

## Zulule or Nkhwezule

(A day or night mask from the Mua area)

### Themes

- 1) Owls as familiars of witches
- 2) Unity & harmony
- 3) Witchcraft
- 4) Witchcraft to maintain/enhance one's position (*kukhwima*)

### Etymology

**Zulule** or **Nkhwezule** is a barn owl.



### Description

The character of the barn owl appears at both day and night rituals. It used to be performed in the past only within a funeral context but today it appears at any ritual. The night costume of **Zulule** consists of an improvised head cover made of banana fibres with a wooden beak, two round eyes of silver paper and 'ears' made of large wooden spoons. The dancer wears a jute outfit stitched with dry banana fibres. He carries a ceremonial axe. The day costume is more realistic. It displays a carved mask or a construction made with canvas or fertiliser bag stretched over a wire frame and painted. It features the face of a barn owl, with large eyes, but the ears that are added resemble a wood owl. The headgear of the mask is made of baboon or other monkey skins. These can be used for the dancer's outfit as well, or a tatter suit may be worn. **Zulule** dances with a ceremonial axe as a weapon.

**Zulule** swerves only one foot, imitating the barn owl standing on one leg. Then, he runs across the arena and starts chasing the audience and threatening them with his ceremonial axe. The crowd disperses in all directions as the male singers call: *"Is it not the one, the barn owl? You, the barn owl, are clever (full of tricks)! You, the barn owl, are too clever!"* The barn owl is a night creature. The bird

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is perceived as a bad omen for the Chewa. Its presence in the village is a threat to the community. The barn owl is linked to the family of witches, who are suspected to change into these creatures of the night and to prey on their family members and children. When villagers hear the barn owl's call, they fear that something terrible will happen; someone will die soon. The barn owl comes to the family group to claim its share of meat. This implies that a family member will die mysteriously because of the greed of a clever and ambitious relative. Such a person takes advantage of his own blood relations for enriching himself and for pursuing selfish advantage. This belief serves the purpose of providing an explanation for sudden deaths and the high mortality rate among the children.

**Zulule** opposes witchcraft and encourages family members who tend to individualism and self-centredness to move back toward the interests of the group and to become more community minded.

### **Song**

*"Suyu **Zulule** (2x)! Iwe **Zulule** kuchenjera!" or "**Mkhwezule, Mkhwezule** ngochenjera tate, **Mkhwezule** ngochenjera!"*

### **Source**

Interviews in 1991 and 2007