



Harri Englund, ed. *Democracy of Chameleons: Politics and Culture in the New Malawi*. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2002. 208 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-91-7106-499-8.



Reviewed by Elaine Windrich (Stanford University)

Published on H-Africa (June, 2003)

Malawi: The Old and the New

Malawi: The Old and the New

This book is derived from the International Conference on Historical and Social Research in Malawi, which was held at Chancellor College in Zomba in June 2000. It was jointly sponsored by the Nordic Africa Institute and the *Journal of Southern African Studies*, which included a complementary selection of studies in its first issue of 2002 (vol. 28). In addition to the eleven papers for this book, some forty others on various aspects of Malawi's history, politics, economy, and culture were presented at the meeting in Zomba. As the editor remarks, the conference together with the subsequent publications "bear witness to the remarkable quickening of historical and social science scholarship in and on Malawi since the demise of Kamuzu Banda's stifling regime in 1994." But this, he warns, is still a "fragile achievement," which the studies in this collection are intended to "nurture through a responsible and balanced appraisal" (p. 9).

On the whole, this intention has been admirably fulfilled, even though there is a virtual unanimity on the two fundamental issues raised by the contributors: first, that Banda's Malawi Congress Party (MCP) rule was uniformly ruinous for Malawi; and, second, that the succes-

sor governments (under Bakili Muluzi's United Democratic Front or UDF) have failed to bring about the reforms necessary for democratic change. In his introduction, the editor attributes this failure to "the culture of chameleon politics," a notion inspired by the poetry of Jack Mapanje, Malawi's internationally acclaimed author who provides the afterword for this book. But the idea is not a new one, since Mapanje wrote *Of Chameleons and Gods* in 1981, at the height of the Banda era, which suggests that "the apparently haphazard manner in which Malawi politicians forge alliances may be little else than a continuation of a culture of chameleon politics." As for the future, Englund predicts that as long as the political leadership changes its allegiances without transparent reasons, with the heroes of yesterday becoming the villains of today (or vice versa), depending on personal friendship or animosity, Malawi's political pluralism will remain "a democracy in doubt" (p. 17).

Political rivalries are also the concern of Edrinnie Kayambazinthu and Fulata Moyo of Chancellor College in the chapter on "Hate Speech in the New Malawi." Their main argument is that "the new democratic constitution does not make sufficient provision against hate speech and the violence and intolerance that it fosters" (p. 87).

The period under review extends from the referendum on multi-party democracy in 1993 to the aftermath of the second democratic elections in 1999, with the authors analyzing samples of the hate speeches of various political leaders, from the state president down to the regional and district governors. From this study they conclude that even under the new political system the violence emanating from hate speech has not abated in Malawi, with its culture of intolerance. The problem, however, is in defining hate speech (here, any communication that insults a racial, ethnic, or political group) and determining how to control or prohibit it. For a new democracy such as Malawi, the trade off for controls would be a diminution of the freedom of expression so recently acquired. And the authors' call for "reasonable limits to free speech" enshrined in the constitution would raise more questions than answers (p. 102). Besides, compared with the bellicose rhetoric in other countries (for example, from the Mugabe presidency in Zimbabwe or, for that matter, the Bush White House), much of Malawi's alleged hate speech would appear to be within the bounds of rival party politics. Being called a "threadbare curtain" or a "useless wind instrument" would appear to be far less life-threatening than being labelled a "traitor" or a "terrorist" elsewhere (p. 95).

The culture of intolerance has also affected the arts in Malawi, especially the musicians and writers, conferring on them a political role that has survived the transition, as the chapters by Reuben Chirambo and Jack Mapanje suggest. In dealing with "Contemporary Popular Music," Chirambo singles out the prolific song writer Lucius Banda because the explicitly political subjects and themes that he explores make him "a compelling representative of the role of popular music in politics in Malawi ... a major voice for the masses" (p. 104). Although Lucius Banda's music was used to oppose the Banda dictatorship, after its downfall he urged reconciliation not revenge, calling for a truth commission that would reconcile the victims to their suffering of the past. But the new UDF leadership, as Chirambo says, have used the past "to distract the attention of the public from their own failures in government." And redress from the courts has also failed to materialize because, as Lucius Banda's songs relate, "within the politics of the rich versus the poor, money gives 'justice' to the rich and denies it to the poor" (p. 109). Not surprisingly, his most critical songs have been banned from the government-controlled Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC).

Like popular song, poetry has also had to struggle against government censorship and repression. The most

famous victim of this past is Jack Mapanje, who was in prison for four years and then in exile because of his critical writings. Although he was pleasantly surprised when the newly elected Muluzi (a former administrative secretary of Banda's MCP) confounded his critics by introducing freedom of speech and association for the first time in three decades, he remains disappointed with what has been done with this freedom. The total silence about Banda's political rebels, especially those who had been imprisoned, exiled or, even worse, "accidentalised" by the hit squads, was an example of this amnesia. Mapanje is also concerned with the fragility of Malawi's new democracy. Having already witnessed the fragmentation of the MCP, with Banda's notorious hitman, John Tembo, joining up with Muluzi's UDF, he now sees a similar disintegration weakening the UDF, whose ministers have been plagued by death (natural or otherwise), desertion, and dismissal for corruption. Looking ahead, Mapanje believes that the primary challenge for the UDF government (without Muluzi seeking an unlawful third term) is whether they will embrace all opposition political parties as well as the rebels and other radicals whom they may not like within the fabric of Malawian society, thus establishing "a free and democratic culture" (p. 187).

Among Banda's other rebels were the churches of Malawi, especially the Roman Catholic and the Presbyterian, which played a leading role in the final stages of the resistance. The Catholic Bishops' Conference, for example, issued a pastoral letter in 1992 calling for the introduction of a multi-party system, which is often cited as the beginning of the end of the Banda dictatorship. Since then, the churches have remained relatively active in politics, establishing civic education programs and even challenging the behavior of irresponsible political leaders, particularly when their corrupt practices became too blatant to ignore and their political hostility threatened the survival of the multi-party system. As many Malawians complained to Peter van Doepp, author of the chapter on "The Clergy as Civil Society Activists," "the politics of predation of the Banda era has been replaced by a politics of neglect under the democratic system" (p. 124). This is also the conclusion of his study of the two main churches operating at the local level, which showed that much more could be done by the clergy to articulate the needs of their parishioners, most of them struggling to survive in a country afflicted by extreme poverty, AIDS, drought, and famine.

Similar conclusions emerge from many of the other studies in this book: that much more could be done by a political leadership with the political will to change the

old order and introduce the new. These include (with all titles abbreviated): “The Politics of Poverty Alleviation” by Blessings Chinsinga; “Civil Service Reform” by Gerhard Anders; “Judicial Mediation in Electoral Politics” by Clement Ng’ong’ola; and “Ethnic Revival and Language

Associations” by Gregory Kamwendo.

Altogether, this is a commendable collection of papers on the problems confronting the new Malawi. A useful twelve-page bibliography suggests further reading on the subject.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa>

Citation: Elaine Windrich. Review of Englund, Harri, ed., *Democracy of Chameleons: Politics and Culture in the New Malawi*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7708>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.