

## ***The dead hand of human rights: contrasting Christianities in post- transition Malawi***

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### ABSTRACT

This article shows the importance of understanding the pluralism of moral ideas in contemporary Africa. Although the discourse on human rights is only one aspect of that pluralism, it threatens to overshadow other ways of conceiving human dignity. The impact of the ‘human rights talk’ can be observed in Christian churches, and the article contrasts elite and lay practices in Catholic and pentecostal churches in Malawi. Drawing upon rural and urban fieldwork, the article reveals variation as much within as between these two forms of Christianity. Rather than documenting a wholesale rejection of the ‘human rights talk’, the article draws attention to the situational use of different moral ideas. In this regard, public debates on politics may be enriched by the insights gained during fieldwork among Catholic and pentecostal congregations.

### INTRODUCTION

Of all the reforms and innovations which the liberalisation of politics and economy in sub-Saharan Africa has sought to achieve, one appears to have rooted itself in society with particular success. It is the willingness and ability to claim rights. In most countries which experienced the ‘second liberation’ in the early 1990s, individuals and interest groups continue to feel entitled to assert themselves as bearers of rights, from the most inclusive human rights to more specific group rights. The claims may be made in courts or in the other arenas of the public sphere, such as the mass media, but the fact that they *are* made flies in the face of the view that little has changed. The extent to which silence and the fear of persecution seem to have disappeared from the public sphere may give pause to those who lament the poor prospects for the ‘consolidation’ of democracy in Africa.<sup>1</sup> The assertions of rights – some vociferous, others more subtle – appear as the most indisputable fruits of political pluralism.

Although there is certainly cause to celebrate this conspicuous

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change in many African polities, critical social analysis cannot take such assertions for granted. To do so would be to regard the claiming of rights as 'natural'. This article focuses on the practices and discourses in Catholic and pentecostal churches in Malawi in order to show how such naturalism may be unwarranted. The article shows, in particular, that the 'human rights talk' (cf. Dembour 1996) can marginalise other ways of conceiving of human dignity and value, and that there may be different approaches to politics even in the same churches. Accordingly, this article's plea is for an appreciation of the true pluralism of moral ideas, and for a certain resistance against the apparent naturalism of individuals and groups as the bearers of rights.

The 'human rights talk' enforces, like a dead hand, a particular understanding of human dignity. It does so by attributing legitimacy to specific moral notions in the public discourse, thereby defining the contours of what is not only acceptable but also *conceivable*. Many African politicians, activists, journalists and religious leaders eagerly participate in this process of definition, a fact that shows the shallowness of the accusation that the 'human rights talk' represents an imperialistic agenda by the North to gain moral high ground over the South (see e.g. Hadjor 1998). While it is important to unmask the politics behind international humanitarianism (Malkki 1997), it is also the case that human rights have gained such widespread currency that they can scarcely be associated with a 'Northern' agenda. Indeed, the 'human rights talk' may have had its greatest emancipatory potential during the period of democratic transition. After it has been widely adopted in society, the disputes over rights often give the state the depoliticised role of an arbiter (Heller 1992; Brown 1995). The 'politics of recognition' (Taylor 1994) which accompanies the claiming of rights may have little to say about entrenched power relations. It merely seeks to codify subjects' identities as sufficient grounds for a share in the ultimately unequal distribution of welfare.

Responding to the challenge of examining human rights in widely different cultural contexts, anthropologists may unwittingly contribute to the 'dead hand' by rejecting the tradition of relativism in their discipline (see e.g. Messer 1993; Wilson 1997). The current approach prefers dialogue and translation, with a concomitant shift from the localism of anthropological research to an appreciation of transnational influences in local politics (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 1997: 365–404). An overly legalistic approach to human rights may thus be enriched by anthropological analysis, but, at the same time, the legal framework of human rights is rarely surpassed. More promising are those studies which are explicit about the need to understand different *moral*

arguments in a given polity (see e.g. Lemarchand 1992; Werbner 1995; Dembour 1996; Engelke 1999; Wilson 2000). The focus on morality enables the analyst to question the apparent naturalism in the idea that individuals and groups are rights-bearing subjects. In a perceptive analysis of the controversy over gay rights in Zimbabwe, for example, Engelke notes that the misunderstanding may partly derive from the Shona notion that 'one's humanity is acquired, not given' (1999: 301). When rights are claimed on the basis of intrinsic qualities, it becomes hard to appreciate the import which some people attach to the gradual social maturation and 'growth' of the person. Even if the rights-bearing subject is seen to have a specific ethnic identity or sexual orientation, the ensuing view of selfhood portrays an abstract and timeless individual – an individual who is similar to all the other legitimate claimants of the same rights.

Religion is an intriguing domain in which to study further the moral arguments in the 'human rights talk' and its alternatives. It seems justified both to draw attention to the notions of human rights in many world religions (Bloom *et al.* 1997) and to observe that a thriving religious life in sub-Saharan Africa threatens to make the sub-continent's politics incomprehensible to outsiders (Ellis & ter Haar 1998). In other words, religious beliefs and practices throw the interplay between universal and specific themes into stark relief, not as a matter of 'syncretism' (Stewart & Shaw 1994), but as a complex process whereby subjects situationally draw upon different registers of moral argument. This article's focus on two forms of Christianity – Catholicism and pentecostalism – indicates the extent of such complexity and the challenges it presents to the 'human rights talk'. The focus shows variation as much *within* as between these two Christianities, with the participation of the Catholic elite in the 'human rights talk' contrasting with lay practices among both Catholic and pentecostal Christians.

Malawi is an apposite setting to study the interplay between politics and Christianity. As the Christian identities of many nationalists attested, the very making of the nation from the late nineteenth century onwards had gained impetus from the work of the Presbyterian missionaries in northern and southern Malawi (McCracken 1977; A. C. Ross 1996). During the struggle for the 'second liberation' in the early 1990s, the Livingstonia Synod in the north and the Blantyre Synod in the south played an active role, whereas the Nkhoma Synod in central Malawi never quite relinquished its acquiescence. The difference between the three Presbyterian Synods was historical; the Livingstonia and Blantyre Synods had been established by Scottish missionaries,

while the Nkhoma Synod had its origin in the Dutch Reformed Church Mission from South Africa. At least equal in its influence to the Presbyterians, the Catholic Church was, after an early confrontation with the emerging one-party regime (Schoffeleers 1999: 17–60), quiet on political matters until the early 1990s. Its bishops' pastoral letter in 1992 was a watershed in the political transition, followed by similar statements by the leaders of several Protestant churches (see e.g. Newell 1995; K. R. Ross 1996; Schoffeleers 1999). The active involvement of Christian churches in democratisation had the improbable result that Bakili Muluzi, a Muslim, became the new state president in the 1994 elections. Yet his ascendancy owed more to the internal politics of the new ruling party than to his religious identity.

Malawi, like many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, embarked on economic liberalisation well before the transition to competitive multiparty politics. Unlike its neighbours, Malawi never showed interest in socialist or 'humanist' experimentation, and the first Structural Adjustment Programme was launched in 1981 (Chilowa 1991). The adjustment phase that started in 1987 began more systematically to introduce neoliberal reforms into the country's economy. The political economy of Kamuzu Banda's regime retained, however, a strong sense of patronage until its demise in the 1994 multiparty elections, the second such exercise since the pre-independence elections in 1961 (see Mhone 1992; on the 1994 elections, see Kaspin 1995; van Donge 1995; Lwanda 1996). A self-styled life president, Banda took his time to respond to the mounting external and internal pressures to change the system of government, but he was also able to withdraw from power without large-scale political violence. The United Democratic Front (UDF) emerged as the new ruling party, led by the new state president Bakili Muluzi – himself, like many other leaders in the UDF, a former servant of the old regime. The 1999 general elections indicated continuing popular interest in politics and, amid disputes over the results, were won by the UDF with a very tight margin. The new regime's formal commitment to human rights seemed to soothe its donors' anxieties over the depth of the country's democratic reform (see Englund 2000a).

#### BEYOND A 'DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION'

Several years after the transition to multiparty politics, Malawians continue to juxtapose the two regimes they have known since

independence. The protagonists of the two regimes seem able to agree on one major difference between the old and new eras – the greater extent of ‘freedom’ (*ufulu*) after 1994. The protagonists of the new regime are likely to argue that, whatever the current problems, at least Malawians no longer fear persecution because of their political and religious allegiances, or arbitrary violence by such institutions of the one-party regime as the Malawi Young Pioneers and the Youth League. The Malawi Congress Party (MCP), the ruling party during the Banda era, seems to admit as much, as indicated by Banda’s formal apology soon after his downfall, and by its present leaders’ promise not to re-introduce compulsory party membership. Yet, many Malawians, whether active in the MCP or not, also use the term *ufulu* for liberalism gone wild – for an era of insolence by youths against their elders, of an immoral dress code, of disobedience and political disunity.

After the multiparty elections in 1994, the UDF government quickly established a number of public offices to safeguard human rights. These included the ombudsman, the law commissioner and the human rights commissioner. The Anti-Corruption Bureau was established to investigate and prosecute past and present abuses of public office, while the National Compensation Tribunal was introduced to compensate for the unlawful detentions which the old regime had inflicted on its subjects. Many of these innovations have been hampered by lack of adequate funds, and the first ombudsman was himself removed from office after allegations of misused funds. More recently, however, the Anti-Corruption Bureau has been able to investigate cases and, among its other actions, ordered the arrest of minister Abdul Pillane in January 1999. The new ombudsman, in turn, gained credibility by beginning to question the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation which had allegedly fired employees on political grounds.

The human rights offices and institutions introduced by the government are, in point of fact, merely the tip of an iceberg constituted by numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) commenting on and inculcating various rights. Such NGOs have spawned at a fast pace in ‘democratic’ Malawi, not least as a response to demands by donors. At the same time, the same principles of accountability and transparency that these NGOs impose on others are being used against them in an emerging local critique of NGO practices. For example, the press condemned the civic education campaigns of some NGOs before the 1999 elections for their inefficiency, along with caustic remarks on human rights NGOs as strategies for employment and enrichment.<sup>2</sup> Some NGO activists,

urban-based graduates more attuned to donor fashions than to social situations in rural areas, were perplexed by the apparent irrelevance of their message on the ground. 'Sometimes when you try to conduct civic education on people's rights', one frustrated activist complained, 'you find that they do not have food or good roads. This makes NGOs' work difficult' (*The Weekly Chronicle*, 3-10.8.1998).

Christian churches have also played a central role both in introducing the liberal disposition and in inculcating its virtues into Malawians. The Lenten Letter by the Catholic bishops in 1992, read in Catholic churches throughout the country, precipitated the transition by articulating publicly Malawi's 'climate of mistrust and fear' and 'the growing gap between the rich and the poor', among other criticisms (see Schoffeleers 1999: 344-54). After the government's initial reaction of banning the Letter and harassing the bishops, strikes, riots and the return of exiled opposition politicians forced it to begin to look for partners for a dialogue on the process which would lead to a referendum on the system of government in June 1993. Mainline Protestant and Catholic churches, Muslims and 'pressure groups' came to comprise the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) in the negotiations. Religious leaders had a high profile in the PAC from its inception and, after the 'pressure groups' became political parties, have continued to manage it, with civic education and press statements as its most visible interventions.

The preoccupation of donors, political leaders, NGOs and churches with human rights has inspired little analysis as to how the 'human rights talk' may limit our understanding of social and political problems. Malawi's current liberalism has embraced the discourse of rights with such vigour that it is becoming the only language persons in public offices are able to speak. The inculcation starts early. Human Rights is now a module in Malawian primary schools. In everyday public discourse, 'stakeholders' and 'interest groups' are common designations for rights-bearing subjects in virtually every arena of life. The new Local Government Bill passed in parliament in November 1998 was one striking example of this language (see e.g. *PAC News*, 1st Quarter, 1999). It transformed councils into assemblies and ruled that their members would consist of elected representatives, chiefs, members of parliament and, curiously, 'interest groups'. It was understood that the latter would grant representation to women, youths and the disabled, among others. By defining such sections of the population as 'interest groups', the bill indicated an increasing codification of society into discrete rights-bearing subjects.

Church leaders, key players in introducing the discourse of rights to Malawi, have continued to participate in this process of inculcation, not missing opportunities to utilise the new language of claims to further their own interests. One example is the leadership of the Zambezi Evangelical Church who claimed ownership of the land where the state president's Sanjika Palace had been erected in Blantyre in 1967. 'Since the Muluzi administration seems friendly, we might reach some compromise', the Church's general secretary commented in February 1999, pointing out that the Church received no compensation when it was evicted in 1970 (*Africa News Online*, 12.2.1999). More common, however, are church leaders' efforts to assist others to utilise the prevailing tolerance for claiming rights. Various projects of civic education have come to be an important aspect of many mainline Christian churches' work. The Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central African Presbyterian (CCAP), for example, has launched the Church and Society Programme which has organised workshops to introduce church youths to 'the meaning of democracy, human rights, community-based development and gender roles in a democratic society' (*Bwalo* 1 (5), 1998; *Bwalo* 2 (1), 1999). Women, another conspicuous 'interest group' along with youths and children in 'democratic' Malawi, have received the attention of several churches and NGOs, such as in the Christian Service Committee's effort to inform women leaders of women's and children's rights (*The Star*, 9.5.1997; *The Nation*, 12.5.1997).

A critical analysis of this proliferation of human rights projects among churches and NGOs should not be seen as a criticism of the good intentions involved, nor of the tangible results they may yield (see Cammack & Chirwa 1997). Clearly, if nothing more, civic education on human rights contributes to the pluralism that most Malawians seemed to yearn for during the democratic transition. Yet, social analysts should also examine the Malawian critiques of liberalism after the transition, rather than dismissing their concerns over excessive *ufulu* (freedom) as needing more civic education (cf. Kanyongolo 1998). These critiques can be seen to take two broadly contrasting forms in post-transition Malawi. One is the critique which confronts the ills of neoliberalism with ideas and interventions which are firmly within the liberal tradition. Another is achieved in, for example, those religious lives which appear to bear no traces of liberal notions of the subject. By comparing the leaders and the laity in Catholic and pentecostal churches, the rest of this article examines the coexistence of these contrasting dispositions even within the same churches.



## VARIETIES OF CATHOLICISM: ELITE INTERVENTIONS

However surprising the Catholic bishops' Lenten Letter might have appeared in the political context of Malawi in 1992, it was almost inevitable in the transnational context of the Catholic Church. A watershed in the Church's transformation was the Second Vatican Council which called for a better understanding of society and culture (Gremillion 1991). As one result, much theology and practical pastoral work has been devoted to 'inculturation', the selective acceptance of diverse cultural traditions in the body of Catholic faith. Another result has been the need by the Church leadership to address this-worldly political and economic ills. This has led not only to using pastoral letters as weapons of public intervention in many countries, but also to the national branches of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (for a Zimbabwean case, see Auret 1992).

The Commission came to Malawi only in 1992 – the same year as the bishops issued their remarkable letter. Given the several papal encyclicals and other documents issued from the Vatican on social justice and development from the 1960s onwards, the Malawian bishops' intervention came late. But the Catholic message on justice and human rights was delayed in most other African countries as well, partly because of national Catholic hierarchies and largely because of the widespread fear of persecution by autocratic regimes. Although Pope John Paul II told the bishops of the need to maintain human rights when he visited Malawi in 1989, Archbishop James Chiona has admitted that the decisive encouragement for the 1992 letter came from the Kenyan Catholic bishops' pastoral letter *On the Present Situation in Our Country* in 1990 (Schoffeleers 1999: 113). Thus, the Malawian bishops made their intervention after the Catholic Church had been trying for a number of years to adopt an active role in society and, moreover, after other African bishops had similarly intervened in the affairs of their own countries. Added to the increasing pressure by traditional donors to reform the system of government – and to the recent multiparty elections in neighbouring Zambia – these factors underlay the bishops' 1992 Letter as a product of intensifying global preoccupation with human rights.

Unsurprisingly, the contributions of the Catholic Church to post-transition Malawi bear much resemblance to those of human rights NGOs. In some cases, the Church and NGOs have become virtually indistinguishable. A striking example is the Church-NGO Consortium which was established in June 1998, and in which the Catholic Commission for Peace and Justice is the only participant from



Christian churches. The others in the Consortium are all NGOs: Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation, Centre for Advice, Research and Education on Rights, and The Malawi Institute of Democratic and Economic Affairs. In its mission statement, the Consortium promised to 'create a vibrant and informed civil society where citizens embrace and practice their democratic rights, roles and responsibilities' (*The Weekly Chronicle*, 27.7.1998). The focus of its activities was to be, of course, the 1999 general elections. To this end, the Consortium proposed to train 3,500 election monitors, distribute 20,000 copies of its bimonthly rural newspaper, hold a 15 minute radio programme every week and establish forty trainers in each district. By the end of the programme in June 2000, the Consortium also expected to have printed 10,000 trainers' manuals and 50,000 T-shirts, posters and leaflets, in addition to producing umbrellas and caps. Also promised were 137 drama performances in parishes, 10 songs to be composed within the programme, national debates and a quarterly all-party forum on the radio.

The programme attracted 70 million kwacha (US\$1.7 million) from donors before the 1999 general elections (*Weekend Nation*, 15–16.5.1999). Its achievements, by contrast, lagged far behind the expectations which the Consortium had aroused. Instead of pursuing civic education in districts, the Consortium was more visible in attending meetings with other NGOs in expensive hotels in order to issue statements on the electoral process, particularly on the activities of the Electoral Commission. These meetings contributed to significant changes in the electoral process, such as the removal of the Electoral Commission's leading officers, but they also inspired the above-mentioned Malawian critique of NGO practices. The Consortium's success in soliciting funds indicated many donors' uncritical demand for the 'vibrant civil society' it promised, however exaggerated its programme may have been.<sup>3</sup>

The contribution of the Catholic Church to post-transition arguments and aspirations has taken many other forms. The bishops' pastoral letters are the most obvious ones, now stock-taking events in 'democratic' Malawi. Although their mild tone no longer sparks controversy in the permissive setting of Malawi after 1992, their greatest interest for the present discussion lies in their criticisms of the post-transition developments. These criticisms, often warning against abusing democracy for excessive 'freedom' and taking issue with specific economic policies, are integral to the liberal tradition whose excesses they seek to combat.

While the 1994 pastoral letter *Building Our Future* highlighted the

principles of multiparty democracy and urged the Malawian populace to exercise their democratic rights, the 1996 letter *Walking Together in Faith* criticised ‘misconceptions of freedom and democracy’.<sup>4</sup> The bishops felt that the time had come to remind Malawians that ‘true freedom and democracy require great discipline’, directing their words especially to youths. The letter also complained that ‘our new Malawi (was) becoming more and more stained by corruption’, but avoided pointing the accusing finger at anyone in particular. In words that made inculturation coterminous with liberalism, the 1996 letter also discussed at some length the need for ‘an affirmative appreciation of our cultures’.

The bishops’ concern over the success of the transition had deepened by the pastoral letter of 1998. After listing a number of positive developments in both the church and society, the bishops overwhelmed their audience with a battery of problems, of which the following were only a portion:

laziness, indifferentism, fatalism, hunger, unemployment, bad living conditions, the HIV/Aids pandemic, rising inflation, cheating, false promises, slandering one another in public, deteriorating level of security, lack of adequate appreciation for women’s contribution and some resistance to the genuine recognition of their rights and dignity.

As in 1992, the bishops may have struck a chord with the Catholic laity by speaking out on problems in society, while the letter showered enough praise on democratic reforms to prevent anyone from believing that the bishops were gripped by nostalgia for the autocratic past. The language of rights provided a common framework for the diverse observations in the letter, from poor labour conditions on agricultural estates to certain ‘traditional’ customs which violated in some cases men’s rights, in others women’s.

This usage of liberalism was wholly compatible with a critique of neoliberal economic reforms. Like many opposition politicians, the bishops deplored the removal of subsidies on agricultural inputs such as chemical fertilisers – ‘we seem to have left everything to the mercy of market forces in a country where the appropriate infrastructure seems to be non-existent’. In certain parishes, the Catholic elite put this critique of the Malawian economy into practice. In Nkhotakota District, for example, tenants on tobacco estates began to demand better conditions for their work soon after the 1994 elections. In a rural parish, their grievances received sympathy from two Catholic expatriate priests, who explained their problems to the District Commissioner in Nkhotakota (*The Nation*, 11.6.1997). When this intervention did not yield results, the priests encouraged the tenants to

organise themselves into a union. The Tobacco Tenants and Allied Workers Union (TTAWU) was established in February 1995, and its office was constructed at the parish. Several prominent human rights activists from the Catholic Church and NGOs, including Banda's long-time detainee Vera Chirwa, attended its inauguration in October the same year in order to underline TTAWU as a landmark in the 'second liberation'. Bishop Tarcisius Ziyaye of Lilongwe put the achievement in a larger context: 'It is not simply a matter of money, but also concerns human lives, respecting the dignity of every person, the right to associate and to legal protection.'

Such interventions by the Catholic elite have been integral to the world-view that depicts persons as rights-bearing subjects. After the transition to political pluralism in Malawi, the Catholic elite have on several occasions stressed the need for both the Church and individuals to act in the world. Christians, the Catholic elite maintain, must not be so immersed in the word of God that they cease to live in this-worldly realities.<sup>5</sup> The accompanying view of persons as mutually independent subjects, detached even from their religious affiliations for the benefit of democracy, becomes especially clear in the Catholic elite's opinion on voting. They view voting as a 'birthright' which should not be tainted with tribal, regional or religious considerations.<sup>6</sup> Although prayers before elections are important, and the participation of Catholics in politics is strongly encouraged, the Catholic elite stress voting as an act of individual choice-making. Any interference, including that which comes from the Catholic elite, must be deplored. Political pluralism, in this world-view, is safeguarded by freely choosing individuals, stripped of all social and religious identities in order to embody the purity of abstract 'citizenship'.

#### VARIETIES OF CATHOLICISM II: PRACTICES ON THE GROUND

By juxtaposing the Catholic elite and their laity, I do not mean to imply that their differences are absolute. This qualification applies to both their Catholicism and their politics. The Catholic elite also live in a world where apparently rational political principles mix with inarticulate religious experiences. Conversely, there is no doubt that the 'human rights talk' may appear compelling to the Catholic laity, whatever the sense of human dignity that can be discerned in their everyday practices. The aim of this article is not merely to appreciate the situational variation of religious and political beliefs but to indicate forms of social relationships and moral being which may become overshadowed by a single-minded interest in human rights. As such,

the elite-laity distinction has heuristic value in an attempt to demonstrate the coexistence of different political and religious practices.

In the area of my rural fieldwork from 1992 onwards – the southern margin of Dedza District, bordering Ntcheu District, both in the Central Region near the Mozambican border – lies a rural parish where Catholicism has, over the generations, gained a pivotal place in villagers' relationships and identities. The first mission school was opened in 1907, the first baptisms administered in 1911, and the parish now boasts a cathedral and has two permanently resident Malawian priests. Many villagers wear small crucifixes and medals even outside religious meetings, and the pictures of the Virgin Mary, Christ and John Paul II commonly decorate houses. The area was, and is, an MCP 'stronghold' and the constituency of John Tembo, Banda's closest ally and the minister of state during the last years of the one-party regime. However, in an open defiance of the life president's advice, the majority voted for the multiparty cause in the 1993 referendum.

It has been argued that the Catholic bishops 'mobilised' their rural laity with their 1992 Lenten letter (see Gifford 1998: 32). Villagers in the southern part of Dedza District did welcome the letter as a truthful account of Malawi's ills, but few thought that the MCP government had been wholly discredited. It was only after the government had declared the letter 'seditious' and embarked on deifying Banda that villagers saw a conflict between Christianity and the Banda regime. Villagers experienced the old regime's growing insolence towards the Church,<sup>7</sup> and the deification of a mortal man, as attacks on God. Despite the 'climate of mistrust and fear', they demonstrated on the eve of the referendum that they did not need the bishops nor their parish priests in order to draw faith and courage from their Catholicism. Wary of being seen to influence their congregation's vote, the parish priests ceased to hold services a few days before the referendum. Yet small Catholic groups in villages continued to pray for the referendum until the morning of the polling day. Many went to cast their protest vote against the life president directly from these prayer groups (see Englund 1996).

Since 1994, the memory of violations against God and the Catholic Church has waned as impoverishment and even hunger have continued unabated. Successive seasons during the mid-1990s witnessed excessive rain, destroying crops, while the rapid increase in the price of chemical fertiliser after the removal of subsidies made this much-wanted commodity scarce among villagers. The sense of insecurity is heightened

by the thefts of crops and property, sometimes countered by violent scenes of mob justice, further encouraging nostalgia for the remembered virtues of the Banda era.

Villagers heard with dismay reports about food aid in other parts of Malawi during the seasons of hunger. Many of them also viewed the Starter Pack Scheme, providing villagers with negligible amounts of seed and fertiliser, as a campaign ploy by the UDF government. Together with such grievances, the fact that the new ruling party never seemed determined to establish a vibrant grassroots organisation in the Dedza South constituency has kept the MCP the most active political party in the area. Under such circumstances, John Tembo, however feared during the Banda era, has become the prototypical Big Man for the area, not least because of his tireless touring of villages even outside the campaign period. In the 1999 parliamentary elections, Tembo received 25,254 votes as against the UDF candidate's 15,371 votes.

Villagers' votes appeared to be consistent with their 'objective' grievances. Yet their response to those grievances was informed by their understanding of moral being, an understanding in which the deteriorating material conditions were interpreted within their religious and cosmological convictions. As mentioned, the UDF had achieved little rapport with most villagers by the 1999 elections, and in the context of economic hardship, the MCP was the safest party to identify with. This identification was enhanced by the resentment, widespread also among the pentecostal Christians discussed below, that President Bakili Muluzi's Muslim identity aroused among many villagers. Before the 1999 elections, rumours were rife that Muluzi was in the process of selling the country to Muslim businessmen who would introduce an Islamic state. The UDF participated in the regionalistic debate before the elections by stressing that Muluzi, a Muslim and Yao from the Southern Region, had two vice-presidents in the party: Justin Malewezi, a Chewa from the Central Region, and Aleke Banda, a Tonga fluent in Chitumbuka from the Northern Region – both, moreover, Christians. Most villagers in the southern margin of Dedza District, like many others in the Central and Northern Regions, remained unimpressed, feeling marginalised by the uneven distribution of wealth in the country. For many villagers in his constituency, Tembo's own identity as a Christian surpassed the fact that he was a Presbyterian and not a Catholic. The confrontation with the Catholic Church, it seemed, had become obsolete.

Significantly, the confrontation was still fresh in the memory of certain other villagers. This becomes especially clear if contrasting

patterns of political support in the area are investigated. In virtually every village the UDF could get at least a handful of votes for diverse personal and political reasons, but particularly interesting was the case of one village, known here as Chintali. Although the village is relatively small and compact, its religious and ethnic homogeneity is not unusual in the area. Like Chintali, most villages consist of Catholic Ngoni, while in some villages Chewa, Presbyterian and independent Christian identities complicate the apparent homogeneity. Given the strong tradition of Catholicism in Chintali village, it was not surprising that its villagers were among the most enthusiastic supporters of multipartism in the 1993 referendum. More surprising, in the context of their fellow Catholics' disillusion, is Chintali villagers' continuing support for the UDF and President Muluzi. Women in the village do not feel inhibited to wear the UDF's yellow waistcloths, and the general sentiment in the village on the eve of the 1999 elections was to vote for the UDF candidate.

No obvious material reasons accounted for this pattern of political support. The village could not claim links to any important UDF personality, nor had it benefited from the UDF era more than other villages. In the mid-1990s, food shortages were as acute there as elsewhere. The distinctiveness of the village in political allegiances must be understood historically, as a process in which villagers' Catholicism, and thereby their support for the UDF, has gained a particular flavour in relation to their neighbours.

Kabudula, a village adjacent to Chintali, has long been central to Chintali villagers' definition of themselves as Catholics. Strolling along a dust road which has a thick concentration of houses on both sides, a casual passer-by would regard the two villages as one. In fact, Kabudula and Chintali are under different village headmen, and their differences became further etched by Christian missions in the early twentieth century. The headman of Kabudula did not join the other headmen who, encouraged by Catholic missionaries, demanded that the colonial government allow a Catholic mission station in their area. Soon thereafter Kabudula became a Presbyterian enclave surrounded by Catholic villages. The two Christian identities continue to present real obstacles to intermarriage, and the relatively large size of Kabudula's population has long permitted village endogamy among Presbyterians. Although intermarriages between Kabudula and Chintali villagers do take place, either one of the couple must change his or her denomination for them to have a Christian wedding ceremony.

Through its projects of ‘development’ (*chitukuko*), the postcolonial state has contributed to this polarisation of the two villages and their Christian identities. During the Banda era, the villages chose differently when they were offered projects. Kabudula opted for a primary school in the village, while Chimtali preferred agricultural projects. Despite a few slightly better-off smallholders in Chimtali, the villages continue to resemble one another in their poor material standards and a large number of smallholders who are vulnerable to food shortages. Kabudula’s primary school has had the same operational problems as other government schools, including the recent influx of schoolchildren after the UDF government made primary education free. Tellingly, when funds for extending the school building were made available in 1999, Chimtali villagers, in a pattern familiar from earlier attempts to make the two villages cooperate in development, refused to participate in making bricks. They argued that most of their children studied in another school in a nearby village and that the extension to the school was entirely Kabudula villagers’ own problem. The nearby village where children from Chimtali studied was a Catholic one.

Multipartyism occasioned much less enthusiasm in Kabudula than in most other villages, and it was evident that many in Kabudula voted for the one-party government in the 1993 referendum. The Presbyterians there were under the Nkhoma Synod which had recently received substantial financial support from Banda, and which never joined the other Synods in their calls for multiparty democracy. Kabudula was unusual among the villages surrounding the parish also in that a branch of the male secret society *gule wamkulu* (also known as *nyau*) maintained a presence in the village. Its masked characters had been used for entertainment and intimidation by the Banda regime to such an extent that most Christians in the area – Catholics and Presbyterians alike – viewed the secret society as an extension of the regime. The attitude to multipartyism became, therefore, another point of cleavage between Kabudula and Chimtali villages, and both Presbyterians and *gule wamkulu* members, while hardly in alliance with one another, had an inclination towards the status quo. After Banda had conceded his defeat on the radio, Chimtali villagers’ jubilant mood turned against Kabudula villagers. Under cover of darkness, some youths showered stones on the iron roofs of elders who were known to occupy important positions in both the CCAP and the MCP.

The tension between Kabudula and Chimtali villagers is an example of intensifying identity politics which emerged with little ‘objective’ cause, and which is now fuelled by the post-transition emphasis on



political difference. However, the arguments between Kabudula and Chimtali villagers rarely indicate the kind of selfhood that underlies much current discourse on human rights in Malawi.

Chimtali villagers swear that they will never forget the threat by some MCP leaders to kill the bishops in 1992. The unity villagers experience with their bishops grows out of the associational life that characterises their Catholicism. A multitude of small groups touch upon virtually every Catholic's life in the area. The groups, which are largely independent of the parish, regularly hear sermons by their officials and engage in various devotional practices, such as the recitation of the Holy Rosary. The most common groups are Limana, the most encompassing of all, and the women's groups Azimayi Achikatolika (the Catholic Women) and Legio (the Legion of Mary). Integral to the spiritual work of these groups are more mundane tasks, such as assistance for members who fall ill or have funerals (see Englund 1996: 123).

It is in meeting such practical and spiritual challenges that villagers' Catholicism becomes an irreducible aspect of their selves. By thus conjoining them into one moral community, villagers' Catholicism extends to all levels of the Catholic hierarchy, as their interest in Malawi's bishops and the pope attests. In this regard, Chimtali villagers experienced the threat to kill the bishops as an attack on themselves, on their own bodies, not as a violation of an abstract individual's right to life.

The figure of John Tembo is subject to a similar notion of selfhood. Despite their apparently irreconcilable political differences, both Kabudula and Chimtali villagers view themselves as Tembo's subjects. He has supported the headmen in both villages with money and gifts such as bicycles, and most villagers have attended his meetings on several occasions. Recalling the agricultural estates and other wealth he was able to amass during the Banda era, villagers believe that he is immensely rich, an impression which he appears to encourage by distributing cash among the local women who dance during his meetings, and by donating funds for local development projects. Kabudula and Chimtali villagers agree on the necessity for such a Big Man to be in government in order to bring large-scale development (*chitukuko*) to the area.

Chimtali villagers' reluctance to vote for Tembo arose, however, from their suspicion towards the MCP, while the UDF government had discredited itself in the eyes of many Kabudula villagers. Particularly telling was the rather unlikely 'secret' (*chinsinsi*) which some Chimtali

villagers claimed to know. Tembo, villagers said, would be Muluzi's successor as the UDF president and thereby also the next state president. Ignoring Tembo's own pride in being a staunch MCP supporter, villagers found evidence for this secret in his alleged discontent with the alliance which the MCP had formed with another opposition party. Although they would not admit it to Kabudula villagers, Chimtali villagers preferred Tembo to Muluzi as the state president. Their 'secret' indicated, therefore, a widespread desire to make the government their own by having as the state president a man whose subjects they had been all along.

The autonomous individuals of liberal democracy, by contrast, were notably absent in Kabudula and Chimtali villagers' political arguments on the eve of the post-transition multiparty elections in 1999. While some rejected the current ruling party as un-Christian, others cultivated the memory of the old ruling party's confrontation with the Catholic Church. Their reasons for doing so were not so much consequences of primordial religious identities as of the highly localised process by which the two villages had become polarised. Villagers' trust in one Big Man made them more united than they thought, however impossible it seemed to reconcile the two parties they had become associated with.

#### PENTECOSTALISM AND THE PRESIDENTIAL PRAYER BREAKFAST

In Malawi, pentecostal churches have, until recently, played a much less visible public role than the Catholic Church and many other mainline churches. Because of their relatively weak interest in development projects such as building clinics and schools other than bible colleges, pentecostal churches may easily be seen as conservative forces in society. In the early 1990s, for example, a study of American pentecostal and charismatic evangelists in southern Africa warned of a 'New Right' threat to liberation and justice (see Gifford 1991). During the Malawian transition, the conduct of pentecostal pastors and missionaries would not have warranted such a warning, and their interventions in politics continue to be rare. One exception is pastor Thaulo Phiri from the Voice of Pentecostal Association and Pastors Fraternity who contributes partisan commentaries to the MCP's *Daily Times*. Although his movement's name would suggest otherwise, he has no extensive pentecostal constituency to support his views.

At the same time, in Malawi as in many other African countries, the rapid growth of pentecostal churches during the 1990s inevitably has

consequences for political life. The ‘reciprocal assimilation of élites’ (cf. Bayart 1993: 150–179) looms large, for example, in Zimbabwe, where Archbishop Ezekiel Guti’s Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa has attracted the interest of the state and business elites (see Maxwell 2000). In Malawi, where no top politician has yet attributed political import to his or her identity as a born-again Christian, a broad coalition of the pentecostal elite was able to organise a rare high-profile meeting between the five presidential candidates a month before the general elections in 1999. The event, held at the New State House in Lilongwe, was called the Presidential Prayer Breakfast (hereafter PPB). The incumbent president and vice-president joined the other presidential candidates, with several cabinet ministers and diplomats also present, to participate in an event which highlighted a non-partisan pentecostal approach to politics.<sup>8</sup>

Because the organising committee of the PPB had representatives from various pentecostal churches, it could not be dismissed as a publicity exercise by a particular pastor. Its co-ordinator, Pastor Madalitso Mbewe, also the founder of the Pentecostal Revival Crusade Ministries, was on several occasions saluted as the one who first conceived the idea of this event. However, the other leaders in the organising committee, Lazarus Chakwera, the General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God, and Stephen Lungu, the Malawi Team Leader of the African Evangelical Enterprise, prevented the public from focusing too exclusively on Mbewe’s person and ministry. Moreover, it was Lungu who delivered the main sermon, and three others pastors led the prayers. World Vision International, an NGO which is associated with evangelical Christianity, was another important actor in broadening the organising coalition by providing the bulk of funding for the event. The clergy was in control throughout the ceremony and allowed President Muluzi to be the only politician who spoke publicly. His speech was a brief expression of gratitude to the organisers.

Only three days before the PPB, the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) had organised a prayer ceremony at a Lilongwe stadium, also attended by the presidential candidates. The organisers of the PPB were at pains to distinguish their function from the PAC event. They observed that unlike during the PAC event, where only pastors from mainline churches led prayers, the PPB not only made the presidential candidates pray but also engaged them in ritual action. Eating assumed special significance on this occasion. ‘In our villages’, Mbewe observed in his opening address, ‘elders come together to discuss and

eat a meal together.’ A common meal, in this case a first-class brunch, put into practice what the organisers saw as the central themes of the PPB – ‘reconciliation’ and ‘forgiveness’. The presidential candidates were seen to share ‘one plate’ (*mbale imodzi*), and, as Mbewe pointed out, through them all Malawians had come ‘corporately together as a nation’. Because the presidential candidates were understood to embody their supporters in their persons, the meal they shared reconciled their various constituencies. The bread and the word became one, because, as Mbewe remarked, ‘if we speak to the leaders the word of God, then the whole nation will be touched, because the leaders will take the message to the people’.

Over and over, during the function and in interviews before and after it, the organisers emphasised that their coalition was not a human rights organisation. They were, rather, concerned about the lack of unity in the country. Division and hatred were problems which could not be solved simply through ‘human effort’, they argued, but the need was for more ‘spirituality’. Just as the meal and the word of God made all Malawians one, the purpose was, according to Mbewe, to ‘enhance fellowship amongst us. We shall be built up in Christ. We are all one in Christ.’ As mentioned, despite the reported hostility of pentecostal Christians against cultural traditions and personal pasts elsewhere in Africa (see Meyer 1998), this purpose was wholly compatible with appeals for the ways in which village elders pursue reconciliation and forgiveness. A journalist reporting the event for the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation was inspired to see the PPB as an example of ‘our ancient Malawian custom’ (*mwambo wathu wa chimalawi wa kalekale*).

There was little in the presidential candidates’ and other top politicians’ conduct after the PPB to suggest that they actually attempted to implement what they had been taught. No reference was made to the pentecostal pastors’ teachings when intense disputes arose following the declaration of the 1999 elections results. More important than politicians’ actual conduct was, however, the fact that the PPB was able to deflect the public attention, if only momentarily, from the apparently entrenched divisions to the idea of all Malawians as one corporate body. It is revealing that this was achieved by an explicit denial of human rights as the central issue of the event. The denial represented an insightful understanding of what human rights had come to stand for in post-transition Malawi. In their critique of disunity and hatred the pentecostal pastors made corporeal and spiritual unity indivisible, only obfuscated by the current emphasis on abstract individuals and groups as bearers of rights.

## THE POLITICS OF TOWNSHIP PENTECOSTALISM

A more critical perspective into the PPB would view the event as futile precisely because the political elite failed to change its conduct. Even more, the idea of unity in the pentecostal pastors' discourse could be seen to be as insensitive to power relations as is the appeal to the abstract individual in the human rights discourse. In this perspective, it is ironical that the pentecostal pastors should desire to see the political elite eating together. Is not, after all, 'eating' a key metaphor for neopatrimonial politics in which the elite always end up with a fuller stomach than their subjects?

Although such a critique should not obscure the way in which the PPB may have enriched public debates, it does raise the question as to how these pentecostal insights are experienced in actual practice. Just as in my previous discussion of the Catholic Church, this requires analysis based on fieldwork among specific congregations. One perspective into pentecostalism as lived practice can be gained in Chinsapo township, some 5 miles from the Old Town of Lilongwe, the site of my fieldwork in 1996–97 and 1999. It is one of the fastest growing townships in the capital city, attracting especially self-employed entrepreneurs, labourers and low-ranking civil servants from all the districts of Malawi. While the city and central government authorities regard its residents as 'squatters' who lack a legal title to the land they occupy, UNICEF and the World Bank, among others, have established communal water points and primary schools in the township from the early 1990s onwards. The living standards, however, remain rural for most residents, who often supplement their meagre urban incomes with cultivation in their villages of origin.

Pentecostalism appears to attract converts at the expense of mainline mission churches, a state of affairs frequently commented upon by township residents. The prominent buildings of the Assemblies of God, Pentecostal Holiness Church and the Apostolic Faith Mission contrast with the humbler huts and houses of several independent pentecostal churches, and new congregations are established when existing congregations split. A close study of such processes, and the ways in which congregational life is maintained, indicates how spirituality and mundane experiences are entwined among pentecostal Christians in the township. In their personal experiences, the emphasis on the 'second birth', on a rupture in the person's life-history, encourages not so much individualism as the realisation of specific moral sentiments in the practice of everyday life.

A part of pentecostalism's appeal among township residents undoubtedly lies in the relative absence of hierarchy in congregational life. Glossolalia – the 'gift' of speaking in tongues – is one example of the conviction that pastors and other leaders have only a limited capacity to know their flock's concerns and that, therefore, everyone must be allowed to pray aloud in public. Quite apart from the importance of spirituality, the congregational life among pentecostal Christians contributes to a secular 'civic culture' through accountable leadership and associational life (cf. von Doepp 1998: 124–5). The management of congregations and churches is an inclusive process, with youths and women often performing important tasks, and the latter also becoming pastors in some pentecostal churches. Each congregation is managed by a committee which meets regularly and whose members occupy various 'offices' (*maudindo*). Persons are elected into these offices for two or three years by a procedure in which ballot papers are used with those who can write, while those who cannot are asked to close their eyes and raise their hands for their favourite candidate.

The associational life of township congregations extends far beyond the confines of the township itself, because American, European and Brazilian missionaries, who invariably reside outside the township, link them to transnational networks. Pastors who cannot afford electricity in their own houses have access to electronic mail and fax machines in their missionaries' residences. When new branches of their churches are opened in neighbouring countries, pentecostal Christians from the township accompany missionaries to these celebrations of transnational togetherness. Although such transnational connections may also be used to marginalise others in a congregation (see Englund 2000b), the pentecostal associational life, whether local or transnational, often represents an avenue to well-being and prestige which is wholly distinct from party politics and NGOs.

This avenue is paved with spiritual and moral demands on the ways in which persons conduct themselves. As the themes in the PPB indicated, rather than being concerned with individual traits, pentecostal Christians' views on personal conduct assess the extent to which the person is under the influence of the Holy Spirit. In Chinsapo township, such assessments are continuous, prompted by the ever-present possibility of Satanic influence even in the most pious born-again, and pastors who lead congregations come under the most explicit surveillance. Healing (*machiritso*), through prayers and the laying-on of hands, is often pastors' major preoccupation. A pastor who

is thought to be an inefficient healer rapidly invites subversive comments from his congregation. When a pastor is seen to fail as a healer on several occasions, suspicions often arise that he or she is infilled with Satanic powers rather than the Holy Spirit. In one case, a township congregation evicted their pastor by hiring a lorry when he was attending a funeral in his district of origin and removed his belongings to the headquarters of the church elsewhere in the city. Neither success nor failure in healing are understood to be dependent on an individual's skill. In order to avoid backbiting, pastors who are successful healers must appear humble and stress that their power to heal derives from the Holy Spirit and that the gifts they receive in recognition of their achievements are directed to God. Whether a success or a failure, the pastor never appears as an autonomous individual abstracted from a specific spiritual and moral condition.

Subversive discourse may also lead disgruntled Christians to found independent churches. The networks of spiritual and material support are thus constantly in the making, moulded by arguments over moral being. By contrast, in their comments on party and state politics, Chinsapo's pentecostal Christians often profess indifference. Troubled by the rumours that President Muluzi wanted to turn the country into an Islamic state, some of them did vote in the 1999 general elections. Many procedures of political life which are available to them as citizens, however, evoke their scepticism. Not only do they subscribe to the connotation of the Chichewa word for politics, *ndale*, as cunning, they also dismiss the need for 'civic education'. What is taught in civic education is, they argue, intrinsic to their pentecostalism. No true born-again Christian tells lies, behaves in a violent manner, or is motivated by greed. Some even condemn the practice of voting, because, they say, if one's own candidate loses, the defeat will continue to nag oneself even against one's best intentions. According to this pentecostal understanding, partisanship in politics affects the 'whole body' (*thupi lonse*) and stifles the Holy Spirit in the person.



By criticising the practice of voting in multiparty elections, pentecostal Christians would seem to attack the very foundations of democratic governance. Although their views appear incompatible with the struggle for human rights in a country emerging from a long period of autocratic rule, this article has resisted an easy dismissal of those views. Both pentecostal Christians in a township and lay Catholics in a rural parish enter into moral arguments with notions which are not readily



comprehensible within the ‘human rights talk’. Crucial to those notions is the tacit emphasis on humanity and selfhood as a condition which is acquired through specific actions and experiences. For the pentecostal and Catholic Christians referred to in this article, those experiences are often spiritual, but their emphasis on ‘growth’ in the course of a life cycle resonates with observations in other African ethnographies (see Riesman 1986).

Such a view of humanity will continue to pose problems to those who try to fit it into the human rights framework. The pentecostal perspective on voting described above, for example, contrasts sharply with the Catholic elite’s understanding of voting as a ‘birthright’. Seen from the human rights framework, there is cause for some alarm when Christians appear to be leaving mainline churches in order to join pentecostal and other ‘faith gospel’ denominations (Gifford 1998: 329–33). They seem to undermine the efforts by mainline churches to promote ‘development’ through projects in health and education. The Catholic elite, in particular, may be bewildered to realise that its attempt to move ‘closer’ to society actually alienates it from lay Christians’ concerns. In the human rights framework, those concerns indicate an undesirable shift from this-worldly political and economic problems to a preoccupation with spirituality and personal cleansing.

If the current tendency indeed represented a wholesale rejection of the ‘human rights talk’, this article would add its voice to those which lament the reversal of democratic achievements. Two observations undermine, however, such a dramatic conclusion. First, this article has insisted on an appreciation of the true pluralism of moral ideas in contemporary African settings. The fact that there are different ideas of humanity is compatible with the possibility that the same person can utilise all of them in different situations. Second, far from entailing consensus between the elite and the populace in ‘patrimonial politics’ (see Chabal & Daloz 1999), the ideas of spiritual and corporeal unity which this article has described contain their own tools for an effective critique of power. The need to resist the dead hand of human rights can be translated into a call for understanding complexity. Those who promote more ‘civic education’ as a response to alternative approaches to politics may themselves have a lesson to learn.

#### NOTES

1. For different senses in which democracy may be ‘consolidated’, see Bratton & van de Walle (1997: 234–7). These authors draw attention to the importance of maintaining civil and political rights also during the period between elections.

2. See e.g. ‘Effectiveness of Local NGOs Come Under Public Scrutiny’, *The Weekly Chronicle*, 3–10 August, 1998; ‘Civic Education Suffers as NGOs Attend Meets’, *Weekend Nation*, 15–16 May

1999; 'NGOs Fail to Teach' and 'NGOs Should Have Done Much Better', *The Nation*, 21 May 1999.

3. In fairness to the Consortium it must be stated that it has been able to launch a few of its many innovative ideas, such as a music cassette on the importance of voting by, among others, Malawi's leading popular musician Lucius Banda, himself a Catholic whose songs have shifted from spiritual themes to political issues after the transition. On the other hand, the Consortium's failure to create lively political debate on the radio had a great deal to do with the bias of the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation towards the UDF.

4. The Malawian Catholic bishops' pastoral letters have been printed by Montfort Media in Balaka and have been available on the internet.

5. See e.g. the booklet *Akhristu mu ndale* (Balaka: Montfort Missionaries, 1997).

6. As stated, for example, at the end of the Episcopal Conference, 25–29 January 1999, in 'Walking Together in Faith, Hope and Love: A Statement from the Episcopal Conference of Malawi to Priests, Men and Women Religious, Catechists, All Pastoral Workers, the Laity and People of Good Will'.

7. During the extraordinary meeting of the national executive of the MCP, the party leaders and activists became increasingly outspoken in their criticism of the bishops, and some even suggested their killing. See Lwanda (1996: 106–7) and Schoffeleers (1999: 131–6).

8. The MCP presidential candidate Gwanda Chakuamba had been taken ill and was represented by his running mate Chakufwa Chihana. Incidentally, Chakuamba, a Seventh-Day Adventist, had the closest links to the kind of Christianity promoted at the PPB. However, his specific Christian identity was not an issue during the election campaign. My account of the PPB is based on the direct broadcast of the event by the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation on 18 May 1999, and on newspaper reports, such as 'The Last "Supper"', *Weekend Nation*, 15–16 May 1999; 'A Prayer for Peace', *Weekend Nation*, 22–23 May 1999.

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