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**Chirwa, Wiseman Chijere**

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**UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND**

## HISTORY WORKSHOP

DANCING TOWARD REPRESSION: POPULAR CULTURE AND POLITICAL REPRESSION IN MALAWI, 1960's - EARLY 1990s.

Wiseman Chijere Chirwa
Department of History
Chancellor College, Malawi

AFRICANA

HWS 55

# Dancing Toward Repression: Popular Culture and Political Repression in Malawi, 1960s - early 1990s.

by

Wiseman Chijere Chirwa
Chancellor College
History Department
P.O. Box 280
Zomba
Malawi

Democracy, Popular Precedents, Practice and Culture

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HISTORY WORKSHOP

Dancing Towards Repression: Popular Culture and Political Repression in Malawi, 1960s - early 1990s

In Malawi, as in African in general, dance and poetic performances are important forms of social discourse.[1] Anthropological and historical accounts show that deeds of valour and moments of joy, sorrow and prosperity were expressed through popular performances which included dance, heroic recitations, and story-telling.[2] In addition to conveying socio-political and cultural messages, these performances were "maps" of individual, group and communal experiences.[3]

Melvin Page has noted that "for even the casual observer, the impression that contemporary dance in Malawi carries a heavy political load is overwhelming".[4] Wherever Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the country's former president, travelled, "his coterie" of

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1 For details see L. Vail and L. White, Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia and James Currey, 1991), C. Kamlongera, M. Nambote, B. Soko and E. Timpunza-Mvula, Kubvina: An Introduction to Malawian Dance and Theatre (Zomba: Research and Publications Committee, 1992); M.E. Page, "Dancing Toward Freedom: The Malawi Congress Party and the Popular Origins of Mass Nationalism in Malawi". Unpublished Conference Paper, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee (1993).

2 For a good coverage on this see A.D. Spiegel and P.A. McAllister (eds), Tradition and Transition in Southern Africa (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1991).

3 Vail and White, Power and the Praise Poem, Chapt.2.

4 Page, "Dancing Toward Freedom" p.1.

colourfully dressed women were also found dancing and singing adulatory songs praising him. Until recently, every political event in the country was accompanied by performance of "traditional dances".

By focusing on the messages and images from some of these dances and songs, this paper aims to demonstrate how party politics appropriated popular performances to create and entrench a Banda-centred repressive political culture in the country. It also argues that between 1992 and 1994, the same popular performances were turned round to challenge, and eventually destroy, the very same culture they had helped to create. Thus, by fosing on the messages and images from these performances, we can learn something about the country's political culture as well as the motives and intentions of its actors.

The paper does not aim at providing a review or full coverage of the country's forms of popular culture. Neither does it intend to get into the academic debates on popular cultures and popular performances.[1] It is simply concerned with messages and images reflecting the common Malawians' perceptions of their political

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[1] For debates see, among others, K. Barber, "Popular Arts in Africa" in African Studies Review, Vol.30 no.3 (1987); Spencer (ed), Society and Dance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); M.T. Drewal, "The State of Research on Performance in Africa" in African Studies Review Vol.34 (1991); Special issue of Journal of Southern African Studies Vol.16 no.2 (June 1990) on Popular Culture.

world.

## I

## Popular Performances and Political Consciousness

During the colonial period (1891-1964), popular performances played an important role in the expression of resistance to colonial domination and capitalist exploitation.[6] Through songs and dances colonized people "defined pungently and accurately the terms of their exploitation".[7] Throughout Southern Africa, migrant labourers ideologically integrated the spatially discontinuous worlds of village and town, work and home, by the performance of traditional dances and songs in compounds and work places.[8] At home, resistance to colonial rule was often expressed through dance and songs like this one from Nkhata Bay, northern Malawi; sang at the peak of the nationalist period between late 1950s and early 1960s:

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[6] See J.C. Mitchell, The Kalela Dance (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956); T.O. Ranger, Dance and Society in Eastern Africa (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975).

[7] Vail and White, Power and the Praise Poem, p.41.

[8] D. Moodie, "Social Existence and the Practice of Personal Integrity: Narratives of Resistance on the South African Gold Mines" in Spiegel and McAllister (eds), Tradition and Transition, pp. 39 - 63.

| | |
|---|---|
| Tingupangana, | We agreed |
| M'chaka chiya: 1891 | In that year; 1891 |
| Azungu; ku Yurupu | Whites in Europe |
| Amwenye, ku India | Indians In Asia |
| Tafipa, mu Africa | Blacks in Africa. |

This song was about history, and "it was history".[5] It was about Malawi as a British protectorate which began in 1891. To the singers, that date was "a date of agreement" that Nyasaland, was a place for blacks. The second verse in the song reflected that agreement:

| | |
|---|---|
| Tingupangana, | We agreed, |
| M'changa chiya: 1891 | In that year: 1891 |
| Asani Mwasambira | When you become educated |
| Mkajiusanga mwija | You will rule yourselves. |

The message is that Malawians viewed British colonialism as a temporary measure of protection from slave trade and Portuguese expansion from Mozambique. When they "became educated" they would rule themselves. By the late 1950s- early 1960s when this song became popular, Malawians viewed themselves as "educated enough" to rule themselves. The song was also about identity and aspirations. Malawi was a country for black people who aspired to rule themselves one day.

What is striking about the nationalist period in Malawi is that there was an attempt to create a national political identity.

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[5] The phrase comes from Vail and White, Power and the Praise Poem, p. 41.

If one listened to the popular songs of the period, one would not miss phrases such as "we malawians", "our land", "we are proud of ..." and many others of that nature. The aim of the resistance was also clear: self-determination. The target was the whole colonial establishment right up to the Queen of England:

| | |
|---|---|
| Queen Elizabeth | Queen Elizabeth |
| Mbaya msungwana yuwa | Oh God, the girl |
| Wangunanga Charu Chidu | Spoiled out land |
| Wangumanga mafumu | She arrested our chiefs |
| Mu nthazi yake | In her powers |

- Popular malipenga song from Nkhata Bay.

Colonial authority was portrayed as destructive and "disrespectful" of traditional authority. That "little girl", the Queen of England, did not respect "Our Chiefs". The picture one gets from this is that colonial rule did not have a popular mandate. It floated over the heads of colonized people and their socio-political structures.

Symbols of a national identity were also clear: the black cockerel and the slogan kwacha - symbolizing the coming of a new dawn, a new nation:

| | |
|---|---|
| Tambala akamalira | When the cockerel crows |
| Kokoliko .... | Kokoliko ..... |
| A malawi ayamba | Malawians are proud of |
| Kunyadira filidomo | freedom, its dawn. |
| Kwacha. | |

The nationalist period thus marked the first stage in the appropriation of popular performances by Malawian political agents. In the name of the nationalist struggle, politicians emerged as custodians of traditional dances and other popular performances. This was important so as to maintain "Our African way of life"[10] which was threatened, if not destroyed, by colonial domination. It was this limited understanding and usage of popular performances that party politics in Malawi utilized to create a repressive political regime.

The first signs of this came in the mid-1960s, shortly after the cabinet crisis in July 1964.[11] One of the popular songs of the time was an attack on the cabinet ministers who had disagreed with Dr. Banda's autocratic tendencies:

| | |
|---|---|
| Moto, Moto, Wayaka | Fire, fire is ablaze |
| Moto wayaka | Fire is ablaze |
| A Malawi safuna: | Malawias don't want: |
| Chipembere, Kanyama | Chipembere, Kanyama, |
| Willie Chokani | Willie Chokani |

Henry Blasius Masauko Chipembere, W. Kanyama Chiume, and Willie Chokani were among the ministers and members of parliament

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10 C.Young and H.K. Banda (eds), Our African Way of Life (London: United Society for Christian Literature, 1946).

11 For details on this event see J.L. Lwanda, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi: A Study in Promise, Power and Paralysis (Glasgow: Dudu Nsomba Publications, 1993); G.T.N. Kamwambe, The Tragedy of Malawians: Lecacy of One Party Rule (Mojo Press, 1993); T.D. Williams, Malawi: The Politics of Despair (New York: Ithaca, 1978).

who disagreed with Dr. Banda's authoritatian leadership and his acceptance of the proposal for lower wages for Africans doing the same work as their white colleagues.[12] Dr. Banda took it as a rebellion against him, personally. The ministers resigned, some were dismissed, and fled the country into neighbouring Zambia and Tanzania. Dr. Banda denounced them as rebels and dissidents. Anybody with personal, professional, and blood connections with these people was in danger of being labelled a rebel.

The Cabinet crisis marked the beginnings of a one-man political culture in the country. "It was at best useless or worst dangerous to put forward any views that conflicted with [Dr. Banda's] known preconceptions".[13] He was the Ngwazi, the conqueror and hero, the Lion of Malawi, the government and the law: "Everything I say is law. It is a fact in this country".[14] Members of the Women's League of the ruling Malawi Congress party did not miss this point:

A Ngwazi ndi boma lero
Ndi boma, ndi boma
Sangala kwambiri

The Ngwazi is the government
He is the government
He is the government
We are happy.

---

[12] Kamwambe, The Tragedy of Malawians, pp. 28-29, Lwanda, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, p.64.

[13] Lwanda, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi p.29.

[14] As quoted in Lwanda, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, p 122.

For Dr. Banda, "The Malawi system, the Malawi style is that Kamuzu says, its just that, and then its finished".[15] No opposition was allowed, and the party women from Nkhata Bay sent that message across:

| | |
|---|---|
| Afyengi wija<br>Akulimbana ndi moto<br>Ngwazi .... A Ngwazi<br>ndi Chatonda, ndi<br>muomboli m'Malawi. | Those who oppose the<br>Ngwazi will burn... will burn<br>The Ngwazi is a hero ....<br>he is a redeemer in Malawi |

Throughout the 1960s, political songs reflected Dr. Bands's consolidation of power and his emerging auctoracy. He was likened to a marauding lion that devoured opposition:

| | |
|---|---|
| A Kamuzu ndi mkango<br>ndi mkango, ndi mkango | Kamuzu is a lion<br>he is a lion, he is a lion |

Everything in the country belonged to him: "Zonse Zimene Za Kamuzu Banda, everything belongs to Kamuzu Banda". All the people of the country were supposed to be solidly behind him:

| | |
|---|---|
| Zibvute, zitani,<br>Ndife a Malawi<br>Tiri pambuyo pa Kamuzu<br>Tidzafa, tidzafa<br>Tiri pa mbuyo pa Kamuzu, | Come hell or high waters<br>We are behind Kamuzu<br>We will die, we will die<br>We are behind Kamuzu |

Traditional popular beliefs reinforced this Banda-centred political culture. Dr. Banda was a bonafide medical doctor, equivalent to, if not above, the traditional sing'anga, medicine

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[15] As quoted in Lwanda, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, p.62.

man. In his own words, "nothing was beyond the sing'anga (medicine man) and his medicine".[16] The belief was that Dr. Banda was a medicine man "who could heal with words only". As John Lwanda has observed, he also had a fly whisk, a symbol of some African medicine men and women and therefore a symbol of traditional medical authority.[17] His medical and healing powers were extended to the way he "liberated the country from colonial rule with words only".[18]

Dr. Banda also capitalized on his name: Kamuzu, a "little root" or a "Little medicine" as in the Scottish " a wee miracle". As a "medicine man" he could influence the course of political events by "the timely and judicious administration of appropriate medicine", in the form of his words, the fly whisk and the slogan kwacha. Lwanda has argued that Dr. Banda's medical persona may also have enabled him to mete out "harsh punishment which kept out sorcery, theft, adultery and disobedience at a minimum in the name of maintaining harmony"[19] The present paper argues that the frequent portrayal of the president as a redeemer, a messiah and a medicine man in political speeches and popular performances was important for ideological and political control. Ordinary

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16 Young and Banda, Our African Way of Life, p. 19; Lwanda, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, p.82

17 Lwanda, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, p.81

18 Line from a Women's League Convention Song: "Wamkulu ndani ku Malawi - who is Great in Malawi".

19 Lwanda, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, p.82.

Malawians strongly believed that Dr. Banda had the power to hear dissenting views expressed by people in their houses or work places even if he was hundrés or thousands of miles away.

What is striking about the process of the creation of the Malawian repressive political culture is how images and symbols from a variety of forms of popular culture were borrowed and fused. Old indigenous traditions and beliefs, and modern popular performances came together to create a new political culture.[20] Religious concepts of a messiah and Moses were utilized in portraying Dr. Banda as a redeemer and saviour as the women of Blantyre sang:

| | |
|---|---|
| Mose waku Malawi | The Moses of Malawi |
| Ndiyo Kamuzu Banda | is Kamuzu Banda |
| Adamenya lake Malawi | He beat the waters |
| Taoloka Yorodano | of Lake Malawi. |
| | We have crossed Jordan. |

It can therefore be argued that despite elements of ultra-conservatism in the Banda regime, its repressive culture was highly creative and innovative.

## II

## Entrenchment of Repression

By the mid-1970s, Dr. Banda had consolidated his grip over the country's political life. Songs by members of the Women's League show this:

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[20] Lwanda, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, p. 81

| | |
|---|---|
| Tifuna yani lero: | Who do we want |
| Ngwazi yekha | Ngwazi alone |
| Winanso ai, winanso ai | Nobody else, nobody else |
| Ngwazi yekha | Ngwazi alone. |

The president himself insisted on his ministers and followers to be loyal to him and his party. Loyalty to the president and the party was the main qualification for appointment to high positions in both the party bureaucracy and the civil service.

Three key factors were central to the entrenchment of the Banda-centered repressive political culture in the country at this time. The first was the expansion of the "public" security system. Dr. Banda created parallel security institutions: the Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP), the Police, the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), the Youth Leaguers, and the Army. During the 1970s and 1980s, the MYP and the SIS, used informers and "plants" to infiltrate the civil service, the party machinery, academic, and other institutions of civil society. "The creation of the parallel and competing security systems was crucial to the maintenance of Malawi's repressive regime. They competed in their displays of loyalty to Dr. Banda personally and his political system in general, in return for recognition and favours". [21] With these institutions Dr. Banda was able to stamp out any form of overt dissent, turning the country into "a land where silence ruled". [22]

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[21] W.C. Chirwa "We Want Change": Cleaning House in Malawi" Southern Africa Report Vol 9. No.4 (March 1994). p.26.

[22] Africa Watch, Where Silence Rules: The Suppressin of Dissent in Malawi (London and New York: Human Rights Watch, 1990).

The second was the control of the flow of information by a variety of mechanisms that impeded freedom of expression and social, political and academic discourse. All publications, movies and popular performances, other than those performed at political events, were subject to control by the Censorship Board.[23] Even the songs and dances performed at political events were subject to approval by officials of the ruling MCP in case they conflicted with the president's preconceptions. As Africa Watch has noted, "controlling the flow of information [was] crucial to the Malawi Congress Party's [and indeed Dr. Bands's] monopoly of power".[24] It was impossible and dangerous to organize any form of political opposition in the country.

The third factor was the way the MCP and Dr. Banda himself used popular performances to ensure political submission. Virtually every political event, diplomatic and state function was accompanied by "traditional dances". All the songs were in praise of Kamuzu: for the roads, bridges, schools, abundant food, and "development everywhere". The same applied to parliamentary proceedings. For weeks members of parliament "continued to praise

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23 For details on this see Africa Watch, Where Silence Rules, Chapt.9; and by the same authors, Academic Freedom and Human Rights Abuses in Africa (London and New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991) pp. 35-40.

24 Africa Watch, Where Silence Rules, p.69.

the Ngwazi for having developed the country beyond recognition".[25]

In addition to the three factors above, the president ensured loyalty by emphasizing the importance of women to him. He regarded himself as a nkhoswe, guardian, protecting his mbumba, women folk. As early as 1946 Dr. Banda believed that:

> All the male members of a Chewa family on the mother's side are nkhoswe to all the female members on the mother's side ... And being nkhoswe to them you, as a male and no matter how young you are , are a Responsible Relative ... When you say they are my "mbumba", or she is my mbumba, you are admitting responsibility in law...[26]

Capitalizing on this traditional concept, Dr. Banda became "Nkhoswe number one" for all the country's women. On every political occasion, his mbumba, dressed colourfully in pieces of cloth bearing his picture, danced and sang praises around him.

This had two political effects. First, capitalizing on the traditional strengths of the relationship between the mbumba and their nkhoswe, "Banda cemented, as no repressive police could better, the relationship between himself and both the rural and urban women. Any dissenting female voices were completely

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[25] Common statement in the House of Parliament. It can be found in almost any issue of the Hansard: Parliamentary Proceedings, for any year between 1975 and 1992.

[26] Young and Banda, Our African way of Life, cited in Lwanda, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, p.83.

marginalised"[27] Second, it gave some women, especially those in the party bureaucracy, and those close to Dr. Banda, some say in ceremonial political matters. Some of them "used this connection and superficial power to keep their men in check both politically and in some cases at a personal level".[28] Anything a woman reported to the party on her husband or any man was taken very seriously. The consequences were obvious: dismisal from work if the man was an employee, detention without trial, or, if lucky, a reprimand from party officials, which would include receiving a good beating from Youth Leaguers or Malawi Young Pioneers.

Women thus became a very effective tool for political control by Dr. Banda and his Malawi Congress Party. Their songs are a good testimony of the degree of submission to this repressive political culture:

| | |
|---|---|
| Tose tikhale chete ... | Let us be quiet |
| Lero Ngwazi ya wina | Be quiet to Kamuzu |
| ...tikhale chete | He is the winner |
| kwa Kamuzu. | |

- Song by Mzimba women.

By the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, a political culture of repression and silence was thus entrenched. For the majority of Malawians political life was non-existent and the country became "proof that repression can work".[29]

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[27] Lwanda, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, pp 83-84

[28] Lwanda, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, p.84.

[29] Africa Watch, Where Silence Rules, p.1.

## III

## Repression Challenged

It was not until 1992 that the country's Banda-centred political culture was openly challenged. The first to do this were catholic bishops in their lentern letter in March that year. "We would ... fail in our role as religious leaders if we kept silent on areas of concern", declared the bishops, "... Nobody should ever have to suffer reprisal for honestly expressing and living up to their convictions: intellectual, religious , or political". They added:

> We can only regret that this is not always the case in our country.... Academic freedom is seriously restricted; exposing injustices can be considered a betrayal; revealing some evils of our society is seen as slandering the country; monopoly of mass media and censorship prevent the expression of dissenting views; some people have paid dearly for their political opinions....[30]

For weeks the country was tense. The bishops were intimidated by the police and party functionaries. Those who dared speak out in support of the bishops were arrested and tortured.

As Dr. Banda was about to consolidate his hold on the country again, Chakufwa Tom Chihana, a trade unionist, picked up from where the bishops had left. He denounced the Malawi Congress Party as "a party of death and darkness" and challenged Dr. Banda to call for a referendum to let Malawians choose between a one-party state

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[30] Catholic Bishops, "Living Our Faith": A Lentern Letter (March, 1992).

and a multi-party democracy. Under pressure from internal political groups, the clergy, international donors and human rights organizations, Dr. Banda conceded and called for a referendum on 17th June, 1992. When the day came, he suffered a humiliating defeat.

During the referendum campaign, there was a renewed interest in popular performances. Officials of the two major political groups, the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) and the United Democratic Front (UDF), energized and mobilized their supporters with chants of "we want change, we want change", followed by "Kongresi paulendo, paulendo, paulendo" - Congress on its way out, on its way out. The motives and intentions of the referendum campaigners and their supporters were clearly spelt out in these chants. They "wanted change" and a multi-party system of government with the Congress out of it.

The same songs and dances that contributed to the creation and entrenchment of a repressive political culture were now used to challenge it:

| | |
|---|---|
| Tifuna yani lero<br>Matipate ... Winanso<br>ai Winanso ai. ....<br>matipate... | Who do we want<br>Multiparty. Nobody else<br>Nobody else, multi-party |

This would be followed by the chant: "Tatopa ndi Kongresi, talopa ndi Kongresi - We are tired of the Congress, we are tired of

the Congress". The targets of change were also clear: Dr. Banda himself, his Malawi Congress Party, and a few ministers very close to him.

The president, once the "Lion" of Malawi, was now a hyena:

| | |
|---|---|
| Uja m'kati ndi mkango<br>Le, ndi fisi | The one they said is<br>a lion, is now a<br>hyena. |

His Malawi Congress Party, once a sophisticated political player, was now a loser:

| | |
|---|---|
| Uja m'kati njododa<br>le yaluza | The one you said is<br>a juggler, is now<br>a loser |

Striking in these chants and songs was the imagery. In Malawian forklore, a hyena is an unintelligent animal that does not move during day time. It is afraid of being seen in the open. That is what Dr. Banda had become - a weak, unintelligent politician who could not face the emerging opposition politicians. His Congress Party was no longer a sophisticated juggler that could play tricks on the opposition politicians.

The move to a multi-party system of government was portrayed as "redemption in death", in a typical biblical fashion. A funeral song was adopted to send this message across:

| | |
|---|---|
| A Ngwazi inu .....<br>m'manja mwanu<br>tachoka, a Ngwazi inu<br>Tiri m'manja mwa<br>Muluzi, a Ngwazi inu | You Ngwazi, we are<br>no longer in your hands<br>You Ngwazi, we are<br>in the hands of Muluzi |

In its original context the song symbolizes the departure of a dead person's body and soul from the living world, on the way to God. In the political context, it was symbolic of the departure of the country from Dr. Banda's control and the beginning of a "new Malawi".

However, Dr. Banda's congress men and women did not lose control without fighting back. They were equally good at jibing at the opposition, and employing imagery to discredit its motives. Notable in this case was the image of bongololo, millipede. Congressmen and Women often jokingly inquired: "munali kuti inu a bongololo - where were you, you millipedes?" In Malawian folklore a millipede is a cowardly creature that coils every time it senses danger. The multi-party advocates were portrayed as cowardly creatures that could not face Dr. Banda when he was at his peak. Now they were taking advantage of his old age.

To members of the opposition, the bongololo concept was both a humorous aside, and a bawdy joke as well as a true portrayal of their strategy. It was true that they recoiled when Dr. Banda was at his peak. Whoever has watched a millipede move will know that after recoiling twice or thrice, the creature will keep moving when it senses that there is no real danger. That is what members of the opposition did. After a few detentions, beatings, and verbal reprisals, they decided to forge ahead, and on 17th May, 1994, the Banda - centered repressive culture collapse.

The bongololo spirit was well captured in the following poem from the UDF News:[11]

Bongololo, your meekness is the foot-stool
of the body of democracy
Today the train of democracy
Has recoiled, has submitted
Because the criers for freedom
have been insulted
From the official platforms

Alas, the enemy has not known
That by recoiling itself,
The long body of the marchers
has forged with reason
and determination.

## IV

## CONCLUSION

Though the bongololo spirit triumphed on 17th May, 1992, if would be wrong to assume, or argue, that popular performances will cease to play a dominant role in the country's political culture. The May general elections and change of government offered Malawians with an opportunity to create a new political culture. Unfortunately, popular performances that played an important role in the creation of the old repressive culture continue to be party-dominated; and may therefore be easily manipulated to articulate the interests of politicians, self-interested elites, and dominant groups. This is a potentially dangerous situation because the issues to be addressed will be controlled by the needs and agenda

[11] The UDF News, 24-30 May, 1993, p.6

of political agencies.[32] There is also too much emphasis on condemning the previous regime instead of creating a wide enough space for the airing of views and discussion of issues as a way of creating a new political culture. In addition, no attempt is made to revive the national identity and cultural nationalism that began during the period of nationalism and were nipped in the bud by the Banda autocracy and repressive political culture. These are areas where popular culture and popular performances will play a key role if given a chance.

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[32] For examples elsewhere see L. Gunner, "Forms of Popular Culture and the Struggle for Space" in Journal of Southern Africa Studies Vol.16 No.2 (June 1990) pp. 203-204. P. Kaarsholm, "Mental Colonisation or Catharsis? Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe" and S. Crehan, "Patronage, the State and Ideology in Zambian Theatre" in the same volume, pp 246 - 275 and 290-306, respectively.