

Chichewa political poetry in Malawian newspapers*

Pascal J. Kishindo

Introduction

Language, according to Bolinger (1990), is a loaded weapon. This is certainly the case in the domain of politics where physical strength is not a prerequisite. Hence a more humane and universally accepted mobilization or immobilization of support is achieved through language. Owing to its manipulative potential, language can be used to persuade, deceive, indoctrinate or liberate people (Chase 1954, Parkin 1984). Politics, therefore, becomes a suitable subject for literature particularly in Africa where society recognizes the social responsibility of the artists. As such socially conscious African artists have found it difficult to ignore the important social and political issues of their contemporary society in their works of art. In this regard, Soyinka (1968:21) has claimed that even the traditional African artist has always functioned as the “recorder” of the movements and experiences of his society and the voice of vision in his own time. It is within the purview of socially committed literature that we consider Chichewa political poetry as it appears in the *Malawi News* and the *Weekend Nation*, Malawi’s leading weeklies, and some ephemeral periodicals. Hitherto this poetry has not received much critical commentary. The poetry will be considered within the framework of propagandist literature where language is manipulated to achieve a political goal (Parkin 1984). For the sake of convenience, the poems have been divided into two categories: those dealing with the referendum (1993) and the first general elections (1994), and those dealing with the second general elections (1999).

Emergence of political literature

As pointed out in Kishindo (1982; 2001) and Chimombo (1988), early Chichewa literature came into being following missionary initiatives which made it clear that the literature was a means to an end; namely, to christianize the heathens. Beyond the pulpit, however, it was a subtle tool of acculturating the converts into the Western tradition. Literature, therefore, was considered as an effective tool for proselytization.

As regards publishing history, the longer genres, for example the short story and the novel, predate poetry. Whereas the first Chichewa novel appeared in 1937, the first collection of Chichewa poetry only appeared in 1963.¹ The reasons for this can only be surmised. The early poetry only dealt with everyday issues affecting individuals in society such as love, birth and death. However, poetry dealing with political issues started to appear in the newspapers in the early 1990s. This is not a mere chance. The early 1990s were a period of great political upheaval in Malawi. It was a time when Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda's single party dictatorship was being challenged. This challenge culminated in the demise of dictatorship and the triumph of multiparty democracy at the polls in 1994. Prior to this period, it was impossible to publish any poetry and indeed any material in the newspapers which was critical of the government. Poems that were published in the media were either in praise of the then ruling party, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and its leadership, or treated non-political subjects. This was the period when censorship was at its peak. According to the Censorship Act and Control of Entertainments Act, "a publication [should] be deemed to be undesirable if it is indecent or obscene or is offensive or harmful to public morals. A publication [should] also be deemed to be undesirable if it is likely to give offence to the religious convictions or feelings of any section of the public into contempt, harm between any sections of the public, be contrary to the interests of public safety or public order (*Laws of Malawi* Section 23(2)(b))." This Act was used to ban no less than 1000 items including books, periodical and magazines, cinematographic films and gramophone records (See *Catalogue of Banned Publications* (nd) and Kanyongolo (1995)). It is inconceivable that any political writing, save the most sycophantic, could have thrived in this oppressive atmosphere.

This period of political upheaval also witnessed a proliferation of independent newspapers of diverse political viewpoints. At their peak, there were close to thirty newspapers in circulation. This was a far cry from the days of a single daily owned by the party. The proliferation of the newspapers without doubt gave the poets a variety of outlets for their efforts. There was suddenly space to be filled in the newspaper. In the subsequent sections we will discuss some of the verse that filled this space.

Poems about the referendum and the first general election

Political poetry in Malawian newspaper is topical. It is characterized by the desire to versify an issue that is currently in the media. With the advent of democracy and its attendant freedoms, writers have the chance to make their

views known as regards the way the state is run and the foibles of those who run it. This was something they could only dream about during the dictatorship. The referendum of 1993 provided the inspiration for much verse writing.

In their attempt to canvass support for a given political ideology or political party, the poets make use of what Furniss (1995) calls value-loaded words. Thus they deploy words in the language that have positive values. Simultaneously, they use words that have negative connotations to describe an opposing political position or political party. Generally speaking, value-loading cuts across precise semantic relationships. Whenever it is employed, the reader would feel that some word carries some element of approval or disapproval, some idea of good or bad (Furniss 1995). It is through this device that the poet can deceive or manipulate the public.

One of the earliest political poems, “Nyali Yawala”, (The Lamp is Lit) by Joe Chinguwo appeared in *The Monitor*.² This is a short poem of three stanzas. The lamp of the title was a symbol of advocates of multiparty democracy. The poem celebrates the victory of the lamp over the black cockerel, a symbol of the then ruling MCP which was fighting against change. The poet pits these symbols against each other. At the referendum of 1993 to decide whether the country should remain a dictatorship or a democracy the lamp emerges as the victor:

*Nyali yawala
Yawaladi nyali
M'dima wathawa
Tambala walira nayesa kunja kwacha
Kuwala kodabwitsako kwamufikira
Zachisoni iye wakondadi m'dima
Mwake muntima mtendere umusowa
Monga mbalame yopanda chisa tulo alisowadi
Monyansidwa ayesayesa kuthimitsa nyaliyo
Wake mdima akutero*

(The lamp is lit
Bright indeed is the lamp
The darkness has disappeared
The cockerel crows thinking it's dawn
The dazzling light has reached him

Alas! He loves darkness
He has no peace of mind
He is sleepless like a bird without a nest
With hate he tries to extinguish the lamp
His is the darkness, he says)

As Chirwa (2001: 7) points out, in Malawian folklore, 'the cock crow' at dawn' is a measurement of time. Each day begins at cockcrow before dawn. The cock crow thus divides the day from the night, light from darkness, and the present from the past. Those who live in the times after the cock crow live in the world of light, and thus have the potential for visions of developments ahead of them. The cockerel and the slogan *kwacha* (dawn) were, therefore, symbolic of passing time, and the emergence of a new nation with a vision for the future. This is the symbol that the MCP adopted since its inception. In the poem, this symbol is subverted. The cockerel, instead of proclaiming a new dawn, is shown to be confused by the dazzling light of the lamp. Instead of symbolizing a new dawn, the cockerel is now being associated with all the evil that the MCP visited upon the citizens of Malawi. Thus by using negative-value imagery, the poet manages to paint the MCP as a retrogressive force. The lamp then signifies the emerging democratic forces, of light shining through the world of darkness proclaiming a new dispensation.

This celebration for the victory of the multiparty democracy advocates notwithstanding, the second stanza strikes a reconciliatory note. The persona says s/he appreciates what the cockerel has done. However, s/he tells the cockerel, and this is the sting in the tail, "Komatu dziwa kuti gule akoma nkulandirana/ Ndipo pamodzipamodzi padaoletsa dzungu." (Know that dancing is fun when you take turns/And staying in one place made the pumpkin rot). These two lines are proverbs, and their message is clear to the cockerel; it is time to change. The need for change is underscored in the two last lines of the stanza in which the cockerel is asked: "Bwanji tione zina? /Mwaulemu tipempha/Ukana kodi?" (Let's experience other things? /We ask politely/ Will you say no?).

In the final stanza the persona urges the lamp not to flicker but to shine ever brightly in order to expose evil deeds and remove oppression. With the light shining brightly crime and witchcraft are exposed, people have no fear and obstacles have been removed. With this new dispensation humanity returns:

*Lero ndife afulu enieni
Kukhala sikumeneku anthuni?
Unali kuti nthawi yonseyi?*

(Today we are genuine citizens
Isn't this the way to live?
Where were you lamp?)

The imagery and poetic configuration is also reflected in the portrayal of the multiparty movement itself, and the institutions that carried it. Multipartyism as a socio-political movement is considered powerful, free, forward looking and marching and ready to put things right. The poet, therefore, uses positive-value words to drive this message home.

Of course *The Monitor* was a pre-democracy paper. It was, therefore, within its interests to publish verse which shared its sentiments.

Once the referendum outcome was decided, interest moved to the first multiparty general elections.

It is axiomatic to say that not every Malawian wanted change. Those who benefited from the dictatorship certainly did not want change. Thus as Malawi was getting closer to the first multiparty general elections, the *Malawi News*, the mouthpiece of the dictatorship, published two poems by M. Ungapembe. The first of these poems was "Tiribe pabwino" (We do not know what is good for us)³. The title of the poem encapsulates its message.

In the first stanza the persona chides Malawians for being ungrateful and disrespectful to the Ngwazi⁴ who brought them freedom and development. The persona wonders why the image of Dr. Banda has suddenly changed. Previously hailed as the "father and founder" of the Malawi nation, "the wise and dynamic leader", "the *nkhoswe*⁵ number one", Dr. Banda was now being referred to as the oppressor, torturer, and ruthless killer. Thus the Ngwazi has fallen from being hero-worshipped to being contemptuously disregarded:

*Wopanda ulemu ndipo wosayamika
Ndifetu a Malawi
Lathu dziko Ngwazi ndiye walikwezadi*

*Yathu miyoyo ndiye watukuladi
Koma lero kumtoso ndiye tikumtengera
Monga a njoka maliro m'malo momthokoza
Kodi kukhala ndi choncho?*

(Without respect nor gratitude
It's us Malawians
The Ngwazi has indeed developed our country
Raised our welfare
Yet today we are treating him with contempt
Instead of gratitude
Is this the way things ought to be?)

The persona does not stop to ask whether indeed Malawi had been “the Garden of Eden” under the leadership of the Ngwazi. All that matters is the loyalty that s/he feels has been betrayed.

In the second stanza the persona claims that before the Ngwazi returned to Malawi in 1958, Malawians were poor. They were in dire poverty; wearing hides instead of clothes and perpetually starving. Now that the benevolent leader has performed all these wonderful deeds, “Tayamba kuluma dzanja lotidyetsa, kupanda pabwino!” (We have started biting the hand that is feeding us, what ingratitude!)

In the third and fourth stanzas, the persona warns Malawians not to be fooled by false promises. To emphasize this view s/he packs this stanza with some pithy sayings “chifukwa chati mbee! Sichinapse/ Ndipo chati thubwi, sichinaoloke” (For what looks partially ripe is not ripe/ And what makes a sinking noise has not yet crossed the water). These sayings amount to the warning “all that glitters is not gold”. The persona refers to advocates of multiparty democracy as false prophets and implores Malawians to return to the MCP fold: “Lero mbali ya abodzawo aneneri/Bweraniko” (Today from the false prophets/Return). The poet here manages to reverse the roles: by negatively valencing the multiparty advocates, he gives the impression that multiparty politics is not good for Malawians.

This poem sits very well with the then MCP propaganda. Dr. Banda was very clear about what Malawians should be grateful for: he had brought them “peace and calm”, “law and order” and “prosperity and development”. Members of the

Women's League of the MCP were accordingly instructed, if not forced, to compose and sing songs that praised Banda for his heroism, his "wise and dynamic" leadership, for "destroying the stupid federation" of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, "redeeming the country from the bondage of colonialism", and "developing it beyond recognition." (See Lwanda 1993 for details). What the poet has done, therefore, is to put this party propaganda in verse form but with very little imagination.

In the second poem "Anali kuti?" (Where were they?)⁶ Ungapembe takes the pro-democracy movement leaders to task. The answer to the question in the poem's title is obvious. And the persona is none too impressed. If these pretenders to the throne are heroes, as they are being touted, why did they not play any role in the fight against colonialism? He asks rhetorically:

*Kodi onsewa sanali mommuno
Bwanji sanaonetse chawo chamuna
Pothyola chonyansacho chitaganya
Bwanji sanafune kulimbana ndi azungu aja
Ndikuwagonjetsa?*

(Weren't all these people here
Why didn't they show their mettle
By destroying the stinking federation
Why didn't they want to fight the white man
And defeat him?)

Since the pro-democracy leaders did not fight the white man the persona concludes that they were cowards. Being a propagandist s/he doesn't want to admit that among the pro-democracy activists were some who also fought the colonialist. That would be an unacceptable truth. The idea is to undermine the credibility of the pro-democracy movement. The persona claims that now that the Ngwazi had done all the fighting and won, the cowards are now coming out of the wood; seeking to reap where they did not sow:

*Kodi kumeneku sikukolola posadzala?
Mphanje Ngwazi anathyola, nsinga nadula,
Yao Miyoyo ndi dziko natukula*

(Isn't this reaping where they did not sow?
Ngwazi cleared the forest, destroyed colonial bondage
Raised people's lives and developed the country)

It should be noted that the persona does not say why with all that the Ngwazi has achieved, people have thought it necessary to challenge him. Neither does s/he give us any reason why things should remain the way they are apart from the fact that the Ngwazi is a hero. Claims about raising the standards of living that the persona makes are easily challenged. But it is the nature of propaganda literature not to engage in a debate; it merely accentuates the positive or the negative. In this case the Ngwazi's positives are the ones being accentuated.

Once the scene was set for the various parties to compete in the general elections for government, strains and divisions started to appear in the once seemingly united pro-democracy movement. The newspapers started reflecting the opinions of the parties they supported, so, too, the poets who wrote for them. In some cases, the issues moved from being national to personal. A poem in that form, "Mnyamata wa chamba" (The cannabis boy) by Chief Mafeke Jr appeared in *The Mirror*⁷. This is a vitriolic poem castigating an erstwhile colleague in the pro-democracy movement who now seems to be wavering in his commitment to the cause by striking a reconciliatory note towards Dr Banda. The poem chronicles the alleged life story of Kamlepo Kalua, leader of the Malawi Democratic Party (MDP). The first stanza introduces protagonist:

Anthuni
Imvani
Lero ndafuna ndikuuzeni
Za m'nyamata wina
Yemwe lake dzina, Kalua

(You people
Listen
Today I would like to tell you
About a certain boy
Whose name is Kalua)

After introducing Kalua in the first stanza, the persona proceeds to detail what s/he considers to be Kalua's sordid past. The third stanza, for example, claims that the protagonist was a cannabis and hard drugs pusher:

Mnyamatayi
Omudziwa bwino akuti
Ake malonda anali
Ogulitsa chamba
Ndi mankhwala ena owononga bongo

(This boy
Those who know him well say
His trade was
Selling cannabis
And other drugs)

Having given us this piece of sordid detail, the fourth stanza tells us about Kalua's involvement in the pro-democracy movement; that he used to rail against Dr. Banda on Channel Africa radio station in South Africa. What seems to irk the persona now, however, is the change of heart that Kalua has had towards Dr. Banda. This becomes clear in seventh stanza:

Anthuni
Mosayembekeza
Lero mnyamatayi
Akuti tizilemekeza Kamuzu
Pamene iye ankatukwana yomweyo
Kamuzu

(People
Suddenly
Today the boy
Says we should respect Kamuzu
When he himself used to insult the same
Kamuzu)

With this "sin" the die is cast, Kalua the man who led the radio on-slaught against the dictatorship is now disparagingly referred to as a mere 'boy'. The apparent *volte face* that Kalua has made is enough for us, according to the persona, to question his credibility and indeed his sanity. This change of heart can only mean that the protagonist has been "bought" by kongoresi, i.e. the

MCP, or, if that is not the case then there is only one conclusion, he smokes cannabis:

*Kodi tilakwa
Tikaganiza kuti mnyamatayi
Wagulidwa ndi kongeresi
Kapena kuti amatukwana
Pa Channel Africa chili boo-boo!
M'mutu chamba*

(Will we be wrong
To think that the fellow
Has been bought by congress
Or that he was broadcasting his insults
On Channel Africa when high
On Cannabis)

In this poem we see a vilification of a presidential candidate. The poet achieves this by use of negative value-loaded words such as “wagulidwa ndi Kongoresi” and “(...) chili boo-boo!/M'mutu chamba.” The message is clear, Kalua is not fit to be a leader. However, the reconciliation that Kalua was advocating was no more different from what other leaders were proposing. One may conclude that this was a way of settling a personal score in the guise of poetry.

As the political temperature was rising, parties were proliferating and some were consolidating their power. With so many parties to choose from, some writers took it upon themselves to advise voters what to do. *The Independent* carried a poem “Mwakonzeka?” (Are you ready?)⁸ by G. Soko. In this three-stanza poem, the poet was preoccupied with the forthcoming elections. The poem advises Malawians to think very seriously about the impending event. They should not rush into making a decision neither should they let the momentous event pass them by because of general malaise. They should instead seize the moment:

*Kwezani maso a Malawi
Kukwezera ku tsikulo
Zamitsani nzeru inu
Usapite wotere mwayi makosana
Zidze pano nzatonse nthuni*

(Raise your eyes Malawians
Raise them to the day
Get wise
Don't let this chance pass you by
What comes today is for everybody)

The second stanza celebrates the forthcoming elections as an unprecedented chance for Malawians to choose their own representatives and leaders. The poem emphasizes the need to be cautious in this all-important exercise because Malawians should not behave like their parents, who a generation ago:

*Mosasamala anasankha oziyelekera ubwino
Atilangitsa ife - atipweteka*

(Carelessly elected self-righteous leaders
They have punished us – they made us suffer)

The final stanza implores Malawians not to be despondent but to turn up on election day in their large numbers to overhaul the system since:

*Taphedwa mokwana, tamangidwa mokwana
Ali kuti malume ngati sali kuli chete*

(We have been killed enough, we have been arrested enough
Where is my uncle if not at the cemetery)

To most Malawians the dictatorship which they needed to overhaul was characterized by political detentions, murders, fear and general oppressive tendencies. To overhaul the system there was need, therefore, to unite. And as part of preparations for this venture Malawians are advised:

*Tisakanganenso za zipani tiyeni tiganize mwakuya
Papita pokambakamba tsono tisankhe
Tengani mbali pokonza tsogolo
Tsogolo lopatsa chidwi ndinso laufulu
(...)*

(We should not argue about parties let's think seriously)

Time for debate is past, now let's choose
Take part in creating a future
An exciting future but also a peaceful one).

This is a typical "advice" poem echoing what the politicians, the civil society, and the media were advising the public about the importance of voting. Nothing is left to the imagination of the reader. The message is made plain.

While the above poems were written in the run-up to the referendum of 1993 and the subsequent general elections of 1994 which were won by the United Democratic Front (UDF) party under the leadership of Bakili Muluzi, the following subsequent sections will deal with poems concerned with the first general elections in the multiparty era.

Poems about the second general election

In the previous section we examined poems dealing with prospects of democracy and how it should be approached, poems in this section deal with the aftermath of the first five years living within a democracy. In a sense, the poems can be viewed as a verdict on the United Democratic Front (UDF), the ruling party's first five years in power.

The most critical poems about Bakili Muluzi, the then incumbent president, and the UDF's first five years in office were carried in the opposition's mouthpiece, *Malawi News*. The *Malawi News* of June 12-18, 1998 carries three poems examining the UDF government's achievement. "Chitukuko cha Muluzi" (Muluzi's development) by Frank Kalilombe is typical. The poem's title is, of course, ironic since what follows is a litany of failures rather than development. The poem is in five stanzas. The first stanza claims that Bakili's development is a mirage:

Chitukuko chachitikadi
Chitukuko chake chosaoneka
Tiyeni tiwone za chitukukochi
Chitukuko cha Bakili

(Development has indeed taken place
Unseen development
Let us analyze this development
Bakili's development)

From this unpromising start, the poem goes on to list the failures of Bakili's government. In the second stanza the scarcity of drugs in hospitals and delays in teachers' salaries is highlighted:

*Kusowa kwa mankhwala m'zipatala
Icho ndicho chitukuko choyamba
Kuchedwa kwa malipiro a aphunzitsi
Chitukuko cha Bakili*

(Lack of drugs in hospitals
This is the first development
Delays in teachers' salaries
Bakili's development)

In the third stanza 'development' include "kusowa chimanga ku Admarc/Umbanda m'mizinda wa mfuti/Kugwirira atsikana ndi amayi." (Lack of maize at Admarc/Armed robbery in towns/Raping of girls and women). The poem attributes these negative aspects to Bakili's government.

In the fourth stanza the list of 'development' is extended to include "Kuzimazima kwa magetsi/Kuvuta kwa madzi m'midzi/Kusowa kwa ntchito" (Erratic power supply/Poor water supply in the villages/Lack of employment).

In the final stanza the poem asks what Bakili has achieved in office. After all what is seen is corruption and a leader who is always on the road. The persona is, therefore, compelled to ask:

*Chitukuko chanji chokhalira kuyendayenda
Chitukuko chogula ma MP m'malo mwa chimanga
Zikakhala zokonza misewu taiwala
Aah! Ichi sichitukuko koma kampeni
Chitukuko cha Bakili, Uuuu!
Zinthu zatotanidye?*

(What sort of development is this when you are always on the road
You 'buy' MPs instead of maize
If it's road construction we forgot about it
This is not development but campaigning)

Bakili's development, Uuuu!
What has happened?)

After listing the failures of Muluzi's government, the final stanza is an indictment of Muluzi's leadership. Muluzi is perceived as someone who cannot sit down for any length of time to think about the plight of the people he rules. Instead, he is perpetually on the road opening one "development" project after another. The last two lines the persona mocks Muluzi's party's slogan. To the question "Zinthu zatotanidyeee? (What has happened?) which the leader shouts, and the crowd is supposed to answer "Zasintha" (They have changed). "Zasintha" being UDF's slogan. Tongue-in cheek this is the answer implicitly expected.

In this verse we see an aspect of manipulation which is manifested by the acerbic attack on Muluzi. The persona is accentuating the "negatives" of Muluzi's government to influence the attitude of the people so that they should reject him and his party and support the persona's own party.

"Mwachitanji nanga?" (What have you done?)⁹ by Elisha Chitani challenges the UDF government to state exactly what they have achieved during the first five years they had been in power. The gauntlet is thrown down right in the first stanza:

*Mwachitanji nanga
Poti 1999 ija yafika
Munkati tikumvetsani
Mukubwebwetuka ndi mapulani a chitukuko
Nanga mwachitanji?*

(What have you done
Since 1999 is here
You said we will feel your presence
When you were mouthing your development plans
What have you done?)

In the second stanza the poem claims Malawians have been fooled in trusting the UDF government since there are no tangible signs of development. The UDF government had in 1994 promised much, "Suuja munkati kulibe misewu kukhale misewu" (Didn't you say where there were no roads there'll be roads)

but delivered nothing. All that has been witnessed is the President opening rural post offices which were not his initiative in the first place but the previous MCP government's. With all these failures Muluzi's government is basically unelectable, according to the poem. A question is, therefore, rhetorically asked:

*Nanga muvotere yani a Malawi
Poti 1999 yafika
Mwachitanji anzanga?*

(Who are you going to vote for Malawians
Since 1999 is here
What have you done my friends?)

In the final stanza Malawians are implored not to be cheated again this time. They should not believe Muluzi's party's manifesto since "mwa njovu mphechepeche sadutsa kawiri" (You don't pass through the elephants loins twice). In other words, once beaten twice shy.

"Tsiku losankha tsogolo" (The day to choose our future)¹⁰ by Victor Chitika is in similar vein as the others above. The persona is also dissatisfied with Muluzi's government. S/he does not see what Muluzi's government can point to as an achievement. S/he implores Malawians to be vigilant against liars. They should not be fooled again in choosing their future since the so-called change that Muluzi was promising only resulted in change for the worse:

*Potitu kumudzi kuno
Deya ndiye watikola
Kodi n'zokuonerani wawa?*

(Since here in the village
We are fed up eating maize bran
Can you truly be proud of that?)

The persona points out that the UDF government promised them paradise but instead hell has materialized. "Potitu zikakhala njinga/Zija munatilonjeza/Ndi sipokosi yomwe ife/Sitinaione" (If it is the bicycles/You promised/Even a spoke/We haven't seen it). The speaker contrasts these false promises that Muluzi makes and the solid injunction that Malawians should work hard in the

field that Dr. Banda made because "(...) Chili/nthaka chuma" (...) there are/riches in the soil). While Dr. Banda approached problems of poverty with stark pragmatism, Muluzi lives in a world of fantasy. He makes promises he cannot keep hoping somehow he will wake up one morning to find all problems solved.

The message of these three poems from *Malawi News* is clear: Muluzi and the UDF are failures. Let us return to the MCP, the party that gave us development, the party which has been tested and proven.

Lest an impression should be given that only the opposition papers carried poetry critical of the government, even the pro-government paper the *Weekend Nation* does publish such verse. The poetry in this paper, like that of the rival paper *Malawi News*, was characteristically of disillusionment; disillusionment with the performance of the politicians. However, unlike the *Malawi News*, the criticism was mild. It dealt with generalities rather than specifics. No fingers are pointed at individuals. In "Kodi mudzakwaniritsadi?" ("Will you satisfy us?")¹¹ by Greyson Ndenguma, for example, the persona tells Malawians that the long-awaited general elections were upon them. This is stated in the last line of the opening stanza, "Inde-chilipoditu pa June 15 pano". (Yes it will indeed happen on June 15).

The second stanza proceeds to warn the political parties not to be carried away with making extravagant promises:

*Koma nanu azipani atsogoleri
Musakomedwe n'kulonjeza
Pongotengera mwayi
Inde wolankhula pa wayilesi*

(But you party leaders
Should not be carried away with making promises
Taking advantage
Yes of speaking on radio)

The politicians who take advantage of free air-time to make extravagant promises are in the third stanza warned that they will be forced to own up:

Inde zambiri mwalonjezadi

*Koma ichi dziwani
Wadzisuletu nsapato samulonjeza
Ndife 'agocho'
Ndiye musatilonjeze mwana lero
Poti mukadzapanda kutipatsa mawa
Zanuzo nsapato
Tidzakulandani*

(Yes you have indeed promised many things
But know this
You don't promise shoes to one with calluses
We are impotent
So don't promise us a child today
Because if you don't give us the shoes tomorrow
Yours
We will surely grab)

With this ominous warning, the persona says, s/he is going to pose a question to the politicians. And this question does not require deep thought to answer. S/he has heard all that the politicians have said and what they have promised. The question is "Koma kodi mudzakwaniritsadi? (But will you live up to your promises?)

As observed, there is no mention of specific personalities or parties here. Politicians are dealt with collectively. This indicates perhaps that the persona is disillusioned with politicians as a breed rather than as specific individuals. It may also indicate that the writer is pro-government and does not want to be seen criticizing it too strongly in print. It could also mean that it is the policy of the newspaper not to publish material which is too critical.

"Chafika chisankho" (The elections are here)¹² by Ezekiel Kapina also deals with the same general elections as the one above. The opening stanza reminds Malawians that they have waited for five good years for this event, therefore there is need to handle it with care "Monga dzira/Tichisamale a Malawi" (Like an egg/Let's handle it with care Malawians).

The second stanza warns politicians that if they have been insulting citizens during their campaigns they should forget about being voted into office:

“Mwachita chipongwe/Sadzakuvoterani.” (Those you have insulted/Won’t vote for you).

The third stanza warns those parties which have been known to foment violence in the run-up to the elections that the public has no desire to vote for them:

Tilibe nanu chikhumbo
Ziwawa nzosathandiza
Ndi mbiri yoipa
Chanu chipani chitchuka

(We have no desire to vote for you
Violence does not endear us to you
With a bad reputation
Your party is notorious)

The final stanza advises politicians to be reasonable and stop threatening each other. After all elections are just a competition “Ndi mpikisano uwu” and not war:

Osati nkhondo
Ndife amodzi
Tisagawikane
Poti chafika chisankho

(This is not war
We are one
We should not be divided
Simply because of elections)

While some sentiments expressed in this stanza are noble, they are naïve in the extreme. For those who have experienced African politics in general, and Malawian politics in particular, an election is not just a competition. For most politicians it is a matter of life and death. The reality is that while the politicians may condemn violence, they actually foment it when it suits them.

This poem, like the previous one, also deals in generalities. It does not name names. The persona, like the general public, is aware of the parties which condone violence but deliberately fails to name them. This can perhaps be

explained by the fact that the *Weekend Nation* is pro-government and it cannot be too critical of the government. This would explain the rather lame pleas for unity in final stanza.

Some observations

Sani (1988:59) points out, political metaphors are either positively or negatively valenced: those with negative valence characterize a given process, action, group or person in an unfavourable manner. Similarly the positively valenced make their characterization in favourable manner. And it is through this process that the poet is able to manipulate and persuade the public to accept his own political viewpoint. In this regard, we have observed that the newspapers that support the opposition publish poetry which vilifies the government and the politicians who run it. On the other hand, they go out of their way to project a positive image of their party and their leaders. Poetry is, therefore, used as a strategy for mobilization of the public to a particular point of view. Similar observations have been made about Hausa political verse (Munkaila 2001). In a sense, this poetry is similar to songs and dances that political parties use to mobilize and garner political support. Just as the songs sung by the supporters, especially the women, are full of mockery, hate mongering, character assassination and condemnation of rival parties, so too, the poetry¹³. For effectiveness, the poetry makes use of simple, unadorned direct language.

In the pro-government newspapers political poetry is measured in its language. When it is critical, it is mildly critical, and does not aim at pointing fingers at individuals or political parties. Instead, the criticism is muted and couched in generalizations. The highly charged and caustic language seen in the opposition newspapers is absent.

However, paradoxically, one notices the absence of exploration of real critical issues which are gnawing at the nation's very fabric. Issues such as ethnic and religious rivalry, nepotism and corruption, and high levels of illiteracy are not raised as issues for political debate in any fundamental way. The poets seem to shy away from these issues yet they are the ever present sword of Damocles hanging over the nation. Perhaps this is not surprising since none of the leading politicians have publicly admitted that these problems are crucial. There seem to be problems that everyone recognizes but no one is willing to address.

While this poetry may lack literary merit, what is interesting about it is that just like the newspapers in which it appears, it captures a moment in time. The poetry deals with the topical issues of the day hence its immediacy and directness. While the newspaper may not be the best medium for an "elevated" genre such as poetry, as Osundare (1998:84) has pointed out, it has its own benefits. Newspaper poetry can be a site for political discourse and potential action against oppression and exploitation by the political elite since it appears in this popular medium. As such, it has a role to play in society as long as the newspaper remains a force in a culture of democracy.

Conclusion

In the paper we have examined political verse as it appears in Malawian newspapers particularly the leading weeklies, the *Weekend Nation* and *Malawi News*. We have observed that language manipulation has been used as a strategy for mobilization to convey a particular view point. This is based on the assumption that the major aim of political poetry as a form of propandist literature is not to convey balanced views but to enhance and maintain a particular ideology. This propaganda nature of the verse makes the message more important than the aesthetics. The poetry is therefore urgent, forceful and direct. To read it years later is like peeping into a time capsule. There is, therefore, not much difference between the verse and the political issues raised in the papers at the time.

Notes

*Sincere gratitude to Rienhard Klein-Arendt of the Institute für Afrikanistik, Universität zu Köln and *JH* reviewers for commenting on an earlier draft. All translations are my own. The usual disclaimers apply.

1. The novel is Samuel J. Nthara's *Nthondo*, Religious Tract Society, London and the collection of poetry is E.J. Chadza's *Nichito ya Pakamwa*, Northern Rhodesia Publication Bureau, Lusaka.
2. See The Monitor, 27th May 1993. This newspaper is now defunct. Although this poem is celebrating victory of the multiparty movement, this was only in anticipation of winning. The referendum actually took place on 14th June.
3. See Malawi News, 14-20 May 1994.
4. The term translates as conqueror and hero. It was a term Malawians used to refer to the first President, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda.

5. Dr Banda capitalized on this traditional Chewa concept which translates as guardian of family, usually a maternal uncle or eldest brother of the family.
6. See Malawi News, 14-20 May 1994.
7. See The Mirror, 12 April, 27 April 1994. It is not clear whether this paper is still in circulation.
8. See The Independent, 5-11 April 1994. This newspaper is now defunct.
9. See Malawi News, 12-18 June 1998.
10. See Malawi News, 12-18 June 1998.
11. See Weekend Nation, 12-13 June 1998.
12. See Weekend Nation, 1-2 May 1999.
13. For the role of politics in popular contemporary music in Malawi see Chirambo (2002) and Chirwa (2001).

References

- Bodunde, C. 2001. *African Language Literatures in the Political Context of the 1990s*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies 56.
- Bolinger, D. 1990. *Language: the Loaded Weapon*. London: Longmans.
- Catalogue of Banned Publications, Cinematograph Pictures and Records from 1st August, 1968 to 31st August, 1979. Zomba: Government Printer.
- Chase, St. 1954. *Power of words*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Co.
- Chimombo, S. 1998. *Malawian Oral Literature*. Zomba: Centre for Social Research.
- Chirambo, R.M. 2002. "Mzimu wa Soldier": Contemporary Popular Music and Politics in Malawi. In H. Englund ed. *A Democracy of Chameleons: Politics and Culture in the New Malawi*. Blantyre: CLAIM/Mabuku.
- Chirwa, W.C. 2001. Dancing Towards Dictatorship: Political Songs and Popular Culture in Malawi. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 10, 1, 1 – 27.
- Furniss, G. 1996. *Poetry, Prose and Popular Culture in Hausa*. Edinburgh: University Press.
- Kanyongolo, F. 1995. The Law and Practice of Censorship in Malawi: A Critical Review. *Church and political transition in Malawi 1992 – 1994*. In M.S. Nzunda and K. R. Ross (eds). Gweru: Mambo Press and University of Malawi.
- Kishindo, P.J. 1982. The Influence of Christianity on Selected Chichewa Writers: A Thumbnail Study. *Kalulu: Bulletin of Oral Literature*, 3,2 – 17.

- Kishindo, P.J. 2001. Chichewa Literature in the Political Context of the 1990s. In C. Bodunde (ed), pp 153-170.
- Munkaila, M.H. 2001. Language Manipulation in Hausa Poetry. In C. Bodunde (ed), pp 39-61.
- Lwanda, J. 1993. *Kamuzu Banda of Malawi: A Study in Promise, Power and Paralysis*. Glasgow: Dudu Nsomba Publications.
- Osundare, N. 1998. Bard of the Tabloid Platform: A Personal Experience of Newspaper poetry in Nigeria. *African literature and Africa's Development* No. 2. edited by A.V. Adams and J.A. Mayes. Trenton, N.J: African World Press Inc., pp 79-85.
- Parkin, D. 1984. Political Language. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 13, 345 – 65.
- Sani, W. 1988. Political Language as a Source of Lexical Expansion: The Case of Hausa. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Indiana.
- Soyinka, W. 1968. The Writer in a Modern State. In Wastberg (ed) *The Writer in Modern Africa*. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies.

*Department of African Languages
Chancellor College
University of Malawi
P.O. Box 280
Zomba
Malawi
pjkishindo@yahoo.co.uk*