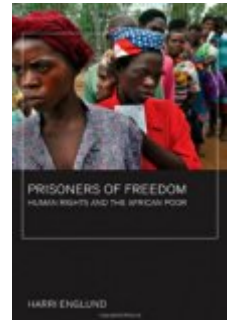


Harri Englund. *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. xi + 247 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-24924-0.



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For most Malawians, the biggest news story of 2006 was the adoption of the thirteen-month-old baby boy David Banda by the mega pop star Madonna. The adoption caused a storm both in Malawi and outside, but for very different reasons. Most of the views expressed in the mainstream media and on blogs in the West focused on whether Madonna was adopting David for reasons to do with enhancing her own media image; yet in Malawi, the debate was on why human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were opposing the adoption. As far as comments expressed in the Malawian media and on the street went, human rights NGOs opposing the adoption were doing so for reasons that had little to do with baby David's welfare, and everything to do with the NGOs' own image. Many Malawians saw the NGOs' actions as defending themselves from accusations that all they cared for was for their pockets and prestige, as evidenced by the conspicuous, sudden wealth acquired by NGO activists, from expensive SUVs to mansions in Malawi's big cities.

Underneath the storm was a thinly veiled anger against NGOs that went beyond David Banda, an issue that has not received the adequate analytical attention it deserves. What were the many Malawians who expressed their anger at the human rights NGOs reacting to? Was it the mere fact that the NGOs were seen as jealous of baby David, as many simplistically put it? Was it the larger undefined nature of what has come to be seen as civil society in Malawi and their tendency to criticize the Malawi government in everything it does, and despise Malawian culture and traditions at every turn? Or, was it a much more nuanced, much more epistemological difficulty arising from what Harri Englund in *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor* has called the abstraction and individualization of human rights as "freedom," whose consequences so far have been the further marginalization of the African (especially Malawian) poor, and the entrenchment of elitism amongst activists and the young people they deploy?

Despite the presence of a number of studies that examine the impact of NGOs since the 1994

advent of multiparty democracy in Malawi, few, if any, of them do what Harri Englund does in this book. Malawi's 1994 transition from the thirty-year one-party dictatorship, under Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, to multiparty democracy has been the subject of numerous studies both inside Malawi and outside. Change in Malawi was long coming, taking the form of movements and political parties largely outside Malawi. But it was 1992 that saw the first real bold move to criticize openly the government, through a lantern pastoral letter written by the country's seven Catholic bishops. The several studies that have examined the transition period and the democratic process since then have been in fields such as theology, cultural and literary studies, politics, and education.[1] There have also been studies on the issue of language and how the insistence on English as the official language of government, politics, business, and education keeps the majority of Malawians, who do not use English in their day-to-day lives, out of the democratic process.[2]

Englund's study is based on an engagement with Malawi that starts in 1999, and becomes concentrated between 2001 and 2003, when he does an ethnographic study that focuses on three particular aspects that capture the discourse on democracy, human rights, and freedom: the translation work on key documents in the political transition; a civic education NGO; and a legal aid NGO. Englund arrives at the conclusion that the human rights discourse on freedom and democracy, rather than empowering the ordinary Malawians that it takes as its main preoccupation, actually disempowers the very people it seeks to empower. It is a powerful and persuasive argument made painstakingly and eloquently throughout the study, relying on both fieldwork and critical analyzing. Englund uses what he terms "ethnographic witnessing" to expose how the disempowerment is operationalized in the way terms such as freedom and human rights have been translated into the national language, Chichewa. He further shows how the disempowerment operates in

the way civic education and legal aid are actually carried out among the NGOs and human rights activists studied.

The author organizes the book's eight chapters around the above-mentioned three case studies of translations and the two human rights NGOs. Englund uses the acknowledgements section to demonstrate his near perfect facility with the national language of Malawi, writing half of it in almost flawless Chichewa with the syntax that characterizes the central region of Malawi, the arbiter of its linguistic excellence. Englund ventures into his thesis right there in the acknowledgements, saying human rights NGOs in Malawi have preoccupied themselves with technical, abstract, and neoliberal definitions of terms such as freedom and human rights in ways that do not carry much meaning in the lived lives of ordinary Malawians. The sense of elitism with which many Malawian youths have taken to their mission of educating the masses about democracy characterizes ordinary Malawians as ignorant of what democracy is, and lacking the wisdom and knowledge with which to live their daily lives. The manner in which the concepts of freedom and human rights have been translated into Chichewa means that the young people carrying civic education to the ordinary people in the villages interpret these concepts in terms of their own rights and benefits, rather than those of the ordinary people.

Still using Chichewa in the acknowledgements, Englund describes his main aim in writing the book as reminding his target audience that, in order to gain deeper insights into the lives of the poor, there is a need to live among them for sustained periods, with the aim of learning from them. That requires learning their language and their culture, and the hardships they experience. Englund says all this was lost on the young Malawians who were "unleashed" on to the masses, as the civic educators became more interested in their own freedoms and rights. He deploys a Malawian proverb that draws on folklore and

talks about how it sometimes takes a guest coming in from the cold, seeking a place for the night, who has a sharp pair of tweezers, to remove a thorn from the foot of a child after the parents' tweezers have failed. Englund was that guest, but one who had more questions, some of them uncomfortable. Nevertheless, he was still warmly welcomed into the communities in which he conducted his ethnographic witnessing.

The introduction to the book identifies the sources that inform Englund's intellectual framework, ranging from Michel Foucault to Megan Vaughan to Amartya Sen to Jean and John Comaroff, and African and Malawian thinkers such as Tiyaambe Zeleza, Thandika Mkandawire, Kings Phiri, Francis Nyamnjoh, Edrine Kayambazinthu, Pascal Kishindo, and James Tengatenga, among many others. The first chapter takes up where the introduction leaves off and continues the discussion of intellectual sources of the study, defining the Foucauldian notion of "governmentality" and how it works to situate human rights as individual freedoms in an African postcolonial context. Chapter 2 discusses how a major factor in the way that the "rights" and "freedom" discourse disempowers the poor can be discerned in the way these concepts have been translated into Chichewa in Malawi, and Chinyanja in Zambia. One revealing finding in Englund's linguistic analysis is how, when translated back into the English language in which the definitions originate, the concepts mean quite a different thing, far removed from the realities of the people the civic education endeavor is aimed at. For example, the Chichewa translation for "human rights" has been given as "maufulu achibadidwe," which in English means something close to "birth freedoms," and not quite human rights (p. 49).

Englund argues that this kind of (mis)translation arises from the undue emphasis on political and civil freedoms in both Malawi and Zambia (p. 53), to the exclusion of people's local wisdom, relationships, and aspirations. He

cites Pascal Kishindo, a leading linguist at the University of Malawi, who has argued that the Chichewa translation for human rights, "maufulu achibadidwe," is in fact a new coinage, and that "zomuyenerera za munthu" would have been a more accurate and contextually relevant translation. The elitist, cavalier attitude with which the translation exercise was undertaken is put into sharp relief in the way Englund, a white researcher, was treated for his insistence on using Chichewa during his interviews and discussions with Malawian human rights activists. "Where will you go with it" asked one activist (p. 25), in a dismissive tone that typifies the reaction of many educated Malawians towards Malawian languages. Many others treated Englund's preference for Chichewa with unveiled mirth. And the problem of what Englund terms "poor translations for poor people" (p. 54), with key governance documents being written in European languages and translations into indigenous languages being merely a formality, can also be found in many other African countries.[3]

Chapters 3 and 4 draw on the implications of the manner in which the translations were done, demonstrating how human rights activists viewed themselves as a privileged class set apart from the villagers whom they saw as illiterate, uneducated, and primitive--prone to misunderstanding democracy. The human rights NGO in question in these chapters, the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE), European-funded and run by the German Technical Agency for Development (GTZ), trained its activists to maintain political neutrality, a position that Englund saw as undermining the very activist orientation that was otherwise required to empower ordinary Malawians. Englund describes a training session in which villagers exhibited their impatience with the abstraction of "human rights" and "freedoms" and began shouting to the young activists facilitating the training about their material needs and economic problems. In keeping with the position of neutrality, the young activists stayed close to their

script of how to define "freedoms" and the villagers' need for more civic education.

By far the most compelling narrative in the study is introduced in chapter 5 and culminates in chapter 6, in a detailed, heart-wrenching account of the flagrant abuses and open exploitation that a Malawian man working for a Malawian of Indian origin went through, with the active complicity of the legal officer of the legal aid human rights organization, the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR). Englund foregrounds the story of Yamikani Chikondi, who worked for Hassam Patel, with a section titled "The Politics of Complexion," in which he provides some facts and figures about the correlation between skin complexion and wealth in Malawi. A long but necessary quote buttresses his argument:

"Complexion remains an index of wealth and opportunity, with most Europeans and Asians enjoying vastly higher standards of living than most black Malawians. Virtually all expatriates, as well as those Asians who have acquired Malawian citizenship and the black elite, live in urban residential areas that the impoverished majority visit only as servants, guards, petty traders, laborers, and occasionally, armed robbers. Although apartheid was never formally instituted in Malawi, segregation is also evident in diet, modes of transport, pastimes, and numerous other everyday contexts. Foreign professionals also tend to be paid more than similarly qualified Malawians. Expatriate aid workers, in turn, usually wallow in their luxury, exempt from tax and employing domestic servants and other support personnel" (pp. 132-133).

Yamikani Chikondi worked for Hassam Patel as a lorry boy, whose duties entailed accompanying the driver of Patel's hardware store on various trips ferrying truckloads of customer merchandise to various parts of the country. His salary was the equivalent of US \$13.00 per month (MK900=Malawi Kwacha), about two-thirds of the stipulated minimum wage in the 2001-2003 peri-

od. Yamikani was never told in advance of any impending trips; instead, he was abruptly ordered to accompany the lorry whenever such trips came up. Many times the trips lasted two weeks, during which time he did not even have a change of clothes, let alone a chance to inform his wife and children before leaving. On such trips, Chikondi's responsibilities included sleeping in or near the lorry as a guard. He was given the equivalent of about US \$1.70 to survive on for those two weeks. The government's stipulation was US \$8.00 per day, but none of this was known to Chikondi. Chikondi was fired from the job after three months, on unproven suspicions that he may have connived with other workers who were caught stealing electrical switches sold in the shop. Englund dedicates a good amount of his gripping and touching storytelling and social justice analysis to this particular case, painting an alarming picture of the travails that many Malawian workers undergo at the hands of their European, Asian, and elite Malawian employers.

Englund's "ethnographic witnessing" led him to uncover the double contempt workers such as Chikondi suffer, first from their employers who treat them as "something less than human" (p. 153), and then from the Malawians who are supposed to represent and stand up for them in their recourse to justice. The legal officer handling Chikondi's case chose not to disclose to Chikondi that his salary and travel allowances were below the minimum wage in the first place. The case dragged on for several months, during which time Chikondi had no income, yet he was required by the CHRR legal officer to keep coming back at his own expense, and to provide the legal officer with money for transporting him to carry out his investigations.

When the case eventually ended, the legal officer had ostensibly taken the side of Patel in assigning blame to Chikondi for causing the whole problem, and in denying him just recompense. The legal officer informed Patel that he owed

Chikondi a pittance US \$4.40 (MK317) as salary and unpaid allowances, which Patel extracted from a thick bundle of crisp new MK500 banknotes, while complaining, without any sense of irony or even remorse, that freedom of employment was creating problems for employers like him. The last two chapters of the book deal with the issue of human rights and mob justice, and a recapping of the study's main arguments and conclusions.

In the concluding pages, Englund focuses on the project of "Redeeming Freedom," the title for the last chapter. He writes, "Sticking to the idea of freedom is more than a mere concession to the realpolitik of neoliberalism. The need is to reclaim freedom from its abuse in neoliberal projects, which carry, in many parts of Africa, uncanny similarities to the late-colonial orders of exclusion and exploitation" (p. 200). Such a comparison, while accurate, to a large extent, is apt to be viewed differently amongst the different groups that constitute the audience for the message Englund is trying convey. The book will be well received and seen as making a persuasive argument for those who see NGOs as having pulled the carpet out from under the feet of African governments, in the way NGOs absorb not only donor money but also the foreign ideologies of the places where the money comes from.

Englund's argument will also be equally favorable to those who see the educated African elite as a major player in the perpetuation of the poverty and disempowerment of the majority of African masses, seen as illiterate, uneducated, and in need of civic education as to what democracy, human rights, and freedom entail. Here is where this study might also manage to please an unlikely audience probably not intended by Englund—the Afro-pessimists. The depiction of the powerful moneyed elites with the ideological and financial backing of Western donors pitted against powerless, poor, illiterate villagers will appear to some to be a disavowal of whatever vestige of hope was

remaining for a neoliberal economic order. The near absence of the role of government in the study gives the appearance of a terrain in which NGOs rule unopposed and unobstructed. The reality, as Englund has attempted to represent, is quite different, but this point can easily be lost in the quagmire of rigid debates about African hope and despair.

Since 2004, with the holding of Malawi's third multiparty presidential and parliamentary elections, the sense of national pride and confidence amongst Malawians has palpably been on the rise. Inflation has come down to single digits, the food reserves are registering their most abundant amounts, donor confidence is back, and Malawi has been forgiven US \$1.4 billion of debt under the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative.[4] The country has always been stable, and has never experienced any civil conflict. Problems such as HIV/AIDS, infant mortality, and poverty are still rampant, but the government's positive presence can be felt especially among the middle class in as far as fiscal responsibility and economic stability go. A number of high-profile corruption cases have been and are still being prosecuted. There is a general sense amongst many Malawians that their country is on the move, and is on track to realizing its full potential. Malawi's transition to multiparty democracy has over time come to be seen as one of the best examples of peaceful handovers of power on the African continent and elsewhere. Very little of the advances the country has made since the transition, however (especially the resurgence after 2004, not to mention the peaceful transition in 1994), receive the due acknowledgement they deserve. Many scholars and commentators still find it easier to focus on the problems and failures.[5] Also lacking from analyses is the resurgence of the indigenous philosophy of *uMunthu* and its collective responsibility for the well-being of the community, which is gaining scholarly attention especially

among theology and psychology scholars, as well as in the popular media.

The appearance of the absence of government in the daily affairs of Malawians in Englund's study partly derives from the tendency by Englund to lapse into opaque theorizing, in what some may see as an apparently overzealous attempt to ground the study in Foulcauldian analysis. In quite a few places, Englund's choice of sources is hard to connect, and in other cases the lexicography does not live up to the standards that otherwise undergird much of the study. This is illustrated when Englund begins the narrative of the dehumanization of Chikondi: "Critical analysis subverts its own objectives if it does not include activists' contradictory position in regard to human rights" (p. 145). Englund wants to simply state that his critical analysis also includes contradictions between what the subjects in his study said and what they did in practice, an example being a constant refrain from the legal officer in Chikondi's case who kept insisting that he had no mercy for Asians who abused the rights of less-privileged Malawians. Yet in practice, these activists and other elites collude, albeit unwittingly, with the rich and powerful tormentors of poor Malawians.

The introduction of the book and its first two chapters are the most difficult to read, owing to Englund's attempt to foreground a theoretical framework of the contradictions in the discourse on democracy, human rights, and freedom. In quite a few places he subjects the reader to sources that, however critical in their analytical pedigree in the annals of Western theorizing, make little sense to African practicalities. The penultimate chapter of the book deals with a case of mob justice and the street-vending scene in Chinsapo, a township of the capital city Lilongwe, but it is difficult for the reader to actually understand what the relevance of the discussion is to the gist of the book's argument about the disem-

powering effects of elite discourse on democracy, human rights, and freedom.

I opened this review with the story of the furious debate caused by Madonna's adoption of a Malawian child, David Banda. The question I posed at the beginning was about the origin of the anger expressed by Malawians at NGOs opposing the adoption.[6] While not providing the definitive answer to that narrow question (after all the adoption occurred after the book was already published), Englund's ethnographic witnessing of the actual practices of human rights NGOs in Malawi is quite revealing of the tensions that have surfaced about the manner in which the concepts of democracy, human rights, and freedom have been translated both into indigenous languages, as well as into well-intended, activist fieldwork among the poor.

It is in this sense, that Englund's place as the night guest who comes in from the cold and has a sharp pair of tweezers on him comes to prominence. Englund has done a study that investigates what very few Malawians will even imagine to be a problem, especially the questioning of elitism in the translation and conduct of civic education and the practice of human rights activism. In spite of the abstract sections of the book, it should be mandatory reading for all human rights activists in Malawi and elsewhere; donor agencies and international consultants; university students; school teachers; and (equally important for the *longue durée* future of Malawi) student teachers at both primary and secondary levels. Translating the book into one or two of the major Malawian languages would bring the important debate that Englund has initiated into the parlors of ordinary Malawians whose lives and predicament are at the center of the study. This might even take one major step in the direction of addressing the key issue being examined by Englund, the nexus of perfunctory translation exercises and their connection to the abstraction and isolation of knowl-

edge and theory about human rights, freedom, and democracy from people's real lives.

Notes

[1]. Kings Phiri and Kenneth Ross, *Democratization in Malawi: A Stocktaking* (Blantyre, Malawi: Christian Literature Association in Malawi, 1998); Kenneth Ross, ed., *Faith at the Frontiers of Knowledge* (Blantyre: Christian Literature Association in Malawi, 1998); Harri Englund, ed., *A Democracy of Chameleons: Politics and Culture in the New Malawi* (Uppsala and Blantyre: Nordic Africa Institute, and Christian Literature Association in Malawi, 2002); Harvey Sindima, *Malawi's First Republic: An Economic and Political Analysis* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002); Moira Chimombo, ed., *Lessons in Hope: Education for Democracy in Malawi, Past, Present and Future* (Zomba, Malawi: Chancellor College Publications, 1999); and Martin Ott, Kings Phiri, and Nandini Patel, eds., *Malawi's Second Democratic Elections: Process, Problems, and Prospects* (Blantyre: Christian Literature Association in Malawi, 2000).

[2]. Al Mtenje, "Who Needs Civic Education? The Inferiority Complex of the Malawian Elites," in *From Freedom to Empowerment: Ten Years of Democratization in Malawi*, ed. Bodo Immink et al. (Lilongwe, Malawi: Forum for Peace and Dialogue and others, 2003).

[3]. Nhlanhla Thwala, "Lost in Translation," *Mail and Guardian* (April 18, 2007): <http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=305750&area=/theteacher/teacherfeatures/> ><http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=305750&area=/theteacher/teacherfeatures/> ; Fikile-Ntsikelelo Moya, "English-only, Eish!" *Mail and Guardian* (May 1, 2007): <http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=306207&area=/insight/insightcommentandanalysis/> ><http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=306207&area=/insight/insightcommentandanalysis/>

[4]. International Monetary Fund, "World Bank and IMF Support Malawi's Completion Point under the Enhanced HIPC Initiative and Approve Debt Relief under the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative," September 2006: <http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2006/pr06187.htm>

[5]. Seanne Winslow, "Moments in History Malawi's Peaceful Transition from a Dictatorship to a Democracy," YouTube video, October 2006: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wecJ8Ou6RZg> ><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wecJ8Ou6RZg>

[6]. Afrika Aphukira, "From Material Girl to Spiritual Mum: Madonna, Malawi, and Baby David" October 17, 2006: <http://mlauzi.blogspot.com/2006/10/from-material-girl-to-spiritual-mum.html> ; Nation Reporters, "Baby David Flies Out," *The Nation* (October 17, 2006): <http://www.nationmalawi.com/articles.asp?articleID=19088>

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