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Why are we here? Existentialism in local Malawian lore

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Abstract
The relationship between Africa and China is certainly gaining traction at the moment, and with this development it becomes imperative to examine the various facets that constitute what may arguably be Africa's most important relationship of the 21st Century. One facet among the many is that of inter-racialism. China's large-escale direct contact with Blacks is a relatively recent occurrence, certainly not long enough for the Chinese to have formed their own definitive independent opinion of the Black race. However, as a result of China's increasing exposure to the Western world, this exposure comes with the baggage of centuries of Western denigration of Blacks through various kinds of media – satellite tv, social media, magazines, newspapers, etc. that seek to exclude Blacks from the polity of human civilisations. According to Western measures of civilisation, the trajectory of civilisation has been the progression from pre-modernism (uncivilised), through modernism (Enlightenment), to post-modernism, this last being widely viewed as civilisation's apogee. A definitive precursor to the post-modern condition, and which also came to define its fervour and texture, is a branch of philosophy called "Existentialism". Adopting a post-colonial stance, and taking up the West on their offer of the trajectory of human civilisation, though clearly not the only one, what forms the core argument of the paper is that, as demonstrated by analyses of the local lores themselves, since time immemorial, Blacks, generally, and Malawians, in particular, have been capable of achieving such vaunted forms of introspection – and more.

Keywords
Malawians,
Blacks,
West(ern),
Stereotype,
Civilisation,
Existentialism

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I KNOW MOONRISE (African-American spiritual)

I know moonrise, I know star-rise,

Lay dis body down,

I walk in de moonlight, I walk in the star-light,

To lay dis body down,

I'll walk in de graveyard, I'll walk through the graveyard,

To lay dis body down,

I will lie in de grave and stretch out my hands,

Lay dis body down,

I go to de judgement in de evening of the day

When I lay dis body down,

And my soul and your soul will meet in de day,

When I lay dis body down.

Introduction

In the eyes of post-modern Western Europe, existentialism is, arguably, the epitome of what a civilised consciousness should look like. In a nutshell, the existential subject is an individual who is highly self-conscious, who carries the weight of the/his/her world on his or her shoulders in the mode of 'the burden of consciousness' – for some, even solipsistically so. Existentialism was a precursor to what came to be known as a full-blown post-Modernism, fundamentally defining the fervour and texture of post-War Europe. And, according to Western measures of civilisation, the trajectory of this phenomenon has been the progression from pre-modernism (uncivilised) through modernism (Enlightenment) to post-modernism, this last as civilisation's apogee. The major proponents of this philosophy in Western letters are Soren Kierkegaard (1843 &1844), Jean-Paul Sartre (1943), and Martin Heidegger (1956). Before them Aristotle (335-23BC/1992) in

The Politics, and the ancient Greeks, generally, had also attempted to outline what a state of civilisation should look like. And, for the Greeks, civilisation was more a matter of natural endowment than a product of socialisation.

The discussion that follows reflects upon what an existential outlook comprises and how such an outlook is applicable to Blacks, generally, and Malawians in particular. Overall, I observe that a significant portion of Malawian lore exhibits an existentialist outlook. Given that existentialism is a mark of civilisation among Westerners, a civilised mindset is, therefore, not a preserve of the postmodern Western European man or woman as is traditionally claimed by the West. An accompanying observation to the main one is that civilisation is not a wholly collective phenomenon, but an individual one, demanding individual effort and application, such that we find civilised and barbarous individuals across all the racial divides – without exception. Perhaps the most important aspect of this paper is the observation that the materials under discussion were generated by those known as 'Malawians' and who, with the exception of Mike Kamwendo, also happen to be 'ordinary' and regular folk, for the most part, who have not been through the corridors of the higher academy. This occurrence suggests that existentialist forms can obtain among all peoples, without exception, be it indigenously or adoptively and adaptively, but certainly authentically so and not just in a hackneyed or second-hand way. The choice of Malawian lore in this paper is out of convenience since that is the lore the author is most familiar with. Indeed, it will be enlightening to study local lore from different peoples all across Black Africa to see whether or not such forms and orientations also obtain among them.

Although existentialism is the main theoretical anchorage for this paper, it also adopts postcolonial orientation in its analysis. As a general rule, postcolonialism resists the assumptions that undergirded the colonial enterprise in which the colonising powers viewed those they colonised not just as less civilised than themselves, but more often than not, as savages who were incapable of civilisation at all (Ashcroft et al.1989). As such this paper is accordingly a call to

the larger world to take a different and much more serious civilisational look at the Blacks of the African continent, and Blacks anywhere in the world.

Further, the existentialist orientation in the lore under study in this paper is not just a random or one-off instance; it has been pursued consistently by the majority of the artists whose work is under analysis in this paper. Indeed, throughout this paper, the pathos or poignancy being referred to in the pieces under discussion is not of the vacuous and vapid kind; rather it has depth and sublimity, even visceral.

In this regard, the epigraph of this paper which dates back most likely to the 15th or 16th century, captures one of the most extreme existentialist moments of what is generally known as 'the dark night of the soul' (cf. St. John of the Cross), an extreme state of mind hovering between hope and despair: I'll walk in de graveyard, I'll walk through the graveyard, /To lay dis body down,/I will lie in de grave and stretch out my hands,/Lay dis body down. This song by an enslaved African contains a graphic existentialist poise, underpinned by remarkable, deeply reflective, and truly uncommon poignancy. Indeed, we may be accustomed to meditating upon death, but rarely do we envision our own death in the personal and singular terms as described here: "I will lie in de grave and stretch out my hands". What we have in the song is as much a stoic and heroic poise as it is an indictment against those who will have pushed this persona to such an extreme reflection on matters of life and death.

The paper starts by noting the well-known global racist prejudices against Blacks and how these are tied to the ideas of civilisation and barbarism. It then defines what is meant by civilisation and how this phenomenon is tied to matters of the development of consciousness and, especially, of self-consciousness – with existentialism singled out for especial treatment. The paper then analyses a number of pieces of lore by indigenous Malawians to illustrate the foregoing debate before it concludes the argument, reiteratively, that some sections of humanity have all along used wrong yardsticks in measuring the civilisation of entire peoples and individuals basing on their race.

Global Racial prejudice against Blacks

As noted above, China's large-scale direct contact with Blacks is a relatively recent occurrence, certainly not long enough for the Chinese to have formed their own definitive independent opinion of the Black race. But the lack of significant infrastructural and industrial development on the continent, especially, must be leaving the Chinese asking questions about the civilizational abilities and capabilities of the peoples of the African continent. In search of possible quick answers to the seeming puzzle, the regular Chinese person gets tempted to fall back on the stock-in-trade explanations from the West, namely that Blacks are quintessentially incapable of any form of civilisation whatsoever, let alone of the highest degrees – the outrage that followed revelations that a Chinese national, Lu Ke, popularly named Susu, was shooting racist videos in Lilongwe in which, under the guise of teaching children the Chinese language, he was in fact making them repeat statements to the effect that Blacks have very low IQs is a case among many in point (Jegwa, Peter: 2023). Indeed, one only has to do an online search of Chinese racism against Blacks to get a fuller picture of the problem, even while adjusting for possible propaganda against China. Therefore, such reported Chinese racism can properly be termed 'learned racism'. As a result of China's increasing exposure to the Western world, what the Chinese need to be made aware of is that this exposure comes with the baggage of centuries of Western denigration of Blacks through various kinds of media – satellite tv, social media, magazines, newspapers, etc. For a more balanced view of Blacks, and in the interest of cordial relations between China and Africa, the latter certainly needs to save itself from the corrosive Western influences alluded to above because most of these assumptions stem from well-worn stereotypes that are at least seven centuries old, stereotypes that seek to exclude Blacks from the polity of human civilisations.

Existentialism

As a formal philosophy, Existentialism concerns itself, broadly, with reflections on what it is for humans to exist – characterised by the difference

between a state called 'living' and that called 'existing': i.e. living is what all things that are alive do, while existing is possible only to 'human beings, especially those human beings who have closely examined or reflected on what it means to be alive. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1967) puts the matter as follows:

> In nontechnical language, anything actually may be said to exist, whether it be a man or a fish or a stone, but in the sense with which [philosophers] are concerned it is primarily human beings who are said to have "existence". The word is then used to emphasize the claim that each individual person is unique and inexplicable in terms of any metaphysical or scientific system; that he is a being who chooses as well as a being who thinks or contemplates; that he is free and that, because he is free, he suffers; and that since his future depends in part upon his free choices it is not altogether predictable…. [B]ut the thought of how much depends on our decision[s] makes our freedom a source of anguish for we cannot know with any certainty what will come of us. (964)

One of the fundamental questions in existentialism concerns why we exist: we seem to be indeed here, but, why are we here and how should we go about being here? The more caustic and cynical, if not despondent, formulation of this question would go something like: we are here, yes, but, why are we here *at all*? To the existentialists, all of meaningful existence could be said to revolve around individually working out answers to these ultimate and potentially grim and dour questions.

On a more positive note, however, existentialism's core is the notion of 'agency' and authenticity: i.e. the ability and freedom (or even burden) of independent choice, and being responsible for the consequences or outcomes of one's choices. This aspect of the existentialist worldview goes something like 'life is what *you* make' which comprises the ability to decisively shape one's outer and inner natures or worlds, and as authentically so as possible.

Although the existentialist tenet called 'choice' is dubbed as 'freedom', it nonetheless comes with a huge responsibility – hence the 'burden' angle to it. Accordingly, the weighty demands of this freedom/burden of choice very often result into a sense of angst, poignancy, pathos, nausea (Sartre), *ennui*, alienation, absurdity/meaninglessness, futility, dread (Kierkegaard), precarity, anomie, despondency even, etc. In 1893 the much adored and shared painting entitled "The scream" by Edvard Munch epitomized this worldview for 19th Century Europe. It was as if Munch had somehow foreseen all the disenchantment that was going to come and take over Europe following the two World Wars in the 20th Century, and beyond.

Interestingly, however, the existentialist poise has been around since much earlier than the 19th Century, one can find it in the biblical books of Ecclesiastes (300 BC), Job (700-500BC), and others which predate European existentialism by the widest of time margins. One can also find this philosophy in numerous African and Malawian proverbs, which are, presumably, several millennia old. These facts of this worldview pre-existing its formal naming as existentialism beg the question of whether the hype around Existentialism as the apogee of 19th Century European philosophy is justified, coming across as it does as a presumptuous latecomer to this very old and almost global intellectual feast. Even the cynics of ancient Greece such as Diogenes (413-323BC) could qualify as existentialists of a sort.

Further, it may be queried if an existentialist poise really is the epitome of a civilised state of self-consciousness. The answer to this query is both 'yes' and 'no'. In so far as it sheds light on the need to examine one's condition of existence, existentialism forms the highest aim of life as captured in the popular Socratian dictum 'an unexamined life is not worth living'. But when it veers towards a view of the human condition as 'entrapment' and 'burdensome', as it often tends to do, existentialism seems to be anti-civilisation altogether. Its glorification of alienation, ennui, angst, nausea, dread, absurdity/meaninglessness, emptiness, futility, etc. strikes one as morbid, to say the least. And so all this leaves us conflicted on

whether to use it as the best example of what it means to be civilised, overall and without qualification.

Black Malawian forms of existentialism

This paper alludes to a diverse range of Black African art forms, with a special focus on Malawian art forms such as proverbs and other sayings, and songs (Mike Kamwendo, Billy Kaunda, Alan Namoko, Lucky Stars, Diamond Kudzala, Kalimba, Gidess Chalamanda, etc), all composed along the lines of existentialism. The overall objective is to demonstrate that, since time immemorial, like peoples of other races, Blacks too, generally, and Malawians, in particular, have been capable of such vaunted forms of introspection - and more.

In this regard, proverbs are especially a prime example of the application of an observant and synthesising mind – and Blacks have a proliferation of these lores, decisively attesting to their civilisational capabilities and propensity. Indeed, the African philosophy halls of fame are lined up with Black luminaries (and also the occasional fair-minded Whites) who have sought to give voice to the indigenous worldviews by revealing the deep intellectual processes at work in them. Such figures include names like Alexis Kagame, Hountounji, Anta Diop, John Mbiti, Steve Biko, Ali Mazrui, Placide Tempels, Basil Davidson, and others.

Some of the items under scrutiny in this paper are syncretic, with exogenous resonances. Others are adaptations, but they have been carefully thought through and wholly embraced by those who exhibit them – adopted and adapted. Where incorporation of exogenous material exists, however, the adoptions seem to be more of ensuring validation through an appeal to already established and accepted lore rather than just idle mimesis. Even more interesting is that, with the exception of Mike Kamwendo, the subjects of my study are otherwise very regular/ordinary Malawian folk, for the most part, but who, despite being of Black racial extraction, and not that highly educated in the formal, Western sense, nevertheless display very high levels of self-consciousness, even of an existentialist type. What all this points to, and this is very important to bear in mind for anyone dealing with Blacks,

is that there are countless other Malawians, and Blacks generally, who have attained this level of self-consciousness. The only way to gauge this attainment is by a close engagement with them as individuals rather than summarily, in a stereotypical fashion, classifying them together with all the ill-focused, clumsy and sloppy ones. The prevalent existence of the proverb/idiom forms, especially, is a pointer to the fact that this phenomenon is very widespread among the indigenous peoples, even as groups. In fact, this observation, and recommendation on engagement, can be made about peoples of all other races. And, given the weight of the evidence that will be presented in this paper, the paper aims to address the doubters across all the racial divides, including the self-doubters among the Blacks themselves (cf. V.Y. Mudimbe), that an existentialist outlook is not the preserve of 19th Century Europe. In fact, this outlook is even much, much older than the latter-day European version of it.

Scholarship on Malawian Lore

To put my discussion into the broader Malawian perspective, it should be noted that studies of Malawian lore have been carried out from many different angles, and most have thrown very useful light on the Malawian peoples and their worldviews. Its material being closer to home, undergraduate students (whom I have supervised over the past years), especially, have used traditional lore as their favourite research haunt/beat, with varying degrees of success – expectedly, they being only undergraduates. On a more serious note, however, meriting special mention are studies such as Anthony Nazombe's groundbreaking 1983 study of modern Malawian poetry but which, he notes, was deeply rooted in traditional Malawian lore of various kinds. Also, studies by Steve Chimombo (1987), and a response to Chimombo by Mvula (1988) on Malawian humor. On the same subject, even more recently, Emmanuel Ngwira and Ken Lipenga Jnr (2018) published their rejoinder to Chimombo's and Mvula's postulations in which they explore the ways in which modern Malawian humor persists mostly in digital media and they note that it now largely tends towards national self-irony, of a deprecatory kind, at the country's expense. Earlier, Chimombo (1988) even attempted to come

up with an overarching theory of Malawian lore which he termed *Ulimbaso* which seeks to map out what Chimombo conceives to be the underlying sensibilities that govern indigenous artistry. Lipenga (2023:5) put out a book-long study of the Malawian rap scene. In his observation, although rap as a music genre has its origins among African Americans, Malawian youths have embraced it as an aspect of youth culture and use it to express what Lipenga terms their state of "waithood" – a deep disenchantment with being eternally stuck in state of waiting before they can assume leading socio-political-economic roles in society both local and national "… within a setup already known for its poverty". So, while the form is foreign the content is decidedly local. Chris Kamlongera, Boston Soko, Mike Nambote, and Enoch Timpunza-Mvula's (1992) study of Nyau and Vimbuza explored these lores from anthropological perspectives, in terms of the roles they play for the ethnic groups among which they are practiced. Fr. Claude Boucher (2012) does the same in his expansive study of Nyau. In the year 2000 Joseph Chaphazika Chakanza published a collection of proverbs he entitled *Wisdom of the People: 2000 Chinyanja Proverbs*. More recently, Witness Mdoka (2022) studied and affirmed the existence of an indigenous ecocritical consciousness in a varied range of Malawian lore encompassing folktales, songs, proverbs, etc. Also, Syned Mthatiwa (2020) has published on the Jando initiation songs of Muwawa village, Senior Chief Ngokwe in Machinga district of southern Malawi, on how these songs both embody, preserve and transmit the cultural values of their performers, authentically.

My paper, though on a shorter scale, and more eclectic compared to some of the long-established studies of Malawian lore as outlined above, takes a decidedly and specifically existentialist turn, to focus on some of the most trenchantly self-reflective pieces within Malawian traditional lore, specifically, while making occasional forays into Black lore, generally. This act of self-reflexivity that is existentialism, (i.e. of consciousness 'turning in upon itself' to become self-consciousness – see Rosenthal, 1993), rather than constituting a withdrawal from the external world in fact seeks to comment, and shine a light on what else is

possible 'out there' in the realm of human self-awareness – and often does so in a very stark and an uncommonly poignant fashion.

Existentialism in Malawian Proverbs

The proverb is the clearest evidence of indigenous intellectual and, often, moral application among any peoples (Finnegan,1970; Chakanza, 2000). Given to didacticism, the proverb may legitimately be said to be 'anti-existentialist' since existentialism advocates for an individual, if not also a singularly personal search for, and take on the meaning of life. Nevertheless, within their context, most proverbs contain observations whose force of intellect, almost approximating the axiomatic, cannot be ignored, neither by the individual nor by the collective.

Although often terse, with a reliance on induction for their production, proverb-development can be a lengthy and demanding process. Like in a scientific experiment, to ensure credibility, the experience that gives rise to a specific proverb has to be repeated several times, and be observed repeatedly, although, as with all knowledge derived inductively (scientific knowledge inclusive), changed circumstances could also torpedo the foundations of a particular proverb. As such, admittedly, while some proverbs contain 'eternal truths', typical of sage philosophy, generally, some demonstrate certain limits on the thinking of a people, at the material time of their derivation. This contextual, contingent and provisional aspect, however, is applicable to just about all knowledge, regardless of methods of its derivation. At the end of the day, we realise that, just as reality is always in a state of flux, so too is knowledge; it is contextual and contingent. A change in a variable or a set of variables leads to corresponding change in outcomes. As such, like in all epistemological endeavours, the best proverbs are those that display open-mindedness and open-endedness as these point to the capacity of a people for self-correction and future adaptation in the event of changed circumstances, or a discovery of new realities.

Although all proverbs are a demonstration of a civilised mindset and intellectual orientation, only those which have an expressly existentialist vein

have been selected for analysis in this paper. The proverbs selected for this paper, obtained mostly from Chakanza (2000) and open sources, will be discussed under several broad themes, namely those on alienation, the precarity and unpredictability of life (and the *angst* and *ennui* associated with these); facticity of life, finitude, finality and the anomie that these engender.

Since time immemorial, life has been observed to be unpredictable and, hence, precarious. This leads to a deep sense of uncertainty, dread, and general alienation from fellow human beings as well as from the universe at large: a feeling of *being in the world* but at the same time *not being a part of the world*. In this category are proverbs such as "chakudza sichiimba ng'oma"(misfortune does not forewarn one); "pofera salambula"(no one can tell where and in what circumstances they will meet their death); "papsya tong'ola sudziwa mtima wa moto"(seize the day!); "likaomba otheratu"(seize the day!); "wakufa sadziwika"(no one knows who will die first and when); "kunja kuli ngati ku mpheto, sikuchedwa kusintha/ sikupanganika"(the course of life is as unpredictable as the weather); "chaona mnzako chapita, mawa chilipa iwe"(misfortune can befall anyone), "chuma ndi mchira wa khoswe, suchedwa kupululuka"(wealth is slippery; it may not last forever), "ukakhala pabwino poyipa pamakutsata"(when living in comfort, be vigilant), "galu akati phethi, wataya nyama"(be vigilant and focused: if you snooze, you lose), "maso anyama ngofiira, sachedwa kutembenuka"(life is unpredictable), etc. all of which reflect this observation about the vicissitudes of life. These kinds of proverbs heighten self-consciousness and they enjoin those exposed to them to be in a state of 'ever-readiness' as they navigate through their journeys of life, with the readiness of a pilgrim, or of a military man/woman. The ultimate aim for all of this is to ensure that nothing whatsoever should ever shock the truly civilised man or woman; he or she should always be on top of his or her game and be ready for anything and everything, in season and out of season. In short, he or she should be a man or woman 'for all seasons'.

When it comes to proverbs that point out life's realities with a frankness and matter-of-factness, the point is to facilitate, not 'emotional numbing', but

rather an attitude of a sublime 'emotional dissociation'. Even finitude and finality should be faced head-on and be amply prepared for, materially as well as psychologically – and, maybe, also spiritually. As will be noted in the songs' section as well, the finest of Malawians have not shied away from reflecting on matters of finitude, finality, and precarity, and with a frankness and sometimes humour that are quite disarming. In this category are proverbs such as: "ndatsala madzi amodzi"(I am almost dead), "imfa sithawika (entrapment)", "imfa ilibe odi" (death does not first knock before coming in), "imfa siisankha, imatenga mkulu ndi mwana yemwe"(death does not choose whom to take. It comes to all and sundry), "mavuto saona nkhope"(misfortune can befall anyone), "zonse ndi moyo", (all else depends on being alive), "zonse ndinthawi" (time is the master of all and of everything), "chitsulo chinola chitsulo chinzake" (iron sharpens iron), "cholira njobvu idalira minyanga" (as you wish, so be it), "chakonda mnzako mlekere"(as you wish so be it), "chosatha n'chiani/palibe chosatha"(everything comes to an end), "chuma chimuka pa chuma chinzake"(wealth follows where there is wealth), "mfiti idzafanso"(even the witch or wizard will die), "m'mimba ndi mchipala"(a parent does not choose what sort of child to give birth to nor what such a child will turn out to be). Proverbs often have a story accompanying them, and as such, each one of these can be discussed at some length in its own right. For reasons of space, a collective analysis as presented above will do for the present paper. The songs, to which I now turn, will receive a fuller treatment, however.

Existentialism in Malawian Local Songs

The selection of the songs that are discussed in this section of the paper, mostly from the 1970s-90s, does not represent an exhaustive list of songs in this category in Malawi, there are a lot, lot more. However, in my view, those that have made it to this paper constitute some of the finest and sublime recorded examples of an existentialist orientation in Malawi to-date. For audio copies of the songs discussed in this paper the reader is advised to contact Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). Though unrelated to them, with the exception of a select few, the songs in this category share very close affinities with songs and forms from the

Black world from elsewhere around the world. For example, the African-American Spirituals, Blues, and, later, Jazz, all bear hallmarks of an existentialist orientation. The world over, Jazz is, in fact, considered to be among the greatest inventions by Blacks in the field of music, perhaps even on the same scale as opera and classical music in terms of complexity of instrument and depth of the imagination (see, for example, Gates Jr.1997: 55-57).

I would like to start this discussion with a focus on Diamond Kudzala's "Ndikakwela pa Phiri la Mulanje". Set in the geographical region of Mulanje and Phalombe, in the vicinity of the majestic Mulanje Mountain, this song is about a persona who has reached his 'wits end' following a battering from the vicissitudes of life: "Ndikakwera pa Phiri la Mulanje Ruo anditenge ine… Podziwa mavuto andichulukira ndipite ndikapume ine". The absence of specific and personal references to what kind of troubles he has encountered in his life points to the song attempting to be a generic statement about the general demands of life, thereby universalizing its experience and reach. Repetition-with-variation forms the core of its stylistic stance. And almost always, repetition serves at least two functions, namely to emphasise a point, and in poetry, and especially musical poetry, it serves to provide rhythm to the beat. In varying the repeated sections, the song seeks to eschew monotony and blandness.

Although on the surface this song appears to playfully highlight the geographies of the Ruo and Phalombe rivers as they come down from the majestic Mulanje Mountain to their respective destinations, namely Zambezi and Indian Ocean on the Mozambican side for the former, and Lake Chilwa in Zomba for the latter, the inclusion of the persona's troubled state of mind becomes apparent quite early on – and it is this that is of real interest to the subject matter of this paper. Accordingly, therefore, the analysis of this song centres on the sense of being 'set adrift', following a buffeting by the onslaughts of life, as it repeatedly says: "Podziwa mavuto andichulukira ndipite ndikapume ine".

The sense of alienation, *angst* and *ennui* is palpable in this song and is captured in the mode of 'a dark night of the soul' driven towards extreme despair. Feeling overwhelmed, the persona chooses to die – and although the choice of his course of action amounts to escapism, at least he makes a choice one way or the other, and thus exercises agency. The desire to 'fly away' rather than 'confront head on' is a common enough stance for extreme existentialist moments, though regarded as not among the strongest of stances because it is deemed 'cowardly'. A temporary tactical withdrawal, on the other hand, would garner a lot of praise because it guarantees continued engagement afterwards.

Further, the idea presented in this song, that of life generally as a burden, is quite central in existentialism where even the freedom of choice is sometimes viewed as the 'burden of choice', and the awareness of one's existence as the 'burden of consciousness'. Indeed, if it was up to us, most people would probably be more at home with choices being made for them and merely coasting through their journey of life – and quite a few in fact succumb to this temptation. This outcome can be attested to by those who underperform, way below their potential, or those who give up altogether and resign themselves to fate – the indolent, tramps, beggars, thieves, and the debauched, generally etc. Some instances of insanity, too, could be cases of the persons exhibiting them having been overwhelmed by the demands that life makes on the living, and in that case, insanity becomes an easier refuge from such demands. In fact, perpetual vigilance is the price to pay to maintain one's attainment of a heightened sense of self-consciousness without which vigilance the way down to the "base" is always an open option. Indeed, such descents or 'degenerations' to the 'base' are not altogether uncommon, and they could even be defended by some in the name of the existentialist's tenets of agency and "choice'. In the present song, the persona's sense of being set adrift is succinctly captured in the song's expression "beru-beru" which, in a graphic visual imagery, mirrors the waves of water cascading down the river, but this time carrying their burden or load of a surrendered 'soldier of life'. The persona's emphasis, however, is on the longing for 'rest'.

In my view, the song's real aesthetic appeal lies in its pastoral geographical references, and in the simplicity of their delineation. The majestic Mulanje mountain, and two of the many rivers that flow from it, form the bedrock of its immediate setting, with the Shire, Zambezi and Indian Ocean, as well as the Lake Chilwa Basin as their far-flung settings, thereby creating a wide geographical vista mirroring the panorama of life itself.

The next song I analyse is Mike Kamwendo's "Ndili ndekha" Set in a likely rural setting where communal living continues to thrive, Mike Kamwendo's song entitled "Ndili Ndekha" is about an elderly persona who, although quite popular with people in his youth, especially on account of his physical strength, has now in his old age been abandoned and forgotten by everyone. Not even something as basic as a greeting comes his way anymore. Human alienation from society, and from the universe generally, is quite a common theme in existentialist circles: the human being finds himself or herself thrown into an incomprehensible and often unfriendly universe in which he or she has to rely on his or her wit to stay afloat or risk falling under.

Mike Kamwendo and Allan Namoko have both touched on this unsettling aspect of human existence in their songs. Namoko's songs entitled "Nsambi" and "Abale mwandisambula" which will be discussed later, are of this same orientation. The personae in all three songs experience alienation from their communities and the consequent acute loneliness, but, to their credit, they also demonstrate a stoic acceptance of their condition. In Kamwendo's song, the societal alienation is on account of the persona's old age and dire poverty. Much as he appears to be stoical about all this, the uncommon pathos with which he puts this development across points to the deep hurt he feels at being so treated by a community that once adored him for his youthful vigour. This treacherous betrayal has made his consciousness turn in upon itself resulting into the existential stance expressed in this finely done song:

> Ndikamayenda munjira, ine ndili ndekha, ndilibe m'bale-e-e-e-e-e-!
>
> Nsanza nditavala, anthu onse nandiseka, nthawi zonse-e-e-e-e-e-e!

Ndingoti-i-i-i, ndingoti ine, palibe kanthu*2

Chatha chaka, haaa! Nditsiku limodzi palibe munthu, ngakhale m'modzi, wondipatsa ine moni!*2

Mo-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-ni-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-!

The drawing-out of the word "moni" (it is presented as "mo-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-ni!) at the end of the song underscores - in his view at least - the deep social and ontological injustice that this society has subjected this persona to. Indeed, even more generally, just about anywhere in the world, a greeting (moni), freely given and received, is the most basic form of acknowledging the being or existence of other person, and when it is withheld a lot is at stake. Such a withholding may even ignite an existential crisis in the one so unacknowledged as they would begin to wonder if they exist as substance at all; or if perhaps they have become a phantom because the moni is a clearest sign that you have been 'seen' or noticed. Most *bantu* greetings have this aspect of a reciprocal sense of seeing and being seen (i.e. saubona/sanbonani, monire, moni, etc). The English expression of 'sending regards' (which very likely derives from the French *regarde* for 'seeing') seems to be of a similar orientation (see Mfune, 2012: 79). The sense of anonymity prevalent in the Westernised African city is a prime example of how such spaces have led to a de-personalisation of the African. However, these attitudes are now fast spilling over even to the rural areas, causing alarm and disorientation among those subjected to them. What may be even more chilling for the rural setting, something which is not the case with the Westernised city, is that people there are being alienated by, and from those whom they otherwise personally know. The repetition with variation in this song is a characteristic stylistic device in most African compositions, resulting into the enhancement of rhythm/tone, emphasis, as well as ensuring variety.

Allan Namoko: Zonse ndimoyo

Zonse, zonse!*2/Zonse ndi moyo!/Zonse, zonse!/Zanga zonse,/Zonse ndi moyo!

This declarative and matter-of-fact song touches on an elemental reality of life, namely that all else whatsoever depends on one being and continuing to be alive. Indeed, even matters of 'legacy', as a mode of transcending one's finitude, depend on one having been alive at one point. That said, however, the song's greater intent seems to be to chide the greed and vapidity of some people who fight over material possessions as if their lives literally and solely depended on those: "Anzathu ali ndi moyo akanganila chuma, Zonse ndi moyo!" Indeed, what does it profit a man?! It could be argued that this song seeks to engender metaphysical reflections on what could be more fundamental than just a material existence.

Content and structure-wise, Namoko's song is quite pithy, almost haiku-like – and most of Namoko's songs tend to be of this sort. However, the song is rendered with such uncommon poignancy and virtuosity which aspects serve to fill it out. Its intimations of the inescapability of human finitude impart to it a depth known only to those who will have reconciled themselves to their own finitude: "Ife nthawi yathu ikadzakwana, Chauta akadzalora, tidzaonana". It is quite apparent in this and in other songs and sayings that Malawians have not shied away from reflecting on this ultimate aspect of existence, namely their eventual death, a reality they have readied themselves for and embraced with an almost unflinching stoicism.

Allan Namoko: "Ana Osiyidwa" and "Mwana wamasiye"

These two songs reflect on the plight of the orphan-child and how such a child is treated by those charged with his or her upbringing in the absence of his or her biological parents. Just about everywhere in the world a child is regarded as a symbol of 'innocence', 'absolute dependency' and 'malleability/impressionability'. This view is buttressed by the fact that, as children, they do not possess agency in their own right, and are at the mercy of their parents or caregivers. Indeed, not able to fend for themselves, the survival of a child is almost entirely in the hands of its caregivers – precisely the reason why child survival or mortality also serves as an important indicator of the development of the entire society or of a nation

as a whole. Not to properly look after the helpless of the helpless, such as young orphans, therefore, would rank a society very low on the human development index. And going by this reasoning, the neglect and suffering of any child anywhere on the globe should be a cause for concern to all responsible adults, beginning with those related to them and extending to all adults whomsoever and everywhere: Ana osiyidwawo, ana osiyidwa,/Ana osiyidwawo, Opanda mayi wawo,/Zoona kuwalera kwake m'matere?*2" That Namoko rose to his responsibility towards the orphaned child in this song, therefore, marks him as a truly civilized human being, despite his having been Black.

As far as existentialism is concerned, what is even critical about these two songs, however, is their outward-looking nature. This aspect is remarkable because the existentialist outlook tends to be regarded as exclusively individualistic, inward-focused (solipsistic even); that of individuals plagued by the 'burden of consciousness', but, clearly, that is not what existentialism is exclusively about. If we look at the broader view of the philosophy as comprising reflections on 'conditions of living', these could include the conditions of living of one's own self, as well as those of one's others. This attribute to existentialism, therefore, makes it amenable to socio-political activism; yes, existentialism *can* be deployed towards social and political ends. It can be observed that, perhaps the aspect of agency -personal or collective - embedded within this philosophy is its strongest resource ever.

Gidess Chalamanda: "Ndimalota", and Kalimba: "A Song Worth Singing"

Loss of a significant other, or a dread of such a loss, can also be a catalyst for reflection on the business of existence. And when such loss involves someone close to one, the feeling can be quite overwhelming. The songs "Ndimalota" by Gidess Chalamanda and "A Song Worth Singing" by Kalimba deal with exactly such a scenario. The persona in Chalamanda's song has a dread of losing his father (and partly his mother) and the consequent loneliness that such an occurrence, were it to happen, would occasion in him: "Nthawi zina ine, Ndimalota Ine, abambo anga

atandisiya ndatsala ndekha ine". It is quite clear that the persona has an especial attachment to his father and the prospect of losing him is enough to precipitate an existential dread in him. His greatest fear is that, as a consequence, he will die a wanderer. In his ontological consideration, his father is his hero who provides him existential anchorage and stability such that his death would unhinge him in a significant way. Of course, it sounds somewhat inimical to the core tenets of existentialism for one to base one's bearings on another, whoever that another may be. But, perhaps for some people the definition of their existence, or the meaning of their existence, includes such significant others as parents, loved ones, or even God, as illustrious beings worth looking up to on one's journey of existence. Such a stance would be understandable, provided that the inclusion of others does not result into divesting oneself of personal responsibility, nor lead to psycho-social and spiritual debilitation.

In Kalimba's song, the persona, who has just been widowed, reflects on the fleeting nature of life, with the inexorable finality of death as its destination: "Seasons change, beautiful flowers fade, like the dinosaurs and forever gone!" As a way of coming to terms with the tragic loss of his beloved and comely wife, he invites his children to join in the reflection on her passing, as a form of group catharsis: "So, my children come and sing with me…. your mother is gone!"

Billy Kaunda's music

Billy Kaunda is another existentialist musician, perhaps quintessentially so. From his debut "Mwapindulanji?", in song after song, Kaunda exhibits a very strong existentialist vein known for its uncommon poignancy. In fact, listening to Kaunda's music requires several health breaks – akin to the comic relief scenes of a tragic play - to enable one recover from all its grim existentialist assaults. Overall, however, rather than entrapping and depressing, listening to his music - and he has quite an extensive repertoire of it - can be very intellectually stimulating and edifying. And, although Kaunda's is perhaps the most syncretic form of existentialism that

mixes personal, traditional lore and biblical forms of existentialism, he decidedly has a very personal take on these latter forms and makes them his own.

Themes of human exploitation and alienation, the finality of death and the loss it visits upon those left behind, as well as the vanity of life predominate in his music. The grimness of these is ameliorated only by the transcendence of the claimed benefits, here-below, of a life well lived, especially a life of genuine self-knowledge, consideration for, and service to others, as well as the possibility of reunion in the hereafter:

Akakufunsa, wekha! Udzayankha, wekha!
Akakufunsa: chuma chonse ndinakupatsa iwe!
Chuma chonse ndinakupatsa iwe!
Osauka unawachitira chani?

(Billy Kaunda: "Dziko Loyipa")

As I have hinted at above, in his music, Kaunda keeps harping on how we live our lives here and what impact that will have on us both here and after we are dead and gone to 'the other world'. Sometimes, as in the song "Kumidima", reunion with the departed is even deemed desirable and is sought for here and now. Where these latter sentiments are expressed, however, it may point to an inability or refusal to 'let go' of the departed. In some cases, as in the song "Ndakusiyilani Mavuto" the departed, such as parents who leave behind orphaned young children, are even cast as singing from beyond the grave to express their dismay at the turn of events in light of how badly treated the children they leave behind often end up being.

That said, it can be argued that notions of 'God' and 'the hereafter', or 'faith', generally, are not existentialist according to the latter-day European version of this philosophy; they tend to be summarily dismissed as 'wishful' or even 'escapist'. However, a good theory must be open-ended enough to allow variation – and academic existentialism is open-ended enough in this sense. Basing on its basic definition as an examination of one's state or condition of being, if matters

of belief form an individual's examination of his or her state of being, then they qualify as subject matter for his or her personal version of existentialism. In fact, the biblical books of Ecclesiastes and Job that we referred to earlier, perhaps the earliest and most trenchant discussants of this philosophy, saw no contradiction whatsoever between an existentialist outlook and matters of faith or God. Indeed, while it is a cardinal requirement that every claim made must be supported with evidence, it is also tenable that one cannot dismiss any claim, even un unsupported one, unless they will have disproved it themselves, otherwise they would be guilty of the fallacy of the appeal to ignorance (*argumentum ad ignorantiam*) which would go something like: 'because I cannot disprove your claim, therefore your claim is not true'. So, the burden of proof lies both ways, by default. As such, excluding matters of faith or God from existentialism would be not only too limiting but also counterproductive; it is not even giving due credit to those who may very well have led to the emergence of the phenomenon as a fully-fledged philosophy in the first place. So, in spite of his regular references to the God, faith, the hereafter, etc. this paper still treats Kaunda's music as fundamentally existentialist.

Conclusion

This paper has vouched for the civilisation capacity of Blacks anywhere on the globe, as a race, and in real terms (by providing already demonstrated examples), as well as in potential (arising from the demonstrated examples). The paper started by noting the well-known global racist prejudices against Blacks and how these are tied to the ideas of civilisation and barbarism, with the latter aspect applied exclusively, and stereotypically to all Blacks as a race – and a call to China to be wary of such blanket classifications in her dealings with Blacks in Africa and elsewhere. The discussion then defined what is meant by civilisation and how this phenomenon is tied to matters of the development of consciousness and, especially, the self-consciousness – with existentialism singled out for special treatment. The paper then analysed a number of pieces of lore by Black Malawians to illustrate the foregoing debate before it concluded the argument, reiteratively, that an existentialist outlook is in fact not a preserve of the postmodern Western European

man or woman; it can be detected even in some Malawian (and generally Black) art forms some of which pre-date the Western latter-day version of existentialism. Such being the case, we could then say that we have all along used wrong yardsticks in measuring the civilisation of entire peoples and individuals basing on their race. With all the evidence demonstrated in this paper, we must accept that we have used mistaken assumptions about human beings and civilisation based on race affiliation. Indeed, civilisation is down to individuals irrespective of whatever race they belong to. As a bottom-line, what the world needs to do, in fact, is that, rather than continue on the path of race, ethnicity, and whatever other superficial divides as yardsticks, engagement with individuals across racial, ethnic, and other divides whatsoever is critical to determining who could be said to be civilised or not.

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