

Language, Identity, and the Politics of Recognition in the Post-Banda Northern Malawi

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Abstract

From the time of the attainment of independence from Britain in 1964 up to 1994, Malawi was under President Hastings Kamuzu Banda's one-party dictatorship. Nation-building was founded on the principle of one nation, one party (the Malawi Congress Party), one leader (Life President Banda) and one national language (Chinyanja/Chichewa). Despite the fact that Malawi is multilingual and multiethnic, the Banda regime created an oppressive political atmosphere under which non-Chewa ethnic and linguistic identities were suppressed. In response to the demise of the Banda regime in 1994 (through the ballot box), there has been a revival of linguistic/ethnic identity-seeking behavior amongst some ethnolinguistic groups. Such groups, for example, now seek official recognition of their languages. This paper discusses this trend of the politics of recognition with special reference to the Northern region of Malawi.

Introduction

During the first 30 years of Malawi's independence (1964-1994), the country was under President Hastings Kamuzu Banda's one-party authoritarian rule. In line with Banda's nation-building ideology, Malawi followed the pattern: one nation, one party (the Malawi Congress Party), one leader (Life President Banda) and one national language (Chichewa/Chinyanja). Despite the fact that Malawi is multilingual and multiethnic, the Banda regime created a political atmosphere under which non-Chewa ethnic and/or linguistic identities were suppressed. As Carolyn McMaster observes, President Banda, using:

...the terminology of the matrilineal society, cast himself as the *Nkhoswe* no.1, the maternal uncle to whom societal decisions were referred. This use of Chewa imagery is a good example of Dr. Banda's projection of Chewa traditions and language onto the whole of Malawian society, a projection which has not always been greeted with wholehearted enthusiasm by members of other tribes such as the Ngoni and the Tumbuka (McMaster 1974: 66).

As a result of the demise of the authoritarianism in 1994 following President Banda's defeat in the first post-independence multiparty general elections, Malawians are now able to declare and celebrate their ethnic and linguistic identities without fear. In this paper, I examine such a development in the Northern Region of Malawi, the

country's most linguistically heterogeneous region where Chitumbuka is the lingua franca. I discuss the major current trends that are linked to linguistic identity declaration and language-centered politics of recognition.

I now describe the arrangement of this paper. I introduce the Northern Region in section 1.2 as follows: the region's location, administration and population (1.2.1), the Ngoni intrusion into the region (1.2.2), dissidence and political activism in the region (1.2.3), and the notion of the "Dead North" (1.2.4). In section 1.3, I introduce and discuss the politics of recognition in the post-colonial Africa. In section 2, I highlight the Northern Region's linguistic and ethnic diversity. The philosophy of 'one nation, one language,' as experienced during the era of Malawi's first president (Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda), is outlined in section 3. During this era, linguistic diversity was regarded as a threat to national unity and cohesion. In contrast, the post-Banda era (section 4) has embraced the philosophy of unity within linguistic and cultural diversity. It is this philosophy, under a democratic political dispensation, that has created a fertile environment in which language-based politics of recognition can grow. The Banda era had no room for such politics of recognition. Finally, section 5 concludes the discussion.

1.2. Northern Malawi: An Introduction

1.2.1. Location, Administration and Population

Malawi is a small landlocked country situated in Southern Africa. Malawi shares borders with Zambia to the west, Tanzania to the north and northeast and Mozambique to the east, south and southwest. Administratively, Malawi is divided into three regions: the Northern Region, the

Central Region and the Southern Region. Each region is made up of administrative districts. The Northern Region is the smallest and is comprised of six districts: Mzimba, Rumphu, Karonga, the Likoma Islands, Nkhata Bay and Chitipa. Mzuzu, the regional capital of the Northern Region, lies within Mzimba district. The 1998 population census report put Malawi's population at 9.9 million. The Northern Region recorded 12 percent of the national total (the lowest), while the Central Region and the Southern Region registered 41 percent and 47 percent of the national total respectively (National Statistical Office 1998).

1.2.2. The Ngoni Intrusion

The Ngoni intrusion into the Northern Region of Malawi in the 19th century was an important historical development. The various Nguni groups started to move out of present-day Natal (South Africa) and Swaziland in the early 19th century. Of particular importance to Malawi are two groups, one that was under the leadership of Zwangendaba and the other belonging to Maseko. Both groups crossed the Zambezi River in 1835. The Zwangendaba group split, with one group settling at Chipata (in present-day Zambia), the second in Mzimba (in Malawi) and the third group in the Rovuma Valley in Tanzania. The Maseko group settled in Dedza and Ntcheu, along the current Malawi-Mozambique border area. Around 1855 the Ngoni of Zwangendaba group, under the leadership of Mbelwa, defeated the Tumbuka and Tonga in present-day Northern Malawi. When the Ngoni entered present-day Northern Malawi, the region not only was inhabited by the Tumbuka but also Tonga, Lambya, Ngonde and others. The Ngoni themselves were not homogeneous either. Their

group had within it non-Ngoni peoples that had been captured during the trek from Natal towards the present-day Malawi region. The Ngoni were slow to adopt Christianity and education. This was in contrast to their subjects, the Tumbuka, who were quick to accept the religion and education brought by the Livingstonia Mission. The Ngoni, on the other hand, had fears that Christianity would have a negative impact on their military prowess and expansionist ambitions.

1.2.3. Dissidence and Political Activism

The modern history of Northern Malawi cannot be complete without the mention of the Livingstonia Mission, an offshoot of the Free Church of Scotland (see, for example, McCracken 1977a, 1977b, 1994; Vail and White 1989). The Livingstonia Mission contributed to the cultivation of a culture of dissidence and political activism in the Northern Region of Malawi. The Livingstonia Mission set up the most comprehensive and advanced educational system. The Mission's Overtoun Institute attracted students not only from Nyasaland but also from some parts of neighboring Tanzania (then Tanganyika) and Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia). As a center of academic excellence, the institute is remembered for producing critical-thinking graduates and excellent non-native speakers of English. There is a general agreement among scholars of Malawian missionary/colonial history that the Livingstonia Mission "provided Northern Nyasaland with an educational head start that was to survive, regionally, at least to the 1920s and, nationally, until the present day" (McCracken 1994: 3; see also McCracken 1977a; Vail and White 1989). McMaster makes the same point: "The regional educational disparity

thus created had a lasting effect on the political development of the territory; for example, the first proto-political organizations were set up in the Northern Region" (McMaster 1974: 12).

During the post-independence era, the Northern Region of Malawi produced a significant number of Banda's so-called enemies such as Kanyama Chiume, Orton and Vera Chirwa (see, for example, McMaster 1974; Short 1974; Vail and White 1989; Africa Watch 1990). It is small wonder, therefore, that the Banda regime regarded the region as the home of "dissidents," "rebels," "confusionists" or "disgruntled elements," to use the labels that referred to those who held views that differed from those of Banda. A number of people of Northern and Southern Region origins were, therefore, persecuted during the Banda era for holding political views that clashed with Banda's political agenda (see Africa Watch 1990).

1.2.4. *"The Dead North"*

The Northern Region, since the colonial days, has been the most economically underdeveloped region. It is this situation that led British colonial officials to label the region in negative economic terms as the "Dead North." Despite having had an excellent education system established by the Livingstonia Mission, the Northern Region lagged behind the other two regions in terms of economic advancement (see McCracken 1977b). The European plantation economy was largely confined to the Southern Region. Because of a significant presence of the European planters, traders and colonial officials in the Southern Region, it is not surprising that the region developed at a faster rate than the North. The growth in the Southern Region of the towns of Limbe

and Blantyre into key commercial centers, and the establishment of the colonial capital in Zomba, contributed to the unequal development of the three regions (McCracken 1977b).

1.3. The Politics of Recognition in Post-Colonial Africa

The first generation of African leaders neglected civil, political and language rights because such rights were perceived to be potentially subversive. Building strong nation states against a background of ethnic and linguistic diversity was high on the national political agenda. As Harri Englund put it, "nation building was the altar at which ethnic and linguistic diversity was to be sacrificed" (Englund 2003: 9). Malawi, for example, adopted a one nation, one party, and one language policy as a way of consolidating national unity. Malawi's northern neighbor, Tanzania, adopted a similar policy, with Kiswahili as the official and national language. The *Kiswahilization* program was regarded as the cement of national unity within the *Ujaama* socialist paradigm. In Botswana—another multilingual and multicultural country—the same trend towards nation building was implemented. Botswana favored homogeneity and fostered it through the retention of English as the official language and Setswana as the national language. The government's *Tswanification* or *Tswanalization*, a majoritarian process of cultural nationalism, "left virtually no space in the public sphere for the country's many non-Tswana cultures, unless recast in a Tswana image" (Werbner 2002a: 676; see also Werbner 2002b and other contributions to Mazonde 2002).

A single local language with national-language status was not the only tool for cultivating national unity. Single-party systems of government were another strategy that was

employed by African rulers who faced "the task of building nations out of competing modes of belonging and identification" (Englund 2003: 2). This scenario has prompted Ayo Bamgbose to declare that in Africa:

It seems we are obsessed with the number **one**. Not only must we have one language; we must also have a one-party system. The mistaken belief is that such oneness of language or party would achieve socio-cultural cohesion and political unity in our multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural societies (Bamgbose 1994: 36). [emphasis added]

The demand for language and cultural rights in Africa has been on the increase since the adoption of plural political systems that started in the early 1990s. The culture of multiparty democracy has given rise to the politics of recognition (see, for example, Mazonde 2002, Werbner 2002a and 2002b, Englund 2003) in multilingual and multicultural nations. In Botswana, for example, the politics of recognition have seen the Wayeyi demand the use of Shiyeyi in pre-schools as well as in the early grades of primary education (see Nyati-Ramahobo 2002). In addition, the Wayeyi also have asked for the use of Shiyeyi in adult literacy programs. These Wayeyi demands for the public recognition of their language have been made against a background of Setswana and English hegemony (see also Nyati-Ramahobo 2000 for the Wayeyi case, and Solway 2002: 723-725 on cultural organizations in Botswana, in general).

According to Alan Patten, a language has public recognition "when it is possible to access public services

and/or conduct public business in that language” (Patten 2001: 692). Examples of public recognition include the use of a language in public schools, health services, the legislature, government and so forth. In a linguistically diverse context, decisions have to be made as to whether one or more languages will be recognized. The criterion for determining which language(s) should or should not receive public recognition is a slippery and critical issue.

2. Northern Malawi: Linguistically and Ethnically Diverse

2.1. The Missionary Factor and Language Planning

When the pioneer Scottish missionaries of the Livingstonia Mission entered the present-day Northern Region of Malawi in 1878, they met both linguistic and ethnic diversity (Vail and White 1989). The Livingstonia Mission's first station was at Cape Maclear in the Southern Region. The initial language of missionary work there was Chinyanja. Dr. Robert Laws, the mission leader, and his group had thought that they would be able to use Chinyanja when they shifted the mission to the Northern Region. When the Mission opened up its first station in the Northern Region among the Tonga at Bandawe, they found a new language – Chitonga. Further into the interior, the Livingstonia Mission “encountered a Babel of linguistic confusion” (Vail and White 1989: 153) that consisted of Nyiha, Lambya, Sukwa, Ngonde, Tumbuka, Ngoni and others. But the most dominant language was Chitumbuka. The missionaries then realized that Chinyanja was not the most effective medium of evangelization and education. They therefore abandoned their earlier plan to use Chinyanja.

With the passage of time, missionary work extended into the interior among the Ngoni and their subjects, the Tumbuka. In the interior, the main language turned out to be Chitumbuka, the language of the conquered. For missionary work to succeed in this area, the Livingstonia Missionaries turned to Chitumbuka as the medium of evangelization. In order not to lose the Tonga, the first converts, missionary work in Tongaland continued in Chitonga while inland, the medium changed to Chitumbuka (*ibid*).

In 1918, the status of Chitumbuka came under a threat when a move toward making Chinyanja the official language in Nyasaland started. Some junior officers in the colonial government proposed that Chinyanja should be given official status and that it should be taught in all the schools. The then-governor, Sir George Smith, rejected the idea. Governor Smith had feared that the policy would unite people of different ethnolinguistic origins against colonial rule. This was undesirable for colonial interests, and therefore, the divide-and-rule tactic of encouraging a number of lingua francas (e.g. Chinyanja in the South and Central, and Chitumbuka in the North) had to continue (*ibid*).

However, when Shenton Thomas became governor, he argued for the case of making Chichewa the sole local language with official status. In the very sphere of Livingstonia Mission's influence, in the northern tip of the Protectorate (present-day Karonga), Kyangonde speakers, who had all along objected to Tumbuka influence, saw this as an opportunity to rid themselves of the language of their Tumbuka overlords. Kyangonde speakers despised the Chitumbuka-speaking and mission-educated Henga who had settled in their area. To the Ngonde, the Henga were

refugees. The Ngonde, therefore, welcomed Chinyanja to replace Chitumbuka. The Ngonde paramount chief, Peter Mwakasungula, supported the Chinyanja proposal (Vail and White 1989, McCracken 2002). The Ngonde had been unhappy all along after the Livingstonia Mission had discontinued using Kyangonde for evangelization and education, and had instead adopted Chitumbuka (see Kalinga 1985). Backed by this support, Governor Harold Kittermaster ordered the implementation of the Chinyanja policy. Any missionary group that went against the language policy risked losing the colonial government's aid on education.

The Livingstonia Mission protested against the Chinyanja policy. The Mission argued that Chinyanja was not widely known/used in the Northern Region; hence it would not serve effectively as a medium of instruction. The Mission then appealed to the Colonial Office in London. A sympathetic ear was given to the Livingstonia Mission's concerns. Considering that the Mission had contributed significantly to the protectorate's education, the Colonial Office reasoned that it was unwise to break off ties with such an important partner. The Colonial Office then advised the governor and his administration "to hold another conference and to impose no policy against the Mission's wishes" (Vail and White 1989: 165). The governor complied with the orders from London. The Livingstonia Mission then continued using Chitumbuka in its schools. In 1947, Chitumbuka and Chinyanja were given official status despite the fact that the former "was spoken by a small fraction of the population" (Vail and White 1989: 166). Chitumbuka held this position until 1968 when the language lost its official status through a Malawi Congress Party convention resolution.¹

2.2. *Ethnic Consciousness and Regionalism*

There is no doubt that the Livingstonia Mission had managed to create a Northern Region identity marker through the use of Chitumbuka. But the missionaries also created an atmosphere in which ethnic consciousness was also cultivated. Writing about the situation in then North Nyasa district (the present-day districts of Chitipa and Karonga), Owen Kalinga (1985) argues that the educational policies pursued by the Livingstonia missionaries in that area contributed to the emergence of ethnic consciousness. Kalinga observes that Reverend Matthew Faulds, who was the head of the Karonga Station of the Livingstonia Mission, favored Ngonde pupils. The favoritism encouraged the belief that the Ngonde "were superior to other peoples of the district" (*ibid.* 63). The Ngonde were thus encouraged to believe that they were different from the others, and that they deserved special treatment. Among the Tumbuka, missionaries also encouraged ethnic consciousness. For instance, Thomas Cullen-Young (Forster 1989) encouraged the writing of Tumbuka histories, aimed at demonstrating that the Tumbuka were different from the other groups (see Kalinga 1985, Vail and White 1989).

Some scholars (e.g. Chirwa 1994-95) have argued that the demarcation of Malawi into the Northern, Central and Southern Regions has promoted an imagined sense of separateness in the minds of the people. People living in these regions imagine that they are different. Government and party structures that operate at national, regional and district levels have further consolidated the separateness of the regions. Past and current political leaders have also tended to reinforce regionalist feelings. For example, while

the first President, Dr. Banda, used to urge Malawians not to think in terms of their regions or ethnic groups, he never failed to remind his audiences that he was a Chewa from Kasungu. Such a declaration went against the spirit of erasing regionalist feelings. Even in the post-Banda era, politicians from all the parties have in one way or the other shown regionalist tendencies through either their deeds and/or discourse.

3. The Banda Era: One Nation, One Language, One Party

Some significant language policy developments occurred during the Banda dictatorship – the first was the official demise of Chitumbuka, and the second was the consolidation of Chinyanja (later called Chichewa) as the national language. Between 1964 and 1994 Malawi's language planning was engineered by the then-Life President, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. He asserted so much influence on language planning that the final outcome was largely his personal views rather than views from language experts or policy makers.² He was therefore the unquestionable language planner and language policy maker during the period from 1964 to 1994. In 1968, a Malawi Congress Party convention resolved to make Chinyanja (Chichewa) and English official languages. To this end, Chitumbuka ceased to be used in schools and the mass media.

Writing about the 1968 language policy, Pascal J. Kishindo claims that it is “difficult to gauge the extent of non-Chichewa-speaking people's resentment to this policy because in Banda's Malawi, dissent was prohibited” (Kishindo 1998: 254). My first reaction is to argue that it is possible, to some extent, to gauge the degree of resentment.

I refer to two incidents that point to the anger with which the Chichewa national language policy was greeted in the predominantly Chitumbuka-speaking Northern Region. First, Peter Forster (1994) and Josef Schmied (1996) claim that angry protestors set ablaze Malawi Broadcasting Corporation facilities in the Northern Region. What exactly was destroyed and how the government reacted remain unknown. Second, H. Leroy Vail and Landeg White mention a song of protest sung at one of Banda's political rallies (1991: 317, endnote 27). In the song, some people from the Northern Region protested against Chitumbuka's loss of official status. Unfortunately, Vail and White do not give an account of Banda's reaction to this song. These two incidents indicate that despite the existence of a very oppressive political climate, some people in the Northern Region did manage, to some extent, to voice their opposition to the Chichewa-only policy.

My second reaction to Kishindo's claim is to agree with him that the protests against Chitumbuka's relegation did not bear fruit in the wake of the heavy-handed administration of the Malawi Congress Party. For instance, My informants claimed that the Banda regime had ruthlessly handled all those who harbored and demonstrated an anti-Chichewa stance (Kamwendo 2002a). The informants also claimed that Malawi Congress Party and government agents set some of the Chitumbuka books on fire. However, the church community, especially the Livingstonia Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) and the Mzuzu Diocese of the Catholic Church, continued to use Chitumbuka as their official language throughout the Banda era. When the Catholic bishops issued their historic pastoral letter of 1992 (in which they sharply criticized the injustices of the Banda regime), three languages – English, Chichewa

and Chitumbuka – were used. Some commentators had remarked that the use of Chitumbuka in the pastoral letter was a sign of the church's rebellion against the then-official language policy. This is not a correct interpretation since the Catholic Church and the Livingstonia Synod of the CCAP had never at any time abandoned Chitumbuka as their main language of pastoral work. The Bible Society of Malawi, as a translator and publisher of the Bible or its portions, was also left free by the Banda regime to publish in any language of its choice.

There were fears that the one national language policy would erase Malawi's linguistic diversity. For instance, in the preface to the reprint of Victor W. Turner's trilingual dictionary, the late Alex Chima said that he had:

Fears that Chitumbuka, together with so many other Malawian languages, was doomed to vanish, driven into final extinction by a conscious government policy of nationalising one language. While I agree that such a policy may have economic and other attractions, its rigid enforcement has struck me, with many other Malawians, as sad, being dangerously monoculturalist and ethnocidal. This could have become a tragic case of induced cultural extinction and the elimination of a people's right to function in their own language and culture (Turner 1996: iii).

I take Chima's view to be rather extreme. I note some problems here. First, Chima simplistically talks of linguistic and cultural extinction as if the link between culture and

language were so easy to understand. Does the loss of a language automatically and easily lead to cultural loss as well? The Ngoni, for example, lost their language in Malawi but they did not lose their culture. If language and culture were one and the same thing, we should have seen cultural extinction among the Ngoni, but this has not happened. The Ngoni, for instance, have kept their traditional dance, *Ingoma*, and other cultural aspects intact. Is this not the reason why we should not rush into equating language and culture? My argument is not that language and culture are not related. Rather, my argument here is that while language and culture are closely connected, there are instances when loss of a language does not automatically lead to loss of culture.

The second problematic issue linked with Chima's lament has to do with the extent to which people could use Chitumbuka after the passing of the 1968 Malawi Congress Party resolutions (Chima 1996). Chitumbuka and other languages were not banned, strictly speaking. To use Patten's terminology, they were simply not accorded "public recognition" (Patten 2001). The use of languages other than Chichewa went unrestricted in all non-official circles. In my view, Garton Kamchedzera's account is more realistic:

Malawians could use languages of their choice under the Malawi Congress Party. Banda himself, who always made his public speeches in English only, had a Chitumbuka interpreter whenever he addressed meetings in the Northern Region. However, it was the compulsory teaching of Chichewa and the implied unimportance of other languages that

some Tumbuka speakers resented
(Kamchedzera 1994: 59).

Third, the relegation of Chitumbuka from official status and the subsequent intensification of the Chichewa policy did not result in an acute language shift from Chitumbuka into Chichewa. For example, I have argued that "of all the indigenous languages apart from Chichewa, it (Chitumbuka) was the one that continued to be spoken and used most widely even during the darkest years of the Banda regime" (Kamwendo 2002a: 148). This argument draws support from at least two sources. First, when one examines the 1966 population census (Malawi's first post-independence population census), one finds that at that time Chitumbuka was the fourth most widely used language. Chichewa, Chilomwe and Chiyao occupied the first, second and third positions respectively. Thirty-two years later, the 1998 population census report (National Statistical Office 1998) shows that Chitumbuka has gone one step up and is now the third most widely used language. The first position remains under Chichewa/Chinyanja, while Chiyao has taken the second position, displacing Chilomwe. This means that while Chilomwe speakers have undergone a massive language shift towards Chichewa (see Kamwendo 2002b), Chitumbuka speakers have acquired Chichewa as a second language but they have not lost their language. That the acquisition of Chichewa did not lead to language (Chitumbuka) loss can be explained by the fact that there is a high degree of language loyalty and pride among the speakers of Chitumbuka. The second support for my argument is taken from Edrinnie Kayambazinthu. She notes that in a sociolinguistic survey that she carried out in 1991 in Karonga and Rumphi districts in the Northern Region

of Malawi, Chitumbuka "was highly used both as a home language and an interethnic language" (Kayambazinthu 1998: 424).

It is important to remember that the Banda regime acted in an ambivalent manner toward Chitumbuka. While the regime had removed Chitumbuka from official domains and had even harassed pro-Chitumbuka elements, there was, however, some degree of partial tolerance toward Chitumbuka. That President Banda allowed Chitumbuka interpretation at his political rallies was in itself an admission that Chitumbuka was a regional lingua franca. Given that during the one-party era the line separating the party from the government was thin, I argue that Chitumbuka had retained some traces of official recognition as evidenced by its use at presidential rallies. Apart from the use of Chitumbuka interpreters at Banda's rallies, the various languages of Malawi were used in songs of praise for President Banda's so-called wise, dynamic and foresighted leadership. Banda never protested against the use of Chitumbuka in those songs of praise. While the national radio followed a bilingual policy (English and Chichewa) during the Banda era, the radio was open to songs in any Malawian language. A program called *Nyimbo za M'maboma* (songs from the districts) is one example. The program featured traditional songs from rural areas sung in local languages. My argument here is that while the Banda regime had placed emphasis on a one language, one nation policy, there was some degree of tolerance toward Chitumbuka in some circles.

Though Banda had the tendency to portray Chewa cultural practices as the core Malawian culture, non-Chewa cultural practices never were discontinued officially by the government. For example, ethnically based dances such as

Beni among the Yao, *Tchopa* among the Lomwe, *Malipenga* among the Tonga and so forth, were not stopped in favor of the Chewa's *Gulewamkulu*. Other ethnically based customs, such as *jando* (boys' initiation ceremony among the Yao) and polygamy in a number of ethnic groups, also continued uninhibited. That Banda proclaimed Chewa supremacy is true, but his regime did not force the non-Chewa to turn into Chewa. If some people opted to conceal their true identity and take on Chewa identity, it was through their own choice. It is not uncommon for some members of minority or less powerful group(s) to seek to align themselves with the dominant or more powerful group(s).

The language policy of the Banda era then can be summed up as follows. The policy strongly supported English as the main official language. Secondly, in relation to indigenous languages, the Banda regime implemented a language promotion regime (Cf. Kymlicka and Patten 2003) that favored Chichewa at the expense of the other indigenous languages. The language tolerance regime (Cf. Kymlicka and Patten 2003) was largely in the field of religion where publishing religious literature in languages other than Chichewa was permissible. Apart from this religious domain-specific language tolerance regime, other public domains such as education and the mass media could not use an indigenous language other than Chichewa.

4. The Post-Banda Era: Towards Unity within Ethnic/Linguistic Diversity

4.1. Language/Cultural Associations

One of the benefits that came with political pluralism in 1993 was the freedom to form associations. Previously

during the one-party state, it was illegal to form political parties or ethnically based cultural and/or linguistic associations. The Banda regime feared that those who had political motives could hijack cultural and linguistic associations. The Chitumbuka Culture and Language Association (CLACA), with its motto, "We honour our language and promote our cultural heritage," is a product of the new political dispensation in Malawi. CLACA was formed in 1994 with the aim of preserving the culture and language of the Tumbuka (see Kamwendo 2002a). Upon noticing that there was no standard orthography of Chitumbuka, CLACA members revised the existing orthographies with the aim of producing a standard orthography. Although the revision of the orthography was not guided by relevant scientific principles from linguistics, the effort remains laudable. The orthography project was later boosted by the technical guidance that was provided through workshops organized by the Centre for Language Studies of the University of Malawi.

CLACA also lobbied the government to reintroduce Chitumbuka in schools. In the other parts of Malawi, no lobbying for the mother tongue policy has been done. Since Chitumbuka had a long history of being used in schools before the 1968 policy change, it is not surprising that there is remarkable enthusiasm for the mother tongue policy in this region. CLACA has not only been lobbying for the implementation of the policy but also has made proposals on school textbooks. The Teachers' Union of Malawi had suggested that subject-content books that were written in Chichewa should be translated into Chitumbuka and other relevant languages. This suggestion was rejected by CLACA "because Chichewa books had a culture which was different from Chitumbuka culture e.g. *gule wamkulu*." CLACA then

wrote to the Ministry of Education on May 20, 1996 making clear its objection to the translation of books from Chichewa:

All Tumbuka books should not be reprinted at random but after the approval of the Association for Tumbuka Language and Culture. We want the orthography which is generally acceptable to appear in the readers today. These should not be literal translations of Chichewa teaching materials.

In the light of CLACA's concerns about cultural or linguistic purity, it is worthwhile to remind ourselves that there is nothing like a pure (stable) language, or a pure (stable) culture. Language change, language borrowing and language shift are natural and inevitable consequences of language contact. Since language change is inevitable, one can therefore question the usefulness of CLACA's attempts to arrest language change or what it considers to be the corrosive effect on Tumbuka culture of books translated from Chichewa. We live in a world in which translation is one of the main means of transferring information from one language to another. If people were to worry about the so-called corrosive effect of translation, the world would not have been able to spread a lot of valuable information.

In 1998 a second language and cultural association known as the Abenguni (or Ngoni) Revival Association was formed in Northern Malawi. It had three objectives. The first objective was to revive the language that is not being passed on to future generations. That Ngoni was moribund is well documented in the literature. The second objective was to bring unity to the Ngoni of Central and Northern

Malawi. Thirdly, the association aimed at fostering Ngoni identity. The association then began teaching Zulu, a variant of Ngoni (Kayambazinthu 1998). Kishindo has remarked that "the futility of the exercise can be likened to flogging a dead cow" (Kishindo 2002: 221). This is another case of an ethnic group trying to reassert its identity.

4.2. Other Modes of Politics of Language Recognition

It is important to realize that the Northern Region is a region with competing identities, both linguistically and ethnically. While at the highest level (regional level), the people of the region generally would identify themselves with the regional lingua franca, Chitumbuka, it is not uncommon to see the same people, at another level, identify themselves with other languages (their mother tongues). For example, some of the members of CLACA also happen to be members of the Abenguni Revival Association. The Ngoni, for instance, find themselves to be ethnically Ngoni but linguistically Tumbuka. That is, the Ngoni no longer speak their language but the language of Tumbuka – Chitumbuka. In trying to learn Ngoni through the revival efforts, these people are attempting to regain their lost linguistic identity.

On September 13, 1997, a Tonga chief, whose mother tongue (Chitonga) has a very high mutual intelligibility with Chitumbuka, requested the then-State President, Bakili Muluzi, to authorize the use of Chitonga on the national radio, giving further testimony to the presence of competing/multiple identities. For the Tonga, Chitumbuka is for regional identity, while Chitonga is closer to home since it is a marker of their ethnic identity. By requesting the then-President, Bakili Muluzi, to give Chitonga airtime,

the Tonga did not mean that they were unable to understand Chitumbuka newscasts. They simply were trying to assert their mother-tongue identity.

The current use of Chitumbuka by the CCAP and the Mzuzu Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church in the Northern Region has also sparked linguistic identity-seeking behavior. For example, I have noted that Kyangonde-speaking congregations of the Catholic Church have asked for the liturgy to be shifted from Chitumbuka to their language (Kamwendo 2002a). This is not new. History is simply repeating itself. When the Scottish missionary Cullen-Young worked among the Ngonde in the early 20th century he had noted that they “evidently disliked the mission’s policy of using the Tumbuka language as the medium of instruction. Young understood that there was a historical reason for this, as Tumbuka was the language of the Henga who were intruders in the area” (Forster 1989: 13). The CCAP also has received a similar request for the change of its liturgical language policy in Nkhata Bay, Karonga and Chitipa (see Kamwendo 2002a). Of course, in some cases there might be communication breakdown when Chitumbuka is used. However, in other cases, the call for changing the language policy is, as I have mentioned earlier, simply a way of declaring ethnic identity.

5. Conclusion

As for the politics of linguistic recognition, I have argued that it was the Livingstonia Mission that transformed Chitumbuka into a regional identity marker. The Mission gave unwavering support to the speakers of Chitumbuka against the Colonial Government’s attempt to marginalize Chitumbuka (see Vail and White 1989). Due to the autocratic

nature of the first post-independence government, the politics of linguistic recognition in the Northern Region were silenced. With the demise of Banda's regime, the politics of linguistic recognition have come out of hibernation. The politics of recognition come under the umbrella of linguistic and cultural rights that the Bill of Rights in Malawi's new constitution provides. One obvious headache for the government in this scenario is what Jacqueline Solway sums up as follows, "How, for instance, in granting rights predicated upon group differences, can the state hold in check what some fear as lifting the lid of a 'Pandora box', resulting into a possible proliferation of groups demanding perhaps unending rights and resources?" (Solway 2002: 718).

As early as 1966, John Msonthi, a member of Banda's cabinet, had expressed his concerns over what we can now call the politics of language recognition. In his speech in parliament, Msonthi supported the view that only one local language—Chichewa—should be used on the national radio. He argued that if Chitumbuka were to be maintained on the radio:

This would definitely prompt the Yao to say that, 'Oh, I demand that Yao too should be a language on the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation'. I can't see any reason why the Atongas can't come forward and say, 'We want Chitonga too to be on the wireless,' and then the Alomwe and even the section of Asenga in Mchinji will come in for that (Malawi Government 1966: 496).

As for the Northern Region, it is worth stressing that the fact that Chitumbuka is the dominant language there does not mean that Chitumbuka is used or known by all. For instance, the Centre for Language Studies established that Chitumbuka could only be used as a medium of instruction in the junior primary schools in some areas and not in every part of the region (1999). In addition, I have observed that while the dominant medium of patient-health service provider communication at the Mzuzu Central Hospital is Chitumbuka, some patients, especially those coming from Karonga and Chitipa, are unable to use Chitumbuka, hence they resort to using interpreters (Kamwendo 2004). To this end, Aleke Banda's caution made in parliament in 1966 remains valid today:

Now, I would like also to point out one problem on this point that, while we reduce the use of Tumbuka and increase the use of Chinyanja, I think I would like also to mention here that it may be necessary in certain circumstances for us to do some broadcast in one of the languages which we have in the country for special reasons. In some local areas, for example, we may find that it is almost impossible for some of the people to understand what we are saying in English or Chinyanja or Tumbuka. (Malawi Government 1966: 501).

In this paper I have attempted to show that it is not correct to view the Northern Region as a homogeneous unit, be it linguistically or ethnically. John McCracken's question: "How useful is it to conflate 'northern' and

'Tumbuka' identity, as has so frequently been done?" is very pertinent and essential for critical scholarship (McCracken 2002: 87). This question should remind us of the ethnic and linguistic complexity of the Northern Region of Malawi. Secondly, it is important to note that the politics of language recognition, which started during the missionary/colonial era, were suppressed during the Banda dictatorship. Now that the dictatorship is gone, and has been replaced by a culture of democracy, there is a revival of linguistic/cultural identity-seeking behavior as well as the politics of recognition. This behavior is more vibrant in the Northern Region than in the other two regions of Malawi.

Notes

¹ It is intriguing that it was politicians from the Northern Region (e.g. Flax Musopole, M.Q.Y. Chibambo) who were in the forefront of calling for the relegation of Chitumbuka's status in the post-colonial period under the Banda administration. For parliamentary debates on the language policy, see Malawi Government (1966), and for a critical analysis of the situation, see McCracken (2002).

² Cf. In a speech in parliament in 1966, Aleke Banda, then Minister of Development and Planning said the Ngwazi (Dr. Banda) had "pointed out that there is no one else who knows the proper Chichewa at the moment. The only person I know who knows the proper Chichewa at the moment is the Ngwazi himself" (Malawi Government, 1966: 500).

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