth or a stranger through a prolonged absence, he has the duty to respect his people's needs. If he remains deaf to their criticism and discontent, he should be removed and replaced by another leader whose heart is at one with his people.

Our parable clearly refers to Dr. Kamuzu Banda, who by then was seen as senile and unable to rule the country any longer. His selfishness and stubbornness had lost him the people's trust. His identity as a 'foreigner' had been kept secret for too long and he could not prevent this skeleton in the closet from being revealed. The doors were wide open to change.

### Song

*"Siwathu tate Siwathu tate! Nanga ngwa kuti iyeyu tate? Ena akuti iyai Siwathu! Ena akuti ea n'wathudi tate koma chikhala chawo tate e e! Oh oh! Siwathu, Siwathu ndi mlendo, guleyu tate, Siwathu!"*

### Source

Interview in 1993