Gender and Ethnicity in Banda's Malawi

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Abstract

During his thirty year reign in Malawi Kamuzu Banda built a state mythology and ideology of development based on constructions of gender and ethnicity that promised no future and little economic change for the majority of the population. The social structures that were established created patterns and processes that continue, a decade after Banda's death, to organize social and cultural life.

Gender and Ethnicity in Banda Malawi[1]

Malawi's first republic came to an end in 1992-94 with the peaceful, electorally based deposition of Kamuzu Banda as president. Banda lived long enough to see his title, "President for Life," fade into irrelevancy. My contention here is that the sociocultural structures established in Banda's 30 year reign brought patterns and processes into being that continue, at least in part, to organize social and cultural life a decade after his death. I also contend, though I do not explore it in this paper, that understanding a relatively non-urban, non-industrialized state such as Malawi leads inevitably to an insight into the more generalized post colonial situation of many Africa nations. In order to be able to grasp the realities of contemporary Malawi it is necessary to subject Banda's Malawi to some scrutiny.

Two major foci of Banda's regime and its policies were gender and ethnicity, seen as crucial elements to control in order to create and accelerate economic development. This approach shifted attention away from growing disparities in wealth and access to resources and toward the need to modernize traditional culture (almost never spoken of in Banda's Malawi in the plural). This rhetorical sleight of hand hid attention to the historic changes in social locations of those who were the supposed recipients of development efforts. Since this process developed and continued throughout Banda's three decades, realities that were not, were created.

In Malawi the national mythology being created placed a version of Chewa culture and its matrilineal institutions at the center. The result was that women occupied the heart of national concerns, which was (and is) a place utterly without either power or autonomy. The

case can be made that placement in this central position constitutes a devolution or degradation of the historically traditional position of women. At the same time ethnic groups, especially in the Northern Region, not sharing cultural commonality with the Chewa were either suppressed or largely ignored as parts of this national structuring.

Social locations are central to macro level discussions of domestic policy priorities. These are some of the steps in the national value hierarchy. They constitute the normative background against which distributive decisions are made. Social locations can be conceptualized as the relative positions created by the intersection of various polar pairs of acquired and ascribed characteristics, for example rural-urban, agricultural-industrial, formal sector-informal sector, male-female, traditional-modern, Ngoni-Chewa. My goal here is to focus on these issues in one country in southern Africa. My emphasis is on what David Bidney (1967) might have called meta-policy, that is, policy about policy, or perhaps simply the ideological paradigm within which policy formation takes place.

For almost all of the countries of Africa their existence as national entities is a product of colonialism and its retreat. With a recent independent history of no more than 40 years, a central concern revolves around creating national unity from the materials of social, cultural and political pluralisms created by arbitrary colonial boundaries. At the same time, these countries are in the process of developing policies and orientations toward their pressing immediate concerns.

One source of data for these policy orientations is the private statements of government officials to researchers. Another is in the officially sanctioned public statements about development and its place in national life. My emphasis here is on this latter source of data. I am especially concerned with statements directed toward those the Malawi government regularly referred to as "ordinary people." Ultimately, the data come from three sources:

newspaper accounts, public speeches and informants' comments. In a country as centrally controlled as Malawi under Banda, informants' private comments are the only source of data likely to show any potential for a narrative discourse not in accord with the official one. Media statements and descriptions are also important because they set the public agenda that the government claims, truly or falsely, to be implementing.

Under its first president, Malwai represents one version of the process by which a country creates its national mythology, the charter legitimating both the country and its policy orientations. Part of that process consists of creating new traditions (cf Hobsbawm 1983). New versions of past history reshape the symbolic universes of the country's ethnic groups. The result is meant to be a nationally shared history and vision of the nation and its people. In the process different groups of people are accorded symbolic placement in the social system. This positioning becomes a touchstone for interaction and policy formation. In many ways, as Douglas (1966, 1973) notes, the symbolic values and their perception overshadow reality. The cognitive system built in this way is analyzable as a variety of mythology.

Taking clues from Levi-Strauss (1967) and Leach (1976), we can expect to find a repeated set of themes, even in materials as varied as a series of newspaper articles. In the Malawian instance, the national mythology placed a version of Chewa culture and its matrilineal institutions at the center. The result was that women occupied the heart of national concerns, which was (and is) a place utterly without either power or autonomy. The case can be made that placement in this central position constitutes a devolution or degradation of the historically traditional position of women. At the same time ethnic groups, especially in the Northern Region, not sharing cultural commonality with the Chewa were either suppressed or largely ignored as parts of this national structuring.

For the first thirty years of Malawi's independence, Banda, relentlessly maintained his

position as virtually the only significant, public political figure in the country. During that time he presented an image of being the architect of both Malawian independence and all that happened thereafter. In this sense, he became the mediating figure in the construction of a national mythology and almost everything was portrayed as his personal accomplishment.[2] Only he could speak about the country's policies and orientations toward solving its pressing problems.

Malawi

Malawi achieved independence in 1964 and in 1966 became a republic within the British Commonwealth. It is a small land-locked nation nestled in the Great Rift Valley by the shores of Lake Malawi. In 1980 population was estimated at between 8 and 9 million. Between 80 and 90 per cent of the people were classified as rural farmers (National Statistical Office 1980). Current estimates (CIA Fact Book 2007) place the population at close to 13 million. The rural-urban division has not changed appreciatively in the 27 years between these two estimates. Historically and ethnically this is a complex region; the area experienced the effects of the major southern and eastern African events of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was an important part of the east African slave trade. Zulu expansion in South Africa drove several Ngoni groups into the territory. It was central to the Anglo-Portuguese competition for control of the area that eventually became Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia. Through all of this time and through the twentieth century this small territory has also both provided labor for extractive industries in neighboring countries and, while nearby regimes were not majority controlled, been a haven for refugees fleeing from these same areas.

The major staple crops are cassava, sorghum, millet and a locally adapted variety of maize; major cash crops are tobacco, tea, coffee, sugar and hybrid maize. None of the known mineral deposits have, as yet, been judged sufficient in either quantity or quality to justify

development of extractive industries beyond some locally oriented limestone for cement, and small, unprofitable, rapidly depleted coal mining. As a result, the country relies on its agricultural capabilities. The small holder (i.e. individual farmer) sector of the economy involves most of the rural population and produces most of the locally consumed maize, as well as a crucial proportion of coffee, tea and tobacco. The estate sector (i.e. agribusiness), which is small, but growing, is devoted entirely to cash crop production. One feature of Malawi's agricultural policies under Banda was introduction of hybrid maize as an internal cash crop. This is especially important to note because maize is air pollinated. There is no consensus about the extent of change, but anecdotal materials indicate that locally adapted varieties have been affected.

Culturally, most of Malawi is part of the East and Central African matrilineal belt. The northern areas are largely patrilineal, dominated by Ngoni, Tumbuka and a number of smaller groups. The common and defining features of matrilineal systems are the core inheritance pattern and the basic definition of the kin group. The kin group is defined as people related through female ancestors and relatives. People who share the same sociological mother count themselves as related, regardless of their male relatives. For women this means the core relationships are among sisters and brothers, and between mothers and daughters. For men the core relationships are among sisters and brothers, and for a man, his sister and her son. Inheritance passes along the lines of these relationships. A woman's property is inherited by daughters and a man's by sister's sons. It is these features that gave rise to the classical social anthropological literature focusing on the role of the mother's brother. However, as various scholars (Poewe and Lovell 1980, Richards 1967, Collier and Yanagisako 1987, Nakane 1967, Schneider and Gough 1961) have demonstrated, such a designation implies greater homogeneity than actually exists.

Malawi is ethnographically complex. The culturally hegemonic ethnic group, the matrilineal Chewa, has cultural, linguistic and historical ties with peoples in both Zambia and Mozambique. Similar cross-national ties exist among the patrilineal Ngoni who currently reside in the same countries and are descended from groups who fled the consequences of Zulu expansions under Chaka in the 19th century. The contemporary Ngoni of Malawi and Zambia have their cultural origin in the absorption of peoples they met and conquered as they fled northward. Ngoni people were known to say (but very quietly while Banda was in power) that if the British had waited a bit longer before their conquest, they (the Ngoni) would have conquered the entire territory and the the British would have had to deal with only one ethnic group.

The cultural history of other groups is equally mixed and even less clear. For example, the Yao, whose late 19th and early 20th century culture was carefully documented by Mitchell (1956), are a relatively recent ethnic grouping. They seem to have started as a small group that expanded by absorbing communities and individuals from nearby groups, not an especially unusual phenomenon in this part of the world. This poly-cultural melange seems to have been united by the economic advantages of trading and controlling the caravan routes through Mozambique to the coast (Vaughan 1987). By the time they began to enter Malawi in the 1790's, they were also united by a common Islam, which set them off from their new hosts. On the other hand, their matrilineality and closely related common language gave the Yao points of commonality with the people among whom they were settling. They also continued to be open to people from other groups who decided to become Yao (Abdallah 1919). Eventually they came to both economic and political dominance of the area into which they moved.

While it is unnecessary to provide an ethnographic sketch of every major Malawian group, some, like the Ngoni, Tumbuka, Nyanja and Nyakyusa do not see themselves as traditionally matrilineal. The effect was that even while Banda’s policies claimed to be creating

national unity and solidarity around Chewa ethnicity, they both created and hid serious ethnic cleavages.[3]

Themes and Settings:

Public pronouncements about the state of the country and its people took the form of leitmotifs which usually appeared in the form of polar pairs, primarily: Tradition-Modernity, Poverty-Development and Nature-Culture. Three other themes, Women, Men, and tribe (ethnicity), not usually presented as part of any sort of polar pair, actually constituted the core subject matter around which the polar pairs revolved.

The mythic structuring of these themes, through constant repetition, reconciled and constrained the tensions and contradictions in their presentations and in their intersections with each other. The result was an archaizing ideology. The constructed system used a contemporary version of past events as a major reference point (in this case the events of independence), and presented no vision of future possibilities or goals. In the end, it was an ideology always looking back.

Women's central location in Malawi's developing national mythology was usually presented in metaphorical terms and was managed by a public media focus on one of three roles: as homemakers participating in targeted adult education activities, as members of a very small urbanized "modern" sector and as members of the cultural institution known as *mbumba*. The urban sector, characterized by western oriented education, manufacture, wholesale and retail trade, bureaucracy, and government affects fewer than 20% of Malawi's women. Those who are in this sector were regularly portrayed as happily combining career and domestic roles. Their social concerns were represented in the same vein as the stereotypical women's pages in the United States and England. In spite of being employed in the modern/urban sector, their aspirations were depicted as mirroring the roles laid out for women in other sectors, i.e.,

domestic tranquility and focus.

These three roles are not entirely separated. Their overlapping presentation reflects some aspects of reality. However, the emphasis was consistently placed on women both as *mbumba* and as those attending homecraft classes. Modern sector employment was never disparaged, but it also was never a featured part of women's social location in Malawi.

The *Mbumba*

Banda made the *mbumba* an institution central to his construction of women's social location during his tenure in office. His version of the *mbumba* depended very much on his own constructions shaped over his childhood, forty years outside of Malawi, becoming an elder in the Church of Scotland and gaining his M.D. My discussion below relies heavily on a small book he wrote with Cullen Young, a Presbyterian missionary, in 1946. The extent to which Young and Banda distorted ethnographic realities is not as important as understanding what he thought he was emphasizing and creating in post-independence Malawi.

As noted earlier, most of Malawi belongs to a cluster of East and Central African cultures that can be characterized as matrilineal. But that should not be taken to imply cultural uniformity, even as regards the operation of the kinship system. On the other hand, there is a smaller cluster, Nyanja, Chewa, Lomwe and related peoples, stretching from Eastern Province Zambia through Malawi and into the bordering regions of Mozambique who do share matrilocal residence patterns and the matrilineal institution of *mbumba.*

An essential feature of matrilineal systems, as usually described in the ethnographic literature, is the significance of a woman's brother as her most closely related male relative within the kin group. In this particular area the brother, or someone standing in that classificatory position, is known as the women's *nkhoswe*, which is sometimes translated as advocate, or some other English word with the same connotations.

Properly, an *mbumba* is "*mbumba ya* ...." (the *mbumba* of [the name of the *nkhoswe*]). Although most translations into English do not make it clear, Young and Banda (1946) insist there is a strong sense of control and a guardian relationship evident in the original formulation. *Mbumba* and *nkhoswe* are terms applied to members of the same localized matrilineal kin group. Although all male, matrilineal kin, regardless of age, are said to be *nkhoswe* to the female matrilineage segment (Young and Banda 1946), the actuality is that age was a significant cross-cutting factor; only elder males actually acted as *nkhoswe* (Mandala 1990). Also important, as both Young and Banda (1946) and Mandala (1990) note, this relational aspect of the local matrilineal system did not have a formal structural parallel. That is, the age distinction was an informally understood constraint on the formal responsibilities of the *nkhoswe*.

The nature of the relationship, as understood by Banda, is worth a brief exploration. In 1946 Banda does not seem to have been contemplating the *mbumba/nkhoswe* relationship as some sort of policy cornerstone. Young and Banda use the English terms "responsible relative," "sponsor," and "guide" as reasonable, though not exact translations of *nkhoswe*. They further note the linguistic relationship between *mbumba* and *nyumba* (house) as being "close enough to give a picture of meaning" (1946: 13).[4]

> ...being nkhoswe to them you, as a male and no matter how young you are, are a Responsible Relative.... All nkhoswe are responsible in law not only for the well being but also for the good conduct of their mbumba ....Should [a female relative]....get into trouble...it is you and your fellow nkhoswe who are brought to court; you and they who must meet any penalty, fine or other punishment. Conversely, if anyone among your mbumba is injured by anyone it is you and your fellow nkhoswe who sue; you and they who receive the damages awarded (1946: 13-14).

The extent to which the *nkhoswe/mbumba* relationship, as sketched by Young and Banda, actually obtained anywhere in what is now Malawi is unclear. There are various descriptions (Mitchell 1956, Tew 1950) of the institution among peoples of the area that differ

somewhat from this one.

The intersection of age with gender noted by Mandala suggests that the description provided by Young and Banda, if it has any ethnographic accuracy, may well represent a stage in a process in which the traditional system, under the pressures produced by colonial control, was losing both its flexibility and complexity. Their description has the strong flavor of a hierarchy that Mandala explicitly claims was absent. It also seems that the earlier European ethnographers did not clearly distinguish the corporate group from the social relationships among its members. The *mbumba*, the group of matrilineally related women, constituted the center of a village's network of social relationships. This was especially so in smaller villages (Richards 1967). During the 19th century, in villages that were the seats of chiefly authority, the *mbumba* were also a significant part of the political system.

The League of Malaw Women

The exact date of the founding of the League of Malawi Women is unclear, partly because it was (and is) unclear who actually founded the League.[5] But it was probably within the decade before independence in 1964. The League was usually described as a special branch of the Malawi Congress Party (rather than as a women's auxiliary) where women have the autonomy to organize themselves and focus on their special development concerns.

It was portrayed as Malawi's premier women's organization, a pioneer in national development.[6]

> But today women play a vital role in Malawi. They now work side-by-side with their male counterparts in practically every field in order to further develop the country. The drive belt behind this important role is the Women's League of Malawi, a political wing of the parent body, the Malawi Congress Party (Daily Times, 17 October 1984, Mothers' Day Supplement:9).

The reality was somewhat different. To the extent that the League insulated women from participation in Party affairs by creating a distinct (and secondary) "women's party," its effect

contradicted its official image. This contradiction was even reflected in the same quasi-official sources as they described what women of the League do.

> Women sing praises in recognition and appreciation of the Ngwazi's[7] far-sighted leadership which has helped them gain a special place in society. In their present role, women help to strengthen the Malawi Congress Party, the mighty force upon which the Government is founded. They function alongside the Party from branch to regional levels. Many of them hold influential positions in every sphere of life.
>
> Apart from crowning national events with beauty, traditional dances have a significant cultural effect on the society in Malawi. They are a true reflection of the Malawian woman's liberation from social bondage (Daily Times, 17 October 1984, Mothers' Day Supplement: 3).

Neither this contradiction nor the formal position of the League can be understood except in reference to the traditional *mbumba* and its contemporary transmutations.

The League as *Mbumba*

The League of Malawi Women was often referred to as the President's *mbumba*, and he as their "*Nkhoswe* No. 1." This one statement, when read in the context of Young and Banda's explication of matriliny, encompassed much regarding the position of women in Banda's Malawi.[8] Since the Malawi Congress Party was officially defined as a mass party, membership was mandatory, which meant purchasing a Party membership card each year.[9] Hence, in theory at least, all Malawian women, regardless of ethnic backgrounds, were part of the same *mbumba*, and the President was their *nkhoswe*.

> My own people, the people of this country, particularly women say Kamuzu is their nkhoswe. As nkhoswe for the women of this country, I am nkhoswe for all women, the Africans, the white women, the Indian women (President Banda speaking at Republic Day Ceremonies 6 July 1984).

A significant feature of national charter development in Malawi, as well as many other developing nations, is the effort to link current ideological poses with traditional ones. In the instance of Malawi the core of that historic anchor was the ideology of matrilineal kinship, as interpreted by Banda and his small circle of advisors. Especially important in this regard is the

sense of corporate unity based on sharing the same substance. Poewe (1981), in her work on the Luapula area of Zambia, refers to the metaphor of "sharing the same womb." Richards (1967) in a more general vein refers to the metaphor of "sharing the same breast." Whether or not there actually is any difference between the two is a question beyond the scope of this paper. What is clear is that in the Malawian context the close collateral ties of matriliny were emphasized. An effort was made to create the image of a "sorority group" (Mitchell 1956) embracing the entire nation, even including peoples who had no traditional concept of the *mbumba*.

A corollary aspect of this approach was elevation of Chewa and perceptions of Chewa traditions to a culturally hegemonic position. Idealized versions of Chewa culture and traditional practices were put forth as the national norm. English was said to be the official language, while Chichewa was said to be the national language. Publication or radio broadcast in anything but these two was forbidden.[10] At one point, while asking about ethnic differences, one informant sidestepped the entire question by saying “We are all Chewa now.”

People from closely related groups, such as the Lomwe, were able to participate with minor difficulty. Others, less closely related to the Chewa, for example Ngoni, Tumbuka and Yao, found themselves at a social, cultural and ultimately political disadvantage. Another way of looking at this phenomenon is to say that the repressive approach taken to combat tribalism, in fact, created it, a lesson that has yet to be learned in many places.

Tradition-Modernity

Central to the government's activities was the notion that all of its efforts were directed toward modernizing the country, without clearly specifying what that meant. In this vein women were exhorted to adopt some modern practices and give up corresponding traditional ways. Their societal placement within the movement toward modernization was clearly stated in the

public discussion of homecraft classes, the major governmental effort to reach rural as well as urban women.

> The Government introduced homecraft classes for women to learn modern ways of looking after their families (Daily Times 28 November 1984:2).

> Speaking when he [the District Party Chairman] closed a six-month homecraft course at Muona over the weekend, ...[he] stressed the importance of homecraft classes and appealed to husbands to allow their wives to attend the courses. "Homecraft classes are arenas for practical education," he said (Daily Times, 14 December 1983: 5).

Within this context, the function of homecraft classes and the kinds of traditional practices they are to replace are clearly stated.

> "Your families will be strengthened through the different skills you have learned during the course," he [the District Party Chairman] added. He advised the women to refrain from the use of herbs in order to strengthen their families, describing the practice as old fashioned and impractical (Daily Times 27 November 1984: 3).

> "Home management skills the women gain at the homecraft centres are conducive to stable marriages," he [the District Party Chairman] said. He discouraged the women from what he called "love potions" -- which he said were an experience of the past. "Just prepare nourishing dishes for your husbands then you will be loved most," he stressed (Daily Times 24 September 1984: 5).

> The Chikwawa district Party chairman, . . . has called for more women to join homecraft classes where they could learn new ways of home management to ensure good health among people (Daily Times 1 November 1984: 5).

There is a secondary theme running through the homecraft articles that illustrates the traditional - modern conflict even more clearly. The articles advertise homecraft classes as a replacement for "love potions" obtained from traditional healers. Although from the perspective of ethno-medicine, it is a serious distortion, these substances were depicted as mere primitive magic. Consequently, the homecraft classes became a species of modern amulet with the same magical effect of keeping husbands from straying.

> He [the District Party Chairman] said better home management also strengthened marriage bonds as opposed to love potions which were popular in the past (Daily Times 28 November 1984: 2).

> He [the District Party Chairman] said that home management skills gained through homecraft courses were conducive to family happiness, adding: "The love potion is an experience of the past for stable marriages (Malawi News 29 September to 5 October 1984: 2).
>
> Home management skills gained through homecraft courses are conducive to stable marriages, the district Party chairman in Mchinji, . . . said last Friday (Daily Times 24 September 1984: 5).
>
> In Kasungu, the district Party chairman there, . . . has thanked women for attending homecraft classes, saying men who are given good food are more likely to love their wives (Daily Times 3 December 1984: 5).

These quotes seem to make a connection between food and "love." However, this is an instance in which the problems of cultural and linguistic translation complicate the possibility of such an interpretation. It is not clear just what cultural meaning is being given to "love." In the same way, "love potion" does not seem to have the same meaning as it does in western mythology. The clearest connection is with marital stability. This makes sense in the light of the general brittleness of marriage in matrilineal-matrilocal systems (Poewe 1981), but even more so when given the conjunction of the culturally intrusive western concern with nuclear family stability, and the traditional subsistence agriculturalist's concern with food sufficiency.

Rereading these passages leaves us with the sense that "love potions," good food and homecraft classes are all directed toward cure of a politically manufactured social illness: patriarchal nuclear family marital instability.

Although my focus here is on the public face of homecraft, the reality of the courses and their curriculum was not very different. Women tended to be ignored in most development programs, and even though the homecraft programs did formally include a few agricultural items, the relative curricular emphases make the point. In one training center course 39% of the time was devoted to cookery, home improvement and laundry, 23% to needlework and handicraft, 13% to child care and family health education and 25% to horticulture, poultry

keeping and crop storage (Hirschmann 1984). What we need to understand about these data is that traditionally, throughout Banda's regime and still, women provide much of the agricultural labor for producing subsistence crops, i.e., local food consumed locally.

The realities of women's lives were, and are (Semu 2002) even further from the image presented by the homecraft curriculum. When women were asked about their problems, the responses never indicated a lack of knowledge. They always indicated a lack of access to materials (Ngwira 1987). The materials referred to range from maize, firewood and relish[11] for food to cloth and thread for clothing or even embroidery. The last is telling because it means that even the skills taught in homecraft could not be used by most ordinary women.

As with all other things in Malawi, President Banda was portrayed as the sole mediator of the transition.

> The district Party chairman in Kasungu,...has praised the Ngwazi for introducing homecraft programmes, which helped improve people's living standards (Daily Times 1 November 1984:5).
>
> The District Party chairman for Nsanje...has paid tribute to the Ngwazi for educating women in Malawi through the establishment of homecraft classes which help to improve living conditions (Daily Times, 14 December 1983: 5).

The clear messages in all of this were that 1) women were to do as they were told,[12] and 2) their major role in the development process was to feed their husbands, that is, to be domestic providers, doing what they were said to have always done.

Secondarily, there is an identification of ordinary women with the traditional, that is, the non-modern. It is women, who were continually spoken of as consulting traditional healers for charms and potions. In two years of reading the newspaper, I did not come across a story about a man seeking out a traditional healer for a "love potion." My students and other informants told me it happens regularly, but the semi-official public media, seemed to have no idea it was happening. This is a good illustration of the agenda setting function of the media,

as they ignored men using or seeking love potions, or s uccess potions. This identification of women with tradition is important because tradition is described as both a major support of and impediment to development. Love potions are obtained from traditional healers, who were portrayed as a major personification of traditional ways, including curing social and biological ills through witchcraft. Traditional practices were depicted as "things of the past," antithetical to modernity and national development This ambivalence, of course, is completely reconciled (at least symbolically) by the President as mediator.

The President was portrayed as personally responsible for modernization, raising living standards and improving the position of women through homecraft classes. In return, the women praised him with traditional dances and songs.

> Earlier, the District Women's League Chairman in Mangochi...asked women in the area to practise their traditional dances and to compose meaningful songs in praise of the Ngwazi for the development taking place in the country (Daily Times, 22 January 1985: 3).

Poverty and Development

A second major theme is poverty versus development, expressed in terms of a comparison between a constructed and arbitrarily defined colonial period and today. Malawi was, up until 1974, a significant source of labor for mines in South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe.[13] Some estimates indicate that each year as many as 170,000 men were working in other countries prior to that date (Pike 1969:25, McMaster 1974:35). The severe reduction in external male labor migration by the government created a real need for increased employment opportunities within the country. However, the issue in this paper is the terms in which it was phrased.

> The Malawi leader told his people that before he came home [in 1958], Nkhotakota district was one of the poorest districts in the Central Region. Men wasted a lot of their time playing `bawo' and dancing malipenga throughout the day. This was no longer the case, Nkhotakota had changed for the better. People took farming seriously and men concentrated on farming instead of

> playing and dancing, he said. He explained that in the past farming was left to women who grew a little cassava and rice. But now men go to the garden and production of maize, rice and other crops has been stepped up (Daily Times, 4 February 1985: 1).

Men are lazy, or at least not truly interested in farming, and if development is to occur, they must be forced to work in the fields.

> The Ngwazi said he did not stop his people from playing bawo and dancing malipenga as such, but he wanted them first to work in the fields. He had told women in Nkhotakota and Nkhata Bay not to give their husbands food if they didn't go to the garden (Daily Times, 4 February 1985: 1).

There are two interesting aspects to this construction. One is in the introduction of a subordinate theme revolving around the extent to which women are delegated responsibility for seeing to it that men work in the fields. This is nicely balanced by men's duty to allow women to go to homecraft classes.

> He urged men to allow their wives to attend homecraft classes established in their areas in order to raise the living standards of their families (Daily Times 27 February 1984:5)

The second is in the extent to which it echoes colonial assertions that matrilineality inhibited men's interest in farming, especially farming for profit. Colonial officiails in Malawi argued that the hold of matrilineality must be either broken or the system must be helped to evolve to more civilized forms in order to facilitate men taking a personal interest in farming and in land tenure in "their own" villages (Duly 1948). All this was directed toward having more crops to sell, and hence more money. Development seems to have been defined as increasing wealth for some. The significance of traditional and especially matrilineal forms of land tenure has continued to be an issue of debate in academic and other venues in Malawi (cf, eg, Shaw et al 1985, Cross 2002).

Nature-Culture:

A third major theme revolves around the opposition between nature and culture. The

nature-culture dichotomy has been academically discussed as some sort of human universal, especially in conjunction with an analogous female-male dichotomy (cf MacCormack and Strathern 1980, Ortner 1974). Although the concept is still a matter of considerable, probably unresolvable debate, it is never-the-less the case that in the rhetoric of development in Malawi under Banda, the nature-culture dichotomy took on considerable importance, and was also tied to a female-male dichotomy. The effort seems to have been to create an image of the good, that is modern Malawi through the nature-culture opposition and a temporal comparison with "nature" referring to colonial or pre-colonial times.

Several times a week the daily newspaper carried a story about a lion, hippo, crocodile, python, or lightning bolt killing, or almost killing a villager. The message was, of course, that nature, which surrounds every villager, is dangerous and both uncontrollable and unpredictable.

> A three-metre long python has been killed in a chicken pen in Ntchisi, the second to be killed in the district within three days. A 14-year-old boy killed the other one last Sunday when the reptile nearly killed his dog.
>
> . . . .
>
> The area of Chief Nthondo is said to have numerous pythons, which have threatened people and livestock in the past six months (Daily Times, 14 December 1983: 3).
>
> Shock turned into horror last weekend for [an] Ndirande resident .... First he killed the snake that had given him the shock at a friend's house, only to hear later that the herbalist who 'owned' it was demanding to know why he had killed it....(Malawi News, September 29-October 5, 1984: 5).

The second quote was chosen because it clearly illustrates the pervasive linkage between nature and tradition. In Malawian religion prior to the advent of Christianity, pythons and rain shrine priestesses had a close association with fertility and good fortune. Here the linkage to pre-Christian religion is carefully avoided, but is still made through the traditional healer. A common feature of the cultural construction of some aspects of traditional healing in the Malawi

area is the connection with familiars, usually drawn from the ranks of dangerous animals. One Christian mission in the Central Region even keeps a zoo of traditional familiars in an effort to demonstrate either that these are only ordinary animals, or that traditional healing through this mechanism no longer has any potency. To the extent that women were linked to the nature side of the dichotomy, the linkage occurred through their alleged penchant for seeking love potions by visiting traditional healers, who are clearly associated with nature and traditional religious constructs through the familiars they keep.

The contrast comes with a view of the effects of modern agricultural practices on raw, untamed nature.

> The two Party leaders had cited the peace and calm prevailing in the country, the fact that estates established in the district had driven lions away, and the rural electrification programme at Manwera as examples of the Ngwazi's accomplishments in the district in particular and the nation as a whole (Daily Times, 28 January 1985: 5).

Here, of course, not only does modern estate farming (but not village small holder agriculture) keep nature at bay, but this too is mediated by the President.

Conclusion

During Banda's regime, Malawi's political culture was what Joffe (1973) called hortatory. Public life and the government's public face were dominated by exhortations deriving from a single central authority, the Life President. The wise and dynamic ruler dispensed sage advice, usually in the form of pithy sayings or phrases repeated over and over again. In almost every speech Banda could be counted on to say something on the order of "I have said on more than one occasion ...." A variety of rhetorical mantras were employed, all of which were directed

toward creating an image of a country preserving ethnic traditions, while peacefully modernizing and respecting the rights of women "because we are a matrilineal people."

Although the effort was made to indicate that these allegedly hegemonic traditions automatically rendered Malawi ahead of "more advanced" nations in this regard, the fact is that portrayal of women's socio-cultural location in Malawi's public ideology was depressingly familiar. Women are the center of the domestic domain. Their home management skills need to be modernized, but at the same time they are to focus on teaching traditional values. Women and their behavior are a primary source of family stability (and by implication instability).

There are a number of ironies and contradictions here. Marriages are typically brittle in many "traditionally" matrilineal systems because specific men are not important in the continuation of the corporate group. Yet women are portrayed as being responsible for preserving something regularly referred to as traditional family values. In effect, many of the same traditions are spoken of as both crucial to development and standing in its way at the same time. The values that locate the family as the basic social and economic unit are the cornerstone of the emphasis on small holder agriculture, and gendered aspects of family health and stability.

These same values, in the matrilineal context, are also partly responsible for marital instability. By defining marital stability as women's responsibility, the social and developmental positions of children and families were fixed as an exclusively domestic domain concern. By conflating them with matrilineality, women also become responsible for preserving ethnicity, which is also "known" to be inimical to economic development.

As it grew, Malawi's national mythic charter inextricably entwined the position of women, economic development, and national identity. In this process, a number of contradictions are

encompassed and constrained, but not resolved. As Levi- Strauss notes,

> ... The purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if ... the contradiction is real) .... (1967: 226).

The contradictions here were real, and some of them were only resolvable through a process of reconstruction and mystification, which also glossed over the unresolvable contradictions involved in being dependent and independent at the same time. The emphasis on women's responsibility for family stability and health masked the realities of high infant mortality rates and malnutrition levels, unemployment and a still growing rural-urban gap. The redefinition of, and appeal to, traditional formulations of the position of women masked the extent to which these very structures were distorted by colonial social formations and continued to be distorted by post independence extensions of the same patterns.

Banda's Malawi followed a policy that ideologically stressed improvement in the position of women, easing the burdens of a harsh traditional life. However, if the burdens were to be lifted, then the first task was to demonstrate that they existed in extraordinary measure. Thus, we find women were depicted as overburdened by the domestic concerns of child bearing and rearing, as well as the "superstitious" practice of consulting traditional healers for amulets to keep their husbands from straying.

The problem with straying husbands is that if they have any money, they spend it on someone else. If they are farmers, they also spend the time that "traditionally" should be spent in the fields. These traditions about the traditional division of labor mask the fact that historically women did (and still do) a large part of the agricultural labor and had a major part in maintaining networks of interaction and relationship (Tew 1950, Mitchell 1956, Mandala 1982). Even more

significant is the way modern traditions of women's place conditioned perceptions of future possibilities.

Several informants (all male and in their mid-twenties to early thirties) patiently explained to me that one of Malawi's problems regarding women is that male wage labor migration produced a situation in which men leave their wives and children in the villages with no means of support, either monetary or agricultural. This drives the women into farming, which their burdensome domestic duties render inefficiently and poorly done. Thus, they said, development should provide more male wage labor in more places, so men can go back to their homes and properly care for their families.

Given the data indicating that women are more efficient farmers than men, not only in subsistence, but also cash crop farming (Berheide andSegal 1994), these informants' acceptance of the basic governmental myths about women is worthy of note and begins to explain why the position of women does not seem to have changed over the last 25 years.

Here we can see a rewriting of the past. The range of possibilities is restricted to a narrow segment of the historic cultural complex. Historically (Mandala 1990) and ethnographically, matrilineality facilitated male migratory movements by reducing their centrality in marital units. Female domestic roles, which actually included provision of a substantial portion of subsistence, as well as maintenance of informal communal networks, were referred to during Banda's regime as only consisting of child care, cooking and house cleaning.

> She [the district League Chairman] said that women must thank the Ngwazi for introducing the Women's League because they were now able to work hand in hand with their menfolk in the development of the country unlike colonial days when they were only restricted to the kitchen (Daily Times, 17 January 1985:5).

This new version of the past led back to more contemporary concepts of a domestic-

public domain division, and of the straying husband, which in turn, set a developmental goal as reducing the social and economic pressures that make men stray. The dialogue between perceived and actual historic traditions continues as current time recedes into the past. New present time conditions come to take their place and draw upon these more recent traditions as authentic representations of what the traditional ways were like. At the same time there is an effort to create a clear historic marker, a liminal point of separation between traditional times and contemporary times. In the instance of Malawi, that point is the end of colonial domination, marked not by independence in 1964, but by President Banda's return to Malawi in 1958.

> "Before the Ngwazi came back home, people of this country led very poor lives,"
>
> she added (Daily Times, 20 November 1984: 2).

In this way, even though Malawi's development ideology used the events leading to independence as its central historic marker, the perception of the traditional, pre-independence pattern both changed and was perceived as fixed. Since the modern traditions that recede into the past are based on a narrow segment of the historically existing options, the traditional past tends to point more and more in a single developmental direction, even though the ultimate goal remains undefined.

In general, our notion of the nature of developing societies tends to treat their institutions as simply in the process of becoming functionally more specific. In reality, the nature of developing societies is such that they contain institutions from more than one cultural matrix. They are hybridized systems. By and large, the grafted institutions come from industrialized societies. Thus, there exist, within the same social system, at least two sets of institutions. One stems from indigenous perceptions of the past and of future possibilities. The other comes from external perceptions of the same local realities. As these fuse, they produce a new series of contradictions and conflicts, as well as a masking ideology.

In the instance of Malawi under Banda, creation of a national mythology attempting to

reconcile the contradictions between “modernization” and preservation of a colonial version of tradition was, perhaps, more open than most. Its gendered linkage is also unusual only in its openness. Because the independent nations of former colonial empires have yet to achieve either national unity or a national macro-culture, the efforts begun in the first generation of post-colonial regimes are likely to continue for some time.

NOTES

[1] A much earlier version of this paper was presented at the Fifth International, Interdisciplinary Conference on Women, San Jose, Costa Rica, February 1993. The main body of the research on which this paper is based was supported by a Fulbright Senior Lectureship Award for the years 1983-85. Additional research was conducted in August 1992 and November 1993.

[2] Short (1974) suggests Banda was probably born in 1898. He died in 1997, and in 1998 some members of his family announced that he had been born in 1896. May 1992 is an approximate date for the onset of pressures for a transition to a multi-party governmental system. Since then, political and other events moved rapidly, but not clearly. In June 1993 a national referendum was held on the question of legalizing multi-party politics. The result was overwhelmingly in favour. A national parliamentary and presidential election were scheduled for, and held in May 1994. Two trips to Malawi close to this time (August 1992 and November 1993), as well as subsequent contacts have convinced me of two things: 1) Even though, by 1992, Banda had lost all power and was, in fact, under indictment for a series of political murders in 1983, his position in the national mythology remained anomalous. As long as he was alive, his personal dominance during the country's first 30 years maintained a measure of symbolic significance as mediator of the country's initial accomplishments. Today, his importance is less salient, as the country has a number of serious economic problems to cope with. 2) Even as the intensity of the hortatory rhetoric abated, neither the real nor symbolic position of women was likely to change for some time. More recent studies, e.g., Semu 2002, bear this out.

[3] This is something of an understatement. Most of the peoples of the Northern Region and a significant portion of those in the Central Region claim traditional patrilineality. That and the suppression of literature or radio broadcasts in indigenous languages other than Chichewa were major sources of resentment, anger and identifications that leaned in the direction of ethnic separatism. In 1993, when Banda’s power was gone, the two poles of excitement were elimintaion of national dress regulations and the resumption of radio broadcasts in Chitumbuka.

[4] I have chosen to focus on Young and Banda's description of the *nkhoswe-mbumba* relationship because its sense of "responsible relative" and avuncular care taking pre-figure Banda's later construction of a national *mbumba*, the League of Malawi Women.

[5] Although Banda claimed to have founded the League, the best evidence is that Vera Chirwa founded the League sometime in the decade before independence. In 1981 she and her husband, Orton Chirwa were abducted from exile in Tanzania, brought to Malawi, tried and convicted of treason. Orton Chirwa died in prison in 1993. Vera Chirwa was released in the same year. In 2004 she became a candidate for President and in October 2007 her autobiography was published by Zed Press.

[6] Until the 1985 establishment of a new women's organization, *Chitukuko Cha A Mai M'malawi* (Development of Malawian Women, usually abbreviated to CCAM), the League was portrayed as the

only organization for women interested in national development. Until 1994, the League continued to be active, but the CCAM, which was usually described as the development wing of the League took over activity in this sphere. The CCAM seems to be somewhat more project oriented and less declaration oriented than the League proper. The motivation for a new organization, associated with, but independent of the League, was probably related, at least partially, to the positioning of the League as the President's *mbumba*. Under Banda, neither organization developed any real power or influence, and it is not clear that one ever became more prominent than the other. Since, approximately 2003, CCAM has emerged as one of several NGOs dealing with issues of women's position under the umbrella of the Council of Non-Governmental Organizations in Malawi (CONGOMA).

[7] *Ngwazi* is probably best translated as "person of great achievement" and, aside from his earned medical doctorate, and a general presidential honorific, was the only title or praise name Banda used. However, its meaning, when applied to the President, came close to something like "hero of the state."

[8] With the advent of a multi-party electoral system in 1994, the possibility that this state of affairs might be addressed by the new government became a real potential. Currently the state of affairs seems to be that while the post-Banda governments have claimed to be addressing these issues, the political will to implement constitutional guarantees is lacking.

[9] Anthropological and Sociological theory claim that there is always a gap between the ideal and the real. I was repeatedly told that the same was true on the ground". My own experiences support that notion. On the other hand, the para-military Malawi Young Pioneers regularly stood at the entrance to markets demanding that people purchase party cards before entering, or went from door to door in the vilages "urging" people to purchase a card for each family member. In 1993, I was told that this effort had already begun to disintegrate, a year or more before the 1994 elections.

[10] The extent to which this policy of repressing ethnicity created tribal animosities can be gauged by the speed with which the first post-Banda government lifted the ban and the rapidity with which radio broadcasts in Chitumbuka were heard. It was one of the first tasks undertaken.

[11] Relish refers to the sauce of meat, chicken or fish and vegetables with which the basic *nsima* (maize porridge) is served.

[12] In truth, men too were to do as they were told, but in Malawi this became a matrilineal version of a very ordinary gender hierarchy: Banda told everyone what to do and the men told the women what to do. But as *nkhoswe* of all women in the country, the President also directly (or through government ministers) told women what to do.

[13] The story that is commonly told is that in 1974 there was a plane crash in which a great many migrant Malawian miners were killed, and as a consequence, the Government shut down all recruiting for the mines. Sometime later, recruiting was restarted, but at a considerably reduced rate.

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