

# Malawi's Marginalisation of Indigenous Languages in Literary Publications

Themba Moyo

## Origins of the post-colonial language policy and its practice

For more than forty years now Malawian political history has largely been determined by the policies that the former head of state, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, instituted, followed and enforced. His dictatorial rule (1964 -1994) was characterised by promoting Chewa<sup>1</sup> matrilineal social structures which he saw as crucial for the control of land and inheritance. He claimed that his was a social structure that had suffered from benign neglect under the British rule. He revived the concept and institution of the *mbumba*<sup>2</sup> and appointed himself as *nkhoswe*<sup>3</sup> number one. Dr. Banda became the anointed 'brother' who assumed the role of a mediator between sisters and brothers, and the one who took over the responsibility for his sisters and especially daughters. The Chewa concept of motherhood, further, formed the base of the 'four corner stones' of his rule: Unity, Loyalty, Obedience and Discipline. It bears noting that his views and this approach was purely for egotistical reasons—to boost and advance his own image and aspirations. Women were forcibly mobilised to

---

<sup>1</sup> Chichewa was regarded as a minority dialectal variant of Chinyanja (Mchombo 1998) spoken in central Malawi. Another main dialect spoken in Malawi is Chimang'anja spoken in the southern region. Chinyanja is thus a common name of the same language spoken also in Zambia and Mozambique. In Banda's era he elevated Chichewa to a language, whereby it attained national status and symbolism. This was from September 21 1968.

<sup>2</sup> *mbumba*: In a matrilineal culture these include sisters and their daughters where the brothers to the sisters are the custodians of the entire family.

<sup>3</sup> *nkhoswe*: Normally this is the name given to a brother or *ankhoswe*, i.e. brothers to sisters. The brothers assume custodianship and responsibility of the sisters and their daughters, particularly in marriage arrangements. One brother would thus be a *nkhoswe* of one sister, another brother for another sister, etc.

purchase *kanga*<sup>4</sup> material, which carried a portrait of the life president himself, as the women's league uniform. The president's portrait in *kanga* materials would be carefully positioned on the women's breasts. With this, the gyrating queens came to dance for him as their *nkhoswe* number one and his role as patriarch was set unhindered. This demonstrates Banda's bizarre aesthetics but also how he expropriated the Chewa values along with capitalist advertising conventions to boost his dwarf image both at home and abroad as a popular head of state. The result was a personality cult. He claimed to rule on behalf of the women whose custodian and protector he said he was, but in the process exalted his image as the *Ngwazi*<sup>5</sup> and the lion of Malawi.

His dictatorial rule 1964-1994 promoted Chewa values and its language which placed other languages and their cultural values on a path to total extinction, particularly in the print media. For functional purposes both at home and internationally he adopted the English language and its values and showed a strong passion for classical languages. For him, one was not educated without gaining a knowledge of Greek, Latin and French. 'His Excellency, *Ngwazi* Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda was a leading advocate of French as a modern language as well as Greek and Latin, from which French is derived' (*Daily Times* of May 1990). Phillip Short (1974) has described him as 'a child of two worlds'. We assume that these worlds are the African and the European, where the latter came first to him. Through his fragmentary language policies this meant that Malawian organic literature became fundamentally subverted as a result of the diglossic and hegemonic use of English and Chichewa only as the languages in which writers could see their works published.

Malawi's language policy rested on two ideologies of tribalism and regionalism, which were given to exclusivism and discrimination (Chirwa 1994/5:95). This was effected in the guise of nation-building and national unity. These might be considered as purely rhetorical goals. Through the exaltation of the president's ethnic dialect into a symbolic national language (in accordance with the president's wishes to exalt his own dialect, Chichewa), the language policy adopted a supremacist view of the Chewa language and its culture, in which eight other indigenous languages were relegated to the margins. These included Chitumbuka,

---

<sup>4</sup> *kanga*: A colourful java-printed material depicting colourful African images. In many African countries, some *kanga* materials have featured a country's head of state's portrait. In Malawi, several selected materials featured Banda's portrait which women were forced to acquire and to wear when they had to gyrate for him at his political rallies to boost his dwarfish image.

<sup>5</sup> *Ngwazi*: The word refers to one who has fought and won a heroic battle or battles. Banda 'attained' this title for liberating Malawi from colonial rule. He claimed to have achieved this single-handedly.

Chinkhonde, Chinyakyusa, Chilambya, Chitonga, Chiyao, Chilomwe and Chisena. The first five are spoken in the northern region where Chitumbuka has emerged as the regional *lingua franca*. Chichewa with its various dialects is the dominant language in the central region. Chiyao, Chilomwe and Chisena are languages spoken in the southern region, along with Chichewa which is also largely spoken in the south, but here it is commonly known as Chinyanja of the Chimang'anja dialect. The approximate proportions of the Malawian population that use different languages are open to question as to the precision of such figures, but may prove useful as a rough guide. (See figure below).

**Estimates of the number of Malawians who understand Chichewa**

Author	Speakers of Chichewa
Knappert (1998) .....	83%
Morrison et al (1989) .....	60%
Katzer et al (1989) .....	>30%
In Tadzadjeu (1977).....	77%

(Cf. Matiki 1998:13)

As is evident in these statistical differences, there is no agreement among scholars on the number of people who understand Chichewa (Matiki 1998:13). The northern region has more than six languages, of which Chitumbuka is the regional *lingua franca*. Chiyao, too, has a considerable number of speakers, largely in the southern region and some also in the central region, along the Salima-Chipoka lakeshore corridor. Chiyao is particularly widely spoken in the densely populated districts of Machinga, Mangochi, Zomba, Chiradzulu and the Blantyre rural district. The two languages, Chitumbuka and Chiyao, could thus be seen as languages of wider communication, regionally, than other languages spoken within their respective regional communities. Banda did not allow linguistic surveys to be carried out during his rule, presumably for fear of true revelation of how languages ought to be determined at both regional and national levels for use.

The 1966 statistics which attempted to give estimated population figures of speakers per language were based on a population census count rather than on a sociolinguistic count. This explains why many scholars have viewed such figures as skewed and therefore treated them with caution. There is clearly a diverse ethno-linguistic composition of the country, despite the claim Banda made that the Chewa of the central region, from which Banda himself came, constituted the country's majority tribe (Chirwa 1994:99). This claim has 'no demographic or ethno-linguistic validity' (Africa Watch 1990:57) as there is no 'dominant linguistic group' (Chirwa 1994:99). The statistics provided in the 1966 census count could therefore be viewed as having been skewed to salvage a set political agenda. It seems that Banda saw the

introduction of Chichewa as a national language as part of the attempt 'to promote the idea that Chewa culture was synonymous with Malawi' (*Africa Watch* 1990:35). This indicates 'the degree to which the regime was bent on regionalistic and ethnic particularism' (Chirwa 1994:104).

Anyone who expressed ethnic identity apart from the president himself was condemned as a 'tribalist', bent on undermining the 'four corner stones' of the Malawian Congress Party. Everyone was thus expected to rally behind the strong leader, the 'father of the nation'. Expression of one's ethnic identity through one's language use on official platforms was regarded as a sign of disloyalty to one's nation and to the head of state personally.

Chichewa as a language symbolised Malawi and Malawi was synonymous with Banda. By promoting his own tribalism he denounced it in others (Vail & White 1989). The elevation of the Chewa language and its culture, through which the citizenry were to identify themselves nationally, was the worst example of a language policy marked by linguacentrism of the hegemony of the English-Chichewa diglossia alone.

### **The origin of indigenous literature in print**

Christian missionaries started literary production in the written mode in indigenous Malawian languages in the nineteenth century. The missionaries, as forerunners of British administration and business enterprises, realised that to achieve their evangelising mission they had to educate the natives through their indigenous languages first. After this they were exposed to English to improve their knowledge of the language and their prospects of employment. Converts were also taught skills such as carpentry, hospital assistantship, bookkeeping and clerical skills. This was part of the proselytisation process, where schools were set up and the Christian converts made to learn the 3 Rs—i.e. Reading, Writing and Arithmetic.

The intention was that such activities could bring light to a country that was described to have been in darkness, as was the rest of heathen Africa. In the quest to bring this light, the Scottish missionary, David Livingstone, persuaded his British compatriots and investors at Cambridge University to direct their attention to Africa and in particular to Southern Africa. He had further advocated the colonisation of countries such as Malawi through the 'Three Cs': Commerce, Christianity and Civilisation. Apart from the presumed initial goal of missionising, these three Cs became the main catalyst in the globalisation of European capitalism. It bears noting therefore that the colonising mission had to be mediated through the 3Rs.

In the process of making the converts literate through Christian literature, the first printing house, the Hetherwick Press, was established by the Scottish missionaries at Blantyre Mission in 1884. The missionaries thus became the first to

develop vernacular languages through the work of this press. Vernacular languages such as Chinyanja (this was the original name of the language before it was changed to Chichewa on 21st September, 1968) and Chitumbuka, which were the country's two main languages for early instruction and mass communication, had their grammars and dictionaries codified, along with the production of their orthographies.

Mphande (1996) has argued that while the colonisers condemned indigenous cultures as heathen and therefore marked them for destruction, the irony of this colonial situation is that they (the colonisers) deemed it necessary to 'civilise' the natives in their own locale through their own cultural expressions. The purpose of this was to create an overarching image of a national culture which, through indirect rule, would facilitate the proselytisation of the different native peoples.

With this kind of ideology it is not surprising therefore that the origin of the pioneer Malawian writers in indigenous languages tended toward Christian moralisation. The literature that was first published was largely dependent upon biblical stories and traditional life. The mission schools encouraged the first African converts to write stories about the joys of conversion in their indigenous languages (Mphande 1996:93). One such leading convert of the Presbyterian Scottish mission in Malawi, Charles Chidongo Chinula, for example, translated John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* into Chitumbuka. Hetherwick Press subsequently published it in 1932. A considerable number of Christian nativity plays and morality tales were also translated into indigenous languages.

Other publications which were marked by biblical and traditional life could be seen in the titles of early Chinyanja novels and plays. These included *Kazitape* (*Tale Teller* 1950) by E.W. Chafulumira and *Mkazi wacimaso-maso* (*Zomfula the Unfaithful Wife* 1959), by Jacob Zulu. Again the basic aim of this literature was to convert natives to Christianity but also to help them assimilate European values and aesthetics. The agenda then primarily signified the British intention 'to align culture as a critical axis in their colonising mission' (Mphande 1996:92).

Another fundamental way in which the missionaries and the colonialists achieved this was also through appropriation. For instance, indigenous cultural forms of expression, particularly song, were incorporated into the Church of Scotland practices. In the production of this literature that was printed through missionary efforts

many songs and other forms of cultural expressions were appropriated by the Christian missionaries, 'exorcised' of their pagan traits, and reconstructed in accordance with English prosody melody. They then were reissued as church hymns, with little regard by them to whatever had once regulated their prior use. Ingoma war songs thus found their places alongside popular English melodies in church hymnals (Mphande 1996:93).

Chingoni<sup>6</sup> and later Chitumbuka in northern Malawi were creatively employed in songs of well-known African tunes, which were subsequently sung in churches. This obviously suggests that the missionaries saw flavour in African songs which they converted into church hymnals.

### **Language as a social badge**

Language is not just a code. It becomes a marker of individuals' identity. Communities which cannot express themselves through the written word in their own languages will remain virtually rootless with little else to leave behind for posterity. While we recognise the economic argument that writing in the language of power, English, brings in income in the form of royalties that accrue to such authors through a wider readership, some literary works would still need to be expressed in local languages that carry a unique flavour in their idioms and other forms of proverbial expression. Such features give the readers and the community at large their identity. It bears noting, as Njabulo Ndebele has argued, that 'Tolstoy did not write in English. Nor did Ibsen, nor Thomas Mofolo. Yet their works are known the world over' (cited by Lindfors 1989:50).

### **Statistical information on published works in indigenous languages**

The marginalisation of Chitumbuka from 21st September 1968 together with the rest of Malawian indigenous languages by government policy which permitted only Chichewa and English to be used as languages for literary publications, meant that other indigenous languages were reduced to oral languages of the home and ethnic identity only. Writers and other folklorists, for example, could only write their works in their minds only or tell such tales orally in their languages to their folks in their homes but not through the state-owned Malawi Broadcasting Corporation's (MBC's) literary programmes or through the publishing houses. This restriction was applied until 1994.

---

<sup>6</sup> The original Chingoni was a dialect of isiZulu which came into Malawi with the arrival of the Nguni settlers, of Zulu, Swazi and Xhosa stock in the nineteenth century. Chingoni today refers to the Chitumbuka dialect spoken in Mzimba as the original Chingoni is obsolete. It has been submerged into Chitumbuka. A little of it, however, is still spoken in Mpherembe area in Mzimba. It is also used in *izibongo* (praises, particularly of chiefs etc.) and *zithakazelo* (clan praise names).

Kamwendo (1998) has reported on a survey conducted by the Writers' and Artists Services International (WASI). The survey showed that between 1900-1988, only 42 literary works were published in Malawi, in the three languages, in the following order: English as the most frequent, followed by Chichewa and Chitumbuka. Most of the publications in Chitumbuka were published in the period before Malawi attained her independence. Here the Livingstonia Mission made a significant contribution to the encouragement of the language and growth of the secular literature in the language (Kamwendo 1998:34).

What we note is that literary works remain non-existent in the other indigenous languages such as Chiyao, Chisena and Chilomwe, and so on. These languages are clearly viable languages in the areas where they are spoken, and texts in these languages would thus command considerable readership. 'One therefore cannot talk of a novel in Chiyao, a short story anthology in Chilomwe or a collection of poetry in Chisena in Malawi' (Kamwendo 1998:34). While this is the case with non-existent published works in the marginalised languages, Timpunza-Mvula (1995) noted that there was an unequalled growing body of literature in Chichewa, which included essays, poems, plays, newsletters, books and novels. This increasing volume of literature might seem to imply that Chichewa, 'was the only authentic literature of national importance' (Timpunza-Mvula 1995 in Kamwendo 1998:34). Timpunza-Mvula (1995) further noted that it was unfortunate that there was no corresponding literature in any other languages. The only publication of note in Chiyao was *Cikala ca Wayao* by Johanna Abdallah. Kishindo (1994:132) has noted that the foreword to the book hailed it as an indispensable text for anyone who wished to understand the dynamics of Yao society in historical perspectives. But this was more than a historical text. It also told of the cultural outlook of the Yao.

The general picture then of published works in Malawian indigenous languages is one that Kamwendo (1998:34) has referred to as a 'literary drought' largely as a result of the skewed language policy that the Banda regime pursued.

## **Problems in the development of the orthography and grammars of indigenous languages**

While Chichewa has undergone considerable development in its grammar and orthographic principles through the Chichewa Board established in 1972, its progress has been hindered by the absence of a long-awaited dictionary. From 1972 to 1995, when the Board was being dissolved, this had still not been published. Its absence posed problems for budding writers who may have waited to use it in writing. With regard to other indigenous languages, hardly anything had been done in the way of codifying these languages in grammar books and dictionaries.

However, preliminary efforts made by missionaries in the development of indigenous languages need to be commended. Edward Steere published *Collections for a handbook of the Yao language* as long ago as 1871. Two decades later this was followed by Alexander Hetherwick's publication of *A Handbook of Yao Language*. George Meredith Sanderson, who had studied Chiyao as it was spoken in Nyasaland, published *A grammar of Chiyao* in 1922 and *A Dictionary of the Yao Language* in 1954. Sanderson's work is widely acknowledged to be definitive and authoritative (Kishindo 1994:132). Bishop Frank Thorne had expressed regret that the language had 'not been recognised as one of the official languages of the protectorate' in view of its musical nature, and the virility and interesting nature of the Yaos. Nevertheless in the period between 1964-1994 the language was not recognised as a suitable and potential vehicle of literary expression and publication.

It is interesting to note that Timpunza-Mvula (1992) sympathised with the post-colonial government's institution of monolingualism through the promotion of Chichewa as the language through which different ethnolinguistic groups would express and identify themselves. He then claimed that there had not 'been any antagonism to Chichewa language policy' which he 'ascribed to the charismatic and pragmatic leadership of Dr. Kamuzu Banda and the people of Malawi' (Timpunza-Mvula, 1992:40). But he was a little naive in not recognising how the populace was coerced into accepting Banda's language and cultural policies through political repression. And it bears noting that while there was no overt challenge to the established policies, this did not mean that covert resistance was absent. 'For instance it was not uncommon for non Chewa speakers to speak the language deliberately badly, trivialise its cultural traditions, or downplay its importance in schools' (Chirwa 1994:106). This reaction could have only been intended to reflect dissenting views of exclusivist linguistic policies which allowed the use of only one language for official purposes.

Three years later, however, Timpunza-Mvula came to recognise the detrimental effects of the use of Chichewa as the only indigenous language for use in published works, when he came to note that 'one would assume that Chichewa is the only authentic literature of national importance' (Timpunza-Mvula et al in Kamwendo 1998:34).

With regard to Chitumbuka, the other indigenous language employed in print, very little was published on the description of the language. The missionary Walter Emslie published *Notes on the Tumbuka Language as spoken in Mombera's Country* in 1891 (the year the country became a British Protectorate) and a *Table of Concords and Paradigm of Verbs of the Tumbuka Language as Spoken in Mombera's Country*. In 1911, Donald Mackenzie published *Notes on Tumbuka Syntax*, which was another minor work (Kishindo 1994:134). Dr. Emslie's *Introductory Grammar of the Tumbuka* (1913) was more substantial than his earlier



work. It was, however, not until 1952 that William Turner published the *Tumbuka-Tonga-English Dictionary* which could have gone some way toward assisting writers in their writing. With the outlawing of Chitumbuka as a viable *lingua franca* for the northern people in 1968 through a presidential decree, all hopes of literary growth through published works in the language were shattered. In schools and in publishing houses, written books were removed. There was no evidence of the language in print—i.e. with the exception of those who still had Bibles and hymns printed in the language. However, it did not only remain a powerful language confined to a specific region, but was also used by speakers in the other regions.

The same exclusivist language policies lamentably contributed to the literary drought in post-independent Malawi. Children who were born after 1964 were referred to as 'the born-frees', since they were born after the country had attained its independence in 1964. They were therefore believed to have been liberated in all respects. However, their access to literary works for knowledge and also for enjoyment purposes was ironically severely restricted as they could obtain only works written in English and Chichewa. These were also the only languages they were allowed to speak in public places and at school.

I witnessed an interesting conversation, which exemplifies the destructive effects of this language policy. A grandmother, speaking Chitumbuka, asked her granddaughter (who was in standard eight): 'Ka mukusambira nkhuni?' meaning, 'Where do you go to school?'. The granddaughter, being fluent in Chichewa and not in her mother tongue, only picked up the word 'sambila'. In Chitumbuka in this context the word means 'to attend school' but in Chichewa it means 'to swim'. The answer the grandmother received was, 'Timasambila ku lake.' The answer was obviously in Chichewa. This is a code-switched sentence, meaning, 'We swim at the lake'. To a further inquiry made by the grandmother, 'How do you spell Ekwendeni?' The grand daughter spelt it as 'Equenden'. Ekwendeni is the name place of her maternal grandmother and her mother. The girl's error was understandable given that she had never seen the Chitumbuka orthography anywhere, at home or at school, and therefore only used her ingenuity to spell it along the lines of English or Chichewa, the only languages she knows.

The point here is that there are a considerable number of young people, as well as adults, born after 1964, who have never seen or read any literary works in their respective indigenous languages or indeed works in other languages other than Chichewa or English, with the possible exception of the Bible and hymns, some of which could have survived extinction after the 1968 decree. These suppressed languages include Chilomwe, which is rarely spoken (see Kishindo 1994), Chisena, Chitumbuka and Chiyao, all of which are languages that are widely used and therefore deserve to be developed and employed in literary works.

## **The impact of censorship laws on publications**

In Malawi the Censorship Board's members were appointed by the president and were entirely of Chewa origin. Its infamous Censorship and Control Entertainment Act (1972) had a tremendous impact on what could be viewed, performed and published, either in English or in Chichewa. This became the government's main weapon in the control of access to knowledge and information produced within Malawi and elsewhere. The Censorship Board, through its enactment of this Act, prohibited publications which it deemed as 'prejudicial to public security' that would 'undermine the authority of, or the public security or confidence in the government and promote ill-will among the inhabitants of Malawi' (Mphande 1996:99). The act further decreed that any work of art or book could be censored if it was deemed to be indecent, obscene, offensive or harmful to what it claimed to be public morals. The total effect was that such measures brought about stagnation in literary publications where budding writers were left with no foundation to build on and no framework within which to work out their own artistic destiny. Furthermore, its vague phraseology meant that there would always be a way of controlling what was published within the country. This led to a situation where there was virtual total control of access to alternative published literatures in indigenous languages. What the government feared most was 'seditious' literature that would influence Malawi's population to become revolutionary.

Punishment for writing or live performances of what the Censorship Board construed as seditious works was imprisonment without trial or recourse to any form of justice. This can be exemplified by the arrest of the academic and poet, Jack Mapanje, in September 1987. Banda arrested him for writing poetry in English which the government concluded was seditious. He was only released after being in jail for four years without any form of hearing or trial.

The existence of the Censorship Board made writing in both indigenous languages and English a risky business, and it was because of the risks involved that writers were denied their right to give a measure of elegance to their own indigenous languages.

The institution of these authoritarian measures had an inimical effect on indigenous literature to some considerable extent. Even through the sole indigenous language of publication, the Chichewa syllabi in schools remained stifled as a result of government control. Jolly Max Ntuba laments the implications of this:

The most important question is: how can the youth be interested in reading about Malawi culture in a novel when there is no Malawian novel among their prescribed books in their classroom?

I will repeat if it only to bore the reader: it's even sadder to note that in schools

no Malawian novel has yet found its place—whether at primary school, Junior Certificate or Malawi Certificate level. This fact alone ... portrays the much hated ugly impression (Ntaba 1984:06).

Ntaba, a prolific novelist and a short story writer through the medium of Chichewa, further criticised the Censorship Board as he observed that '90% of the creative writers' materials was being rejected by the censors as there was clear evidence that 'there was [a] deliberate attempt to discourage writers' and this situation was made worse by what he referred to as 'political opposition in the guise of literature' (Ntaba 1984:8f).

It bears noting that Jolly Max Ntaba's books written in Chichewa had secured a more stable market in Zambia. His last two novels were not even available in bookshops Malawi. The fact that publications were confined to English and Chichewa for over thirty years has meant that publishing houses and sponsors of writing competitions could have developed interest in only these two languages.

For over six years (1981-1988) I participated and chaired the 'Writers' Corner', a literary programme, in English, in which literary works are critiqued every Sunday evening on the national radio. 'Theatre of the Air' which features drama is another popular programme in English. The two literary programmes for radio in Chichewa are 'Nzeli Nkupangwa' (which largely focuses on poetry and short stories) and 'Mlakatuli' (which is purely devoted to poetry in Chichewa). Even after the 1996 reviewed language policy was adopted in which five other indigenous languages (namely, Chitumbuka, Chiyao, Chilomwe, Chitonga and Chisena) were elevated to official status, programmes devoted to creative works have not been featured in these other languages.

Generally, writers have held negative attitudes towards literary works published on air or in text in indigenous languages. This has largely been based on economic reasons as there is little income in the form of royalties that accrue from such efforts. Added to this is the notion that to publish works in English indicates that the author is knowledgeable, whereas to publish in an indigenous language is equated with backwardness. Publications in English have thus given these artists more prestige than their fellow artists published in indigenous languages. The impact of this ideology has caused the number of publications in Chichewa to dwindle while the rest of the indigenous languages were long relegated to oblivion. Kamwendo (1998:37) has noted that it is 'unfortunate that thirty years of independence have not freed some Malawians from linguistic imperialism or linguistic chauvinism.' There is

a tendency to degrade local languages and exalt foreign languages, especially English, the language of the former coloniser.

The *Malawi News*, a weekend edition of *The Daily Times*, which was owned by Banda and his lifetime companion, Miss Cecelia Kadzamira, further controlled people's access to literary works as it largely carries stories in English, but concedes about two and a half pages in Chichewa. *The Weekend Nation* has only four out of its usual 16-17 pages devoted to Chichewa. In a country with already a low level of literacy, literary publications in English have further limited the amount of knowledge and sheer enjoyment of literary works that can be accessed by the masses in their own languages. In all there are five Malawian newspapers, all of which largely employ English, with the exception of the *Malawi News* and the *Weekend Nation*, both of which grant a few pages in Chichewa. There are no newspapers that use other indigenous languages apart from Chichewa.

Written publications in English which have placed Malawian leading writers into wider international readership, earning more prestige than those published in indigenous languages, have included Joe Mosiwa's *Who Will Marry Our Daughter?* Lupenga Mphande & Anthony Nazombe's (eds.) *Namaludzi*; Anthony Nazombe's (ed.) *The Haunting Wind* (1990); Lupenga Mphande's *Crackle at Midnight* (1995); Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* (1993); Frank Chipasula's *Whispers in the Wings* (1991); Tikambe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* (1992); and Chimombo's *Napolo Poems* (1987) among others.

Many of these works published in English were the result of efforts of the Writers' Group founded in April 1970 by a group of six students at the main campus of the University of Malawi, Chancellor College. Most of the initial manuscripts discussed in the Writers' Groups' sessions appeared in English in the University's literary publications, *Expression*, *Expression Supplement*, *Soche Cedar* and *Odi*.

While budding writers were indoctrinated to write in English, they were also made to 'imitate English literary traditions that seemed calculated to make them into Black Wordsworths, Black Shakespeares, or Black Eliots' (Mphande 1996:90). Mphande (1996:90) further cites Ken Lipenga, a writer in the English medium, who noted that there was a compulsory reading list in the English Department of the University of Malawi, which Lipenga described as having been calculated to ensure that even after the attainment of independence in 1964, the perpetuation of colonialism continued through cultural dependence. What we observe here is that some indoctrination of the writers' minds operated through the Western canon through the English language, where little attempt was made to establish a more liberating and distinctively Malawian literary tradition, even through the medium of English itself. This then impelled these budding writers further away from ever writing in their own mother tongues.

Even if some would have attempted to work in the vernacular, the problem was further compounded by the prescription that the only alternative was Chichewa. Publishers, too, have exploited this situation because their only consideration is the money to be generated from publications in English. Even where the works published have been of mediocre quality these have been promoted as long as they are in the economically 'correct' medium.

## Future prospects

We have noted above that with the language policy review of 1996, the present government elevated five other indigenous languages, in addition to Chichewa, to official status. A directive was made by the Ministry of Education that with effect from the 1997 academic year, mother tongues would be employed as instructional languages in early education from grade 1-4. From a psycholinguistic perspective this heralded hope that more learners would gain more knowledge through the languages of their homes or in those languages in which they would have attained proficiency in reading and writing. This would thus enable them to learn more effectively. With regard to literary publications, linguistic liberalisation meant freedom of expression for all which would presumably see more literary works published in indigenous languages. Besides, there was hope that this would also go some way toward improving the standard of literacy in the vernaculars generally.

After the first democratic elections in Malawi in 1994, a considerable number of newspapers flourished but these were again largely published in English. The only newspaper that published in Chichewa, the only vernacular used by a newspaper, was the Malawi News. It was much later that the *Weekend Nation* followed suit. This flurry, however, soon withered, perhaps as publishers saw little economic gain even if they published in English. One of them, *The Democrat*, has since become a fortnightly paper and not a daily paper. The two main dailies—both in English—remain *The Nation* and the *Daily Times*. 'Despite this linguistic liberalisation, the Malawian writer and publisher remain glued to two traditional languages, i.e. English and Chichewa' (Kamwendo 1998:35). No one has dared to write in either Chitumbuka or Chiyao, which are both languages which—in the absence of reliable linguistic surveys—we assume are widely spoken in the country along with Chichewa. The three indigenous languages, Chichewa, Chitumbuka and Chiyao, are far more widely used among the masses than English. The notion of linguistic liberalisation has not yet found root in Malawi as pride in the use of other vernacular languages has not arisen in many. This pertains to readers as well as writers.

It also bears noting that since the official recognition of the five other indigenous languages the general public has vehemently complained through the

press, that the elevation of these languages to official status and particularly their use as instructional languages in early education will lead to the lowering of standards in English. Yet again we see that English is valued more than vernacular languages in terms of its economic cachet. Furthermore, it reflects the élite's view of English as the language of power: educational, economical and social.

There seems to be little harm caused in publishing in a global language such as English, if the intention is to project and promote a pan-Africanist image of global significance. Writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986:72) have, however, appealed for the decolonisation of the writers' and readers' minds from what he has described as 'the Western imperialist linguistic bondage.' He has argued that the development of languages of the supremacist powers such as English should not be at the dire expense of regional languages.

It seems it would be a worthwhile effort to develop indigenous languages, not only for literary consumption, but also so that they can be utilised and function to their fullest capacities for different purposes if their grammars are described and their orthographies developed. It is heartening to note that the Centre for Language Studies in Malawi has been established in place of what used to be the Chichewa Board. It has made an effort to develop a more comprehensive language policy for the country and has already embarked on the harmonisation of orthographies of varieties of languages and not just of Chichewa alone. This in the recognition of the fact that there is a need for the preservation and celebration of the linguistic and cultural pluralism that characterises Malawi as a multilingual state (Mchombo 1998:41).

## **Conclusion**

Six years after the first democratic elections, after more than thirty years of dictatorial rule, the use of other indigenous languages on the radio is token. The languages elevated to official status are only heard in the ten minutes' news slots allocated for each. The hegemony of Chichewa continues along with that of the most powerful language, English. The rhetoric supporting the recognition and preservation of all other languages and cultures through their use in published literary works does not imply the desire to implement a pragmatic language policy, just as the mechanism of absolutist control of the censorship laws remains intact as they have still not been repealed in Malawi; the political structure and bureaucracy still retains Banda-ism.

Little has changed in the country, let alone the thought of encouraging writers to publish in their respective indigenous languages. Here the government of the day will need to consider a bottom-up approach that has to be initiated by the civil society where the indigenous languages in these communities are used. This is in the hope that they can also be employed in literary works, even if published on a small scale.

With the dawn of the democratic era in May 1994, everyone was looking forward to the new political and linguistic restructuring which would move toward a genuine linguistic pluralism, in keeping with the notion of democracy, through egalitarian linguistic use. The institution of monolingualism at the indigenous level and bilingualism at the national level, in literary publications, in a multilingual state cannot be seen as desirable for socio-cultural, linguistic, literary diversity, political access and the development of the country as a whole.

Department of Linguistics  
University of Zululand

## References

- Africa Watch 1990. *Where Silence Rules: The Oppression of Dissent in Malawi*. New York: Washington DC & London: Human Rights Watch.
- Chimombo, S 1987. *Napolo Poems*. Blantyre: Manchichi Publishers.
- Chipasula, F 1991. *Whispers in the Wings*. London: Heinemann.
- Chirwa, CW 1994. The Politics of Ethnicity and Regionalism in Contemporary Malawi. *African Rural & Urban Studies* 1,2:93-118.
- Chirwa, CW 1994/5. Regionalism, Ethnicity and the National Question in Malawi. *SAPEM*, Dec/Jan:59-62.
- Kamwendo, G 1997. English in the Malawi Education System: The Present and the Future. Conference paper presented at the English Teachers Connect, 12-14th July at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
- Kamwendo, G 1998. The Use of Vernacular Languages in the Malawian Literary Industry. *Alternation* 5,1:32-38.
- Kishindo, Pascal 1994. The Impact of a National Language on Minority Languages: The Case of Malawi. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 12,2:127-150.
- Lindfors, B (ed) 1989. *Kulankhula: Interviews with Writers from Malawi and Lesotho*. Bayreuth: African Studies Series.
- Mapanje, J 1993. *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu*. London: Heinemann.
- Matiki, AJI 1998. *An Exploration of Language Planning Issues in Malawi*. Bayreuth: African Studies Centre, Boston University (African Studies Series 14.)
- Mchombo, SA 1998. National Identity, Democracy and the Politics of Language in Malawi and Tanzania. *Journal of African Policy Studies* 4,1:33-46.
- Mosiwa, J 1975. *Who will Marry our Daughter?* Blantyre: Longman.
- Mphande, L 1996. Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda and the Malawi Writers' Group: The (un)making of a Cultural Tradition. *Research in African Literatures* 27,1, Spring: 80-101.
- Mphande, L & A Nazombe (eds) 1984. *Namaludzi*. Blantyre: Dzuka Publishing Company.

- Nazombe, A (ed) 1990. *The Haunting Wind: New Poetry from Malawi*. Blantyre: Dzuka Publishing Company.
- Ng'ombe, J 1989. *Sugarcane with Salt*. Blantyre: Dzuka Publishing Company.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in English Literature*. London: James Currey.
- Ntata, JM 1984. Problems of Writing—The Local Malawian Novelist. In *MALA Bulletin: The Journal of the Malawi Library Association* 4,1:4-12.
- Short, P 1974. *Banda*. London: Kegan Paul.
- Timpunza-Mvula, E 1992. Language Policies in Africa: The Case for Chichewa in Malawi. In Herbert, RK (ed): *Language and Society in Africa: The Theory and Practice of Sociolinguistics*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Vail, L & L White 1989. Tribalism in the Political History of Malawi. In Vail, L (ed): *The Creation of Tradition in Southern Africa*. London: James Currey.
- Zezeza, T 1992. *Smouldering Charcoal*. Oxford: Heinemann.