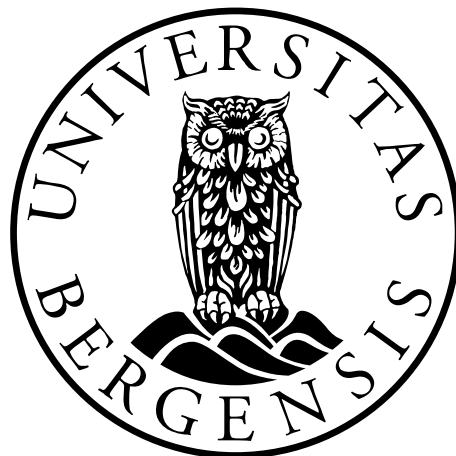


# THE WAYS OF MAIZE

*Food, Poverty, Policy and the Politics of Meaning among  
the Chewa of Malawi*

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# Dedication

To my loving soulmate Dean Kampanje-Phiri  
and  
to my adorable son Matamando





# Abstract

This ethnographically grounded study of Chewa people's foodways traces the involvement of the Chewa people in global development politics and policy processes. With the aim of understanding how development interventionist policies affect or are affected by Chewa people's way of life, central to this thesis is the place given to Chewa people's interests, values and meanings over the course of these policy processes. More specifically, an analysis of how new dimensions and tensions are brought about through the interaction of global and local contexts is at the very core of the arguments presented here.

Maize is placed at the centre of this ethnographically grounded research work due to its centrality in the Malawian context. It occurred to me during my fieldwork that maize was both present in many arenas of social life and best articulated the meanings, values and interests of specific groups. One reason for this is that while there are regional food preferences in Malawi, maize remains central, particularly among the Chewa people on whom the thesis is based. Because of its significance, maize is placed at the core of food and 'poverty' policy processes and it is also deeply embedded in the different aspects of Chewa way of life – all of which contributes to making maize a politicised crop within and beyond Malawian power relations.

Taking this context as its starting point, this thesis specifies that standardised policy concepts such as *'food security'*, *'poverty'* and *'the poor'* are usually constructed at forums that are often dismissive of local people's interests, values and meanings, as well as of their potential to contribute towards solving their own problems. Often these concepts are thinly conceived, yet they are used in policy models or frameworks that aim to solve problems in diverse and complex social settings. Rather than alleviating 'poverty' or hunger, these

standardised policy models conceal power relations that exacerbate already precarious situations by further marginalising people who have been promised that their lives will improve under such interventionist policy measures.

How such standardised policy models are understood and responded to locally tells us a lot about why ‘poverty’ and ‘food insecurity’ persist in a country like Malawi, despite huge aid investments and the implementation of many national and international development, ‘food security’ and ‘poverty’ eradication programmes. Moving the issue of power relations and the discursive aspect of policy models into the food equation helps us to reveal empirical insights into how and to what extent local people accept, reject, contest or manipulate the dominant policy models. In arguing that power relations are integral to the ways in which food (specifically maize) is used, produced, consumed and distributed, this thesis uncovers the politics of meaning, values and interests that surround maize production, consumption and distribution among the Chewa of Malawi.

Hence, the first contribution of this research is based on the fact that while Malawi is clearly at a crossroads of different models relating to ‘poverty’ and food issues – at local, national and global levels – only a few ethnographic studies have focused on this complex articulation of models and meanings in local contexts. In attempting to analyse this complex interaction of models and local meanings, this research makes a scholarly contribution to this under-theorised topic not only in anthropology but also in development studies. As a second contribution, the present work contributes to an on-going debate about the ways in which food is vital in sustaining life beyond the physiological context in which it is often discussed and studied. Thus, in following the ways in which maize is used, produced, prepared, consumed and distributed among the Chewa, this thesis also shows how food constitutes values, meanings and relationships that are pertinent to a specific group of people. By empirically

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bringing together food issues that have previously been theorised by other scholars as distinct aspects of food, this thesis seeks to broaden the theorisation of food issues within food studies.



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Dedication .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>List of acronyms.....</b>	<b>xvii</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction: Food, ‘Poverty’ and Policy issues in Malawi.....</b>	<b>3</b>
Following the Ways of Maize: Setting the Context.....	8
The Historical and Political Ways of Maize: A brief history .....	10
The Economic and Socio-cultural Ways of Maize .....	13
The Conceptual and Discursive Ways of Maize.....	16
Main Arguments .....	17
The Study Site and The Chewa People.....	18
Research Methodology .....	22
A note on anonymity.....	26
Thesis Outline .....	26
<b>CHAPTER 2 .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Conceptualising the Ways of Maize within Food Studies .....</b>	<b>29</b>
General Theoretical Perspectives in Food Studies.....	31
Food and the Individual .....	35
Food as a System .....	39
Food and Power: The Institutional Ethnography of Food and ‘poverty’ Polic.....	44
The Mediating Capacity of The Ways of Maize/Maize Pathways .....	47
The Ways of Maize/Maize Pathways .....	48
Concluding Remarks.....	55

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<b>Part 1: The Historical and Political Ways of Maize .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3 .....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>The Politicisation of Maize .....</b>	<b>61</b>
On Becoming the Dominant Food Crop in Malawi .....	64
‘Maize of The Ancestors’: Socio-culturally Mediated Pathways of Maize in Pr .....	67
The Institutionalisation of Maize during the British Administration (1891–.....)	75
Matrilinealisation of Maize during the Banda Regime (1964–1994) .....	90
No Maize, No Vote: The Trajectory of Maize Through the ‘Democratic’ Trans .....	99
Betwixt and Between Regimes of Value: Contested Maize Politics in Bingu ..	108
Concluding Remarks .....	118
<b>Part 2: The Economic and Socio-cultural Ways of Maize .....</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4 .....</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>Understanding the Significance of Maize and Matrilineal Relations among the Contemporary Chewa people .....</b>	<b>123</b>
Encountering Matrilineality Through the Crowning Ceremony of a Village ...	125
The Process of Crowning a Village Headman/Chief and Chewa Relatedn ...	126
Changing the Name: From Chitopola village to Elias village .....	136
The Event .....	141
The Pamphambano Ritual: Encountering Political Hierarchies and Social ...	149
Chewa Way of Life as an Obstacle to Christianity and Development .....	156
Concluding Remarks .....	164
<b>CHAPTER 5 .....</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>The Social, Economic and Symbolic aspects of maize .....</b>	<b>169</b>
Land Issues and Division of Labour among the Contemporary Matrilineal C ..	173
Maize Production .....	176
Maize Consumption .....	182
Maize Distribution .....	187

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Sharing, Reciprocity, Gift and Economic Exchange in Relation to Maize ..	190
The Role of Maize in Chewa Beliefs, Cosmological and Symbolic Worlds.....	197
Puberty Initiation for Girls – Maize in Mkwangali Rites .....	202
White Maize Flour and Mother’s Milk .....	215
Witchcraft, Jealousy, Envy and the Importance of Secrecy .....	223
Maize in Sensual Relations and Memory .....	234
Concluding Remarks.....	240
<b>Part 3: The Conceptual and Discursive Ways of Maize.....</b>	<b>243</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6.....</b>	<b>245</b>
<b>Conceptualisation of ‘Food security’, ‘The poor’ and ‘Poverty’ in Malawi ..</b>	<b>245</b>
Standardised Concepts as Policy Templates: ‘Food Security’, ‘The poor’ and	246
Templates Exemplified .....	249
Conceptualisations of ‘Poverty’ ‘The poor’ and ‘Food Security’ in National ..	257
The Malawi Food Security Policy Concepts and Its Guiding Principles.....	260
When Standardised Concepts Meet Lived Experiences: Food and ‘Poverty’ ...	263
Definitions of ‘Poverty’ and ‘The poor’ among the Chewa .....	263
‘Food Security’ and Complex Chewa Foodways .....	271
Resistance, Contestation, Acceptance or Manipulation? The case of the .....	276
Concluding Remarks: The Politics of Meaning in Food and ‘Poverty’ Policy	296
<b>Appendix 1: Map of T.A.s in Lilongwe District .....</b>	<b>300</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Maize Surplus and Deficit from 2001 – 2010.....</b>	<b>301</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>302</b>





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# List of acronyms

<b>ADMARC</b>	Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation
<b>AIDS</b>	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
<b>APMB</b>	Agricultural Production and Marketing Board
<b>CIMMYT</b>	International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center
<b>DC</b>	District Commissioner
<b>DFID</b>	Department for International Development (UK)
<b>DHAO</b>	District Humanitarian Affairs Officer
<b>DPP</b>	Democratic Progressive Party
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agricultural Organisation
<b>FMB</b>	Farmers Marketing Board
<b>FSP</b>	Food Security Policy
<b>FUM</b>	Farmers Union of Malawi
<b>G.V.H.</b>	Group Village Headman
<b>HIPC</b>	Heavily Indebted Poor Country or Heavily Indebted Poor Countries
<b>HIV</b>	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
<b>IHS-2</b>	Integrated Household Survey
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>LHCRU</b>	Lungwena Health Centre Research Unit
<b>MBC</b>	Malawi Broadcasting Corporation
<b>MCB</b>	Maize Control Board
<b>MDG</b>	Millennium Development Goal
<b>MDGs</b>	Millennium Development Goals
<b>MGDS</b>	Malawi Growth and Development Strategy
<b>MNSGR</b>	Malawi National Strategic Grain Reserve
<b>MPRSP</b>	Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
<b>MRFC</b>	Malawi Rural Finance Company
<b>MVAC</b>	Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation

<b>NGOs</b>	Non-Governmental Organisations
<b>NFRA</b>	National Food Reserve Agency
<b>NSGR</b>	National Strategic Grain Reserve
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
<b>PAP</b>	Poverty Alleviation Programme
<b>PRSP</b>	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
<b>SACA</b>	Smallholder Agricultural Credit Association
<b>SAP</b>	Structural Adjustment Programme
<b>SAPs</b>	Structural Adjustment Programmes
<b>T.A.</b>	Traditional Authority
<b>UDF</b>	United Democratic Front
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>USA</b>	United States of America
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>V.H.</b>	Village Headmen
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme

## List of maps, figures and tables

### List of maps

Map 1 Ethnic Groups of Malawi .....	11
Map 2 Traditional Authorities in Lilongwe District .....	300

### List of figures

Figure 1 Article on a Swedish NGO and the fertilizer programme in Malawi .....	111
Figure 2 Article on the views of Malawi Farmers Union on the fertilizer Programme .	113
Figure 3 John Elias's clan members preparing food and a local drink from maize .....	145
Figure 4 Elizabeth's clan members cooking at a different place .....	145
Figure 5 Mayi D testing a maize drink prepared by Elizabeth's clan members .....	148
Figure 6 John Elias and fellow villagers nervously waiting .....	150
Figure 7 Villagers endorsing John Elias as their chief with offerings of money .....	152
Figure 8 John Elias crowned chief by Traditional Authority Kalolo representatives ...	152
Figure 9 Chief John Elias crowned and endorsed as the new chief .....	154
Figure 10 A Nyau dancer performing at the crowning event .....	157
Figure 11 Convincing Elizabeth to attend the pamphambano ceremony .....	159
Figure 12 John Elias's sister-in-law and the tobacco she cultivated .....	179
Figure 13 Mayi D measuring maize using a small plate at Nsundwe market.....	189
Figure 14 Making Chindongo with white maize flour paste in Khombe Village .....	208
Figure 15 White maize flour and red clay soil used in an initiation figurine called <i>Chilengo</i> in Eastern Zambia.....	208
Figure 16 Clay figurine coated with white maize flour paste .....	228
Figure 17 Nyau waiting to take the new chief back to the village with white maize flour on their heads .....	229
Figure 18 Elizabeth harvesting in her maize field .....	268
Figure 19 Elizabeth and her children on the day of Chief Elias's crowning ceremony..	268

### List of tables

Table 1 Relation between linked substances .....	211
Table 2 Elements regarded as sources of contamination .....	213
Table 3 Maize Surplus and Deficit from 2001 – 2010 .....	301



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION: FOOD, 'POVERTY' AND POLICY ISSUES IN MALAWI

We pledge our political will and our common national commitment to achieving food security for all and to an ongoing effort to eradicate hunger in all countries ... poverty is a major cause of food insecurity and sustainable progress in poverty eradication is critical to improve access to food (*Rome Declaration on World Food Security and World Food Summit Plan of Action*. Food and Agriculture Organisation 13–17 November, 1996).

*We do not have a Chewa word that literally translates as food security. But according to what our agricultural extension workers teach us, most of us here in the village understand food security as taking care of food ... one has to have enough food to last throughout the year, and when I say chakudya (food), I mean maize (Chitopola village member, Fieldnotes 29 November, 2007).*

These two epigraphs provide a brief context for the situation in Malawi wherein 'eradicating poverty and hunger' and 'food security' are key notions integral to dominant policy processes of the contemporary development era. Each key notion projects a standardised, easily measurable and apparently objective definition of the social phenomena captioned within development discourse. How such key notions acquire local meanings or come into conflict with specific ways of life, as the second epigraph suggests, is pertinent to this

ethnographically grounded research. In this way I am in agreement with Broch-Due who argues that “‘thin’ images and descriptions have a tendency to turn into ‘thick’, politicised and controversial ones the moment they move out of global speech-space and become localised and situated in real social situations” (Broch-Due 1995:2). It is within such a context that this research project explores the complex and contested meanings and practices that collect around notions of ‘poverty’ and food in policy processes, especially during their interpretation and implementation among the Chewa of Malawi. I have also placed the standardised conceptualisations of ‘the poor’, ‘poverty’ and ‘food security’ in scare quotation marks throughout this thesis. This is to emphasise that despite concrete policies aimed at addressing problems related to such concepts, there is no consensus about what constitutes ‘the poor’, ‘poverty’ and ‘food security’ among the different groups involved in such policy processes in Malawi. More importantly, it is by following the ways in which maize mediates these policy processes, and by examining how maize articulates meanings and values pertinent to Chewa way of life, that I hope to shed more light on the effects of standardised policy processes on specific local contexts.

Following World Bank/IMF policy guidelines, poverty is minimally defined in the final draft of the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (MPRSP) “as a state of continuous deprivation or lack of basics of life”, with a statistical poverty line drawn to distinguish the poor from the non-poor (Government of Malawi 2002:5). The newly developed Malawi Growth and Development Strategy Paper (MGDS) has further narrowly conceptualised poverty in economic terms where “the poorest 10 per cent [are considered as those who] earn K6, 370 per person per annum” (Government of Malawi 2006:8). An expanded definition is given in the related Draft National Food and Nutrition Security Policy, where poverty encompasses

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dimensions of deprivation that relate to human capabilities including consumption and food security, health, education, rights, voice security, dignity and decent work... [Such that] poverty is closely related to food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition (Government of Malawi 2004: 3).

What is 'food security' or 'food insecurity' then? It is worth noting here the ingrained ambiguity surrounding what 'poverty' is in relation to food insecurity across different government departments in Malawi and within development policy frameworks in general. As shown in the definitions above and in the first epigraph of this chapter, the ambiguities concerning standardised definitions or notions of 'poverty' or 'food security' in policy frameworks arise partly because it is not clear whether 'poverty' is the cause of 'food insecurity' or 'food insecurity' is the cause of 'poverty'. These ambiguities are also a result of varied constructions of 'poverty' that arise due to different disciplinary biases and ideological values (See also Shanmugaratnam 2003). This is not to say that 'poverty' is merely a matter of divergent ideas. But as Anderson and Broch-Due (1999: 9) argue, "even where its social manifestations ... are blatantly evident [and concrete], its meanings and interpretations [are] inevitably ... culturally and conceptually constructed".

In agreement with the scholars above, this thesis's point of departure is to further explore what happens when global and more streamlined constructs of 'poverty', 'the poor' and 'food security' meet socio-culturally mediated local perspectives. By socio-culturally mediated I mean to say that this work will look at how issues concerning food and 'poverty' are shaped and understood within a specific context involving a particular way of life of a specific group of people. More specifically, I will examine how issues of food and 'poverty' in standardised policy processes resonate with the Chewa people's way of life. As such, the main findings of the present research suggests that despite of the best intentions of development policy planners seeking to alleviate 'poverty'

and hunger in Malawi, their efforts are played out locally and contributes to different social outcomes in local people's lives. Such locally mediated outcomes includes, but is not limited to, the acceptance, resistance, contestation and the manipulation of the policy processes in question and some undesired outcomes – such as policies worsening the conditions of the targeted people. These findings are also in line with the conclusion drawn from East Africa by David Anderson and Vigdis Broch-Due (1999). In their findings they also concluded that, in development policy processes, who 'the poor' are or what is 'poverty' "are defined by external reference, not internal definitions" (Anderson & Broch-Due 1999:19). As a consequence, these externally conceptualised policy concepts overlooks the fact that "the poor have needs which development agencies seek to address, but they also have [values] and interests which derive from the social and cultural context in which they live (Anderson & Broch-Due 1999:19). Based on these empirically overlooked aspects of policy processes, this thesis also shows how the undesired outcomes of policy processes are partly caused by the misunderstandings or controversies that proliferate as a result of the different interests, meanings and values held by the institutions that seek to address the issues of 'poverty' and hunger, when compared to the varied conceptualisations of these issues held by the Chewa people.

Focussing on Chewa people's way of life and how their interests, values and meanings come into conflict with those of policy practitioners, this research also explores the myriad meanings and practices that the concepts of 'food security', 'poverty' and 'the poor' produce both within the diverse Chewa community and among Malawian bureaucrats involved in policy decisions in the capital city. The first contribution of this research is based on the fact that while Malawi is clearly at a crossroads of different models relating to 'poverty' and food issues – at local, national and global levels – only a few ethnographic studies focus on this complex articulation of models and meanings in local



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contexts. As such, in attempting to theorise and analyse this complex interaction of policy models and meanings in local contexts, this research makes a scholarly contribution to this under theorised topic not only in anthropology but also in development studies. As a second contribution, the present work contributes to an on-going debate about how food is not only vital in sustaining life in a physiological sense, but also how throughout histories, food has been a maker of class, unity and distinction as well as endowed with particular meanings, symbols and metaphors. Thus, in following the ways in which maize is used, produced, prepared, consumed and distributed among the Chewa, this thesis also shows how food constitutes values, meanings and relationships pertinent to a specific group of people. By empirically bringing together food issues that have previously been theorised by other scholars as distinct aspects of food, this thesis contributes to broadening the theorisation of food issues within studies of food.

As such, some questions addressed in this thesis include the following: how have policy interventions on crop production, ‘food security’, food aid and ‘poverty eradication’ influenced or affected the lives of the Chewa people of Malawi? In the context of such policy interventions, what choices do the Chewa have in making their livelihood decisions in relation to the production of cash and food crops? Central to my inquiry is also the place given to the Chewa people’s interests, meanings and values in terms of food issues and ‘poverty’ in policy-making processes. In other words, this ethnographically grounded thesis attempts to map out the broad ways in which maize links different aspects of standardised policy processes and the lived life experiences of the Chewa people in Malawi.

## **Following the Ways of Maize: Setting the Context**

It occurred to me during my fieldwork that maize was both present in different arenas of social life within the Malawian context and best articulated Chewa way of life. The reason for this is that while there are regional food preferences in Malawi, maize remains central, particularly among the Chewa people of Malawi on whom the thesis is based. Maize is not only placed at the core of food and ‘poverty’ policy processes; maize is deeply embedded in the different aspects of Chewa way of life – all of which contributes to making maize the most significance and politicised crop within and beyond Malawian power relations. This is partly because Malawi is landlocked and, thus, dependent on agriculture for its subsistence and economic needs. As such, food issues have always had a historical and political relevance due to the critical economic and social significance of agrarian produce. This has become evident over time in the ways that political administrations have handled food issues in particular ways and with particular effects on people’s livelihoods and food values.

It was as a result of these kinds of observations that I was inspired to follow the different aspects of maize that would allow me to weave together a number of topics concerning the Chewa and the policies that target them. My use of maize in exploring and analysing my research material is also in line with Appadurai (1986:5), who suggests that if we look at ‘things’ as having a potential ‘social life’, we can trace their horizons of meanings by following their diverse trajectories. This implies that

[e]ven if our own approach to things is conditioned necessarily by the view that things have no meaning apart from those that human transactions, attributions and motivations endow them with, the anthropological problem is that this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things. For that we have to follow the

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things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things (Appadurai 1986: 5).

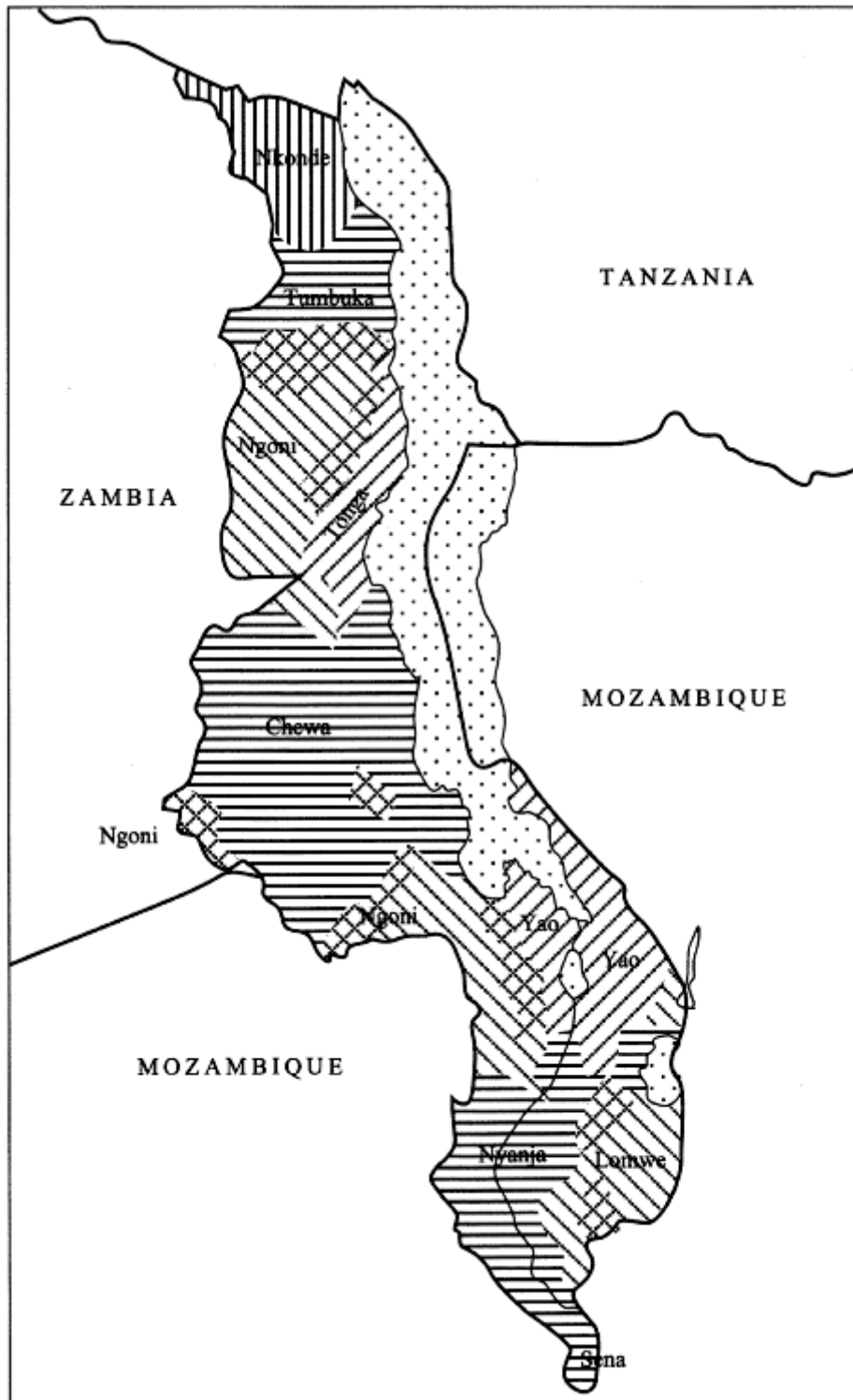
As this suggests, following the ways of maize within the Malawian context, specifically among the Chewa, allows me to trace the various interests, values, meanings and relations that maize both mediates and articulates. Thus, ‘the ways of maize’ throughout this thesis refers to the different ways and processes through which maize not only sustains life but also articulates, mediates or embodies the meanings, values and interests of a particular group of people and/or institutions. This also encompasses the different ways in which maize mediates between various groups of people or social arenas. In agreement with Appadurai’s perspective briefly outlined above, it is indeed through following the ways of maize that we begin to see how different interests, values, meanings and relations are constituted in maize’s form, use and historical trajectory within the Malawian context. Following this trajectory of maize as having its own history and its own meanings inscribed in its form and its use also helps me to uncover the dynamics of its production, processing, preparation, consumption, partaking and procurement, as well as its exchange value in relation to other kinds of items in Malawi. Following the ways of maize thus opens up a space to address such questions as follows: what role does maize play in the context of the Chewa people and in Malawi more generally? What are the policy processes concerned with its production, consumption and distribution? How do such policy processes affect Chewa people’s everyday lives? What are the various transactions involving maize – as a food item, a gift, a commodity, or as a symbol of social relationships, identity, gender or cosmology? Most importantly, how does maize mediate all such questions and contribute to an understanding of concepts such as ‘poverty’ and ‘food security’ among the Chewa? In this study, such questions

are explored within broad themes namely: “The Historical and Political”; “The Economic and Socio-cultural” as well as, “The Conceptual and Discursive” aspects of maize. These themes should not be taken as distinct aspects but as empirically interwoven as a result of the criss-crossing of the many ways of maize.

*The Historical and Political Ways of Maize: A brief history*

In Malawi, archaeological signs have been found of previous hunter/gatherer settlers who were later replaced by Bantu migrants and maize cultivators in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries AD (See also Encyclopedia of the Nations 2011). The groups of people in contemporary Malawi are descendants of these early Bantu settlers, comprising Chewa, Nyanja, Tumbuka, Yao, Lomwe, Sena, Tonga, Ngoni and Nkhonde/Ngonde (see Map 1, below). In general, these groups of people belong to either matrilineal or patrilineal kinship organisations. My research took place among the matrilineal Chewa, who are the dominant group of people in the country. Their ‘Chichewa’ language and English are the two main officially recognised languages in Malawi.

MAP 1  
Ethnic Groups of Malawi



Source: Pike and Rimmington (1965) cited in Kaspin 1995:600

In pre-colonial times customary law regulated the distribution of land and the right to cultivate. With colonialism, particularly during the post-Second World War era, land reforms and a change of the crop mix transformed the agrarian system, splitting it into two types: (a) a Europeanised, commercialised enterprise of coffee, tobacco, tea and cotton under a tenant–landlord ownership system, and (b) an Africanised peasant, subsistence economy with a limited production of cash crops. The establishing of a colonial plantation economy radically changed ownership patterns, turning huge expanses of land organised by public tenure into private property (Sahn & Arulpragasam 1991a:5). The privatisation of land in combination with labour migration, low productivity of subsistence crops and market interventions affected local livelihoods and ordinary Malawians’ choice of both cash and food crops. As Englund (2002:138) argues, widespread colonial and post-colonial labour migration provided a workforce for the mines and agricultural estates in South Africa and Zimbabwe and later on Malawian estates with cheap labour. This widespread labour migration also decided the parameters of the present-day economic situation for Malawi and its peoples (Englund 2002:138).

The post-independence government under President Banda’s autocratic regime expanded the plantation economy, diverting cheap labour into large-scale agricultural enterprises. This commercialised sector was monopolised by those in power who usurped the vast profits, contributing only minimally to the distribution of wealth throughout the country. In other words, the colonial tobacco, coffee and tea estates remained the backbone of the postcolonial economy (Christiansen & Kydd 1983), and encouraged rural–rural migration rather than urbanisation (Englund 2002:138).

With the subsequent democratisation of the political system in 1992, market liberalisation arrived. Restrictions on smallholder cultivation of tobacco were removed and market reform also affected the trajectory of maize. From being a subsistence crop, maize became a commodity sold in local markets, although it

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achieved a far lower price than tobacco. The devastating effect of this value difference has been that farmers allocate less land to maize production and more to tobacco, causing a shortage of food in the country (Peters 2006: 323). However, there is no consensus in the debates regarding the scant allocation of land to maize as an effect of liberalisation policies. This is because other players in this debate maintain that even after these reforms maize remains the most-grown crop.<sup>1</sup> More recently there has been a series of complex scenarios that must be taken into consideration – among them, drought and ill-founded food politics, such as the selling of maize from the National Grain Reserve on the international market. These factors have led to the need for imported food aid, which in turn has led to the creation of a food arena of great complexity and contention (see also ActionAid 2004; Peters 2006). One result of this ill-founded policy change was a widespread food crisis that lasted from 2001 to 2006 growing seasons. Paradoxically, this food catastrophe grew in the wake of the efforts to “eradicate ‘poverty’ and hunger” by international and national development agencies working in Malawi. The ways in which such international and national policy reforms targeting maize have repeatedly resulted in causing or exacerbating hunger and further marginalising local people is a topic I will explore in detail in chapters 3 and 6.

### *The Economic and Socio-cultural Ways of Maize*

There have always been many *foodways* in Malawi beyond food’s physiological capacity to sustain life. By foodways I mean the ways in which what we eat, how we eat, and who we eat with, as well as how we acquire, prepare and share our food, are all aspects of food that are imbued with values and meanings that define who we are (see also Adema 2007; Counihan 1999;

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<sup>1</sup> Personal conversation with World Bank official, Malawi (15/11/07). The anonymity of informants was promised due to political issues, which are addressed later in the thesis.

Harris 1987). In this way, foodways are expressive of rich meanings, beliefs and practices that are pertinent to a specific group of people. Among the Chewa, not only is food central to their celebrations, funerals and rituals, but it is also the foundation of their cosmological understanding and what it means to be Chewa. Whether exchanged as gifts or as commodities for sale, foods are deeply embedded in Malawian culture and maize holds a special significance.<sup>2</sup> Symbolic values are attached to different varieties of maize and to different stages in its production, consumption and distribution. For example, pure white maize grain and flour symbolise high status and wealth, while dark coloured maize is associated with low rank and 'poverty'. The strength of social relations and their tensions, such as witchcraft accusations, are also expressed through the idiom of food, which is manifested daily through the interpretation of hospitality. For important visitors, most Malawians share the custom of preparing a thick porridge made with white maize flour (*nsima yoyela*) served with chicken and vegetables. The visitors are supposed to acknowledge the treat by uttering "*anatilandila bwino, tinadya nsima yoyela ndi nkhuku*" (we were well received for they prepared for us white maize flour thick porridge and chicken). Those failing to serve their visitors with such hospitality risk being labelled stingy and at times may even risk being accused of practising witchcraft. These rich socio-cultural aspects of food are rarely considered by policy makers. However, they are issues I will return to in chapters 4 and 5.

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<sup>2</sup> When referring to 'Malawian culture', I refer to a historical ideology that the first Malawian president after independence advocated, but it still has an effect on Malawians to this day. Dr Kamuzu Banda's concept of 'Malawian culture' was based on the Chewa matrilineal tradition and this was enforced on those who attempted to resist his concept of oneness. See chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of Banda's legacy. For further discussion on 'Malawian culture', see also D. Kaspin (1995) and P. G. Foster (1994).



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The locally embodied meanings of food tend to become particularly tense in the advent of hunger, when foreign foods arrive as part of humanitarian aid. Due to its colour and foreign origin, for instance, Malawian hunger victims of the 2001–2006 food crisis were suspicious of rations of yellow maize (a surplus produce of the USA farmers, pushed into the aid orbit by multi-national corporations such as Cargill). The inauspiciousness of yellow maize, which was distributed nationwide, was reinforced by its pattern of distribution during the food crisis because donors instructed local chiefs to prioritise the ‘poorest of the poor’ as beneficiaries of food aid. Among the Chewa, this resulted in chiefs being singled out as potential witches within their own communities because they failed in their obligation to deal with their people without differentiating among them or showing favouritism.

Through such unintended consequences of food aid, we can see the importance of tracing the ways of maize and its capacity to constitute social life. The Malawian hunger crisis further elaborates the ways that food not only makes relations but can break them too. Appadurai (1986: 14) suggests that although cross-cultural exchanges are typically based on shared understandings, there can still be specific exchanges based on divergent perceptions of the value of the objects being exchanged. The clearest example of where such contested exchanges are likely to occur is precisely during periods of extreme hardship, such as famine and warfare. The present research, then, explores in detail how struggles over the meanings and value of food manifest themselves during hunger crises. What happens to food decisions and established foodways at such times? How does imported food aid articulate local perceptions and practices? What role do power positions play in this kind of situation? Whose meanings and interests count the most in national and international policy processes? I will attempt to answer these questions in chapter 6 of this thesis.

*The Conceptual and Discursive Ways of Maize*

The outline provided above underlines my central claim that standardised policy terms such as *'poverty'*, *'the poor'* and *'food security'*, despite their apparent neutrality, leave a trail of complex and contested meanings and practices when they are inserted into local arenas, and when they are articulated through culturally specific foodways. For instance, a definition of 'food security' is inscribed in the third draft of the Malawian Food Security Policy:

The policy has used the widely accepted World Food Summit definition of food security which points to the following four related but distinct dimensions ... food availability, food access, food utilisation [and] food stability (Government of Malawi 2004:12–13).

This 'thin' and rather nebulous version of 'food security' has been adapted from an even 'thinner' definition formulated by the World Food Summit:

'food security', at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels – exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (Food and Agriculture Organisation 1996:3).

Given that *'poverty'*, *'the poor'* and *'food security'* serve as "keywords"<sup>3</sup> in Malawian policy frameworks, such as the MPRSP, the MGDS and in the Food Security Policy (FSP), the following research questions are examined in chapter 6: Who defines such concepts and in whose interests? How are they interpreted and struggled over at local and national levels?

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<sup>3</sup> See Raymond Williams (1976:13).

Thus, the empirical and conceptual discussion in chapter 6 looks at the ways in which standardised notions of ‘food security’, ‘poverty’ and ‘the poor’, developed at international forums, conceal many ambiguities, especially during the implementation of policies. Chapter 6 will also discuss how these standardised notions dominate national policymaking to the extent that local experiences, perspectives and values are dismissed as mythical, obstacles to development, irrational and/or irrelevant. This work will also propose that the privileging of standardised definitions/concepts in policy processes in Malawi continues unheeded, despite there being no public consensus about what constitutes ‘poverty’, its causes and effects. This also means that, it continues to be the case that local perspectives are not sought in most Malawian policy processes. Finally, it is important to recognise that standardised definitions/concepts are politically charged, since they involve the promotion of one form of rationality over another.<sup>4</sup> In light of this recognition of politically charged policy concepts, this work also looks at the power relations that underlie the kinds of problems outlined above.

### **Main Arguments**

The context provided above brings to the fore the overall argument of this thesis, notably, that standardised concepts such as ‘*poverty*’, ‘*the poor*’ and ‘*food security*’ are usually constructed at forums that are often dismissive of local people’s interests, values and meanings, as well as of their ability to solve their own problems. Often these concepts are thinly conceived but are still used for policy making aimed at solving problems in diverse and complex social settings. Rather than alleviating ‘poverty’ or hunger, these standardised notions

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<sup>4</sup> This observation is also in agreement with Shanmugaratnam (2003:1) who asserts, “[t]here are competing and complementary conceptualisations of poverty and inevitably the ongoing debates are politically and ideologically charged”.

of policy models conceal power relations that have repeatedly contributed to exacerbating precarious situations or further marginalising the people whose lives ought rather to improve under such interventionist policy processes.

How such standardised concepts of policy models are understood and responded to locally reveals a lot about why ‘poverty’ and ‘food insecurity’ still persist in a country like Malawi despite huge aid investment and the implementation of various national and international development programmes concerned with ‘food security’ and ‘poverty eradication’. Bringing power relations and the discursive aspect of policy models into the food equation helps us to open up pertinent empirical insights into how, and to what extent, local people accept, reject or manipulate the dominant policy models. More importantly, in arguing that power relations are integral to the ways in which food is produced, consumed and distributed, this thesis uncovers the politics of meaning, values and interests that surround maize production, consumption and distribution among the Chewa of Malawi.

### **The Study Site and The Chewa People**

This ethnographically grounded research is based on my fieldwork, which I carried out among the Chewa people of Malawi from March 2007 to January 2008, and in follow up field trips between November 2008 and January 2009, and from August to December 2010. The ethnographic component of my research was carried out in Lilongwe district, one of 28 districts in the country, predominantly occupied by the Chewa people.

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I conducted my fieldwork in two villages, Chitopola and Matekwe, which are under the local government jurisdiction of Traditional Authority (T.A.) Kalolo.<sup>5</sup> This area was chosen because it was one of the areas most affected during the 2001 to 2006 food crisis in Malawi. The area is also prone to natural disasters such as drought and floods and consequently much of donor, government and NGO work takes place here. It is also one of the localities that practices fundamental socio-cultural practices pertinent to the Chewa. In this regard, there are clear conflicts discernible here between Chewa meanings, interests and values, and those meanings, interests and values inherent in a variety of interventionist policies.

Although there is a lack of pre-colonial anthropological data on the matrilineal Chewa in Malawi, we know from historians that they were the largest group of Bantu migrants who settled within the Central Region (see also Kachapila 2006; Phiri 1983). The Chewa people are said to have undergone various transformations over the years, including the nature of domestic authority and control or custody of children (Phiri 1983:257). Phiri shows that changes among the Chewa since the nineteenth century have come about as a result of

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<sup>5</sup> Local governments are established in Malawi's 28 district and 6 urban councils within the three regions in Malawi. These local governments are administered by district commissioners and chief executives respectively, who are appointed by the central government (see also the Malawi Government/ Ministry of local government and rural development website: <http://www.mlgrd.gov.mw/0105.htm> or the Commonwealth Network Malawi website: [http://www.commonwealth-of-nations.org/Malawi/Government/Regional\\_And\\_Local\\_Government](http://www.commonwealth-of-nations.org/Malawi/Government/Regional_And_Local_Government)). Traditional Authorities (T.A.s) in Malawi are embedded within the local government structures which were introduced during the colonial administration. They encompass a territory under which Group Village Headmen (G.V.H.) and individual Village Headmen (V.H.) are a part of this bureaucratic structure. In this case, Traditional Authority (T.A.) Kalolo is one of the 18 T.A.s within Lilongwe district. (See also Appendix 1 for the Map of T.A.s in Lilongwe district).

the slave trade, the intrusion of patrilineal groups such as the Ngoni from Southern Africa and the Swahili from the East Coast, and from Christian missionaries' teachings and European techniques of education (Phiri 1983:258). Furthermore, from the 1890s, the Chewa people were not only subjected to colonial rule, but were also drawn into a capitalist economy, both of which contributed to significant changes in Chewa people's way of life (Phiri 1983; Kachapila 2006).

Like elsewhere in Malawi, maize is the main food crop grown in this area, and it is supplemented by a wide range of produce such as groundnuts, sweet potatoes, sorghum, millet and a variety of vegetables. The main cash crop is tobacco, introduced through the plantation economy, as outlined earlier in this chapter. According to Phiri (1983:271), the effect of this addition to the crop pattern was an erosion of the matrilineal system of tenure where the means of production ideally lies in the hands of adult women as matrilineal inheritors. As elsewhere, British colonialists familiar with a patrilineal system gave men exclusive access to tobacco and, thus, to the only cash crop (Phiri 1983:271). With such changes in tenure, and the historical labour migration of men, in conjunction with the strain these changes placed on the matrilineal kinship system, women have been placed in a key position in terms of food production. With the cessation of international labour migration in the 1970s, and the introduction of market liberalisation policies allowing smallholder farmers to grow tobacco as a cash crop without quota restrictions in the 1990s, other changes also occurred within the matrilineal structures (see Phiri 1983; Englund 1999).

Crucially, and relating to the theme of this thesis, food crises, and the various forms of intervention intended to address them, loom large in the history of the Chewa people of T.A. Kalolo and in Malawi more generally. Whilst food is a straightforward matter in humanitarian or development discourse, food among

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the Chewa constitutes thick, complex and paradoxical issues that are pertinent to their ways of life. Food is one of the strongest ethnic and class markers among the Chewa tribe. It provides endless metaphorical references not only to hostility among rival groups but also in terms of relations of domination that make use of food symbolism (Weismantel 1988:143–167). Such attitudes are abundant amongst the Chewa and can be seen in local proverbs, such as *‘kapolo okhuta aposa mfumu ya njala’* (A slave with food is more powerful than a Chief without food). As will become clear in subsequent chapters, such Chewa proverbs, which are also related to maize, speak volumes about the redistributive ethos that Chewa chiefs must have towards their subjects.

The event referred to earlier, during the 2001–2006 hunger crisis, when some Chewa chiefs were labelled witches by their own communities, is an important case in point. Through this case it is possible to trace the implications of policy models and Chewa people’s response towards such standardised policy interventions. These implications were clear in terms of the effect of food rations that targeted ‘the poorest of the poor’. Contrary to the best intentions of donors, the rations evoked a register of stigmatisation and suspicion in relation to the chiefs. This took a particularly intensive form among the Chewa, as chapter 6 will show in detail. Chewa responses ranged from insisting that everybody should be categorised as ‘the poorest of the poor’ the labelling of chiefs as witches in the service of foreign masters, to the boycotting of developmental projects. Thus, this research further proposes that an appreciation of witchcraft beliefs, ceremonial relationships, reciprocity, and the meanings attached to hospitality in the way food changes hands, is vital if we are to develop an understanding of the Chewa people’s way of life. Without such an understanding, it becomes inevitable that policy processes targeted at solving Chewa people’s problems will yield unintended consequences.

Hence, this thesis is not only an attempt to advance the ethnography of Chewa peoples in Malawi, but also forms the basis of an institutional ethnography, where global and local linkages can be traced, comprehended and analysed. It aims to illuminate the complex linkages between ‘poverty’ discourses, paradigms, local conceptualisations, global interactions and transformations, as well as the politics of meaning, values and interests within Malawian ‘poverty’ and food policy processes. It also aims to understand and explain a wide array of complex interconnections between policy processes, specific socio-cultural realities, and the configuration and reconfiguration of the life worlds of Chewa peoples in Malawi through following the trajectory of maize.<sup>6</sup>

### **Research Methodology**

As indicated in the previous section, I conducted the main ethnographic fieldwork among the Chewa people of two villages, Chitopola and Matekwe, from March 2007 to January 2008. I also had follow up field trips between November 2008 and January 2009 and from August to December 2010. To give myself some flexibility to come and go between the two villages, and the opportunity to relate to different people as much as I could, I secured an independent hut for rent within Chitopola village. Being in Chitopola village meant that I became more acquainted with the informants here than I did with those from Matekwe village. Aside from being part of everyday routines in the village in which I resided, I also accompanied women from Chitopola village to the local market every Wednesday and Saturday, where they were engaged in selling maize. Unlike the women from Matekwe village, who were mostly engaged in brewing beer as their source of income, and hence spent most of

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<sup>6</sup> This research also forms part of a comparative project within Poverty Politics Studies, headed by Professor Vigdis Broch-Due, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen.



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their days at home, women from Chitopola spent most market days at the market, which also became my weekly routine. My interaction with members of both villages in these various ways provided me with richly diverse and comparable ethnographic material based on Chewa people's way of life.

Given the aims of the research, in addition to this ethnographic fieldwork, which was participatory and observational in nature, I also conducted interviews with officials of institutions dealing with 'food security' and 'poverty' issues. Of specific interest were the office of the Malawi World Bank, the World Food Programme in Malawi, various government ministries and some parastatals, such as the Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC) and the Malawi National Strategic Grain Reserve (MNSGR). Archival research on the policy documents of these institutions and on newspaper articles concerning the issues in question also contributed to the wide array of material studied. Other sources of research material included attending 'poverty' debates and campaigns conducted by UNDP in Malawi, as well as attending other 'poverty' seminars in Malawi and abroad during the course of my fieldwork.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, the nature of my fieldwork was multi-sited since it involved the employment of several data collection techniques and several arenas where the information was sorted out.

Language issues were not a problem in this study due to the nationwide use of the Chichewa language, but I encountered other challenging aspects of carrying out fieldwork at 'home'. Firstly, I am Nyanja by descent and learnt a lot about the unfamiliar world of the Chewa; however, I also encountered some setbacks

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<sup>7</sup> For example, two of these seminars were: The Bergen Seminar Series in Norway on Governance Assessments and the Paris Declaration: Opportunities for Inclusive Participation and National Ownership (23–25 September, 2007); and in Malawi, the Launching of the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy Paper (25 July, 2007).

in relation to accessing secret ritual information. Coming from a different ethnic and religious (Christian) background, strong taboos surrounded my attendance of certain Chewa rituals, both as regards the Chewa and among my own relatives. The serious nature of such taboos meant that I would have had to sever ties with my own family because I would never have been accepted as one of them if I had insisted on attending such rituals. This was a price I was not willing to pay in order to access secretive ritual information, since as will also become clear throughout this thesis, relations to and protection of one's own relatives are greatly valued within the various groups of Malawi. In this case, my experience of how my own relatives were able to influence my decisions contributed to my understanding of the significance of Chewa relatedness in aspects of their everyday lives.

Secondly, being a young woman and coming from the city meant that I was not able to gain very much access to male domains to the extent that I desired. This is partly because it is also considered taboo among the Chewa for a young married woman to spend significant amounts of time with other men because she would then be considered promiscuous. To solve this predicament, I hired a research assistant, who was himself a Chewa. His services not only assisted me in accessing important ethnographic material within the male domains, he also played a vital role in providing me with some information about rituals that are fundamental to Chewa way of life.

However, my past experience as a United Nations/District Assembly employee on humanitarian issues, my educational status and city dwelling background sometimes worked to my advantage. This was especially useful in securing personal conversation with authoritative figures such as, the Traditional Authority Kalolo, village chiefs and officials from different governments departments as well as other officials from bureaucratic institutions relevant to my research. This access to authoritative figures such as, the Traditional

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Authority Kalolo and village chiefs also enabled me to clarify my observations with the people responsible for overseeing and managing fundamental aspects of Chewa way of life. My past experiences, qualifications, and relations that I had established during my former post as the District Humanitarian Affairs officer of Lilongwe district,<sup>8</sup> also meant that I was able to access policy documents and relevant information that might otherwise have been difficult to obtain.

Furthermore, my curiosity to learn about Chewa way of life, and the mistakes I made due to my different background from that of my Chewa informants, meant that most of my informants were keen to teach me their accepted ways of doing things. Since most city dwellers are usually perceived as arrogant within the villages which I did my fieldwork, however, my residence in the village and my participation in Chewa daily duties, in order to learn their ways of life, were considered to be exceptional factors. As I got to learn during my fieldwork, this perception of city dwellers as arrogant by my informants was partly due to the fact that; most city dwellers – such as policy practitioners – only came to tell local people what to do, rather than to seek an understanding about how they live their lives on a day-to-day basis. Overall, then, I developed trusted relationships, especially with the women with whom I spent most of my

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<sup>8</sup> Prior to my studies in Norway, I was employed under a UNDP/Government of Malawi project on a post of District Humanitarian Affairs officer for Lilongwe district. Under this post which I held for two years (from 2002-2004), I was responsible for coordinating and monitoring disaster management and preparedness programs that were being carried out in Lilongwe district by different UN agencies, NGO's, and Government ministries. As such, one of my main tasks was to monitor humanitarian food aid distribution during part of the 2001-2006 hunger crisis. The experiences that I got from this position and those that I latter acquired during my PhD research work, all contributed to my access to different research material that has been used in writing this thesis.

time at the market, and with their families, all of whom contributed to the many insights I obtained into the different aspects of Chewa way of life.

#### *A note on anonymity*

I have maintained complete anonymity in relation to interviews with officials from the various bureaucratic institutions that I sourced some of my research material according to their individual interests. This was partly due to other politically sensitive issues discussed in this thesis, that some of my informants were simply not comfortable to be acknowledged by name. With the exception of public figures, I have either used pseudonyms for my informants' first names, or used their descriptive positions within their own socio-cultural settings for most of the contributors to my research. In instances where I have used specific life stories, people's relations and images, this has been done with the interest and consent of my informants to share their life experiences, meanings and values which they feel are mostly undermined by different political figures and policy practitioners.

### **Thesis Outline**

This thesis comprises six chapters. The first two chapters provide the introductory material. Chapter 1 introduces the thesis by outlining the basic subjects addressed. In an effort to situate my own work within food studies, chapter 2 also forms part of the background to this research and reviews some theoretical and analytical perspectives with reference to some of my empirical findings.

The rest of the chapters are divided into three thematic parts. These parts, which have been discussed briefly above, are not empirically distinct but complexly interconnected. The first part, "The Historical and Political Ways of

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Maize”, consists of chapter 3. This chapter provides a general historical background of policy processes concerning maize. It explores the ways in which maize has become one of the politicised crops in the Malawian context. Part 2, “The Economic and Socio-cultural Ways of Maize”, examines maize in relation to various complex issues ranging from kinship, food symbolism, cosmology, cultural practices, beliefs and land issues, to some economic and political aspects of maize production, consumption and distribution among the Chewa people of T.A. Kalolo in Malawi. This part is made up of chapters 4 and 5, both of which trace the trajectory of maize in different arenas of social life. These chapters also explore the social complexities that are created, revealed and entwined by foodways in Chewa people’s everyday lives. Also focussing on the complex, reconfigured social, individual and sensuous relations that food articulates and mediates, these two chapters move between empirical and theoretical discussions that collect around the individual and the social. The work here perceives these factors not as two different aspects of social life but rather as complexly entwined social phenomenon. The discussion in chapters 3 to 5 foregrounds but also contributes towards an understanding of the politics of food and its meanings through an exploration of policy processes concerned with ‘food security’ and ‘poverty’ issues in Malawi.

Part 3, “The Conceptual and Discursive Ways of Maize”, encompasses the final chapter of this thesis. Tackling issues of hunger, and definitions and meanings of ‘poverty’, ‘the poor’ and ‘food security’, chapter 6 concludes the research by examining and discussing the impacts of and responses to policy models among the Chewa people, alongside commentary on the institutions involved in the implementation of such policies. More generally, this last chapter also discusses the politics of meaning, values and interests that surrounds standardised policy processes, especially those concerned with maize production, consumption and distribution in Malawi.



# **CHAPTER 2**

## **CONCEPTUALISING THE WAYS OF MAIZE WITHIN FOOD STUDIES**

Substantial empirical material in this thesis is provided to suggest that maize constitutes, articulates and mediates the various meanings, interests and values of different groups or arenas within the Malawian context. Maize is not only a staple food that physiologically sustains the lives of most Malawians, it is also part of, and expressive of social complexities that constitute a range of people's experiences, meanings and values relating to food. These varied and complex social expressions are articulated through the ways in which maize is used, produced, consumed and distributed among the peoples of Malawi. This chapter argues, then, that in following the ways in which maize is used, produced, consumed and distributed we may start to uncover such social complexities. In short, the many ways and processes through which maize not only sustains life but also articulates, mediates or embodies the meanings, values and interests of a particular group of people and/or institutions, are defined throughout this work as 'the ways of maize'.

Power relations are also expressed through the ways in which maize is used, produced, consumed and distributed. This statement is in agreement with such scholars as Arnold (1988), Burbach & Flynn (1980) and Mintz (1986), who suggest that not only has food been central to local politics, and a concern in central governments' politics, but it has been historically, and indeed continues

to embody, power in its most basic, tangible and inescapable sense. In Malawi, this is exemplified in the fact that despite the change in the global rhetoric of “local ownership”, public policy is not usually influenced by domestic research findings or by an existing local knowledge base. As in most aid dependent countries, Malawi is usually at a crossroads of external policy models that influence some of its major decisions in food production, consumption and distribution. Similarly, Jerve’s recent study in Tanzania (2006) shows that the government remains ambivalent about actively using Tanzania’s education researchers in their negotiations with influential donors, and they remain far from embracing evidenced-based policy making. In addition to this, Jerve (2006) further points out that global development agencies like the World Bank give primacy to international over domestic knowledge. Thus, Jerve concludes, “in aid-dependent countries reforms more frequently take place in the form of paradigmatic shifts, largely influenced by changes in donor policies (Jerve 2006:16). Likewise, a recent study comparing Zambian and Malawian Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) processes found that initiatives were still driven by donors while the so-called local stakeholders participated only minimally in the formulation of policy documents (Bwalya et al. 2004:25). This Malawian PRSP was one such policy document, which was a policy framework for Malawian policy initiatives from the 2002 to 2006 fiscal years. This was also instrumental in the formulation of the current Malawian Food Security Policy. Importantly, is how the use, production, consumption and distribution of food are addressed in this Food Security Policy. Maize is of significance because of its centrality within such policy processes and within Malawian foodways. This being the case, following the ways in which maize in Malawi is expressive of, or mediates power relations through policy processes that concern its use, production, consumption and distribution is a significant aspect of the present discussion.



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The brief outline above gives a broad overview of this anthropological research on Malawian foodways. With specific reference to the way of life of the Chewa people, I encountered two initial challenges – one empirical and one that was analytical in nature. First, there was a need to understand the link between ‘global’ and ‘local’ aspects of policy processes. This involved the challenging task of compiling an ethnography based on different methods of data collection, and research material from different settings. Secondly, there was a problem of linking complex ethnographic material of an empirical nature to that which is discursive and conceptual. To overcome these challenges, I have followed the ways in which maize is used and explored the arenas in which it is produced, consumed and distributed. Also inspired by Appadurai’s concept of ‘commodity paths/pathways’, the concept of ‘the ways of maize/maize pathways’ has helped me to link the different aspects of food issues that have been addressed separately from a number of perspectives in food studies. Importantly, this theoretical discussion also aims to situate my own analytical position in relation to the many perspectives available in food studies.

### **General Theoretical Perspectives in Food Studies**

Many anthropological studies on food have placed emphasis on food exchange as an expression of social solidarity (Meigs 1997:103); others concentrate on how individuals and their actions, motives, emotions, experience and thought in relation to other individuals contribute to understanding food issues. Along these lines, Counihan and Van Esterik (1997:3) assert that food and food events encode and regulate key social relations. On the other hand, the values and the meanings of food, taste and eating are also revealed in the form of individual experiences, practices and habits, as they relate to an individual understanding of the self (see Korsmeyer 2002:4; Meigs 1997:103). The former perspective privileges an understanding of how food is embedded in social relations as parts of a whole, or as parts of a system. The latter view, which is often perceived as an opposing stance in these food debates, takes a single person as

its starting point. This approach is mostly associated with the biological and psychological aspects of food and the use of food as a means of understanding personhood and subjectivity

Pat Caplan (2005) also discusses these kinds of perspectives in food studies. She notes that Claude Levi-Straus (1965, 1970) and some of his followers, such as Mary Douglas (1966, 1975), have been among the most influential in studying food as a system (Caplan 2005:1–2). She observes that Levi-Straus and Douglas sought to understand food as a cultural system (Caplan 2005:1), and their work was a significant contribution to the understanding of food issues as part of a system. From a contrasting perspective, Audrey Richards' (1932) work in Zambia, and the work of Ruth Benedict (1932, 1934) have made a significant contribution to studying food from an individualistic perspective. I will discuss each of these dominant perspectives in food studies in later sections of this chapter.

However, the present study argues that food issues of many kinds are empirically and complexly related. This presents a dilemma in analysing research material with a view to understanding the social phenomena relating to food, because food issues involve complex relationships between individuals and their social realities. As a result of such complexity, I agree with Caplan (2005), Korsmeyer (1999) and Meigs (1997) in arguing that food issues are difficult to comprehend using only a single perspective. Food and the act of eating are not only economic, social or nutritive events; they also encompass emotions and values that reflect both individual and social relations in multifaceted ways. Indeed, not only do food and food events connect people with the world, they also open people's range of experience to the varied influences of belonging and the emotions of other living beings over time (Meigs 1997:104). In short, placing emphasis on one perspective in food

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studies over another fails to take account of the insights to be gained from linking the viewpoints referred to above.

A number of researchers in food studies have written about the ambiguities that arise from the relationship between ‘the individual’ and ‘the social’. These works include David Howe’s *Sensual Relations* (2003); Carole M. Counihan’s *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power* (1999); Constance Classen’s work on *The World of Senses: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (1993); Paul Stoller’s *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* (1989) and Carolyn Korsmeyer’s edited volume, *The Taste Culture Reader* (2005), to note but a few. Most of these scholars agree that in order to make sense of foodways and eating, “we need to understand not only the variety of social, cultural and historical context, but also the many layers of knowledge and meanings held by different subjects and even a single subject, in relation to food and eating” (Caplan 2005:25).<sup>9</sup> However, there are also points of difference among these writers, especially in their chosen areas of emphasis on their object of study, or in their emphasis on symbolic, social, individual or sensual orientations in their approach to food.

For instance, in the work of David Howes and Constance Classen, through their emphasis on “The Anthropology of the Senses”, they acknowledge the following:

While everyone belonging to a culture will be influenced by the dominant sensory model ... or ensemble of sensory values and practices ... not everyone will adhere to it. Alternative models may be elaborated that respond to the particular experience of the persons in question and challenge the order (Howes & Classen 1991: 272-741).

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<sup>9</sup> See also Carole M. Counihan (1999:23–24) for a similar view.

Furthermore, in Howes's book on *Social Relations* (2003), he advocates that "[s]ensory models not only affect how people perceive the world, they affect how they relate to each other" (Howes 2003:55). In this way, "sensory relations are social relations" (Howes 2003:55).<sup>10</sup> These statements clearly show that Howes and Classen place emphasis on the social dimension of sensory models.

In her Introduction to *The Taste of Culture Reader: Experiencing food and drink*, Carolyn Korsmeyer (2007) has a different point of departure as she grapples with the kinds of issues discussed by Howes and Classen. With her emphasis on taste, Korsmeyer postulates that "[t]his variability of 'subjective' experience – that is, the experience of a perceiving subject – is nowhere more noticeable than with the sense of taste" (Korsmeyer 2007:3). She goes further, suggesting,

This relativism, however, is highly suspect, as taste is also subject to pressures of social change ... If taste were merely subjective and relative (as the old adage suggests), then one would never wonder what one misses from food and drink (Korsmeyer 2007:7).

In her concluding statement, Korsmeyer's emphasis is on the "individual" as her point of departure in relation to the wider social context is evident through the claim that "[t]astes are subjective but measurable, relative to culture and to Individual, yet shared; fleeting sensations that nonetheless endure over many years in memory; transient experiences freighted with the weight of history" (Korsmeyer 2007: 8).

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<sup>10</sup> See also Constance Classen (1990:732), writing in a similar vein.

As these comparisons suggest, food issues are not merely concerned with either ‘the individual’ or ‘the social’ as opposing social phenomena. Indeed, food and the act of eating relate to, articulate and are an integral part of a wide range of social realities that cannot simply be distinguished in terms of belonging to either ‘the social’ or ‘the individual’. To examine this claim further, it is necessary to look more closely at these different perspectives that have been dominant in the study of food. This exploration is made in order to situate within food studies the present research work carried out among the Chewa people of Malawi, and the institutional ethnography that I carried out in the government and donor offices responsible for ‘food security’ and ‘poverty’ policy processes. Hence, what follows is a discussion about how each of the dominant perspectives is relevant to my own analysis and how each falls short in explaining and linking the various aspects of my research material. To address these shortfalls, towards the end of this chapter I will return to the notion of the ways of maize and maize pathways, which have the capacity to mediate and articulate, both empirically and analytically, the issues concerning food that this thesis examines throughout. As has been outlined above, this concept of the ways of maize provides a means to analyse through a study of food the complex relationship between individuals and their social realities.

### *Food and the Individual*

As mentioned earlier, Audrey Richards’ seminal 1932 work on food studies in relation to Zambia), specifically *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe*, approaches food studies from an individualistic perspective, though with some modifications. She establishes this approach in her opening paragraph in the first chapter of the book, suggesting:

Nutrition as a biological process is more fundamental than sex. In the life of the individual organism it is the more primary and recurrent physical want, while in the wider sphere of human society it determines, more largely than any other physiological function, the nature of social groupings, and the form their activities take (Richards 2004:1).

This perspective is similar to what Fredrik Barth (1987) proposes, when he advocates an approach for studying social reality that tends towards a preoccupation with thought and the practice of individuals as aggregates of their social context rather than as social wholes. This approach is concerned with degrees of variation rather than with coherence (Barth 1987:86). Through his analysis of the thoughts of the Ok peoples, he sought to mediate between issues of social reality and the self (Barth 1987:86–87). From that analysis, he formulates an approach that he advocates as fruitful in studies concerned with the relationship between individuals and social relationships:

I urge that we rather recognise the penetration of the society deep into the privacy and psyche of the individual, and that we acknowledge how much of every individual is out there, dispersed in his or her previous and current relationships with others (Barth 1987:86).

Like Richards, Barth emphasises the individual dimension of social relations, but he also questions the idea that society is inherently cohesive. Nevertheless, Richards' approach slightly differs from that of Barth, and that of other scholars who study food issues from this perspective, as Moore's preface to the 2004 edition of Richards's (1932) book suggests:

Audrey Richards began her career as a natural scientist and she brought to her anthropology a commitment to multidisciplinary that would be

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enviable today ... For the consumption of food for Richards was not just linked to preferences and tastes, but also to family structures and the bonds of kinship and sentiment, to economic production and technological accomplishment, to marriage, authority and power, and ultimately to political organisation, religion and symbolism (Moore cited in Richards 2004:vii–viii).

For the scholars that followed who theorised food from an individualistic perspective, emphasis was placed on the physiological and psychological factors of food, as well as on sensory dimensions of food in terms of smell, taste, sight and texture. They also explored the body as part of individual experiences within broad social contexts and social relations. For those who were concerned with the sensory dimensions of food, emphasis was placed on one sensory mode over another, of which vision has been perceived as the most dominant of the sensorium. This observation has also been made, and criticised by, recent scholars on the anthropology of senses, such as Korsmeyer (2002, 2007), Howes (2003) and Stoller (1989). Howes maintains,

Too often studies of the senses will consider each of the five senses in turn, as though sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch each constituted a completely independent domain of experience, without exploring how the senses interact with each other in different combinations and hierarchies. Too often, as well, the senses are considered from a purely physical and personal psychological perspective. Sensory experience is presented as physical sensation shaped by personal history (Howes 2003:xi).

Arguing that “sensory experience may be collectively patterned by cultural ideology and practice” (Howes 2003:xi), and that “sensation is not just a matter

of physiological response and personal experience” (Howes 2003:xi), Howes goes on to observe that “[Sensation] is the most fundamental domain of cultural expression, the medium through which all values and the practices of the society are enacted” (Howes 2003:xi). For Howes, then, as discussed above, “sensory relations are social relations” (Howes 2003:55).

The studies discussed above provide an important contribution towards the study of social phenomena that deal with individuals’ thoughts, actions, motives, sensations and personhood as they relate to other individuals within a specific context. Applying this approach to my research material provides useful insights for the analysis into the ways the Chewa individuals think about food, and attach to food issues varied values, meanings, emotions and relationships. Through these insights, a deeper understanding can be gained into Chewa people’s varied foodways and their personal experiences with food. An understanding of issues of personhood and matters of taste, smell and texture, and of how these relate to visual as well as physiological aspects of food among Chewa individuals can also be gained through such work. These important insights can assist me in formulating an understanding of the motivation for individual Chewa people’s choices in relation to food, food production, food consumption and ritual ceremonies, which are fundamental and specific to Chewa traditions and their concept of what it means to be Chewa. Furthermore, this perspective is also helpful to understand and analyse the diverse values that each person attaches to food issues in relation to their own social realities.

However, this study is not only concerned with the Chewa people’s varied and individual experiences. As shown earlier in this chapter through the general discussion of perspectives in food studies, the significance of food can never be purely personal, physiological or nutritional. The analysis of ‘food security’ and ‘poverty’ policy processes entails an examination of the institutional



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relations that encompass government institutions, donors and the Chewa in coherent ways. As such, the approach outlined above only works in the present context to a certain extent and falls short in terms of understanding and linking the different aspects of food among the Chewa people. It is due to this shortfall in the individualistic perspective that I will now turn to an examination of how other scholars emphasising the social dimension of food have addressed some of the issues raised in this present work.

### *Food as a System*

As mentioned earlier, in the second section of this chapter, the works of Levi-Strauss, particularly “The culinary triangle” (2008[1965]) and *The raw and the cooked* (1970) have contributed enormously to ethnographic and theoretical knowledge that seeks to understand cultural systems in respect of food (see also Caplan 2005:1; Mintz & Dubois 2002:100). Maintaining that food is not only ‘good to eat’ but also ‘good to think with’, Levi-Strauss’s approach treats food as analogous to language, and he sought to examine the ways in which meanings can be grasped from an understanding of symbols, metaphors and myths associated with food.<sup>11</sup> However, his work, like that of his predecessors and his students (including Mary Douglas), has been criticised by scholars such as Jack Goody (1982) as having failed to account in a coherent way for individual differences and historical changes in social relations (see also Caplan 2005).

Douglas’s 1972 work, “Deciphering a Meal”, attempted to transcend and contend with some of the criticisms evident in Levi-Strauss’s work. Theorising food in terms of language with a precoded message, Douglas’s general thesis was that “[i]f food is treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in

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<sup>11</sup> See also P. Caplan (1994:6-7) and M. Harris (1987:58-59) on Levi-Strauss’s contention that food is not only ‘good to eat’ but also ‘good to think with’.

the patterns of social relations being expressed” (Douglas 1972:61). She goes further, to suggest, “like sex, the taking of food has a social component as well as a biological one. Food categories therefore encode social events” (Douglas 1972:61). Hence, even though she builds her approach on Levi-Strauss’s linguistic model of food, she tries to distance herself from his binary reference of “syntagmatic relations” by postulating that “[a] complex series of syntagmatic associations governs the elements of a meal and connects the meals through the day” (Douglas 1972:65).

Through her analysis of food categories, first within her own family and then within the United States, she looks at the composition of a meal, with a specific reference on Jewish food categories of what constitutes the edible and the “abominable” (Douglas 1972:72). In so doing, Douglas makes a significant contribution in showing how food categories encode social meanings. Like language,

[t]he precoded message of food categories is the boundary system of a series of social events ... [Hence], the meaning of a meal is found in a system of repeated analogies. Each meal carries something of the meaning of the other meals; each meal is a structured social event which structures others in its own image (Douglas 1972:68, 69).

Importantly, the relevance of the boundary system that Douglas is proposing here is that it also contributes to an understanding of significant socio-cultural meanings of what might or might not be considered as food in different socio-cultural contexts.

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Carole M. Counihan (1999) is one of the contemporary scholars on food who have tried to build on Douglas's insights. Reviewing food as meaning, symbol and language, Counihan observes,

In every culture, foodways constitute an organised system, a language that – through its structure and components – conveys meaning and contributes to the organisation of the natural and social world ... Foodways are a prime domain for conveying meaning because eating is an essential and continuously repeated activity. Foods are many, and they have different characteristics of texture, taste, colour, and modes of preparation that are easy labels for meaning. Food constitutes a language accessible to all (Counihan 1999:19).

However, the work of Douglas (1972) and Counihan (1999), like that of Levi-Strauss, is criticised by some scholars such as Michael Jackson (1983a; 1983b). Jackson challenges the conventional manner in which the body can be understood as “simply the passive ground on which forms of social organisation are inscribed” (Jackson 1983b:143). In agreement with Jackson (1983a; 1983b), Howes further criticises Douglas's approach as continuously treating “the body as unknowing object” (Howes 2003:30). This, he concludes, is due to “a denial of the somatic similar to that which results from privileging the linguistic” (Howes 2003:30).

Howes admits that “sensory relations are social relations” (Howes 2003:55), and advocates for a perspective of sensory models that he and Constance Classen developed in collaboration. He suggests,

The first lesson of the anthropology of the senses is that the senses operate in relation to each other in a continuous interplay of impressions

and values. They are ordered in hierarchies of social importance and reordered according to changing circumstances. The dynamics of intersensory relationships are what make the sensory models employed by societies and individuals vital, interactive and versatile (Howes 2003:47–48).

Howes goes on to note, “societies will have different theories concerning how the senses work and how they are divided or integrated” (Howes 2003:53). In this regard, Howes continues,

The continual interplay between sensuality and sociality that one finds across cultures makes it essential for a sensuous anthropology to explore the social, as well as the conceptual dimensions of perception (Howes 2003:56).

The quotations and general discussions here all bring to the fore the social dimension of food within food studies. The discussion also points to some of the criticisms to which this social system perspective is often subjected. One such criticism is the failure to account for individual differences and historical changes in social relations. Most contemporary researchers in anthropological food studies who approach food from this systematic perspective have taken on board the need to situate their work in the context of historical change and political economy, yet a search for meaning is still being sought (see also Mintz & Du Bois 2002).

In light of the perspective discussed above on food as a system, there are several pertinent aspects of which my present analysis can draw in order to highlight and understand the relationships between policy implementation processes and the Chewa people’s way of life. In studying the socio-cultural

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and institutional relations that occur during food policy implementation processes through the lens of the social system perspective discussed here, an understanding of how the Chewa people influence (or are influenced by) such policy processes can be gained. In addition, the broader structural relations of international food politics and their impact on Chewa food production, consumption and distribution can also be realised. However, in choosing this perspective over the individualistic approach discussed earlier within this chapter, some important insights may be missed that could have been attained from exploring individual experiences, perceptions, values and meanings – all of which are also important in understanding Chewa people's foodways and personhood. This admission is in agreement with Caplan, who suggests that the knowledge of food and eating

is both socially and culturally constructed as well as being developed by particular subjects in terms of their own identities, their life histories and their views of themselves and their bodies. We need, then, to see food consumers both as agents, imbued with volition and intentionality, and as social beings, continuing to use food to express significant relationships (Caplan 2005:25).

Thus, the separate use of each of the perspectives discussed above in analysing my own research material would still provide me with incomplete insights into the social realities of the Chewa people. More specifically, each of the perspectives falls short in opening up a space through which the various aspects of my research material and the policy processes outlined can be interlinked and comprehended at the same time. Yet this remains an important quest of this research, because during my fieldwork I empirically observed that there is no simple or single opposition between social phenomena that received wisdom has distinguished as belonging to the individual or to the social aspect of food. Through my own experience among the Chewa people and beyond, I

learnt that what counts as an individual or a unit is not inherently clear, but complexly expressed through their foodways. To further this discussion, the next section will explore how scholars have studied food in relation to power. This is important because, as will also become clear throughout this thesis, maize within the Malawian context constitutes, articulates and mediates power relations within and between different groups of people.

*Food and Power: The Institutional Ethnography of Food and 'poverty' Policies*

Arnold (1988:3) notes, "Food was, and continues to be, power in a most basic, tangible and inescapable form". Food is, and has been, central to local politics, as it has also been a concern in the politics of nation states (Burbach & Flynn 1980). Foodways have been manipulated by national rulers in terms of the economic, social and political destiny of the nation state itself (see also Counihan 1999; Korsmeyer 2007; Mintz 1996): "Where this power originates; how it is applied and to what ends; and in what manner people undertake to deal with it, are all part of what happens when food habits change" (Mintz 1996:17–18). The ways in which this power is negotiated, resisted or accepted in times of plenty as well as in times of hunger has also been an important subject in relation to food (see also Burbach & Flynn 1980; Camporesi 1989; Scheper-Hughes 1992). As Counihan (1999:8) also notes, "Class, caste, race, and gender hierarchies are all maintained, in part through the differential control over and access to food". In fact, these differences are highlighted in periods of hunger and famine. This is so partly because,

Food scarcity mirrors and exacerbates social distinctions; famine relief goes first to groups with power and in times of economic crisis, the rich get richer by buying the land and other resources of the poor as the latter give up everything in the struggle to eat (Counihan 1999:8).

Having incorporated this aspect of power into the discussion, I will now turn to an exploration of how the concept of institutional ethnography and discourse analysis are relevant to an understanding of the power aspect of foodways in Malawi.

Institutional ethnography has been described by Escobar (1995) as an analysis of what institutions actually do in their day-to-day practices of different development agendas/policies. This is relevant to this thesis because institutional state policies shape, and are shaped by, all kinds of discourses and practices, at global, national and local levels, such that their effect percolates down into everyday life and does so in complex and contradictory ways (Broch-Due 2005:13–14).

The percolation of such institution policy processes into people's real life experiences also constitutes complex power relations. One way of exploring such relations, as suggested by Lie (2011), is to examine the interconnections between discourse, power and actor's practices. The argument here is that discourse analysis makes it possible to grasp how macro and structural aspects of development policies, such as texts and/or concepts, are produced and consumed on various levels, both among the main discursive bearers (such as the World Bank) and among consumers (such as NGOs and government stakeholders). Lie further argues that incorporating discourse analysis into actor-oriented practices helps us to understand the various international components of aid and how ideas conceived in one place are articulated in real life experiences in another (Lie 2011:39–40). Thus, text, contractual agreements, policy guidelines, standardised concepts and other documented sources relating to institutional day-to-day practices can benefit from this analytical approach.

Inspired by Michel Foucault's (1991) notion of '*governmentality*', the assumption behind Lie's discourse analysis is that policy processes constitute ideological paradigms, which are highly political, complex and fragmenting, yet concealed within different discourses. As such, the application of standardised policy models drawn from international forums in national policy processes can be viewed as political, fragmenting and constitutive of power relations. This institutional aspect of power can be traced throughout the history of development assistance in Malawi. Consequent to the realities outlined above, the donor community and international development agencies have been criticised for using top-down approaches that have led to changes in development discourse and policy language (United Nations Development Programme 2003:30). This is not only applicable to general development policies in Malawi. As will be discussed in detail in chapter 6, certain policies (such as the Food Security Policy) reflect top-down approaches and have specific effects on local people's everyday lives. This observation is in agreement with Broch-Due, who argues, "[t]he development industry has been the major generator of pre-constructed frameworks like templates and blueprints that can be deployed as tools to simplify and control across continents a range of diverse and complex environments" (Broch-Due 2000:38).

The limitation of exploring the power aspect of food within the kind of discourse and actor-oriented analysis which Lie proposes is that this approach omits a wide range of issues that are pertinent to understanding foodways within a particular context. In focussing on ideological paradigms that are political, complex and fragmenting, and on the ways in which these paradigms relate to people's actions, there is a tendency to oversimplify or overlook a range of experiences, meanings, values and interests that one thinks are not related to the discourses or ideological paradigms in question. In view of the shortfalls of the perspectives discussed above, I will now turn to a discussion of



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why I have chosen to analyse my research material through following the ways of maize.

### **The Mediating Capacity of The Ways of Maize/Maize Pathways**

As should be clear by now, “[f]ood is never ‘just food’ and its significance can never be purely nutritional” (Caplan 2005:3). Being a broad topic, food is at the heart of individuals, as it is also at the centre of societies and cultures. Throughout histories, food has been a maker of class, unity and distinction as well as endowed with particular meanings, symbols and metaphors. Exchanges of food, as well as perceptions of its taste, smell, texture and colour, or of how it is produced, prepared and consumed in different cultures have long been the object of anthropological quest (see, for example, Counihan 1999; Counihan & Van Esterik 1997; Curtin & Heldke 1992; Howes 2003; Korsmeyer 1999, 2005; Mintz 1996; Mintz & Du Bois 2002; Richards 2004; Stoller 1989). Not only have food studies helped illuminate

broad societal processes such as political-economic value-creation ... Such studies have also proved an important arena for debating the relative merits of cultural and historical materialism vs. structuralist or symbolic explanations for human behaviour, and for refining our understanding of variation in informants’ responses to ethnographic questions (Mintz & Du Bois 2002:99).

From ritual arenas, to marketplaces, and to individual kitchens, maize and its many pathways are complexly entwined and remain important towards understanding Chewa people’s foodways. However, theorising such foodways complexities in a single study has been a challenge within food studies. Such a challenge cannot be pronounced more clearly than in a claim made by Hall (1995) that some postmodern approaches concerned with concepts of food and

the body falls short in explaining the complexity of these issues and risks leaving out vital questions of agency and power.

To transcend such dangers of leaving out important question of agency and power, most researchers on food have acknowledged foods as being part of a “complex system” (see Counihan 1999:20), while focussing on or emphasising one or several aspects of food. In this regard, Sidney Mintz and Christine Du Bois observe, “comprehensive anthropological monographs on food systems are lamentably rare” (Mintz & Du Bois 2002:101). While the present thesis is not such an ambitious project that it claims to transcend such challenges in one study, the attempt has been made here to theorise and understand such complex tendencies of foodways as I encountered in the field. In my efforts to understand and link the different dimensions of food among the Chewa, I have also been inspired by Appadurai’s (1986) concept of paths/pathways and how Ferguson (1992) and Broch-Due (1999) have applied the concept in their respective analyses. In particular, the concept of pathways has enabled me to follow the different ways of maize among the Chewa people and in the policy processes that seek to control maize production, consumption and distribution.

#### *The Ways of Maize/Maize Pathways*

The concept of pathways is derived from Appadurai’s (1986:16–29) analytical concept of paths of commodity exchange. In simple terms, “paths” entail the actual trail, route or flow of commodities in any given situation, particularly as they are created through exchange (Appadurai 1986:18). It is through paths of commodity exchange as a continuous process that a framework of rules, and the meanings within which exchange takes place, are created and maintained (Ferguson 1992:59). I hereby understand by *pathways* as the criss-crossing of paths and the processes that contribute to their construction, maintenance and divergence to form new paths. Appadurai further suggests that paths or pathways are concepts that cannot simply be understood as manifestations of

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general cultural principles. However, commodity paths and pathways constitute power relations in which those with power ensure that paths are made and maintained. These concepts are polysemic in the sense that they are both reflective and constitutive of social partnerships and struggles for pre-eminence (Appadurai 1986:18–19). Thus, commodity paths or pathways “express not a simply neutral, general cultural order, but a particular set of interests that are served by that order and help constitute what Appadurai calls a ‘regime of value’” (Ferguson 1992:59) – a concept to which I will return, below.

Ferguson (1992) and Broch-Due (1999) employ the concept of ‘pathways’ in their respective analyses, though from different points of departure. I will first discuss how Ferguson has applied pathway analysis to his research material. To map the cultural topography of wealth in rural Lesotho, Ferguson approaches the cultural analysis of commodity exchange by drawing attention to the process of path-making and path-breaking, as well as to the structure of the path itself. This approach, he observes, “politicises the analysis of commodity exchange by bringing into focus a shifting terrain of political contestations over paths and diversions” (Ferguson 1992:59). This approach enables him to overcome a static representation of wealth based on a static system of normative views of commodity exchange and inert cultural or moral principles (Ferguson 1992:59). Mostly inspired by Appadurai’s concept of the path, Ferguson views the terrain of paths and diversions of wealth in rural Lesotho “as a battlefield on which paths are political instruments and diversions the subversive and sometimes transformative challenge to the status quo” (Ferguson 1992:59). Here, the use of the path as an analytical tool is derived conceptually but is empirically relevant in the way it allows him to ask open-ended questions concerning the contested topography of wealth in rural Lesotho. Through such a perspective, “simple questions about who is rich and who is poor ... become complex questions about commodity paths, cultural and legal categorisations of wealth, and the power relations that maintain or erode these categorisations” (Ferguson 1992:59).

This analytical approach is specifically relevant to the present analysis in quite significant ways. This is because it opens up a space where political questions can be addressed. Specifically through following the historical and present trajectory of maize in Malawi, it is possible to address the following kinds of question: do the standardised approaches that dominate national policy prescription come at the expense of local level experiences, knowledge, values, beliefs and conceptualisations of being? Moreover, the concepts of ‘regimes of value’ and ‘tournaments of value’ constituted within this analytical approach in relation to pathways are also useful in revealing the power relations that are part of maize pathways. The idea of regimes of value illuminates the existence of particular interests that are served by more general socio-cultural orders (Ferguson 1992:59). This means that regimes of value transcend specific cultural frameworks in regard to commodity exchange by adding a larger scale to the analysis (Appadurai 1986:15). Thus, it is presupposed in any regime of value that not all exchange situations, either inter- or intra-cultural in nature, are based on a complete cultural sharing, but rather on varied degrees of value coherence, from one situation to another and from commodity to commodity (Appadurai 1986:14–15). This concept also accounts for diverse interests, knowledge systems and power relations in which the powerful define the rules for the flow of commodities or the establishment of commodity pathways. The process of commodity path-making and path-breaking thus becomes political in nature:

What is political about this process is not just the fact that it signifies and constitutes relations of privilege and social control. What is political about it is the constant tension between the existing frameworks (of price, bargaining and so forth) and the tendency of commodities to breach these frameworks. This tension itself has a source in the fact that not all parties share the same *interests* in any specific regime of value,

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nor are the interests of any two parties in a given exchange identical.  
(Appadurai 1986:57)

That is to say, complex periodic events that are removed from specific cultural contexts but remain reflective and constitutive of the tensions existing within regimes of value are what Appadurai refers to as “tournaments of value” (Appadurai 1986:21). It makes sense, then, that participation in those tournaments of value “is likely to be both a privilege of those in power and an instrument of status contests between them” (Appadurai 1986:21). Appadurai goes further, suggesting that through the mechanism of tournaments of value a link is established between socio-culturally established commodity paths and commodity exchanges with more distant systems. This is particularly interesting because analysing maize through the pathways perspective outlined above also entails a revelation of the interaction between locally established maize paths and other pathways of maize established through wider policy processes. Furthermore, it involves the analysis of particular regimes of value held by different groups, which are brought together through policy processes concerning maize.

Although the approach discussed here has been criticised by scholars such as Graeber (2001), there are several significant points in Appadurai’s analysis that are relevant in relation to the current analysis. Graeber contends that in emphasising the social life of things Appadurai writes as if all exchanges are simply about things and have nothing to do with making or maintaining social relationships (Graeber 2001:32). As much as Graeber makes an important point here, I disagree with his analysis in one important way: that is, an analysis of the social life of things can have everything to do with the making, maintaining and even breaking of social relationships. In fact, one of the advantages of using the pathways approach in the present analysis is that it makes possible an analysis of maize as having its own social capacity to establish, break, maintain and even mediate social relationships. It is also through the social capacities of

maize that we see how maize is endowed with a social life, whereby empirical meanings are inscribed in its form, its uses and its trajectory. I acknowledge that power encounters contribute to the establishment of maize pathways, their diversions and the fact that tournaments of value are instrumental in instituting the rules that govern the flow of such pathways. Hence, the extent of the applicability of Appadurai's conceptual pathway approach in this present work lies in its relevance in linking the different aspects of my research material through following the pathways of maize within a Malawian context.

However, there is a limit to this analytical approach that lies with its conceptual basis and its emphasis on commodities. Although Appadurai's definition of commodity tries to transcend barriers of market exchange to include symbolic, classificatory and moral exchanges in specific social and historical contexts (Appadurai 1986:13–16), it is conceptually difficult to envisage other forms of exchange as being constituted in commodity paths. Since maize is more than just a commodity for sale and a staple food among the Chewa, an empirically grounded pathway approach that also encompasses the symbolic, moral, cosmological and individual aspects of social life will further benefit an analysis of the maize trajectory in Malawi. For such an empirical grounding of the concept of pathways, I now turn to Broch-Due's (1999) analysis on the morality of exchange among the Turkana pastoralists.

Broch-Due (1999:51–63) uses Turkana idioms of 'pathways' and 'food paths' (*akimuij erot*) as analytical concepts that extend the applicability of Appadurai's pathways beyond the physical and social worlds to include individual anatomy and physiology, and the cosmological and symbolic aspects of Turkana pastoralists. In her study, Broch-Due shows that "what one eats moves along 'food paths' (*akimuij erot*) and the image of paths and flows goes on to characterise the inner workings of the body including the essence of human life – breath, knowledge and power" (Broch-Due 1999:52). She also shows that physical paths represent "social pathways along which people,

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livestock and other assets move, creating a ‘roped path’, *eropit*, between donors and recipient” (Broch-Due 1999:52). These local constructions among the Turkana are similarly found among the Chewa.

Referring to paths, tracks or ways as *njira*, and an arena where several paths criss-cross as *pamphambano*, the Chewa also use these concepts as idioms that express their complex social contexts. Just as there are different physical paths that lead to different places, there are also *njira zosiyanasiyana* (different ways/paths) that are expressive of the different social contexts with which maize can be identified among the Chewa in Malawi.<sup>12</sup> For instance, *mu njira zamakolo* (in ancestral ways), maize is constitutive of traditional values that not only define who a true Chewa *is* but that also connect the dead and the living through rituals.<sup>13</sup> In a different context, while selling maize *ndi njira imodzi* (is one of the ways) of making money, its production, consumption and distribution is constitutive of *njira za chikhalidwe cha a Chewa* (the different aspects of Chewa way of life). Not only is maize essential to the sustenance of life, as expressed in their phrase *Chimanga ndi moyo* (maize is life), but how it is taken through the digestive track is also pertinent to Chewa people’s foodways, which include individual and physiological experiences with maize. Furthermore, maize is also constituted in *njira zaboma* (state ways). In the cases outlined here, each *njira* (path/track/way) is not only representative, expressive and reflective of the social relations and individual experiences that it encompasses, but it also constitutes specific values, interests and meanings that govern the flow of maize in each context. Through studying this empirical context, it occurred to me that the different ways in which maize is used, produced, consumed and distributed could also be a useful analytically to link

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<sup>12</sup> See chapters 4 and 5, which also show how maize is part of different aspects of Chewa ways of life.

<sup>13</sup> I will discuss this aspect of maize at length in chapters 4 and 5.

the various aspects of Chewa people's foodways and the institutional policy processes that concern maize.

During fieldwork, my Chewa informants would commonly express their success in every aspect of their everyday lives through the idiom of *kutsatira njira zoyenela* (following the right ways/paths) to reach one's targeted goals. How these locally constructed notions of "the right ways/paths" involving maize meet other, external constructions that constitute maize pathways is pertinent to the present analysis. This can also be empirically derived through studying the significant meanings of *pamphambano* (where several physical paths criss-cross/ at crossroads) in the local Chewa context. It is not only a place believed to have supernatural forces; it is also an arena where Chewa people usually crown their local chiefs. It is a politically significant location, then, as will be shown in chapter 4. Just as government officials, donors and local people move along these physical paths that meet at *pamphambano*, so do their socially constructed paths that involve maize. In this way, *pamphambano* also represent a space where pathways of different groups are brought together within a specific context involving maize. Hence, like *pamphambano*, policy arenas or processes can be understood as a social space that establishes a link between local, socio-culturally established paths and more distant systems. Like Appadurai's tournaments of value, these mechanisms of linkage constitute power relations that play a vital role in the establishment, maintenance and breaking of socially and locally constructed pathways of maize.

Thus, a synergised, analytical approach to maize, which is inspired by the perspectives of 'pathways' and 'food paths' outlined above, is required in order to link the varied material of this ethnographic research. This approach is what I have termed throughout this thesis *the ways of maize*, or *maize pathways*. It helps me in tracing the interests, values and meanings held by the actors and institutions brought together through the historical pathways of maize in the Malawian context. Such an integrated analysis allows me to scrutinize maize



beyond the common knowledge of it as a commodity for sale, a staple food for most Malawians, and as a gift item in social exchanges. Going beyond such established knowledge opens up the possibility of tracing the complex, socio-culturally mediated pathways of maize, in an approach that takes on board local knowledge, power relations, kinship ties, individual experiences, and the symbolic and cosmological dimensions of maize – all of which articulate the very essence of being a Chewa. Consequently, the focus of the empirical discussion of the following chapters is on the link between these socio-culturally mediated pathways that constitute specific regimes of value that are particular to the Chewa people, and other wider regimes of values held by other actors and institutions along the trajectory of maize in Malawian history.

However, it is important to underline that the portrayal of the Chewa as having a regime of value (interests, values and meanings) that is particular to them does not mean they are excluded from the forces of the world at large. On the contrary, the involvement of the Chewa in global politics and transitions, and the ways in which such global issues affect their lives, are also central aspects of this work. Indeed, at the core of the arguments presented here is an analysis of how new socio-cultural dimensions and tensions in Chewa way of life are brought about through the interaction of global and local contexts.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In his critique of complexity theories, Stewart (2001) comments on the pointless nature of institutional analysis that does not address people's real experiences and meanings in their everyday lives. Following Mintz (1986:151), I refer to what might be called "inside kinds of meaning". In this context it means "getting inside the rituals and schedules of the group, inside the meal or eating event, [or] inside the social group itself" (Mintz 1986:151). In other words, it refers to the "meanings people indicate when they demonstrate they know what things are supposed to mean... for example, [that] hospitality

‘means’ self-respect” (Mintz 1986:151). The link between such local meanings, interests and values, with what institutions normally do; and ethnographic accounts about how the outcome of institutional processes affects local people’s lives, are under theorised topics in food studies. This gap is what the present research attempts to theorise and to understand empirically.

Thus, of interest here are the meanings given to culturally embedded activities in the production, consumption and distribution of food in Chewa people’s everyday lives, and the ways these meanings become politically charged in the advent of policy encounters. In moving the power question closer to the inside meanings that the Chewa people give to their everyday practices concerning food, I am generally in agreement with a number of other scholars (Broch-Due 1995; Green 2006; Lie 2011) who have explored at length the relationship between the power of representations in developmental discourses and the normalisation of such discourse in real life. Of comparative interest are ethnographic analyses such as that of Scheper-Hughes (1992), which show that the people of Alto, Brazil, internalise their helpless state (caused by hunger and poverty) as a medical condition and that welfare institutions along with government practices contribute to this kind of internalisation and marginalisation. A contrasting example is provided by Pigg (1997), who explores the ways that traditional practitioners among a marginalised group in Nepal manipulate the “labels” given to them by development bureaucrats in order to achieve their own empowerment.

In order to weave together the various aspects and dimensions of food discussed throughout this chapter, I have drawn upon a conceptualisation of the ways of maize. In conceptualising the ways of maize, I have also been inspired by Appadurai’s concept of commodity paths/pathways where he suggests that commodities have a potential for social life, with their “total trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption” (Appadurai

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1986:13). This pathways approach has been relevant to this present work due to Appadurai's emphasis that, it is through following the trajectory of any 'thing' that we can be able to trace the commodity's pathways and diversions as well as the human actions that enliven things (Appadurai 1986:5). Appadurai also goes further, suggesting that "[t]he diversion of commodities from their customary paths brings in the new" (Appadurai 1986:29). Thus, in taking us through the trajectory of Kula commodities, their histories, paths and diversions, Appadurai highlights the social complexities of the Kula people. Maize can easily be conceptualised in such a context. Through my empirical findings during my fieldwork, and the insights acquired during the consequent analytical process, maize emerged as central due to its existence in and its capacity to interconnect different spheres and arenas of social life in the Malawian context. Weaving itself through history, and through socio-cultural, individual and political issues, the trajectory of maize in Malawi helps us conceptualise and understand food issues and policy processes that would otherwise not be evident if each theoretical perspective discussed earlier in this chapter were to be applied on its own to my research material.

In this case, following the ways of maize not only takes us through arenas of kinship, ritual, cosmology, food symbolism and power, but it also takes us through sensuous and individual experiences, as well as issues concerning history, institutions, economies and hunger. Its various paths not only constitute social tensions, reconfigured relationships and power relations, but also address divergent meanings of value systems, where issues of resistance, negotiation, acceptance or acts of rebellion and manipulation are significant. It is in this context that the politics of food (particularly maize), takes on board power relations, which link the interests, values and meanings of different groups and/or institutions. This is in agreement with Appadurai, who asserts "*politics* ... is what links value and exchange in the social life of commodities (Appadurai 1986:57). Hence,

What is political about this process is not just the fact that it signifies and constitutes relations of privilege and social control. What is political about it is the constant tension between the existing frameworks ... and the tendency of commodities to breach these frameworks. This tension has its source in the fact that not all parties share the same *interests* in any specific regime of value, nor are the interests of any two parties in a given exchange identical ... It is in this sense that politics is the link between regimes of value and specific flows of commodities (Appadurai 1986:57).

With Appadurai's words in mind, then, the trajectory of maize in Malawi, specifically among the Chewa people, is shown here to provide not only a necessary link for the different aspects of my research material, but it also empirically connects the Chewa people and the wider global context of development policies. In this way, following the trajectory of maize and its pathways allows me to link the observed ethnographic material of my research with that which is discursive and conceptual by following the different regimes of values (interests, values and meanings) that are brought together within policy processes concerning maize. It is to the exploration of such diverse interests, values and meanings, which are mediated by the ways of maize and the historical context of maize pathways in Malawi that I will now turn in the following chapter.

# **Part 1: The Historical and Political Ways of Maize**



# CHAPTER 3

## THE POLITICISATION OF MAIZE

In this chapter, I will provide a brief historical outline of how maize became a politicised crop in Malawi. This exploration foregrounds an in-depth analysis of the ways in which maize is deeply embedded in Chewa people's everyday lives. Thus, this chapter will undertake a significant historical exploration on how the richness of meanings and practices were drawn around maize as products of its many pathways. By maize pathways, I mean the many ways and processes through which maize articulates, mediates or embodies particular meanings, values and interests of a specific group of people and/or institutions. In other words, the pathways of maize/maize pathways are what I have also described as 'the ways of maize' in chapter 2.

In the search for an understanding of the empirical relations between the many ways of maize/maize pathways, I have been inspired by the work of Appadurai (1986). Appadurai suggests that, in following the 'social life of any thing' through its exchange "route, path, or track" (Appadurai 1986:18), we can also see how things are endowed with a social life whereby a set of meanings are inscribed in its form, its uses and its trajectory (Appadurai 1986:18–29). This is important because it not only allows me to follow maize pathways in the day-to-day lives of the Chewa people; it also enables me to trace the entire historical trajectory of maize in Malawi. Through following the ways in which maize is used, produced, consumed and distributed, and by exploring how meanings, values and interests are constituted in its form and use, an

understanding of how it contributes to making, maintaining or breaking specific ways of life can be gained.<sup>14</sup>

Maize is of specific significance here due to its centrality for different groups of people and social arenas within the Malawian context. The aim of this chapter, then, is to discover how maize came to occupy this central arena and to be inscribed with different meanings, interests and values in its form, its uses and its trajectory, and how it came to be a politically charged crop in Malawi. Through the exploration of the many ways of maize or maize pathways in a historical context, I will demonstrate that these pathways are not only culturally mediated, but are also permeated with power relations emanating far beyond Chewa localities. Consequently, the ways in which power and changing politics shape the network of the ways of maize historically will be the focus of this chapter.

To achieve the aims outlined here, I will follow the trajectory of maize within specific political administrations in Malawi. Specifically, I will explore how different administrative policies contributed to turning maize into a highly politicised crop. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how maize pathways became both constitutive and reflexive of power relations. Through my analysis, the processes of the 'path-making' and 'path-breaking' of maize will emerge as a space through which meanings and practices are both contested and maintained. As Ferguson (1992) argues, through the constant effort to exercise power by diverse state agents some paths are made and maintained by the powerful. However, other paths and diversions are established as a result of acts of subversion, resistance, manipulation or transformative challenges to the status quo by those subject to divergent state politics (Ferguson 1992:59).

I will discuss the issues raised above in light of Chewa people's ethnography, and will briefly review relevant aspects of the literature on maize from pre-

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<sup>14</sup> For a detailed discussion of the ways of maize/maize pathways, see chapter 2 of the present work.



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colonial times to the present day. My emphasis on the trajectory of maize in this chapter supports my main argument that the national policy processes concerning maize in Malawi have more often than not been dismissive of the local contexts of ordinary people. This unremitting unwillingness to take into account the parameters under which local people operate is even more serious given the historical evidence in the archives, which suggests that such attitudes and policies have repeatedly resulted in outright famines and suffering on the part of the people they intended to serve. Thus, the ways in which changing state policies shape the trajectory of maize and contribute to changes in or maintenance of Chewa people's way of life will be significant aspects of this analysis. Specifically, I will place emphasis on how such policy reforms influence or are influenced by the socio-cultural realities of Chewa people's ways of life, with particular reference to their food production, consumption and distribution. As will become clear, Chewa choices within the food domain often contradict national standardised policies that seek to solve their food and 'poverty' problems. This happens precisely because the planners fail to consider local complexities when they design and implement policy measures.

It is within the context outlined above that I will reflect upon specific historical contexts of maize pathways. Acknowledging how power encounters contribute to the establishment of maize pathways and their diversions, and how policy arenas or processes are instrumental in instituting the rules that govern the flow of such pathways, this chapter also seeks to answer the following questions. How do different regimes of value and contestations of meanings and resources manifest themselves within the politics of maize in Malawi?<sup>15</sup> How are these struggles evident at different historical moments in the trajectory of maize in Malawi?

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<sup>15</sup> To paraphrase Appadurai (1986), 'regimes of value' in this context and throughout this thesis has been understood as meanings, interests and values held by specific groups of people/institutions within a specific context.

In the following discussion I will reflect upon the structural influences and policy processes that have affected the trajectory of maize and, consequently, the lives of local people. This emphasis on the historical trajectory of maize in Malawi is important because different governments have handled food policies differently. This has resulted in various implications for maize production, consumption, distribution and even its availability in the region. To understand how such policies and other structural reforms concerning maize affect, or have been affected by, local people's contexts in one way or another, entails following the pathways of maize and the interests, values and meanings that are inscribed, articulated, or constituted in maize's form, its use and its trajectory. Tracing the trajectory of maize in Malawi, particularly among the Chewa people, not only sheds more light on how this particular crop became to be conceptualised as life itself among the Chewa, but it also helps us to realise the importance of maize as a factor in the politics of the nation.

Where specific Chewa ethnography falls short, I will refer to the Chewa by the general local categories of 'smallholder farmers' or 'African farmers', as presented in other literature sources. The majority of Malawian farmers own less than one hectare of land and as such are indeed smallholders – the majority of the Chewa are no exception. Additionally, a system of farming was introduced during the colonial administration, which distinguished these smallholder farmers (mostly composed of Africans) from European estate farmers. In this sense, terms such as 'smallholder farmers' and 'African farmers' are often considered to be synonymous in Malawi's historical context.

### **On Becoming the Dominant Food Crop in Malawi**

Before the questions raised above can be answered, the historical context in which maize became the dominant food crop and a staple food for most Malawians needs to be addressed. This context clarifies the ways in which

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maize became embedded for most Malawians in socio-culturally mediated foodways, including those of the Chewa. Maize is thought to have been introduced to Malawi by Portuguese traders around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (see Dowswell et al. 1996; Tindall 1988; Zambezi 1979). It has also been documented that maize replaced millet and sorghum as staple foods and has become the dominant food crop for most Malawians over the past 60 to 70 years (see McCann 2001; Smale 1993; Smale & Jayne 2003).

However, there is some reason to believe that maize became a dominant food crop long before the colonial period (1891-1964), as others have documented its presence and importance before that period. For instance, Vaughan (1987) indicates that by the 1870s the Ngoni people of central Malawi were already intensively cultivating maize and millet, using the labour of Chewa and Nyanja slaves. She underscores this early prevalence of maize, citing Laws (1879): “By 1878, one traveller was noting how part of the area was completely denuded of trees, and that people had to rely on maize roots for fuel” (Vaughan 1987:58). It seems clear, then, that maize played a crucial role in Malawi prior to colonialism.

The widespread famines in Malawi in 1912 and 1949 also demonstrate the importance of maize and how it was already regarded as a staple food for most Malawians by these periods. Vaughan, for example, argues that the 1949 famine was largely due to a failure of the maize crop, as well as a result of structural influences that worked to control its production and distribution (Vaughan 1987:94–99). This is in agreement with Ng’ong’ola (1986), who argues that these two famines were made worse by the ordinances that targeted maize production and distribution, which were passed by the British administration. The fact that the first of such ordinance targeting maize production and distribution was passed as early as 1912, is also evidence of an existing dependence on maize as a staple food.

Clearly, then, it is difficult to pinpoint a specific period when maize became the dominant crop in Malawi, partly due to the lack of literature documenting the importance of maize before the colonial era. However, in oral accounts, my Chewa informants referred to local maize as ‘the maize of their ancestors’ (*chimanga chamakolo*).<sup>16</sup> This linking of maize with ancestry further supports the argument that maize was an important crop during the pre-colonial period.

It is important to understand, however, that the lack of consensus about when maize became a dominant crop in Malawi is political in nature. This is partly because the planners concerned with agricultural policies in Malawi deliberately chose to forget the prevalence of maize prior to colonial encounters to validate their agendas in policies that argued for crop diversification. Much as policy makers’ concerns about over-reliance on maize in this region is genuine in its own right, Carr (2004) argues that many planners and donors concerned with agricultural policies promote mythical assumptions that have not been validated by historical fact. One such assumption is precisely that maize was promoted and became dominant only after independence under Dr Kamuzu Banda’s regime (1964–1994). The argument that underlies this assumption suggests that even though Malawians only became accustomed to maize less than 60 years ago, their resistance to diversifying maize for other crops is due to their conservatism in farming and food practices (Carr 2004:12). This is not entirely true. As will become clear throughout this thesis, Chewa foodways have not remained constant but are dynamic. The very fact that maize was incorporated and replaced millet and other food crops in the staple diet of most Malawians is evidence of this vibrancy of local foodways. Hence, to understand the present context in which Chewa people make their decisions on maize production, consumption and distribution, it is important to trace the different ways of maize/maize pathways and the role it has played at different historical moments and political regimes.

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<sup>16</sup> I will further discuss this point in the next section.

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In this way, the question of when maize became a dominant crop in Malawi becomes secondary. Instead, the question that takes precedence concerns precisely how maize became imbued with different empirical meanings in its form, uses and trajectory throughout its history in Malawi.

### **‘Maize of The Ancestors’: Socio-culturally Mediated Pathways of Maize in Pre-colonial Malawi (prior to 1891)**

As already established, there is a paucity of written sources that document the presence and importance of maize prior to 1891, simply because of the prevalence of oral tradition. Consequently, most information on maize during this period is found in oral accounts that have been passed from one generation to the next within the different peoples of Malawi. Among the Chewa, as in most parts of Malawi, the preferred maize variety is known as ‘*chimanga chamakolo*’ (maize of the ancestors) (see McCann 2001; Smale 1993; Smale & Jayne 2003; Smale & Phiri 1998; Smale et al. 1995). This type of maize is also referred to as ‘*chimanga cha lokolo*’ (local maize), as opposed to the various types of hybrid maize available in the region. *Chimanga chamakolo* is usually characterised as a hard sweet grain and is referred to as a flint variety by agricultural scientists, which is the opposite of most hybrid dent varieties that have a soft grain. The observation about the preference for *chimanga chamakolo* in most parts of the country has been well documented by McCann (2001) and Melinda Smale’s extensive work (Smale 1993; Smale et al. 1995) on the adoption of hybrid maize in Malawi. In her 1995 work which she published together with two other authors, Smale et al. notes,

Malawians reveal a distinct consumption preference for the flinty varieties loosely categorized as ‘local,’ or ‘maize of the ancestors’ (*chimanga cha makolo*). These varieties are more efficiently processed into the fine white flour (*ufa woyera*) used to prepare the preferred type of nsima, and their hard grain is more resistant to weevil attack in storage

than most of the dent, white hybrids that have been introduced in the past (Smale et al. 1995:353).

This preference for *chimanga chamakolo*, as the observation above suggests, not only concerns its physical properties but also its taste. These sensory qualities together with how the local context became constitutive of this preferred maize variety are all important factors in understanding the trajectory of the maize of the ancestors. More specifically, through following the pathway of the maize of the ancestors, it is possible to trace how maize became constitutive of socio-culturally mediated meanings, values and interests as well as sensory preferences during the pre-colonial period and beyond.

The Chewa, like most other Bantu migrants who settled in Malawi between the thirteenth and fourteenth century AD, were cultivators of millet and sorghum. Through trading with Portuguese merchants, they also adopted maize after its introduction between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (see Tindall 1988). Maize gradually replaced millet and sorghum during the decades that followed. Most scholars and policy analysts account for maize replacement of sorghum and millet by reference to its physical properties, such as its storage and processing qualities, which most people in Malawi still prefer to this day (see McCann 2001; Smale 1993; Smale et al. 1995). However, in addition to such physical properties, I will also show that its compatibility with different socio-cultural contexts also contributed to the transition among the Chewa.

My findings among the Chewa suggest that maize has been part of their lives as far back as the older generations can remember – hence their idiom of *chimanga chamakolo* (maize of the ancestors). Apart from maize being part of Chewa symbolic world, belief and knowledge systems; it is part of their everyday life, their yearly celebration and accounts for their most recalled hunger crisis of 1949. All of these aspects have been passed down from one generation to the next through rituals and socialisation processes. The

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meanings, knowledge, values, power relations and the sustenance capacities imbued in *chimanga chamakolo*'s form, in its use as well as its pathways, are ever present in Chewa oral traditions, yearly festivities and in their everyday activities. However, this does not suggest that *chimanga chamakolo*'s pathway among the Chewa erases the history of millet and sorghum as part of their lives. On the contrary, my Chewa informants from older generations constantly gave accounts of the use of millet and sorghum flour before maize became the dominant and preferred crop. An account from one of the older informants, who was also a beer brewer, further demonstrates the points raised above:

*During the old days, we used to brew our beer from mapila (sorghum) and mawele (millet). After maize came, we only started using it to make the porridge for the beer where we later added chimela (flour from germinated seed) either of sorghum or millet. Now this beer you see is both made from maize porridge and maize chimela. This makes things easier because now one can use maize in almost everything (Personal conversation with an older informant from Matekwe village, Fieldnotes 13/12/07).<sup>17</sup>*

This account suggests that the introduction of maize among the Chewa engineered diverted foodways that were previously occupied by millet and sorghum. Most of my younger Chewa informants reported hearing from their grandparents that people used millet or sorghum flour before maize was available, for most of the purposes that maize is now used. Despite the different generational experiences with maize, it was evident from their accounts that maize had come to occupy fundamental aspects of Chewa people's everyday lives. As I learnt during my fieldwork, maize proved to have many advantages over millet and sorghum. For instance, in terms of flour processing, one could get large quantities of flour from a few cobs of maize, compared to the larger

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<sup>17</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

quantities of millet or sorghum needed to produce an equivalent amount of flour. Secondly, maize was protected by its leafy covering from bird damage, while the exposed grain of sorghum and millet required labour and time for scaring away birds (Smale & Jayne 2003:9–10). However, the most significant observation from the points raised by my informants was that white maize flour constitutes an important aspect of their rituals, diet and foodways. The cultural emphasis on colour saturation meant that white flour processed from *chimanga chamakolo* not only tasted better, but looked much whiter in comparison to that made from millet or sorghum. The whiteness and texture of maize plays a significant part in Chewa people's colour symbolism and cosmology.<sup>18</sup> Thus, as millet had been before, maize, in its form, use and pathways gradually became filled with local meanings of symbolic, cosmological and ritual significance, and in such ways it became part of the power dynamics of the Chewa matrilineal relations.

Further to this, one of the Chewa elders explained to me, “*during pre-colonial times, a chief without large granaries of maize or maize gardens faced difficulties in maintaining his legitimacy, especially in times of hunger*”<sup>19</sup> (Personal conversation with an elder from Elias village, Fieldnotes 28/04/07). It was expected of the chief, as an overseer of the matriline's wellbeing, that he should have sufficient food to feed the whole village if required. He was also obliged to feed those who for various reasons were unable to meet their food requirements throughout the year. I was told that this is the origin of the Chewa proverb, ‘*Kapolo okhuta aposa mfumu ya njala*’ (a satisfied slave, or a slave with food, is better than a chief without food). To ensure that chiefs had food at all times, they had large gardens for which village members would offer their services in cultivating, planting, weeding and harvesting, in addition to working in their own gardens. Although these obligations and expectations

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<sup>18</sup> I will discuss in more detail the symbolic and cosmological aspect of white maize flour in chapter 5.

<sup>19</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.



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were initially concerned with the cultivation of sorghum and millet, they were easier to meet with the institutionalisation of maize because it posed fewer labour demands. Hence, the expectations and obligations that maize was imbued with, in addition to the varied meanings and knowledge with which it became associated, constituted a distinct regime of value particular to the Chewa people's way of life.

This distinct Chewa regime of value that surrounds maize is not only expressed through their complex calendrical, cosmological and symbolic rituals, but also through the Chewa's engagement with maize in their daily life as their essence of being – hence their saying, '*chimanga ndi moyo*' (maize is life). As Tindall (1988) observes, the life of Bantu settlers before the colonial encounter was based on agriculture as their economic and subsistence source. Practicing shifting cultivation and slash and burn agriculture, men and women had specific roles and tasks: "Everybody joined in harvesting the crops, a time of festivities, as each family in turn called in helpers and provided food and drink for them" (Tindall 1988:70). Maize being one of the principle grains cultivated during that period, alongside millet, sorghum, cassava and bananas, it formed the basis of the evening meal. Tindall illustrates this point further, observing,

[t] he grain was made into flour by stamping with a pestle and a mortar, or by grinding between two stones. The flour was then made into a stiff porridge, which was eaten with meat or vegetable relish. It was washed down with copious quantities of home made beer ... The diet was varied by herbs collected in the bush and the vegetables included yams, sweet potatoes, groundnuts, pumpkins, beans and cucumbers. In some areas the Arabs had introduced rice, onions, figs, vines and sugarcane, and occasionally oranges and lime (Tindall 1988:71).

Similar recollections of maize amongst elderly Chewa informants suggest the long duration and the importance of maize amongst them. Ritual practices that are still maintained today, like festivities that take place after maize harvest, are either considered to connect them with their ancestors or to '*kusunga chikhalidwe cha makolo athu*' (preserve our ancestors' way of life).

Nostalgia due to the loss of most of 'the ancestor's way of life' and an urge to preserve it is mostly expressed by older generations of Chewa and the elders whom I encountered during my fieldwork. This nostalgia could not be dismissed as an ordinary expression of loss that occurs with age and generational changes. Repeated references to how *kale* (in the past) things used to be, surfaced in most of my conversations with the Chewa of different generations. This revealed that their established foodways have not remained constant over time, but have been dynamic and constantly changing. Not only have the Chewa people adopted new hybrid varieties over successive years (see Smale 1993, Smale et al. 1995), they have also incorporated these new varieties into their rituals, as well as in the engagements of their everyday lives.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, amidst the myriad diversions that have occurred in relation to socio-culturally mediated pathways involving maize among the Chewa, *chimanga chamakolo* remains their most preferred variety. Along with the new white maize hybrids that have been incorporated into Chewa foodways, *chimanga chamakolo* has acquired local meanings and become constitutive of a regime of value that is particular to the Chewa people.

That the name given to their most preferred maize variety is *chimanga chamakolo* (maize of the ancestors) reveals a trajectory of maize that reconnects the Chewa in a changing world with their pre-colonial past and their

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<sup>20</sup> The dynamics that have arrived with the introduction of other varieties/types of maize, such as yellow maize (usually distributed as humanitarian aid), is a topic I will address in chapter 6.

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ancestors. However, the incorporation of new hybrid varieties and maize inputs (such as fertiliser) into Chewa way of life also takes us through pathways of maize scarcity, hunger and the political complexities of the different governments over time. It is not suggested here that the Chewa should try to ignore or overlook the introduction of maize by foreign actors, such as the Portuguese, by claiming that maize comes down to them from their ancestors. On the contrary, the evoking of *chimanga chamakolo* is both an attempt to keep alive a past that is otherwise felt to have been obscured, or that is being gradually transformed, and a literal meaning that values their ancestral role in the adoption of this important crop. Indeed, it is tempting to view the trajectory of *chimanga chamakolo* as an “invented tradition” (to borrow Eric Hobsbawm’s 1993 terminology), which is taken to mean

a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past ... However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of ‘invented’ traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition (Hobsbawm 1993:1–2).

This definition of invented tradition does not entirely fit the Chewa people’s context. Much as invented traditions are meant to establish symbolic, institutional and particular contexts that serve the purposes of social cohesion, social hierarchies and socialisation respectively (Hobsbawm 1993:9), Hobsbawm also argues that their peculiarity lies in their being “factitious” (Hobsbawm 1993:2). This presumption defeats the social context in which *chimanga chamakolo* is understood among the Chewa, where its history is

neither factitiously invented nor invented as a response to novel situations. However, the invoking of *chimanga chamakolo* among the Chewa brings into play the role of maize in various aspects of Chewa people's lives, such that the past and the management of socio-cultural meanings and values are constituted in the specific ways in which maize is used, produced, distributed and consumed. The processes through which maize is imbued with socio-culturally mediated meanings and values are not static, but dynamic as well as political in nature, to the extent that they contribute to the reconfiguration, revision, revitalisation or subversion of Chewa people's socio-cultural context (see Appadurai 1981:218). Such Chewa socio-cultural context also constitutes a specific regime of value that not only governs the myriad pathways of maize among the Chewa, but also forms part of Chewa people's lived experiences as they interact with other, wider social contexts in arenas similar to *pamphambano*.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the preference for *chimanga chamakolo* and maize in general among the contemporary Chewa reveals a complex interaction between the historical trajectory of maize and its politicisation. On one hand, this complex interaction is manifested through different governments' management of maize in Malawi, and through the ways in which their policies have contributed to politicising and perpetuating the importance of maize. On the other hand, how Chewa people have responded to such political processes and how their established

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<sup>21</sup> As described in chapter 2, *pamphambano* is a Chewa word for a place where several physical paths cross or at crossroads. In the above contexts and throughout this text, *pamphambano* is also being used conceptually to represent an arena where varied Chewa interests, values and meanings concerning maize interact with other, distant interests, values and meanings of different groups of people/institutions. In this way, *pamphambano* is synonymous here with Appadurai's concept of tournaments of value. It is also representative of policy arenas or processes where different regimes of values (interests, values and meanings) come into contact (or conflict) with each other.

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pathways have been maintained or diverted through political encounters, adds substance to this complex trajectory of maize. We will now turn to pathways and diversions of maize within the colonial period.

### **The Institutionalisation of Maize during the British Administration (1891–1964)**

In contrast to southern and western parts of Africa, colonialism in Malawi has a relatively short history. According to Tindall (1988:179), Malawi only became a British protectorate as late as 1891. Being a landlocked country without any valuable resources, Malawi was considered to be beautiful but poor, and hence did not attract much attention from prospective colonisers. It was only after the Portuguese influence threatened to gain strength in Malawi that the British government gave the country a protectorate status and instituted Sir Harry Johnston as its first administrative commissioner (Kampanje-Phiri 2010; Palmer 1985; Tindall 1988).

Most of the scholars cited here argue that Malawi was never intended to be a settler colony, but was colonised to extend the British colonial regime northwards and to provide a cheap source of labour to other settler colonies.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, even though Malawi was never intended to be a settler colony, most legislation implemented during the colonial period was motivated to a larger extent by British interest in expanding its imperial influence than it was to serving local people's interests. These British interests constituted specific regimes of value that interacted with specific local ones through the legislation that was passed during this period. The legislation that targeted maize and its institutionalisation is of particular interest here because such legislation not

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<sup>22</sup> For more details see Englund (2002); Green (2007); Kampanje-Phiri (2010); Palmer (1985).

only contributed to the politicisation of maize, but also had significant implications for local people's foodways and livelihoods.

One of the first changes that Johnston instituted as governor was the conversion of most of the customary land to private ownership (Tindall 1988). Thus, by 1896, about one-seventh of the land in Malawi (then known as Nyasaland) had been appropriated by European estate farmers and the colonial government's estates (Tindall 1988:184). This was the hallmark of a distinct agricultural system that clearly separated African farmers/smallholder farmers from the European estate farmers as two distinct groups. It was also a period that saw legislation introduced that sought to control the kinds of crops grown by smallholder farmers (see Ng'ong'ola 1986; Pryor & Chipeta 1990; Vaughan 1987). Dominated by, the estates were relatively large in size and were primarily dedicated to growing tea, coffee, and flue-cured and burley tobacco. In contrast with the European estate farmers, smallholder farmers were restricted from producing burley tobacco but were entitled to produce other types (mainly fire-cured) and other cash crops that were not grown by European estate farmers. Unlike the European estate farmers who sold most of their products through both national and international auction markets, smallholder farmers sold their produce for export to state-run marketing boards that were supposed to stabilise market prices (Pryor & Chipeta 1990:52).

These other cash crops that the smallholders were allowed to grow included cotton and groundnuts. Most importantly, the smallholder farmers were also the principal producers of maize (Ng'ong'ola 1986:241).<sup>23</sup> Of relevance, here,

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<sup>23</sup> It is also worth noting that the occupation by European settler farmers on customary land constitutes one of the controversial debates about colonialism, and this has been extensively documented by other scholars (see Green 2007; Van Donge 2002; Kydd 1984; Kydd & Christensen 1982; McCracken 1983; Ng'ong'ola 1986; Palmer 1985; Sandima 2002; Vail 1975). As it has been a topic that has been extensively covered, it need not delay us here.

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is how the regulation of maize took place in the context of a two-sector agricultural system instituted by the colonial administration. Through the institutionalisation of maize and other colonial legislation, which affected its production and distribution, we can see how different regimes of value held by specific groups were brought together within a dual agricultural sector.

As I have shown in the previous section of this chapter, the pathways of maize in pre-colonial times became constitutive of specific regimes of values particular to the Chewa people. With the advent of ordinances that sought to control maize production and distribution, inevitable changes occurred to these socio-culturally mediated pathways of maize. The first of such ordinances that directly targeted maize production and distribution was enacted in 1912 after a widespread famine. Through this ordinance, the governor was mandated to restrict trading in maize and other foodstuffs, with the aim of preventing European estate farmers and other intermediate bulk purchasers from exploiting smallholder farmers (see the Native Foodstuffs Ordinance No.12 of 1912 cited in Ng'ong'ola 1986:243–244). However, the ordinance contributed more to the exacerbation of the food shortage than to correcting the situation (Ng'ong'ola 1986:243–244). As a result, these unintended consequences meant that maize became scarce. This scarcity of maize disrupted the calendrical festivities, which significantly relied on maize and were fundamental to Chewa way of life. Eventually the ordinance was amended, in 1920, as a response to this exacerbated hunger crisis. The amendment specifically sought to lower the price of maize, as it was suggested by the authorities of the time that

to allow the high maize prices to continue was not in the interest of the country as the native did not understand the reason for market fluctuations, and once taught to expect these high prices and finding that he could not obtain them for his maize he would quickly reduce his acreage and use his surplus for making beer (The Native Foodstuffs

(Amendment) Ordinance No. 11 of 1920, cited in Ng'ong'ola 1986:245).

This amendment of the ordinance after the First World War enabled the government to evade normal trading arrangements. The colonial government used the restrictions to obtain foodstuffs at very low prices (Ng'ong'ola 1986:244–245). This made it possible for Britain to meet its own and international food demands at low costs during an inter-war period where most countries in Europe and beyond were going through an economic depression.

The legislation that targeted maize production and distribution from 1912 onwards was partly instituted as a response to a hunger crisis and to prevent an uprising by the local people. However, most of such legislation was to a large extent influenced by the fluctuation of British interests within and beyond the borders of Malawi (see Mandala 2006; Ng'ong'ola 1986). This meant that local foodways were rarely taken into consideration in designing and implementing such legislation, and this was the beginning of erosion of local people's socio-culturally established pathways, and of their capacity to define and contribute to solving their own livelihood problems.

Among the ordinances that induced changes in local foodways were the 1926 Maize Export Ordinance, which introduced rules for the grading and export of maize from Nyasaland; the 1934 Native Produce Ordinance, which attempted to outlaw a common practice of offering trade or consumer goods in exchange for African food and other produce; and the 1938 Marketing of Native Produce Ordinance, which empowered the governor to control any produce grown or produced by Africans (Ng'ong'ola 1986:245, fn28). More importantly, the ordinances that specifically targeted centralised maize production and distribution included the 1946 Maize Control Ordinance; the 1952 Produce Marketing Ordinance; the establishment of an Agricultural Production and Marketing Board (APMB) in 1955, and the 1959 Produce Marketing Ordinance



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and its amended policies in the 1960s (see McCracken 1983; Ng'ong'ola 1986).

The historical significance of these ordinances can be seen in the subsequent centralisation of the agricultural sector and, more specifically, in the centralisation of maize. The institutionalisation of maize resulted in the establishment of new pathways of maize. For instance, the 1946 Maize Control Ordinance was the first post-Second World War measure aimed at establishing a corporate Maize Control Board (MCB) with power over both internal and external marketing of maize. Under this ordinance, it was held that all surplus maize produced by African or European producers should not be “sold, destroyed, moved or disposed of or otherwise dealt with in any manner” (Ng'ong'ola 1986:251–252) without authorisation by the board. However, to implement this ordinance, it was necessary to create an infrastructure throughout the country, since maize was grown in virtually every part of the protectorate. Although measures like fixing a very low buying price and doubling the selling price of maize were applied by the board to cover the cost of instituting and maintaining a countrywide network, the legislation soon proved to be over-ambitious (see Lele & Meyers 1989; McCracken 1983; Ng'ong'ola 1986). In reaction to this attempt to centralise maize, smallholder farmers simply withheld their surpluses and this contributed to a significant drop in maize availability on the internal maize market and later to the famous countrywide famine of 1949 (see Ng'ong'ola 1986; Vaughan 1987). Again, then, it can be seen that legislation which sought to control the production and distribution of maize resulted in a hunger crisis. My older Chewa informants recalled the 1949 hunger crisis, with vivid examples. Among the worst incidents they reported to me in relation to the 1949 famine were having to eat grass, bitter poisonous herbs that killed many people, and other foods such as snakes, which are considered taboo among the Chewa. Marriages were broken due to husbands' failure to provide maize for their families, or by wanting to suckle their lactating wife's breast whilst they were sleeping. In short, the

following account from one of my informants gives a picture of the effect of the hunger crisis on Chewa people's way of life:

*The 1949 hunger crisis is one of our most remembered food disasters. People behaved like animals in search for survival. I had to leave my husband because there was no reason for marriage; we could neither have sex on empty stomachs nor was he able to provide me and my children with the maize that we mostly needed. It was everybody for himself/herself. People became greedy – and worse still we could not carry out our yearly activities of ziliza (memorials), zizangala (crowning of the chief ceremonies) and, of course, zikwati (weddings). It was indeed a terrible experience (Fieldnotes 12/01/08).<sup>24</sup>*

The experiences narrated here are among the many recalled by the survivors of that particular famine and similar recollections have been documented by other scholars of the 1949 famine. For example, Vaughan (1987) notes that stories, songs and recollections of the famine, which recount foraging, migration, disease, death and both the cohesion and disintegration of local people's ways of life, were ever present among the survivors of the 1949 famine (1987:1). This exemplifies how the legislation instituted by the British administration, which sought to control maize production and distribution, contributed to such experiences. In this way, newly established pathways of maize instituted through such legislation engineered inevitable changes in local socio-cultural context.

Nevertheless, with the liberalisation of maize marketing as a response to the famine of 1949, critics questioned the need for a separate Maize Control Board, with its vast distribution network, since by this time similar boards for cash crops such as tobacco and cotton had also been established. The administration

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<sup>24</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

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responded by proposing an amalgamation of the marketing boards. Thus, the 1952 Produce Marketing Ordinance initiated the amalgamation process by merging diverse legislation on maize marketing and the marketing of other foodstuffs. Furthermore, a new Produce Board was created to control the marketing of African produce, which included maize, maize flour, beans, peas, wheat, groundnuts, rice, paddy, sorghum, millet, cassava and cotton seed (Ng'ong'ola 1986:252). With the establishment of the Agricultural Production and Marketing Board (APMB) in 1955, the amalgamation process advanced and now included assets, liabilities, powers and duties previously held by the cotton, tobacco and produce boards (see McCracken 1983; Ng'ong'ola 1986). This central institution, which was renamed the Farmers Marketing Board (FMB), and which became ADMARC after independence, became one of the institutions or battlefields of different regimes of value and thus further politicised maize in significant ways.<sup>25</sup>

The process and legislation that led to the establishment of the APMB during the colonial administration contributed not only to the institutionalisation of maize but also to the general importance of maize as a cash crop. This contributed to a further increase in the maize acreage among smallholder farmers (see Smale 1993) and to politicisation of maize pathways. Unlike the pre-colonial times when maize pathways were mostly controlled by local institutions that served specific socio-cultural ends, maize was now instituted within the government machinery that sought to control and regulate its production and distribution. In this way, the institutionalisation of maize constituted power relations that could be traced in legislation intended to limit the type of cash crops the smallholder sector was entitled to grow, where they sold their cash crops, and how pricing policies for their products would be set. Therefore, it can be argued that the legislation implemented by the different marketing boards instituted by the colonial government were not only

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<sup>25</sup> Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation – ADMARC.

instrumental in channelling diversions to established socio-culturally mediated pathways of maize among the majority of African farmers, they also contributed to their marginalisation.

This conclusion is in agreement with a majority of scholars (see, for example, Van Donge 2002; Kydd 1984; Kydd & Christensen 1982; McCracken 1983; Ng'ong'ola 1986; Sandima 2002), who have argued that the structural system of agriculture developed by the colonial administration imposed exploitative labour regimes, markets and land policies on African farmers, perpetuating inequalities between the two sectors.<sup>26</sup> They also argue that these exploitative tendencies were the backbone of the independence government that followed. The Malawian elites who took over control of the European estates after independence adopted most of the colonial approaches towards estate and smallholder farming. Thus, Kydd (1984), Ng'ong'ola (1986) and Sandima (2002) specifically point out that European settlers' interests were mostly served by the legislation and directives carried out by the colonial administrators at the expense of African farmers.

However, Pryor & Chepeta (1990) and Green (2007) argue against such assertions by suggesting that there is not enough empirical evidence to place the blame for the inequalities between the two agricultural sectors on estate agriculture. Green (2007) further challenges the views of the majority of those scholars who emphasise the exploitative tendencies of the colonial administration towards smallholder farmers, by arguing that the community of settler farmers was very low, compared to other British settler colonies. Furthermore, not all legislation was passed in favour of European estate farmers since the administration had to ensure its legitimacy with African farmers. Green criticises such scholars for focusing on a specific time period

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<sup>26</sup> The two sectors refer to the estate and the smallholder agricultural sectors discussed previously within this section.

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and generalising from that data to the entire colonial period. Green also states that these scholars simply identify similarities between colonial and post-colonial administrations and take them to signify some sort of continuity of policy trends. These mistakes, he adds, have led most scholars to draw conclusions without an empirical basis, and therefore to paint a static picture of British administration policies that were in fact dynamic and unpredictable. Green concludes that “policies were not always aimed at supporting the estate sector or structured to harm smallholder production. Instead, policies seem to have changed over time in response to ever-changing social and economic conditions” (Green 2007:130).

While I partly agree with Green on the issue of the dynamic nature of the policies implemented by the colonial administration and the governments that followed, and that the policies implemented by these administrations were not always structured to harm the smallholder sector, there are areas in which we differ. Since Green does not mention or analyse the power relations that existed within the British administration and beyond, his argument omits some important empirical facts. For example, his arguments are partly based on the fact that the estate sector during the British government was relatively small and financially weak compared to smallholder farms, whose commercial production was often large. Moreover, that the colonial administration often implemented policies in favour of smallholder farmers due to fear of, or in response to, an uprising (Green 2007:133, n6) is another interesting aspect of power relations that Green does not pursue in depth. A further interesting angle to this empirical aspect of power is that most estate settlers’ grievances arose from what Palmer (1985: 232) calls “modest government support to peasant growers”. European estate farmers lobbied the government against such support, which was conceived as a threat to their own welfare.

Not only was government support to smallholder farmers modest, the colonial government also usually portrayed this group as children, incapable of

independent thinking through the legislation that was implemented on behalf of the smallholder farmers. The fact that their interests were mostly taken into consideration because of a fear of, or in response to, an uprising and many times in response to a hunger crisis, indicates a power aspect at play that Green's analysis does not fully address. This, I would argue, is a crucial empirical reality that must be addressed. Different regimes of value were at play, and it seems clear that those whose interests were constantly served by the legislation of the British administration had considerable power, even though they might have been limited in number.

The under-representation of African farmers' interests in arenas of decision making played a vital role in their being marginalised. It also meant that they had to comply, resist or adjust to the newly established pathways of maize that were usually instituted in arenas beyond their control. One such important arena of decision making that significantly controlled the fate of smallholders' livelihoods was the legislative council:<sup>27</sup> mostly comprised of colonial government administrators and European estate farmers' representatives, African farmers were left unrepresented.

Even though African representation was pushed forward by some native associations, mostly around the late 1930s, these institutions proved to be weak and were further rendered ineffective as a result of the divide and rule tactics of the colonial regime, which encouraged the leaders of some native associations to switch their loyalties at critical times (McCracken 1983; Tangri 1972). However, it is through these native associations that we can gain a picture of how the dissatisfied educated African elite expressed a need for African representation so that the interests of the majority of Africans could be accommodated. Levi Mumba, a leader of one of the most active native associations made the following observation:

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<sup>27</sup> An important body that formulated policies during the British administration.

the way native interests are being looked after is not satisfactory in that natives are not consulted, and this have raised a desire to have a say in matters touching them ... Those of you who are looking after native interests ... should take special interest in these Associations and keep in close touch with them, encourage them by getting through them native opinion regarding any new legislation and so guide them aright in their attempt to have a say in such matters (Levi Z. Mumba's Speech, 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1924, cited in Tangri 1972:292).

The leaders of these associations not only complained of being represented by European administrators, but also expressed concern that the government was largely influenced by a small European community on matters that concerned African interest. A memorandum that expressed such grievances was posted in *Nyasaland Times* newspaper:

We are troubled because ... our small European community has more power with the government than all of us Africans together. We see that even with a majority of official members of the Legislative Council the unofficial members are allowed to arrange things in the interest of the Europeans, and that native development is hindered unless it is for the benefit of Europeans. Many of our people grow tobacco. The Native Tobacco Board regulates this industry. But it is not native. We have no say in the election of its members, and on the board are those who buy our tobacco. Also it is now law that all our tobacco must be sold on the auction floors of a private company. We were not consulted or we should have asked that the government should take the control of that company in our interests. Such questions are decided in Legislative Council (30th June 1938:2–3, cited in Tangri 1972:300–301).

As these two quotations suggest, the lack of representation of African farmers on the legislative council meant that the interests of European estate farmers were more readily served than those of the majority of African smallholder farmers. However, the administration had to show some modest support for the smallholder farmers to avoid resistance or an uprising that would have undermined its international agenda on British imperialism. Thus, at the core of most British interventionist policies was a specific regime of value that aimed to serve British imperial interests in controlling the local people, maximising profits through pricing policies, and fulfilling the international demands of the British Empire. The colonial government not only saw itself as an instrument of order and development, but also felt mandated to act on behalf of the local people who, in its view, were not only childlike but also did not understand the global dynamics and international markets (see also Sharpe 1910). Local people were mostly perceived as irrational, and therefore in need of constant intervention from those deemed capable of rational thought. As Vaughan notes,

In the colonial context, ‘reason’ and ‘unreason’ were already separated. The ‘savage’s’ incapacity to see things clearly and see things as a whole, his underdeveloped personality, his different system of causal explanation, all demonstrated the impossibility of dialogue between the two systems of thought ... If *the native* thought himself possessed by evil spirits, or victim of witchcraft, or if he occasionally turned into a were-lion, this was only an extension of the beliefs and ‘irrationality’ of his own society (Vaughan 1983:218–219).<sup>28</sup>

As this quotation suggests, paternalistic tendencies and the perception of the native as irrational were implicit in most of the colonial administration’s interventionist policies that targeted control and regulation of smallholder farmers’ produce. Such interventionist policies constituted specific regimes of

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<sup>28</sup> My emphasis in italics.



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value, which ensured that some interests were readily accommodated or implemented through legislation at the expense of others and as a result of unequal power relations. In agreement with Escobar (1995:45–46), I would also argue that such unequal power relations exemplify a politics of knowledge that allows others as experts to classify problems, formulate policies or pass judgement on entire social groups, and to forecast their future. It is through such knowledge politics, as part of policy processes that different groups are bound together, and certain actions or modes of rationality are promoted over other forms of rationality or actions. Such knowledge politics in policy processes often result in marginalisation of the weaker or under-represented groups, since their own regimes of value are often dismissed or compromised.

The discussion so far has established that most African smallholder farmers' interests, meanings and values were easily disregarded or compromised due to lack of direct representation on the legislative council and in other arenas where decisions were made that affected their lives. The Chewa were no exception in this regard. Such under-representation of the Chewa resulted not only in significant effects on their food production, consumption and distribution, but also on their lives in general. Unable to directly communicate their own regimes of value through legislation, and particularly that targeting maize, the Chewa, together with the majority of African farmers, had to rely on colonial administration initiatives to accommodate their interests in legislative processes. This eroded local capacities to deal with and contribute to solutions for the problems they faced in their everyday lives, as they had done during the pre-colonial period.

My argument here does not suggest that smallholder farmers were toothless fighters on the battlefield of contesting interests, meanings and values. Rather, it suggests an analysis that contextualises the flow of different regimes of value (interests, meanings and values) that converged within policy processes, and an assessment of whose interests, meanings and values were constantly served or

undermined through such processes. Tracing the trajectory of maize within the colonial government and beyond provides such an opportunity. As the subsequent sections will further show, the legislation passed by the British administration did not only have significant effects on the majority of smallholder farmers, but it partly contributed to the fate of later policy initiatives by post-colonial governments. In addition, the legislation was not to be questioned by the African farmers themselves, which contributed significantly to the muting of local voices. This compromised specific regimes of value constituted in local socio-culturally mediated pathways of maize pertinent to the majority of smallholder farmers and more specifically to the Chewa. It was through such legislation, and at times through coercion, that the colonial government solved the predicaments of the British Empire, and exercised control over and reaped modest economic benefits from African farmers (see McCracken 1983, 1986; Ng'ong'ola 1986).

In summary, the agricultural legislation instituted by the British colonial government has been analysed by some scholars as an expression of uncertainty with regard to colonial intentions for the protectorate (see Green 2007; Mandala 2006). Such uncertainty included the fact that, historically, Malawi was not intended to be a settler colony, as the other British colonies were, due to its lack of valuable resources and the fact that it was land locked. Nevertheless, the colonial government introduced a series of policies that not only had notable effects on African farmers' foodways and livelihoods, but also laid the foundation for the policy initiatives of the post-colonial regimes. Even though one cannot draw a direct causal line between the different policies and their implications for smallholder farmers, as Green (2007) argues, it is possible to follow the different regimes of value behind specific legislation or policies that mostly serve specific interests of a particular group of people or institutions at the expense of other people's/institutions' interests.

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Hence, I have shown that although most of the legislation was instituted to protect the estate farmers, we also find modest support for smallholder farmers by the colonial government through its interventionist policies. This suggests some degree of impartiality on the part of the British administration. Through this minimal impartiality, other scholars have gone further to conclude that the British administration was caught between balancing the interests of estate farmers and those of smallholder farmers (Mandala 2006). Most importantly, Mandala argues that “while capable of faithfully serving the global agendas of British imperialism, [the government] could not act as a trustworthy servant of any particular social class within the country” (Mandala 2006:524). However, it was easier to pass legislation favourable to European estate farmers than it was to implement legislation based on meanings, values and the interests of the majority of African farmers (see McCracken 1983; Palmer 1985; Tangri 1972). This was partly because in cases where the government showed support for smallholder farmers, most of the decisions were made on their behalf, while the estate farmers had representatives within the legislative council to contribute and lobby for policy directions in their favour.

After independence in 1964, the legislative context outlined above formed the basis for policies and executive decisions by the autocratic independence regime of Dr H. Kamuzu Banda. Maize remained crucial for successive governments. The colonial administration had contributed significantly to maize politicisation by introducing the institutions and policies that were intended to control maize production, distribution and marketing through which new maize pathways and diversions in local socio-cultural contexts were established. It was also as a result of colonial administration that for the first time the production of a food crop otherwise grown freely by most African farmers during the pre-colonial period was now institutionalised through policies targeting its production and distribution. Moreover, these policies to a large extent served to fulfil the international interests of the British Empire. However, the discussion will now turn to the policies and institutional

interventions concerning maize that were undertaken by the independence regime of Kamuzu Banda.

### **Matrilinealisation of Maize during the Banda Regime (1964–1994)**

It is important to note that after independence in 1964 Kamuzu Banda's legacy drew upon several political dimensions. These included the modification of some of his colonial predecessors' approaches to the agricultural sector; incorporation of Chewa traditions to his own policy ideologies; and new structural interventions influenced by donors.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, the agricultural sector remained politically significant since it still brought together different interests, meanings and values of different groups of people and/or institutions.

The politicisation of maize has therefore been a permanent factor of agricultural politics in Malawi from colonial times onwards, and remains the foundation of policy reforms to this day (see Ng'ong'ola 1986; Vail 1983). One of the significant contributions of Banda's regime towards this politicisation was his appropriation of patron–client relationships, which exist in matrilineal Chewa traditions. Considering himself to be the primary matrilineal guardian of the Malawian nation (*nkhoswe number 1 ya mtundu wa amalawi*), Banda assumed responsibility for ensuring that all his people had houses that did not leak, that they did not lack clothing and, most important of all, that they did not go hungry. To achieve the latter agenda, he promoted maize production through his calendared crop inspection trips, which sought to encourage smallholder farmers to compete in producing the best maize. As a Chewa chief was obligated in pre-colonial times, Banda guaranteed the Malawian people (whom he addressed as 'my people') that, being their *nkhoswe* (guardian/patron), the availability of food (specifically maize) was one of his primary concerns. In return, he expected loyalty, obedience, unity and

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<sup>29</sup> See also Thomas (1975) and Jones & Manda (2006) for detailed accounts of Banda's ideologies.

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discipline. Instituting these four ideological aspects as '*ngodya zinai*' (the four cornerstones) of his government, he enforced them through political violence, especially in cases of opposition.

A number of scholars and policy makers have concluded that it was only after Banda's regime that maize became more dominant than at any other point in the history of Malawi (Carr 2004). However, as I explained in the previous sections, of primary concern here is how the different governments used maize to advance their own interests, rather than issues of how maize dominance was associated with a specific government. The increased centrality of maize within the different governments not only shows how each contributed to the politicisation of maize, it also shows how maize trajectory became constitutive of contestations of different regimes of value and local socio-culturally mediated meanings.

Banda, in line with his colonial predecessors, insisted that policies implemented by his government were not to be questioned, even by his fellow government members. Unlike his colonial predecessors, however, he instituted fear among the people through the enforcement of his four ideological cornerstones as a basis for government. Epitomising some Chewa aspects of loyalty and respect to the *nkhoswe* (guardian) or their chosen chiefs, Banda insisted that a good and prosperous nation is built on the basis of unity, where its people are disciplined, obedient and loyal to their *nkhoswe*.<sup>30</sup> Unlike the Chewa chiefs/guardians, however, his insistence on loyalty, and his preoccupation with creating a nation based on his four cornerstone values, was to a large extent instituted by force. Consequently a culture of silence and fear arose, which muted the voices of the people. Increasingly, therefore, policy initiatives were based on his own personal choices as patron of the nation, and

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<sup>30</sup> See also chapter 4 on the process of instituting a Chewa chief and the obligations and expectations involved in the process.

on what he considered to be the interests of his people.<sup>31</sup> In short, then, most of the maize policies instituted under Banda's regime were influenced by a combination of his ideology and the appropriation of some matrilineal Chewa traditions as well as a continuation of some agricultural policies that were instituted by his colonial predecessors. It was through the enforcement of his four cornerstones that a culture of fear and silence was propagated and thus, again, smallholder farmers were not heard in policy processes that concerned them. This was much the same as when African farmers had no representation in the legislative council during the colonial period.

Another significant policy reform that occurred after independence saw the transfer of many of the estates previously owned by European settlers to African high officials and many others became publicly owned state farms. As Pryor & Chipeta (1990:53) note, the Press Corporation owned by President Banda 'in trust for the people of Malawi' was one of the companies running several such estates and other business ventures throughout the country. The Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC) was another government-owned institution that assumed ownership of such estates (Pryor & Chipeta 1990:53). This parastatal was renamed from the Farmers Marketing Board (FMB) to ADMARC under the 1971 Farmers Amendment Act.<sup>32</sup>

The potential outcomes of this transfer of administrative power and the structural reforms of estates that followed seemed promising in the beginning. The 'dualistic' agricultural economy that the independence regime inherited and operated was perceived by Banda as somehow different from that of his colonial predecessors. In one of his speeches in parliament during a budget

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<sup>31</sup> For a similar view, see Jones & Manda 2006:208; Thomas 1975:32–33

<sup>32</sup> A parastatal is a state-owned company that aims at both making profits and providing some level of social services to the public.

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session, the president openly indicated the difference between the two administrations, emphasising,

Today paternalism is ... out of date, out of place ... The purpose of the board must no longer be confined to or even concerned with ... the narrow limits of stabilising prices of farm produce ... but must be widened to include actual development ... of agricultural resources in the country ... Not only that, but even more, those concerned with “management” must be taught to think in terms of active managers of development and of a business concern which must develop our agricultural resources and make profit at the same time (President Dr H. Kamuzu Banda, Speech, 9–16 March 1971, cited in Ng’ong’ola 1986:257).

Therefore, the policy concerns and the legislative changes that took place under Banda after independence gave primacy to economic development through agriculture and the drive towards profit making. The government’s attempts to regulate the prices of smallholders’ cash crops (such as maize) were not abandoned. However, the regulations were aimed at stimulating producers to grow enough, yet at the same time allowing the government to gain revenue from the surplus of the produce through its marketing board (see Ng’ong’ola 1986; Pryor & Chipeta 1990; Smale 1993).

This approach seemed to work for the Banda regime for a while, and the early 1970s witnessed success stories of infrastructure development and economic growth (see Chinsinga 2002; Kandoole et al. 1987; Kydd & Christiansen 1982; Pryor & Chipeta 1990; Smale 1993; Tsoka, 2006). The extent of the success, as analysed by Pryor & Chipeta (1990:55), was such that “‘capitalist’ Malawi achieved what most ‘socialist’ nations have not been able to achieve, namely profitable government-owned farms.”

ADMARC seems to have played a vital role in these success stories. Through its structural reforms, accumulated profits and price regulatory policies, an increased production of smallholder cash crops was achieved. Private companies were founded and there was also an increase in the number of statutory corporations. In addition to its development mandate, ADMARC was responsible for subsidising farm inputs such as fertiliser and seeds. It provided readily available markets to smallholder farmers through its extensive depots (see Ng'ong'ola 1986; Smale 1993). Furthermore, it provided processing and storage facilities for smallholder farmers' produce and released a maize reserve through its depots during the hungry seasons. ADMARC also administered a loan scheme with a low interest rate for smallholders. These roles and the price regulation mandates that ADMARC undertook encouraged smallholder farmers to increase yields and to release land for cultivating cash crops without violating their food requirements; this contributed to an increase in maize subsistence production relative to the production of other smallholder export crops (Smale 1993:53). This was partly the result of policies that ensured that the most lucrative cash crops, such as burley tobacco, were reserved for cultivation by estate farmers, as in colonial times.

Before long, the strategy of the Banda regime also faced criticism. The monopolistic tendencies of ADMARC that had been institutionalised during the colonial era were accused of contributing to the exploitation of smallholder farmers. Firstly, implicit taxes on smallholder cash crops which were raised to maintain the gap between producers and international prices were said to have increased the inequalities between the two sectors rather than benefiting the majority of smallholder farmers (Christiansen & Southworth 1988; Tsoka 2006).<sup>33</sup> Unlike the estate farmers, smallholders had limited options as to where

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<sup>33</sup> The taxes were implicit because they were pegged to the low purchasing prices offered by ADMARC to smallholder farmers. These taxes allowed ADMARC to evade some costs of storage and processing, and enabled it to even make some profit



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they sold their crops due to ADMARC's monopoly in purchasing their produce. Estate farmers sold their crops at auction using international prices and they remained largely untaxed, as in colonial times (Lele 1990). Thus ADMARC's implicit taxes and its monopoly over the sales and purchase of smallholder crops reduced the choices available to smallholder farmers, compromising their autonomy and their capacity to innovate, and created an increased the gap between the two agricultural sectors (Hirschmann 1990).

Secondly, to enable more estate farming after independence there was a further change of land use from customary to leasehold, which was the result of demand for more burley tobacco (Pryor & Chipeta 1990:52–54). This further exacerbated the exploitation of smallholder farmers who were left with few options and less productive land than that allocated to the estates (see Hirschmann 1990; Pachai 1973). In this regard, there is a common consensus that

a conscious strategy of promoting estate production to fuel the national economy and generate much-needed revenues divided agriculture into prospering estates that were given preference in the production and sale of major export crops, and smallholders producing mostly local maize for subsistence (Smale 1993:52).<sup>34</sup>

It has also been suggested that the accumulated profit accrued by ADMARC was made at the expense of the economic wellbeing of smallholder farmers (Ng'ong'ola 1986:258). Thus, the economic growth outcomes following the

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through the difference gained from the low producer prices and the international selling prices. See also Christiansen (1984) and Christiansen & Southworth (1988) for a detailed analysis of the exploitative tendencies of ADMARC.

<sup>34</sup> See also Hirschmann (1990), Tobin & Knausenberger (1998) and Tsoka (2006) for a similar view.

Banda regime's introduction of new policies and structural reforms have been characterised as problematic by scholars and donors alike, mainly because they fostered an inequitable distribution of wealth, and a situation in which those most in need of benefits were least likely to receive them (see Hirschmann 1990; Ng'ong'ola 1986; Smale 1993; Tobin & Knausenberger 1998; Tsoka 2006). In this regard, Banda's agricultural policies faced similar criticisms to those of his colonial predecessors.

The structural problems of the 'dualistic' agricultural system became evident during the late 1970s and early 1980s. External factors such as the world energy crisis and the war in Mozambique, which resulted in the closure of Malawi's rail links to the Indian Ocean, took their toll on Malawi's deteriorating economic fortunes (see Pryor & Chipeta 1990; Tsoka 2006). These factors contributed to fluctuating prices on the international tobacco market and in transportation, both of which had a negative impact on the Malawian economy. The government was unable to cushion the farmers from these escalating costs. Consequently, "many estates (including some under ADMARC and Press Corporation) began to lose considerable amounts of money; and a number went into receivership or bankruptcy" (Pryor & Chipeta 1990:55).

The government was forced to turn to international lending institutions to try and stabilise the economy. Between 1981 and 1987, structural changes to the 'dualistic' agricultural system were introduced as Malawi adopted Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) (see Chinsinga 2002; Pryor & Chipeta 1990; Tsoka 2006), which affected the growing of maize and other crops. As Peters observes, Banda's negotiation with the IMF and the World Bank in 1981 led to the adoption of the first series of structural adjustment policies in Malawi (Peters 2006:323). These SAPs included

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[r]aising the producer prices of non-maize crops (tobacco, groundnuts and cotton) [which] led to the increases in export crops but by displacing maize. ... This, with the closure of some ADMARC centres, resulted in consumers not being able to obtain staple maize in the deficit period, and to a food crisis by 1987 (Peters 2006:323).

Here we can see again how policy interventions contributed to a hunger crisis. Such predicaments for smallholder farmers disrupted their foodways and livelihoods, as explained above.

With his adoption of SAPs, Banda's patronage commitments and his ideologies found their way into the trajectory of maize and contributed to its further politicisation. During his rule the first contestations of different regimes of value emanating from donor aid conditions became evident. These conditions not only challenged Banda's own interests, meanings and values, in terms of his four cornerstones ideology towards nation building, and his stated obligation to feed the Malawian people, but they were also in conflict with local regimes of value. With the need for financial support on one hand and the need to fulfil his patronage obligation on the other, Banda was caught between different regimes of value that were intended to serve different interests. The maize trajectory in this sense was again imbued with politics, through policies that targeted its production, distribution and marketing. Not only do we see the interests of donors being served by the conditions for aid accompanying SAPs, it is also clear that Banda's government constantly manipulated these conditions in order to accomplish his pledged obligation to feed the people, which is an interesting aspect of power contributing to the further politicisation of maize. For instance, during his term of office, it was not uncommon for Banda to violate aid conditions if they came into conflict with his obligations as patron of the Malawian people. This observation is in agreement with Sahley et al. (2005) and Harrigan (2003). They both observe that when faced with a threat to his popularity caused by an emerging food crisis emanating from the

SAPs of the 1980s, Banda reintroduced fertiliser subsidies and violated World Bank and IMF conditionality in the process. Harrigan (2003) specifically notes that

President Banda had strongly identified his populist legitimacy with domestic maize availability, contrasting colonial famines with post-independence food security ... The food crisis of 1987 interacted with domestic political pressures resulting in the government's agricultural policy violation of World Bank conditionality (Harrigan 2003:850).

By 1994, the policy context was marked by these structural changes. Donor involvement and international pressure influenced the situation by creating a political environment that sought to end certain executive decisions and legislation introduced by the oppressive one-party regime. Donors justified their interventions by pointing out that such executive decisions or legislation mainly served the interests of the dominant elite over those of the rural masses (Smale & Jayne 2003:29). These structural changes, and other social and natural factors (such as the drought in 1991 to 1992 growing season), contributed to the decline of maize production by smallholder farmers from the early 1990s onwards (Smale & Jayne 2003:35). Furthermore, a referendum on changing from one-party rule to a multiparty government took place in 1993. This led to Malawi's first democratic elections in 1994, in which President Kamuzu Banda lost to Bakili Muluzi. Of importance to the present discussion, as well, is the connection between hunger crisis and government transition.

It is important to note that President Banda's thirty years of rule established institutional structures that were inherited by subsequent governments. Some of these structures remain the basis of today's policy challenges and constitute contestations of regimes of value held by different groups involved in similar policy processes. The matrilinealisation of maize was one of his significant contributions to the politicisation of maize, since he epitomised the obligations

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of a Chewa chief to maintain his legitimacy and the promotion of his ideological agendas. With the change of government in 1994, new political pathways of maize emerged. However, some of the structural reforms of Banda's regime were maintained, modified or assumed new meanings within the democratic transitional period. Therefore, the discussion will now turn to the policies and structural reforms that affected maize production and distribution during the era of President Muluzi.

### **No Maize, No Vote: The Trajectory of Maize Through the 'Democratic' Transition Government (1994–2004)**

Structural Adjustment Policies continued during the presidency of Bakili Muluzi. Market liberalisation, price policies intended to encourage private marketing of crops such as tobacco and maize, and the permitting of smallholder farmers to grow burley tobacco, continued to affect maize production and distribution during this new administration (see Smale & Jayne 2003; Smale & Phiri 1998; Peters 2004, 2006; Tsoka 2006). The cuts in public expenditure led to the closure of most ADMARC depots, in order to allow private traders to take on some of the roles of the government. Later, between 1994 and 1995, fertiliser subsidies to farmers were completely removed.

From the 1980s onwards, the evolution of most policy reforms affecting maize production, distribution and marketing are considered to have been greatly influenced by the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) supported by the IMF,<sup>35</sup> the World Bank, USAID<sup>36</sup> and other donors (see Sahn et al. 1990; Smale & Phiri 1998; Tsoka 2006). This is partly because donors and international lending agencies began promoting the reform of food marketing and pricing as a central component of SAPs in Africa, after their failed

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<sup>35</sup> International Monetary Fund.

<sup>36</sup> United States Agency for International Development.

attempts to strengthen the performance of statutory marketing boards in eastern and southern Africa during the 1960s and 1970s (Smale & Jayne 2003:29). Consequently, the framework of policy-based lending on which most policy reforms in this region were based, strongly influenced the reforms and expanded external influence over domestic agricultural policy through aid conditions (Smale & Jayne 2003:29).

Since 1995 most policy reforms have come about as a result of such structural adjustments. For instance, the removal of the fertilizer and input subsidies, alongside high fertilizer and hybrid maize seed prices, which were introduced as part of SAP conditionality, meant that these products were now beyond smallholder farmers' purchasing power (see Smale & Phiri 1998; Tsoka 2006). In addition, it has been argued by a number of scholars that pricing reforms on maize and tobacco, the closure of ADMARC markets and the reinforcement of an open market have not led to the improvement of smallholder production or their long-term welfare (see Christiansen & Southworth 1988; Lele 1990; Sahn & Arulpragasam 1991b). Open market retail prices have been shown to be higher and to express wide seasonal variation, more so than the prices offered by ADMARC in any given season (Smale 1993:55). Furthermore, private traders have proved to be insignificant suppliers of food during the hungry season in some areas, since they are opportunistic and mostly sell their grain soon after purchasing it during the harvest time (Peters 2006). Thus, the security that ADMARC seemed to have provided to smallholders (by ensuring the purchase of their produce during the harvest period, and by making it available during periods of famine) was eroded in most parts of the country. This observation has also been made by Smale (1993). Smale notes,

[f]rom a small farmer's viewpoint, the most salient result may be that he or she can no longer sell harvested maize to meet immediate cash needs, transfer the cost of maize storage to ADMARC, and purchase the needed maize during the hungry season (Smale 1993:55).

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Despite ADMARC's monopolistic tendencies, which were targeted by SAPs, the general view for many farmers had been that "ADMARC essentially provided a credit facility with better terms than can be found in their villages" (Lavers 1988, cited in Smale 1993:55). This view resonates with my research findings, which also suggest that while most smallholder farmers preferred a wide range of options where they could sell their produce, they also valued ADMARC's services greatly. This was evident in that some of my informants opted to sell their produce to ADMARC even at a loss to ensure that they would purchase it back in times of maize scarcity.<sup>37</sup> This would not be possible if they sold it to other intermediate traders who were suspected of selling the maize abroad immediately after purchase.

In this way, the closure of the majority of ADMARC depots affected smallholder farmers significantly, since it meant that the secure and readily available storage facilities had been removed. This exposed their maize yields to pest attacks and the exacerbation of maize scarcity during seasonal deficit periods. The result of this scarcity of maize was recurrent hunger crises, which significantly disrupted Chewa foodways and the calendrical festivities fundamental to their way of life.

Furthermore, the privatisation of the National Strategic Grain Reserve (NSGR), and the interference in its management, has also received some attention from those reviewing the effects of SAPs.<sup>38</sup> For instance, Peters (2006) asserts that external influence on the management of the grain reserve was among the factors that contributed to the 2001 to 2006 famine:

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<sup>37</sup> I also discuss this topic of the preference for ADMARC's over intermediate traders in chapter 5.

<sup>38</sup> The National Strategic Grain Reserve (NSGR) was previously under the management of ADMARC.

While part of this was due to a very poor harvest due to problems with rain, and the pressure by IMF to reduce the grain reserves by the government, much was due to a sequence of events that have not been fully explained, but that involve both inept management and corruption (Peters 2006:325).

As this quotation suggests, both internal and external influences on the management of maize in the NSGR contributed to maize politicisation during this era. The 2001 to 2006 hunger crisis is another case in point, where the management of the NSGR revealed interactions of different regimes of value whereby those with power dominated the establishment of policy direction, which partly contributed to the hunger crisis. Thus, due to the IMF and World Bank preoccupation with policy reforms that enable governments to reduce their expenditures, the advice that they gave to the Malawi government to reduce its grain reserves came at the cost of contributing to a hunger crisis which took the lives of thousands of Malawians ( ActionAid 2004:4–7).

The ActionAid (2004:4) policy brief compiled during the critical phase of the hunger crisis also asserts that the deaths which occurred made this particular famine the worst in living memory. In particular, the brief shows that this hunger crisis was even worse than the famous 1949 famine. Although the complexity of this particular hunger crisis will be discussed in depth in chapter 6, it is important to note here that interventionist policies like those instituted in colonial times caused or exacerbated hunger crises and marginalised the very people such policies were intended to serve. Thus, I am in agreement with Smale and Jayne, who assert that “disruptive policy initiatives, sometimes pushed by donors, appear to have exacerbated the deepening poverty” (Smale & Jayne 2003:41) and worsening welfare conditions for smallholders.



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It would be inaccurate to attribute the politicisation of maize during this era to SAPs alone, however. Several internal changes also contributed to the new trajectories of maize. Due to the centrality of maize in the eyes of the government and the people, its politicisation was inevitable, both in the past and to this day. The use of maize in election campaigns, to assure people that food would be available under a given government, was a trend that became common with the emergence of democracy in Malawi. Inputs and resources related to maize production, consumption, availability and distribution entered a more complex political arena involving donors, government and the people of Malawi, and the Chewa did not escape the consequences of this kind of politics. As explained in relation to *pamphambano*, earlier in this chapter and in chapter 2, the complex political arena of maize policies brought together the regimes of values of different groups. Involved in their own complex foodways, the Chewa people became part of an even more complex political arena that involved fertilizer subsidies, pricing policies, unstable market prices, and the availability of maize seed and genetically modified varieties, as well as in food aid and donor-driven political policies concerning maize, most of which were, and remain, largely beyond Chewa people's control. *The governance dimension of food security in Malawi*, a report written by a team of researchers, explains,

Politicisation of food security is nearly unavoidable given that state legitimacy is so dependent on maize availability ... The more people affected by food insecurity, the higher the issue moves up on the policy agenda and the more political and immediate it becomes (Sahley et al. 2005:62).

There are numerous examples of such politicized incidences concerning maize in Malawi, especially during the era of Bakili Muluzi and throughout the period of government that followed. One of the structural reforms that occurred due to the politicisation of maize and its inputs (seed, fertilizer and pesticides, for

example) involved a credit scheme called the Smallholder Agricultural Credit Association (SACA). This credit facility was institutionalized under Banda's government and was affiliated with the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development. It offered subsidized credit for farm inputs (such as fertilizer, seed or livestock) to smallholder farmers. Distributing its credit services through ADMARC, it was the only organised scheme at this time that supplied credit to farmers' clubs (see Smale & Phiri 1998; Smale & Jayne 2003). As Smale & Phiri (1998:5) explain, the SACA loan recovery rate was about ninety per cent; this was regarded as one of the highest recovery rates among developing countries. In part this was made possible because the farmers were required to repay their previous loans in full before taking out new loans. It was also a sensitized credit scheme, which the government institutionalized through extensive agricultural extension services and media coverage, using the single radio station that existed at that time.<sup>39</sup> With the drought of 1991 to 1992 growing season, and the multiparty election campaigns in 1993 and 1994, credit recovery rates dropped to 25% and 16% respectively (Smale & Phiri 1998: 5). The politicians during the election campaigns emphasised that the credit inputs offered by the scheme were supposed to be free. Naturally, this exacerbated defaults on smallholder loans. These factors, together with the deterioration of extension and credit activities, resulted in a liquidity crisis for the scheme and, eventually, its total collapse in 1994 (see Chirwa 1994; Smale & Jayne 2003; Smale & Phiri 1998).

Later that year SACA was renamed the Malawi Rural Finance Company (MRFC). It was placed under the management of a private firm, but its rural credit conditions proved to be prohibitive for most smallholder farmers who had previously benefited from SACA. Unlike SACA, MRFC's interest rates ranged between 36% and 54%. Furthermore, MRFC required farmers' land

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<sup>39</sup> The Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) was the only radio broadcaster and was patronized by Banda's regime.

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title deeds as collateral, and membership of a farmers' group as a condition of its credit scheme (Smale & Phiri 1998:5). In addition, the formal credit sources of the scheme did not support maize production unless the farmer was engaged in the production of other cash crops (Smale & Phiri 1998:6). These factors pushed to the limits smallholder farmers who were mostly involved in the cultivation of maize, and most of whom had neither the collateral capital required, nor any land title deeds since most smallholdings exist under customary agreements (see chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis). The removal of fertilizer subsidies, and the lack of reasonable credit facilities, resulted in poor maize yields, since most farmers could not afford to buy the inputs required for their maize crops. Once again, cycles of intermittent hunger crises and lack of a regular income to purchase daily needs were the inevitable consequences of credit reform. This statement is in agreement with Aryeetey's (1996), argument that the current financial reforms on directed credit and market liberalisation have proved to be insufficient in providing a wider access to financial services and has resulted in fragmenting as well as constraining Africa's financial markets. In fact, as suggested here, market liberalisation policies in Malawi contributed to the further marginalisation of the smallholder sector rather than boosting opportunities through market competition.

Bakili Muluzi's era was thus characterised by an overall decline in economic performance and by deterioration of the welfare conditions of the majority of Malawians (Tsoka 2006:11). The negative effects that some of the structural reforms had on smallholder farmers were coupled with an on-going hunger crisis that lasted for at least five consecutive growing seasons (from 2001 to 2006). This food crisis coincided with a change in administration in 2004, from President Muluzi to Dr Bingu Wamutharika's regime. Paradoxically, it was also during Muluzi's administration (which was, on the whole, supported by donors) that policy initiatives explicitly targeting 'poverty eradication' were carried out. For example, in 1994, the government had launched the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP), and a Social Action Fund in 1995, to support

community-driven development. Furthermore, in 1998, Malawi Vision 2020 (Government of Malawi 2000) was launched as a long-term development strategy, as was the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy of 2002–2005 (see Tsoka 2006). Despite all these donor-driven policies and vast programmes that were aimed at ‘eradicating poverty’ and improving the overall welfare of the Malawian populace, Muluzi’s regime ended on a tragic note, with the hunger crisis and a general deterioration of smallholder livelihoods.

During Bakili Muluzi’s presidency, it was possible to see that new dynamics of political power arose when the democratic transition entered the trajectory of maize and its further politicisation. Even though older institutionalisation of maize dates back to colonial times and stretches throughout Banda’s regime, still contributing to the predicament of smallholder farmers through the policy initiatives in Muluzi’s era, new complexities emerged with the introduction of democracy in Malawi. This occurred in part because the government was torn between serving donor demands through aid conditionality. It also faced legitimacy problems that required the incumbent democratic government to ensure that the people had food, in order for the politicians to gain their votes during elections. Thus, Harrigan rightly notes that policy processes during this era and the one that followed have been significantly influenced by “the interplay of two distinct factors: shifts in development paradigms within the international aid community (led by the World Bank) and the effects of domestic pressures within the aid recipient” (Harrigan 2003:848).

Can we conclude, then, that with the introduction of democracy, the interests and voices of ordinary Malawians were suddenly being heard through this emergence of a domestic pressure towards food for votes? The answer to this question cannot be a simple yes or no. Where the regimes of value of those with power are constantly served, and when there is a contestation of those regimes of value locally, the complexity of power relations play a vital role in policy processes in Malawi. Just as in colonial times, most donor-driven policy

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reform and the outcomes of aid conditionality exist in constant contradiction, or end up compromising specific socio-culturally mediated meanings and values that serve particular local interests. At times, this has forced democratically elected governments facing legitimacy pressures domestically to default on such donor conditionality. Just as President Banda faced popularity problems towards the end of his term, partly due to effect of SAPs, President Muluzi faced similar challenges. A series of donor-driven policies were implemented during his presidency, which had profound effects on pathways of maize as part of local people's established foodways, and on their livelihoods in general. Furthermore, it was during this period that a number of factors converged and resulted in a hunger crisis that lasted for almost five consecutive years.

Through the various factors outlined throughout this chapter, such as institutional reforms, policy processes that can be traced back to colonial times, the emergence of new political relations and the demand for, and centrality of, maize among smallholder farmers, a convergence of different regimes of value is seen within the trajectory of maize. This is because each group brings with them their own conceptualisations, interests and values that constitutes their specific regimes of value. Accordingly, it is these different regimes of value, imbued with the interests, meanings and values of the different groups concerned that contributed to the further politicisation of maize through policies that sought to control its production, consumption and distribution/marketing. Consequently, the complex nature of the politics of maize does not only involve the politics of knowledge, values, meanings and belief systems that are contradictory, it also constitutes power relations whereby the powerful constantly seek to control the weak and to ensure the promotion of their own interests. In this context we can trace how these power relations are locally contested, undermined, embraced, but we can also start to understand more fully how these power relations contributes to change, or reinforces the status quo within the institutionally established pathways of maize in Malawi. I will

now turn to a discussion of the government of Dr Bingu Wamutharika, which serves to further exemplify the complexities of the politicisation of maize, and the effects of this process on local contexts.

### **Betwixt and Between Regimes of Value: Contested Maize Politics in Bingu Wamutharika's Administration (2004 to the present day)**

The political climate in which Bingu Wamutharika took office would have been challenging for any leader succeeding the Muluzi regime. As he had the support of Bakili Muluzi, who personally campaigned for Wamutharika as his successor, most Malawians were sceptical about whether change could in fact be achieved. It was a common sentiment that he would merely serve as a pawn for Muluzi in the pursuit of his legacy. However, shortly after winning the election, in February 2005, Wamutharika resigned from the United Democratic Front (UDF) and went on to form his own party – the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) (Sahley et al. 2005:16).

Under public scrutiny, it was an opportune time for Wamutharika to prove his legitimacy, now that he had disassociated himself from Muluzi. Among the features marking his difference from his predecessor was the cultivation of a general nostalgia for positive aspects of the Banda regime. For example, Wamutharika's emphasis on unity, coupled with some of his policy reforms in the agricultural sector, resonated with Banda's legacy.

One such policy reform was the re-introduction of fertiliser subsidies for smallholder crop production. Although it was an unpopular initiative with the donors and received no support from them in its initial year, the programme was launched in the 2005 to 2006 growing season. The outcome was that after close to five consecutive years of maize deficit and hunger crisis, Malawi now accumulated a surplus of 487,007 metric tons of maize (Government of

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Malawi:nd).<sup>40</sup> This contributed to the end of the hunger crisis, and also increased the popularity and legitimacy of President Wamutharika.

The move to re-introduce fertilizer subsidies against donor wishes can be traced back to Banda's regime, as shown previously in my discussion on Banda's regime. Sahley et al. (2005) assert that the intense political competition of the newly introduced democratic system led political leaders to offer bold and possibly unrealistic promises during electoral campaigns. In light of these political competition and unrealistic promises made by political leaders, the issue of government-subsidised inputs has become a prominent part of the political landscape in the post-Banda era (Sahley et al. 2005:44).

Recent debates about the subsidy programme and its contribution to the further politicisation of maize have also received attention from Malawian newspapers. On the front page of *The Nation* (26 October 2010), an eye-catching heading read: "UK CAUTIONS MW ON SUBSIDY: It cannot run forever – DFID".<sup>41</sup> This article reflected the views of the director of the DFID responsible for west and southern Africa. Cited as representing the British government, whose domestic economic cuts were said to have affected its foreign commitments, he pointed out, "although the subsidised farm inputs programme is important to the well-being of Malawians, the initiative cannot run forever and should have a cut-off point in the future" (Drummond (Director of the DFID) cited in Sonani 2010 - *The Nation* 26/10/2010:1). His comments were featured barely three weeks after Wamutharika gave a lecture at Boston University, USA, entitled: *The African Basket: Innovations, Interventions and*

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<sup>40</sup> See also a detailed account of maize production, deficits and surplus in Appendix 2. The information on the maize surplus was obtained from the Ministry of Agriculture in October 2010. However, the figures were obtained from a database and are not available in a published document.

<sup>41</sup> DFID is an acronym for British aid from the Department for International Development.

*Strategic Partnerships*. Here Wamutharika advocated for an introduction and the intensification of agricultural subsidies within the African Union (AU) (see Chikwembani 2010 - *The Nation* 04/10/2010:2). In the same lecture Wamutharika stressed that his “administration will continue with the subsidy programme as long as it is necessary” (Wamutharika cited in Chikwembani 2010 - *The Nation* 4/10/2010:2). Although the director of the DFID emphasised that the responsibility for deciding how long the subsidy programme should run rests with the Malawian and not the British government, his comments as chief representative of British aid to Malawi carried more weight, as he questioned the future sustainability of the programme. This is hardly surprising, since the British government is currently one of the major donors financing the farm input subsidy programme. Barely two weeks after the DFID article was released, a Swedish organisation posted its views in support of the subsidy programme (see figure 1, below)



THE NATION  
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2010

# Swedish organisation backs fertiliser subsidy

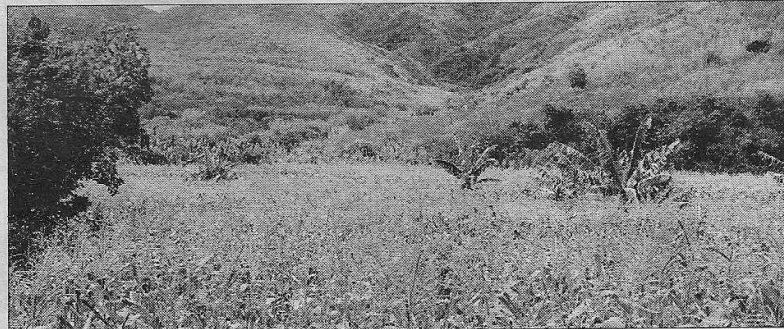
SAMUEL CHIBAYA  
STAFF WRITER

**N**ewly-appointed global chief executive officer for Swedish Cooperative Centre (SCC), Anneli Rogeman, has said Africa's ailing smallholder farming sector requires that the exorbitant farm inputs be subsidised.

Rogeman, earmarked to take over SCC global leadership from Lennart Hjalmarson, said this in Lilongwe on Tuesday when she visited the country as part of her global visits to countries where her organisation to be works.

"It is necessary and I don't think you can do without it. I think it is needed," said Rogeman in support of agricultural subsidies, while stressing the need for smallholder farmers to take farming as business.

She has also asked called upon members of cooperatives to work hard



PHOTOGRAPH: NATION LIBRARY

**Four years of fertiliser subsidy has led Malawi to back-to-back bumper harvests**

towards finding markets for their products to make business out of agriculture.

Her predecessor, Hjalmarson, said the last five years SCC has been in Malawi has produced tremendous positive outcomes that point towards taking farming as business.

Hjalmarson mentioned the experience of cooperatives in Malawi as being exceptional because they are community initiated and driven unlike

elsewhere, where you find the cooperatives are built from top officials to the bottom.

Rogeman's backing of agricultural subsidies come barely one week after President Bingu wa Mutharika urged African countries to stand up and fight for subsidies for the continent's poor farmers.

Mutharika told an African Ministers of Agriculture conference in Lilongwe last

Wednesday that such subsidies should not only be restricted to fertilisers and seeds but also include tractors and irrigation equipment.

"There is no way an African farmer can survive without subsidy. Those who say no to subsidies are hypocrites. Such subsidies would be directed towards the purchase of fertilizers, improved seeds, pesticides, tractors, and irrigation equipment, extension services and marketing," he added. ■

**Figure 1:** An article on a Swedish NGO and the fertiliser subsidy programme in Malawi. Source: Chibaya 2010 - *The Nation* 04/11/2010:7.

This article offers a different view on the subsidy programme from that of the DFID. Supporting the programme, the Swedish representative added another dimension to the heated debate, emphasising that there was no uniformity on the part of the donors regarding the issue. This particular article was unusual, however, in underlining the existence of diverging donor perspectives, since the majority of donors (mostly multilateral donors, like the IMF or the World Bank) share the view of the DFID.

As these incidents demonstrate, different regimes of value in different donor communities contribute to their policy directions or choices. The British government, guided by a regime of value that constitutes neoliberal policy approaches and the minimisation of state expenditure, does not support the Malawi government in terms of providing indefinite input subsidies. In agreement with the majority of multilateral and bilateral donors, such as the World Bank, the IMF and USAID, who also share this regime of value, the British government views an indefinite subsidy programme as irrational, especially when it relies so heavily on donor funding. In contrast to these views, the Swedish NGO, which operates through a different regime of value prevalent in most Scandinavian welfare states, is sympathetic to the input subsidy programme. These differences among the donors suggest that the policy recommendations they make are influenced by the meanings, values and interests under which the different donors base their operations.

In Malawi, newspaper columnist D. D. Phiri has commented on the subsidy debate through his article entitled: *On fertilizer subsidy, savings*. Agreeing with the British donors, he pointed out, “If the British government can vigorously limit expenditures on social services that directly benefit its own poor, it is naïve to expect it to spare expenditure that concerns the poor in other countries” (Phiri 2010 - *The Nation* 29/10/2010:11). However, his views were not shared by a representative of the Farmers Union of Malawi (FUM). Applauding the success of the input subsidy programme, the FUM representative asserted, “the current successful farm input subsidy should not be phased out and needs no exit strategy because it has proven to be a success story in its four-year lifespan” (Jumbe (FUM representative) cited in Chipalasa 2010 - *The Daily Times*, Business Times, 06/11/2010:8). The representative further suggested that if the donors were not keen to support this initiative, the only solution would be for the government to mobilise more resources locally,

but not quit the programme. The title of the article where these views were expressed makes this stance clear (see figure 2, below).



**Figure 2:** An article on the views of the Farmers Union of Malawi on the fertiliser subsidy programme in Malawi. Source: Chipalasa 2010 - *The Daily Times*, Business Times, 06/11/2010:8.

The contentious debate on the subsidy programme resonates with the divergent views I encountered during my fieldwork among the Chewa of T. A. Kalolo. Some of my informants were of the opinion that the programme would be better off terminated because its selection of beneficiaries via a voucher system was creating conflict among villagers, who for the most part expect universal

subsidies. Others disagreed strongly with this view, and opted for increased numbers of beneficiaries for the programme rather than its eradication. Those who held the latter view associated the absence of fertiliser subsidies with hunger, and worried about experiencing another food crisis similar to the one they had just gone through.

The debates and the different views on the subsidy programme indicate how politicised the issue of maize and maize inputs has become. Since most of the fertiliser issued through the subsidy programme is aimed at increasing maize production, the perception of the programme at international, national and local levels constitutes a complex scenario and is highly political in nature. This is because the divergent regimes of value held by donors, the Malawi government and local people converge in such policy processes. Sahley et al. (2005:44) observe, “Although the desire to deliver on a populist platform may be a product of intense political competition in a multi-party system, it is important to highlight that the issue of fertiliser and maize are of heightened political sensitivity in Malawi.” The patron–client relations that Banda’s government institutionalised under his leadership as the guardian of the Malawi nation (*nkhoswe nambala l ya mtundu wa a Malawi*) were adopted and appropriated in the democratic regimes that followed, and their political relevance has been intensified through political campaigns for votes. Farmers’ expectations, the activities of governments, and donor opinions on government actions sometimes entwine and intensify the politicisation of maize production, distribution and inputs. Cammack et al. note,

Fertiliser has long been an essential resource that Malawians are accustomed to receiving from the state, mediated through local leaders. There is a growing sense that providing fertiliser at reduced or no cost is one of the government’s obligations (Cammack et al., cited in Sahley et al. 2005:44-45).

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Hence, on the one hand, there is a continued belief on the part of the government that it is obligated to actively engage in patron–client roles that would benefit the majority of Malawians and the general development of the country. This includes providing inputs such as maize seed and fertilizer at reduced or no cost (Sahley et al. 2005:45). On the other hand, donor demands urging governments to cut state costs in roles that seem to burden the state, can come into conflict with both government initiatives and local people’s expectations. Such tensions have been more pronounced during Wamutharika’s regime through his government’s insistence on implementing the subsidy programme without donor support. This insistence on implementing the fertilizer subsidy programme for maize production by Wamutharika’s government, has revealed just how highly political the issue of maize and its inputs are in the Malawian context. Such complex politics of maize have constantly put the Malawian government betwixt and between different regimes of value. Like *pamphambano*, the point at which several paths meet, policy formulation arenas become the converging place for these different regimes of value where maize pathways and their diversions are often established. Nevertheless, the complexity of the situation also shows how power relations in terms of the politicisation of maize can be contested due to differences in regimes of value. As such, the widespread support by most ordinary Malawians for the fertiliser subsidies, and the nostalgia involved in reactivating the social services ADMARC offered to rural communities, are just some examples of contested donor regimes of value. These factors have also contributed to major policy initiatives that have taken place with little or no support from donors, which has resulted in further politicisation of maize during Wamutharika’s government.

For instance, since 2006, in response to the demands of smallholder farmers for ADMARC provisions, there has been a gradual reinstatement of their statutory social services. Such services include, but are not limited to, maize pricing control, provision of farm inputs, provision of an alternative market, storage of

farmers' produce, the processing and grading of farmers' produce, the exporting of surplus crops, and the selling back of maize to farmers during deficit periods (Personal conversation with ADMARC's Chief executive officer 14/01/08).

Re-instituted as a quasi-company, ADMARC now operates as an independent company that also has the provision of some level of national social services as one of its mandates – similar to its operation during the Banda era.<sup>42</sup> However, its price control policies have been reformulated. ADMARC now sets the purchasing price, but allows the selling price to be determined by the markets. Farmers are given a wider choice of where to sell their crops, while at the same time they are given a degree of stability through the availability of ADMARC services (Personal conversation with ADMARC's Chief Executive Officer 14/01/08). Hence, the re-institution of ADMARC's roles is one of the policy initiatives of Wamutharika's administration that have been carried out with little donor support (Personal conversation with ADMARC's Chief Executive Officer 14/01/08).

However, ADMARC's accumulation of massive loans has been highlighted in a recent incident involving the National Food Reserve Agency (NFRA).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Social functions are to be understood in terms of the government providing social services to its people, as in welfare states, where some of such social functions are highly subsidised by the state. In this case, then, the government is ideally subsidising storage, processing and maize input prices while it is also expected to make a reasonable profit from the smallholders' produce.

<sup>43</sup> The National Food Reserve Agency (NFRA) was established in 1999 as an independent institution aimed at managing the Malawi NSGR – a mandate which was previously under ADMARC (see also IMF web article on *Malawi—The Food Crises, the Strategic Grain Reserve, and the IMF*, <http://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/facts/malawi.htm>.)

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Despite these two institutions being separated during Muluzi's government, they have constantly crossed paths under the current regime. Currently, ADMARC has a contract with the Malawi government to supply maize to the National Food Reserve Agency (NFRA) for the supply of strategic maize reserves (Matabwa (Chief Executive Officer for ADMARC) cited in Khanje 2010 - *The Daily Times*, Business Times, 13/10/2010:1).<sup>44</sup> However, due to the bumper yields that the country has had for the past four years, it has not been able to sell most of its stalks, in a situation that dates back to 2008. Consequently, "We have 47 000 tonnes of maize in our depots dating back to 2008 which we have not been able to sell on the market because of the good harvest Malawi has experienced over the past years" (Matabwa (Chief Executive Officer for ADMARC) cited in Khanje 2010 - *The Daily Times*, Business Times, 13/10/2010:1). It follows from this that ADMARC has had to reschedule the repayment of its loans.

These developments have sorely tested some of the policies carried out under the pressure of the expectations of the Malawian population which at the same time they are subject to international pressures. The question as to whether ordinary Malawians have the power to influence policy decisions, or whether politicians simply implement policies in line with voter expectations in order to win power, is a complex one. Nonetheless, tracing the trajectory of maize and its politicisation, as well as its inputs such as fertiliser, is helpful in terms of addressing such complex questions. Through following the trajectory of maize in Malawi we can gain a picture of whose regimes of value contribute most to important policy directions.

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<sup>44</sup> Dr .C. Matabwa is the current Chief Executive Officer for ADMARC.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The aim of this chapter has been to highlight how structural and policy interventions concerning maize, carried out by the different government administrations in conjunction with international institutions, have contributed to maize politicisation. It has highlighted the ways in which these processes have affected and continue to affect the lives of smallholder farmers, which include the majority of the Chewa. My overall argument throughout this thesis is that most of these structural reforms and policy processes are carried out without a proper understanding the Chewa people's socio-cultural dynamics; hence, they have had a significant impact on their lives, but all too often in a detrimental manner. For instance, the closure of most ADMARC depots in many rural areas during Muluzi's presidency, which also included the closure of their nearest Kalolo ADMARC depot, meant that most of the Chewa people in this area had difficulties in accessing maize in times of scarcity. The farmers also encountered problems in selling their maize in times of plenty, since the markets where private traders are established are situated far from this nearest ADMARC facility.

The centrality and significance of maize at international and national levels has manifested itself in part through the ways in which the government administrations have consistently considered maize production as central to national 'food security'. This has also been apparent in the ways that international policy interventions have targeted aspects of maize production, distribution and consumption. Recently, however, there has been a significant emphasis on the implementation of a Food Security Policy, which has been supported on the whole by donors and the Ministry of Agriculture. This policy emphasises food diversification by targeting maize production and consumption. The various groups in Malawi have divergent views on such an initiative as a result of the varying empirical relevance that maize has among the different groups. The Chewa people, for instance, still regard maize as the



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basis of their lives, and its production, consumption and distribution constitutes a complex regime of value that comprises socio-cultural, symbolic, political and individual aspects of their everyday lives. Hence, new policies and structural reforms, such as crop diversification programmes and the Food Security Policy, need to be based upon an understanding of these engrained complexities that exist among the Chewa people and beyond, in order to have a positive impact on their lives.

Since independence, governments have at least partly based their legitimacy on the availability of maize for the masses, but more significantly so since the introduction of democracy in 1994. At the same time, these governments also face donor demands with regard to policies and interventions, that economic growth should be produced by a reduction in government expenditure, some of which funds vital social services. The interaction of these demands with some policy interventions that have specifically targeted maize creates a complex scenario that puts maize at the centre of contesting regimes of value, as well as at the heart of conflicting socio-cultural and institutional conceptualisations. Understanding these interactions and conflicting meanings, values and interests is important if we are to appreciate how struggles over meanings, resources and interests manifest themselves at different historical moments in the trajectory of maize in Malawi. Moreover, examining these issues more widely helps us to understand how the politics of maize is contested, embraced or manipulated as a result of these differences in regimes of value.

Maize has come to mean life itself for the Chewa people. Its centrality in their lives contributes to the ways they conceptualise 'poverty', 'the poor' and 'food security'. This is because the conceptualisation of these concepts amongst the Chewa people contains the conflicts, internalisation, manipulation of and resistance to the different meanings, values and interests constituted in their own regimes of values, as will become clear in subsequent chapters. Policy makers often forget or omit this fact, as they formulate policies that resonate

with their own interests, values and conceptual convictions, while attempting to solve the problems faced by the Chewa in their daily lives. To conclude, then, understanding how the Chewa people conceptualise ‘poverty’, ‘the poor’ and ‘food security’ not only provides important insights into how they deal with their own problems; it also sheds more light on the complex livelihoods and relationships of which they are a part. Bearing in mind this context, the following chapters will discuss fundamental aspects of maize in Chewa way of life and how these aspects are pertinent to understanding how the Chewa conceptualise and experience issues of ‘poverty’, ‘the poor’ and ‘food security’.

## **Part 2: The Economic and Socio-cultural Ways of Maize**



# CHAPTER 4

## UNDERSTANDING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MAIZE AND MATRILINEAL RELATIONS AMONG THE CONTEMPORARY CHEWA PEOPLE

In this chapter, I will discuss the organisation of a matrilineal Chewa group of central Malawi. I will explore the ways in which their idioms of relatedness are articulated, distinguish and mediated through the preparation, use and consumption of maize. Specifically, this chapter extends the presentation of my research into the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo in Lilongwe district, where I carried out my fieldwork. The intention of this discussion is not to duplicate some of the well-established and on-going debates on matrilineal or kinship studies, but to show how this matrilineality works among contemporary Chewa people. The aim is to understand more fully how some of their fundamental decisions are reached in terms of maize preparation, use and consumption, as well as in terms of its production and distribution. The intention is that this chapter will provide an understanding of how such decisions regarding maize influence, and are influenced by, local values, interests and meanings, as well as the moral obligations and expectations that are pertinent to the Chewa. Hence, at the heart of this matrilineal exploration is not only the discovery of some aspects of Chewa foodways, but also an uncovering of the divergent meanings, values, points of tension, resistance, choice and power relations of which the Chewa are a part.

This chapter provides an entry point to my later analysis of Chewa people's response to government policies on 'food security' and 'poverty eradication'. Chapter 6 will provide this exploration of 'poverty' and 'food security' as standardised concepts that are widely used in food and 'poverty' policy processes throughout Malawi. This chapter, meanwhile, will begin the exploration of such policy issues in demonstrating the significance of matrilineality and annual festivities in relation to the ways of life of the contemporary Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo in Malawi.

In this discussion I will focus on the encountered traditional practices, moral obligations and expectations that have significant implications for the ways in which the Chewa organise themselves, use their resources and create meaning in their lives. Through the cases presented here, I will elaborate upon the significance of the moral obligations and expectations of a Chewa chief, resource distribution (particularly in relation to maize), and the lineage demarcations of Chewa political and social organisation. These aspects of the Chewa will be further elaborated through an exploration of how maize articulates Chewa people's relatedness during a ceremony to crown a chief/village headman. This exploration into such relationships will contribute to our gaining more insight into the continuity, reconfiguration and complexity of the contemporary matrilineal Chewa context.

The research insights presented in this chapter highlights my argument that standardised concepts used in development policies (such as the 'food security' Policy) in Malawi are usually foreign to the local people they are intended to serve. To understand the degree to which such policy interventions can be successfully implemented, rejected, manipulated or can even worsen the conditions of the targeted people is to gain a deeper understanding of the people in question and how they conceptualise the problems addressed. The relevance of this chapter in relation to the thesis overall is the need to gain a deep understanding of Chewa people's way of life and to appreciate how

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Chewa relatedness contributes to their vital decision-making processes. Furthermore, I will also highlight the role that food, particularly maize, plays in such relations. These insights will contribute to an understanding of how the Chewa conceptualise and experience issues of ‘poverty’ and ‘food security’ in relation to the standardised policy interventions of donors/governments, which aim to address such problems among the Chewa.

### **Encountering Matrilineality Through the Crowning Ceremony of a Village Headman/Chief**

The event at which a chief is crowned is one of the most significant events among the Chewa people. It usually takes place during the period after the maize harvesting season, when food is plentiful. Other rituals pertinent to Chewa way of life also take place around this time. During my participation in such an event in Chitopola village, it occurred to me how important the crowning ceremony of a chief was in terms of understanding how the contemporary matrilineal are organised. Not only does the event encompass complex manifestations of social solidarity, familial ties and individual relations, but it also serves as a reminder of the distinctions drawn between relatives and outsiders, fundamental obligations and expectations. That it takes place in a time of historical change also sheds light on how some of the fundamental values, interests and meanings of the Chewa people have changed and reconfigured over time or, indeed, been maintained.

To begin our discussion on the significance of matrilineality among the Chewa people of Chitopola village, it is important to describe some kinship relations that were found to be fundamental for the crowning ceremony of a village headman. These relations are important because they are integral to the ways in which food (specifically maize) is produced, consumed and shared in Chewa people’s way of life.

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*The Process of Crowning a Village Headman/Chief and Chewa Relatedness*

“A chief plays a vital role among the Chewa people”, I was told in a conversation with an older woman:<sup>45</sup> “As such, the selection and the process of crowning a chief is one which is taken seriously and cements some of our chikhalidwe (way of life) as Chewa people” (Personal conversation with an older woman of Elias village, Fieldnotes 23/07/07).<sup>46</sup> This woman, as I learned later on, was behind the process to select the chief, together with other women. She was also a relative of the chief-to-be, in that they belonged to the same clan, since she was a sister of John Elias’s mother. She explained to me,

*On the day the previous chief Chitopola died, my brother who is mwini mbumba (guardian) of our mtundu (clan), gathered us all older women of the clan as his mbumba (women related through a matrilineal lineage). He asked us to go to mkanyumba komata (an enclosed house/in privacy), to choose who would be our next chief to take the place of the deceased because mfumu siikufa (a chief never dies). After kukambirana (some deliberations), we came up with the name John Elias, who is my sister’s son, but I also consider him as my son. He was selected to be our mfumu yogwirizila (temporary chief). At that time, we referred to him as mfumu yogwirizila, because he had to prove to us all*

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<sup>45</sup> The reference to older women here is synonymous with the Chichewa terms of *ntchembere* (those who have given birth) or *azimayi achikulire* (women who are older, roughly from age 30 and above, or those who hold elder positions). These two Chichewa terms are difficult to translate into fluent English because not many of my Chewa informants know their exact age. Furthermore, there is no clear distinction between *ntchembere* and *azimayi achikulile*, since some women who have given birth in their teens or twenties are also called *ntchembere* and *achikulile*, compared to those who are older but have never been pregnant or given birth.

<sup>46</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.



*through his behaviour that he will be kind to all and be able to take care of the village with compassion, responsibility and generosity. So, just a week before the big ceremonial event of crowning the chief, we were reconvened by our mwini mbumba in the same mkanyumba komata to see whether John Elias would be the one to be endorsed as our chief, or if we needed to select a new name for the position. However, all our deliberations are done in secret ... and it is only older women like us who participate in these deliberations, and no men are allowed. Our mwini mbumba is the one who is supposed to reveal the results in public. During the first deliberation, he has to tell the name to the public on the day of the funeral, and during the second deliberation, he has to give the name to the Traditional Authority or to his representative through the nkhoswe ya ufumu (chieftainship witness).<sup>47</sup> It is a time we all enjoy, but we also need to be careful in order to select a chief who will have our interests at heart (Personal conversation with Magileti, Fieldnotes 29/11/07).<sup>48</sup>*

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<sup>47</sup> I will continue the discussion on the role of chieftainship witness (*nkhoswe ya ufumu*) later in this chapter. However, in simple terms the role of *nkhoswe ya ufumu* can be understood as a witness or counsellor of the chieftainship, similar to the idea of a wedding witness or counsellor. The term *nkhoswe* within Chewa contexts is generally used to mean a guardian (*mwini mbumba*). This is because, there is usually an interaction of obligations between a witness and an overseer of a specific clan in such a way that one of the obligations of a Chewa guardian (*mwini mbumba*) is also to stand as a witness or counsellor (*nkhoswe*) for his *mbumba*, see for instance, the works of J. P. Bruwer (1955), K. Phiri (1983) and D. Kaspin (1995) for a similar interpretation of the term. In the chieftainship context above, *nkhoswe* was defined to me as meaning a witness or one that represents and counsels during chieftainship. These responsibilities are usually bestowed on male members of another clan, but with similar last clan name.

<sup>48</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English. Also, to maintain anonymity, most of the first names used throughout this chapter are not the real names of my informants.

The process of selecting a chief/village headman, as this extract explains, relies on matrilineal relations, the *mbumba*. This observation was confirmed by John Elias:

*A clan without a mbumba cannot crown a chief ... so without a mlongo [sister], there will be no one to crown you Chief. If one becomes a chief without being crowned by the mbumba, or buys his way into chieftainship, it does not carry much weight, because you are not respected or people would simply regard your chieftainship as illegitimate. However, one who is selected by the mbumba earns the respect of the mbumba who have put him into power (Personal conversation with Chief Elias, Fieldnotes 13/12/07).<sup>49</sup>*

This observation challenges a lot of the received wisdom, which proposes that the influence of the maternal lineage in matrilineal forms of organisation is on the verge of extinction (Mtika & Doctor 2002:93). It has also been suggested that matrilineal systems are in an evolutionary phase, transforming from matrilineal to patrilineal systems (see Mtika & Doctor 2002:93). However, the present work is in agreement with Kachapila (2006), Phiri (1983) and Vaughan (1988), who also acknowledges that the Chewa matrilineal form of organisation has transformed over the years. However, these three scholars argue, that despite changes in contemporary Chewa society, which have arisen as a result of colonial influence, missionary teachings, invasion by other patrilineal tribes and, lately, the influence of capitalism and market liberalisation, the influence of matrilineal relations within matrilineal systems is far from over.

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<sup>49</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

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On one hand, most scholars of matrilineality concentrate on power differences between men and women.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, they either only focus on the erosion of authority of the *mwini mbumba* over his sister and her children or on changes in residence upon marriage (see Mair 1951b; Mtika & Doctor 2002; Phiri 1983). By only placing emphasis on these aspects of matrilineality, most of the scholars have ended up making some evolutionary claims, such as those proposed by Mtika & Doctor (2002), which equate the changes in matrilineal systems to the transition from matrilineal to patrilineal forms of organisation. Other perspectives within kinship studies have also concentrated more on debates between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, or on an understanding of matrilineality as the opposite of patrilineality (see Schneider 1961, 1980, 1984). However, my own experience among the Chewa suggests that it is important to discuss the different relationships and roles between men and women holistically. This is because my encounter with matrilineality among the contemporary matrilineal Chewa people, in the crowning ceremony of a chief and beyond, reveals the complexity of how they are organised. Not only are the relationships that are pertinent to the organisation of the Chewa flexible, they have also been reconfigured by the changes to which the Chewa have been subjected. Part of such change in Chewa matrilineal relations has been the perforation of the institutional bureaucratic power structures of which the contemporary Chewa are a part. Maize is particularly significant in articulating and mediating such social and institutional relations due to its centrality in the various aspects of Chewa way of life, as well as being a prime concern of food and ‘poverty’ policy processes in Malawi. Among the Chewa, the significance of maize is partly elaborated within this case of the crowning ceremony of a chief, and in the many other annual festivities that take place after the maize harvest. Within the Malawi government, the significance of maize pertains to how different policies on food and ‘poverty’ seek to control its production,

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<sup>50</sup> See, for example, a feminist perspective from Schlegel (1972) on male dominance and female autonomy.

consumption and distribution. These social realities concerning maize pathways among the Chewa and beyond are pertinent in helping us to understand how matrilineal relations among the contemporary Chewa are flexible, negotiable and have indeed been reconfigured over time.

In light of this, I am more in agreement with the work of Kachapila (2006:340), who concludes from her study on *Nyau* (a secret institution of masked dancers dominated by men) among the Chewa that redefined relations of the *mbumba* and their male counterparts remain ambivalent and negotiable. This flexibility and resistance from within has allowed both continuity and the reconfiguration of matrilineal values among the Chewa people. My understanding of the process of crowning a chief at Chitopola village suggests that matrilineal relations still play a vital role in the crowning of a Chewa chief, let alone in terms of the Chewa matrilineal social and political order. In return, the chief is indebted with expectations and obligations that will ensure the protection and welfare of his fellow clan members and his entire village.

Such expectations and obligations became explicit during a personal conversation I had with John Elias and one of his five brothers. I learnt that selection of a chief is based on the personal qualities of a guardian (*mwini mbumba/nkhoswe*) who can look after his people, and protect and represent them in issues that are important for them at both village and government levels. This does not mean that anyone with such qualities can be crowned chief. Chieftainship among the Chewa follows matrilineal lineages, starting from the *bele lalikulu* (the eldest breast/eldest maternal lineage) to the youngest breast/maternal lineage (*bele laling'o* [singular] or *mabele ang'ono* [plural]). There is supposed to be a rotation of the chieftainship from *bele lalikulu* to *mabele ang'ono*, failing which disputes might occur if *bele lalikulu* try to keep the chieftainship to themselves.

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Of significance here is the term *bele*, which can be literally translated as (breast). This symbol of relatedness is also spoken of in terms of *mimba*, which means (womb). As such, *bele lalikulu* can also be referred to as *mimba yayikulu*, and *bele lalin'gono* can also be referred to as *mimba yaying'ono*. This observation of Chewa people's terms of relatedness has been documented by a wide range of scholars, colonial administrators and others who have studied the Chewa people from different perspectives (see Bruwer 1955; Kaspin 1995; Phiri 1983). In the same way, Poewe (1981), observes that "[w]hat unifies the constellation of women, her brother, and her children and what makes it 'uniquely binding in an absolute sense is its genesis in 'one womb,' its focus on 'one mother' ... be she living or a remote common ancestress" (Poewe 1981:7). Even though in recent debates in kinship studies there has been an ongoing divide over the implications of 'natural substances' such as *bele* (breast) or *mimba* (womb) to characterise kinship ties, it is important to note how such ties remain fundamental to the organisation of the Chewa people's social interaction in the case above.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Janet Carsten (2001) discusses the term 'substance' within different analytical contexts. She problematises the dominant analytical use of substances such as blood as a biogenetic component of kinship ties at the expense of the varied social meanings that the term substance entails within different social settings. Her main argument is that while substance as a Western analytical concept of kinship relations has fallen short of conceptualising the many ways people are related in non-western societies, it remains a useful component of kinship relations within different social contexts. This is partly because of how the term substance (be it blood, bodily matter, essences, vital parts or contents) encompasses a breadth of meanings and can be used to destabilise the dichotomised distinctions of biology and social codes on which kinship analysis has been based. See also Schneider (1980), Strathern, (1992a, 1992b), McKinnon (2001) and Peletz (1995, 2001) for detailed discussion of the different conceptualisation of substances in relation to kinship analysis.

In light of the foregoing discussion, I also observed that John Elias was from *bele lalikulu* and hence an eligible nominee for the chieftainship. This is because, as John Elias explained to me, his

*mother was the first born (wa chisamba/oyamba) out of six children, three of whom are still alive. My mother's brother, who was born after my mother, is my uncle (atsibweni) and he is also mwini mbumba of our Elias-Phiri clan ... Elias-Phiri, is our clan name (mfunda/chiongo), such that my atsibweni is an overseer of vital matters such as funerals, memorials, weddings, chieftainship and other issues that concern our clan (mtundu)... and the last born (mzime) of their family is also alive. So, I and all my brothers (azichimwene anga) and all my sisters (azilongo anga) of the same womb/ or from one womb (amimba imodzi), are from bele lalikulu or mimba yaikulu. My relatives (Azibale anga) from my mother's sister are from bele laling'ono/mimba yaying'ono (Personal conversation with Chief John Elias, Fieldnotes 22/12/08).<sup>52</sup>*

This extract suggests that understanding maternal relatedness still goes a long way towards helping us to understand the contemporary Chewa matrilineal form of organisation. As will be explained below, maize is fundamental in articulating, mediating and distinguishing among these matrilineal relationships. Through the kinds of historical processes discussed in chapter 3, maize has replaced the central place that millet once occupied, and it is now deeply embedded in contemporary Chewa people's ways of life. Moreover, how maize came to occupy this central place among the Chewa can be further elaborated through the ways in which its use, consumption and preparation during the crowning ceremony of a chief encompass a wide array of meanings and social relations. Thus, to return to my discussion on matrilineal relations,

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<sup>52</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

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which I observed as playing a significant role in the crowning ceremony of a chief, I will examine these relations in terms of John Elias Phiri's clan.

It is worth noting here that by the time John Elias was nominated as *mfumu yogwilizira*, he was already a guardian (*mwini mbumba/nkhoswe*) of his own three sisters and their children and his grandchildren (*zidzukululu*). Being the second born in a family of eight, and an eldest son, he was responsible for his *mbumba's* affairs, which included representing them as their *nkhoswe* (guardian/witness) in their wedding arrangements and marriages. This observation confirms Bruwer's assertions that "[t]he structural framework of the matrilineage is conceptualised in the form of a hierarchical system in which rank and status permeate through females and are projected on to males ... according to sequence of birth" (Bruwer 1955:113). John Elias, being the eldest son, was highly respected by his *mbumba*, even though he shared these responsibilities with his four younger brothers. However, as indicated earlier, John Elias's uncle (his mother's brother) had an overarching responsibility as *mwini mbumba* and *nkhoswe* of the whole of the Elias-Phiri clan, which included John Elias himself. Due to the sequence of the siblings' ages, his sister (Mayi D, who was the first born and from *mimba imodzi* with John Elias) and John Elias himself were both possible nominees for the chieftainship amongst the family members.

Also of note here is the openness of the Chewa to allowing a female member to be nominated for the position of a chief. Most important, however, is the significance of family relations and hierarchies, and the central role that the *mbumba* plays in the selection of a chief. I was told that a woman who might be a nominee during the deliberations of the *mbumba* might be sent out of the deliberations, or simply asked not to attend, because she might be told that she was being considered as an eligible candidate for the position (Personal conversation with Magileti, Fieldnotes 29/11/07).

As we have observed, the *mbumba* plays a critical role in the selection of a Chewa chief. Even though scholars such as Chanock (1998), Mitchell (1956), Vaughan (1988) and White (1987) acknowledge that women have been central to the redefinition of matrilineal ideology throughout the history of the Chewa of Malawi, there is also an implicit consensus that the *mbumba*'s influence has been diminishing over the years as a result of external influence (see also Kachapila 2006; Mtika & Doctor 2002). For example, in relation to my observation on the active role that women play in selecting a Chewa chief, Vaughan (1988) also shows that during the colonial administration,

what look[ed] like real female assertiveness was being demonstrated at a time when, through the new District Administration (Native) Ordinance of 1924, women were in fact losing much of their real power in local politics ... Women had less influence now over the selection of village headmen. These headmen now appointed male councillors ... were given new powers by the colonial state (Vaughan 1988:26–27).

However, there appears to be a lack of literature documenting the role of *mbumba* in selecting the chief after the advent of colonialism and the transitions that have occurred among the Chewa people since then. This being the case, the rediscovery of the significant role that the *mbumba* plays in the present case is open to many interpretations. However, the point I want to make is that matrilineal relations still matter among the contemporary Chewa people. These relations are significant in ensuring the continuation or reconfiguration of Chewa traditional values and their social organisation, even in times of tremendous change. Furthermore, the present rediscovery of the involvement of the *mbumba* in selecting a chief, and the flexibility about who takes the next chieftainship (either a male or a female member of a clan), are examples that demonstrate the negotiability and flexibility of matrilineal Chewa relations. These observations undermine common assumptions that have portrayed



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matrilineal forms of organisations as rigid structures that only allow change in one direction (i.e., from the matrilineal to the patrilineal).<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, the rediscovery of the role of the *mbumba* in selecting a Chewa chief demonstrates how Chewa matrilineal relations reconfigures over time. Considering that during colonial times the role of the *mbumba* was taken away by the colonial administration, through instituting as chiefs Chewa men who were loyal to the government, the present findings are remarkable. During the same colonial period the cultivation of cash crops (such as tobacco) was placed in the hands of men, as discussed in chapter 3, so Chewa women were found to be more involved in food production, particularly maize (Vaughan 1988). This predominance of women in maize production, as well as in its consumption and distribution in traditional Chewa festivities, ensured that the significant role that the *mbumba* played during the pre-colonial period did not entirely disappear. In fact, through maize production, preparation and consumption, the *mbumba*'s influence on Chewa organisation was ensured, and can even be traced within the present cases where Chewa women use food preparation and consumption to make kinship claims and demarcations. In arguing that maize was essential to the *mbumba*'s influence in Chewa organisation during colonial times and in the present, I am not denying that women's autonomy was greatly undermined during the colonial period (see also Vaughan 1988). What I am emphasising is that even in the midst of changes, some of which were instituted by the colonial government, the flexibility and negotiability of relations between Chewa men and women has allowed them to reconfigure their matrilineal organisation to ensure thriving values, meanings and practices that are pertinent to Chewa way of life. This rediscovery of the involvement of the *mbumba* in selecting a chief, just as they were involved in pre-colonial times,

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<sup>53</sup> See also a similar observation by Poewe (1981:3–6) on the matrilineal Luapula people of Zambia.

further demonstrates that Chewa matrilineal forms of organisation configure and reconfigure over time.

With this context in mind, the next section further demonstrates the flexibility and negotiability of relations within Chewa matrilineal organisation. Through the presentation of a specific case, I will illustrate that although ideally a matrilineal chief is selected within a framework of matrilineal relations; sometimes exceptions are made, based on the social roles, expectations and obligations that a chief is supposed to fulfil.

### *Changing the Name: From Chitopola village to Elias village*

The first time I was introduced to the village by an agricultural extension worker, I was taken to John Elias, who was then *mfumu yogwirizila*. It was early March 2007 and some crops were still in the fields; the maize was almost ready to be harvested. John Elias's fate was pending, in terms of whether he would be endorsed as the real chief of the village; the decision was due towards the end of this harvesting season when the food, particularly maize, would be plentiful.

Chitopola village, which later became known as Elias village, was the village of which John Elias was temporarily the chief. This was also one of the two main villages where I carried out my ethnographic fieldwork. The village is made up of 99 'households' that belong to the same Elias-Phiri clan, with the exception of a few that comprise government employees, teachers and other migrants from across the country.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> By households, I generally mean a group of people who are related by kinship ties and marriage and stay together in the same house or the same compound. Among the Chewa, members of the same household usually eat their daily meals together; sometimes the household includes non-kin members that have, due to circumstances,

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Before the day of the crowning ceremony of the chief, I learned from a group of women with whom I spent most of my time in the village and at the marketplace that the village was no longer going to be known as Chitopola, but as Elias. During an informal personal conversation, I asked the *mfumu yogwirizila* John Elias why this sudden change of name was taking place; he replied with the following story:

*Tracing back to our ancestors, this village was called Chitopola after a man called Chitopola. This man was a mkamwini (male in-law/ married stranger to the clan). He was famous for his beer brewing and generosity, so that the villagers crowned him chief. After his death, it was time for the chieftainship to return to its rightful owners. As such, the Elias-Phiri was the clan to whom this chieftainship belonged and that's also the reason why they had nominated me at his funeral as mfumu yogwirizira. It was also a symbolic gesture that the chief to be selected had to come from my clan and not from the deceased chief's clan. Since I was among one of the eligible candidates for the chieftainship within my clan, it is also the reason why the mbumba had nominated me as the mfumu yogwirizira ... So, that is why the village is no longer to be known as Chitopola, but Elias village after our own clan name (Personal conversation with Chief John Elias, Fieldnotes 18/06/07).<sup>55</sup>*

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become affiliated to a particular group. I have also put the term household in single quotation marks to indicate that in anthropology there is no consensus on the universal applicability of the concept of household. See also further discussion on the concept of household in Thomas Barfield's (1997) *The dictionary of anthropology* and in Barnard & Spencer's (2002) *Encyclopedia of social and cultural anthropology*.

<sup>55</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

Hence, during the first few months of the fieldwork I referred to this village as Chitopola; during the rest of my fieldwork it was referred to as Elias. This change of name was not fully comprehended by extension workers from the Ministry of Agriculture, who still referred to the village as Chitopola. They did not understand why the sudden change of name had taken place.

Of importance here, however, is that the villagers permitted a male in-law (*mkamwini*) to be crowned as chief, even though he would usually be perceived as an outsider, or a stranger, to the clan into which he married. This finding challenges a common understanding in studies concerned with Chewa matrilineal relations that portrays *mkamwini* (plural – *akamwini*) as assuming the non-negotiable position of ‘stranger’ in their wife’s village, while having their obligations and entitlements recognised only in their matrimonial homes and affiliations.<sup>56</sup> Although this is an exceptional case, its account in relation to the Chewa of T. A. Kalolo signifies that some relationship boundaries can at times be crossed and are open to negotiation (see also Kachapila 2006 and Vaughan 1988 for similar observations). In this instance, Chitopola’s beer brewing (in which maize is the main ingredient in the local beer) and his generosity contributed to him being appointed as chief, which adds to our growing evidence of the significance of maize in Chewa power relations. As shown in chapter 3, maize in pre-colonial times was an essential asset that the Chewa chiefs were expected to have in abundance so that they could fulfil their obligation to feed the hungry or mitigate any hunger crises among his subjects. These expectations and obligations of a Chewa chief have over time been articulated in various arenas of Chewa way of life, as well as through one of their proverbs, which states, ‘A slave with food is better than a chief without food’. It is through such expressions, and in observing how a *mkamwini* was selected as chief in the case above, that we see how maize is part of the

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<sup>56</sup> For a detailed discussion on the position of ‘the son-in-law’ (*mkamwini*) within Chewa matrilineal relations, see also L. Mair (1951b) and K. Phiri (1983).

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expectations and obligations of a Chewa chief – hence its significance in articulating fundamental aspects of Chewa people’s way of life.

Contrary to my findings above, Mtika & Doctor (2002:81) suggest in *Matriliny, Patriliney, and Wealth Variations in Rural Malawi* that matrilineality and patrilineality do not have any influence on gift exchange or wealth flow. This is despite the fact that some of their qualitative findings conclude that, “The main reasons for helping one another included compassion, obligation, and responsibility” (Mtika & Doctor 2002:83). They do not probe any further as to how these obligations, responsibilities or compassion work beyond the realms of gift exchange, or in what ways these obligations, responsibilities and compassion influence people in helping each other during time of illness or in daily household chores. Being limited in scope by the statistical measurements of the variables of exchange that they established, and valuing these exchange variables in monetary terms, Mtika & Doctor’s findings leave a lot to be desired.

In opposition to the findings of Mtika & Doctor (2002), my own research suggests that Chewa people’s expectations of their chief’s obligations, responsibility and generosity constitutes a fundamental aspect of their way of life. This present work also suggests that Chewa people’s expectations, obligations and responsibilities play a vital role in the selection of a chief. As my case above suggests, the significance of these factors can be traced in the extent to which the boundaries of matrilineal relations can be crossed. Thus, that a ‘stranger’ (or an ‘outsider’) to a clan who meets specific Chewa expectations, obligations and responsibilities can be eligible to occupy the position of a chief among the matrilineal Chewa is a ground-breaking observation that challenges the more general portrayal of a rigid Chewa socio-cultural organisation. I am not suggesting here that this is always the case: matrilineal relations, as I found out, still play a fundamental role in determining who can become a chief and who cannot do so, as they also do in determining

the distinction between relatives and non-relatives. Even in relation to such exceptional cases as that discussed above, I learnt the following from a personal conversation that I had with Chief John Elias and his brother:

*We were told by azigogo athu (our grandparents) that even Chitopola's chieftainship unavomelezedwa (was legitimised) by a consensus of the mbumba who were making the deliberations at that time ... The responsibility of selecting a chief is given to women because they are perceived to be olera (to have nurturing abilities), which gives them more insight into, and better judgement of, those who have leadership skills that will ensure their safety and the welfare of the entire village being taken care of (Personal conversation with Chief John Elias and his brother, Fieldnotes 22/12/08).<sup>57</sup>*

The discussion above supports my argument that matrilineality is an important aspect of the ways in which Chewa people organise themselves, use their resources and create meaning in their everyday lives. The fact that Chewa matrilineal organisation has transformed and been reconfigured over time is a point that I do not contend (see Englund 1999; Kachapila 2006; Morris 2000a; Phiri 1983; Vaughan 1988). In fact, I am in agreement with Brian Morris (2000a), who postulates that among the Chewa changes in recent decades have to a large extent been influenced by development planners and politicians, who have undermined the autonomy and power of women belonging to matrilineal institutions. They have done so by giving precedence to an ideal of the conjugal family under the authority of a male figurehead (Morris 2000a:58).

The significance of maize in articulating, mediating and demarcating the ways in which people relate to each other through matrilineal relations has been emphasised throughout this study. Also of interest here has been an exploration

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<sup>57</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

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of the expectations and the obligations of which these relations are constituted. With these points in mind, I will in the following sections further elaborate on how maize is deeply embedded in Chewa way of life, which is pertinent to this demonstration of the ways in which these matrilineal relationships work among the contemporary Chewa. I will explore this through tracing how the terms of Chewa relatedness were actually played out during the crowning ceremony of a chief, through the preparation and consumption of maize.

### **The Event**

It is a sunny but cold Friday morning, on 27 July 2007. Some women and children are at the borehole pumping and drawing water for the day. Small boys are chasing the chickens to be cooked later on, while a group of young men slaughters goats a little further away, but within a visible distance. Some women are sweeping the ground and others are washing their pots and big cooking drums. The actual celebration to crown a chief takes about two days. Tomorrow will be an important occasion but today is also significant, as the people of Elias village are preparing to crown their chief.

The week leading up to this day has been hectic for Dorothy (John Elias's mother), her sister Magileti and their relatives and friends. Dorothy's brother remobilised his *mbumba* to gather again in private (*mkanyumba komata*), to determine who should be the next chief for Elias village. The *mbumba* involved in these deliberations included even those who had moved out of the village and were living in their husbands' matrimonial homes under a *Chitengwa* agreement.<sup>58</sup> They were all obliged to come and participate in this important phase of selecting the chief.

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<sup>58</sup> *Chitengwa* can be explained literally as a woman moving from her matrimonial home to stay in her husband's village. It is what most scholars in kinship studies have termed virilocality. This is often conceptualised as the opposite of uxorilocarity,

Today, however, what transpired in these deliberations is going to be revealed publicly. The *mwini mbumba* (John Elias's uncle who is also Dorothy's brother) has already been told the results, but he must maintain secrecy until a specific time. On this occasion, he will not be the only one to reveal the results. This is because the *nkhoswe* (witness) of this chieftainship will also be involved in raising up the new chief from the gathered crowd and bringing him before the Traditional Authority officials, who will make this position official within the jurisdiction of Traditional Authority Kalolo. Chief Nsipu of the Nsipu-Phiri clan is the witness/ counsellor (*nkhoswe*) of this chieftainship. Having the same last clan name as the Elias-Phiri clan, they are considered to be *abale* (relatives/related).<sup>59</sup> John Elias commented on this process as follows:

*During the crowning ceremony of a chief (mwambo oveka ufumu), we always need a nkhoswe, just like at weddings (zikwati). There is no chieftainship (ufumu) without a nkhoswe ... The nkhoswe have to have the same mfunda or chiongo (clan name) as ours, but have to come from a different village ... Usually a chief of that particular village ... It is believed that having the same mfunda/ chiongo signifies that we are related (ndi abale athu). In the past it meant that we could not even intermarry with such a village (Personal conversation with Chief John Elias, Fieldnotes 18/05/2007).<sup>60</sup>*

The claims made here by Chief John Elias, regarding being related through having the same last clan name (*mfunda/ chiongo*), have also been observed by

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where the husband and his wife reside in the wife's matrimonial home. See also K. Phiri (1983:262) and B. Morris (2000a:38) for similar interpretations of *Chitegwa*.

<sup>59</sup> See also Bruwer (1955:117) on how the term *abale* indicates members of the same matrilineage, or children of the same mother.

<sup>60</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.



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Morris (2000a). However, although Morris emphasises the lack of relevance of such relations among the present matrilineal institutions due to intermarriage between people with the same clan names (Morris 2000a:20–21), the extract above suggests otherwise. Among the contemporary Chewa, marriages between people with the same *mfunda/ chiongo* have become commonplace, but we can still see from this case that such relations remain relevant and significant in other social arenas of the matrilineal organisation. Thus, the role that Chief *Nsipu* plays in crowning John Elias is noteworthy. It is also important because it further demonstrates how local power relations have become part of wider bureaucratic power relations.

Meanwhile, at the event, although John Elias's uncle and the chieftainship witness have told John Elias and his wife Elizabeth to prepare for the occasion, he is still anxious. Rumours abound that he has been chosen to continue, but no one can be certain until later in the afternoon. For John Elias it is a day of nervousness: whether he will continue to be a chief depends on how well he performed during the interim period when he was the *mfumu yogwirizila*. During this period he was expected to do everything that a crowned chief is expected to do, yet he had to perform the tasks under the scrutiny of the *mbumba* who nominated him. Today he must just wait and hope that the *mbumba* have endorsed him in their final deliberations.

Other preparations that have taken place before today's event included gathering contributions for the chief's tribute. Through a personal conversation I had with John Elias's brother, I learnt that the whole village contributes to this tribute. This contribution takes the form of a fee paid to the Traditional Authority, so that they can crown their own chief. It is locally known as *Chamtunda* (or *Chamafupa*), which was basically a payment of around MWK20,000 (approximately US\$140.00) during the time I carried out my fieldwork. This village contribution is given to the chieftainship witness through the *mwini mbumba*. The chieftainship witness then has the

responsibility of giving the tribute to the Traditional Authority. In this case, John Elias's uncle was responsible for the tribute collection, and gave it to Chief Nsipu, who in turn was to deliver it to the Traditional Authority, or to some T. A. representatives. These important hierarchical power relations are an integral part of crowning a matrilineal Chewa chief. How the *mbumba*, the *mwini mbumba* and the *nkhoswe* of the chieftainship all cooperate to crown a specific chief demonstrates the significance of matrilineal relations among the Chewa. That maize plays an important role in such occasions, as well as constituting and articulating these matrilineal relations, is a topic to which I will return later on in this chapter.

The discussion so far is intended to show how the terms of relatedness work among the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo, and how understanding the ways of maize in this context contributes to an understanding of these relations. In this regard, another significant observation relates to food preparation and consumption before and during the day of the event. Thus, a week before the event, women from John Elias's clan and from Elizabeth's clan went to a maize mill (each side of the family forming a separate group), singing their songs as a sign that a significant event would soon be taking place.<sup>61</sup> They soaked maize until it germinated and then they dried it. This germinated dried maize, which was later milled, was specially processed for a local drink that they prepared in large quantities on the first day of the ceremony. John Elias's clan members and Elizabeth's clan members prepared their meals and drinks separately and at different locations (see figure 3 and figure 4 below). Husband and wife also had different lists of invited guests who were to be served by the side that invited them during the event itself.

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<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth is John Elias's first wife.



**Figure 3:** John Elias's clan members, in-laws and their friends preparing food and a local drink made from maize (27/07/07)



**Figure 4:** Elizabeth's clan members and friends cooking at a different place from her husband's relatives and friends (27/07/07)

As the figures above show, the first day of the event is dedicated to cooking massive amounts of maize porridge that will be left to cool overnight. This constitutes the local maize drink that is usually taken during the second day of the crowning ceremony. The goats and chickens slaughtered earlier today have now been cooked, and should be sufficient for tomorrow's event too. Some meat has just been boiled today, ready to be fried and cooked tomorrow. Other foods prepared today include *nsima yoyela* (a thick porridge made from pure refined white maize flour), rice, legumes such as beans and peas, cabbages and other green leafy vegetables. These will also be cooked on the second day of the event. In most cases, the dishes cooked for a celebration event such as this include meat stews, which are considered prestigious. For those who can afford it, apart from the local maize drink served to invited guests, fizzy drinks such as Coca-Cola and Fanta are also on offer, symbolising that the people hosting the event are wealthy.

The clan members and friends of each side help in preparing the food and making sure that there will be enough for their guests. The guests who are not relatives of either of the clans involved in these preparations must ensure that they know which side of the clan invited them. If they do not know, they risk going hungry on this occasion. I noticed just such an incident while sitting by the cooking place for Elizabeth's clan. A member of a nearby village approached Elizabeth and said that he and a group of people from his village had not yet been served: they did not have anything to eat or drink. The first question Elizabeth asked was "*Who invited you?*" His response was "*Amfumu*" (The chief). To this Elizabeth automatically responded,

*"Then go that side ... [pointing to where John Elias's clan members were cooking] ... If you are not clever enough to remember who invited you, you might go hungry, don't you know that? ... This is a hectic day*

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*for all of us, but that is the first thing you should make sure to follow up when you had just arrived.” (Elizabeth, Fieldnotes 27/07/07)<sup>62</sup>*

This observation shows how important it was for the Chewa people to keep separate the lists of guests and where they would be served, even though they were attending the same occasion. The distinction among the kinship relations and friendships associated with each of the clans involved seemed to play a vital role during the event of crowning a chief. John Elias’s clan members and friends were kept separate from Elizabeth’s clan members and friends in terms of the cooking places and food consumption. Maize was central in making such kinship distinctions through how it was prepared and consumed during the event. It was through the cooking processes and the consumption of huge quantities of the maize drink, and of foods such as *nsima* (in which maize is the main ingredient) that an emphasis was placed on keeping separate the kinship relations or friends affiliated to each of the clans. This demonstrates that from colonial times to the present, as maize has replaced millet, it has become deeply embedded in Chewa way of life. Not only has maize come to articulate fundamental relations pertinent to the Chewa, but its significance on occasions such as the crowning ceremony of a chief sheds light on how it has become a mediating food crop between different kinship members, as well as in terms of Chewa power relations. These aspects of maize can be further exemplified through the ways that the kinship boundaries described above were also observed as being flexible. While I was still sitting by the cooking place where Elizabeth’s clan members and friends were preparing their food, I observed that John Elias’s sister (Mayi D) and her daughter came to taste the maize drink prepared by Elizabeth’s side. Mayi D brought with her some of the drink that had been made by their side of the family. Figure 5 below expresses these observations

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<sup>62</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.



**Figure 5:** Mayi D, testing a maize drink prepared by Elizabeth’s clan members and friends, while the cup on the ground contains the same drink, prepared by Mayi D’s relatives and friends (27/07/07)

The observation offered here demonstrates again the significance of *bele* (breast) or *mtundu* (clan) relations, and the ways in which maize mediates these relations in rendering them flexible. Through the exchange of the maize drink between Mayi D’s clan and that of Elizabeth’s, the kinship boundaries that were kept separate in terms of the cooking places were rendered porous and thus exposed as flexible. The link that maize makes visible in terms of kinship relations contributes to our understanding of how the Chewa organise

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themselves or relate to one another. This mediating aspect of maize highlights the ways in which Chewa people use their maize resource to create order and meaning in their lives.

In the next two sections I will explore how the meanings, values and practices inherent in the ritual of crowning John Elias came into conflict with Christian values and development agendas. This exploration will allow me to elaborate further on themes of ambivalence and individual choice among the contemporary matrilineal Chewa. The aim of the next part of this chapter is to demonstrate that concrete social actors are variously positioned, as is the context in which they organise themselves and their resources, and the ways in which they create meaning and order in their lives (see also Peletz 1995:360).

*The Pamphambano Ritual: Encountering Political Hierarchies and Social Beings*

When all the guests and clan members from each side have been fed, the ritual of crowning a chief begins. The chieftainship witness mobilise everyone present to gather at the *pamphambano* (at crossroads/a road junction) that acts as the main entrance to the village. The main entrance to Elias was the junction that connected the village road with the road to the Traditional Authority's residence and the tarmac road that leads to the capital city. At this *pamphambano*, the ritual will take place. John Elias, who is among the crowd, seated like the rest of the villagers, awaits his destiny. Below is (figure 6), which is a picture of John Elias waiting anxiously with the rest of us who were attending the function:



**Figure 6:** John Elias (right), nervously waiting with fellow villagers (27/07/07)

The beginning of the chief's crowning ritual at the *pamphambano* is marked by several opening speeches in which the *mwini mbumba*, the chieftainship witness and the Traditional Authority's delegates express their gratitude to the guests and the members of the village. These speeches are a reminder to everyone present that an important event is about to happen. When the speeches have finished, the guardian of the clan (*mwini mbumba*) and the chieftainship witness set off to raise the nominated candidate from the crowd. On this occasion, John Elias is raised up among all of us gathered at the *pamphambano*. He is then seated on a chair, and the *mwini mbumba* of the Elias-Phiri clan give another speech, saying,

*With great help from our mbumba in the selection and endorsement of John Elias as our new chief, it is my greatest pleasure today to introduce to you my own mphwanga (nephew) as one who has shown and proved himself reliable during his reign as mfumu yogwirizira. In*



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*this regard, I urge you Elias to continue with the kind of heart which you have shown. The people have trusted you and believe in you that you will keep your village in peace and without favouritism ... do not be like a chief who forgets where you are coming from, remember those who have put you into power and take care of your people, because today all these eyes are upon you ... I now leave everything in the hands of Chief Nsipu, our chieftainship witness, to continue with the ceremony (Speech by John Elias's *atsibweni*, Fieldnotes 27/07/07).<sup>63</sup>*

This speech is followed by a ceremony in which Chief Nsipu asks the villagers to show if they are in agreement with this chieftainship and if they endorse John Elias as their new chief. Men and women stand up, dancing, singing and chanting songs that are specific to such an event. They also offer money, placing it on a plate placed near John Elias. This gesture is followed by another: the Traditional Authority representatives put a red gown called *Nkhanzo*, around John Elias's neck as a symbol that he has now been crowned as chief (see figures 7; 8 and 9 below).

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<sup>63</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.



**Figure 7:** Villagers endorsing John Elias as their chief with offerings of money (27/07/07)



**Figure 8:** John Elias being crowned chief by Traditional Authority Kalolo representatives (27/07/07)



**Figure 9:** Chief John Elias: now crowned and endorsed as the new chief (27/07/07)

During this *pamphambano* ritual, I tried to find out the significance of the songs that the women were singing. One of the women in the crowd told me that the songs were both laments and advice to their new chief, and an expression of their happiness. She told me,

*the chief is simply being advised that he has to have self control as a chief. As such he has to make sure that he does not listen to inexperienced people who might lead the village to chaos ... The songs also address some negative qualities of some chiefs who, once they are in power, are misled by bad advice or by their own conceit/greed and engage themselves in favouritism when solving disputes, or just basically forget where they are coming from. These negative qualities of*

*a chief do not help to build a village as a unit* (Personal conversation with a woman in the crowd, Fieldnotes 27/07/07).<sup>64</sup>

Other songs were sung to show the political hierarchies that the chief crowning event was to follow. The songs declared that villagers who want to crown a chief for their village have to go to the district commissioner to ask his permission, but they were told to go to their Traditional Authority Kalolo. The Traditional Authority Kalolo told them to go to the Group Village Headman (G.V.H.), who is an overseer of several villages. The G.V.H. responded, 'If only I had received the tribute to crown your chief!'<sup>65</sup>

Even though I was not present during the initial process when John Elias was nominated as *mfumu yogwirizila*, I was told that after the women had agreed and were certain that they wanted to crown a chief, they asked their *mwini mbumba* to ask for permission and for the services of the Traditional Authority to crown him. Based on the history of a clan and the absence of disputes for a particular chieftainship, and depending on his own schedule, the Traditional Authority gives permission and sends representatives, or attends the ceremony himself. However, since these kinds of events are not uncommon within his jurisdiction at this time of year, he only attends a few ceremonies and delegates the others to his advisers (*nduna*), who are mostly Group Village Headmen. These representatives receive the chieftainship tribute on behalf of the T.A.

Worth noting is that in both the *pamphambano* ritual and its accompanying songs, political hierarchies, as well as the expectations and obligations of a Chewa chief, were expressed. More importantly in the present context, perhaps, is that matrilineal relations, which were in part articulated through the

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<sup>64</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

<sup>65</sup> This was the gist of one of the songs performed at the chief crowning ceremony in Elias on 27 and 28 July 2007.

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preparation and consumption of maize, were also being played out at this ritual. This contributes to our understanding of how these matrilineal relations are part of a wider organisation of bureaucratic power relations within the Malawian government political hierarches.

For example, once John Elias had been crowned in the presence of the T. A. representatives, matrilineal relations and friends during the *pamphambano* ritual, he was recognised as a legitimate chief within Malawian government institutional structures, due to the official recognition of the chieftainship by the Traditional Authority Kalolo. As a result of this official recognition, Chief Elias would have to balance his obligations towards his subjects with the expectations of the government. While his subjects had expectations in John Elias that he will perform his obligations and responsibilities to the greater good of the entire Elias community, the Malawi government had an expectation that he would implement its policies. As will become clear, especially in chapter 6, the Chewa chiefs' attempts to balance these different expectations, obligations and responsibilities during policy processes are often a source of contradiction and tension. Like *pamphambano*, where several roads meet, policy processes are arenas where Chewa chiefs confront different value systems, meanings and interests, as well as the expectations they have to balance during their time of service. In this regard, it is not a coincidence that the ritual of crowning a Chewa chief takes place at the *pamphambano*. In fact, the significance of the *pamphambano* ritual is its symbolic and practical representation of the multiplicity of relations, values, meanings, interests and expectations that each of the pathways meeting at the *pamphambano* constitutes. That maize is also significant in articulating the relations, meanings, values and interests, which the *pamphambano* ritual partly represents, is just one of the many ways of maize among the Chewa. Through this particular pathway of maize in the crowning ceremony of a chief, it becomes apparent that the meanings, values, interests and practices that are

pertinent to the Chewa people must run alongside the interests and expectations of the Malawian government.

Taking into consideration the foregoing discussion, one can still question how individual Chewa interests, meanings and values are apparent within the crowning of the chief events and ritual practices described above. To further address this question, I will return to my observations, and my surprise that Elizabeth (Chief Elias's wife) was absent from the *pamphambano* ritual ceremony. Her decision not to attend this important ritual sheds more light on how variably positioned individuals express their choices, interests, values and meanings. It also indicates that ambivalence is part of the contemporary matrilineal Chewa. This observed case on Elizabeth's absence from the *pamphambano* ritual also exemplifies the inevitable tensions and contradictions that result from different value systems, meanings and interests. I will discuss this case in the following section with specific reference to Christianity and development policy approaches.

### **Chewa Way of Life as an Obstacle to Christianity and Development**

After the *pamphambano* event, the men and women dance and shout with joy while heading back to the village; their new chief follows them. Upon arrival at the village, Chief Elias is kept in seclusion, out of sight of the rest of the villagers, until the next day. Meanwhile, he receives advice from other chiefs who belong to a secret Chewa institution known as *Nyau*. *Nyau* masked dancers, which are central to Chewa way of life, comprise a secret men's society that performs its rituals at important events, such as the crowning of a chief ceremony.<sup>66</sup> Different groups and types of *Nyau* masked dancers entertain

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<sup>66</sup> For more details on the role of *Nyau* in Chewa societies see also J. P. Bruwer (1952); M. Chanock (1975); H. Kachapila (2006); I. Linden (1975); I. Linden & J. Linden (1974); B. Morris (2000b); P. Probst (2002); W. H. J. Rangeley (1948, 1949,

the villagers overnight, while waiting for the final day of the event. The events that took place yesterday mark only the beginning of the crowning ceremony of a chief. On the second day, the main activities will include eating large amounts of food and drinking the local maize drink, which is like a beer by this time, and performances by different types of *Nyau* dancers (see figure 10 below).



**Figure 10:** One of Nyau dancers performing at the crowning event (28/07/07)

The involvement of the *Nyau* dancers in the crowning of a Chewa chief is an important aspect of Chewa people's way of life, as I was later to learn. A personal conversation with Chief Elias's uncle, who was also *mwini mbumba* of the Elias-Phiri clan, illuminated this important aspect of *Nyau* involvement in the ceremony:

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1950, 1951); J. M. Schoffeleers (1971, 1976, 1992); J. M. Schoffeleers & I. Linden (1972); J. W. M. Van Breugel (2001); K. Yoshida (1993); Leslie Francis Zubieta Calvert (2009).

*The type of chieftainship that carries more weight is one which has Nyau dancers performing during the crowning ceremony. This really represents true Chewa chikhalidwe (way of life). However, in regard to a Christian chieftainship among the Chewa people, where they refuse the performance of Nyau dance during the crowning ceremony, this kind of chieftainship is not respected that much, or is not as famous as the one with the Nyau. For instance, if there is a dispute in the village concerning disrespect for the Christian chieftainship, this clearly manifests itself in the form of people approaching the chief directly without respect and not following proper channels in addressing the chief ... This never takes place in a chieftainship where Nyau have been involved ... proper channels to address the chief with respect are always followed (Interview with Chief John Elias's uncle, Fieldnotes 07/08/07).<sup>67</sup>*

As we have seen, John Elias's crowning ceremony involved *Nyau* ritual dancing. However, a conflict surrounds the very existence and performance of these *Nyau* dances because such events juxtapose the kinds of traditional Chewa values and beliefs examined here, and Christian values and beliefs in terms of what is perceived as holy and what is evil. In this case, most Christians within T.A. Kalolo who I was in contact with during my fieldwork, considered the *Nyau* performances to constitute evil forces of magic and witchcraft.<sup>68</sup> Such controversies were certainly present during John Elias's crowning ceremony. Prior to his becoming *mfumu yogwirizila*, John Elias and his wife Elizabeth belonged to a local Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church. However, knowing that he wanted his chieftainship to be recognised and to carry more weight in terms of Chewa traditions, he stopped going to church

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<sup>67</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

<sup>68</sup> See also Kachapila 2006; Phiri 1983; Van Breugel 2001 for similar findings



because of the conflicting values at play. Elizabeth, on the contrary, was a staunch Christian and an active member of the church, even by the time I was finishing my fieldwork. Due to her strong Christian beliefs and values, Elizabeth opposed the whole idea of *Nyau* performance at her husband's chief crowning ceremony. Figure 11 below illustrates these observations.



**Figure 11:** From the left: Elizabeth with her two children and her mother's sister, trying to convince her to attend the *pamphambano* ceremony (27/07/07)

John Elias's shift from Christian to *Nyau* values caused tension in his marriage. This change was also a manifestation of how Christian and *Nyau* values were polarised among the Chewa. On one hand, Elizabeth was unable to compromise her Christian values by witnessing what in Christian circles are usually considered 'sinful performances' and evil. On the other hand, John Elias needed to be fully recognised and respected as a true Chewa chief. Despite elders talking privately to Elizabeth, advising her to at least attend the

second day of the ceremony, she remained firm and refused to attend or to look at any of the masked dancers. When the *Nyau* masked dancers came to where her clan members and friends were cooking, she hid her face or went inside the house in order not to catch sight of them.

Another reason she may not have wanted to see the *Nyau* masked dancers was that she was pregnant. As one of the women's ritual instructors (*anankungwi*) whom I encountered during my fieldwork told me,<sup>69</sup> "*In our Chewa traditions there is a belief that a pregnant woman is not supposed to see the Nyau masked dancers because the baby can end up looking like one of them when it is born*" (Personal conversation with a women's ritual instructor from Elias village, Fieldnotes 28/07/07). So, whether Elizabeth's refusal to attend the ceremony was due to one or both of the reasons outlined above remains a point of contradiction and complexity. Her own explanation was that she did not attend the ceremony simply because she was a dedicated Christian.

Nonetheless, her refusal to attend the crowning ceremony had implications for her 13-year marriage: John Elias found himself a second wife. Rumours had been circulating during both days of the crowning ceremony that he might bring a new wife to sit by his side during the ceremony, since Elizabeth was refusing to do so. It was also because of these rumours that the women were advising Elizabeth to attend the ceremonial events so that her husband might not use her refusal to attend as an excuse to find another wife. However, Elizabeth told me, with an emotional gesture,

*You know, I will not attend the ceremonial event anyway. I have been hearing about this other young girl for a while now and his intention to sit with her at the crowning ceremony. So, if he wants to do that, he can*

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<sup>69</sup> *Nankugwi* (singular) or *Anankungwi* (plural) are women who are initiation ritual instructors.

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*go ahead. After all, I will be moving back to my parents' village. Now that we grew a lot of maize together and made a lot of money out of the tobacco and ground nuts which we cultivated together, he wants to spend that money with this young girl ... I won't let that happen (Personal conversation with Elizabeth, Fieldnotes 28/07/07).<sup>70</sup>*

Despite Elizabeth's sentiments and the rumours that were circulating, neither the rumoured chief's wife-to-be nor Elizabeth sat by the side of the newly crowned chief throughout the ceremonial events. However, a week after the crowning ceremony, the new wife was indeed brought to the village and was given a house near Chief John Elias's mother and his sister. Elizabeth and her two children moved back to her mother's village, where she delivered her third child. The big house that Elizabeth and her children had shared with Chief John Elias remained unoccupied by the new wife, even though Elizabeth had moved away to live with her parents. Despite the fact that Elizabeth came back after a while, when her husband went to fetch her from her parents' village, she kept complaining that things would have been different if her husband had not compromised his Christian values:

*We used to pray together and read the Bible together and he was even an active member of the church ... But these outside things (referring to Nyau rituals) have turned him to being full of himself and not listening to my advice anymore ... just see how young the girl is that he has got for himself, he would not have done that if he was still a Christian (Personal conversation with Elizabeth, Fieldnotes 16/10/07).<sup>71</sup>*

These kinds of sentiments are not only expressed by ordinary Christians like Elizabeth. Extension workers, who implement the Food Security Policy as part

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<sup>70</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

<sup>71</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

of development agendas, are also ambivalent about traditional ceremonies and rituals that involve cooking such large amounts of food. Torn between pressure from their managers to ensure ‘food security’ in the country, and the importance that Chewa people attach to such events, extension workers face a considerable challenge, which tends to leave them viewing such ceremonies as obstacles to progress:

*The Food Security Policy implementation process starts with our bosses who tell us what we should teach the farmers. For instance, some technologies which we are told to teach the farmers include crop diversification, ensuring un wasteful food consumption patterns ... as opposed to those food wasting habits in times of plenty and during their annual festivities ... We also teach them technologies, such as planting one seed per each planting station, also known as the Sasakawa method, which ensures higher yields of maize ... but some problems we face are with crop diversification – people here are used to maize and are not willing to change to cassava as their staple food ... They also continue wasting massive amounts of food after the harvesting period through their annual festivities, despite our advice ... This slows our work progress and is quite a big challenge for us (Personal conversation with an agricultural extension worker, Fieldnotes 13/12/07).*

The agricultural extension worker’s description of the challenges they face on the ground, and Elizabeth’s refusal to attend the crowning of the chief ceremonial events, demonstrate some of the complexities and paradoxes that arise from the interaction of different values, meanings, interests or moral grounding. The crowning ceremonies of Chewa chiefs, along with annual rituals and other ceremonial festivities that are pertinent to Chewa way of life, are usually perceived as obstacles to progress, or as morally wrong, by development policy implementers and Christian circles respectively. Despite these contradictions or paradoxes that arise from different values and interests

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and from different moral perspectives, these annual rituals and festivities are pertinent to how the contemporary matrilineal Chewa organise themselves and create meaning in their lives. They constitute specific meanings, values and interests and also provide the context in which the Chewa people organise themselves and their resources, and the ways in which they create meaning and order in their lives. Maize is part and parcel of this context through its capacity to articulate, distinguish or mediate relations during its use, preparation and consumption in such annual rituals and festivities.

However, government policies seeking to promote ‘food security’ perceive such rituals and ceremonies as wasteful and a cause of ‘food insecurity’ and ‘poverty’. This is because policy implementers fail to discern the reasons why Chewa people commit themselves to such rituals and ceremonies, even in the knowledge of the recurrent food shortages that they face towards the end of every year. It is because of these different values, meanings and ways of doing things that the Chewa and the Malawi government, as well as other development institutions working in Malawi, often find themselves working towards opposing and conflicting ends during policy implementation processes. It is through such policy implementation processes that the power relations and tensions, which emanate from the power interactions between institutional bureaucracies and Chewa way of life, become apparent. I will return to discuss these power relation and tensions in chapter 6. Of significance here is the importance of Chewa matrilineal relationships, and the ways in which maize is deeply embedded in such relations to the point of articulating, distinguishing or mediating such relations through its use, preparation and consumption. Furthermore, when taken together, the different cases presented in this chapter demonstrate how the contemporary matrilineal Chewa people organise themselves, their resources and the ways in which they create meaning in their lives.

## Concluding Remarks

As this chapter has shown, matrilineality among the contemporary Chewa is quite complex and comprises several variables that include, but are not limited to, the nature of marriage, residence during marriage, the exercise of domestic authority, lineage, and the control or custody of children (Phiri 1983:257). Several scholars also agree that, the Chewa matrilineal form of organisation has undergone a number of transformations over the years (Kachapila 2006; Phiri 1983; Vaughan 1988). Changes during the nineteenth century included the effects of the slave trade, the intrusion of patrilineal groups such as the Ngoni from southern Africa and the Swahili from the east, Christian missionaries' teachings, and European techniques of education (Phiri 1983:258). Furthermore, "from the 1890s, the Chewa people were not only subjected to colonial rule, but were also drawn into a capitalist economy" (Phiri 1983:258).<sup>72</sup>

According to Mtika & Doctor (2002:93), other recent changes pertain to the influence of capitalism and market liberalisation, which have encouraged individualistic tendencies among the Chewa people that accord only limited involvement of the *mwini mbumba* in the affairs of nuclear families. This, they conclude, has increased the involvement of the father of the children in his children's affairs, and hence the movement from a matrilineal to a patrilineal type of kinship organisation. However, the present discussion so far has established that even in the midst of all these transformations, the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo still perform annual rituals and ceremonial events that ensure the flexibility and negotiability of social relations within their matrilineal organisation. The significance of such rituals to the continuation and/or reconfiguration of roles between men and women in times of change

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<sup>72</sup> See also Chanock (1998), Kachapila (2006), Kaspin (1995), Vaughan (1988) and White (1987) for a similar observation.

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within the matrilineal forms of organisation have also been noted by other scholars, such as Vaughan (1988) and Kachapila (2006). It is in line with these scholars' findings, and a result of my own findings among the Chewa, that I challenge the assertion of Mtika & Doctor (2002:93) in referring to the Chewa as moving from a matrilineal to a patrilineal system. In challenging the assertions of Mtika & Doctor (2002) in this regard, I am generally in agreement with Poewe (1981), who attacks such assertions as encompassing evolutionist assumptions in an attempt to demonstrate that "there [is] in the development of humankind a *universal* stage entirely held by matriarchy" (Poewe 1981:1). This generalised form of kinship, she continues, tends to bring back rigidity and reduce cultural variation (Poewe 1981:4). Consequently, this may result in losing "sight of the diverse folk-cultural theories of procreation, heredity and gestation" (Poewe 1981:4). In light of her study of matrilineal ideology among the Luapulans of Zambia, Poewe concludes,

In kin-based societies ... matriliney and patriliney imply different relationships between the sexes. Women control strategic resources and are central to the decision-making process in matriliney ... The influence of women on the most fundamental issues of these communities, namely, distribution of worth and succession to a position of deceased womb mates, is every bit important as that of men ... Often, when the decision is unfavourable for certain individuals, the plan of action will have been decided by one sex but announced by someone of the opposite sex ... In other words, those who voice the decision will rarely have made it; they also tend to take the blows as well as the credit (Poewe 1981:50, 105–106).

Poewe's discovery here is significant to my current research findings, especially with regard to the complex relationships between men and women, and how they work together in matrilineal societies. These relationships, together with the moral and social obligations that the crowning ceremony

reveals, are in the present work regarded as fundamental to an understanding of how matrilineality works among the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo. More importantly, the understanding of such relationships in Chewa people's way of life can help us to understand more about how they respond to or conceptualise the policies that are intended to address their problems.

Like the Luapulans of Zambia (Poewe 1981), the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo have changed and reconfigured over time. Thus, old ideologies of matrilineality have been reconfigured towards newer ones, following contact with other patricentric groups, Christianity and the western industrial market system, all of which are based on different economic, political and moral principles.<sup>73</sup> However, that most matrilineal societies have changed to a patricentric emphasis, if only at the family level, has been a sufficient condition, apparently, to persuade other researchers steeped in structuralist exchange theories to see only male dominance (Poewe 1981:50). Nevertheless, as I have shown throughout this chapter, my research material suggests that reconfiguration, flexibility, negotiation and complexity are the terms that best describe the changes among the contemporary matrilineal Chewa people, rather than an evolutionary transformation that proposes a movement from matrilineality to patrilineality.

In acknowledging the various historical influences, and in rejecting some assertions on the evolution of matrilineality to patrilineality, this discussion has tried to show how the contemporary Chewa of T. A. Kalolo use their terms of matrilineal kinship relations and organise themselves. Through the Chewa's expression of these matrilineal kinship relations, which are articulated, distinguished and mediated by maize use, preparation and consumption in the different aspects of their lives, we can see that matrilineality remains

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<sup>73</sup> See also Phiri (1983), Vaughan (1988), Mtika & Doctor (2002) and Kachapila (2006) for different explanations of such changes.



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significant in terms of Chewa people's organisation. Depending on their interests, meanings, values, expectations and obligations, the Chewa adapt their activities, as well as adopt, resist or modify new technologies and values. Thus, matrilineality today provides just such a context where the interests, meanings, values, expectations and obligations that are pertinent to the Chewa can be understood. It is also possible to view such matrilineality as a context in which conflicting values, as well as change, are resisted, embraced or modified.

Through following the ways in which maize was used, prepared and consumed during the crowning ceremony of a chief that I was privileged to attend, maize emerged as an important factor in articulating, distinguishing and mediating the matrilineal relations that are pertinent to Chewa way of life. Through this same case, I have demonstrated that maize is deeply embedded in the lives of the contemporary matrilineal Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo. Maize can be seen to have occupied a central place in the lives of the Chewa, through its significance within their annual rituals and ceremonial festivities that take place after the maize harvesting season. Moreover, that maize is both constitutive and elaborative of meaningful aspects of matrilineal Chewa way of life is a central aspect of this thesis. It is from this perspective, then, that I will discuss in the following chapter how decisions about maize production, distribution and consumption are made. Thus, the significance of maize in matrilineal relations that organise land ownership and food, as well as cash crop production, distribution and consumption, are among some of the important themes to be discussed in chapter 5.



# CHAPTER 5

## THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND SYMBOLIC ASPECTS OF MAIZE

As discussed in the second chapter, food studies often emphasise the significance of food in terms of the maintenance of social relations or group solidarity (see, for example, Douglas 1972; Levi-Strauss 2008[1965], 1970). On the other hand, emphasis is also placed on the physiological/psychological aspect of food as an individual experience, and on the understanding of personhood through food (see for example, Mead 1928, 1943; Richards 2004). Recently, however, a number of scholars have tried to bridge the gap by suggesting that not only does food provide nourishment for the body, and hence account for individual experiences, but also that food is at the heart of the shared values, symbols and meanings that account for social relations and social solidarity (Caplan 2005, 1994; Counihan 1999; Gumerman IV 1997; Howes 2003; Korosmeyer 2005; Mintz 1986, 1996; Mintz & Du Bois 2002; Weismantel 1988).

Furthermore, amongst these different orientations in food analysis, the most prominent among both more traditional and newer approaches have employed semiotic/linguistic analysis and/or symbolic analysis of food. The former involves structures and the deciphering of the codes and meanings that food

idioms as a language entail (see Counihan 1999; Douglas 1972; Levi-Strauss 2008 [1965], 1970); the latter explores the different metaphors of food as entry points to the ways in which people connect food to rituals, symbols, cosmology and belief systems (see Harris 1987; Kaspin 1996; Turner 1961, 1967; Weismantel 1991a, 1991b; Whitehead 1984). Additionally, the recent “Anthropology of the Senses” school has made a significant contribution to the food register (see Korosmeyer 2005; Howes 2003; Classen 1990, 1993; Stoller, 1989).

Important to note from this is the implicit assumption that tends to dissect food studies as leaning more towards ‘the individual’ or ‘the social’ as two distinct categories.<sup>74</sup> Depending on the point of departure, emphasis on ‘the individual’ or ‘the social’ aspects of food creates a continuous divide and challenge that haunts the enquiry of different aspects of food within food studies to this day. Arguing against such binary conceptualisation, or the treatment of food as leaning more towards either ‘the individual’ or ‘the social’, this chapter maintains that foods entail complex interactions between what received wisdom has categorised as ‘the individual’ or ‘the social’. Thus, food studies are complex, and no single approach or simple comparison between fixed categories can help us gain deeper insights into food complexities. In this, I am in agreement with Caplan (1994, 2005) and Mintz & Du Bois (2002), who assert that epistemological, empirical and methodological issues in the anthropology of food are highly complex in nature. In this regard, Caplan specifically suggests:

[W]e need to look at culture, however defined, but also at political, not to say moral and ethical issues too. Food is a topic which lends itself, indeed, demands reflexive analysis; objectivity and subjectivity dissolve

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<sup>74</sup> See also chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of the dominant analytical perspectives in food studies.

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into one another, since what we eat is not only who we are, but also who they are too, and what they eat or do not eat, is also upon our food and the manner of its production. Food then, is a metaphor for our sense of self, our social and political relations, our cosmology and our global system (Caplan 1994:30).

Only a fragment of these complexities can be pursued in this chapter and throughout this thesis. The focus of the specific food complexities discussed in this chapter is on tracing the ways of maize, which is not only the staple food for the majority of Malawians, but it also constitutes significant meanings, values and interests that are particular to the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo.

Just as Carole Counihan (1984) used bread to explore changes in social relations in the town of Bosa, Italy, this chapter intends to use maize as a lens for analysing changes and continuities in social, economic and sensual relations, as well as its significance in the symbolic/cosmological spheres among contemporary Chewa people. Taking up some themes discussed in chapter 4, this chapter continues with the thesis that the Chewa matrilineal form of organisation has been reconfigured rather than radically changed. I will argue here that the ways in which Chewa people make decisions about food production and consumption, and the market transactions involving food, depend on complex interactions of the social, the individual, the symbolic and other political dynamics that are beyond their control. Chewa people's decision making in the food domain often contradicts with the standardised policies that seek to solve their food and 'poverty' problems. Such policies rarely consider local complexities during their design and implementation. With this in mind, at the core of this discussion is the way in which Chewa food decisions are integral to and expressive of their way of life. Furthermore, the involvement of the Chewa people in a market economy introduces another interesting angle concerning the complex articulation of social relations, individual actors and the institutions involved in Chewa people's everyday lives. In other words, this

exploration into the different ways of maize among the Chewa lays the groundwork for understanding how Chewa people attach different interests, values and meanings to maize. Following the ways of maize in the Chewa context is particularly important because it contributes to an understanding of how the Chewa conceptualise and deal with issues of ‘poverty’, ‘the poor’ and ‘food security’.<sup>75</sup>

In order to uncover the Chewa complexities discussed here, I will follow the ways in which maize is used, produced, consumed and distributed among the Chewa. In following maize in these various arenas of social life, I have been inspired by Appadurai’s (1986) who suggests that in tracing the ‘social life of things’ we can trace the horizons of meaning by the diverse forms that things (including food stuffs) take in terms of their uses and their trajectories. With specific reference to Kula commodities,<sup>76</sup> Appadurai illustrates this point by arguing, “It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transaction and calculations that enliven things” (Appadurai 1986:5). He shows that by following such trajectories, complex interactions among ‘regimes of value’, histories and context can be discerned.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> This is a topic that I will address in detail in chapter 6.

<sup>76</sup> Appadurai’s definition of commodity refers to “things that at a certain phase in their careers and in a particular context, meet the requirements for commodity candidacy” (Appadurai 1986:16). He explains that the commodity candidacy of things is “less a temporal than a conceptual feature, and it refers to the standards and criteria (symbolic, classificatory and moral) that define the exchangeability of things in any particular social and historical context” (Appadurai 1986:13–14).

<sup>77</sup> Appadurai’s (1986) ‘regimes of value’ (also discussed in chapter 2) accounts for diverse interests, values, meanings and power relations in which the powerful define the rules for the flow of commodities, or establish commodity pathways. This means that regimes of value transcend specific cultural frameworks through the flow of commodities in exchange. Appadurai further argues that in any regime of value not all commodity exchange situations, whether inter- or intra-cultural, are based on a

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It is not only that “[t]he diversion of commodities from their customary paths brings in the new” (Appadurai 1986:29), but that commodities also “represent very complex social forms and distribution of knowledge” (Appadurai 1986:41).

Hence, it is the “total trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption” (Appadurai 1986:13) of maize that is the main logic of this chapter. However, before moving to an in-depth discussion of the social, economic, symbolic, sensual and individual aspects of maize among the Chewa, it is pertinent to outline a context for how land distribution and inheritance works among the contemporary matrilineal Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo. This is significant because without access to land, people cannot cultivate food, in this case, maize.

### **Land Issues and Division of Labour among the Contemporary Matrilineal Chewa**

In pre-colonial times, customary law regulated the distribution of land and the rights to cultivate. With colonialism, and particularly during the post-Second World War era, land reforms and a change of the crop mix transformed the agrarian system, splitting it in two parts. One of these was a Europeanised, commercialised enterprise that included the growing of coffee, tobacco, tea and cotton under a tenant–landlord ownership system; the other constituted an Africanised peasant, subsistence economy with a limited production of cash crops (see Englund 2002:138).<sup>78</sup> The establishment of a colonial plantation economy radically changed ownership patterns, turning huge expanses of land

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complete cultural sharing; some are based rather on varied degrees of value coherence from one situation to another, and from commodity to commodity (Appadurai 1986:14–15).

<sup>78</sup> See also chapter 3 where I have discussed the dualistic agricultural system within a historical context.

organised by customary tenure into private property (Jul-Larsen & Mvula 2009; Sahn & Arulpragasam 1991a). The privatisation of land in combination with labour migration, the low productivity of subsistence crops and market interventions affected local livelihoods and ordinary Malawians' choice of both cash and food crops (Englund 1999; Vaughan 1982, 1987). As Englund (2002:138) argues, the widespread colonial migration that provided cheap labour for the mines and agricultural estates in South Africa and Zimbabwe also decided the parameters of the present-day economic situation of Malawians.

President Banda's post-independence government expanded the plantation economy, diverting cheap labour into large-scale agricultural enterprises. This commercialised sector was monopolised by those in power, who usurped the vast profits, contributing only minimally to the equitable distribution of wealth across the country (Englund 2002; Vaughan 1987, 1988). Thus, the colonial tobacco, coffee and tea estates remained the backbone of the postcolonial economy, encouraging rural-rural migration rather than urbanisation (Englund 2002:138). With the subsequent democratisation of the political system in 1992, market liberalisation had arrived. Restrictions on smallholder cultivation of tobacco were removed, and the more general market reform affected the trajectory of maize. From being a subsistence crop, maize became a commodity sold in local markets although it commanded a far lower price than tobacco. Consequently, there are debates among some researchers who insist that the devastating effect of this value difference has been that farmers allocate less land to maize production and more to tobacco, causing a shortage of food in the country (Hirschmann 1990:475). Other researchers argue, however, that their "data do not show any consistent patterns of either lower levels of maize production or lower levels of consumption of maize for those families ... who grow some burley tobacco" (Peters 2006:340).



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These political and market-led transformations, in combination with drought, and ill-thought out food politics (such as selling off the Malawi national maize reserves on the international market, creating a subsequent need for imported food aid), converged to create a food arena of great complexity and contention. One result had been the production of a widespread hunger crisis that lasted for at least five consecutive years from the 2001 to 2006 growing seasons. Paradoxically, this food catastrophe increased in the wake of efforts to ‘eradicate poverty’ and hunger by various international and national development agencies working in Malawi. Inevitably, these historical transformations have also affected the Chewa and the ways they make their decisions on land distribution, the division of labour and the types of crops to be grown.

According to some historical and traditional accounts, matrilineal customary laws of land holding as a means of production show that adult women have been custodians of rights to land in their matrimonial villages (see Hirschmann 1990; Phiri 1983; Vaughan 1982,1988). This means that their husbands could only use the land as *mkamwini* (in-laws or strangers to the clan), while having their own land rights and authority as brothers, or *nkhoswe* (guardians), in their matrimonial homes of origin (Phiri 1983:260). Hirschmann and Vaughan (1983) also show that this form of kinship organisational, in conjunction with the historical labour migration of men from Malawi to South Africa and Southern Rhodesia during the colonial era (and in certain periods of time during the independence era), contributed to Chewa women playing a major part in food production.<sup>79</sup> Migration of Chewa men also affected women’s labour demands to balance their need for consumer goods in the absence of their husbands (see Hirschmann & Vaughan 1983; Peters 2002; Vaughan 1982). Another controversial issue has been that the production of tobacco, which is the main cash crop for Malawi, and which was introduced by the

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<sup>79</sup> Southern Rhodesia is currently known as Zimbabwe.

Europeans, was almost entirely in the hands of men, so that with the ending of international labour migration in the 1970s, conflicts among the matrilineal Chewa engendered inevitable change (Phiri 1983:272).

These organisational changes and the subsequent reconfiguration of Chewa lives is the focus of this chapter. Specifically, I will look at how land distribution as means of production influences contemporary Chewa people's lives. What follows then, is a case analysis that examines how land is distributed and how decisions are made, in relation to food and cash crops, among the contemporary Chewa people of Traditional Authority Kalolo.

### **Maize Production**

John Elias was both a guardian of his *mbumba* (women related through a matrilineal lineage) and a temporary chief of Elias village during the initial phases of my fieldwork in this particular village.<sup>80</sup> At that time, Chief John Elias had one wife and two children who were living with him in his matrimonial home under an agreement called *Chitengwa*.<sup>81</sup> They had been married for just over 10 years and had lived most of this time in Elias, where he had responsibilities of guardianship for his *mbumba*. A few of his other relatives lived nearby; his mother lived only five to ten meters away from his own house, as did his four brothers. Two of his four brothers were also married

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<sup>80</sup> The first names used in this text are not the real names of my informants for reasons of anonymity. However, the last names are their general clan names, also known as *mfunda* (see chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of clan affiliations).

<sup>81</sup> *Chitengwa* can be explained literally as a woman moving from her matrimonial home to stay in her husband's village. It is what most scholars in kinship studies have termed virilocality. This is often conceptualised as the opposite of uxorilocarity, where the husband and his wife reside in the wife's matrimonial home. See also K. Phiri (1983:262) and B. Morris (2000a:38) for similar interpretations of *Chitengwa*.

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and they lived with their wives in this same village. One of his three sisters, a divorcee, had a house about 15 steps away from John Elias's house. However, a daughter of Chief John Elias's sister was married and was living under *Chitengwa* in her husband's village. Another sister of Chief John Elias was also married and was living under *Chitengwa* in her husband's village. A third sister, who was the youngest in their family, was unmarried but lived in Elias village with her mother. As such, Elias village mostly included members of the Elias-Phiri clan, spouses of Elias-Phiri clan members who were married and a few others who had either asked for land and settled in the village or had come as government/missionary employees. In total, I was told, this village comprised 99 homesteads/households.<sup>82</sup>

Surrounding their houses were large pieces of land that belonged to the Elias clan. Each of the brothers and the sisters of Chief John Elias (including those who were married and living in nearby villages) had their own pieces of land in Elias village, as did their mother. John Elias's wife, Elizabeth, was cultivating with her husband in his own allocated field that surrounded their house, but she also had her own piece of land from the village where she came from. Since it was possible for her to travel frequently to her matrimonial home, she and her husband also cultivated her field together, and they rented more fields from other villages to allow them to grow more cash crops, like tobacco and groundnuts, while still being able to grow sufficient food. On Elizabeth's land they usually grew maize and pumpkins, while in her husband's field they mostly grew tobacco, although they also incorporated some patches of maize.

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<sup>82</sup> Whether the definition of homestead or household entailed a man, his wife and children, or clan members who eat together at meal times, remained unclear to me. This distinction between household and homestead was confusing because of the fluidity of the ways in which the division of labour, or the production, preparation, and consumption of food complexly involved both kinship-based relations and what in the west would be conceptualised as a nuclear family (husband, wife and children).

In the fields that they had rented, they mostly grew groundnuts and some small patches of maize.

When I asked them why they grew tobacco in the field that belonged to John Elias but not on Elizabeth's land, the answer was, "*we do practice crop rotation sometimes, as advised by the extension workers. So we also do cultivate tobacco in my garden once in a while*" (Personal conversation with Elizabeth, Fieldnotes 11/04/2007). However, since Elizabeth's land is a long distance away and tobacco farming requires frequent care, they told me that they found it practical to grow it on John Elias's land, most of the time. In the two growing seasons that I was carrying out my fieldwork, I only observed tobacco being grown in John Elias's field. I was told that a year before I came they had planted tobacco in Elizabeth's field. I also observed that the Elias clan had some wetland gardens – *dimba* [singular]/ *madimba* [plural] – nearby, which were distributed among the clan members. These wetlands were used for growing winter crops, such as sweet potatoes, vegetables and maize. The villagers also created nurseries of tobacco seedlings in these *dimba* gardens because they provided a year-round water source.

Notably, some things were kept separate even though the labour was shared. Both John Elias and Elizabeth had their patches of land separately inherited from their maternal relations. Even though Elizabeth and her husband cultivated most of their crops together, she still considered that her own piece of land and crops produced thereon could be claimed as her own. With the tobacco, which was mostly grown on her husband's field, Elizabeth did not have much say or influence in its processing, marketing or the outcomes after its sale, even though they cultivated it together. This was evidenced by the fact that her husband obtained more help in processing and packaging the tobacco from his brothers than from Elizabeth. The groundnuts that they cultivated from the rented fields were a source of income in which both Elizabeth and her husband had equal claims of ownership. This equal claim of ownership was

observable in the effort both Elizabeth and her in-laws or friends put into processing the groundnuts. On one hand, this observation concurs with Phiri's (1983:271) findings, that tobacco growing was instituted as a crop for men during and after the British administration in Malawi. On the other, the complexities of how men and women keep their labour and products separate from one another were also challenged by what I observed. Even though Elizabeth cultivated maize on her own land and claimed it as her own, they later mixed it and stored it together in the same granary with the harvest from her husband's land and from the rented land. I also had an opportunity to observe one of John Elias's sisters-in-law who, without much help from her husband, but with the assistance of her two sons, cultivated a large field of tobacco on her husband's land (see figure 12 below).



**Figure 12:** John Elias's sister-in-law and the tobacco she cultivated

Nevertheless, the significance of keeping separate the means of production, in this case land and labour, was twofold. Firstly, the demarcation of different clans is seen in land ownership. Secondly, the allocation of labour and the types of crops grown in specific field belonging to each of a married couple also highlights the important role that women more than men play in food production. Thus, even though Elizabeth could use her husband's field while

she was staying in his village, she remained a stranger and hence had no claims of ownership over her husband's piece of land. This being the case, it was important for Elizabeth to maintain her own piece of land among her own clansmen. This provided a form of security in case of divorce, upon which she would be required to go back to her own village.<sup>83</sup> The observation that most Chewa women in the central region of Malawi are increasingly living under *Chitengwa* agreements in their husbands' villages, has led some scholars in other studies to conclude that the Chewa matrilineal form of organisation is transforming into a patrilineal one (see, for example, Mtika & Doctor 2002). My findings suggest, however, that although some aspects of the Chewa matrilineality are changing, some of the basic kinship relations remain, pertinent to the ways in which the Chewa people are organised. Hence, the influence of Chewa matrilineality on land distribution and on which crops should be grown in whose field remains significant. As seen in Elizabeth's case, and from her fellow sisters-in-marriage living in Elias, the Chewa of T. A. Kalolo are still very much influenced by maternal relations in their decision making on land distribution, and food and cash crop production, among other decisions. This concurs with Hirschmann's findings from a matrilineal group living in southern Malawi:

it appears that the system contains a number of enduring features that are of fundamental importance to the welfare of women ... The rights to land give women a considerable degree of security. The land will stay in their hands throughout their lives and divorce or separation (both of which are common) will not alter matters. Such security is valuable (Hirschmann 1990:479).

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<sup>83</sup> See also the findings of David Hirschmann (1990:479), who discerned in his southern region case study that women's land ownership offered them a valuable sense of security.

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I also observed that maize remains a key crop, grown by almost all the Chewa in T. A. Kalolo. Women here play a more important role than men in maize production, consumption and distribution. This concurs in part with Peters' observations in southern Malawi, where "Every family including the richest, has the goal of producing as much of its staple maize needs as possible: hence the overwhelming predominance of maize in the fields" (Peters 2002:175). Even though men help to some extent in the production of maize, I observed that women played the significant role in its production, harvesting, processing, consumption and distribution. For instance, despite Elizabeth and her husband ploughing, cultivating and weeding the maize fields together, it was Elizabeth and her female relatives and sometimes her friends who planted the maize, and harvested it, processed it and sold it at the market. Elizabeth was entirely responsible for cooking *nsima* (a thick porridge made from maize flour), which is the main dish, served with different types of relish, in Chewa peoples' diet.<sup>84</sup>

It is to this consumption of maize that I will now turn. It should be kept in mind throughout this ensuing discussion about maize production, consumption and distribution that it is intended to highlight some of the complexities in Chewa people's livelihoods and how this in turn contributes to their conceptualisation of notions of 'poverty', 'the poor' and 'food security'.

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<sup>84</sup> Relish in this case and throughout this thesis is used in terms of the Chewa word *ndiwo*, which means any kinds of meats, chicken, fish, savory saucy dishes or a variety of vegetables and legumes that are eaten with *nsima* (the main source of carbohydrate made from maize flour). Thus, the use of the word relish in this context is also close to one of its meanings given in *The Oxford Encyclopedic English dictionary* (Pearsall & Trumble 1996: 1218) where relish means "a condiment eaten with plainer food to add flavor..." Since *nsima* has a plainer taste, most people in Malawi usually refer to all such kinds of dishes that are eaten together with it or any main source of carbohydrate as relish (*ndiwo*).

## Maize Consumption

As Counihan (1984:53) notes, the “study of the mode of consumption reveals human relationships and basic values in a group”. Among the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo, just like in Bosa, Italy, where Counihan carried out her fieldwork, meals are a central arena for families and constitute one of the domains through which domestic as well as complex relationships are revealed.

It is through maize consumption that Chewa relationships are defined and redefined. While maize consumption can take the form of eating the fresh, boiled cobs, or an ingredient in different types of dishes, the most common way maize is consumed is through a daily dish called *nsima*. *Nsima* can be made from different types of maize flours, such as pure refined white maize flour (*ufa oyela*), or semi-refined (*shopilo/granmill*) or non-refined (*mgaiwa*) flour. Sometimes the flour is made from the maize husks that are produced during the processing of *ufa oyela* or *granmill*, and this type of flour is called *ufa wa madeya*. These different types of flour connote different social meanings, even though individual preferences might sometimes contradict these social connotations. This is similar to an observation made by Howes and Classen as regards sensory models, where they assert,

[w]hile everyone belonging to a culture will be influenced by the dominant sensory model – or ensemble of sensory values and practices – not everyone will adhere to it. Alternative models may be elaborated that respond to the particular experience of the persons in question and challenge the order. (Howes & Classen 1991, cited in Howes 2003:55)

For instance, during my fieldwork I learnt from the women whom I used to accompany to the market where they sold maize that *ufa oyela* (literally, ‘white



flour' due to its colour) signifies a higher social status than *ufa wa madeya*.<sup>85</sup> This was partly explained by the fact that those who mostly refine their maize into *ufa oyela* must have a lot of maize in stock throughout the year to do so. Those who do not want to lose anything from the maize prefer to mill the maize into *mgaiwa* to ensure that their maize stocks last for a longer time. One of the women at the market commented on this:

*Nsima made from ufa oyela is soft and it tastes good; however, it uses more flour during cooking and for those who prefer to eat nsima made from ufa oyela on daily basis has to have a lot of maize in stock to do so... But nsima made from mgaiwa does not require a lot of flour when cooking and it is usually hard and filling* (Personal conversation with one of the women at Nsundwe market, Fieldnotes 04/07/07).

Since *ufa wa madeya* is made from remains of refined maize flour, it is usually considered less desirable and hence as food for *anthu osauka* ('the poor').<sup>86</sup> It is darker in colour than *mgaiwa*. The *nsima* cooked from it is hard and does not look appetising, even though it fills the stomach more quickly than *nsima* made from the other types of flour. *Granmill/shopilo*, which can both be bought in supermarkets or made locally, is another type of flour that I observed being used in some houses in Elias and Matekwe villages, especially between the months of August and October. During these months most households start rationing their maize stocks, which usually run out before the next harvesting season. Overall, most of the houses I visited during my fieldwork preferred *nsima* made from *ufa oyela*. This type of flour was also used at large and prestigious events, such as the crowning ceremony of a chief, at weddings,

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<sup>85</sup> This was the consensus amongst the women as we discussed maize processing at the market.

<sup>86</sup> I will discuss in detail the implications of *ufa wamadeya* and yellow maize flour in relation to perceptions of the poor and poverty in chapter 6.

church events, *gule wankulu* performances and other social events such as funerals, memorials and initiation ceremonies.<sup>87</sup> The symbolic significance of *ufa oyela* and its role in cosmological understanding is another topic to which I will return later in this chapter. However, it is important to note here that the different maize flours mentioned above constitute a classificatory system of meanings pertinent to Chewa way of life.

I also observed that individual preferences for these different types of flour play a significant role in how maize is consumed locally. At times this could be seen as challenging the dominant socially mediated meanings. In contradiction to the social connotations that *nsima* made from *ufa oyela* is most preferred and associated with high social status, most of the men I had personal conversation with during the fieldwork preferred *nsima* made from *mgaiwa* to *nsima* made from *ufa oyela*. This was despite the fact that other types of flour (especially *mgaiwa* and *ufa wamadeya*) assume a lesser social status among the Chewa. In this regard I was often told by most of my male informants that after working hard in the fields, or in any energy-demanding job, they wanted a more filling *nsima*. The extract, below, from a conversation I had with Mr Phiri of Matekwe village substantiates this point:

*Nsima made from ufa oyela is not for men, it's for toddlers and women... [He laughs] it is not that filling after one has done a hard job. You will certainly feel hungry a few hours after you have eaten, just like when one has eaten rice. However, nsima ya mgaiwa (nsima made from mgaiwa flour) ... wow... [He sighs], I have no words for it. For me, if I have eaten, then I have to be given nsima made from ufa wa mgaiwa*

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<sup>87</sup> *Gule wankulu* is a performance in the form of dancing, by *Nyau* masked dancers. These dancers are of ritual significance to different aspects of Chewa ways of life. I will discuss this ritual significance in relation to maize and Chewa people's beliefs, symbolic and cosmological worlds later in this chapter.

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(mgaiwa flour) ... *then I will be satisfied and happy* (Personal conversation with Mr Phiri of Matekwe village, Fieldnotes 28/05/2007).<sup>88</sup>

Responses like this were not uncommon amongst men throughout T. A. Kalolo. However, most women I talked to preferred *nsima* made from *ufa oyela* than that made from *mgaiwa*. Consequently, it was *nsima* made from *ufa oyela* that I observed being cooked most often in most of the houses I visited, and during the important social events I attended during my fieldwork.

How *nsima* is eaten also reveals the ways in which Chewa people reaffirm and redefine relationships. Mauss (1990:55) claims that a man does not usually “eat with his enemy”. This was certainly a common perception experienced during my fieldwork among the Chewa people. I usually observed that *nsima* is cooked by a woman who shares it with her husband and her children, or with any clan member that is considered as part the household. The children often eat with their mother, if they are still young, or eat separately from their parents if they are older. The father is usually served alone and usually eats inside the house, while the mother and the children eat in the kitchen or outside on the open compound if the weather is good enough. However, in instances of *Chidyerano* (a practice where people from several houses eat food together), things are done a bit differently. In such cases, women within the same village cook their food in their own kitchens and then bring it to a common place within the compound. Thus, male clan members who are related by blood, or who are from one breast (*bele limodzi*), together with their wives, children and in-laws gather to eat together at the compound. In such an occasion, men eat separately from women, and children eat on their own. Nonetheless, for *Chidyelano* to take place, the people involved have to get along well. This is because it involves eating together from the same plate not only with people

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<sup>88</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

related by blood, or from the same matrilineal lineage, but also with in-laws who come from different matrilineages. In this way, *Chidyerano* is instrumental in reaffirming or redefining relationships and friendships that are part of food consumption patterns among the Chewa. However, I was also told that this practice no longer takes place as often as it used to due to changes taking place in Chewa settings.

I also observed that issues of hospitality are attached to food consumption. It is a Chewa tradition that when they have a visitor they show their hospitality by cooking good food for them. For a special guest this usually consists of *nsima* made from *ufa oyela* and served with chicken. *Nsima* made from *ufa oyela* with other kinds of relish is also served to any other guest they might receive. The guest/visitor must acknowledge this by saying '*anatilandila bwino, tinadya nsima yoyela ndi nkhuku*', meaning, 'we were well received for they prepared for us a white maize floured *nsima* with chicken'. Those failing to serve their visitors this dish risk being labelled stingy and can even be accused of practising witchcraft. A comment such as '*tinangochoka ndi njala yathu*', meaning, 'we just left with our stomachs empty', is the most commonly uttered phrase in gossip or complaints from visitors/guests who expected to be served by their host but did not receive any food during their visit. If the host wishes to avoid such gossip and accusation, s/he would apologise to the visitors as they are leaving, saying, '*pepani mwangochoka ndi njala yanu*', meaning, "sorry that you are leaving while hungry".

Meanwhile, if the host prepares food and the visitor refuses to eat, a controversy begins. By preparing food, the host indicates that they are receiving the visitor/the guest as *m'bale*, which means as a relative. This redefined relationship between the host and the visitor is fragile and full of suspicion. In the meantime, however, the visitor is treated as *m'bale* and is also subjected to the kinds of moral judgements found in kinship relations. As such, a visitor who refuses to eat food prepared for them can be accused of witchcraft

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or being stingy, like any clan member who does not share their food with other clan members. In light of this forgoing observation, it is considered taboo among the Chewa to refuse food offered by a host who intends to show his/her hospitality through its consumption.

During fieldwork, I entered into these kinds of fragile relationships with the women and their families with whom I became acquainted. Most of the women I spent time with at the marketplace called me *Asii* (sister). When I refused on one occasion to eat at Elizabeth's house because I was in a hurry to leave for the city where I had other engagements, I received this comment:

*Asii, why are you refusing to eat? You think we have put some medicine in the food to bewitch you? Or maybe you just do not want us to eat at your place when we visit you?* (Elizabeth's comments, Fieldnotes 29/11/07)

This example suggests that food consumption among the Chewa people of Kalolo not only carries moral values and social expectations but also forms and redefines complex relationships beyond that of the clan. Whether or not the visitor will be visited by the host in the near future, the implicit expectation of hospitality is that of reciprocation. Hence, temporality and the complexity of social and individual relations are not only formed and expressed through food consumption, but are also reinforced, defined and redefined through such encounters. What follows, then, is how maize distribution contributes to this complex web of social relations and meanings.

### **Maize Distribution**

During my fieldwork, I spent most of my time with women who sold maize at a local market called Nsundwe. Most of these women were from Elias. They were buying maize from other farmers, making decisions via an intangible

sense of sight, using verbal negotiation to purchase quantities of maize that would enable them to make a profit in return. Through observation and by analysing various quantities of different sacks of maize, without weighing them, the women were able to judge whether they would make a profit or not. Their judgement formed the basis for bargaining with the farmers from whom they were buying the maize, and who shared the same ability to quantify the product without weighing it. Maize distribution in this sense could be perceived in terms of trade and profit rather than the sharing of an important staple food.

However, after spending some time with the women at the market, I was startled why they started complaining when the demand for maize was high, supply was low and selling prices of maize rose. Although this presented an opportunity to make more profit as businesswomen, the scarcity of maize and the higher prices made it difficult for them to purchase more maize due to their limited capital. Consequently, this hindered them in fulfilling a social role. This social role, I was told, required them to measure their commodity in the smallest quantities for those in dire need who might die of hunger if this staple food was not supplied to them. Hence, not only were the women at the market to fulfil their individual needs, which were attained after making a profit, but they were also considered, and considered themselves, as channels for the redistribution of food. The extract below is taken from a conversation I had with one of the women at the marketplace; a picture follows this extract, which further substantiates the points made here:

*Our business is not only about making profits; being Chewa women, we are also expected to take care of others who are in need of our help... these old men and women you see coming to buy maize in small quantities look up to us ... sometimes we even have to give out maize on loan to some people we know, who might have not eaten anything for days ... This makes our business tricky Asii. That is why we run out of*

*capital from time to time ... but it does not matter as long as we know we are able to make some little profits for ourselves and also help others ... We are not like some of our greedy leaders, who keep on getting rich at the expense of those who are underprivileged. It is the because of these greedy leaders of ours that those who are poor (osauka), will keep on getting poorer (azingosaukilabe); and those who are rich (anthu ochita bwino) will keep on getting richer and richer (kumangolemelelabe) (Personal conversation with a woman at Nsundwe market, Fieldnotes 12/12/07).<sup>89</sup>*

Figure 13 below also confirms the position that Chewa women at Nsundwe market assumes:



**Figure 13:** Mayi D measuring maize using a small plate at Nsundwe market.

<sup>89</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

*Sharing, Reciprocity, Gift and Economic Exchange in Relation to Maize Distribution*

The case described above highlights some of the important aspects of Chewa people's lives which are in line with Counihan's (1981) observations among the people of Bosa in Italy. Counihan observes, "While market exchange has long governed commerce, a strict, incessant reciprocity has always been the basis of close and long-lasting social and economic relations..." (Counihan 1981 cited in Counihan 1984:52–53). The value of sharing and reciprocity sometimes surpasses the need for individual gain in order to maintain long-lasting social and economic relations among the matrilineal Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo. Food distribution and sharing beyond the market arena involve social relations and reciprocal obligations and expectations. This also applies during events such as the crowning ceremony of a Chewa chief (discussed in detail in chapter 4), when clan members invest a lot of food in expectation that the chief will take care of them in return in times of need. A matrilineal Chewa chief, then, like most members under his authority, is endowed with reciprocal obligations and expectations when they enter into social relationships that involve food sharing and distribution.

In examining the women's decisions at the marketplace, we can also see a second scenario, whereby complex interactions between Chewa people and outside institutions take place. This concerns the women's choices about who they should opt to sell their maize to. As observed, social obligations and individual preferences emanating from different motivations form a complex scenario at the market. When it concerns selling their maize back to their own communities, the women's motives could be easily explained as being influenced by social and reciprocal obligations. However, when it came to selling the same maize commodity to intermediate traders and a government



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institution called the Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC), a different scenario emerged. Some of the women decided not to sell their maize to certain intermediate traders even if they offered them a higher price, because they believed these traders would sell the commodity outside the country. Instead, they opted to sell to ADMARC, a government institution that they trusted to keep the food and sell it back to them in times of maize scarcity. Having said this, some of my informants did not mind reaping benefits from these intermediate buyers, because they did not have any social obligations to them. These choices were individual in nature and could not be observed easily without getting to know more about the motivations behind the women's choices. Another explanation of the influences on the women's decisions at the market can be found in Peters' (2006) work:

The single most disastrous effect of the first round of structural adjustment and liberalisation programme was to assume that the parastatal's function of providing affordable consumer maize in the deficit season could be taken up – virtually overnight – by private traders ... Private traders who moved into the new market were – and still are, 15 years later – overwhelmingly small-scale and opportunistic (Peters 2006:341).

The opportunistic tendencies of the intermediate traders and their inability to access a wider market, especially when maize is scarce, influence the women's decisions as to whom or to which institution they should sell their maize. Their consideration of their long-term access to maize plays an important role in this decision making. The women, like most of the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo, believe that '*Chimanga ndi moyo*' (maize is life); thus, its distribution at the market is not merely an issue of having a commodity for sale, but is full of complex symbolic and implicit social relationships that require its future security and availability.

The sharing and reciprocal obligations that surround maize were also observed at times of catastrophic occurrences such as hunger crises, or at socio-cultural events such as the crowning ceremony of a chief, funerals, weddings, *gule wankulu* ceremonies, memorials (*ziliza*) and. In Elias village, like in many other villages under T.A. Kalolo's authority, most of the events listed above occurred soon after maize harvesting and involved the sharing of maize among kinship relations and friends. A specific case that took place whilst I was there involved the organisation of the ceremony for the crowning of Chief John Elias (see also chapter 4 of this thesis). Prior to the ceremony, Chief John Elias's clan members, their friends, and Elizabeth's clan members and their friends, contributed maize for the event, although each side did so separately, observing kinship affiliations. Friends and clan members who contributed their maize for the event implicitly or openly expressed the expectation that the people being helped would reciprocate in the same way or in other different instances. The following extract is taken from a conversation between John Elias's mother (Dorothy) and some of her friends who came to deliver some baskets of maize while we were outside her house processing some more maize for the event:

Dorothy: *"Thank you so much for the parcel/the gift (katunduyu) ... it really means a lot to us, 'muzigona kutali ndi moto'"* (a saying, literally meaning, 'you should be sleeping away from fire').<sup>90</sup>

Friend 1: *"Chemwali mukuchita kuthokoza ine? (sister, why are you even bothered to thank me)? Zinthuzi ndi zothandizana (these events needs us to help each other). I know that if tomorrow the same thing happens in my village, you will do the same for me"*.

Friend 2: *"Indeed Asii, musachite kuthokoza (sister, do not bother thanking us). Remember the saying goes, 'today it is with you, but*

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<sup>90</sup> The meaning of the saying in this context is simply to give good wishes to the one who brought the parcel, and to wish them protection from harm, as an expression of gratitude or appreciation by the receiver.

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*tomorrow it is with me*’ (Paja amati ‘Lero chilli kwa inu, mawa chilli kwa ine’)” (Fieldnotes 04/07/07).

This type of conversation did not only apply to chieftainship events. Amongst other social occasions, funerals and weddings also called for such contributions and the sharing of maize. As I will show in chapter 6, the sharing of maize in times of hunger and food aid develops social complexities and institutional relationships that are at times conflicting and paradoxical.

So far, we have seen that it is through maize production, consumption and distribution that relationships are defined and redefined – and even that more complex ones emerge. The significant role of maize in the maintenance and articulation of socio-cultural relations, meanings and values, as well as the reconfiguration of the Chewa socio-cultural context, can be traced through the cases discussed above. More importantly, these cases elaborate upon the ways in which maize is deeply embedded in Chewa people’s everyday lives.

Maize distribution, either as a commodity for market exchange or as a gift, and through reciprocal obligations, calls (both within market arenas and beyond) for a complex interplay between formal modes of economic exchange and socio-cultural demands. On the surface, this appears to be what Goran Hyden terms an ‘economy of affection’, which characterises peasant economies. Hyden describes this economy of affection as based on the maintenance of position in kinship, community or religious networks (Hyden 1980:18–19). The myriad familial and communal ties provide the basis for organised activity through which peasants cooperate for the purposes of basic survival, social maintenance and economic development (see also Hirschmann 1990:467; Waters 1992:163).

The cases discussed here partly support Hyden’s claims above, though his further postulation is more problematic. He advances his argument by claiming

that these networks and the high value placed on personal relationships are dependent upon a “peasant mode of production” (Hyden 1980:19).<sup>91</sup> He states that the persistence of this ‘peasant mode of production’ in the case of rural Africa is a resistance mechanism to the intrusions of capitalism or the market economy and is one of the most significant factors inhibiting economic development (Hyden 1980:19).

Hyden’s reference to a specific ‘peasant mode of production’ assumes a particular boundary that separates his subjects from the wider world, especially when he refers to them as ‘uncaptured peasantry’ (Hyden 1980). However, presenting peasant economies as having a specific mode of production is problematic in this case. Hyden’s concept of a ‘peasant mode of production’, which is similar in nature to Marshal Sahlins’s (2004:41) concept of a “domestic mode of production”, proposes a mode of production that is characterised by underproduction. These modes of production mainly aims at producing for subsistence needs other than economic exchange (see Sahlins 2004:82–86; Hyden 1980:12-18). Both Sahlins’s and Hyden’s concepts, however, tend to oversimplify the Chewa people’s way of life, if such concepts are to be applied to an analysis of the Chewa context. As I have argued throughout this thesis, the Chewa people’s way of life is a complex interaction not only of individual interests (which include the advancement of their personal lives) but also of socio-cultural and other foreign values that entwine and can be traced through following the trajectory of maize among the Chewa.

Secondly, Hyden’s concept of a ‘peasant mode of production’ presupposes that a capitalist mode of exchange exists in opposition to the former, and that this capitalist mode of exchange is based on a rational, calculated maximisation of profit. In the case of the Chewa people, I would argue that their choice to emphasise moral and/or socio-cultural obligations over the individual

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<sup>91</sup> See also T. Waters (1992:163) for a similar interpretation of Hyden’s argument.

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maximisation of profit at times, is a calculated move of some sort. This is because it involves making a choice whereby the maximum gain might not necessarily be found in material terms, but also in other terms, such as reciprocal services and transactions, or in relation to status and solidarity. Sahlins (2004) observes in his preface that “[i]f you’re not maximising material utility, you might be satisfying some other, purely social value” (Sahlins 2004:xi).<sup>92</sup> In this case, “[r]ationality operates within a relative cultural order which for its part has its own reasons” (Sahlins 2004:xi). Taking a broader view, however, the cultural relativity of exchange that Sahlins’s analytical framework suggests still falls short in accounting for the various contesting values that are part of Chewa socio-cultural context.

Bourdieu, with his concept of the “good-faith economy” (Bourdieu 2007:173), explores similar dynamics of exchange that Hyden and Sahlins are concerned with. He postulates that the general law of exchange in the ‘good-faith economy’,

means that the closer the individuals or groups are in the genealogy, the easier it is to make agreements, the more frequent they are, and the more completely they are entrusted to good faith. Conversely, as the relationship becomes more impersonal, i.e., as one moves out from the relationship between brothers to that between virtual strangers (people from different villages) or even complete strangers, so a transaction is less likely to occur at all, but it can become and does become purely “economic” in character, i.e., closer to its economic reality, and the interested calculation which is never absent even from the most generous exchange ... can be more and more openly revealed (Bourdieu 2007:173).

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<sup>92</sup> See also Marcel Mauss (1990) for a similar view on calculations of gift exchange.

This quotation involves neither the presence nor the absence of a specific mode of economy, but rather shows how social or individual relations are played out in exchange, based on a specific context. Hence, rather than understanding the economic life of the Chewa people “as a contest between self-satisfaction and social constraint ... economising within the local rules of the game” (Sahlins 2004:xi), I would argue that different meanings, values and interests are at play here, be they individual, shared, economic, symbolic, cosmological, gender-based, political or foreign. They intertwine into complex systems of meaning and practice and constitute Chewa people’s complex socio-cultural context. This kind of conceptualisation does away with the problem that treats the ‘rational’ and the ‘cultural’ as belonging to incommensurable orders of discourse, where the former is a practical calculus of individual action and the latter refers to social forms such as matrilineal clans, ritual obligations, and relations of hierarchy, family or devotion, or whatever principle is organising the provisioning of the society (Sahlins 2004:xi).

Thirdly, the postulation of Hyden’s ‘economy of affection’ as being the major stumbling block to economic development (however defined) echoes the standardised conceptualisations of most development planners and policy makers, which equate everything that is socio-culturally mediated as a hindrance to the implementation of their policies. This form of conceptualisation is problematic and I have further discussed the implications of such standardised conceptualisation in chapters 3 and 6 of this thesis. On the same note, research from Cameroon by Ngwainmbi has also shown that policy-makers, especially from government institutions, play an active role in trying to promote capitalist models at the expense of pertinent social, ritual, cosmological and subjective values associated with agriculture. Thus, Ngwainmbi maintains,

Cameroonian farmers attribute more to agriculture than just economic activity ... there is a sacred component ... rituals which provide for

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social bonding; and ... a process of self-definition, self-determination, and self-actualization associated with food production (Ngwainmbi 2000:103–104).

Malawi provides no exception to the scenario outlined in this extract. The discussion here shows that the exchange of maize and how it is shared – in the form of a gift, or as a commodity for sale among the Chewa – is both socio-culturally constituted and also draws on an array of individual experiences and foreign interests, values and meanings that contribute to the complexity of everyday life for the Chewa. To demonstrate further aspects of this complex scenario, I will now turn to a discussion of the role that maize plays in understanding Chewa people's symbolic and cosmological realms.

### **The Role of Maize in Chewa Beliefs, Cosmological and Symbolic Worlds**

Many researchers writing on Chewa belief systems, cosmology and symbolic worlds have emphasised the role that *Nyau* (a secret institution of masked dancers dominated by men) plays in Chewa society (see Kachapila 2006; Kaspin 1990, 1993; Morris 2000b; Probst 2002; Rangeley 1948; Schoffeleers 1976; Van Breugel 2001). *Nyau* and its public and secret rituals dates back to pre-colonial times and is particular to Chewa people. Comprised of masked dancers who through their ritualistic performances emulate various images, especially animals and people, *Nyau* are also known as *Zilombo* (animals) or *Mizimu* (spirits), and hence cannot be easily defined. Nevertheless, some scholars have described *Nyau* as a men's secret organisation made up of *Akamwini* (men who are married into a matrilineal clan and are living in their wife's village), who through its rituals and prominence are consoled for the grievances they face away from their own homes (Phiri 1983:261). The increased presence of *Chitegwa* marriages among the Chewa means that most Chewa men now stay in their own matrimonial homes and yet they can still be

part of *Nyau*. Kaspin (1993) describes *Nyau* as a group of male initiates; it has also been regarded as an institution that provides for the basic ritual needs of both men and women, officiating at funerals, at puberty initiations and at crowning ceremonies of Chewa chiefs (Kaspin 1993:35). Recently, Kachapila (2006) has described the presence of women initiates within *Nyau* and an increased involvement of women in its ritual performances. Kachapila argues that this involvement of women signifies the negotiability and reconfiguration of gender relations among the matrilineal Chewa people (Kachapila 2006:321).

Worth noting here is that much of *Nyau* scholarship has focussed on its role as a resistance mechanism to encounters with politics and Christianity, as well as against the cultural domination of other tribes, such as the Ngoni and the Yao, and against European influence in Chewa areas (see Chanock 1975; Linden 1975; Linden & Linden 1974; Phiri 1975; Van Breugel 2001). Some scholars have gone beyond the resistance aspect of *Nyau*, discussing its symbolic representation of change as well as its cosmological dimensions (see Kaspin 1990, 1993; Probst 2002; Schoffeleers 1976). More recently, work has been carried out on *Nyau*'s gender dimension (see Kachapila 2006). Critical of *Nyau* theories of resistance as being static, and pointing out the short falls in new theories that have added an aspect of change, Kachapila indicates how gender relations, which are more ambivalent and negotiable within the *Nyau* context, mirror "the status of men and women at any given moment in Chewa Society" (Kachapila 2006:321). As I argued in chapter 4 and will expand upon below, these ambivalent and negotiable gender relations contribute to the complex socio-cultural context of Chewa people's ways of life.

*Nyau* and its rituals, together with rain-making or spiritual shrines, have often been depicted as "dominant symbols", to borrow Victor Turner's (1967:20) seminal concept. Thus, as a "dominant symbol" *Nyau*, its rituals and the spiritual/rain-making shrines among the Chewa are often "regarded not merely as means to the fulfilment of the avowed purposes of a given ritual, but also



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and more importantly refer to values that are regarded as ends in themselves, that is, to axiomatic values” (Turner 1967:20). This observation is in line with Probst’s work (2002), which is critical not of the symbolic dominance of these two institutions, but of the ways in which anthropological and historical studies investigating their links and interdependence have focused on cosmological principals and, hence, operate on a synchronic level. Proposing instead a diachronic analysis that accommodates historical change and a combination of cosmological with social and political issues, Probst’s analysis nevertheless also emphasises the symbolic dominance of the *Chisumphu* rain-making shrine and the Nyau masked dancers. He observes that these factors represent

the most important ritual features of the Chewa Society, both institutions are closely interwoven with one another, creating a complex spatial arrangement of political, religious and economic relationships and activities (Probst 2002:180).

However, as significant as the *Nyau* and the spiritual/ rain-making shrines rituals might be in terms of understanding the Chewa, I would like to propose that the symbolic dominance of maize within these Chewa ritual aspects and beyond has been overlooked and even masked. Although Schoffeleers (1976) observes that amongst the varied myths of the origin of *Nyau* are some that are rooted in food, the significance of this food dimension, and specifically white maize flour, has been under-emphasised or has disappeared entirely beneath intricate descriptions of the ritual enactments. The symbolic and cosmological aspect of white maize flour hereby proposed will be based on a review of how other writers have documented its presence in the rituals they studied, and yet seemingly missed the significance of white maize, let alone white maize flour. These claims will be presented alongside some of my field observations, which had their own limitations due to issues of secrecy and the taboos that surround those secrets, as discussed in chapter 1. Bringing to the fore the use of maize in the existing literature, and the limitations of my own observations, are crucial

parts of the study at this stage. This is not only because highlighting the role of maize will help us see how the symbolism of white maize among the Chewa has been obscured, but also because it will show how maize is an important aspect in the maintenance of Chewa secrets and the protection of their well-being.

As Kaspin and many others have noted, *Nyau* rituals and other social activities among the Chewa occur soon after the maize harvesting season when food is plentiful (see, for example, Kaspin 1990, 1993, 1996; Van Breugel 2001; Zubieta Calvert 2009). This season runs between May and November. For example, in both her articles (1993 and 1996) as well as in her PhD dissertation (1990), Kaspin indicates that *Nyau* rituals are performed at funerals, memorials, puberty initiations and chief crowning ceremonies, and that these events usually take place soon after harvest. She also notes that conceptions of the body and its cosmological associations are based on agricultural metaphors, and specifically on the seasonal calendrical activities associated with the production and consumption of maize:

The broad outline of seasonal change ultimately encompasses these myriad, minute changes: the wet season is the time of food production, the dry season the time of food consumption. And although seasonal change determines numerous activities in the village, the annual cycle is governed primarily by the gardening of maize. Maize is critical, first, because it is the staple of the diet, and, second, because its cultivation bounds the farming season: it is the first crop planted and the last crop harvested. In fact, the progress of the maize marks the progress of the seasons. Thus planted with the onset of rains, it ripens during the hunger months, it dries with the cessation of the rains, it is harvested during the cold season, and it is cooked as porridge and beer for public festivals of the hot season. The rains return, the maize is replanted, and the cycle begins again (Kaspin 1996:565).

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This quotation points to the ways in which maize plays a critical role. Not only is maize significant during *Nyau* ritual festivities, but also in other socio-cultural practices pertinent to Chewa people's way of life. Emphasising the cosmological significance of the Bunda rain-making shrine and its rituals (Kaspin 1996), and the *Nyau* as a totalising ritual system that defines the contours and the categories of the Chewa community (Kaspin 1993), the critical role of maize which she observes at times in her analysis disappears here beneath the dominance of the symbolic and cosmological rituals she studies. Thus, in the cases above and in others that I will discuss below, the symbolic dominance of maize is obscured and at times non-existent in analysis, even though its presence in the rituals is acknowledged. Transcending barriers of ritual, physical, cosmological, spiritual, political and moral realms, maize entwines these aspects, constituting the complex world of the Chewa people.

In consideration of Kaspin's work cited above and others, who have made extensive contribution to the scholarship of *Nyau* rituals and rain-making shrines among the Chewa,<sup>93</sup> I will limit myself to highlighting the significance of white maize flour in a few rituals and Chewa belief systems. In particular, I will emphasise *Mkangali* (the puberty initiation for girls), witchcraft beliefs and the symbolic dominance of maize in relation to mother's milk. I will also look at its regenerative and general cosmological value, as well as the symbolic dominance of white maize flour. I have made this selection to avoid ethnographic repetition of events that have already been studied in depth by other scholars. More importantly, I have made this specific selection in order to

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<sup>93</sup> The literature on the *Nyau* and on rain-makings shrines in a Chewa context is extensive and includes the work of J. P. Bruwer (1952); M. Chanock (1975); I. Linden (1975); I. Linden and J. Linden (1974); H. Kachapila (2006); B. Morris (2000b); P. Probst (2002); W. H. J. Rangeley (1948, 1949, 1950, 1951); J. M. Schoffeleers (1971, 1976, 1992, 1999); J. M. Schoffeleers & I. Linden (1972); J. W. M. Van Breugel (2001); K. Yoshida (1993); Leslie Francis Zubieta Calvert (2009).

highlight the significance of white maize flour among the Chewa – an aspect that has often been overlooked by scholars and policy makers alike.

*Puberty Initiation for Girls – Maize in Mkangali Rites*

*Mkangali*, as many others have explained, is one of the women's rituals among the Chewa people that prepare young girls for their transformation into adulthood. The onset of this ritual is marked by the beginning of a girl's menstrual period. However, since each girl will reach puberty at different times to others, *Mkangali* (also known as *Chinamwali chachikulu* – the Big Chinamwali) is organised in such a way that several girls can be initiated together. It usually occurs as one of the big festivities after maize harvest. A small or little *Chinamwali* (girls' initiation ritual) is usually performed before *Mkangali*:

The girls' rituals, called Chinamwali ("the maidenhood"), include three separate rites – a preliminary initiation at menarche (the little Chinamwali), a second initiation during the Nyau ceremonial season (the big Chinamwali) and a final initiation with the first pregnancy (Chisamba). Although each phase is essential, the middle rite receives the most attention during a four day celebration called *Mkangali*. (Kaspin 1990:205)

While many scholars disagree on the naming of the girls' rites, they agree that the initiation rituals are marked by the onset of a girl's first menstrual cycle. This disagreement over terminology has also been noted by Zubieta Calvert (2009) and Morris (2000b). Morris notes that both *Chinamwali chachin'gono* (the small *Chinamwali*) and the big *Chinamwali* are referred to as *Chinamwali Cha Ndakula* (meaning girl's initiation ritual for a grown up) (Morris 2000b:112). Zubieta Calvert distinguishes among these terminological

variations by referring to two types of *Chinamwali*. She notes that scholars such as Winterbottom & Lancaster (1965) and Van Breugel (2001) refer to the first *Chinamwali* as *Chinamwali Chaching'ono* (the “little initiation”), when the girls have their first period (Zubieta Calvert 2009:136–137). She also notes (Zubieta Calvert 2009:136–137) that the second initiation, *Chinamwali chachikulu* (the “great initiation”), is referred to as *Chisamba* (the initiation that takes place during the first pregnancy) by Winterbottom & Lancaster (1965) and Van Breugel (2001). However, my understanding of the terms, and those of Kaspin, cited above, resonates with J. W. Bruwer’s findings among the Chewa of Zambia. Bruwer observes,

when the girl has her first menstruation she undergoes an individual initiation and this is called *Cinamwali* or *Cinamwali caiwaye*; later when a group of initiates are ready then they undergo the *Cinamwali Cacikulu* or *Cinamwali ca Mkangali* and then, a third initiation happens to women who are about to have their first child and this is called *Chisamba*. (Bruwer 1949, cited in Zubieta Calvert 2009:137)<sup>94</sup>

These terminological variations suggest that the girls’ initiations might be termed differently or constitute different processes not only among the Chewa people of Malawi but also among those settled in Zambia and Mozambique. These kinds of variations, as well as similarities among girls’ initiations among the different Chewa groups, have been studied at length by Zubieta Calvert (2009). As such, my choice to discuss the Mkangali rite is not to emphasise its

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<sup>94</sup> Note that in J. Bruwer (1949, cited in Zubieta Calvert 2009) *Cinamwali* is spelt without an *h*; in Malawi it is spelt with an *h* – *Chinamwali*. These two words are pronounced in the same way, however. This might be due to one of the following factors: the transformation of the *Chichewa* language, which was initially written as *Cicewa*; the *h* that comes after the *c* was introduced not long ago, in Malawi at least. Or, it might be due to country differences, whereby in Zambia Chewa words are written as in Bruwer’s work, above.

importance over others vis-à-vis *Chinamwali chachin'gono* and *Chisamba*, since they are interrelated in quite significant ways. As Kaspin notes, “by raising girls to womanhood the productive center of the village is itself replenished” (Kaspin 1990:204–205). My choice to discuss *Mkangali* here is due to two key factors. Firstly, of significance to me is the use of white maize flour in *Mkangali's* instructions (*m'yambo*) during the ritual practices. Secondly, why the rituals are performed soon after the maize harvesting period when food is plentiful is also of significant interest to this analysis overall.

Since what I discuss in relation to *Mkangali* is based on an interview I carried out with one of the *Nankungwi* (women instructors for girls' initiation), and on a body of literature that has already described such a ritual, I will not repeat the intricate details of its processes since this has been extensively documented elsewhere.<sup>95</sup> However, I will highlight some of the instructions and practices during this initiation ceremony that involve food, and white maize flour in particular, as well as its symbolic and cosmological associations in this rite and beyond. This is because the symbolic and cosmological significance of maize within girls' initiation rites has been underemphasised.

Drawing from the conversation I had with the *Nankungwi* in Elias village, I learnt that white maize flour (*ufa oyela*) is used to instruct the initiates on how they can know the different stages of their menstrual cycle:

*When a young girl watha msinkhu (has come of age), or we can also say wagwa pansi (to fall down), timakhala naye pansi m'kanyumba komata*

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<sup>95</sup> The literature documenting girls' initiation ceremonies amongst the Chewa is extensive. See, for instance, L. Birch de Aguilar (1996); J. P. Bruwer (1952); A. M. Drake (1976); I. Hodgson (1933); H. Kachapila (2006); D. Kaspin (1990); I. Linden (1975); A. J. Makumbi (1975); Marwick (1952, 1965); B. Morris (2000b); W. H. J. Rangeley (1948, 1952); J. M. Schoffeleers (1973, 1976); J. W. M. Van Breugel (2001); K. Yoshida (1993); L. F. Zubieta Calvert (2009).

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(literally meaning, we sit down with her in a sealed house, but simply put it can mean, we take her into seclusion in a private house) *for several days until she finishes her menses. During this time, we give her several preliminary instructions about how she can take care of herself and to help her to be a responsible adult who will not be a disgrace to our community. The climax of these instructions is given to the girl during Chinamwali cha Mkangali, where several other girls who have also reached puberty within that year will be initiated together. There are some repetitions of the instructions we give to the girls in the preliminary Chinamwali, but since this one is well prepared in advance, there are a lot of activities and M'yambo that are given to the girls over a four- to five-day period. As such, the first important instruction given to them is to show them how they can master and understand their menstrual cycle, without which they can put the lives of other people in danger. Firstly, we show them through different colours, particularly red and white, how their menses will look from the beginning to the end of each menstrual bleeding. We usually use red clay soil or any ground red particles to indicate how the flow will look at the beginning, and then we mix the red clay/red particles with white maize flour to show them how the flow will look midway, and the colourless discharge at the end of the menses is represented by white maize flour. Others who have money can also use different colours of beads, particularly red and white, which can be bought in shops, but in most cases, flour elaborates each phase of the menstrual flow better. Secondly, whether a girl is married or not, we instruct them that during the time they are having their menses, they should abstain from putting salt in the food they prepare as well as from sex because they can harm the people who either eat their food or sleep with them through a state called Mdulo (cutting). Thus, if among the group some are married, they are instructed to put a red sign ... beads or a red cloth on the sleeping place which they share with their husbands to warn them that she is wotentha*

(hot) and hence dangerous to have sex with. Similarly, they have to put out a white sign to show that she is now in a good state (wazizila) (in a cold state or not harmful) (Personal conversation with Nankungwi from Elias village, Fieldnotes 28/07/07).<sup>96</sup>

These instructions contain several points that are significant for the present research. Firstly, the use of white maize flour in the instructions was intriguing. Even though others have noted the significance of white maize flour in having a capacity to purify/protect during girls' and boys' initiations among the Yao people, I have not come across literature that points to such significance within Chewa initiation ceremonies. Both Stannus & Davey (1913) and Mair (1951a) mention that white flour was used among the Yao to anoint initiates' foreheads as a sacrifice to their ancestors. Apart from footnotes, where Mair (1951a:63) cites Clyde Mitchell, who indicates that sacrifice involving maize flour was offered to the ancestors at the beginning of the initiation ceremony (to ask them if the timing of the initiation was right; sometimes it was smeared on the initiate's forehead and the forearm of each initiates' mother), few other details pertaining to the significance of the maize flour are provided. However, a conversation with a retired chief research officer of Lungwena Health Centre Research Unit (LHCRU), which is located among the Yao of Mangochi district, further highlighted the significance of white maize flour in Yao puberty initiations:

*At the beginning of the initiation ceremonies either of boys or girls, which are usually done separately, the initiates, gather at the chief's place, who officiates the Unyago (initiation ceremony) and offers sacrifices and prayers to their ancestors. Since the initiates stay in seclusion with their instructors and aphungu awo (their counsellors or tutors) for a period ranging from four to six weeks, there are others who*

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<sup>96</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.



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*might want to harm them through witchcraft, or they may fall sick due to some illnesses, both of which can lead to death. As such, white maize flour is smeared on the forehead of each initiate to ask their ancestors for protection of the initiates from any kind of harm while under initiation ... and this act of smearing white maize flour is known as Mbopesi, which means sacrifice. At the same time, the ancestors are also asked to give the initiates wisdom that will allow them to acquire the teachings and skills taught to them during the initiation, which will be for the greater good of the entire community. (Personal conversation with Rose Kaliza, Fieldnotes 03/01/08)*

From the conversation extract above and from the work of the other writers cited here, we can see how white maize flour has been and is still used as part of *Yao* initiation ceremonies. Linking the dead and the living through *Mbopesi*, white maize flour, during *Yao* initiation ceremonies mediates the supernatural protection capacities of the ancestors and embodies it through the smearing of each initiate's forehead. The significance of this white maize flour has been understudied or underemphasised both as regards the *Yao* and the *Chewa* people to whom I now return.

Aside from work on the *Yao* people living in the same region where I carried out my fieldwork, a number of scholars have noted the use of maize flour in *Chewa* girl's initiation rituals (see Hodgeson 1933:133; Van Braugel 2001:196; Zubieta Calvert 2009:171–177). Again, apart from Zubieta Calvert, who has shown with detailed images how white maize flour is used in the making of *chingondo/timbwidza* (a clay figurine that an initiate wears during the fourth day of *Mkangali*) among the *Chewa* of Malawi, and how it is used in making an initiation figurine called *Chilengo* among the *Chewa* of Zambia, little follow-up has been done on the significance of white maize flour in such rituals. It is possible to see from figures 14 and 15 below, by Zubieta Calvert's

(2009), how maize flour is used in two different settings: by the Malawian Chewa and by the Chewa of Zambia.



**Figure 14:** A white maize flour paste used in making *Chindongo* in Khombe Village, Malawi. Photo by Leslie Zubieta Calvert.



**Figure 15:** White maize flour and red clay soil used in an initiation figurine called *Chilengo* in Eastern Zambia. Photo by Leslie Zubieta Calvert.

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The use of white maize flour, then, as a means by which to teach young Chewa girls of T. A. Kalolo about the stages of their menstrual cycle is an important observation to which this work now returns. In the present research, and drawing on the pictures above, the white maize flour is significant in several ways. The colour symbolism in its use has been observed by others as relating to more than the colour of menstrual blood and the clear flow that the white maize flour symbolises at the end of the menses. As the *Nankungwi* [singular] indicated (see extract above), those who can afford white or red beads can use them to represent these symbolic colours, but in this particular case white maize flour and red clay were used. Whether white maize flour and red clay are the most commonly used mode of instruction as opposed to the use of beads among the Chewa of T. A. Kalolo is not a point I was able to verify because many of the *Anankungwi* [plural] I contacted did not wish to reveal their world of initiation secrets to me – a point I will return to later. Nevertheless, Kaspin, who also studied the Chewa of T. A. Chadza, which is located in the same Lilongwe district in which I carried out this fieldwork, observes,

the menstrual cycle is easily marked by a two-colour system, that is by red beads women wear when they menstruate and must refuse men, and the white beads they wear when they do not menstruate and can invite men (Kaspin 1990:154).

Her observation is similar to that of Van Breugel (2001:202–203), who carried out part of his research in T. A. Chadza; he refers to the beads the women wear as *Nkuzi*, which they must cut loose when they are menstruating and hang them on the wall for their husbands to see, as a warning that they are now in a ‘hot’ state (*wotentha*). This act warns the husbands that it is dangerous to sleep with their wives or eat food salted by them. Zubieta Calvert makes a similar observation in her most recent findings:

In central Malawi I got to a village where the women told me that they had stopped wearing beads because, at some point, fleas made their nest in the beads so this is something they do not practise anymore. This was interesting to me as it made me realize the hygiene issues of keeping beads around the waist all day long; however it is very unusual to find a Chewa village where women do not wear the beads around their waist (Zubieta Calvert 2009:149–150).

The variation in these accounts in relation to how white maize flour or beads are used during girls' initiations among different groups of Chewa people in Malawi and beyond indicates the complexity of their practices and beliefs, which cannot be simplified or generalised in this case. However, there are commonalities in these different accounts, one of which is the colour symbolism and the other constituting natural phenomena, such as hot or cold, life and death.

Just as Kaspin's analysis of the colour symbolism mentioned above seeks to provide a link with such natural phenomena, I would like to explore further how white maize flour can be interlinked with concepts of hot and cold, and life and death among the Chewa of T. A. Kalolo. Borrowing from the representation of bodily fluids and temperature that Kaspin uses in her analysis, I will elaborate upon these aspects below. However, Kaspin warns that the extremes presented in the chart below should be perceived in terms of scale. This is because for hot and cold, for example, they "designate not essential qualities of any single substance, but the relation between linked substances" (Kaspin 1990:140) (see table 1 below).

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1. Cold	Spirit World/Death	Dry
2. Cool	Rain and Water	Wet
3. Warm	Saliva/Milk/Urine	Wet
	Blood inside the body	
4. Warmer	Semen	Wet
5. Hot	Menstrual Blood	Wet
	Spilled Blood	
6. Hottest	Fire	Dry

**Table 1:** Relation between linked substances. Source: Kaspin 1990:140.

Since Kaspin's analysis of the chart above mostly related to cosmological phenomena associated with the rain-making shrines, *Nyau* rituals and the reproductive cycle, I will only refer to some of its aspects in relation to white maize flour and its ritual significance. As in the case of the *Nankungwi*'s conversation cited earlier, the girls are instructed to abstain from sex when they are *wotentha* (hot) because this can cause an illness called *Mdulo* (cutting) to the men who they may have sex with. *Mdulo* may even cause death if the ones suffering it or vulnerable to getting it are not treated or protected from it.<sup>97</sup> Thus, the menstrual blood, which is coloured red, is also considered hot and dangerous to others who may be perceived as having a different temperature. As Kaspin further postulates,

The commingling of body fluids of equal temperature is always safe, and, when they are combined and heated through sexual activity, they are regenerative. But the commingling of the bodily fluids of unequal

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<sup>97</sup> For more detail on *Mdulo* see Kaspin 1990, 1996; Ranglely 1948; Schoffeleers 1976; Van Breugel 2001; Zubieta Calvert 2009.

temperature is unsafe, producing sterility and death. If a sexually active adult handles a new born baby or a menstruating woman has sex with a man, the marked difference in temperature makes the hotter a source of danger to the cooler ... [This means that a]t one extreme corpses are cold ... At the other extreme menstruating women are hot, as the food they cook. Between these two extremes we find sexually active adults who are warm, a function of the movement of sexual fluids between them. As these markers indicate, predictable changes in "temperature" occur during the span of life. Newborns are cold, children are cool and adults of childbearing age are warm. As the body ages and sexual capacity diminishes, the body cools down again. The coolest adults are postmenopausal women and very old men, and the coldest of all are the dead (Kaspin 1996:570, 569).

The logic of the danger of the different temperatures involved in menstrual taboos, as explained here, is also found in Ranglely (1948). However, his reference to a menstruating woman as *wozizira* (meaning cold) is not in agreement with my own findings or those of Kaspin (1990, 1996) or Van Breugel (2001), among others. Another explanation that has been put forward in relation to menstrual taboos is that of contamination or pollution (see Douglas 1966; Zubieta Calvert 2009). Although Zubieta Calvert drew up a chart that shows the interrelation of 'hot' and 'cold', she placed emphasis on the idea that the dangers of intermingling 'hot' or 'cold' lie in the logic that they contaminate each other and can lead to death. This can be seen in her model, which is table 2 below:

<b>Contamination according to circumstances</b>	
<b>HOT (-Tentha)</b>	<b>COLD (-Zizira)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sexual activity or potentiality</li> <li>- Menstrual blood</li> <li>- Relish</li> <li>- Salt</li> <li>- Adultery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Relative absence of sex</li> <li>- Infants</li> <li>- Unusually sick person</li> <li>- Neophyte</li> <li>- Corpse-death</li> <li>- <i>Nsima</i> (flour pap)</li> <li>- Ancestral spirits</li> <li>- Children yet to born</li> <li>- Sterility</li> </ul>

**Table 2:** Elements regarded as sources of contamination (Source: Zubieta Calvert 2009:138).

While the notions of *wotentha* (hot) and *wozizira* (cold) are important concepts among the different Chewa groups studied by the researchers cited here, including in my own work, this emphasis on contamination omits some of the most important aspects of Chewa way of life. In agreement with Douglas (1966), I propose that these concepts can also help us further our understanding of how and why some meanings and values are compatible with Chewa people's socio-cultural categories and some are not. Chewa notions of hot or cold, colour symbolism and cosmology schemes all constitute a wider system of categories that are pertinent to Chewa way of life. It follows from this that what is harmful or considered a threat to Chewa wellbeing is not a polluting agent per se, but something that lies outside this wider classification of meanings and values.

So far we have only seen how red clay or red beads symbolise menstrual blood, and how this blood and the person producing it can be considered 'hot', dangerous and capable of causing death. Because it has been discussed elsewhere, I have not gone into detail about how *Mdulo* (cutting) occurs under different circumstances, or given further information about how salt is a medium through which heat emanating from a menstruating woman can be passed to the food she cooks, harming 'cooler' individuals who partake of the food.<sup>98</sup> Instead, I would like to return to the discussion about the significance of white maize flour in light of this logic of the menstrual taboo, where danger or death can be caused by the commingling of different substances with different temperatures. Having shown that white maize flour is part of girls' puberty rituals in the Chewa groups of Malawi and Zambia, I will now explore the life-giving properties that white maize flour has among the Chewa of T. A. Kalolo.

Kaspin's colour symbols propose that "red is always 'hot'", and that "black and white can signify virtually any condition, wet, dry, warm, hot, cold" (Kaspin 1990:155). I would like to propose here that white maize flour has life-giving capacities, just as *Mbopesi* has among the Yao, since it can transcend barriers of hot or cold, warm, dry or wet, and life and death, by virtue of being white. According to my findings among the Chewa, white maize flour is regarded more as a 'life giver' than a 'life taker', although both capacities are present. This dual aspect of white maize flour is very significant in Chewa people's way of life and is found in one of their key idioms: '*Chimanga ndi moyo*' (maize is life). Thus, although I began by showing how white maize flour is used to distinguish among stages of the menstrual flow, I would like to extend its significance in terms of its symbolic relevance within Chewa belief systems. *Nsima*, as described earlier, is made from white maize flour cooked during important rituals such as *Mkangali* and other annual ceremonial events.

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<sup>98</sup> For detailed accounts, see Kaspin (1990, 1996); Rangeley (1948); Van Breugel (2001); Williamson (1956).



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However, the symbolic dominance of white maize flour in such rituals and important social occasions that occur after the maize harvest (such as weddings, chief ceremonies, *Nyau* performances, memorials) constitutes particular beliefs, meanings and values pertinent to the Chewa people's well-being. I will explore this symbolic and belief aspect of white maize flour in relation to mother's milk, the spirit world, and its use as protection against witchcraft encounters.

### *White Maize Flour and Mother's Milk*

Victor Turner (1967) found that among the Ndembu mother's milk transcends the nutritive value that it provides to newborns through its symbolic dominance. In deciphering the metaphors in *Nkang'a* girls' puberty rituals, and specifically the symbolic significance of the *Mudyi* tree (the milk tree), he shows a complex interaction between biological acts, domestic relations and the world of ancestors. The *Mudyi* tree represents human breast milk and the breast that supplies it; the significance of nurturing between a mother and her children is not understated here. However, the reference to the *Mudyi* tree as "the tree of a mother and her child" (Turner 1967:21) amongst the Ndembu, "has shifted from description of a biological act, breast feeding, to a social tie of profound significance both in domestic relations and the structure of the widest Ndembu community" (Turner 1967:21).

It is in this context, then, that I will explore the significance of mother's milk and white maize flour in the context of the Chewa of T. A. Kalolo. Although little has been written about breast milk in relation to white maize flour among the Chewa of Malawi, or elsewhere, I will draw from some accounts that have at least related mother's milk to its white symbolism, or the symbolism of the mother's breast. For instance, Vigdis Broch-Due documents that breast-feeding among the Turkana of Kenya is a joint parental project. Not only does it allow mothers and fathers to continually contribute in the growing process of a child

that started with “the shared act of procreation ... The breast becomes a symbol for the fertility given to her clan to be consumed by the husband on behalf of his” (Broch-Due 1993:69). As such,

The breast (*esekina*), bears a masculine gender prefix while the term milk (*ngakile*) is constructed as feminine. The father, unable to let the baby suckle directly from his physical body, is metaphorically present in the part of the mother’s body, the breast, through which her nurturing fluid flows. If we pay attention to the processual gender models of the Turkana, a breast (or a penis) cannot be understood purely as the ‘natural’ property of the body to which it is fastened. Rather, gendered persons are the outcomes of interaction (Broch-Due 1993:69).

Such assertions can be further substantiated by what Victor Turner discerned about the Ndembu’s procreation theories.<sup>99</sup> He discussed procreation with one of his informants, and specifically asked why the Ndembu descent is traced through mothers. His informant replied:

A man begets children, but they are the mother’s because it is she who suckles and nurses them. A mother feeds a child with her breast; without it the child will die ... breast milk (*mayeli*) is “white” too, a “white stream” and the *mudyi* tree, the dominant symbol of the girls’ puberty rites, is a white symbol because it exudes white latex. Indeed, the primary sense of *mudyi* is breast milk (Turner 1967:65).

From the above conversation, Turner further postulates,

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<sup>99</sup> See also Marilyn Strathern’s (1990) discussion of Melanesian procreation theories in *The gender of the gift: Problems with women and problems with society in Melanesia*.

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Thus the *katooka*, a “white river” is bisexual in significance, representing both semen and milk. White symbols may then stand for both masculine and feminine objects, according to the context or situation and are not reserved (Turner 1967:65).

The extracts above suggest the implicit ambiguity inherent in the symbolism of the breast and breast milk. Portraying masculinity and femininity not as two opposing forces but rather as complementary, the symbolic aspect of white breast milk seems to have a capacity to transcend barriers that received wisdom has otherwise shown as belonging to two opposing categories. Such ambiguity not only pertains to the nurturing properties of mother’s milk, but also to a woman/a mother as a nurturing being. As Ruth Tsoffar’s structuralist study among the Egyptian Karaite Jews of San Francisco Bay in North America also shows, the conflicting symbolic meanings that the body of a breast-feeding mother represents help us to understand the cultural, religious and political aspects of Karaite communities, including those living in the Diaspora. Bearing in mind that womanhood among the Chewa encompasses not only fertility issues but also the survival of the community as a whole, Tsoffar's example also shows that motherhood within the Karaite context is an all-encompassing role that defines a woman’s totality. Just as we have seen among the Chewa, a menstruating woman among the Karaite is viewed as a danger to the entire community of which she is a part:

A menstruating woman is not allowed to touch men’s food, sit at the main table on high holidays (Passover and Yom Kippur), or visit a woman who has recently given birth ... At the same time, a new mother is considered vulnerable because her body is actively involved in the production of milk, and both she and the community concern themselves with protecting this milk (Tsoffar 2004:8).

Tsoffar explains that the vulnerability of a lactating woman to a menstruating one emanates from the impurity that a menstruating body represents, which might result in a stopping of the flow of milk, or it might be a cause of infertility to others upon contact. She points out that paradoxically a postpartum lactating mother is both lactating and menstruating at the same time. She observes that the impurity of postpartum bleeding shapes women's perceptions and divides their bodies into two distinct areas – the upper/clean and the lower/dirty:

The lactating woman, while not fully divorced from her genitals (for her postpartum bleeding defines her impurity), inhabits the opposite extreme of this cultural spectrum: the upper part of her body reflects a symbolic exaggeration of the enlarged breast and the nipples of a nursing mother. The cultural signification of this state is health, abundance, and nourishment. Whereas the upper body is productive, the lower body is restrictive. As two separate beings, the menstruating woman and the lactating woman are not only reduced to their bodily condition, but their bodies themselves are divided and fragmented by the social, religious, moral and aesthetic significance their society attaches to menstruation and lactation (Tsoffar 2004:13).

Tsoffar's analysis is influenced by Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (1966). In this study, Douglas makes an important point, sometimes often overlooked in studies applying her analytical criteria. Thus, what is defined as impure by Douglas is not contingent upon some natural properties of the substance, as such, but upon its relationship with a wider system of socio-cultural categorisation. In this regard, whether the Chewa operate with the same construction of the dual body of a lactating mother is of course an empirical question, *not* an essentialist one. However, the Chewa seem to operate with comparable notions that allow us to draw upon some of the insights of Tsoffar's analysis on Egyptian Karaite women of Jewish origin. As in the

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extract (above) from Tsoffar's work, I am interested in examining the ambiguities or paradoxes that emanate from the juxtaposing of two parameters otherwise considered to be incompatible, symbolically or naturally. Since the body of a postpartum mother described above reconciles two bodies (the lactating and the menstruating), which are otherwise perceived as in conflict with each other, I would like to cultivate further the capacity of white breast milk vis-à-vis white maize flour to transcend such incompatible barriers. As Tsoffar has shown, it is through the continuous flow of milk in the upper body of a postpartum mother that the dangers of the menstruating lower body are subverted. Thus,

As long as a woman breast-feeds, the culturally constructed superiority of the upper body over the lower body is incontestable, and, as long as milk is coming out of her body, two systems of oppositions are acting together, constantly shifting defined contours of the inside and outside, the upper and lower body (Tsoffar 2004:16).

Can we trace the symbolic capacity of white breast milk in this way in the context of the Chewa people? Not by concentrating on the logic of impurity *per se*, perhaps, but by focussing on that of the commingling of different temperatures. Based on our earlier discussion on Kaspin's (1990, 1996) work and my own findings among the Chewa, the body of a menstruating postpartum Chewa woman is considered 'hot' and hence has the potential to harm the 'cold' newborn. Before this state, both the mother and the foetus were in a cool state. Zubieta Calvert also observes this, stating, "during the period of pregnancy, the woman and child are considered 'cool'" (Zubieta Calvert 2009:275). How, then, does a Chewa mother's milk rise above the potential harm of a 'hot' postpartum woman? As Kaspin's (1990:140) model on the relationship between linked substances proposes, milk is considered to be warm and its continuous flow within the mother's body renders her warm. Thus, the white breast milk, which is considered 'warm', mediates the two

extreme states of hot and cold that are brought together through the parturition process. This is not the only explanation available in the literature, however.

Turner (1967:69–70) notes that among the Ndembu, whiteness is associated with aspects such as “goodness (*ku-waha*), making strong or healthy (*ku-koleka* or *ku-kolisha*), life, purity (*ku-tooka*), to lack (or be without) bad luck or misfortune, to have power (literally to be with power)”, to mention only a few of the examples provided. In this context, whiteness can be assumed to have the power to transcend barriers that are considered dangerous, or that are considered to be, symbolically or literally, in conflict with other elements. Turner acknowledges that the meanings of colour symbolism among the *Ndembu* are complex and contextually mediated. I propose that in similar way mother’s milk among the Chewa people represents a complex significance that includes not only kinship relations, but also close relations that have turned sour, as well as a wider connection with and disconnection from the spirit/ancestral worlds. As I explained in chapter 3, members of the same clan are not only recognised through the idiom of 'being of one breast' (*a bele limozdi*) or 'of one womb' (*a mimba imodzi*), but a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders is based on the understanding of such relations. And, as a reminder, the symbolic significance of mother’s milk, which is white in colour, is pertinent to the present discussion, wherein it is proposed that white maize flour holds similar symbolic significance.

Since the regenerative aspect and the *goodness* of breast milk as it nurtures the newborn – ensuring the continuity of the entire community – is present in all the cases presented here, I would now like to discuss how it can also be of potential harm to the child it is presumed to nurture. This occurs in the context of what one of the informants told me regarding the issue of respect that youngsters are taught to show to their elders:

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*According to our m'yambo yachichewa (Chewa customs or Chewa instructions), it is important to respect not only our chief, but also our anakubala (mothers or parents in general), those who are older than us, and our ancestors ... but for a child, it is very important to respect its parents, especially mayi ake omubeleka (the mother that gave birth to him or her). This is because if a mother that has given birth to you (mayi amene anakubeleka) spills her breast-milk on the ground as a gesture of cursing you ... one might have great misfortunes or bad luck ... just like one that has angered our ancestors (Personal conversation with a woman from Matekwe village, Fieldnotes 12/07/07).<sup>100</sup>*

This extract is partly in agreement with what Kaspin observed about the involvement of ancestors in the everyday life of the Chewa people. She claimed,

The degree to which ancestor spirits involve themselves in everyday life is ambiguous. Chewa say that they can bring disease and disaster to people; for this reason it is important to remember them with offerings, just as one would offer food to a hungry neighbour. But the spirits are rarely cited as the cause of actual misfortune and are usually assumed to be a benign presence (Kaspin 1990:233).

Nevertheless, she goes on to note,

While individual spirits may occasionally cause trouble for family members, the ancestor spirits as a whole are credited with the material maintenance of their surviving kin, responsible for both the fertility of women and the fecundity of the gardens. The first is a function of their beneficent interest in the health and well-being of their descendants, a

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<sup>100</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

prerequisite to productive family life. To this is attached their role as guardians of the *mwambo*, meaning the rituals which ensure productivity and the rules of sexual conduct which ensure pregnancy and childbirth. Thus when the Chewa explain their rituals and sexual procedures as “custom of our ancestors” (*mwambo wa makolo*), they are evoking one of the sanctions that uphold them, for failure to abide by the rules can incur wrath of the spirits. In this vein, one woman suggested that the disease *mdulo* is inflicted by the ancestor spirits in retaliation for breaking the menstrual prohibition. (Kaspin 1990:234).

The two extracts above from Kaspin's (1990) work and my empirical findings among the Chewa highlights the notion that, just as the mothers (who are perceived as nurturing) can bring misfortune or bad luck to their own children through spilling their milk on the ground, the ancestors (who are also perceived as ensuring the reproduction and well-being of the matriline) can also inflict harm on their descendants if angered. Thus, the mystical powers that white breast milk has in its double-edged capacity to encompass masculinity and femininity, hot and cold, and health (nurturing) or illness (misfortune/bad luck) are intriguing.<sup>101</sup> Due to the complexity of the symbolic dominance that breast milk has in relation to the colour symbolism of white, red and black, which is present in most Chewa rituals, it would have been of interest to examine such relations in detail.<sup>102</sup> However, this would mean moving far from the scope of this thesis, because the significance of breast milk and its colour symbolism is here embedded in the context of white maize flour, to which I now return. Like the mystical powers that white breast milk has in its double-edged capacity to encompass contradictory features or ambiguous elements such as hot and cold,

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<sup>101</sup> See also Broch-Due (1993) and Turner (1967) on the capacity of a breast or breast milk to encompass contradictory features or ambiguous elements.

<sup>102</sup> See also Zubieta Calvert (2009), who has discussed these relationships at some length.



and health (nurturing) or illness (misfortune/bad luck), white maize flour will next be explored in the same context in relation to witchcraft beliefs and its ritual significance.

*Witchcraft, Jealousy, Envy and the Importance of Secrecy*

One of the things that alarmed me when I returned to my home town for fieldwork after two years away from Malawi was that witchcraft and witchcraft accusations were being reported constantly in the local newspapers, as well as being addressed in churches at almost every Sunday service. Had the practice of witchcraft increased, or was something happening that was contributing to an increase in these concerns? I expressed my naïve curiosity about this one Sunday morning to a neighbour of mine after attending a Sunday service: “I thought witchcraft practices were mostly a concern in rural areas? How have these concerns become common in towns as well?” Her response was as follows:

*Not these days, my friend; our neighbourhoods are no longer safe because nowadays even the witches have got so sophisticated to the point that you can not only be suspicious of your close relatives, but even neighbours ... nowadays people pay witchdoctors to become witches. As such; anybody can be of potential harm even though you are not closely related. In this neighbourhood, as you heard the preacher, some evil women are teaching other people's babies to be witches. As such it is really important to pray for our neighbourhood because this is really getting serious (Personal conversation with my neighbour, Fieldnotes 11/03/07).<sup>103</sup>*

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<sup>103</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English

Stories like this were not uncommon. While I was carrying out my fieldwork in Matekwe and Elias, my research assistant informed me that there was going to be a case heard at the Traditional Authority Court, which it would be interesting to attend.<sup>104</sup> The case concerned a woman who was a teacher at a local school – she was a Chewa by descent – and a man who was a retired ADMARC employee, originally from the northern region but now settled among the Chewa for more than 20 years. These two people were accused of teaching witchcraft to some children in the neighbourhood. The accusation was brought by parents nursing their 12-year-old son, who had reported to his parents that he was injured by these two teachers of witchcraft. He claimed they were urging him to kill his parents through magic, but he could not do it. He said he was being beaten every night and, when he did not yield, he was dropped from their magic airplane and was now confined to bed. On the day of the hearing, the accused came to court, but the child's parents did not attend because their son's health had worsened. The case was postponed until later in the week, but unfortunately the boy died two days later. Consequently, the case was postponed indefinitely due to funeral arrangements, and because of the bitter emotions expressed by the bereaved family who were threatening to deal with the accused during the daytime, even though they harmed their son during the night.

These stories of witchcraft and witchcraft accusations were not only limited to teaching other people's children to be witches, but also concerned the stealing

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<sup>104</sup> As indicated in chapter 1, Traditional Authority (T. A.) is a territorial title given to a local chief who oversees a number of villages. It is one of the highest bureaucratic positions of traditional chiefs, under which there are Group Village Headmen (G.V.H.) and Village Headmen (V.H.)/chiefs. The T.A. position is also a recognised position within the bureaucratic system of local government, where the District Commissioner (DC) is an overseer of several Traditional Authorities in each district. In this context, it implies that cases that are solved at T. A. level are cases that have failed to be resolved at either G.V.H. level or V.H. level.

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of food crops from other people's gardens through magic. Other witchcraft accusations were manifested through gossip about people who became wealthy over a short period of time. Jealousy, envy and greed were in most cases felt to be the causes of witchcraft practices. Usually, those that were doing well in society were vulnerable to being bewitched by those who were jealous of them. The case outlined above, however, suggested something different: here, a teacher and a former government employee, who were considered better off in terms of their social status, were accused of being witches. The controversy was discussed even in the cities, where comments such as this were to be heard: "such a beautiful lady with a lot of money but you just cannot believe that she practices witchcraft at night" (Preacher's words in a Sunday service ceremony, Fieldnotes 11/03/07). This was how one of the preachers phrased it during one of the church ceremonies I attended at the beginning of my fieldwork period. It seemed that even town people who had a lot of money compared to those who lived in the rural areas were capable of harming other people out of spite and greed.

So how is this connected to food issues and 'poverty' and, most importantly, to the current discussion about the significance of white maize flour? In this analysis of these issues of witchcraft and the changes that have been happening in the country, it is important to uncover why these occurrences are increasing now. Strangers have entered the scene and are perceived as being potentially harmful. The combination of money, 'poverty' and witchcraft seem to be interrelated in quite complex ways. Hence, finding a correlation between these aspects and the different pathways of maize explored within this thesis would be significant, and would offer a new perspective on understandings of 'poverty' and 'food security' issues in Malawi.

Going back to our discussion on *Mkangali* girls' initiation rituals, Zubieta Calvert (2009) discusses the process of making the *chingondo* (a clay figurine worn by initiates during the ritual). How it is disposed of after its use is a

closely guarded secret of the *Anankhugwi*. Its powers can be appropriated by witches if it ends up in the wrong hands. Hence, the initiated girls (*anamwali*) are not allowed to touch it at any given moment from its production through to the time they dance with it on their heads, to the point at which it is disposed of. The following extracts from Zubieta Calvert's work elaborate on this:

When these figures are being made in the context of initiation, the secrecy that goes around the creation process is powerful and dangerous, thus I could only take pictures of the creation process, but I could not come close to touch them or measure them (Zubieta Calvert 2009:174).

She went further, observing that

[f]or example, based on written accounts and my personal experience in central Malawi, the *namkungwi* (teacher) and the *phungu* (tutor, who is under the instruction of the teacher), exclusively control the creation of the *chingondo* or *timbwidza* ... Only women involved in the manufacture are able to touch the *chingondo*; there are no accounts where initiates are said to touch the *chingondo* (as distinct to wearing it) and I did not witness any such event when I participated in the ceremony in central Malawi in 2003" (Zubieta Calvert 2009:185).

During her own initiation with two other initiates, Zubieta Calvert also observed,

After the *namwali* danced at the *bwalo* with the *chingondo* on her head, the *chingondo* was thrown away in a place known only to the *namkungwi*. The *namkungwi* told me that this must be done because the *chingondo* has great power and it can be used by people (witches) as an instrument of witchcraft (Zubieta Calvert 2009:179).

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These quotations presuppose the *chingondo* (also known as *timbwidza* in other Chewa contexts) have certain powers. Zubieta Calvert mentions that such powers include the ensured fertility of the *namwali*, but if they are not handled properly, illness and death can result (Zubieta Calvert 2009:178–179). She also mentions in one instance that she suggested she might take it with her on a plane but, it was said, it would have caused the plane to crash:

I asked if I could take a *timbwidza* with me (I wanted to see their reaction) but they said that if I took it, the airplane would crash, and after the lady said this all the other women laughed strongly. I was told that if someone attempts to go where the *timbwidza* is destroyed they will also die. (Zubieta Calvert 2009:184)

Zubieta Calvert does not explained the role of white maize flour, which is part of the *chingondo/timbwidza* creation process, even though she vividly shows this through a series of her pictures (see for example figures 16 below and figure 14 shown earlier in this section). These observations of the presence of white maize flour in *chingondo/timbwidza* creation process are interesting if we link the notion of the powers of the *chingondo/timbwidza* with the earlier discussion about the double-edged capacity of mother's milk. This is not only important because white maize flour is part of the *chingondo* but also because, as with mother's milk, which has generative associations, such as fertility, its misappropriation can lead to misfortune of various kinds. Thus, among the Chewa, *chingondo* is guarded against witchcraft appropriations. Its potential to harm others who are not entitled to touch it, when seen alongside its regenerative properties, reveals a paradox that also constitutes the spirit realm as consisting of both 'life givers' and 'life takers'.



**Figure 16:** Clay figurine coated with white maize flour paste. Photo by Leslie Zubieta Calvert

Going beyond the *Mkangali* ritual mentioned above, in which maize is seen to be significant, the presence of white maize flour in other Chewa rituals, such as crowning ceremonies of Chewa chiefs, weddings, funerals and memorials, cannot be understated. Since most of these rituals take place soon after the maize harvest, its physical and symbolic import is likely to be observable in such rituals. For instance, during my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to observe a crowning ceremony of a Chewa chief at the village I was staying in (see chapter 3). Not only was white maize flour used for the large quantities of *nsima* served to the invited guests, it was also used on the heads of the *Nyau* (who were in attendance to take the new chief back to their village. See figure 17 below). This made me wonder not only about the symbolic significance of the white maize flour on the bodies of the *Nyau*, which were also painted with red and black, but also about who these *Nyau* represented.



**Figure 17:** Nyau with white maize flour on their heads, waiting to take the new chief back to the village from the road junction/entrance to the village .

Did the *Nyau* which were referred to as *Mizimu* (spirits) represent their ancestors, waiting to welcome the newly crowned chief back to the village?<sup>105</sup> Or did the white maize flour on top of the *Nyau*'s heads represent these ancestors? What about the other colours, red and black, which were also on the bodies of the *Nyau*? What did they signify? I had dozens of questions, but when I started asking some of the women sitting near me, they seemed uneasy about giving me any answers. One of the women was open enough to respond, however:

*You have to ask these questions to that man [pointing to where he was seated] after all this is over. He directs the proceedings of those*

<sup>105</sup> See also Deborah Kaspin (1990, 1993) and Zubieta Calvert (2009), both of whom observed that the *Nyau* are also referred to as *Mizimu* (spirits) or *Zilombo* (animals).

Mizimu, *and maybe he might have those answers for you.* (Personal conversation with one of the women in the crowd, Fieldnotes 27/07/07)

When I got a chance to get near the man to whom I had been referred, later that day, I asked for an interview on one of the days when he was free, to which he agreed. However, when that day came and he realised that I wanted to know the secret meanings symbolically represented on the *Nyau* bodies, our meeting was cut short. He had only this for an answer: “*Kodi mayi simunamvepo mwambi oti zakumzinda saulula?*” (Madam, haven’t you heard of a saying ‘never reveal what is done or discussed at *Mzinda*’).<sup>106</sup> However, a later discussion with Chief John Elias, who was also an owner of *Mzinda*, revealed some significant points. He told me that the secrecy surrounding the rituals and symbols is of profound importance, as it is what constitutes and ensures the existence of traditions that are particular to Chewa people. In this case,

*white-maize flour and the other colours that you observed during the crowning ceremony constitutes meanings that not only ensure our well-being, but if those secrets end up in wrong hands, they can be misappropriated and cause us great misfortunes*”. (Personal conversation with Chief John Elias, Fieldnotes 22/12/08)

The presence of white maize flour in the *Nyau* case presented above is another interesting example of the paradoxes that transcends the barriers of life and death – or other wider symbolic meanings of hot and cold, red, black and white, wet and dry – when explored in detail. However, my limitations in terms of gaining such intricate and secret meanings coincide with what both Debora

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<sup>106</sup> *Mzinda* is a meeting place of the *Nyau*, which is usually the graveyard, surrounded by thick trees and bushes. It is also known as *Dambwe*.



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Kaspin and Zubieta Calvert found in relation to secrecy among the Chewa people of Malawi. Zubieta Calvert notes,

To gain access to secret knowledge, as an outsider, is a challenge that researchers have to face all the time. My personal experience in central Malawi is that one will never have full access to all secrets for a number of reasons. An advantage that I had is that, as a woman, I was allowed to participate in the *Chinamwali* and bear witness to some events that are kept secret from men and non-initiated people. I want to mention that getting information has never been easy, but also never impossible. Before my first visit to Malawi in 2003 I remember asking McEdward Murimbika, then a PhD student at Wits, if he thought that people would accept me. I asked him this question because I knew he was also doing ethnographic research in the Limpopo Province in South Africa. He said: you will be more accepted because you do not share the same taboos. Back then I did not understand what he meant. Then, when I visited Zambia in 2007, I was told that people saw me as an ‘honorary male’. I think that being a female has granted me the trust of women but also the fact that I am a foreigner also helped. In the beginning I doubted this, but as a foreigner, I do not share the same taboos and I am not implicated in any power relationships with anyone in the community (Zubieta Calvert 2009:163).

Zubieta Calvert’s experience here could also be considered quite exceptional because she went through an initiation ceremony of *Chinamwali*, just as Deborah Kaspin also went through *Chinamwali* and *Nyau* initiation ceremonies. In my case, being a Malawian of Nyanja origin, I could not go through similar processes due to some of the taboos we share with the Chewa people, as Zubieta Calvert suggests in the extract above. More importantly, I could have ended up paying dearly for this secret knowledge access, because going through such initiations could have meant my becoming alien to my own

close relatives, who have different perceptions, values and meaning that are against such initiations. However, my experience, together with that of Zubieta Calvert and Kaspin, points to the significance of the secrecy among the Chewa and among the different groups of people in Malawi. It is within this context that Kaspin also observes,

[t]he boundaries of secrecy around these bodies of ritually transmitted knowledge assert and reify the principal of social categories of the community. Thus children are excluded from adults because they do not know about Nyau, while men and women are excluded from each other's domains because they do not know each other's ancestral esoterica ... This is not only because the secrets define masculinity and femininity but because secrecy reifies the boundaries between male and female, and more generally, between those who know secrets and those who know nothing. Thus participation in the Chewa community rests on the distinction between the initiated and the uninitiated, called "the shaved" (*ometa*) and "the unshaved" (*osameta*) ... It is the secret language and their secret messages that separate the inside from the outside and that make membership of Chewa community literally imbued with meaning ... The quintessential outsider, then, is the foreigner; the European, the Ngoni and Tumbuka neighbour, the state official who, unlike the Chewa children, will always be "unshaved". As the permanently excluded, not only will these people never attend Nyau ritual but they will never comprehend the messages created by its idioms. (Kaspin 1996:40, 46, 47)

Despite Kaspin's suggestion here that these socio-cultural categories are absolute, we have seen already how one of the Tumbukans (the retired ADMARC employee, referred to above) was accused of witchcraft, together with a Chewa teacher. Having settled among the Chewa for a long time, the secret realms had become porous for him and had become part of his own day-

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to-day life, to the extent that he was perceived as a threat to the Chewa community. Thus, my being denied access to such secrets can also be accounted for by the power that I might have acquired if I had had such access. Would it be appropriated to the greater good, or for the well-being of the Chewa people, or would I have used it to harm them? In similar vein, these same questions would have been asked by different members of my own clan, friends and my neighbours who would always question and suspect me as having acquired mystical secrets that might put their well-being in danger.

White maize flour, which is used in the various rituals among the Chewa, conceals secrets and symbolic meanings that, as argued here, can be both 'life giving' and 'life taking'. Just as we have seen that breast milk has a symbolic significance, white maize flour also signifies different aspects of Chewa social, symbolic and cosmological life, such as maternal relations, ancestral spirits, coolness, warmth, or a mediation between extreme symbolic/cosmological states of 'hot' and 'cold', or 'red' and 'black, in different contexts. As such, the importance of understanding further the symbolic and cosmological significance of white maize flour, beyond its colour symbolism, is essential. In looking at the symbolic dominance of white maize flour in the arenas of Chewa rituals, witchcraft beliefs and its physical use in Chewa ceremonies, the importance of white maize flour and maize among the Chewa cannot be underestimated.

Thus far, this discussion has highlighted the role of white maize flour and white maize in general in Chewa belief systems and cosmology, and its use in symbolic, economic and social worlds. Little work has been carried out in relation to the symbolic role of maize, apart from the colour symbolism to which many researchers have confined their studies. This discussion, however, has noted several observations suggesting that white maize, and specifically white maize flour, is a dominant symbol in Chewa rituals, and constitutes wider socio-cultural categories of Chewa way of life. The trajectory of maize

will now take us to the sensuous relations and memories it recalls among the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo.

### **Maize in Sensual Relations and Memory**

As Gumerman observes, a “certain way of preparing a food item, for example, may symbolise ethnic, class or gender identity, and actively delineate the status and roles of subgroups” (Gumerman IV 1997:109). However, culinary rules are not always followed and not all members of a society follow the same rules. Among the Chewa, matters of taste, smell, texture and how food is prepared to suit personal preferences can further elaborate this point. Much as it can be claimed that there is little variation in what is cooked in terms of the Chewa diet, and in how it is cooked (see also Kaspin 1996), and that matters of taste, smell and texture are not only physiologically/individually oriented but also socially mediated (Classen 1990; Howes 1993, 2003; Korosmeyer 2005; Stoller 1989), individual differences among Chewa foodways are still significant if one is to understand their culinary system. As Goody suggests, we must not “neglect those important aspects of that culture that are linked with social or individual differences” (Goody 1982:28). Thus, food not only provides calories or pleasure to individuals who consume it (Gumerman 1997), but food and cooking are also part of complex social, symbolic and sensuous realms that provoke memories of the past that are collected in individual and/or collective histories.

Take the consumption of roasted maize among the Chewa, for instance. As outlined above, maize is usually consumed as a main meal in the form of *nsima*. However, the various ways in which it is prepared and consumed constitute other arenas of meaning. Maize cobs can be boiled or roasted while fresh and eaten as a snack. Dried maize seeds can be processed to *mphale* (pounded maize seeds) and then boiled or ground into flour and used to make porridge – this would usually be eaten as a breakfast meal. These same dried

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maize seeds can also be roasted and are eaten as snacks. It is the path of this dry roasted maize that I would like to follow here. Its preparation and consumption among the Chewa can help us learn more about individual preferences, gender and age group distinctions, as well as common preferences in relation to its smell, taste and texture. I will first elaborate upon this point through an encounter with roasted maize in a conversation with Chief John Elias, his two brothers and a friend, one Monday afternoon.

Being a chief of Elias village, a guardian of his *mbumba*, a father of three children and by now a husband of two wives, John Elias was obviously a busy man. In between the government meetings, ritual arrangements, dispute settling and livelihood obligations that he was entangled in, I managed to book an appointment to meet him this particular Monday afternoon, on 22 December 2008. This was not my first meeting with him, nor was it to be the last, but the uniqueness of this meeting was that it took place in the company of his brothers and a friend, while snacking on a plate of dry roasted maize mixed with roasted ground nuts. The vivid memories I still have of this particular meeting start with the entrance of Elizabeth (his first wife) with two plates of dry roasted maize and groundnuts, just before we started our interview. One of the plates was for the chief, his brothers and friend; the other was for me.

Even though I tried to excuse myself from having the snack,<sup>107</sup> Elizabeth insisted, commenting, *“It’s just a snack, something to play with in the mouth while you are having your conversation, it will not fill your stomach”*

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<sup>107</sup> I learned later that this was a form of courtesy that was ambiguous: you do not accept the food at once, even if you want it, when it is offered to you. This shows that you did not intend to take advantage of their hospitality, otherwise you might be perceived as a greedy person (*odikiza*). On the other hand, you cannot deny the food once it has been offered to you because this can signify different meanings of being impolite, rude or snobbish; at times, this has even resulted in the kinds of witchcraft accusations discussed in this chapter.

(Elizabeth's comments, 22/12/08). With its aroma, of course, anyone accustomed to the smell of dry roasted maize who finds pleasure in eating it would start to salivate. But like boiled eggs, whose smell might be awful to those not eating them, yet enjoyable and pleasant to those consuming them, so it was with this dry roasted maize. As we were discussing the various issues of kinship, politics and food production, and the consumption and distribution of cash crops, markets and so on, we were all enjoying with pleasure the dry roasted maize snack mixed with roasted ground nuts. Its smell (now perceived as a pleasant aroma to all of us who were eating it in that room) and its sound, as it was crushed between the teeth, soon became an integral part of our conversation. Its texture as it was ground into flour between my teeth made my tongue and throat dry, yet this made me salivate more, and I had to ask for water to lubricate my intermittently dry mouth. The pleasure I took in eating this roasted dry maize, and the childhood memories it evoked, brought me back to my high school days, when dry roasted maize was an important snack.

When I asked for water, Chief John Elias asked me if I was not used to eating roasted maize, given that I was from the city and educated. To his surprise, I expressed how much I shared their pleasure in this maize snack and it opened up a new discussion about how, over time, roasted maize has been enjoyed by individuals and communities alike. He started to explain how as young boys they also roasted maize on hot ash, while tending to goats and warming themselves in the cold months of June and July. While discussing the same issue of roasted maize, one of Chief John Elias's brothers commented,

*Even our old people to this very day, they seem not to give up this taste of roasted maize, to the extent that our young women have to pound it for them and they would take it in the form of flour that we call m'bwim'zwi. That's why we have the saying ukapanda mano usamaswa phale (if you don't have sufficient teeth, do not break the potsherd in*

which maize is fried).<sup>108</sup> (Personal conversation with Chief John Elias's brother, 22/12/08)<sup>109</sup>

In response to this statement, I asked whether maize was still roasted in a potsherd (*Phale*). John Elias answered,

*Well ... most people still use clay pots to roast maize ... but those who can afford frying pans, they now use those too. However, maize roasted in frying pans does not taste as good as that which is roasted in a clay pot. So for me, I still prefer maize roasted from a clay pot even though my wife has some frying pans* (Personal conversation with Chief John Elias, Fieldnotes 22/12/08).<sup>110</sup>

To this comment, a friend of John Elias, who was also part of this conversation, added,

*This is really true. I am from the northern region where rice is our staple food, but we still eat roasted maize as a snack from time to time. Since I moved here, my children who were all born here always bother their mother for roasted maize to take to school. This is because they don't want to kusilila (be envious of) their friends when they are eating it during break times* (Personal conversation with Chief John Elias's friend, Fieldnotes 22/12/08).<sup>111</sup>

This conversation and my own experience with the roasted maize speaks volumes not only about shared values of the taste, smell and texture of dry

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<sup>108</sup> A potsherd in which maize is fried is usually made of clay. See also Chakanza (2000:312) for a similar translation of the Chewa proverb.

<sup>109</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

<sup>110</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

<sup>111</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English.

roasted maize, but also about how individual preferences, gender issues and past memories are revealed through its preparation and consumption. In this case, I am in agreement with Caplan who, citing Proust (1987), asserts that one can capture “the exceptionally powerful way in which taste can represent so much: the past, memories of childhood, a sense of place and time and one’s own self within it” (Caplan 1994:6). Through understanding the ways in which dry roasted maize is prepared, and by whom it is prepared, we can learn much about gender relations and age group distinctions. As adult married men, which was the marital status of all the men present in that room during the conversation outlined above, their presence in a kitchen to prepare their own food, let alone the dry roasted maize of their preference, was almost unthinkable. Their wives usually prepared all the food for them, including the dry roasted maize, according to their preferences. Where exceptions occur, men can roast their own dry maize or cook their own food either in the company of other men, at night, when they are not under the scrutiny of their neighbours, or as boys who are not yet married. This also speaks volumes about the division of gender roles and gender perceptions among the Chewa.

The ways in which this dry roasted maize is eaten, and the ways it is prepared, also says something about Chewa people’s social status. For instance, mixing roasted groundnuts with roasted maize can signify that one has sufficient resources to allow the family to cultivate other crops such as groundnuts, or the money to buy them and eat them as a snack. However, eating dry roasted maize with or without roasted groundnuts is also a matter of personal preference. I observed during my fieldwork that some people simply preferred to eat dry roasted maize and roasted groundnuts separately, even if they had them both. I was told by one of my informants that they did not want one food to interfere with the taste of the other, so they enjoyed each snack separately. I also learnt from common accounts among the Chewa that roasted maize is best eaten on its own, as many Chewa ancestors have done in the past. Notably, roasted



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maize constitutes a culturally and historically mediated sensorium particular to the Chewa, and to the different groups of people in Malawi.

So far, I have highlighted the active role that maize plays in terms of social and gender relations, and in terms of individual preferences pertaining to the smell, taste and texture of roasted maize. Through this, we can learn that sensual dimensions of taste, smell and texture are socially shared; it is also observable that their conceptual and perceptual dimensions can stir personal as well as collectively shared memories. This resonates with what Paul Stoller learnt from the Songhay culinary system that sensuous experience is not opposed to reason, rather it is filled with logic, meanings, expository as well as evocative elements, both personal and communal (Stoller 1997:91). In line with Stoller's insights, Howes goes further explaining that:

The continual interplay between sensuality and sociality that one finds across cultures makes it essential for a sensuous anthropology to explore the social, as well as the conceptual, dimensions of perception (Howes 2003:56).

The discussion above is in line with the work of a group of researchers (Goody 1982; Gumerman IV 1997; Caplan 1994, 2005; Minzt & De Bois 2002) who agree that foodways account for both diversity and shared encounters. This being the case, the trajectory through which dry roasted maize has taken us, in relation to the other paths and diversions of white maize explored in this chapter, further establishes the socio-cultural complexities of the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo. The ways in which white maize, and white maize flour, contains and elaborates key symbolic, cosmological, economic, social and sensuous aspects pertinent to the Chewa has been the major contribution of the foregoing discussion.

## **Concluding Remarks**

There have always been many foodways in Malawi beyond physical need. As I have shown in this chapter and throughout this thesis, food among the Chewa is central to celebrations, funerals and rituals, and is the foundation of local cosmologies. Whether exchanged as gifts or commodities, foods are deeply embedded in Chewa peoples' way of life. Maize has a special significance. For instance, among the Chewa, this significance of maize is expressed through its symbolic meanings and values that are attached to different varieties and types of maize flour and to different stages in its production, consumption and distribution. Furthermore, as shown in the course of this chapter, pure white maize grain and flour symbolise a complex range of relationships, beliefs and cosmological understanding of the world of the Chewa people. In part, it signifies high status and wealth, as opposed to dark maize flour, which is associated with low rank and 'poverty'. As chapter 6 will show, its comparison with the yellow maize flour distributed as humanitarian aid to the Chewa during a hunger crisis created a scenario that was at once symbolic, political and physiologically complex.

Both the strength of social relations and their tensions, such as the witchcraft accusations observed here, are expressed through the idiom of food. This is manifested in the ways the Chewa interpret hospitality, and the reciprocal obligations that involve the sharing of maize and its products. These socio-cultural relations and tension are also apparent in the symbolic and ritual significance of maize. This chapter has also shown that these socio-culturally mediated meanings and values can also be challenged through alternative kinds of voices, meanings, values and practices.

These rich socio-cultural dynamics of food, and in particular of white maize, are rarely considered by policy makers. Bearing this in mind, the complexities

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of the different pathways of maize among the Chewa in relation to the paradoxes that emerge as a result of differing conceptualisations of ‘poverty’, ‘the poor’ and ‘food security’ will be discussed in the following chapter. The significant contribution of the present chapter has been to highlight the social, economic, sensuous, cosmological and symbolic aspects of maize and how it best articulates the way of life of the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo. These are often overlooked aspects of maize in many ethnographic accounts, as well as in policy processes that concern the Chewa. It is through maize production, consumption and distribution, as well as through its symbolic and cosmological dimensions, that Chewa people define, organise, reorganise and express complex social, economic, symbolic and sensuous relations pertinent to them. Yet, it is also through such processes that new types of relationships emerge. Through their saying, ‘*Chimanga ndi moyo*’ (maize is life), the Chewa people continuously express not only how important maize is in their lives, but also that maize is basically an intrinsic part of them.

Maize is expressive of significant aspects of individual and social relations among the Chewa; it also goes beyond this and brings together groups of people through policies that target its production, consumption and distribution. In this way, maize opens up paradoxical arenas that involve contesting ideologies or regimes of value (meanings, values and interests<sup>9</sup> – all of which contribute to its politicisation. Thus, policy interventions concerning maize, which link together donors, the Malawian government and the Chewa people, become tense institutional arenas of meaning, interest and value differences, especially during their implementation in local settings. How such institutional and political arenas of maize affect Chewa people’s way of life is one of the complex scenarios that the next chapter will address. Thus, different conceptualisations of the problems at hand, which are the result of different meanings, interests and value systems, constitute ambiguities that are evoked when standardised policy interventions are implemented that concern ‘poverty’

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and 'food security'. It is these ambiguities that I will address in the chapter that follows.

## **Part 3: The Conceptual and Discursive Ways of Maize**



# CHAPTER 6

## CONCEPTUALISATION OF 'FOOD SECURITY', 'THE POOR' AND 'POVERTY' IN MALAWI

In this final chapter I examine Chewa people's responses to, and the wider effects of, specific policy frameworks and interventions that have recently been employed to address issues of hunger, 'the poor', 'poverty' and 'food security' in Malawi. In making the conceptualisation of 'poverty', 'food security' and 'the poor' the focus of this chapter, Chewa people's conceptualisation of these issues will be assessed in relation to those of donors and the Malawi government that filter through policy processes which attempt to address the problems in question. In particular, I will demonstrate that the ways of maize discussed throughout this study contribute to our understanding of how the Chewa experience, conceptualise and respond to, standardised policy processes.

This assessment will lend support to my key research thesis, notably; that standardised concepts used in development policies in Malawi (such as the 'food security' Policy) are notoriously foreign to the local people they are intended to serve and, thus, are often ineffectual. To appreciate the degree to which policy interventions might be successfully implemented, accepted, contested, rejected, or manipulated, or to what extent they might actually worsen the conditions of the targeted people, we need a deeper understanding

of those people and of the ways they conceptualise and experience the problems they face.

My main emphasis in this chapter will be on the newly instituted Food Security Policy (FSP) and its guiding principles and policy frameworks. Like I partly discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis, I will analyse the concepts used in national and international policy frameworks such as the Malawi ‘poverty’ Reduction Strategy Paper (MPRSP), the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which contributed significantly to the process of developing and implementing the new FSP. In addition, I will explore the ways in which standardised concepts constitute power relations whereby those with power attempt to control the weak. How this exercise of power is resisted, contested, accepted or manipulated, or contributes to a worsening of the conditions of the weaker people, is also a concern of this chapter. I will show this through a specific hunger crisis case, where the meanings, interests and values of different groups of people converge within the context of humanitarian aid intervention.

Towards the end of this concluding chapter, I will address the following questions: whose conceptualisation of the problems under discussion matters most in policy processes in Malawi? What implication does this have for the Chewa? Overall, I will try to summarise how the ways of maize within the Malawian context mediates different values, meanings and interests of different groups of people/institutions as well as articulates Chewa people’s way of life.

### **Standardised Concepts as Policy Templates: ‘Food Security’, ‘The poor’ and ‘Poverty’ in Global Policy Frameworks**

The term *template* as it is used here follows Broch-Due’s sense of “simplified representation” (Broch-Due’s 1995:2), and Raymond Williams’s notion of “keywords” (Raymond Williams 1976:13). ‘Simplified representations’ and



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‘keywords’ in the two contexts above constitute discursive social encounters that conceal specific power relations. Thus, the term template is used in this chapter to mean standardised discursive policy models or concepts (generally dominated by economic conceptualisations) that act as policy guidelines for development policies.

For the past 50 years, critics of development aid have pointed out that it has proven to be unproductive due to its preoccupation with unilateral knowledge (mostly economic in nature) or standardised policy prescriptions that lack an in-depth understanding of local contexts (Broch-Due 1995; Easterly 2006; Hirschman 1958; Lepenies 2010; Rottenburg 2009). Others have gone further, criticising the hegemonic agendas of development practitioners who through their aid policies aim to control aid recipients implicitly or tacitly (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; Lie 2011; Scott 1998; Tsing 1993).

What follows is an exploration of how such standardised concepts or templates constitute power relations whereby those with power to control resources use the templates in policy processes to control local people’s lives. First, drawing on examples from donor institutions such as the World Bank and UN agencies, I will show how their conceptualisations of ‘poverty’, ‘the poor’ and ‘food security’ act as templates or ‘authoritative interpretations’ (to use Mosse’s terminology) in both their aid policy directions and in those of the recipients’ governments. In Mosse’s (2004) terms, “authoritative interpretations”, like templates, are understood as common narratives or conceptualisations that tie together heterogeneous entities, such as people, ideas, interests, events or objects, through a translation process (see Mosse 2004:647). Thus, while I acknowledge that there is no single view within aid institutions like the World Bank, due to varied interests and the multiplicity of their aid programmes (see also Lie 2011), I will argue that a specific conceptualisation of the problems raised here is usually promoted by such institutions as part of their aid policy approaches. This is in agreement with Arce & Long (2000), who show that

among the international donors a policy discourse exists that strives to ensure that practices are rendered coherent in terms of a single overarching framework, while overriding a diversity of approaches or a multiplicity of rationalities and values. Hence, despite fragmentation and dissent within and between aid institutions, “actors in development are constantly engaged in creating order and unity through political acts of *composition*” (Latour 2000, cited in Mosse 2004:647). It is through such political composition that Mosse’s concept of authoritative interpretations is imbued with different, even divergent, interests and agendas. As Mosse explains,

the more interests are tied up with their particular interpretations, the more stable and dominant development’s policy models become ... Clearly common narratives or commanding interpretations are supported for different reasons and serve a diversity of perhaps contradictory interests (Mosse 2004:647).

Hence, as I have argued in the chapter 3, donor interests or agendas constitute specific regimes of value.<sup>112</sup> For donors, these regimes of value constitute the meanings, values and interests that guide their everyday practices, but these factors are also represented within specific policy conceptualisations or templates. Donors’ specific regimes of value are articulated through the templates or authoritative interpretations that guide their various aid policy processes. The privileging of an economic conceptualisation of ‘poverty’ or ‘the poor’ within aid institutions such as the World Bank, despite the fragmentation and dissent within and between such aid institutions is a significant factor that this chapter will address.

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<sup>112</sup> In using the term ‘regimes of value’ I am drawing on Arjun Appadurai’s (1986) concept. Its use here and throughout the thesis is understood in terms of the interests, meanings and values that groups of people employ during their interaction within a specific context.

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*Templates Exemplified*

As Shanmugaratnam (2003:12) notes, “The World Bank has addressed the problem of poverty systematically from its own global point of view”. Despite some of its critics pointing out the shortcomings of its insistence on conceptualising ‘the poor’ through an established ‘poverty’ line, its approach to ‘poverty’ in this regard has not changed (see Dierckxsens 2000; Mawdsley & Rigg 2002; Shanmugaratnam 2001, 2003). In an overview, the *World Development Report 2008*, the World Bank’s emphasis on the problem of ‘poverty’, and its commitment to providing policy guidelines to resolve the issue, was based on the fact that, “Three of every four people in developing countries live in rural areas – 2.1 billion living on less than \$2 a day and 880 million on less than \$1 a day – and most depend on agriculture for their livelihoods” (World Bank 2008:1). Thus, its commitment to viewing the world’s poor as those living on either less than \$2 a day, or on less than \$1 a day, continues to inform its policy direction and the interventions it suggests for the countries concerned.

This standardised conceptualisation of ‘the poor’, and the definition of ‘poverty’ as based on a lack of adequate income to command basic necessities, has been widely adopted by governments in the developing world, including Malawi (a point to which this chapter will return). This is despite the fact that while ‘poverty’ lines might be useful in roughly quantifying those who are economically deprived, its shortcomings mask the diversity of the targeted group, their social and cultural variation, and their own divergent conceptualisations of who ‘the poor’ are, or what ‘poverty’ is in their specific local contexts (Shanmugaratnam 2003:4). Furthermore, this conceptualisation omits from the analysis a large number of those who are economically deprived, as in the case of Guatemala, where people who earn far more than the poverty line rate are unable to cover their material needs (Ystanes 2011:126). The drawback of this standardised way of contextualising the issues in question becomes evident during policy implementation processes, whereby foreign

templates or standardised representations (like those discussed above) meet with divergent local contexts (see Broch-Due 1995). The paradoxes created therein result in the development of policies that are not in line with local people's needs, or the rejection, contestation and manipulation of such policies during their implementation phase. This situation can also result in other unintended consequences, such as worsening the condition of the people whom such policies are meant to serve.

I am not suggesting here that the World Banks' orientation in conceptualising 'poverty' in economic terms has not been affected by changes over time. On the contrary, I agree with other scholars who have shown that the ways in which the World Bank has conceptualised 'poverty' over time cannot be understood in isolation from its paradigm shifts on economic development (Harrigan 2003; Lie 2011; Shanmugaratnam 2003). Shanmugaratnam, for example, notes that for more than three decades the fundamental assumptions of the World Bank's paradigms of economic development have been deregulation, privatisation and state minimalism (Shanmugaratnam 2003:13). Harrigan goes further, to suggest that the inconsistent paradigm shifts of the World Bank with regard to economic development have contributed to u-turns and policies that seem to go in circles in aid-recipient countries such as Malawi. Concentrating on the agricultural reforms that Malawi undertook from 1981 to 2000, based on World Bank/IMF guidelines, Harrigan shows this effect in terms of local agricultural policies. His argument is that as the Bank shifted its development paradigm from pricism and state minimalism to a more holistic approach, which revolves around a paradigm of "livelihoods and entitlements", so the agricultural policy approaches in Malawi changed in a similar manner (Harrigan 2003:848). Moreover, he notes, the policy inconsistencies within the

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World Bank and in Malawi were influenced by domestic political pressures (Harrigan 2003:848).<sup>113</sup>

Recently, Lie (2011) has shown that the World Bank's development paradigm has shifted from the top-down approaches that were constituted in its Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) to a more participatory or local ownership approach. Within this new paradigm, Lie adds, there is an assumption of a general restructuring of aid relations with recipient institutions, where the former are designated greater responsibility over processes of planning, implementation and reporting (Lie 2011:85). Due to such changes, current buzzwords or templates embedded in the new development paradigm of the World Bank include "participation, ownership and partnership" (Lie 2011:85). Despite such temporal and rhetorical changes to the development paradigm of the World Bank, Lie argues that explicit donor-driven, top-down and paternalistic approaches have been abandoned, in principle, in favour of a Foucauldian sense of exercising power – governmentality (Lie 2011:109). Through these new forms of aid relations, the World Bank as a ruler is allowed to retain "control through other profound means that do not dictate the ruled *per se* but rather provide the realm within which they operate" (Lie 2011:109). This is interesting because it brings us back to the notion of 'authoritative interpretations' explored in the preceding section; that is, it addresses the ways in which the Bank uses its authoritative interpretations as mechanisms of social control, despite the changes discussed above.

As much as I acknowledge the Foucauldian sense of governing constituted in the World Bank's development aid approaches, it is necessary to understand the limitations of the ways in which such form of exercise of powers is accomplished. In this, I am in agreement with Li (1999), who suggests, "the

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<sup>113</sup> See also chapter 3, where I discuss how policy processes have been partly influenced by internal political pressures.

Foucauldian concept of governmentality provides a better guide to the *project of rule*” (Li 1999:314). However, this does not lead us to an understanding of “*how rule is accomplished*” (Li 1999:314), yet it is important to reach an understanding of how policy processes of planning, institutionalisation and implementation become constitutive of mechanisms of social control. It is also pertinent to gain a fuller appreciation of how templates or ‘authoritative interpretations’ acquire meanings in specific local contexts, and hence expose power relations through this process.

As this discussion shows, it is not surprising, then, that despite its rhetorical changes in its development policy approaches, the World Bank still privilege an economic approach through its abstract templates. These templates have more leverage in terms of informing its various policy directions than the specific lived experiences and conceptualisations of everyday life in different local contexts. During my fieldwork, an interview with a World Bank official in Malawi confirmed this standardised or abstract nature of policy prescriptions:

there is no deliberate attempt to even think of the beneficiaries, or the target group concerns in the World Bank’s policy process, or while it is giving advice to the government. Soliciting ideas from the rural masses only takes place in the form of consultations at regional level, which are usually done with top officials, and not necessarily with those concerned – the villagers. This is because cost-effective models are more preferable than time-consuming and expensive evidence-based policy processes.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Personal conversation with an anonymous source from the World Bank in Malawi (Fieldnotes 15/11/07).

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My informant also pointed out that due to weak state structures and its low bargaining power, which is a result of its dependency on aid, the government does not usually own the policy processes. In general, the government's lack of resources makes it prone to donor influence; in other words, it tends to bow to donor conditionalities in search of funding.

My informant also observed that the World Bank continues to have more leverage in passing on its standardised policy conceptualisations to the government because the government has no clear knowledge of which direction to follow in combating its own problems. Consequently, donors such as the World Bank are able to enforce their own methods and establish their own way of doing things. The World Bank hires its own consultants, for example, who are fully funded by its resources, using templates that produce the kinds of results they are looking for; it then foregrounds its decisions, based upon the advice of these consultants. In Malawi, this has created a scenario whereby evidence-based policy processes, which involve taking into consideration the views of targeted groups, rarely exist. As a result, national policies that contribute to the way the government is run are mostly – donor driven and/or politically motivated – but rarely from the local people who face the problems those policies are intended to solve.<sup>115</sup>

Such policies, directed as they are by foreign templates, have negatively affected local people's conditions in Malawi (see also chapter 3). Some of the World Bank's advice, and the conditions enforced, which were based on a standardised conceptualisation of 'poverty' and 'the poor', included the Structural Adjustment Programmes discussed in chapter 3. As outlined there, further marginalisation of local farmers occurred as a result of a complex series of events, one of which was the removal of fertilizer subsidies to smallholder

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<sup>115</sup> Personal conversation with an anonymous source from the World Bank in Malawi (Fieldnotes 15/11/07).

farmers, which had emerged as a condition for the World Bank/IMF market liberalisation policies. In addition, the World Bank/IMF recommendation to sell the maize from the national grain reserves, when maize was becoming scarce in the country, contributed to causing or at least exacerbating the nationwide hunger crisis that occurred between the 2001 to 2006 growing seasons (see also ActionAid 2004; Sahley et al. 2005; Smith 2003). Later, I will discuss this particular hunger crisis and the ways that aid templates contributed to the subsequent marginalisation and control of the Chewa people. Here, it is important to note that although most of the reforms engineered by the World Bank have been carried out in the name of ‘poverty’ reduction, much of the policy debate on liberalisation and agricultural reform has taken place in a vacuum, with little reference to what is happening in relation to ‘poverty’ in the local context (Harrigan 2003:858).

The World Bank’s conceptualisation of ‘food security’ is as well a standardised one that endorses the approach of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). Specifying that “The commonly accepted definition of ‘food security’ is ... when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active health life” (Food and Agricultural Organisation 2002, cited in World Bank 2008:94), both institutions support this approach. How the conceptualisation is adopted by the government of Malawi and what its impact is upon local people’s livelihoods will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

My argument here is intended to highlight the fact that the World Bank conceptualisations of ‘food security’, ‘poverty’ and ‘the poor’ tend to be standardised and foreign to the local perspectives of those they are intended to serve. As the *World Development Report* (2008) states, food security emerged as a concept in the 1970s after a rapid increase in prices caused by a global food crisis (World Bank 2008:94). It then became institutionalised through The



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International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which was ratified by 153 states, whereby the countries involved obligated themselves to progressively realise the right to food. This right to food is also a specific policy principle, which aligns with the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG), the target of which is to eradicate ‘poverty’ and hunger by 2015 (United Nations Development Programme 2003). The MGDs also serve as another blueprint that guides Malawi’s policies on ‘poverty’ and ‘food security’, as the next section will show.

Of note here is how two different policy paradigms are incorporated within the concept of ‘food security’. While the World Bank continues to maintain certain reservations about state intervention in public services, the United Nations (UN) approach to human development acknowledges inequalities that persist through power imbalances. As such, the role of the state in narrowing such inequalities is greatly valued by UN policy approaches. As Shanmugaratnam argues, it has been a concern of the UNDP and other UN agencies that increasing global inequalities are aggravating deprivation and consequently denying the right to human development for the majority of the world’s population (Shanmugaratnam 2003:16). It is through this rationality that the UN not only advocates the wealthy taking responsibility, but also that those with power should enhance and create opportunities for promoting the capabilities of ‘the poor’. In other words, the UN approach to policy interventions emphasises the responsibilities of the rich and those with power to enforce entitlements to basic necessities as a basic human right (Shanmugaratnam 2003; United Nations Development Programme 2003).

It is also interesting to note that in most cases the UN uses similar rhetoric or policy templates as the World Bank. For instance, the MDGs – a policy framework developed by the UNDP and scheduled to last from 2000 to 2015 – constitute an instance of such similar rhetoric or policy templates. It is emphasised within the MDGs that national ownership – by government and

communities – is the key to their successful implementation (United Nations Development Programme 2003:1). For example, “partnership with” and “increased participation of poor countries” in development policy processes constitutes MDG number 8 (see United Nations Development Programme 2003:2, 3, 20–25).

The ambiguities that have arisen due to the application of such policy frameworks, with their templates exemplified above in the Malawian context are interesting to follow. They are important because they will help us to understand the ways in which such abstract notions of ‘partnership’ and ‘local ownership’, or the standardised conceptualisations of ‘food security’, ‘the poor’ and ‘poverty’, have informed particular policy processes. Also of significance is the World Bank’s endorsement of UN conceptualisations, such as ‘food security’, and the UN application of the World Bank’s policy templates. This supports Mosse’s assertions, cited above, in that the more interests are tied to particular interpretations or conceptualisations, the more stable and dominant development policy models become (Mosse 2004:647).

In the cases highlighted above, a common conceptualisation (such as ‘food security’, ‘local ownership’, ‘participation’ or ‘partnership’) formulated by the World Bank and UN agencies is clearly supported for a variety of reasons and might even serve diverse, contradictory policy interests. Thus, despite their slight differences in conceptualisations of ‘poverty’, both institutions are bound together by dominant policy templates that inform the directions of their interventions. The use of such conceptualisations as templates in policy processes overrides or masks such diversity, and the multiplicity of rationalities within and beyond the institutions in question (Acre & Long 2000: 21-27). It is important to examine how such policy templates work within specific national policy processes, and this is what I will focus on in the next section.

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## Conceptualisations of ‘Poverty’ ‘The poor’ and ‘Food Security’ in National Policy Processes

The Malawi ‘poverty’ Reduction Strategy Paper (MPRSP), which was a guiding document for the draft ‘food security’ Policy of 2004, defined ‘poverty’ minimally, “as a state of continuous deprivation or lack of basics of life” (Government of Malawi 2002:5). It further defined ‘the poor’ as “those whose consumption of basic needs (both food and non-food items) is below the minimum level estimated at 10.47 Malawian Kwacha per day in 1998” (Government of Malawi 2002:5).<sup>116</sup> Studies that were carried out to evaluate the formulation of this MPRSP as a national policy guideline pointed out that despite the rhetoric of the policy being ‘a country driven and owned’; it was born out of the principles of Bretton Woods.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, it was through the World Bank/IMF conditionalities, which were established for countries to access debt relief through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative that the formulation of the MPRSP was based on (Tsoka 2006:14–15).<sup>118</sup> Tsoka argues that the strategy failed right from the start to correctly

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<sup>116</sup> The average exchange rate in 1998: MK31.1 = US\$1 (see also Government of Malawi 2002:5, fn12).

<sup>117</sup> The evaluations include those carried out by government institutions, NGOs and independent researchers. Specifically referred to here is a detailed evaluation of the MPRSP process, undertaken by D.Kubalasa (2004) from the Malawi Economic Justice Network, and Maxton G. Tsoka (2006) of the University of Malawi.

<sup>118</sup> The Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative was launched in 1996 by the World Bank, the IMF and the International Development Association (IDA). This was a framework through which Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and the IMF) and other creditors provided debt relief or forgive debts for countries whose poverty eradication initiatives were seen to be hampered by their heavy debts. Pertinent to this framework was that for countries to qualify for the HIPC initiative they needed to have had a satisfactory performance record under IMF/IDA supported programs; they also had to produce Poverty Reduction Strategies acceptable to the creditors. In Malawi, the production of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP),

identify the causes of ‘poverty’ in Malawi because its identified causes were aligned to the World Bank and IMF concepts, which did not match local definitions of the problem. Tsoka further substantiates this point, arguing,

While the MPRSP holistically define poverty as a state of continuous deprivation or lack of basics of life (economic, social, psychological and physical), the MPRSP concentrates on causes that are mainly economic like factors that constrain the productivity of land, labour and capital. ... It, however, did not go deep enough in developing strategies dealing with fundamental issues ... because of its failure to root out the causes of poverty (Tsoka 2006:16–17).

Tsoka’s findings support my own point here that national policy processes are to a large extent informed by donor conceptualisations. This ensures that donor interests and agendas are more easily incorporated into policy processes than those of the local people whom the policies are intended to assist. As this is the case, it is unsurprising that the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS), which is the current national policy guideline, replacing the MPRSP, follows similar policy approaches.<sup>119</sup> Based on the second Integrated Household Survey (IHS-2) (Government of Malawi 2005), the strategy notes that the current level of poverty in the country stands at 52.4 per cent of the population, which translates to 6.3 million Malawians living below the poverty line: hence, they are poor (Government of Malawi 2006:7). The ‘poverty line’ definition given here is guided by the international ‘poverty line’ measure of \$1/day, exemplified by the World Bank conceptualisation of ‘poverty’ outlined and the government commitment to implement it, were conditions for accessing the HIPC debt relief but they were not locally initiated. (See also Tsoka 2006:14; World Bank internet links on “HIPC History” and “Debt Relief and Development”).

<sup>119</sup> The MPRSP, Malawi’s policy guideline, was scheduled to last for 5 years (from the 2002 to 2006 fiscal years). Hence, the MGDS is the current policy guideline that is scheduled to be in operation between 2006 and 2011.

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earlier in this chapter. In Malawi, however, this ‘poverty line’ has been adopted in government policy guidelines, like the MGDS, using the local currency, and these have been extrapolated to a one-year period. As such, ‘poverty’ is still conceptualised in this strategy in economic terms, as a condition where the poorest 10 per cent live on median incomes of MK6,370/per person/per year (Government of Malawi 2006:7).<sup>120</sup>

In addition, there has been a rhetorical emphasis on local ownership and participatory approaches, which the Malawi government attributes to the process of formulating the MGDS as an overarching policy framework for Malawi. It was emphasised in both the policy document (Government of Malawi 2006) and during the launch of the policy framework, on 17 July 2007, that the policy process was participatory and that the Malawi government led the process. The implication was that it was locally owned. Despite this policy document being ‘locally owned’, there are ambiguities inherent in it, which do not specify how ordinary Malawians (like the Chewa of Kalolo) contributed to the participatory approach. Instead, the document specifically outlines how policy goals and the templates prescribed in Malawi Vision 2020 (Government of Malawi 2000), MPRSP, MEGS<sup>121</sup> and the MDGs have influenced its goals.<sup>122</sup> It is unsurprising, then, that the standardised conceptualisations repeatedly used in the MGDS are closer to the donor conceptualisations examined earlier than to everyday conceptualisations that Chewa people can readily relate to. In addition, the importation of concepts such as ‘poverty’ and

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<sup>120</sup> The average exchange rate in December 2006: MK145.05 = US\$1 (source: Yahoo currency convertor).

<sup>121</sup> Malawi Economic Growth Strategy.

<sup>122</sup> Most of the guiding policy documents mentioned in the MGDS were either developed with the financial support (and under the agenda) of the UN, or in tandem with the World Bank. For instance, the Malawi Vision 2020 and the MDGs specifically align with UN policy agendas while the PRSP and MEGS align with World Bank/IMF policy paradigms.

‘the poor’ from international definitions are not limited to national policy frameworks, like the MGDS discussed above. Specific policies, such as the Food Security Policy, show similar trends.

*The Malawi Food Security Policy Concepts and Its Guiding Principles*

The definition of ‘food security’ inscribed in the first draft of the Malawian Food Security Policy can be found here: “The policy has used the widely accepted World Food Summit definition of ‘food security’ which points to the following four related but distinct dimensions – food availability, food access, food utilisation and food stability” (Government of Malawi 2004:3, 5). Thus, the standard version adapted from the World Food Summit states, “[f]ood security at the individual, household, national and global levels exists when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary and food preferences for an active healthy life” (Food and Agriculture Organisation 1996:3) Notice how this definition is similar to the World Bank’s conceptualisation of ‘food security’, which may be a result of its endorsement of the FAO’s definition of the concept. The definition of ‘food security’ in the final version of the policy does not differ greatly from the one given above. It only differs in outlining the concept as one of the specific objectives of the policy. The final policy document reads as follows:

The concept of food security implies that:

- (a) *All Malawians at all times have both physical and economic access to enough nutritious food for an active, healthy life;*<sup>123</sup>
- (b) The ways in which food is produced and distributed should be environmentally friendly and sustainable;

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<sup>123</sup> My emphasis in italics

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- (c) Both the production and consumption of food are governed by social values that are just and equitable as well as moral and ethical;
  - (d) The ability to acquire food is ensured;
  - (e) The food is obtained in a manner that upholds human dignity” (Government of Malawi 2008:10).

The ‘food security’ policy document opens by outlining its guiding principles, the first of which specifies that the MGDS will be its framework for achieving ‘food security’ (Government of Malawi 2008:6). The other guiding principles include: good governance, a multi-sectoral approach and partnership, capacity development, commitment to international agreements (including the MDGs; the 1996 World Food Summit Declaration; and the 1992 World Declaration of the International Conference on Nutrition), protection of the right to food, social protection, the role of the market and other cross-cutting issues such as HIV/AIDS, gender equity and empowerment, and the environment (Government of Malawi 2008:6–9). In an interview with an official from the Ministry of Agriculture, I also learnt that the principles specified here have been adopted from various documents that include the MGDS, the Millennium Development Goals, Malawi Vision 2020 (Government of Malawi 2000) and other international agreements, such as the (OECD 2005)<sup>124</sup> Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (Personal conversation with an official from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fieldnotes 9/01/09). Even though most of the guiding principles are not defined or explained in the document, and are not well understood by the various national actors involved in Food Security Policy processes, they have nevertheless been used repeatedly throughout the policy. Absent from the overarching principles of the FSP, however, are concepts and terminologies that can be easily understood in the local context or that can be translated into local languages that local people like the Chewa can easily relate to.

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<sup>124</sup> OECD is an acronym for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

In an interview with the same official from the Ministry of Agriculture, I also learnt that the formulation of the Food Security Policy itself was carried out through regional consultation workshops at various hotels in each of the three regions of Malawi. The delegates constituted representatives from NGOs, donors, church institutions, civil society organisations,<sup>125</sup> government officials and some chiefs at Traditional Authority level (who mostly attended the workshop as spectators). These findings concur with the work of a research team looking at governance dimensions of food security in Malawi in 2005. The team concluded,

Donors [were] an influential ‘stakeholder’ in the food security policy process ... Civil society and the private sector ... have been marginal to food security. Where they have been involved, it has been through formal and temporary channels such as by invitation to comment on the MPRSP process, or to attend the National Food Security Joint Task Force meetings” (Sahley et al. 2005:60, 63).

The discussion above substantiates one of the main arguments of my thesis, which is precisely that national policy processes in Malawi give privilege to donor policy approaches rather than to local people’s conceptualisations and experiences of their everyday lives. Thus, foreign and abstract conceptualisations of the problems at hand become authoritative interpretations or templates that inform policy processes. But how do these templates work in day-to-day life experiences? This brings me to our next discussion, which

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<sup>125</sup> The concept of civil society can be subject to the kinds of contradictions raised in this thesis. However, its use here is based on original data sources, where it is commonly employed to mean organisations that represent local people. The irony is that these organisations are mostly funded by donors; membership is based on formal recruitment of the educated few and, hence, does not empirically represent the majority of local Malawians, as the concept assumes in principle.



explores how such policies, dominated as they are by foreign abstract conceptualisations, operate within the Malawian context of Chewa people's everyday lives.

### **When Standardised Concepts Meet Lived Experiences: Food and 'Poverty' in Terms of Both Chewa Concepts and Policy Templates**

#### *Definitions of 'Poverty' and 'The poor' among the Chewa*

Within the jurisdiction of Traditional Authority Kalolo, where I carried out my fieldwork, there seemed to be no consensus as to what these concepts mean. However, some characteristics, which tend to differentiate the rich (*olemela*) from 'the poor' (*osauka*), were most frequently cited in their conceptualisation. I also learnt that the Chewa idioms of *olemela* or *osauka* were not the only terminologies they use to describe or distinguish the different characteristics of rich and poor. In a similar manner to the ways in which the Chewa express their idioms about 'the poor' or the rich, local perspectives on 'poverty' were also expressed through idioms or terms that have a number of possible meanings. For instance, 'poverty', which may be translated as *umphawi*, *kusauka* or *kuvutika* in a Chewa language (which is Chichewa) seems to have different connotations or meanings attached to the various terms used. This being the case, a person experiencing *umphawi* or *kusauka* might also be referred to as *waumphawi/ mphawi*, *ovutika*, *osauka*, *wausiwa* or *masikini/opemphetsa*. While all these terms have different connotations, it is important to note the differences to be discerned in the terms themselves. On one hand, while *waumphawi/osauka* can express the lack of something, *wausiwa* is a specific term to express a lack of clothing or bedding, and *ovutika* can be qualified with other terms to emphasise different types of lack or suffering. For instance, Chief John Elias's brother, who was one of my main informants, had this to say about the term *ovutika*:

Ovutika, *just like osauka or waumpawi, is one who is lacking something, or is being inflicted with/suffering from something. For example, one can be ovutika ndi njala (suffering from hunger), another can be ovutika muthupi (suffering from sickness), while others can be ovutika ndi maganizo (having a troubled mind); others can be ovutika ndi umphawi (suffering from lack of many different things) (Personal conversation with Chief John Elias's brother, Fieldnotes 11/04/07).*<sup>126</sup>

I also learnt that the Chewa terms *mphawi/waumphawi*, *osakistitsa*, *ovutikitsitsa* and *masikini/opemphetsa* have more stigmatising connotations in comparison with the other idioms. While *mphawi/waumphawi*, *osaukistitsa* or *ovutikistitsa* are *Chichewa* terms for people experiencing extreme conditions of *umphawi*, *kusauka* or *kuvutika*, the terms *masikini/opemphetsa* are given to people who beg in the street and are usually disabled.<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, what is both stigmatising and common to these terms is that they are subject to moral judgements that classify someone as hopeless, lazy and useless. For instance, I observed that even though disabled people are generally empathised with and taken care of by their close relatives among the Chewa, *masikini/opemphetsa* are generally looked down upon. Just like *mphawi/waumphawi*, *osaukistitsa* or *ovutikistitsa*, people who are considered to be *masikini/opemphetsa* are morally judged as useless and unproductive in reciprocal social relations. Moreover, their unproductiveness, helplessness and dependency on alms are factors that subject them to these kinds of moral judgements.

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<sup>126</sup> My translation from Chichewa to English of a conversation I had with Chief Elias's brother.

<sup>127</sup> Even though disabled people among the Chewa are generally empathised with and taken care of by their relatives, those who beg in the streets or at other people's houses are subjected to moral judgements of uselessness and unproductiveness.

Presumably because of the stigma and moral judgements associated with terms such as *mphawi/waumphawi*, *osaukistitsa*, *ovutikistitsa*, or *masikini/opemphetsa*, I rarely observed the use of such stigmatising terms amongst the Chewa in their day-to-day lives. However, in cases where such terminology was employed, people tended to be offended and distanced themselves from such categories. For instance, since *mphawi/waumphawi* carries the stigma of meaning that someone is considered to be a useless or a helpless person, it was one of terms that I observed in use when people were quarrelling. Its use in that context was specifically deployed to degrade the other as not being worth anything, with phrases like ‘*pita uko mphawi iwe*’ (get off my face you *mphawi*), or ‘*iwe nde mphawi othelatu*’ (simply meaning in this context that someone is ‘a loser’).

The term *osauka*, which most of the policy makers/implementers use as a literal translation of ‘the poor’, is also perceived in a number of different ways among the Chewa of T. A. Kalolo. When I specifically asked my informants about their understanding of who ‘the poor’ are, or about how they conceptualise the word ‘poverty’, their responses were given in terms of varying characteristics. Thus, in one of my informal interviews with three people, their responses on this issue were as follows:

- Mayi D: “*Osauka is one who does not have food. In times of hunger, they are the ones who always relies on casual labour in other people’s gardens*”.
- Elizabeth: “*Osauka is one who has usiwa – they only have torn clothes for themselves and their children or they do not have anything to cover themselves at night. They might even covers themselves with sacks and they even don’t have kitchen utensils. While, those who are rich (olemela) are those who have food, decent clothes for themselves and their children; they are happy people and they cover themselves with warm blankets at night*”.

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- Judith: “Yes, *osauka* or *waumphawi* is someone who when you look at them, you take pity on them. They are usually unhappy and usually do not have friends. They feel more isolated because they are *aumphawi*, while those who are rich (*olemela*) have many friends and can afford to drink tea every day. They are also people who do business and do not lack most of the essentials of life most of the time. They usually have money, livestock, can easily find more gardens to borrow from, have a good house and eat well because food is not a problem to them” (Fieldnotes 11/04/07)

Varying responses like these were common throughout my fieldwork. The use of the terms depended on what each person valued, without which they would consider themselves or others as *osauka*, *mphawi* (singular)/*aumphawi* (plural), *ausiwa* or *ovutika*. Thus, it can be seen in the varied definitions and meanings of the terms discussed here that Chewa people clearly distinguish between different types and degrees of ‘poverty’.<sup>128</sup> When I asked individuals whether they considered themselves to be rich or poor, they often distanced themselves from the idea of being poor and instead referred to other people who relative to their own situation would be considered poor. This was validated on one occasion when I observed that most people were wearing torn or dirty clothes when working in their fields or relaxing in their homes. Since Elizabeth had earlier the same day given me her definition of *osauka* as being someone who only wears torn clothes and does not have something to cover themselves at night, I asked her if the clothes she was wearing that day (which were quite old and worn) meant that she was poor. She laughed at me before she gave me her response:

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<sup>128</sup> I am indebted to Professor Harri Englund for this observation; in a personal conversation he reminded me that the Chewa terms *masikini* and *kusaukustista* make a distinction between ordinary and extreme levels of poverty.

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*These are just my working clothes. You should see what I am going to wear to my husband's chief crowning ceremony. We always dress up for those special occasions – like going to church on Sunday, during weddings or other celebrations, where people will definitely be watching for who has the latest Chitenje and who does not. On such occasions you can also differentiate between osauka and opeza bwino (those who are well to do). So I will certainly show you that I am mpondamatiki (one who steps on money) by putting on my latest Chitenje on that day (she continued laughing)<sup>129</sup> (Personal conversation with Elizabeth, Fieldnotes 11/04/07).*

To illustrate this conversation exchange, figures 18 and 19 below are photographs, one taken on the day that conversation took place; the following taken on the day of the crowning ceremony of Chief John Elias.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> *Chitenje* is a sarong or a piece of cloth that is wrapped around the waist.

<sup>130</sup> It should be noted here that I did not have a chance to discuss further the *Chitenje* she was to wear on the day of the ceremony. This was because of the controversies that had arisen between Elizabeth and her husband, discussed in chapter 4, which made her reluctant to participate in most events of the crowning ceremony. Nevertheless, Elizabeth and her children were dressed up more than they would have been on an ordinary day.



**Figure 18:** Elizabeth in her maize field, harvesting



**Figure 19:** Elizabeth and her children on the day of Chief John Elias's crowning ceremony

The way Elizabeth distanced herself from being *osauka* is in line with what other scholars have shown that under normal circumstances rural people tend to

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distance themselves from stigmatising labels such as “isolated communities” (Li 1999:300–310) or “the poor” (see Anderson & Broch-Due 1999:10; Ystanes 2011:154). I also observed that moral evaluations concerning witchcraft, theft and laziness contribute to Chewa people’s stigmatised conceptualisation of ‘poverty’ or ‘the poor’. As I showed in chapter 5, envy is one of the causes of witchcraft acts among the Chewa. Consequently, gossip that connects ‘*osauka a njiru*’ (the envious poor) to acts of witchcraft, theft and laziness were common during my stay in Elias village, and during my frequent visits to Matekwe village and Nsundwe market. Those who were lazy in cultivating maize or taking care of their crops would be the subjects of such gossip, especially if at harvest time they filled their granaries to the brim. In such cases, people would ask each other publicly how someone could manage to fill a granary, when obviously they had not put much effort into cultivating, weeding or putting fertiliser on their maize gardens. There was frequent speculation that these were the kinds of people who would steal other people’s maize crop through magic. I was also told repeatedly that such people steal maize from other people’s gardens using witchcraft, sending animals such as snakes, rats or *ndondocho* (small, human-like creatures that go around at night).

It was because of this kind of speculation that people in both Matekwe and Elias encouraged each other to work hard in their fields so that no one would be left behind to envy others who had worked hard. Indeed, the moral evaluations that connected witchcraft accusations to theft and laziness further contributed to the stigmatisation of those conceptualised as ‘the envious poor’ because of their potential to cause harm to others by using magic against them. It follows from this that people not only wished to distance themselves from this category, but they also worked hard to make sure that they did not fall into such a category and thus become the subject of such moral judgement.

In summary, then, the varying terms and idioms that the Chewa people use to express 'poverty' experiences, and the ways they conceptualise 'poverty' issues, constitute a range of complexities and moral evaluations. Far from being a straightforward condition of deprivation and destitution that can be easily defined or empirically measured by a standardised template, 'poverty' among the Chewa is a complex construct that encapsulates a vast range of social and historical struggles and their constantly reconfiguring socio-cultural values (see also Anderson & Broch-Due 1999:9).

Hence, rather than having a single, standardised definition of 'poverty' encompassing all forms of suffering and experiences associated with the term, the conceptualisation of 'poverty' among the Chewa people varies according to individual experiences of need and suffering. Moreover, their socio-cultural values contribute to the context in which these terms/idioms are understood. Thus, it is unsurprising that a single term such as *osauka* ('the poor') or *kusauka* ('poverty') will be conceptualised and experienced differently by different people within the same community. This claim is in agreement with Ferguson (1992:57), who found that in rural Lesotho people not only seemed to be rich and poor to different degrees but also that they were rich and poor in entirely different ways. Just as there are many idioms or terms to connote 'poverty', so there are varying conceptualisations and experiences of those different terms among the Chewa. These findings also resonate with Broch-Due's argument that poverty discourses mainly expressed in economic terms are reductive in nature (Broch-Due 1995). Broch-Due further postulates that the standardised conceptualisation of poverty

appears to give a simple and revealing categorisation of areas, populations and their needs. However, by making income and nutrition the only factors accounting for complex social realities, it can just as easily conceal and misrepresent important social and cultural processes that define and create poverty (Broch-Due 1995:1).



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Other researchers, such as Shanmugaratnam (2003) and Green (2006), have also argued against and criticised the standardised definitions used in policy processes and they have highlighted the controversy that arises when varying needs and experiences are not taken into consideration during such processes. To elaborate more on the complexity of local conceptualisation, and to further explore how standardised concepts contradict local complexities, I will now turn to Chewa people's meanings in term of 'food security', and to their actual food practices in everyday life. This will allow me to explain more concretely how external and donor-driven policy templates work in Chewa people's everyday contexts.

#### *'Food Security' and Complex Chewa Foodways*

Different interpretations of what different people understood by the concept of 'food security' were recorded during my fieldwork. For instance, during an informal conversation with some of my informants (whom I used to accompany to the marketplace, where they were engaged in selling maize), I asked them what they understood by the term 'food security', or if they had ever heard of it. In response, most stated that agricultural extension workers had educated them about the concept. They were taught that 'food security' meant ensuring that they had food supplies all year round. Regardless of what they were taught, I then asked, how did they understand the concept themselves, in their local context? Their responses were as follows:

- Judith: *"We do not have a Chewa word that literally translates as food security. But according to what our agricultural extension workers teach us, most of us here in the village understand food security as taking care of food. Firstly, one has to have enough food to last throughout the year (kukhala ndi chakudya chokwanila chaka chonse),*

*and when I say chakudya (food) I mean maize. Secondly, one has to eat it carefully, and not waste much of it through selling or exchanging it for other goods like salt, woven baskets, mats or fish ... that is what we learn from our agricultural extension workers (alangizi athu a za ulimi)."*

- Magileti: *"Eating diversified food other than just nsima, so one can eat potatoes in the morning, nsima and relish in the afternoon and evening. This variation can also ensure that our maize lasts longer."*
- Chikumbutso: *"But also cultivating dambo gardens."*<sup>131</sup>
- Judith: *"Indeed, cultivating dambo gardens. It ensures that we also have food crops for sale since it is in these dambo gardens that we grow a variety of vegetables for our home consumption and for sale. Sometimes we also grow maize and potatoes in these gardens because there is moisture throughout the year."*
- Mayi D: *"To be honest, most people here in the village understand food security in terms of taking care of food. So I understand food security as eating carefully without wasting too much food, not as many people do when they have just harvested. Instead of eating once a day, as most people do in times of scarcity, other people cook nsima more than three times a day soon after harvest. This is eating wastefully, as there are usually a lot of leftovers which are thrown away"* (Fieldnotes 29/11/07).

From the understandings expressed here, it is tempting to conclude that the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo have a fairly common view of the concept of 'food security', formed alongside the teachings of their agricultural extension workers. During the initial period of this research, I was convinced by their responses and took it for granted that this was what they were doing in practice. However, this perception changed over time after observing what was actually

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<sup>131</sup> *Dambo* gardens are mostly situated near a constant source of water, which makes it possible to produce crops throughout the year.

happening. Despite the definitions of ‘food security’ given above, I discerned that after the harvesting period most of my informants were preparing large quantities of food. Specifically, large amounts of *nsima* were cooked for their two main meals (lunch and dinner) but also, sometimes, for breakfast, before they left for their daily chores. Despite what they had told me earlier, I did not really observe that any household diversified its main meals with other foods, as they claimed to be doing, during my 10 months stay in Elias and during my subsequent short fieldwork trips to both Elias and Matekwe. I also observed that those who had access to other foods – such as rice, potatoes, roasted groundnuts, pumpkins or fruits – ate them between main meals as snacks, or else they gave them to their children. Moreover, those who could not have *nsima* due to lack of flour, but had rice or sweet potatoes instead, complained that they were suffering from hunger because it meant they were going to bed hungry (‘on an empty stomach’, *angogona nayo*). I also observed that the post-harvest period is when the people of this area tend to conduct the majority of their cultural activities pertinent to the Chewa way of life. This is when Chewa people prepare a lot of food and beer whose main ingredient is maize (see also chapters 4 and 5). Despite what they learn from the agricultural extension workers, I found that nothing, except crisis situations such as hunger, would convince them to forgo these significant annual festivities and practices. An account below, taken from one of the conversations I had with Chief John Elias, elaborates upon this observation:

*Our yearly cultural festivities and practices contribute to food wastage. These include rituals on gule wankulu,<sup>132</sup> chieftainship (zizangala), weddings (zikwati), friendship exchanges (zipongo), wedding agreements (zinkhoswe), initiations (zinamwali), memorials (ziliza) and funerals*

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<sup>132</sup> *Gule wankulu* rituals involve the performance of masked dancers, also explained in detail in chapters 4 and 5. It is a ritual that singles out the Chewa as a distinct group of people.

(maliro). *For all these to take place, it requires cooking foods like nsima, relish and beer in large quantities. Certainly, during these cultural festivities or practices, food is wasted in large amounts, but people fail to realise this fact. This is because these festivities and practices are part of our Chewa traditions and they are of great value to us* (Personal conversation with Chief John Elias, Fieldnotes 22/12/08).

As this suggests, to understand the Chewa conceptualisation of ‘food security’ is to understand their socio-cultural context, and the values and meanings that contribute to the ways in which they make decisions on food production, consumption and distribution. Food practices and foodways have also been found to be an informative tool for understanding local conceptualisations of ‘food security’. As Weismantel (1988) and Mintz (1986) argue, food is a class maker and different types of foods can be used to distinguish the rich from the poor. This was also found to be relevant in the course of the present research, but in subtle and sometimes contradictory ways. An account by one of the elders, with whom I had a conversation in Matekwe, further substantiates this point:

*Here in the village, food issues are always discussed amongst us, ranging from how we can find new ways of having enough food that can last us the whole year to different aspects of food production, distribution, preparation and consumption. Different people eat their food in many different ways, so it is obvious that food distinguishes us from our fellow villagers that we live with close by. We observe that due to different reasons, one of which can be lack of maize, some people may only eat potatoes, vegetables, rice or just salted maize porridge. Most of the people who eat like that are taken pity on because they probably don't have maize flour to eat nsima everyday like the majority of us. This is why some people are better off than others because they eat well – they are never short of maize flour to cook nsima, they are able to find good relish like meat, or they can also have other kinds of foods*

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*like fruits, cassava, potatoes, rice, tea, cooking oil or bread, which they can eat between meals or give to their children, so that their households are considered to be Mwanaalilenji (to have food at all times so that their children have no reason to cry with hunger). This also shows that such a person/household is rich and is usually envied by those who are not that rich. What makes people different in terms of their food consumption is that some people have several gardens, such that they are able to grow different types of crops in large amounts and hence harvest a lot. Others only have small plots and have no money to rent more garden space; hence they harvest smaller yields. The other difference sometimes is in terms of what type of maize flour people prefer to use for their nsima; some use refined white maize flour (ufa oyela), some eat non-refined maize flour (mgaiwa) and some eat semi-refined maize flour (grain-meal/Shopilo). All these distinctions depend on how much maize and other foods one has (Personal conversation with an elder from Matekwe village, Fieldnotes 28/08/07).<sup>133</sup>*

This exploration of the variety of food practices among the Chewa (also discussed in detail in chapters 4 and 5) has helped me to emphasise the complexity of food issues in this region. Although most of my informants seemed to have grasped what agricultural extension workers advocated in terms of the concept of ‘food security’, their food practices usually challenge this received wisdom. How the Chewa conceptualise food issues tends to be a complex interaction of socio-cultural values, meanings, individual preferences, land issues, natural forces, and market forces, and policy processes (most of which tend to be beyond their control). To understand more fully these aspects

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<sup>133</sup> See also chapter 4 for a detailed discussion on the different preferences to do with maize flour and the meanings associated with each type of flour. However, the meanings associated with yellow maize (which was distributed as humanitarian aid during the 2001–2006 hunger crisis) and its flour will be discussed later in this chapter.

of Chewa people's everyday lives, and the policy processes that contribute to their predicament, it is important to analyse such relations within a hunger crisis scenario. This is significant not only because the 'food security' Policy was developed during the lengthy hunger crisis of the 2001 to 2006 growing seasons, but also because donor interventions during this period ignited different local responses towards humanitarian assistance in general and to the templates of 'poverty', 'the poor' and 'food security'.

### **Resistance, Contestation, Acceptance or Manipulation? The case of the 2001–2006 Hunger Crisis**

It was not until the hunger crisis that occurred during the 2001 to 2006 growing seasons that a call to develop a specific national 'food security' policy was made by donors, the Malawi government and NGOs. This policy was to be concerned with 'poverty', food and agricultural issues in Malawi. As discussed in chapter 3, previous food policies were formulated and implemented either as part of other institutional legislation (in the colonial era) or as part of other 'poverty' and agricultural regulatory policies (in post-colonial administrations).<sup>134</sup> This being the case, the significance of this particular hunger crisis is not limited to having initiated the development of a specific 'food security' policy in Malawi. It also demonstrated that different actors contributed to causing or exacerbating the food crisis due to ill-founded policy interventions. Also worth noting is the fact that during this hunger crisis explicit examples can be found of the standardised conceptualisations of 'poverty', 'the poor' and 'food security' being resisted, contested, accepted or manipulated by Chewa people.

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<sup>134</sup> See also Government of Malawi (2006:14, fn 9), where it is stipulated that food security policies carried out by the government throughout the 1990s were primarily driven by ADMARC's capacity to regulate domestic maize production, which avoided increases in maize prices to consumers, especially during the lean season of November to March.

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As soon as a declaration of a countrywide famine was made by President Muluzi in February 2002, humanitarian aid was organised by donors and NGOs to address the crisis.<sup>135</sup> To be one of the beneficiaries of this food aid, one had to be either ‘the poorest of the poor’ (*osaukitsitsa/aumphawi*) or amongst the most vulnerable (*ovutikitsitsa*). According to a Vulnerability Assessment Committee (VAC), which was established to assess the extent of the crisis and coordinate the humanitarian interventions required,<sup>136</sup> such categorisations included the elderly, the sick, disabled people, female-headed households and those households with large numbers of dependants/orphans, among others (see Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee 2002:3–4). The role of the village chief in this humanitarian intervention was to identify a specific but limited number among their people who could be categorised in this way and, hence, become beneficiaries of the food aid. Among the Chewa, however, this process brought about particular challenges for most of the chiefs. Considered to be an overseer of their people, a Chewa chief is expected to regard them without favouritism. Thus, the requirement to choose only a few as beneficiaries of humanitarian aid invoked various reactions and responses

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<sup>135</sup> A delay on the part of Muluzi’s government in announcing and declaring a countrywide hunger crisis has also been blamed by donors for exacerbating the food crisis. They claim this contributed to the loss of more than a thousand lives, which could have been prevented if the crisis had been acknowledged earlier. The blame game about who was responsible for the deaths of thousands at this time persisted, since the Muluzi government blamed the donors (and specifically the World Bank and the IMF) for their advice prior to the hunger crisis. This advice encouraged the government to sell the maize in the national strategic grain reserve to allow the Malawi government to pay its outstanding loans and cut the cost of storing old stocks of maize (see chapter 5 and ActionAid 2004 for further detail on these controversies).

<sup>136</sup> The MVAC was composed of representatives from government ministries, UN agencies, DFID, USAID and NGOs such as CARE International and Save the Children, among others.

both from the chiefs and the villagers. As Stan Kalolo's<sup>137</sup> account (below) suggests, humanitarian aid distribution among the Chewa constituted ambiguities of resistance, contestations, acceptance and manipulation:

*On the issue of food distribution or free items, most of the time they don't end up well. It is also a time when people cultivate grudges and develop hatred for one another. To distribute free items is not wrong, but if one is used to receiving, it hinders him/her in working and finding things which one needs in life. It makes one poor because the time you want something might not be the time the owners of the items are ready to give them to you. But again, there is the issue of favouritism, of which many people accuse their chiefs during the distribution of free items. People kill each other because they want to get these free items. Nevertheless, because distribution of free items is a type of Chitukuko (development), it needs to be given only to those who have completely nothing to earn their living from. Thus, either orphans, disabled or old people they say – but this also means that many people who are left out from receiving these free items will not be willing to offer their services next time they are called upon by their chiefs to contribute in other development activities or different communal tasks (Personal Conversation with Stan Kalolo, Fieldnotes 03/07/07).*

The ambiguities expressed in this account were not limited to ordinary villagers like Stan; the chiefs of Matekwe and Elias also gave accounts of food aid challenges they had encountered during the hunger crisis. Both chiefs indicated that too few beneficiaries were allocated, so that the process of choosing those few became political and a source of contestation, fragmentation and resentment. They explained that when they followed the procedure set by

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<sup>137</sup> As indicated earlier, in the introduction to this thesis, Stan Kalolo was my field assistant and helped me greatly during my fieldwork in Malawi; he is Chewa by birth.



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MVAC to select those few beneficiaries, they were often accused of choosing their own close relatives, or of practicing witchcraft, by the majority of the villagers who were left out (see also chapters 4 and 5 on the relationship between a chief's obligations and witchcraft accusations). At times, this forced the chiefs to ask those registered as beneficiaries to bring the food to them, so that they could redistribute it to all the village members. However, in such cases, each villager only received a plate of maize, which was not even enough for a family meal. Consequently, both chiefs ended up enforcing a system whereby members of one household were given a bag of maize in rotation, using the names of those few registered as beneficiaries of food aid.

To make matters more complicated, of course, this solution required the cooperation of those registered as beneficiaries. At the distribution centres, field monitors for the food aid were emphasising that food was not to be redistributed, as some chiefs were rumoured to be doing, and beneficiaries were advised to report any chief forcing them to do so. This contributed to tense relations between chiefs and their subjects. Guided by World Food Programme (WFP) guidelines, an emphasis on individual entitlements by food aid monitors made it easier for them to evaluate the impact of food aid on specific individuals rather than on entire villages. Under these guidelines, beneficiaries were given to understand that anybody who forced them to redistribute their food was violating their entitlement to it as part of a vulnerable group and, hence, was committing a crime. In this way, the registered beneficiaries were encouraged to stand up to anybody, including their chiefs, if they imposed a redistribution of their food. Such boldness ran counter to Chewa people's way of life because respect and obedience to the chiefs, who have been selected by the villagers themselves, constitute Chewa obligations and expectations between chiefs and the villagers (as shown in chapters 4 and 5). In the end, not all the food aid beneficiaries were willing to share their maize through the redistribution or rotation system put in place by some chiefs as a remedy for local conflicts. In some villages, such as Matekwe

and Elias, however, I was told that the redistribution or rotation system suggested by the chiefs was consensual and helped to resolve the local conflicts that the humanitarian aid had brought about.

In almost all the villages within T. A. Kalolo, however, the most common response to the selection of *osaukitsitsa/aumphawi* or *ovutikitsitsa* as beneficiaries of food aid was that most people wanted to be identified by such categorisations. This was paradoxical, because Chewa people's conceptualisation of *osaukitsitsa* or *ovutikitsitsa* is synonymous with the term *mphawi*. As discussed earlier, a designation of *mphawi* carries a level of stigma that under normal circumstances people would distance themselves from. For instance, this attitude was apparent during my two-year position as a District Humanitarian Affairs Officer during this particular hunger crisis. While on field trips to monitor the food distribution and other disaster management activities, I was constantly approached by people who had heard that I was representing the district commissioner's office. The grievances of those who approached me ranged from not being included as beneficiaries of food aid to showing me how poor they were by pointing to their torn clothes or flat stomachs (to indicate that they had gone without a proper meal for days). They urged me to report to the *boma* (the district assembly) that many *anthu*<sup>138</sup> *osaukitsista* or *ovutikitsitsa* had been left out of the humanitarian assistance programme.<sup>139</sup>

Could the need to be categorised as 'the poorest of the poor' or the most vulnerable, in the cases reviewed above, be usefully viewed in light of Scheper-Hughes's (1992) sense of the internalisation of government interventions, or in Pigg's (1997) sense of the manipulation of government

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<sup>138</sup> *Anthu* is the Chichewa word for 'people'.

<sup>139</sup> In cases like these, many believed that it was the district assembly that was deciding the number of beneficiaries allocated for each village.

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interventions? In *Death Without Weeping*, Nancy Scheper-Hughes explores the fact that the people of Alto, Brazil, internalise their state of helplessness, which is caused by hunger and poverty, as a medical condition. She shows how welfare institutions and government practices contribute to this kind of internalisation and marginalisation. *Nervoso* (nervous sickness) is explained by Scheper-Hughes as being a hunger-related illness, but it is also shown to be an internalised response to experiences of marginality and powerlessness. This “personalised” and “psychological” response is generally conceived by sufferers as a condition that requires medication (Scheper-Hughes 1992:169). In turn, medical practitioners, as an arm of the government, perpetuate such helplessness by treating the condition with medication, even though they are aware that the causes of *nervoso* are socially mediated (Scheper-Hughes 1992:196–199). A contrastive example is provided by Stacy Lei Pigg (1997), who shows that Traditional Medical Practitioners (TMPs) and Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) working among a marginalised group in Nepal manipulate their “labels”, as they are represented by the development bureaucrats, to their own advantage (Pigg 1997:261). As part of promoting a primary healthcare programme that required training all non-biomedically grounded practitioners in Nepal under the labels of TMP and TBA, shamans, spirit mediators and village women birth attendants were identified as the target group for such training (Pigg 1997:261). Despite labels representing a development framework that assumed the target group to be “a special kind of cultural insider” (Pigg 1997:264), villagers saw the training as an opportunity to improve their social status. Thus, to the disappointment of the trainers, the trainees often disassociated themselves from the cultural categories that often portrayed them as ‘backwards’ within development logic. Instead, Pigg shows that with pre-existing theories that give precedence to cosmopolitan medicine over local healing knowledge, trained TMPs and TBAs now saw themselves as health workers within the government bureaucratic system (Pigg 1997:281–282). Consequently, they took their training and their labels as a gateway to cosmopolitan medical practice, which legitimised them as government

employees. From here, the TMPs and TBAs started to demand salaries from the government for their services (Pigg 1997:280).

These two examples help us reflect upon the kinds of Chewa complexities that represent ambiguities of resistance, contestation, acceptance and manipulation of policy interventions. Alongside the ways in which Chewa people respond to standardised concepts and categorisations of ‘the poor’ and ‘poverty’, which are implicit within humanitarian aid, such ambiguities often proliferate. As this discussion suggests, the Chewa people concretely accept or internalise their state of helplessness (or standardised policy categories) in times of crisis such as hunger. They do so through a desire to be part of categories that would otherwise be stigmatising. Like the Alto people suffering from *nervoso* in Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s (1992) case, the Chewa, suffering from the effects of a hunger crisis, turn to institutional structures that promote conceptualisations of their problems in a standardised way. Even though such conceptualisations include categories that are stigmatising and subject to moral judgements in the everyday life of the Chewa, such categories are temporarily accepted or internalised in order to acquire food aid. Thus, the ways in which stigmatising categories become desirable to the Chewa in times of life-threatening catastrophes is an example of their acceptance of, or internalised response towards, standardised policy conceptualisations and interventions. As Li also notes, accepting stigmatising labels in order to access goods that are needed nevertheless hurts and compromises the state of being of those on the receiving end (Li 1999:310). Thus, such acceptance or internalisation of the labels/categories that are usually conceptualised as demeaning and stigmatising within Chewa contexts further compromised their sense of human dignity, which, ironically, the Malawian Food Security Policy is intended to uphold.

My intention here is not to give a picture of the Chewa people as toothless fighters who in their vulnerability simply accept or internalise policy categories such as ‘the poorest of the poor’. Even though policy makers’ templates carry

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weight in terms of directing the course of interventions, they are also subject to manipulation and contestation over the course of implementation in local contexts. Among the Chewa, resistance, contestation or manipulation of humanitarian aid categorisations of ‘the poorest of the poor’ can be traced in accounts like those expressed by Stan Kalolo, quoted above. Furthermore, their demand to be included in such categories, and their associated threat to boycott other development activities, is a further example of Chewa people’s determination to manipulate standardised policy processes. Although such development policy processes are ideally supposed to benefit the Chewa people, they also understand that their services are needed in order to render any development project successful. In this way, the Chewa threats to boycott activities introduced by donors, NGOs or by the Malawi government constitute a manipulative stance that forces negotiations among the parties involved. Policy implementers (government or donor) need the Chewa people’s cooperation to account for the success of implemented projects to their funding agencies. This factor also leads agricultural extension workers to plead with Chewa people to participate in policy interventions in order to please their bosses in the capital who expect to see successful results (see chapter 5 for a similar discussion).

Nevertheless, each of the Chewa responses above projects power relations that are associated with policy templates and with categorisations such as ‘the poorest of the poor’. The Chewa are controlled by those in power in accepting or internalising policy categories that are otherwise perceived as stigmatising in Chewa everyday life. The policy makers, whether or not they are consciously aware of the implication of their policy templates, nevertheless promote particular models of intervention. The promotion of such standardised models not only legitimises their exercise of power in such localities, but also reflects on how that power is accepted, resisted, manipulated or internalised. How such templates contribute to further marginalisation of the Chewa people is a significant aspect of this thesis, because (as we will see, below) the ambiguities

associated with food aid policy templates compromise Chewa people's way of life in very significant ways.

The contradictions associated with policy templates, which in turn guide the direction of policy interventions, can be further shown by the example of the distribution of yellow maize during the hunger crisis described above. Although white maize was generally distributed at this time, yellow maize was also sent out at times from the many distribution centres I visited in my capacity as a District Humanitarian Affairs Officer (DHAO). The yellow maize mostly came from a United States surplus. Since United States of America (USA) farmers are heavily subsidised by their government, their surplus produce is pushed into the aid orbit by multinational companies such as Cargill. This cheap source of maize contributes significantly to the power dynamics of food aid. Additionally, since standardised templates of humanitarian aid mainly aim to provide a local staple food to those suffering from hunger, the main concern of humanitarian aid workers is usually how best to procure the staple food cheaply during emergency situations. Maize being a staple food for most countries within the sub-Saharan region; the significance of the distribution of yellow or white maize during a hunger crisis here is often overlooked as a crucial aspect of food aid by humanitarian policy makers. In fact, my findings among the Chewa suggest that the distribution of yellow or white maize as food aid in this specific local context can have significant implications. The distribution of yellow maize as a cheap source of calories among the Chewa people of Malawi calls upon the many ambiguities associated with standardised humanitarian interventions. The ways the Chewa responded to this yellow maize further substantiates and exemplifies a point made by Arnold (1988:140) - that in contemporary food aid politics, "food is power". As evident in many Chewa accounts in relation to yellow maize, some of their most common grievances included the following responses:

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- *Yellow maize was generally more bitter than our usual white maize and many of us were having diarrhoea from it.*
  - *Flour made from yellow maize did not have a pleasant smell for one to eat, but we could still eat it because of our hunger situation.*
  - *It was also rumoured that this yellow maize was imported from Zimbabwe where its original intention was feed for cattle – so it means we were eating food for animals.*
  - *We could not use yellow maize flour in our rituals because both its colour and bitterness were generally not acceptable. Thus, yellow maize served purely as a survival mechanism amongst us (Fieldnotes 15/11/07).*

These accounts demonstrate that the ‘food security’ concept (as outlined in the Food Security Policy) contains many contradictions. Some of the objectives of the FSP include the notion that “both production and consumption of food are governed by social values that are just and equitable as well as moral and ethical”, and that “[t]he food is obtained in a manner that upholds human dignity” (Government of Malawi 2008:8). However, the accounts provided above specifically indicate that the food distributed during the hunger crisis was at times not only socially and morally unacceptable but also compromised the dignity of the recipients. Moreover, the provision of yellow maize, which was causing sickness and was conceptualised among the Chewa as only fit for animal consumption, was both unethical and a contradiction of the standardised conceptualisation of ‘food security’. Paradoxically, despite yellow maize being an important source of calories that helped alleviate the hunger crisis, it also contributed to further marginalisation: in fact, a worsening of the Chewa people’s hunger experience took place.

The distribution of yellow maize during this hunger crisis provides a good example of the kinds of divergent interpretations that are induced by standardised policy interventions. While for humanitarian aid policy makers

the concern was simply to provide food that would help to eradicate the hunger crisis, the Chewa people's response to it reveals that there were cultural and social meanings attached to the food aid, rather than it being a simple matter of survival. A multiplicity of aspects of food aid were overlooked, on the whole, by the humanitarian workers, in a situation that consequently worsened the experience of the hunger situation among the Chewa. For instance, for the aid workers, it was important that the staple food for most Malawians is maize; it did not matter to them whether they distributed yellow or white maize. In fact, the distribution of yellow maize during the hunger crisis was partly justified by aid workers due to its high vitamin A content and that it was also cheap to procure. As I indicated earlier, yellow maize was usually sourced from the subsidised USA farmers' surplus, which meant that it was cheaper than the white maize that could be purchased anywhere within southern Africa, where most farmers' crop production remains largely unsubsidised. Because yellow maize was considered to be advantageous by both aid workers and 'food security' policy makers, they considered it to be the best food aid available for aid purposes (see also Muzhingi et al. 2008; Tschirley & Santos 1995).

Contrary to the thinly conceived aspects of yellow maize outlined above, the Chewa people perceive maize in relation to all its social and cultural complexities. As I learnt from the observations and conversations I had within Chewa settings, white maize in particular has deeply engrained meanings in Chewa people's lives. Not only does white maize contain social, symbolic, cosmological and economic values, it is also part of their culturally and historically shaped sensorium (see chapters 3, 4 and 5). Because yellow maize does not contain and manage these fundamental meanings and values, it is considered to be an anomalous and unclassifiable food among the Chewa.

This became apparent to me in the ways that different types of flour made from white maize are categorised, while it was difficult to imagine or place yellow maize flour into any of these categories. For example, as I observed in chapter



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5, pure refined white maize flour (*ufa oyela*) is both used symbolically and physically consumed in Chewa rituals and during their important yearly festivities. It is also part of a classificatory system whereby those who mostly use white flour for their *nsima* throughout the year are considered rich, as it signals that they have larger maize stocks in comparison to others. This is evident in a number of significant aspects of Chewa way of life. For instance, idioms of hospitality are expressed by the Chewa people through serving their visitors *nsima* made from white flour. *Nsima* made from *ufa oyela* is generally preferred among the Chewa because of its taste, texture and aroma in comparison with that made from other types of flour, as I learned over the course of my fieldwork in T. A. Kalolo. Even though *nsima* made from non-refined white maize flour (*mgaiwa*) is mostly preferred by men rather than women, the symbolic value and higher status that white maize flour accords is generally acknowledged among the Chewa. As also discussed in chapter 5, *nsima* made from white maize husks (*nsima ya gaga/ ya madeya*) is generally perceived as food for those who do not have maize and who are, thus, considered to be poor. While *nsima ya gaga/ ya madeya* can be tolerated in times of crisis such as hunger, without raising much of moral questions, *nsima* made from yellow maize is generally placed outside the realms of Chewa food systems and values.

In line with Douglas (1966) observations on food abominations of Leviticus, yellow maize among the Chewa is considered to be “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966:44), which Douglas explains in the context of an ordered system and classification of matter. For instance, ‘dirt’, to the western mind, “is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements” (Douglas 1966:44). This idea of dirt proposed by Douglas allows a connection between symbolic fields with more obvious systems. For example, among the Chewa, pure white maize flour holds symbolic and cosmological significance in their rituals; in addition, the taste and colour of white maize constitute Chewa people’s socio-culturally

mediated sensorium (see chapter 5 of this thesis). The sweet taste of *chimanga chamakolo* (the maize of the ancestors) is usually preferred among the Chewa to other white hybrid varieties, let alone yellow maize. As related by, and observed among, the Chewa, white maize flour made from *chimanga chamakolo* is brighter, sweet smelling and has a good taste, and its pure whiteness also contributes significantly to Chewa symbolism, and to their cosmological as well as socio-culturally mediated values and meanings, as I have shown in chapter 5. In contrast, the darker colour, and Chewa people's perception of the flour made from yellow maize as smelling and tasting awful, contributes to the incompatibility of yellow maize with Chewa people's way of life. In short, white maize's capacity to articulate, constitute and manage their symbolic, cosmological and socio-culturally mediated sensorium, values and meanings makes it a significant aspect of Chewa way of life. In this regard, yellow maize amongst the Chewa is, as Douglas (1966) terms it, 'matter out of place' because of its inability to contain and elaborate key symbolic, cosmological and sensorial values pertinent to Chewa people's way of life.

The Chewa revulsion against yellow maize is not an intrinsic result of their conservatism in not wishing to accept an alien or unfamiliar food. As discussed in chapter 3, historically, Chewa people have adopted different types of food introduced by traders, explorers and colonisers, and white maize is just one of these imports. They have managed to adopt and incorporate white hybrid maize varieties into their rituals and diets, even though *chimanga chamakolo* remains their preferred variety. Thus, Chewa people's ability to give local meanings to white maize, which were previously imbued in millet or sorghum flour, contributed greatly to the widespread adoption of white maize by the Chewa ancestry (see chapter 3). However, the incompatibility of yellow maize with Chewa people's symbolic, cosmological, sensorial and social realm contributes significantly to its being conceptualised as 'matter out of place'. In fact, one of my informants precisely indicated to me that "yellow maize flour smells like dirt" (Fieldnotes 29/11/2007) – a sentiment shared with most of my Chewa

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informants. In this sense, yellow maize was portrayed as something disgusting and only fit for animal consumption, as indicated earlier.

Interestingly, Kristeva (1982, 1996) and Korsmeyer (2002) have also explored the power and effect of foods considered to be disgusting by different groups of people. Kristeva uses the concept of “the abject” to describe things that are perceived as disgusting and that arouse strong feelings that are both somatic and symbolic in nature (Kristeva 1996:118). “The abject”, she claims,

is something that disgusts you, for example, you may see something rotting and you want to vomit – it is an extremely strong feeling that is at once somatic and symbolic, which is above all a revolt against an external menace from which one wants to distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that it may menace us from the inside (Kristeva 1996:118).

Of note here, of course, is that one example of ‘the abject’ as described above comprises the loathing of food items (see also Kristeva1982:2). Feelings of abjection can be encompassed by an experience of a gagging sensation further down the stomach, the shrivelling up of the body and an increased heartbeat, along with visual disturbances, dizziness and nausea, which are provoked by the sight of a particular loathed food (Kristeva1982:2). Nevertheless, during both my fieldwork and my term of service as the DHAO among the Chewa, I did not encounter such experiences provoked by yellow maize. Even though I received many accounts indicating that yellow maize caused diarrhoea among the Chewa, the fact that they could still consume the food they loathed without vomiting tells us more about power structures than it does about food being considered as abject amongst the Chewa. Thus, in this regard, I am more in agreement with Douglas than Kristeva in conceptualising yellow maize among the Chewa as ‘matter out of place’ and not ‘the abject’ per se. As Douglas explores in relation to the abominations of Leviticus in *Purity and Danger*,

yellow maize is considered ‘matter out of place’ among the Chewa because it is an unclassifiable element, which does not fit their pattern of the cosmos and their symbolic realms, as well as their personal preferences and their socio-culturally mediated sensorium, values and meanings. In these ways, then, yellow maize is simply incompatible with Chewa people’s way of life.

Korsmeyer (2002) explores how foods initially conceived as disgusting can become delightful and pleasurable to eat. In this study she draws upon Edmund Burke’s theory of sublimity, which analyses the conversion of pain into delight. According to Burke, “objects that inspire terror may trigger the ecstatic delight of the sublime because a state of emotional contentment is simply too close to that intermediate state of indifference that lies between pleasure and pain” (Burke 1757 cited in Korsmeyer 2002:220). Similar to Burke’s argument, Korsmeyer proposes, “foods that initially disgust can be transformed into the unqualifiedly delicious” (Korsmeyer 2002:220). Using two examples, one of which involved serving a live fish, killing it at the dinner table for the pleasure of the consumers, Korsmeyer suggests that part of this kind of experience of a meal involves an awareness of the presence of death amidst the continuation of one’s own life. Such experience is better understood “as an aesthetic transformation of an aversion into a pleasure – the disgusting into the delicious” (Korsmeyer 2002:220). Should we understand Chewa people’s consumption of yellow maize during the hunger crisis along the same lines?

As will be clear by now, for the Chewa yellow maize is an anomalous food that certainly arouses anxiety and negative feelings. However, it is not considered as *abject* since it was consumed during the hunger crisis without causing Chewa people to vomit. It is doubtful, however, that yellow maize could be converted into the ‘delicious’, as Korsmeyer proposes, because of other symbolic, cosmological and social cultural values that yellow maize fails to acquire. Korsmeyer also points out that “no one can stand out of culture and proclaim a neutral list of disgusting foods” (Korsmeyer 2002:219): what might

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be disgusting in one culture might be pleasurable in another. The revulsion felt towards yellow maize by Chewa people should rather be understood in terms of the totality of Chewa people's way of life. As dirt or animal feed would be perceived as 'matter out of place' on western dinner tables, so yellow maize in Chewa people's kitchens and ritual arenas is considered in the same way.

The acceptance of such an anomalous food in times of hunger precisely reveals the policy makers' exercise of power. In being denied a choice of food that is socially, symbolically, cosmologically and sensuously relevant to them, the Chewa are subjected to being controlled by those in power through the standardised policy templates that are mostly donor-driven and foreign to the Chewa. Not only are the policy makers deciding what sort of food is given to the Chewa through food aid intervention, the internalisation of that food by the Chewa through its consumption entails a kind of powerlessness to control their own predicament during a hunger situation. Thus, the distribution of yellow maize as humanitarian aid, which is considered to be 'matter out of place' among the Chewa, compromises their dignity and their entire way of being, and worsens their hunger experience as they internalise this anomalous food.

Local complaints about yellow maize tend to be dismissed by both the humanitarian aid agencies and the government practitioners involved in 'food security' policy processes. In fact, the kinds of objections against yellow maize exemplified in the discussion above are usually regarded as an example of Chewa people's conservative nature and reluctance to change their over-reliance on white maize.<sup>140</sup> Food aid monitors at the distribution centres

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<sup>140</sup> The over-reliance on maize in Malawi, especially the preference for white flint maize varieties, which take longer to mature than most hybrid varieties, is constantly referenced as one of the causes of food insecurity by policy practitioners (see Menon 2007; Sahley et al. 2005). The preference for this particular maize variety, also known as the 'maize of the ancestors' among the Chewa, is regarded as one of the factors that

generally talked about yellow maize as being more nutritious than white maize, to try to convince beneficiaries to change their food habits. Such conservative local attitudes also tend to be conceived by policy practitioners as contributing to chronic food insecurity across the region. Food policy makers in Malawi regard it as crucial that farmers should be encouraged to diversify their crops countrywide. Moreover, they emphasise that it is important to promote appropriate cultural and food practices that do not jeopardise ‘food security’ (see Government of Malawi 2008:11–15). In this way, most Chewa socio-cultural practices and annual festivities that involve cooking a lot of food soon after harvest falls into the category of cultural practices that jeopardise ‘food security’ and are considered as stumbling blocks to development policies. These observations are in agreement with other scholars such as (Pottier, 1999) who have also discussed on how local people’s understanding of hunger, the term possibly closest to the concept of ‘food insecurity’, may well contain viewpoints that do not interest the officials whose job is to improve ‘food insecurity’.

In this discussion, I have argued in line with Arnold (1988), demonstrating that in contemporary food aid politics, food is power. Those with resources and the power to control humanitarian assistance take upon themselves the right to decide who should live and who should die, who should be fed what foods, when they should be fed, and who should perish from starvation (Arnold 1988:140–142). In such ways, the politics of famine and its historical context are imbued with the power relations that exist between the rich and ‘the poor’, whereby those who possess and control food also control the fate of those to live or die in want within poor communities (Arnold 1988:142).

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sets back their adoption of new hybrid maize varieties (see also Smale 1993, Smale et al. 1995).

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The discussion above supports the general thesis presented throughout that standardised concepts in policy processes, such as ‘food security’ or a labelling of ‘the poor’, act as mechanisms of social control that aim in fact to control the people whom the policies are intended to serve. Through the presentation of empirical material, I have also shown that Chewa people act in terms of their socio-culturally mediated values and understood meanings. Since, as Mintz suggests, meaning can effectuate certain kinds of behaviours, it follows that power and meaning are always connected (Mintz 1996:30). Consequently, standardised conceptualisations of ‘the poor’, ‘poverty’ and ‘food security’ are constitutive of power relations, which, among the Chewa, summon ambiguous responses of resistance, contestation, acceptance or the manipulation of the policy interventions governed due to different meanings attached to such standardised concepts. As Wolf (1982) reminds us, “meanings are not imprinted into things by nature; they are developed and imposed by human beings” (Wolf 1982:388) It follows from this that, “the ability to bestow meanings... to ‘name’ things, acts and ideas... is a source of power” (Wolf 1982:388). This means that among the Chewa there are competing discourses surrounding the concepts of ‘food security’, ‘poverty’ and ‘the poor’, due to their capacity to give meaning to things, acts, ideas or values that matter in their everyday lives. The Chewa capacity to embrace such competing discourses simultaneously is also what makes resistance, contestation, acceptance or manipulation of interventionist policy processes possible, however subtle that process might be (see also Weismantel 1988:164).

On one hand, those with power constantly seek ways to ensure that their interests are fulfilled by making their own ‘authoritative interpretations’ socially relevant in different localities. On the other, the weak will constantly respond to such conceptualisations in varied and unpredictable ways. It is this unpredictability that makes discursive power illusory, yet the fact that such standardised conceptualisations effectuate a variety of local responses is sufficient to substantiate further study into policy templates as being

mechanisms of social control. As Asad observes, since translation occurs within relations of power, it follows that some languages are made stronger than others (Asad 1986: 156-160).

This research has established that policies formed without taking into consideration divergent local perspectives, values and meanings have ended up being rejected, contested, accepted or manipulated, or have even contributed to worsening the lives of those whom the policies were intended to serve. As Tsoka notes (2006:2), “Traditional beliefs, customs, ceremonies, and other social cultural factors still exert a powerful influence on community life especially in matters of social relationships, decision-making patterns, inheritance rights, acceptability of new ideas and practices.” A deeper understanding of these divergent socio-cultural factors, and of local conceptualisations of local problems, will improve the chances of successful implementation of those interventions targeted at improving local livelihoods. Thus, giving local people a space in which their capacities to give meaning are acknowledged, and in which they can solve their own problems, would be a positive move and not a hindrance to development policy processes. Herein, a sense of real ownership could be realised. It follows that among the Chewa such a process would translate to the implementation of meaningful projects to which they could more readily relate.

In this regard, it seems relevant to conclude this section with an extract from a speech given by Senior Traditional Chief Kaomba of Kasungu district. Speaking at the launch of the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS), the Senior Chief began with a question:

Who owns the MGDS? The question might sound awkward but many projects fail to make an impact because of lack of ownership. In most cases, documents like this one are perceived to be for academia, economists, senior civil servants and other educated personalities. [He



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then concluded that]... Until such time that the poorest of the poor in our villages can see a positive change in their lives, reducing 'poverty' in our communities will still remain a never-ending war. Our involvement in the fight, however, can make a difference (Kaomba 2007).

## **Concluding Remarks: The Politics of Meaning in Food and ‘Poverty’ Policy Processes in Malawi**

Concluding this research project on the complex trajectory of food issues and related policies in Malawi, with specific reference to the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo, is a difficult task in itself. Nonetheless, each explorative journey has to have an end point: where one explorer finishes, another may make their point of departure. What follows, then, is not a complete end in itself, but a juncture that the scope of this thesis has enabled me to reach.

The present thesis has raised several concerns regarding the use of standardised concepts in interventionist policy processes. Firstly, as demonstrated throughout the different parts of this thesis, the use of standardised concepts in interventionist policy processes in Malawi continues unheeded, despite historical evidence showing that such approaches have repeatedly contributed to the marginalisation of, or the worsening of conditions for, the Chewa people. Paradoxically, these are the policies which are nominally intended to improve the lives of local people such as the Chewa. The thesis has also shown that, through this continuous implementation of policies that are thinly conceptualised and mostly carried out in tandem with foreign policy templates, an on-going muting of voices takes place. Again, this results in undermining meanings, values and interests that are fundamental to Chewa people’s way of life and to the ways in which they conceptualise, experience and solve their problems. This muting, and the undermining of local perspectives, meanings, interests and values, is integral to the politics of meaning in food and ‘poverty’ policy processes, since it is during the implementation of these interventionist policies that we see the promotion of one form of rationality over another.

My focus on the limitations of interventionist policy processes that are concerned with ‘eradicating poverty and food insecurity’ is not to suggest that

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such processes have never had a positive impact on the livelihoods of the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo. But for social scientists it is a worthwhile and important task to expose the ambiguities, contradictions, paradoxes and conflicts of interest that arise from hopes raised by the promises of development policies (see also Acre & Long 2000). Since one of the promises that the development policies make is to improve the livelihoods of those categorised as ‘poor’, and to ‘eradicate poverty’ and hunger, this thesis has subjected such categorisation, and the templates associated with such promises, to empirical analysis. As such, easy standardised conceptualisations, which direct policy solutions in a variety of development policy processes, have been exposed and shown to constitute ambiguities, contradictions and conflicting meanings, values and interests during their implementation in a specific local context.

Secondly, I highlighted the role of maize in understanding the contrasting values, interest and meanings that are inherent in the interventionist policy processes in question. Specifically, I have explored how maize mediates conceptualisations of ‘poverty’, ‘the poor’ and ‘food security’ between the Chewa and the different institutions that seeks to address problems related to those concepts within the Chewa socio-cultural context. In following the ways in which maize is used, produced, prepared, consumed and distributed among the Chewa people of T. A. Kalolo, maize has emerged as been central to this thesis’ exploration and analysis of a wide variety of relevant themes. The centrality of maize among the Chewa, and within food and ‘poverty’ policies in Malawi, has allowed me to trace the power relations that are articulated and mediated through its use, production, consumption and distribution. Through following the different ways of maize in arenas of Chewa social life, issues of kinship and cosmology, and experiences of a symbolic, sensory, economic, political or gendered nature, as well as issues of witchcraft and hunger, and

individual as well as group experiences (to mention but a few) have also been discerned.

Maize has thus been approached here as indicative, mediating or constitutive of kinship, and of cosmological, economic, symbolic and power relations, as well as of group and individual experiences: as the Chewa proverb says, *chimanga ndi moyo* (maize is life itself). As one example of how maize articulates and mediates social and power relations, I have demonstrated that Chewa people's food practices and their over-reliance on maize remains a challenge for Ministry of Agriculture officials and the many donors who have tried to implement 'food security' policies based on foreign, standardised conceptualisations of 'the poor', 'poverty' and 'food security'. Maize is largely, and reductively, perceived as simply a starchy crop, or the main source of carbohydrate that physiologically sustain most Malawian people, by 'food security' and humanitarian aid policy practitioners. It is not considered as the only viable solution to end 'food insecurity' problems in Malawi. In fact, diversification of food crops, the avoidance of wasteful food consumption and practices, together with the other guiding principles of the Food Security Policy, are all approaches that agricultural extension workers have been directed to advocate to local people, to ensure that "all Malawians at all times have both physical and economic access to enough nutritious food for an active healthy life" (Government of Malawi 2008:10).

In being concerned only with the physiological capacity of maize – that is, as the most common source of carbohydrate that sustains the lives of most Malawians – many policy practitioners dealing with food and poverty issues in Malawi fail to see the significance of maize beyond this factor. This has also been a general problem raised in debates within food studies. In these debates, scholars have pointed out that food is not only vital to sustain life in a physiological sense, but also that the ways in which food is produced, consumed and distributed constitutes values, meanings, interests and

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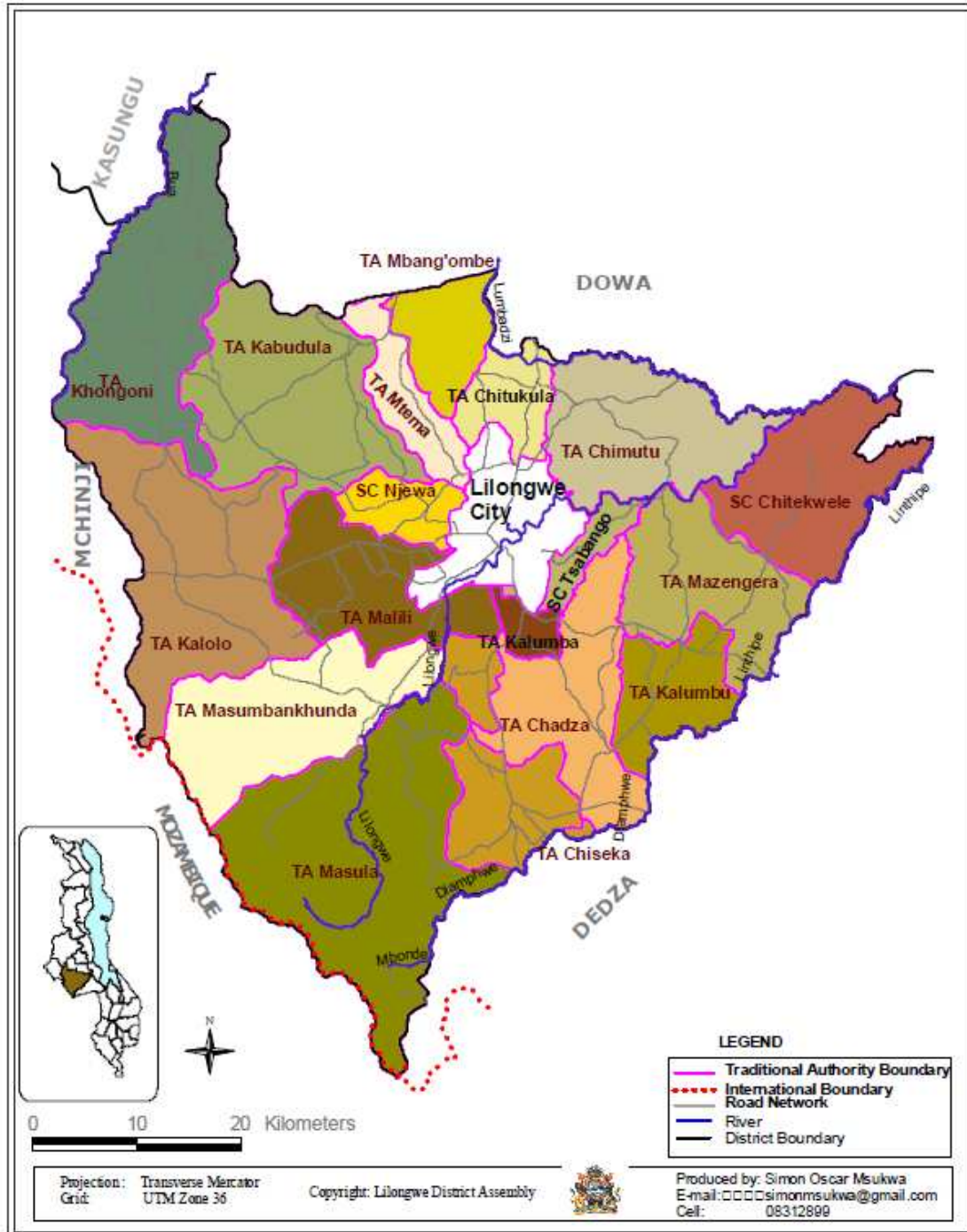
relationships that are pertinent to ways of life of specific groups of people (see Caplan 2005; Counihan 1999; Korsmeyer 2007; Mintz & Du Bois 2002). In such ways, food and foodways are significant aspects of human life, and this research has attempted to bridge the policy gaps as well as contribute to the ongoing debates in food studies by showing that maize among the Chewa is life (in its holistic sense), as their proverb illustrates. Not only does maize sustain Chewa people's lives physiologically, but its deep embeddedness in Chewa way of life provides us with the rich context in which Chewa people organise themselves, make vital decisions, act, and create meaning and order in their lives.

Thus, an attempt has been made throughout the present thesis to follow the trajectory of maize, which transcends the barriers of social life among the Chewa people and beyond. In calling upon the logic of following the pathways of maize, as inspired by Appadurai (1986), whereby meanings and practices are viewed as complexly interconnected aspects of the social life of things, a contribution has been made in narrowing the gap that exists in both food debates and food policy processes that have placed considerable emphasis on the physiological aspects of food. More importantly, in following the ways of maize and in empirically bringing together food issues theorised by other scholars and policy practitioners as distinct aspects of food, I have also highlighted the significant politics of meaning, interests and values that are constituted in food, 'poverty' and policy processes among the Chewa of Malawi.

# Appendix 1: Map of Traditional Authorities in Lilongwe

district

Map 2



Source: Lilongwe District Assembly 2006: 11

## Appendix 2: Maize Surplus and Deficit from 2001 – 2010

Table 3

### DOMESTIC FOOD GAP (2001-2010)

Year	Total Requirement (mt)	Food Requirement	Gross Production (mt)	Gross maize Gap/ Surplus (mt)
2000/01	1,643,274		2,432,334	789,060
2001/02	1,825,449		1,495,104	-195,229
2002/03	2,035,643		1,351,549	-684,094
2003/04	2,016,052		1,966,024	-50,028
2004/05	2,039,291		1,502,259	-537,032
2005/06	2,183,506		2,620,513	487,007
2006/07	2,255,049		3,444,655	1,189,606
2007/08	2,352,796		2,777,438	424,642
2008/09	2,458,123		3,767,408	1,309,285
2009/2010	2,526,726		3,419,409	892,683

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