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In the shadow of good governance : an ethnography of civil service reform in Africa

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In the shadow of good governance:
An ethnography of civil service
reform in Africa

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Gerhard Anders

Brill

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Glossary and abbreviations

<i>amalume</i>	maternal uncle (Chichewa)
ACB	Anti-Corruption Bureau
ADMARC	Agricultural Development Marketing Association
<i>bwana</i>	master, boss (Chichewa)
CSCU	Civil Service Census Unit
CSTU	Civil Servants Trade Union
ESAF	Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility
FRDP	Fiscal Restructuring and Deregulation Programme
HIPC	Heavily Indebted Poor Country Initiative
IC	Industrial Class
ID	Institutional Development Programme
IDA	Institutional Development Association
<i>katangale</i>	corruption (Chichewa)
<i>mbumba</i>	local sorority group consisting of a group of sisters, their children, and their maternal uncle (Chichewa, Chiyao)
MCP	Malawi Congress Party
MHC	Malawi Housing Corporation
MPSR	Malawi Public Service Regulations
MTEF	Medium Term Expenditure Framework
<i>mudzi</i>	village (Chichewa)
MYP	Malawi Young Pioneers
NFRA	National Food Reserve Agency
NSO	National Statistics Office
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
PSCMA	Public Sector Change Management Agency
SAF	Structural Adjustment Facility
SAL	Structural Adjustment Loan
SC	Subordinate Class
SGR	Strategic Grain Reserve
UDF	United Democratic Front
<i>ufiti</i>	witchcraft (Chichewa)

Map of Malawi

Introduction: Unpacking good governance

Civil servants as implementers and “target population”

According to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) there is little doubt that African bureaucracies are inefficient and unsustainable. Corruption and mismanagement of public resources are identified as the main impediments to economic recovery. Good governance is being promoted by the Bretton Woods institutions¹ as the instrument for removing these obstacles to economic growth. The term “good governance” denotes a set of policy measures intended to transform “dysfunctional” public institutions into efficient and transparent service providers that will be accountable to the public and subject to the rule of law. It is hailed as the solution to the impasse in development.

Good governance manifests a shift in development discourse. It differs from classic development interventions based on the modernization paradigm, since it is neither about building roads nor transmitting superior scientific knowledge for the purposes of “development”; for example, in order to increase agricultural production. Good governance seems to be about the transmission of a

¹ The World Bank and the IMF are also referred to as Bretton Woods institutions. Both organisations were established by the Bretton Woods agreements, signed by delegates from 44 Allied governments in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, in July 1944. Another term used in this book is International Financial Institutions (IFIs).

different type of knowledge. Its objective is the establishment of systems of management and self-control to improve “efficiency” and “transparency”.

Since the early 1990s, good governance has become the dominant *shibboleth* of development discourse; without uttering this password it has become impossible for governments to receive financial support. Except for countries with substantial oil reserves, such as Nigeria and Angola, there is virtually no African country left where the principles of good governance do not guide public policy. To some observers it appears as if the World Bank and the IMF have succeeded in establishing an all-encompassing system of surveillance and control, which has replaced the ideological antagonism of the Cold War that cunning Third World leaders were so adept at exploiting (cf. Abrahamsen 2000).

Malawi is no exception in this regard. Since the introduction of multi-party democracy in 1994, the government has implemented a whole range of World Bank and IMF-supported programmes to improve governance. A central element of this reform process is the reorganisation of the civil service with the objective of improving efficiency and transparency, deemed essential preconditions for better governance. Civil servants² have been in a peculiar position with regard to the implementation of the civil service reform and related measures, as they are both executors and addressees of the reform process, its agents and its subjects. Their response has ranged from various forms of resistance and to the occasional pursuit of illicit extra-office income-earning activities – activities that lend little support to the notion that World Bank and IMF programmes are efficacious. What appeared on paper to be an all-encompassing system of control provoked unanticipated responses by civil servants who had become accustomed to enjoying privileged and safe positions under Banda’s autocratic rule between 1964 and 1994.

The reorganisation of the civil service at the turn to the 21st century cast a shadow over civil servants’ lives. They struggled for security at a time characterised by an overwhelming sense of crisis and uncertainty. In a bid to manipulate the reforms to their advantage, civil servants responded in unforeseen and often illegal ways to protect their positions of relative privilege. Apart from this reorganisation, their everyday experiences were already characterised by extreme uncertainty. HIV/AIDS, malaria, and the pauperisation of rural kin all contributed to their sense of insecurity. Of course, there was no uniform response to the reforms. The experiences of a high-ranking official in Lilongwe’s ministerial headquarters were obviously different from those of a watchman

² I.e. government employees working in the civil service and the army, including temporary workers. Employees of state-owned companies are excluded, as different terms and conditions apply for them.

with five children, who was the only salaried employee in his family. In recognition of the diversity of experiences the following chapters describe a wide range of civil servants' responses to civil service reform, democratisation and the economic crisis including several case studies of individual civil servants.

To understand civil servants' unanticipated reactions to the civil service reform I followed two lines of inquiry: a vertical and a horizontal one. The vertical one follows the policy from the individual civil servant up to the ministerial headquarters that issues circulars, and from there to loan documents signed by representatives of the Bretton Woods institutions and cabinet ministers. The horizontal line of inquiry casts a wide net over the everyday life of civil servants, which encompasses both, the public and the private sphere. Instead of presenting an account limited to either of these, I present an analysis of the ways people connected these spheres and crossed the boundaries between them.

This ethnographic study of the manifold ways Malawian civil servants negotiated civil service reform and social change constitutes a contribution to the anthropology of the postcolonial state in Africa. There are very few studies of what African bureaucrats actually do, both at their workplace and in their private lives, which arguably accounts for widespread misconceptions about corrupt African civil servants and "dysfunctional" states. This book addresses this gap. It is based on a fine-grained ethnography of the everyday life of civil servants in Malawi and how they dealt with the implementation of the good governance agenda promoted by the World Bank and the IMF.

The "dysfunctional" African state

The good governance agenda and civil service reform in Africa, in particular, are based on the idea of the "dysfunctionality" of African states, stemming from an imagined disconnect between transplanted "modern" state institutions and "traditional" African society. The latter is assumed to subvert the proper functioning of the bureaucracy. The idea of a divide between state and society is, of course, not new and has been at the heart of modernization theory, which views the state as an engine of social change. Ironically, this dichotomy also informs the IFI's good governance agenda although, according to the neo-liberal dogma, the dysfunctional state constitutes a serious impediment to development. In line with the Washington consensus, good governance heralded the end of the interventionist state and promoted its reduction and transformation into the protector of private property rights, thus enabling society to engender economic growth.

These ideas reflect a long-standing debate among Africanist scholars about the nature of the postcolonial state in Africa. The notion of "dysfunctionality" is

often employed to describe the relation between the state bureaucracy and society (Bayart 1993; Bratton & van de Walle 1994; Chabal & Daloz 1999; Cohen 1980; Diamond 1987; Mbembe 1992, 2001; Médard 1982, 2002). Early studies of the African state usually adopted a Weberian approach. Cohen (1980), Diamond (1987), Ekeh (1975) and Médard (1982), for example, measure the bureaucracies in Africa against criteria derived from Weber's ideal type of rational-legal power, and find that African state institutions are "dysfunctional" and "corrupted" by patronage and tribalism – in other words "primordial" ties of affection, although the term itself has become unfashionable lately. Médard adopted Eisenstadt's (1973) concept of neo-patrimonialism to describe the hybrid nature of the African state. In the neo-patrimonial state, "the bureaucratic logic was artificially applied to a patrimonial logic" based on "primordial sentiments", according to Médard (1982: 179). Although the concept of neo-patrimonialism has its merits, it is also flawed, since it considers social relationships only in terms of their patrimonial character and their deviation from an ideal model of rational-bureaucratic order, usually equated with the advanced Western democracies. From the neo-patrimonial perspective, African society is responsible for the state's pathological nature, with its peculiar mixture of supposedly modern and traditional elements according to Weber's typology (cf. Weber 1990).

The studies by Chabal & Daloz (1999), Bayart (1993) and Mbembe (1992, 2001) challenge the notion of a transplanted state that is alien to African society. According to these authors, the postcolonial state in Africa is a complex hybrid in which ethnic and clientelistic networks have appropriated the colonial state apparatus and have transformed it into an instrument that serves particularistic interests. Due to their focus on the rational-legal model of the state, however, these studies usually do not differentiate between the so-called clientelistic relations that usurp the state institutions and thus, unwittingly, reproduce the dualism between the Weberian legal-rational order and African society, lumping all types of social relationships, from kinship to various voluntary forms of association, under the latter.

Recent anthropological studies of the postcolonial state (Blom Hansen & Stepputat 2001; Das & Poole 2004; Ferguson & Gupta 2002; Gupta 1995; Nuijten 2003) have recognised the danger of reproducing "state thought", "the state categories of thought produced and guaranteed by the state", according to Bourdieu (1994: 1). Instead they investigate popular "imaginaries", ideas and theories, of the state. This goes a long way in transcending the dichotomy between state and society, which is at the heart of most social-scientific approaches to the state. However, it also presents a distorted image of the state. First, as a consequence of the focus on popular representations of the state only little attention is paid to the practices of those representing the state, the tens of

thousands civil servants who crowd government offices, neighbourhoods, markets and churches. Second, studies in this vein concentrate on the “margins of the state” and attempts of the population to make it “legible” (Das & Poole 2004) but pay much less attention to the denizens populating the centre of the state, so to speak, and their unforeseen responses to policy implementation.

By contrast, the present study builds on a careful ethnographic account of civil servants’ individual trajectories, connecting the relationships with colleagues, neighbours, friends, relatives and kin in the home village, and often revealing considerable differences in the moral principles governing the conduct in these spheres, a phenomenon I refer to as a “patchwork of moralities”. This book thus shows the manifold ways in which state and society, public office and private life, are actually intertwined (cf. Herzfeld 1992; Blundo & Olivier de Sardan 2006; Gupta 1995; von Benda-Beckmann & von Benda-Beckmann 1998).

Good governance as technology

As elsewhere in Africa, good governance, the fight against corruption, market liberalization and democratic reforms in Malawi have to be considered in the context of the country’s dependence on foreign aid and the far-reaching influence of mainly Western donor agencies, most notably the World Bank and the IMF, on government policy. In Malawi, the government’s policymaking has been dominated by multilateral and bilateral donor agencies since the early 1990s. The objectives of the government that came to power after the end of Banda’s authoritarian regime and the multi-party elections in 1994 included the reduction of poverty levels and addressing the economic crisis. It was, therefore, particularly responsive to the demands for reform made by the “donor community”, spearheaded by the World Bank and the IMF. This, of course, was a consequence of the country’s dependence on foreign aid. Government figures for 2001 confirm, for instance, that 90 per cent of the development budget, the financial resources for development projects, and about 30 per cent of the current budget were paid by donor agencies. These estimates do not include the regular balance-of-payment payments made by the IMF and national donor agencies to compensate for overspending.

A burgeoning body of literature has formulated a scathing critique of the Bretton Woods institutions and other Western donor agencies for protecting their own economic and political interests under the cover of advancing economic and political liberalism. By drawing on postcolonial studies and Foucault, these authors interpret development as an instrument of Western hegemony, framing countries as “underdeveloped” and in need of development assistance (Abrahamsen 2000; Escobar 1991, 1995; Ferguson 1994; Mitchell 2002). Fer-

guson even draws a parallel between development discourse and Foucault's "genealogy" of the prison (1994: 20). From the critics' perspective, good governance is a "discursive transformation that, while claiming to liberate the poor, enables the West to continue its undisputed hegemony over the African continent under the changed conditions of the new world order" (Abrahamsen 2000: 44).

While these studies succeed in showing how categories such as "underdeveloped" are actually social constructions that reify evolutionist and Orientalist assumptions they fail to account for disjunctions and contradictions within development discourse, on the one hand, and flawed programme design and haphazard implementation, on the other (cf. Harrison 2003; Mosse 2005a). By relying mainly on textual sources, its critics often present an image of development discourse that unwittingly echoes the claims to efficiency made by development agencies. My analysis avoids the determinism of these studies and focuses more on social practice and social relations, which produce and reproduce policy ideas and concepts such as good governance. Policy and textual self-representations can neither be isolated from the practices of consultants and negotiators, as Mosse argues (2005a: 14-15), nor from the people charged with the implementation of policy reforms. In line with other studies it examines in detail how tools such as "ownership", "partnership", "community participation" and "conditionality" are actually operationalised on the ground (Gould 2005; Mosse 2005b; Murray Li 2007; Mosse & Lewis 2005).

In an attempt to understand how the good governance agenda is inserted into the national polity by means of "conditionality", this book traces the construction of "country ownership" through the loan documents signed between the international financial institutions (IFIs)³ and the government of Malawi. The grey area of letters of intent, memoranda, mission statements, technical protocols and terms of reference of development projects has not received the attention it deserves. The legal dimension has been conspicuously absent in studies of development discourse, and only a handful of studies explicitly address its significance with regard to development policies and projects (Moore 2002; Randeria 2003; von Benda-Beckmann 1994; von Benda-Beckmann 2001).

This neglect of the legal dimension might be attributed to the materialistic perspective of many studies in the fields of political science and anthropology that mainly view the legal form in terms of superstructure. To consider the legal dimension in these terms, however, would ignore the ways in which power relations not only shape legal rules but are also, in turn, shaped by them. Legal techniques focusing on notions of "country ownership" and "conditionality" are

³ The World Bank and the IMF are the two major international financial institutions also known as Bretton Woods institutions.

crucial in expanding the influence of the IFIs and in ensuring the reorganisation of Malawi's state apparatus according to the principles of New Public Management and neo-liberal institutional economics. This entails an analysis of the forms of knowledge used to unify ownership and conditionality by means of a set of "tools" employed to promote good governance. Chapter 3 therefore focuses on mundane bureaucratic practices and the idiom of policy documents that legitimise the neo-liberal political agenda of the Bretton Woods institutions.

Drawing on an account of the implementation of civil service reform and fine-grained ethnographic case studies, this book then shows that what on paper initially appeared to be an all-encompassing and efficacious system of control and surveillance, dissolved in the messy practice of policy implementation, provoking unanticipated responses from civil servants who tried to co-opt or adapt to the reorganisation of their workplace. In order to understand the responses of civil servants, it is necessary to go beyond the sphere of the public office and to include all aspects of their social lives.

From the perspective of individual civil servants, the civil service reform did not constitute a grand and comprehensive plan but only one aspect of their daily lives, experienced as mundane practices, such as getting one's pay-check, securing a salary advance or leaving work early to take care of a private business. Other issues not related to work were also very important to my informants. Their everyday lives in Malawi's urban and peri-urban areas were fraught with tension. They experienced conflicts between their obligations towards a wide circle of kinsfolk and their own middle-class dreams. The civil servants' privileged positions raised expectations among their kinsfolk who expected to benefit from this. Yet, under the pressure of high inflation rates and the economic crisis, many civil servants found it difficult to satisfy the needs of their relatives in their home village and therefore preferred to "keep a safe distance", as they put it.

Recent studies of Africa have pointed out that the experience of "crisis" constituted a dominant feature in the everyday lives of modern Africans during the 1990s (Ferguson 1999; Mbembe & Roitman 1995). Indeed, the sense of crisis was overwhelming during my fieldwork. If I had to sum up the everyday experiences of most civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba in the late 1990s and the early 21st century, I would be compelled to choose the words uncertainty and crisis. The civil servants I encountered in the offices in Lilongwe and Zomba experienced an acute anxiety in the shadow of "expenditure control" and "job evaluation". This feeling transcended material insecurity and should be understood in terms of existential uncertainty and anxiety. In their study of Cameroon, Mbembe & Roitman note a "lack of coincidence between the every-

day practice of life (facticity) and the corpus of significations or meanings (ideality) available to explain what happens, to act efficaciously” (1995: 325).

Like the Cameroonians observed by Mbembe & Roitman, the Malawian civil servants I encountered during my field work were struggling to come to terms with the crisis, and developed new “ways of making do” in de Certeau’s sense (1984). By invoking de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) I would like to emphasise that civil servants’ mundane day-to-day activities, both in and out their offices, do not constitute a residual category but should be central to the social-scientific study of the state. Following de Certeau, this book conceptualises their everyday lives in terms of improvised or errant trajectories that “remain heterogeneous to the systems they infiltrate and in which they sketch out the guileful ruses of *different* interests and desires” (de Certeau 1984: 34). While de Certeau developed his theory to account for the poetics of the modern consumers’ subtle ways of resisting the “rationalized, expansionist, centralised, spectacular and clamorous production” (1984: 31) of consumerist capitalism I argue that his concept of “making do” contributes to a better and de-exoticised understanding of the workings of the postcolonial state when applied to civil servants’ “trajectories” and “ruses”.

Field sites

This study focuses on civil servants in urban and peri-urban areas in the central and southern regions. Lilongwe, the capital, and Zomba, were selected as field sites for one obvious reason: both towns contain sizeable populations of civil servants. Fieldwork was conducted between November 1999 and November 2000, and again in February and March 2002. In November 2007, I returned for a follow-up visit. Except for Chapter 7, which deals with events until the end of 2007, this book presents ethnographic evidence collected between 1999 and 2002. In colonial times, Lilongwe was a small administrative post with a few South Asian traders who had come as contract labourers. The town was declared the new national capital in 1974 and the population grew considerably after the establishment of the ministerial headquarters. In the late 20th century, there were approximately 400,000 inhabitants. All ministries have their headquarters in Lilongwe, where a large proportion of the staff is concentrated. According to my own estimates, roughly 20,000 civil servants lived in Lilongwe during the late 1990s (GoM 1996a).⁴ My research in Lilongwe was concentrated on Capital Hill and the township Biwi. In addition, I regularly visited and

⁴ It is important to note that the civil service census in 1995 only presented numbers on civil servants in the districts of Lilongwe and Zomba. Hence, the estimates given here for the towns are lower than the numbers in the census to account for civil servants who live in the district outside town (GoM 1996a).

talked to primary and secondary school teachers in Nathenje and Likuni, two peri-urban settlements to the east and west of Lilongwe.

Zomba was the colonial capital and the capital of Malawi until 1974. In 2000, it numbered about 70,000 inhabitants, making it one of the four major urban areas in mainly rural Malawi. Zomba hosts Chancellor College, the largest constituent college of the University of Malawi, the headquarters of several government departments, and a large army base. Zomba town probably numbered about 10,000 civil servants in the late 1990s (GoM 1996a). Research in Zomba focused mainly on the National Statistics Office, Geological Surveys, the General Hospital and the district administration. Most informants lived in Mable Lines and the new township of Matawale, which was built with financial assistance from the World Bank, about five kilometres east of Zomba. Others lived in Sadzi, a township located on the road to Blantyre. I also worked with a group of extension workers employed by the Ministry of Health in Domasi, a peri-urban area about 15 kilometres east of Zomba.

The two cities were very different in character, reflecting Malawi's past and present. In Lilongwe, new buildings were under construction all over town in 2000 and 2002. Many of them were built around City Centre, the business part of town, to house government departments and development agencies. In spite of the precarious economic situation, belief in some kind of development and progress seemed to be common and Lilongwe was the place where "things happen"; it was more vibrant, with expensive hotels and nightclubs. Development agencies and foreign diplomatic missions were based here. This was even more conspicuous in 2007, after a number of roads had been improved and numerous new office buildings had been built.

Zomba, by contrast, was a quiet town, breathing the air of decay and past glory. Its physical appearance was dominated by its colonial heritage, with most government offices in dilapidated buildings that used to house the colonial administration. Many officers were housed in colonial houses, dating back to the early 20th century, while very little construction activity could be observed in town. The only exception was the Central Hospital, which was being rebuilt with support from the German development agency GTZ. The main reason for these differences was money, or rather the lack of it. Lilongwe had become the entry point for development aid and the national centre, while Zomba was cut off from direct access to development aid and was degraded to a provincial centre in shoes too large to fit.

Studying up, follow the policy

During my fieldwork I often commuted between the tidy and air-conditioned offices of the World Bank and development agencies, the crammed offices of

ministerial headquarters where a fan was a highly valued commodity, district administrations and hospitals where clients crowded every available space, waiting for their grievances to be addressed and where long forgotten files filled rusty cabinets, and primary schools in townships where a chair and a desk were the exclusive privilege of the headmaster. I met senior officials in sharp suits, shining shoes, playing with a cell phone and their car keys. But I also met gardeners and watchmen who could not afford the bus fare and had to walk barefoot every day from their grass-thatched houses in peri-urban areas to the office to protect their only pair of shoes from dust and dirt.

Civil service reform affected all civil servants and ministries. I therefore had informants in all salary grades and in various ministries, ranging from senior officers in the Superscale (Superscale is the technical term for the highest salary grades), professional officers, senior technical officers, technical officers, nurses, primary and secondary school teachers, messengers, cleaners and watchmen in the Subordinate Class (SC) and Industrial Class (IC) (the former comprising support staff; the latter labourers on temporary contracts). Most of my informants worked for the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, the Army, the Veterinary Department, the District Administration, the National Statistics Office, Geological Surveys, the Ministry of Gender and the Ministry of Works.⁵

About half of my informants were women. Virtually all informants, except for the very young, were married and had children. The typical female informant was usually married to a man who also worked in the civil service or had other formal employment, often in a higher position than his wife. With regard to the male informants, the picture was more mixed: sometimes the wife worked for the government, although usually in a lower position, and sometimes the wife would be a “housewife”, by which people meant that she was involved in subsistence farming and small-scale business to earn some cash of her own and, if possible, contribute to the household income.

Although all people working in the public sector were affected by policy reforms, such as retrenchment and privatisation, my study is limited to those working in the civil service and the army, and excludes staff of state-owned companies (so-called parastatals), such as the Malawi Post and Telecommunications (MPTC) and the Malawi Development Corporation (MDC) and the university. The conditions of employment for the staff of these organisations differed from those of the civil service and were more similar to the private

⁵ It is important to note that civil servants are not a homogeneous category. Civil servants are defined by their employment in the civil service, it is merely an occupational category differentiated by factors such as grade, department, age, gender, function, education and training.

sector. Furthermore, these organisations were not targeted by the civil service reform, although all of them were forced to implement austerity measures and reorganise in preparation for privatisation.

In order to understand the process of policy implementation and the links between these different sites, it was necessary to “study up” and investigate “processes whereby power and responsibility are exercised” (Nader 1972: 284). In her study of the influence of government and companies on children, Nader speaks of taking a “vertical slice” by “studying up”, as opposed to “horizontal” studies of marginalized groups and networks (1980). Thus, I moved up the hierarchical ladder and talked to senior civil servants in the ministerial headquarters and local World Bank staff in Lilongwe.

When “studying up” the researcher cannot rely exclusively on localised methods to study a “translocal” phenomenon, such as the state (Gupta 1995) or organisations such as the World Bank. To fully understand the process of policy intervention it is necessary to draw on newspapers, policy papers, official documents, government circulars and legislation as well as more conventional ethnographic data (Gupta 1995; Nader 1972; Shore & Wright 1997). In her study of women’s rights activists from Fiji, Riles (2001) points out that documents are an integral element in the ethnography of international NGOs and international organisations and should therefore be treated as ethnographic artefacts. By this she means that documents are constitutive elements of the expert cultures studied by contemporary anthropology. My study combines the ethnography of civil servants’ everyday lives with that of the policy documents prescribing the civil service reform to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of policy implementation.

In a variation of Marcus’ conceptual vision of multi-sited fieldwork my method could be described as “follow the policy” (1995: 105-113). I was continuously moving up and down the ladder of the bureaucratic hierarchy, with occasional forays into relevant localities such as the church or the home village. This movement between different places led me to appreciate the heterogeneity within the civil service and the complexity of implementing the civil service reform. And, were it not for the often exhausting and difficult journeys between these locations, I would have felt as if I was zapping from channel to channel, like switching from “Dynasty” to a grim documentary.

Basic information about the civil service

In 2001, the government of Malawi had a total estimated expenditure of approximately US\$ 421 million (MK 45,874 million). The total budget consisted of statutory expenditures for public debts, pensions and gratuities, recurrent expenditures voted by parliament, and capital or development expenditures. The

former roughly denotes the cost of running the government apparatus, whereas the latter denotes projects implemented by the government. As a rule of thumb, the former is mainly financed by the government, whereas the latter is financed up to 90 per cent by donor agencies. In 2001, statutory expenditures were estimated at roughly US\$ 100 million (MK 10,729 million), voted (recurrent) expenditures at US\$ 197 million (MK 21,469 million) and capital or development expenditures at about US\$ 125 million (MK 13,676 million). The government employed about 120,000 employees and served a total population of about 11 million people (ratio 1:100) (GoM 2002). In absolute numbers this is very little. For example, in the same year the city council of Amsterdam had total expenditures of about US\$ 5000 million and employed about 14,000 employees, serving a population of 700,000 (ratio 1:50 not counting regional and federal civil servants and government employees). According to the Malawi civil service census conducted in 1995, the civil service numbered 112,975 civil servants (28,706 women and 84,269 men) (GoM 1996a).⁶ By 2000, the total number of civil servants had grown to approximately 120,000, mainly due to an increase in primary school teachers. The largest ministries were the Ministry of Education with nearly 60,000 civil servants, the Ministry of Health with 15,300 civil servants, the Ministry of Agriculture with 10,000 civil servants and the Ministry of Forestry, Fisheries and Environmental Affairs with 8,000 civil servants (GoM 1999a: 67). In 2000, the army numbered around 10,000 and the police force about 6,000.

Salaries were generally quite low. In 1999 and 2000, the time of my first fieldwork, the most junior staff like security guards, gardeners and messengers earned about MK 1000 (US\$ 25) per month. Extension workers and primary school teachers earned between US\$ 30 and US\$ 45 per month. Even officers with higher qualifications, like a diploma or a bachelor's degree, rarely earned

⁶ Formally, only government employees in established positions were civil servants, as opposed to temporary staff and Industrial Class (IC) workers in non-established positions. Established positions were centrally administered by the Public Service Commission (PSC) and the Department for Human Resource Management whereas non-established positions were administered by the respective ministries and departments. Army and police personnel were not formally regarded as civil servants. However, police officers, temporary staff and IC workers were counted as civil servants in the civil service census. Usually all employees of the civil service, whether they held established or non-established posts, were considered to be civil servants (cf. Malawi Public Service Regulations (MPSR), Public Service Act). One of the measures of the civil service reform was to incorporate the IC into established posts. Hence, when I speak of civil servants I usually mean all government employees holding established and non-established posts in the civil service, the police and the army.

more than US\$ 80 per month. Secondary school teachers with a Bachelor's degree, for example, had a monthly salary of US\$ 50-60. The highest grades, in the so-called Superscale, earned no more than US\$ 250 per month. This is not much considering that rents for houses in the better areas of Lilongwe and Zomba were between US\$ 500 and US\$ 800 and on the rise. Even so-called servants' quarters, basic-single rooms in a backyard, cost about US\$ 100 rent per month in Lilongwe and in Zomba only slightly less. Because of the high rents most civil servants were forced to live in outlying townships (in Lilongwe, for example, Area 23 and Area 25) where rents were still affordable. Yet to reach their work they had to use public transportation, the so-called mini-buses, on which they easily spent US\$ 20 per month. These numbers should suffice to give a preliminary indication of the value of salaries. Chapter 5 addresses in more detail the consequences of inflation on salaries and the way civil servants dealt with the resulting uncertainty.

In October 2000, the terms of work and the remuneration for the higher grades in the Superscale (S4/P4 and above, Deputy Secretary up to Principal Secretary) were radically changed. Officers in those grades had the option of retiring from the civil service and being employed on contract. The scheme was supposed to improve the performance of officers in managerial positions and to make their remuneration more attractive, so that they would be more likely to remain in the civil service. It directly followed recommendations of the World Bank (World Bank 1994b). The officers got three-year contracts that could be terminated at any time, with one month's notice, if the officer's performance was unsatisfactory. These contracts offered a much higher level of remuneration than before. In 2000, an officer in the S2/P2 grade S2/P2 (Principal Secretary) earned almost MK 200,000 per month (US\$ 3000), including more than MK 150,000 in allowances that were not subject to income tax. By 2002, most officers eligible for the performance-based contracts were on contract, although there was fear of so-called political retrenchments. Under the old conditions, Superscale officers could not be easily dismissed but their salaries were significantly lower.

In addition to their salaries, civil servants also enjoyed various benefits, including institutional housing and travel allowances. The value of these benefits was substantial and could be many times higher than the salary. Especially senior officers who regularly attended workshops and travelled outside Malawi enjoyed allowances which by far exceeded their salaries. Senior civil servants were also equipped with telephones, mobile phones and vehicles. Since January 2002, all civil servants have been receiving housing allowances exceeding their salaries up to 100 per cent. The impact of the introduction of the new housing allowances and the conflicts surrounding it are described in more detail in Chapter 4.

Outline

Chapter 2 sketches the historical context of the civil service reform in Malawi, including Banda's rule since independence and Malawi's democratic transition during the 1990s and the effects of Structural Adjustment and economic liberalisation. The third chapter deals with the planning phase of the civil service reform. It presents a detailed analysis of a range of connected documents, signed between 1994 and 2002 between the Bretton Woods institutions and the government of Malawi, on the civil service reform and related policy measures to improve governance. The fourth chapter describes the implementation process of the civil service reform and shows how various actors in the deeply fragmented civil service manipulated, frustrated and subverted the reform to protect their own particularistic interests. It traces the implementation of the civil service reform by "studying up" or by taking a "vertical slice".

The subsequent chapters then present different horizontal slices. Chapter 5 presents various aspects of the everyday life of civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba and addresses central issues such as the importance of the salary, allowances, business and farming. The sixth chapter deals with changing kinship ties in the context of modernity and economic crisis. Chapter 7 is a post-script of sorts, covering events until the end of 2007. It discusses the moral and normative ambivalence associated with the corrupt behaviour of civil servants. The discourse on corruption and the alleged increase of corruption is seen in the context of the profound political and economic changes Malawi has been experiencing since the early 1990s. Summing up the findings of the previous chapters, the final chapter formulates a fundamental critique of the policies of the Bretton Woods institutions and conventional theories of the African state.

Historical background

The implementation of the civil service reform between 1994 and 2002 has to be seen in its historical context. For a long time Malawi was perceived to be a beacon of stability in an otherwise tumultuous region of Africa. Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda¹ ruled the country almost single-handedly from the time it attained independence from Britain in 1964 until 1993, when a referendum ended the one-party rule of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP). The end of Banda's rule is closely connected to the country's economic decline, which began in the late 1970s. Three consecutive generations of Structural Adjustment Programmes did not succeed in restoring economic growth. On the contrary, economic decline worsened in the late 1980s. Due to the economic crisis Banda's regime disintegrated quite quickly during the early 1990s and in 1994 the first free elections since 1961 were held. Banda and the MCP lost the elections and a new government under Bakili Muluzi took office. However, democratisation did not bring welfare. Since 1994, the political system has become highly fragmented and the economic crisis has deepened.

The volatile political situation and economic difficulties Malawi experienced after its transition to multi-party democracy stand in marked contrast to the promising years following the country's independence. When the British protectorate Nyasaland became independent, in July 1964, the British High Commissioner described Malawi as follows:

Politically the country was under the firm paternally despotic control of Dr. Banda. Politics here had gained a certain monolithic appearance that suggested security and

¹ In the following referred to as Kamuzu Banda or Banda.

permanence. There was no real opposition. The Malawi Congress Party seemed popular and deeply rooted [...] Stability, moderation, realism and firm leadership seemed to be Malawi's distinguishing characteristics. The [...] Government of Dr. Banda [...] seemed to promise stability, anti-communism, realism and moderation in foreign policy, and slow but sensible progress in its internal political development.²

Would the British High Commissioner have visited Malawi thirty years later he would not have recognised the country's political landscape. The president's authority was continuously challenged and the political arena was fragmented with politicians selling their votes to the highest bidder. The country was in the grip of a severe economic crisis and food security had become precarious. Things became even worse in 2002 when large parts of the country were affected by a famine compared by many to the Great Nyasaland Famine of 1949.

Banda's rule and the "New Malawi"

Civil service reform in the late 1990s has to be seen against the background of Malawi's transition to multi-party democracy after 30 years "under the firm, paternally despotic control of Dr. Banda". In the 1980s, his iron grip on the country loosened and in the early 1990s civil unrest and donor pressure eventually led to free elections in 1994. Banda's party, the MCP, was defeated by the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) and a new government headed by Bakili Muluzi (UDF) took office. Due to a growing disenchantment because of the lack of economic growth, the electorate's support for Muluzi soon waned but he and the UDF were able to win the presidential and parliamentary elections in 1999. During my fieldwork in 2002, there was a widespread feeling of disappointment in the government, fuelled by the dire economic situation.

The dramatic changes of the 1990s are remarkable considering that for thirty years there had been no need to adjust the High Commissioner's description of Malawi's state of political affairs. Banda had eliminated all potential political competitors already in 1964 during the "Cabinet Crisis" when he ousted the majority of the cabinet ministers and forced them into exile. In subsequent years he tightened his grip on the MCP, the only legal party, and the state institutions.³ In 1971, Banda declared himself 'President for Life' and oppression of suspected opponents grew. Especially people from Malawi's northern region, who had previously benefited from missionary education during the colonial period, were targeted by Banda's campaign to suppress any potential threat to his rule. At the time of independence most white-collar jobs in government and

² In Baker (2001: 88).

³ On the Cabinet Crisis, see Baker (2001). See also Rotberg (1972), Vail & White (1991), Short (1974: 179-230).

the private sector were held by Northerners. Banda perceived this situation as a distortion of the ethnic representation and he promoted the Chewa of the central region, his home region, and gave them better access to education and government jobs (Vail & White 1991; Rotberg 1972; Kaspin 1995; Chirwa 1998).

During the mid-1970s the oppression against so-called “confusionist” and “separatist” elements increased and thousands of people were imprisoned without trial, many from the North. The MCP and the youth paramilitary organisation Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP) had established an efficient web of control, even in the rural areas. In 1977, the political climate improved somewhat but Banda and his inner circle maintained a strong grip on power, the MCP and the economy through a centralised system of patronage focused on Banda. In this sense, Malawi differs from other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Malawi, political patronage remained restricted to Banda and his inner circle, consisting of top party cadres and senior civil servants. Banda always managed to prevent the development of patronage networks from operating independently of him. He did so already in 1964, during the “Cabinet Crisis”, and he continued to strike hard and fast at anyone who had the ambition to create his own patronage network. This is markedly different from other African countries, where a more polycentric political patronage structure emerged at all levels of the state hierarchy soon after independence (Bayart 1993; Chabal & Daloz 1999; Médard 2002: 385).

Under the heavy oppression of one-party rule, everybody was afraid and perceived the walls to have eyes and ears. No one dared to talk about politics in public or to attract attention, so that the illusion of the four basic principles of unity, obedience, diligence and loyalty could be maintained. The poet Jack Mapanje alluded to the survival strategies of Malawians in those years as chameleon-like behaviour, always changing colours for fear of being detained or worse (Mapanje 1981, 2002).

Malawi’s “monolithic appearance” began to show its first cracks in the late 1980s. Banda was getting old and was not able to maintain absolute control in the same way he had. This was further exacerbated by the country slipping into an economic crisis. Eventually the cracks tore open in the early 1990s. The end of the Cold War resulted in a more critical stance of Western donors towards Banda’s autocratic regime. The loss of international support coincided with a loss of domestic legitimacy. Domestically, the undercurrent of discontent that had been building up since the late 1980s finally surfaced. In March 1992, the Catholic Bishops of Malawi issued a Lenten letter that was highly critical of Banda’s regime and made him responsible for poverty and oppression, which was read in Catholic churches throughout Malawi. This triggered wider protests against Banda and his one-party rule. Students and vendors demonstrated in Zomba and Blantyre and the workers at the Whitehead textile factory in Blan-

tyre went on strike. Soon, other workers and civil servants in Blantyre and Lilongwe joined them and went on strike to demand better working conditions and political change. When the bilateral donors stopped development aid due to concerns about the violation of human rights and democracy in Malawi, the pressure on Banda's aid-dependent regime intensified.

The pressure became so strong that he agreed to hold a referendum on the introduction of multi-party democracy. The referendum was held in June 1993 and more than 60 per cent of the population voted in favour of multi-party democracy. The country seemed to change over night, critical newspapers mushroomed, people started discussing politics more freely and an elated feeling about imminent change spread through the population. At last, things seemed to be changing for the better. The general elections in May 1994 were a clear rejection of Banda and the MCP. The UDF became the strongest party in parliament and its leader, Bakili Muluzi, was elected president. Malawians had very high expectations nourished by the promises of the UDF and Muluzi during the election campaign. Muluzi's credo was change, *zasintha*, and in the beginning things did indeed change. Political prisoners were released, a constitution with a bill of rights was introduced, the army disbanded the MYP, primary education became free of charge and the government launched a development programme with the aim to reduce poverty, the Poverty Alleviation Programme. After the elections, the donors resumed their assistance and even expanded their activities until 2002 when several donor agencies scaled down their programmes due to concerns about government corruption.

1994 proved to be a crucial year and generally the people I spoke to during my fieldwork made a sharp distinction between the time prior to 1994, under Banda's oppressive rule, and the period after 1994, the year of general elections. During the first years following the transition to multi-party democracy there was a general atmosphere of reform but by the late 1990s people seemed to have lost faith in the ability of the new leaders to improve the miserable economic situation. This was illustrated by the local government elections in November 2000, considered to be a hallmark of the decentralisation programme, which only had a turnout of 17 per cent of the eligible voters. Instead of doing something for the country, politicians were perceived to be selfish and corrupt. The population's disenchantment with democracy can be largely attributed to the failure of the economic reforms to address the economic crisis and deeply entrenched poverty. During my fieldwork in 2000 and 2002, many people expressed nostalgia for the security under Banda's rule, whose spectre was still lingering, whilst they had little faith in the new democratic leaders.

The results of two decades of structural adjustment

After independence, Malawi's economy grew substantially, as a result of the expansion of the tobacco sector, promoted by Kamuzu Banda. However, in the 1970s, economic performance deteriorated because of the oil and debt crisis. In the 1980s, Structural Adjustment Programmes were introduced to counter economic decline. However, economic recovery remained elusive and the economic crisis became more severe in the late 1990s. In 2002 the situation worsened when large parts of the country were affected by severe food shortages, resulting in several hundred hunger-related deaths. Malawian government officials and NGOs blamed the famine on the sale of the Strategic Grain Reserve (SGR), advised by the IMF, and the reduction of the World Bank-funded Starter Pack Programme. The latter had distributed seeds and fertilizer to almost three million people. The World Bank terminated funding for this programme and in 2000 it was replaced by the Targeted Input Programme (TIP), which only delivered supplies to 1.5 million households.

At independence in 1964, there was moderate optimism concerning Malawi's economic future heralded as a new dawn, *kwacha*. And indeed in the beginning there was hope for a better future. Under Banda's firm leadership Malawi seemed to be set for economic development. And development was badly needed. The territory, established as a British protectorate under the name of Nyasaland in 1891 during the Scramble for Africa, used to be one of the poorest and least developed possessions of the British Empire. In colonial circles, Nyasaland was referred to as the Cinderella of Africa, a quiet colonial backwater serving as a labour reservoir for the more industrialised regions in Rhodesia and South Africa, and supporting a small number of European planters producing mainly tobacco and tea for export, hampered by high transport costs to the coast because of the long routes through Mozambique (Kydd & Christiansen 1982: 355-358; McCracken 1983; Pryor 1990; Vail 1975, 1977).

Soon after independence Kamuzu Banda succeeded in gaining control of the economy through Press Corporation, a private company owned by himself. Press enjoyed a near-monopoly in the industry, finance and trade sectors and became by far the biggest company in Malawi. In the early 1970s, Banda appropriated and distributed a large number of tobacco estates to his followers in the MCP. Banda fully acknowledged Malawi's unfavourable starting position and chose a somewhat unusual development strategy. Instead of following the path of industrialisation pursued by other African countries, his policy concentrated on the expansion of the agricultural production of cash crops, mainly tobacco and tea. The agricultural sector can be divided into large-scale commercial agriculture on estates, on the one hand, and peasants producing mainly for

subsistence and, to a smaller extent, for commercial purposes, on the other. Banda's policy was squarely aimed at the expansion of the estate sector at the cost of the smallholder sector. Kydd & Christiansen (1982) have argued that the development of the estate sector was financed by imposing heavy taxes on peasants through the state crop marketing corporation Agricultural Development Marketing Corporation (ADMARC), a strategy already used by the Native Tobacco Board during the colonial period (McCracken 1983). This development strategy appeared to be successful during the first years after independence. Malawi was quoted as an example of economic development and enjoyed impressive growth rates between 1970 and 1979 because of the estate sector producing tobacco and tea for export. (Harrigan 1991: 207-208, 1997; World Bank 1981). Although Malawi's economy performed very well, Banda's development strategy had detrimental long-term effects on the equitable distribution of wealth and the improvement of living standards of the majority of the population, as Kydd & Christiansen (1982) point out.

Economic growth came under pressure in the late 1970s. In the wake of the oil price hike and reduced prices for tobacco and tea, the main cash crops, the terms of trade deteriorated dramatically in the late 1970s and the interest rates on external debts exploded. The negative effects of these shocks were compounded by a severe drought in 1979 and 1980 and the closure of the railway connection to the sea due to the civil war in Mozambique. The government's budget deficit increased due to the high level of government expenditure. The parastatal sector and Press Corporation faced severe financial difficulties, thus putting more pressure on the government on which they depended for loans (van Donge 2002; Harrigan 1991: 11, 212).

Responding to the crisis the government entered a stand-by agreement with the IMF in 1979. In 1981, the government took one step further and accepted a first Structural Adjustment Loan (SAL) from the World Bank followed by a second SAL in 1982 and a third one in 1985 (Harrigan 1991: 217-223). By accepting these loans Malawi entered a vicious circle of increasingly detailed policy measures prescribed to restore growth and debt servicing to the debtors. Of course, development aid had been a feature of Malawi's budget since independence and even during colonial times but, with Structural Adjustment, a new dimension was reached in terms of scope, objectives, donor involvement in national policy-making and the amount of loans provided.

Malawi was one of the first countries to receive Structural Adjustment support and implemented three consecutive SALs during the 1980s. However, the Structural Adjustment reforms that came with these loans did not succeed in restoring economic growth. On the contrary, the economic crisis deepened during the 1980s, as in most other African countries (World Bank 1989, 1994a). The adverse effects of the economic crisis were increasingly felt by the popula-

tion during the late 1970s and the 1980s. By 1982, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita was 12 per cent lower than in 1979. In the mid-1980s, economic decline intensified even further. People were mainly affected by the higher prices for their staple food maize, the loss of real income, the removal of subsidies for fertiliser, the closure of ADMARC's depots and higher consumer prices (Kaluwa *et al.* 1992: 49-57).

The 1990s did not bring the recovery predicted by the World Bank (1989, 1994a). On the contrary, despite continuing structural adjustment, the economic situation deteriorated even further (Ngalande Banda *et al.* 1998). The economic crisis was certainly an important factor in the popular support for the emerging opposition to Banda's and the MCP's dictatorial regime in the early 1990s. For example, according to government figures, annual inflation was at 22.8 per cent in 1993 and rose to 34.7 per cent in 1994 (GoM 1995a: 5-8). The opposition parties promised to reduce poverty and improve public services in the 1994 election campaign. Difficulties were compounded by severe droughts that hit Malawi in 1990/1991 and 1993/1994. Consequently, expectations were high when the new democratically elected government of Bakili Muluzi came to power in 1994. Together with the donors, led by the World Bank and the IMF, the new government embarked on a Poverty Alleviation Programme in August 1994 (GoM 1995b).

After the suspension of development aid, between 1992 and 1994, by most bilateral donors, though not by the World Bank, aid was resumed after the democratic elections. However, the new government did not really succeed in reducing poverty as it had promised. Following the depreciation of the currency, inflation rose to an estimated 42 per cent in 1995 and to 50-70 per cent in 1996. Actual losses in income and savings were even more sudden and dramatic. The monthly inflation rate in April 1995 (inflation rate for a specific month compared to the same month in the previous year) was 79.1 per cent (Ngalande Banda *et al.* 1998: 78-79), for instance.

Since 1995, the government has been implementing the World Bank's and the IMF's vision of a deregulated economy, open market reforms, less active involvement of the state in the economy, privatisation of state-owned enterprises and the reform of state institutions (World Bank 1994, 2000). However, the hope for economic recovery that would eventually result in higher standards of living and poverty reduction was soon to be bitterly disappointed. Especially since 1997, annual inflation has remained continuously high, at about 30 per cent. In October 1998, the currency was again depreciated and lost 80 per cent of its value against the US dollar. In 1999, the World Bank and the IMF phased out Structural Adjustment lending and introduced the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility. Malawi was also included in the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative for debt relief. In co-operation with the World Bank

and the IMF, the government drew up a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and launched the first Poverty Reduction Programme in August 2000, aimed at further market deregulation, liberalisation, privatisation and the reduction of the budgetary deficit.

My fieldwork in 2002 was overshadowed by a severe famine that affected large parts of the country and the densely populated South, in particular. So far, no exhaustive explanation has been presented but the available data suggests an unfortunate mix of trigger factors, such as the drought and the sale of the Strategic Grain Reserve (SGR) as well as other underlying causes, such as population pressure and deteriorating soil fertility (Devereux 2002). During Banda's reign, the government would intervene in the food market and build up a strategic food reserve to guarantee food security. This interventionist policy was strongly criticised by World Bank and IMF who demanded market liberalisation (Harrigan 1991, 1997). While Banda had been able to exploit the West's fear of Communism to his advantage and resist the pressure of donor agencies, the new government under Muluzi proved to be more susceptible to the donor agencies' advice. Under donor pressure ADMARC, the state-owned agricultural marketing board, scaled down its operations in many rural areas in order to work more cost-efficiently. ADMARC was also responsible for the management of the Strategic Grain Reserve (SGR) but, in 1999, the National Food Reserve Agency (NFRA) was established to manage the food reserve independently and on a cost-recovery basis.

Following two good harvests in 1998/1999 and 1999/2000, the NFRA bought maize with loans from commercial and government banks. In 2000, the SGR was stocked at almost full storage capacity of 180,000 metric tons. In order to purchase the maize, NFRA had borrowed MK 600 million at an interest rate of 56 per cent per annum. By June 2000, the NFRA had a debt of MK 1 billion. This raised donor concerns, and the World Bank and the IMF advised the government to reduce the emergency reserve to 30,000-60,000 metric tons and export the excess stocks to service the debt (IMF 2002). Furthermore, the grain reserve had to be renewed anyway, because the maize had already been stored for two years. Hence, in accordance with these recommendations, NFRA started to sell maize at the end of 2000. However, instead of selling only the excess stocks, NFRA sold the whole stock and by the first half of 2001 the SGR was virtually empty. The World Bank and the IMF had recommended exporting the maize in order to avoid distortion of the domestic market and earn badly needed foreign currency. Despite some sales to Kenya and Mozambique, a large part of the reserve was sold to domestic traders who hoarded maize in anticipation of rising prices at the end of the year, when most households would have depleted their stocks.

In February and March 2001, floods hit many parts of the country, especially the central and southern regions. These floods washed away plants and soil in the affected areas. As a consequence, maize production was reduced by 32 per cent. However, the authorities expected sufficient maize production and ample production of other crops. Based on the information provided by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Famine Early Warning System (FEWS NET), ADMARC and NFRA did not replenish their stocks. According to preliminary studies, the floods were not the only factor responsible for the agricultural production shortfall. It appears that the reduction of the Starter Pack Programme, higher interest rates for input loans and rising fertilizer prices further compounded the problem (Devereux 2002).

The decision to sell the maize and not to replenish the SGR, because of predicted food surplus, proved to be fatal when agricultural production (maize, roots and tubers) was much lower than expected. Due to the shortfall, prices shot up in the second half of 2001, making it impossible for many people to purchase maize to replenish their depleted stocks. In some areas the consumer price for maize went up by 400 per cent. After the price hike, the traders, who had hoarded maize, started to sell their maize, but many people could not afford the exorbitant prices. By February 2002, the food shortages had turned into a full-blown famine in many parts of the country, especially in the central and southern regions. The government and donor agencies reacted very slowly. The end of February, President Muluzi finally declared a state of emergency. But the government was not the only party reacting slowly to the crisis. The donor agencies appeared to be more concerned with the sale of the SGR than with providing immediate support (Devereux 2002).

The government had started to import 150,000 metric tons at that moment but, due to logistical problems and delays, the maize arrived in March 2002 – too late to be distributed in time to all the affected areas. The situation only gradually improved with the arrival of food aid from donors and the purchase of maize from South Africa. However, prices remained high and people were not able to purchase the necessary supplies (primarily seeds and fertiliser) for the 2002/2003 season. According to the affected people and the analysts, the 2002 famine was worse than the Great Nyasaland Famine in 1949.⁴ According to the World Food Programme (WFP), more than 3 million people were threatened by starvation in 2002, and, according to estimates, at least 300-500 but probably 1000-3000 people died as a direct result of the famine (not counting people dying from cholera or HIV/AIDS who were weakened by malnutrition) (Devereux 2002: 18).

⁴ On the great Nyasaland famine of 1949, see Vaughan (1987).

The civil service – from localisation to good governance

Chanock (1998) points out that the legal system constituted one of the most persistent and influential legacies of British colonialism. The same can be said about the civil service in Malawi. After independence, Malawi retained the structure of the British colonial civil service. The colonial administration was characterised by the strict division between European expatriate officers and Africans. Until the late 1950s, only few Africans served in the colonial civil service. Under the localisation or Africanisation programme⁵ of the last years before independence, the number of Africans increased and by 1963 most junior staff were Africans, while expatriates still held the senior posts. Even after independence, Africanisation was implemented very slowly in comparison with other African states, and many expatriates continued to hold high positions in the civil service of Malawi (Baker 1972).

According to informants, who had served in the Nyasaland colonial service, the first years of independence were characterised by high morale and motivation. According to one of them “there was great pride in the service”, although relations between white superiors and African subordinates were characterised by racism and distrust. Soon after independence, in 1964, the shadow of a different type of oppression and politicisation fell on the civil service. Under colonial rule people from the northern region, who enjoyed better access to superior missionary education, had dominated the civil service. Banda was suspicious of the Northerners and wanted to assert Chewa-identity – his own ethnic group – as the national identity. In the wake of the “Cabinet Crisis”, many civil servants, mainly from the North, were imprisoned, dismissed or went into exile. The climate of oppression and political influence intensified in the following years and reached a climax during the mid-1970s, when thousands of officers, many of them from the North, were arrested and dismissed.⁶

Until the end of his rule, Banda and the MCP exercised strict control over the civil service. The civil service became highly politicised and any suspected opposition against the regime could provoke dismissal or detention. Banda’s distrust of the civil service can be traced back to the first days of his rule. In September 1963, civil servants protested in Zomba against the reduction of pay proposed by the Skinner Commission and Banda’s reluctant Africanisation of the senior positions in the civil service, and went on strike (Baker 2001: 133, 185-186, 190). Banda never forgot this open resistance and took every opportu-

⁵ Localisation is the technical term used by the British to denote the transition from a civil service run by expatriate officers to a civil service run by Africans. Sometimes the term Africanisation was also used.

⁶ On creation of tribalism and assertion of Chewa as national identity in general see the seminal article by Vail & White (1991).

nity to criticise civil servants' greed and lax attitude. In order to prevent any resistance within the civil service against his rule, Banda established a tight system of control and oppression. Civil servants spoke of a "culture of fear" when referring to the civil service under Banda's rule – a time when any real or perceived dissent or disloyalty could result in dismissal and detention without trial.

Between 1994 and 2002, the government implemented far-reaching reform programmes under the guidance of the World Bank and the IMF focusing on privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation. One component of the institutional reforms was the civil service reform. Consistent with the World Bank's and IMF's focus on promoting good governance, this reform was aimed at improving efficiency and transparency. Measures taken under the Institutional Development Project included a civil service census to eliminate "ghost workers" (fictitious employees existing only on the payroll), public expenditure reviews, institutional reviews, privatisation, the introduction of meritocracy and a retrenchment exercise.

Efforts to increase efficiency concentrated on removing crucial parts of public administration and policy implementation from the civil service. Development policy, for instance, was mainly implemented by the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF), a parastatal agency whose employees worked on a contractual basis. Democratic reforms were formulated and supervised by the Law Commission and the Human Rights Commission who also worked with contracts similar to the private sector. This was possible since several of these bodies, such as the Human Rights Commission and the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB), were largely funded by donors who had a keen interest in the implementation of reform policies. The higher salaries paid to the employees of these agencies did not constitute a major burden on the budget because of their relatively small number of staff compared to the large ministries. In February 2000 the Departments of Customs, and Excise and Income Tax were dissolved and replaced by the Malawi Revenue Authority (MRA). This new agency worked on a cost-recovery basis; it operated outside the civil service structure and had its own terms of service.

Since the 1990s Malawi's civil servants have become more assertive in voicing their concerns and demands. There were major strikes in 1992, October 1994, January 1996, April, May 1997 and 2001. Only few of these strikes – such as in 1992 and 1994 – were supported by a large majority of the civil servants, while strikes in specific ministries and for particular professional groups have become very common, regularly disrupting the operation of ministries and departments. Labour unrest, especially among junior officers, started in May 1992 and culminated in the strike of October 1994. The strikers complained about insufficient salaries and demanded salary increases. The

strikes of the early 1990s played a crucial role in bringing Banda's regime down. In 1992, shortly after the workers at the Whitehead textile factory in Blantyre went on strike, civil servants also laid down their work. Although the strike had political undertones, their main demand was a substantial revision of the salaries that they deemed insufficient to meet the rising cost of living.

In response to the strikes in 1992 and 1994, the newly elected president Bakili Muluzi decided to establish a commission to address the complaints made by the civil servants and make suggestions for a better salary structure. The commission, headed by Judge Chatsika, delivered its report in March 1995. The main recommendations concerned hefty salary increases. The commission proposed to raise the salaries of the lowest grades in the Industrial Class by 236 per cent, of the middle grades by 120 per cent, and of the top functionaries in the Superscale by 263 per cent. The commission conceded that the implementation of this proposal would result in a 100 per cent increase of the wage bill and stated – with remarkable indifference to the demands of the World Bank and the IMF – that “the Commission is convinced that the increased wage bill is far outweighed by the impact the increase would have on the morale of the civil service” (GoM 1995c).

Not surprisingly, considering the pressure from the donor agencies and the low revenue base, President Muluzi was unable to implement the proposals of the Chatsika Commission right away and instead promised to increase the salaries by 25 per cent (Manda 2000: 87). In April 1997, civil servants, who demanded salary increases and the implementation of the recommendations of the Chatsika Commission, went on strike again. This time the strike was mainly led by professionals in hospitals and the civil aviation department. However, the 1997 strike was not successful and ended after two weeks, without having reached its objectives. This was largely due to insufficient support and internal quarrels between the trade unions (van Donge 1998). The recommendations of the Chatsika Commission were never implemented. Instead the government simply chose to increase all salaries by 25 per cent per year to counter inflation and appease the unruly civil servants.

During Banda's rule, any form of independent employee organisation was forbidden. The Teacher Union of Malawi (TUM) was the only officially recognised trade union of government employees. During the 1994 strike, civil servants were only informally organised. In subsequent years, several trade unions were formed: the Civil Servants Trade Union (CSTU), the Customs Workers Union (CWU) and the Local Government Workers Union (LGWU). The CSTU led the negotiations with the government during the 1997 strike but was unable to realise most demands (van Donge 1998). By 2002, the trade unions had not managed to function properly as representatives of employees' interests yet. They were fairly loosely organised and had no membership administration. For

example, it was said that the CSTU had no more than 800 members. They suffered from factionalism and internal power limiting their impact.⁷

It is difficult to assess the level of politicisation in the civil service since 1994. Compared to the culture of fear, during the days of one-party rule, at the beginning of the 21st century civil servants seemed to enjoy considerably more freedom and leeway. The frequent strikes and open criticism of the government bear testimony to these new freedoms. Prior to 1994 it would have been simply unthinkable to go on strike, form a trade union or write letters to the newspapers, complaining about mismanagement or corruption. Yet there certainly has been a degree of political influence on the civil service since 1994. The highest positions in the civil service (S4/P4 and above) are appointed by the President and are therefore “political”. As a consequence, there were indications that appointments to the top positions in the ministerial headquarters in Lilongwe and the District Commissioners, the central government’s representatives in the districts, were often associated with support for the ruling UDF party between 1994 and 2004.

During my fieldwork, civil servants were in a somewhat ambivalent situation. On the one hand, they did not have to fear for their lives anymore and enjoyed considerable economic and political freedom; on the other hand, the economic situation was very unstable, levels of crime had risen sharply and the restructuring measures threatened job security. Civil servants who had served during Banda’s time often expressed nostalgia for the “good old times” when the civil service was still respected, salaries had not been eroded by inflation and crime was practically non-existent. Despite its oppressive character, civil servants generally associated Banda’s rule with a sense of material security, which has been replaced by a sense of insecurity and anxiety about the future. The following chapters explore the various aspects of civil servants’ responses to the civil service reform and the ambivalence and insecurity they were experiencing between the late 1990s and 2002.

⁷ In March 2000 four trade-unions including the CSTU broke away from the umbrella-organisation Malawi Congress of Trade Unions (MCTU) and formed the Congress of Malawi Trade Unions (COMATU). Background were differences between the CSTU-president Banda and the MCTU-president Antonio. Then an internal power-struggle between Banda and the majority of the members who resented Banda’s decision erupted and the CSTU joined the MCTU again end of April 2000, *Daily Times*, 28.4.2000: 1, 3.

Constructing country ownership

[D]uring the 1980s a new approach was developed, namely conditionality. Aid was provided in return for explicit negotiated commitments to policy reform. The obvious theory underlying this was that aid could be an incentive to policy change. However, an implication of this theory was that governments would be undertaking policy change against what they considered to be their interests, except for the receipt of aid. Policy change was the price which governments would have to pay for aid; or equivalently, policy change would be what donors bought with their aid (Collier 2000: 9).

Introduction

The implementation of the civil service reform programme was one of the central measures to improve governance after Malawi's democratisation in 1994. First steps to improve the performance of the civil service had already been taken by the old regime, under Kamuzu Banda, in the early 1990s¹. These initial steps were feeble and limited in scope but they laid the foundation for the latter measures. When the new government, under Bakili Muluzi, took office, the reform of the civil service gained momentum. Between 1994 and 2002 a whole set of reforms was introduced: The government signed agreements with

¹ Through the Institutional Development Programme I (ID I) the World Bank financed the establishment of the Malawi Institute of Management, an institution to train senior officials and private sector managers in the techniques of New Public Management.

the World Bank² on Institutional Development Programmes II and III (ID II and III) in 1994 and 1996 and the Fiscal Restructuring and Deregulation Programmes I and II (FRD I and II) in 1996 and 1998 and agreed to implement the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) arrangement in 2001. World Bank and IMF documents presented these programmes as necessary measures the government of Malawi would have to take to get the country back on track to development. According to this perspective, economic recovery would remain elusive if the government failed to improve governance by implementing the civil service reform and curbing corruption.

Civil service reform was one of the conditions for the financial support of the World Bank and the IMF. And yet representatives of both organisations have consistently pointed out that the resultant reforms must be “owned” by the borrowing government. According to their legal advisors, “conditionality”, the technical term for the policy measures financed with a loan, does not contradict “country ownership”. The term ownership means that the government requesting a loan from the World Bank and the IMF is fully responsible for the policy measures and their implementation. Country ownership is presented as a necessary precondition for the success of policy reforms. Of course, representatives of the World Bank and the IMF concede that ownership cannot be forced on a government. It has to come from an ill-defined “within” and manifest itself in the political will to implement certain reforms. The lack of ownership is usually identified as one of the main impediments to development programmes. Critical evaluations of the Bank’s and Fund’s operations, such as the one quoted above hold the lack of ownership responsible for the failure of many a development project (Botchwey *et al.* 1998; Collier 2000). This common observation, however, has not changed the policies promoted by the international financial institutions that deem ownership of reforms essential and present conditionality as the logical consequence of ownership. For example, a recent “fact sheet” states “conditions reinforce the level of country ownership” (IMF 2002a).

It would be deceptive to dismiss this claim simply as clumsy attempt at “new speak” only thinly veiling the Bretton Woods institutions’ neo-colonial or neo-imperial agenda. Such unmasking would fail to take into account the way good governance and other development policies are actually inserted into the national polity. In order to understand the implementation process of the civil service reform programme in Malawi between 1996 and 2002 and how civil

² Actually with the International Development Association (IDA); in the following referred to as the World Bank, the umbrella name by which the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBDR), the IDA and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) are known.

servants responded to the reorganisation of their workplace, it is important to follow the transformation of external advice into self-imposed conditions.

This chapter analyses in detail how the notion of ownership is reconciled with the far-reaching conditions set by the World Bank and the IMF with regard to the reorganisation of Malawi's civil service. This is achieved through a set of legal techniques that places the responsibility for policy reforms with the government and transforms economic data into conditions, which the government agrees to adhere to in order to improve efficiency and transparency, a phenomenon I refer to as "normativity of numbers". The chapter further shows how the latest development programmes, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PSRPs) introduced in 1999, supplement the normativity of numbers with highly sophisticated conditions addressing corruption.

The emergence of a concept

Good governance emerged as the central concept in development assistance in the 1990s. With the end of the Cold War, the relationships between the West and African governments were reconfigured. During the Cold War, anti-communism used to provide the most important criteria for Western support, as massive Western support given to autocrats like Seseke Mobuto and Kamuzu Banda demonstrates. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the attitude of Western governments changed dramatically. In the early 1990s, adherence to human rights and democratic values became the benchmark for Western support in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The 1990s concept of good governance heralded an era of much bolder interference in the domestic affairs of governments of developing countries. Until the late 1980s, the state was considered to be the prime actor in developing the national economy and society. State institutions were to be part of the solution rather than a cause for underdevelopment. In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the tone of World Bank documents changed. A radical overhaul of the state institutions according to the neo-liberal dogma was demanded to create favourable conditions for economic development. Good governance was promoted as the principal tool or instrument, which would contribute to "sustainable economic and social development" (World Bank 1992: 5) and "macroeconomic stability, external viability, and orderly economic growth" (IMF 1997: 1).³

The booklet *Governance and Development* published in 1992 was the World Bank's first general statement of the new development agenda. It defined governance as "the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development" (1992: 3). According

³ See also World Bank (1989, 1994a).

to the World Bank, the key dimensions of governance are “public sector management, accountability, the legal framework for development, and information and transparency” (1992: 6). Although this publication was the first to be exclusively devoted to issues of good governance, the Bank had addressed the problems of state bureaucracies in developing countries earlier on. In 1989, a World Bank report on Sub-Saharan Africa mentioned “deteriorating governance” as one of the main causes of the crisis in Africa. It held the expansion of state services and the dominant role of the state in the economy after independence responsible for elusive economic growth:

At independence Africa inherited simple but functioning administrations. They were managed largely by expatriates and were not geared to the development role assigned to them by African leaders. The responsibilities of the state were enormously expanded. But at the same time the rapid promotion of inexperienced staff and the gradual politicisation of the whole administrative apparatus led to declining efficiency. A combination of administrative bottlenecks, unauthorized ‘fees’ and ‘commissions’, and inefficient services imposed costs on businesses that have progressively undermined their international competitiveness. The gradual breakdown of the judicial systems in many countries left foreign investors doubtful that contracts could be enforced. [...] Authoritarian governments hostile to grassroots and non-governmental organizations have alienated much of the public. As a result economic activity has shifted increasingly to the informal sector. Too frequently ordinary people see government as the source of, not the solution to, their problems (World Bank 1989: 30).

In line with this neo-liberal critique of the developmental state, World Bank experts designed instruments to transform the inefficient African state institutions. From their perspective it was only logical to push back the state in order to make room for the private sector. From this unfavourable assessment of the postcolonial state followed the plan to change government institutions in order to create the envisaged “enabling environment” by “defining and protecting property rights, providing effective legal, judicial and regulatory systems, improving the efficiency of the civil service” as the World Development Report of 1991 stated (World Bank 1991).

Governance and Development (World Bank 1992) identified four key aspects of the World Bank’s policy on governance: improvement of public sector management, accountability, the legal framework, and information and transparency. The first included public expenditure management, civil service reform and privatisation of state-owned enterprises. The second emphasised the need to hold public officials and political leaders accountable for their actions. Accountability entailed “making comprehensive and timely information available, classifying expenditures in a manner consistent with budget and programmes, doing appropriate analyses for decision-making, comparing budget and actual results, improving the organisation and responsibility for accounting

in the finance ministry, and increasing the legal requirements for financial reporting”. Third, the booklet emphasised the need to create a legal framework for development by promoting the rule of law. The rule of law is presented as a necessary prerequisite for economic growth; “to create a sufficient stable setting for economic actors” through the “uniform application of rules, the limitation of officials’ discretionary powers of and an independent judicial system” (Ibid: 30-39). All depended on better information and transparency by “transparent budgets and public expenditure programmes, the preparation of environmental assessments and improving domestic and external procurement mechanisms” (Ibid: 39-47, 49, 50).

In 1990, the General Counsel of the World Bank, Ibrahim Shihata, issued a memorandum on governance placing good governance firmly within the scope of the World Bank’s mandate. According to Shihata, the Bank should refrain from any political intervention in the affairs of a country and should not be influenced by the politics of other countries. Shihata argued that good governance should only be of concern to the Bank as long as it is instrumental in promoting “sustainable economic growth and social development”, the Bank’s mandate as it is laid down in the Articles of Agreement (Shihata 1990).⁴ The same limitation applies to the operations of the IMF: its Articles of Agreement also explicitly prohibit political interference.

In subsequent years, World Bank staff and researchers developed a whole range of instruments to operationalise the concept of good governance, such as the “governance approach” (Dia 1993) that provided an analytical framework for civil service reform in Africa. This approach recognised the failure of prior attempts to reform the civil service in Africa and attributed this to the “patrimonial character” of the state in Sub-Saharan Africa where “recruitment [is] based on subjective and ascriptive criteria; public employment managed as a welfare system; pay levels that are unrelated to productivity; loyalty of officials to the person of the ruler rather than to the state; and formalism of administrative rules and procedures” (Dia 1993: ix) was the norm. The “governance approach” proposed a model of three ideal types of the African state based on its “patrimonial profile”: countries with a high patrimonial character, countries with a medium profile and countries with a low patrimonial profile (Dia 1993).

The patrimonial character determined the necessary instruments to modernise the state bureaucracy. Highly patrimonial countries would be in need of the

⁴ “Art. V Sect. 10 [Art. V Sect. 6 with regard to the IDA] *Political activity prohibited* – The Bank [The association] and its officers shall not interfere in the political affairs of any member; nor shall they be influenced in their decisions by the political character of the member or members concerned. Only economic considerations shall be relevant to their decisions, and these considerations shall be weighted impartially in order to achieve the purposes stated in Article I [of this agreement].”

“comprehensive approach” with “the aim [...] to effect the structural and functional changes needed to correct the patrimonial distortions affecting the institutional environment, incentives framework and the performance of core government functions” (Dia 1993: 2). The “enclave approach” would be suitable for countries “with a low patrimonial profile” according to Dia. In these countries the aim would be “to build or reinforce the organizational, managerial and technical capacity to improve the performance and productivity of existing institutions” (ibid: 3). The third approach, referred to as the “hybrid approach”, mixed elements of the two former ideal types by combining a comprehensive public sector reform and isolating a few government core functions that would function as “motors of development”. This approach was applied to countries “with an average patrimonial profile”.

Malawi was considered to fall under the third category. Key functions such as revenue collection, customs and pre-shipment inspection were removed from the civil service and became the domain of new autonomous government agencies and private companies. In March 2000, the Malawi Revenue Authority (MRA) was established to replace the departments of customs and excise and income tax. The new agency operated on a commercial cost-recovery basis, with its own board of directors and conditions of service. Pre-shipment inspection was awarded to the private company Société Générale de Surveillance (SGS). These measures, aimed at creating enclaves, were supplemented by the civil service reform programme, the outsourcing of non-core functions, such as gardening, security services and carpenter workshops, and the privatisation of state-owned companies.

While the World Bank was the forerunner in putting good governance high on the agenda in the development debate, the promotion of the concept was by no means restricted to the World Bank. In 1997, the IMF adopted its “Guidelines Regarding Governance Issues”. Like the World Bank, the IMF explicitly limits its role to economic aspects of governance. The IMF Managing Director, Camdessus, stated in an address to the United Nations Economic and Social Council that “good governance is important for countries at all stages of development [...] Our approach is to concentrate on those aspects of good governance that are most closely related to our surveillance over macroeconomic policies – namely, the transparency of government accounts, the effectiveness of public resource management, and the stability and transparency of the economic and regulatory environment for private sector activity” (IMF 1997). Of course, Camdessus, like his counterpart at the World Bank, did not fail to point out that “the responsibility for governance issues lies first and foremost with the national authorities” (IMF 1997: 2). The following analysis of the loan documents and the way they designed the civil service reform process traces in

detail how the notions of “country ownership” and good governance are reconciled.

Conditionality and country ownership

Good governance and other reforms require slots to be inserted into the national polity. These slots are the conditions for a loan, the government’s commitment to implement specific policy reforms. The loans of the World Bank are referred to as credit agreements and those of the IMF as loan agreements or loan arrangements. Credit agreements and loan agreements are split into two separate parts: a letter to the World Bank or the IMF signed by the government representatives (usually the Minister of Finance or the President of the Reserve Bank), and the credit agreement or loan agreement. If this letter is addressed to the World Bank, it is referred to as the Letter of Development Policy; if it is directed to the IMF it is called a Letter of Intent. The letter is a document in which the government seeking financial assistance describes a set of policy measures it intends to finance with the requested loan. These policy measures are the conditions for the credit or loan, respectively.

After the Bank or the Fund decides to honour the government’s request, a credit agreement (World Bank) or loan arrangement (IMF) is signed. The agreement includes clauses on the undertakings of the borrowing government and the IFIs, the terms of the loan, and the repayment obligations of the borrower. In addition, the borrowing government “declares its commitment to the objectives of the Project [...], and, to this end shall carry out [...] the project with due diligence and efficiency.” However, the agreement does not include a description of the projects to be financed with the credit or loan. Instead, the government’s intention to implement a specific programme and its exact description are embodied in the Letter of Policy or the Letter of Intent. In other words, it is the government, not the World Bank or the IMF, that sets the conditions for the loan in the letter – which is a government document. The Bank or the Fund then declares its intention to disburse the money as long as the government honours the intention stated in the letter.

The splitting of the loan documents is crucial for the construction of ownership and conditionality. According to the World Bank, “conditionality links the Bank’s financial support to implementation of a program of reforms critical for the country’s economic and social development [...]. [C]ommitment to reform is essential, and conditions usually reinforce the level of country ownership needed to ensure the implementation of reforms supported under adjustment loans” (World Bank 2003). The position of the IMF is similar: “When a country borrows from the IMF, its government makes commitments on economic and financial policies – a requirement known as conditionality” (IMF 2002a). From

the perspective of the representatives of the Bretton Woods institutions, the split into the Letter of Policy or Intent, on the one hand, and credit or loan agreement, on the other hand, guarantees country ownership of the reforms, since the conditions of the loan are set by the government.

The World Bank and the IMF deal differently with the ramifications arising from ownership and state sovereignty, although the result is similar. According to the World Bank lawyers, the credit agreement signed with a member state includes the conditions at the request of the government applying for a loan, whereas, according to the IMF lawyers, the conditions do not constitute a legally binding agreement at all. Credit agreements signed between the World Bank and borrowing member states are considered to be agreements between two parties governed by public international law (Broches 1959; Delaume 1982; Head 1996). The credit agreement includes a provision that gives the World Bank the right to suspend disbursement if the programme described in the Letter of Policy is not carried out “with due diligence and efficiency.” Since the conditions are spelled out in the Letter of Policy, a government document, characterising “ownership” as a consequence of “conditionality” seems logical from the perspective of World Bank representatives.

In referring to “arrangements” rather than agreements, the IMF has gone even further than the World Bank to avoid any contractual implications. Gold⁵ has argued, in one of the few discussions of the legal character of the Fund’s stand-by arrangements, that the term “arrangement” does not imply any “intention to contract” by the IMF (1980). Gold states: “the adoption and performance of a program are the responsibility of a member” (1980: 36). He makes a clear distinction between the Letter of Intent and the arrangement: “The two stand-by documents, the Letter of Intent and the stand-by arrangement, do not constitute an international agreement under which the member undertakes obligations to observe its objectives and policies” (Gold 1980: 43).

His argument refers to stand-by arrangements, the regular form of IMF balance-of-payment support in the 1970s, but it also pertains to all subsequent loan facilities – the Structural Adjustment Facility (SAF) and the Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility (ESAF) of the 1980s and 1990s as well as the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility and the HIPC initiative, which replaced ESAFs in 1999. In spite of these changes in the Fund’s policy, Gold’s argu-

⁵ Sir Joseph Gold, who served as General Counsel between 1960 and 1979, played a crucial role in the legal development of the IMF.

ments were never substantially altered and continue to define the legal character of all “arrangements” of the IMF with borrowing countries.⁶

Gold is surprisingly frank about the IMF’s motives in avoiding any contractual implications. He argues that the non-binding character of the Fund’s arrangements has advantages for both parties – the Fund and the government. He observes that “[t]o bind governments by agreement to observe their objectives and policies, so that departures from them would be breaches of obligation, could exacerbate political tensions and increase the difficulties of negotiation [with the Fund]” (Gold 1980: 37). By using “arrangements,” the parties involved leave the fiction of sovereignty intact and avoid legal and democratic accountability for policy reforms that “may impose hardship for a time on the populace as a whole or on sections of it” and “can provoke domestic political controversy and become a cause of friction even within a government,” as Gold puts it (1980: 37).

Since the 1980s, when the concept of conditionality was introduced, the World Bank and the IMF have developed a whole range of different conditions, tailored to the perceived needs of the borrowing governments. Both organisations have harmonized their policies to avoid overlaps and conflicts between their respective conditions. To avoid these conflicts, both organisations basically use the same types of conditions, in order to complement each other in their “arrangements” with borrowing countries (IMF & World Bank 2001). They have developed four types of conditionality: prior actions, performance criteria, structural benchmarks, and programme reviews:

Prior actions are measures that a country agrees to take before the Fund’s Executive Board approves a loan and before the initial disbursement takes place. [...]

Performance criteria (PCs) are specific conditions that have to be met for the agreed amount of credit to be disbursed. There are two types of PCs: quantitative and structural.

- Quantitative PCs typically refer to macroeconomic policy variables [...]
- In arrangements where structural reforms are an essential part of the economic program, structural PCs are also used. These vary widely across programs but could, for example, include specific measures to restructure key sectors [...]

Structural benchmarks are similar to structural PCs, except that individual benchmarks are less critical for meeting the program’s objectives. Thus, benchmarks may help the Board assess a country’s progress on structural reforms, but failure to achieve them would not necessarily interrupt Fund funding.

Another important monitoring tool is the *program review*, which serves as an opportunity for a broad-based assessment [...]. Reviews are used to discuss policies

⁶ “Fund arrangements are not international agreements and therefore language having a contractual connotation will be avoided in arrangements and program documents” (IMF 2002b).

and introduce changes to the program that may be necessary in light of new developments (IMF 2002a).

Prior actions and performance criteria are viewed as hard conditions, because they are a condition for the disbursement of the credit. Structural benchmarks, on the other hand, are considered to be soft, because they would only affect disbursement under exceptional circumstances (for example, massive failure to implement a whole range of structural benchmarks without giving the lending institution a satisfactory explanation). According to the IFIs, structural benchmarks merely serve as points of reference for assessing a country's progress and monitoring the government's progress in implementing the reform programme (IMF 2001a: 3-20).

Recent reports and policy papers of the World Bank and the IMF characterise hard conditionality in the form of performance criteria as being too inflexible and inconsistent with the principle of country ownership (Collier 2000; IMF 2001b; IMF & World Bank 2001). Of course, the Bank and the Fund did not give up performance criteria and other hard conditions completely. However, by emphasising the flexibility of soft structural benchmarks, both organisations have tried to avoid the impression that they punish governments for failing to implement certain policies. Soft conditionality has been presented as being responsive to the needs of the borrowing governments, because it gives them more leeway in adapting to changed circumstances.

The 1990s expansion beyond the financial-economic issues traditionally addressed by the IFI programmes has resulted in the growth of conditionality. The current PRSPs continue this trend and cover all aspects of the national economy, from measures designed to increase agricultural production to policies aimed at improving education and governance (cf. GoM 2002). PRSPs are characterised by a complex mixture of hard and soft conditionality, ranging from quantitative performance criteria to structural requirements, such as the establishment of a system to prioritize expenditure management.

In Malawi's case, the Poverty Reduction Strategy process, with its more complex conditions, has not resulted in more leeway for the government. On the contrary, in 2002 the IMF blocked the disbursement of US\$ 45 million for balance-of-payment support, because of government overspending and corruption allegations against several Cabinet ministers – despite the fact that these were structural benchmarks. Since 2000, it has become common for bilateral donor agencies to stop financial support, due to the misuse of funds or corruption allegations. So far, it seems that only the IFIs and other donor agencies benefit from the greater flexibility afforded to them by the new conditionality in the PRSPs, whereas the government of Malawi faces tougher sanctions than under the Structural Adjustment regime in the event of misbehaviour.

The way the loan documents are drafted reveals the extent to which supposedly government-owned documents are determined by the policies of the Bretton Woods institutions. The following documents have to be distinguished: the Draft Staff Appraisal Report, the Memorandum and Recommendation of the President of IDA⁷ to the Executive Directors.⁸ The Memorandum and Recommendation of the President of IDA is normally heeded by the Executive Directors. The President's recommendations are based on the Draft Staff Appraisal Report. The Draft Staff Appraisal Report, in turn, is based on data collected by visiting missions and data provided by the government and is meant to assess the policy objectives listed in the Letter of Policy. The Minister of Finance sent a Letter of Policy to the World Bank on 3rd May 1994, stating the government's intention to implement a range of policy measures to reform the civil service. The Staff Appraisal Report, dated 17th May 1994, referred to this Letter of Policy of 3rd May 1994 and endorsed the planned measures.

Formally, the sequencing of the documents is correct, the Letter of Policy is dated 3rd May 1994 and the Draft Staff Appraisal Report is dated 17th May 1994. It is odd though that the Draft Staff Appraisal Report and the Memorandum and Recommendation of the President of IDA are both dated 17th May 1994. A comparison of the Letter of Policy and the Draft Staff Appraisal Report undermines the impression created by the sequencing of distinct documents. First, it strikes one that the wording of large parts of both documents is identical. Second, the data referred to in the documents was already collected during the appraisal mission of World Bank staff in October and November 1993 and updated by World Bank staff and consultants in subsequent years. The same observation applies to the policy prescriptions. Both documents, the Staff Appraisal Report and the Letter of Policy, refer to recommendations discussed during the World Bank mission, which visited Malawi in October and November 1993.

Foreign consultants and experts were not only involved in the collection of data, they also participated in drafting government policy. According to a report by a consultant of the accounting firm KPMG, one of the conditions for disbursement of the second tranche of US\$ 30 million of the 1996 Fiscal Restructuring and Deregulation Programme was the submission of a Civil Service

⁷ The president of IDA is identical with the President of the World Bank Group.

⁸ The Executive Directors are responsible for the day-to-day decision-making of the World Bank and exercise all powers delegated to them by the Board of Governors under the Articles of Agreement. Every member government is represented by an Executive Director. Representation depends on the size of the shareholders' economy: The five largest shareholders (Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States) appoint an Executive Director. All other members are represented by 19 Executive Directors.

Reform Action Plan to the World Bank. However, the first draft of this action plan was rejected by the World Bank officials because it did not meet the World Bank standards for civil service reform. At this point, several experts of the British Overseas Development Agency (ODA), the precursor of the Department for International Development (DFID), were hired “to develop an acceptable action plan and more generally to meet the conditions for the release of the second tranche of funds from the Bank”. They wrote a new draft, which was submitted in March 1996. This plan better reflected the concerns of the World Bank and was duly accepted. Shortly afterwards the World Bank released the second tranche (KPMG 1996: 3).

The rejection of loan applications that do not meet World Bank and IMF standards is not uncommon. For instance, the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper that was submitted to the Bank and the Fund in 2000 was discussed with the various missions visiting Malawi, followed by four draft versions that were written in the course of the following two years, a process in which various donor agencies and external consultants actively participated. In spite of their active involvement representatives of donor agencies were keen to delete any reference to their involvement and the donor-driven development agenda in the policy papers and official documents. During the Consultative Group Meeting in 2000, for instance, a representative of one of the major donor countries commented on one of the drafts of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper: “It gives some reason for concern that the document [interim PRSP] states at the outset that PRSP process is simply a response to requirements of the IMF and the World Bank” (The Nation 18 March 2000). Of course, the criticised passage was duly removed from the following draft. Drafting the PRSP was a protracted process. After four drafts had been rejected several World Bank and IMF consultants participated in the writing of the government document and eventually the Final Draft was submitted and endorsed by the donors represented in the Paris Club, the yearly conference of the major donor organisations where the general trend of a country’s performance and future policies are discussed, in April 2002.

The various technologies described so far, ranging from the splitting of the loan documents to the non-contractual nature of the unilaterally binding conditions and the sequencing of the different documents, are all aimed at reinforcing the image that reforms are government-owned. This image, however, is undermined by the extent to which foreign consultants, hired at the behest of the Bretton Woods institutions, ensure that the letters and documents of the government of Malawi are “acceptable” and meet the standards set by the World Bank and the IMF.

The normativity of numbers

“Getting the numbers right” is at the core of what staff and consultants at the World Bank and the IMF do – and the sheer amount of data collected by the IFIs is staggering. A policy document of the Bank and the Fund would be incomplete without extensive statistics and tables on every aspect of a country’s economy, from data on the Gross Domestic Product to social indicators, such as school enrolment. These numbers enable policy planners to determine the state of the national economy and predict future development.

In his ethnography of the IMF, Harper (1998) traces the transformation of numbers from their initial collection by visiting missions to their eventual arrival on the desks of managers and directors in Washington D.C. He observes how important numbers are for the functioning of the IMF. Echoing Levi-Strauss, he describes their transformation as a conversion of numbers from a “raw” state into a “cooked, meaningful” state in country reports and loan documents. According to Harper, the transformation of numbers into a “cooked” state enables the Fund’s staff to assess a country’s present situation.

Harper, however, fails to address one important issue: the normativity of numbers. Numbers develop a particular normative character when they become part of the conditionality of the loan documents. Numbers may acquire normativity in two ways. First, the number itself can transform into a norm when it is part of the conditions attached to the loan and second, the collection of specific numbers, using standardised methods, can constitute a condition. Typical examples of the former are targets for economic growth, inflation, and public expenditure. The second type of normativity of numbers exemplifies the neoliberal trend toward systems of self-control. The operation of the new systems of management and control depends on the collection of reliable and standardised data. For example, the installation of computerised personnel and payroll management, expenditure planning, and accounting systems is a prerequisite of the civil service reform programme. These systems are supposed to function as instruments of self-control that are operated by the government or private consultants, without any direct intervention from the IFIs.

The government’s Letter of Policy or Letter of Intent includes stated objectives of policy reforms. Many of these targets are represented as numbers, touching on all aspects of economic and social development, including Gross Domestic Product, inflation rate, government expenditure, revenues, and average life expectancy. The stated targets or objectives are based on estimates of Malawi’s economic situation at the time – estimates obtained using scientific methods of data collection and processing. They are, however, not fixed; they can change under specific circumstances. For example, by stating that the reduction of deficit is an “objective,” the Letter creates some discretionary room

for the World Bank and the government. Better data collected in the future might indicate that the original goal is no longer realistic and a new goal, based on better estimates of the present and the future, might be formulated. As a form of “scientific knowledge,” estimates are by nature subject to change if data collection and processing methods are improved.

The collection of quantitative data is crucial for policy planning and implementation. Contemporary management and auditing systems depend on reliable sets of quantitative data (cf. Porter 1995; Rose 1999; Strathern 2000). Numbers are only useful if they are collected according to standardised methods; otherwise they cannot be used to assess the country’s progress in relation to a specific norm. In order to receive standardised sets of statistical data, the World Bank and the IMF provide the government of the borrowing country with the necessary technology to collect the required numbers.

When the first World Bank mission for governance reform visited Malawi in 1993, it was surprised that the precise number of people employed by the civil service was unknown. The Bank therefore financed, through the Second Institutional Development programme, a civil service census – “a critical first step in the development of a Personnel Management Information System (PMIS)” (World Bank 1994: 19). The civil service census was conducted in October 1995 (GoM 1996a). The data collected through the census could be fed into the PMIS, including a computerised payroll system, which was eventually introduced in 1998, and a personnel management system. The data thus acquired could be used for other measures, such as functional reviews of ministries and the retrenchment of staff identified as redundant.

Another crucial element of the civil service reform was the establishment of the Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF). MTEF is a technology, which was developed by the World Bank in the 1990s to enable the government to plan and prioritise expenditure in line with the available financial resources over a period of three to five years. MTEF was introduced in Malawi as a condition of the First Fiscal Restructuring and Deregulation programme in 1996. The important contribution of MTEF is that it enables the government “to prioritise” expenditure in a time frame that transcends the traditional yearly budget planning. To “prioritise” does in fact mean that the ministries have to identify their priority activities. High-priority activities will receive available funding, while low priority activities receive less funding or no funding at all if they cannot be sustained. Low-priority activities are usually earmarked for privatisation. MTEF was at the heart of the measures to control government expenditure and constituted a structural performance criterion. It is a technology that was supposed to balance the tasks of a ministry, its expenditures and the available funding. The Letter of Development Policy of the Second Fiscal Restructuring and Deregulation programme stated the aim of MTEF:

The aim will be to correct deviations from the budget and adjust expenditures to changes in resource availability. To enable control over salary payments, expenditure monitoring will also include a monthly comparison and the reconciliation of payroll and personnel, based on the ongoing audit of civil servants.

Of course, MTEF was not supposed to operate in isolation: it was part of an encompassing system of interlocking tools serving specific purposes. Specifically, it was connected to the computerized payroll and personnel management system, which, in turn, relied on data collected during the civil service census. MTEF was introduced, together with a number of instruments, “to assist line agencies in defining their mission, goals and programme objectives, and Activity-Based Budgets (ABB) to enhance programme costing and classification in budget representation”. A system of monthly cash allocations, the so-called cash budget, and a Credit Ceiling Authority (CCA) were also introduced to check overspending, which was endemic in Malawi’s ministries during the 1990s.

The government established several specialised government agencies to implement these systems. For example, it set up the Public Sector Change Management Unit (PSCMU) to conduct functional reviews of all ministries, aimed at evaluating how the ministries performed, as well as at earmarking functions for outsourcing to the private sector. Furthermore, the government established the Finance and Audit Committee of Principal Secretaries and the Special Cabinet Committee on Budgetary Measures to monitor expenditure and check overspending. The Ministry of Finance was responsible for the prioritization of expenditure and in each ministry so-called MTEF Committees were formed to ensure the application of MTEF in their respective ministries.

The discovery of the “C word”

Since the introduction of the PSRPs a gradual shift has taken place from the emphasis on economic analysis to a more open involvement in matters conventionally considered to be more politically sensitive. The most visible marker of this shift was the discovery of the “C word”. In 1996, the World Bank and the IMF put the fight against corruption high on their agenda. This new element in their policies does not imply a move away from or a softening up of the rigorous instrumentalism that characterised their more conventional economic interventions. In the rhetoric of the World Bank and the IMF the fight against corruption is just another “necessary” technical instrument employed in a bundle of other technical measures, such as accounting and budgeting systems, to transform the state into the efficient machine that creates the “enabling environment” for private enterprise.

The discovery of the “C word” has to be considered in the context of growing critique on the World Bank and its policies in the early 1990s. A heterogeneous assemblage of scientists, NGOS and lobbying groups had criticised the Bretton Woods institutions for a long time drawing the attention of the public and politicians to the failures of the Bank and the Fund. Both organisations were held responsible for the deteriorating living conditions of people who were supposed to benefit from their programmes and the deterioration of the environment due to large-scale infrastructure projects. Pressure on the World Bank really became threatening for its continued existence when major donor countries, led by the United States, became increasingly critical of World Bank projects and began to reduce their contributions to the IDA.

By discovering the “C word” Wolfensohn succeeded in reinventing the World Bank as an organisation fighting corruption. In doing so he was able to divert at least some of the attention of the Bank’s critics to corrupt and parasitic African civil servants. As Finnemore (1997) shows, this was not the first time that the World Bank was reinvented. When the Bank was threatened by donor fatigue in the 1960s McNamara succeeded in reinventing the Bank by identifying poverty alleviation as the primary policy objective of the World Bank in 1968.

Considering that the mandate of the Bretton Woods institutions explicitly prohibits any non-economic intervention into the domestic policies of a state it is surprising that the fight against corruption was quite bluntly advanced in policy statements and official documents. The shift in policy of the international financial institutions is marked by Wolfensohn’s address to the Annual Meeting of the World Bank in 1996:

And let’s not mince words: we need to deal with the cancer of corruption. In country after country, it is the people who are demanding action on this issue. They know that corruption diverts resources from the poor to the rich, increases the cost of running businesses, distorts public expenditures, and deters foreign investors. They also know that it erodes the constituency for aid programs and humanitarian relief. And we all know that it is a major barrier to sound and equitable development. Corruption is a problem that all countries have to confront. [...] The Bank Group cannot intervene in the political affairs of our member countries. But we can give advice, encouragement and support to governments that wish to fight corruption and it is these governments that will, over time, attract the larger volume of investment. Let me emphasize that the Bank Group will not tolerate corruption in the programs that we support; and we are taking steps to ensure that our own activities continue to meet the highest standards of probity (Annual Meeting’s Address by James D. Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, Washington, D.C., October 1, 1996).

This speech reflects the instrumentalist vision of the World Bank. Corruption is a “cancer” growing and “diverting resources from the poor to the rich”, increasing costs for private business and deterring foreign investors. The image

of “cancer” evokes a surgeon who cuts away the literally corrupted parts of the body and applies medicines to stop the growth of cancerous cells. Surgery can only be undertaken if there is a correct medical diagnosis. It is neither political nor moral. This imagery draws heavily on the language of disinterested scientific rationality, which produces facts not judgements. Wolfensohn was careful in pointing out that the World Bank “cannot intervene in political affairs”. He emphasised ownership of governments “that wish to fight corruption”. In his representation the World Bank would only play the role of an advisor providing technical knowledge when needed.

The “C word” figured prominently again in a speech delivered on the “Global Forum on Fighting Corruption” in Washington, D.C. on 24 February 1999. In this speech less than three years later Wolfensohn reflected on the discovery of the “C word”:

It is true that when I came to the World Bank, I was given an admonition by our General Counsel that I should read the Articles of the Bretton Woods agreements. In there it says I am to deal with economic matters and that as an international civil servant, I should not, if I want to keep my job, talk about political matters. I was then told that there was one word I could not use, which was the “C” word, the “C” word being “corruption”. Corruption, you see, was identified with politics, and if I got into that, I would have a terrible time with my Board. Well, I then visited quite a number of countries, and I decided in 1996 that I would redefine the “C” word not as a political issue but as something social and economic. That got me in under the wire of the Articles of the Bretton Woods institutions and, simultaneously, my friend Michel Camdessus did the same on the side of the International Monetary Fund. The fact is that all the evidence indicates that the major inhibiting factor to investment and to consistent development; the major factor which affects the lives of poor people in terms of equity and in terms of their opportunity, is corruption (www.worldbank.org/html/extdr/extme/jdwsp022499).

In this speech Wolfensohn displays more confidence: He muses uninhibitedly about his trick that “got him under the wire of the Articles” prohibiting political interference by the World Bank. No more concern about “political interference” and ownership of reforms is expressed in this speech.

Both quotes from Wolfensohn reveal the way the Bank presents measures that are perceived as political, even within the Bank, as purely economical and technical affairs covered by the Bank’s legal mandate prohibiting its interference in the domestic affairs of borrowing countries. His frankness about redefining the “C word” as “something social and economic” is indicative of a dangerous pragmatism that simply subsumes anything it might see fit under its mandate. The realm of the economic does not limit the operations of the Bretton Woods institutions but rather expands the realm of the economic to include the social and political domains. Both, the good governance reforms of the mid- and late-1990s and the fight against corruption are presented as instruments and

technical measures, something from the toolbox of a surgeon who diagnoses cancer or some other dysfunctionality that can be cured applying the proper technology.

While the austerity and efficiency measures of the 1990s, the Institutional Development programmes and the Fiscal Restructuring and Deregulation programmes, were mainly concerned with prescribing technologies to “get the numbers right” the PRSP spelled out very detailed conditions with regard to measures against corruption the World Bank and the IMF expected the government to implement. These conditions did not replace the normativity of numbers but supplemented it. For example, the Letter of Intent sent by Malawi’s Governor of the Reserve Bank and the Minister of Finance on 8 December 2000 to the Managing Director of the IMF, in which Malawi requested “support from the Fund under a three year Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) arrangement in the amount of SDR 45.11 million (65 per cent of quota) and are seeking debt relief under the enhanced HIPC Initiative” contained very detailed measures the government intended to take in order to curb corruption that would not have been part of the agreements signed in the mid to late 1990s. Under the title “Governance” the Letter stated:

Prima facie evidence indicates that corruption and fraud remain major problems in Malawi. The government is fully committed to the prevention of fraud and corruption and prosecution of all identified offenders. Furthermore, the government is committed to supporting the work of the Anti-Corruption Bureau and the Auditor-General and is determined to achieve good governance. In pursuit of this commitment, the government will

- give all possible support to the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) and the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) in their investigations and potential prosecution of former officials of the PCC [Petrol Control Commission] implicated in the irregularities highlighted in the 1998 audit report on the PCC, and take steps to recover misappropriated funds;
- facilitate further action by the ACB and DPP in the cases of the disputed contract award to SECUCOM to provide identity cards and the attempted procurement of Land Rovers through Apex Motors;
- by end-February 2001, pursue the recovery of at least MK 150 million in cases of large-scale evasion of customs duties, together with appropriate penalties, and provide adequate resources for investigation and prosecution of such cases, including associated corruption issues.

The government went quite far with this list of cases of fraud and corruption it wanted to deal with. It even specified a date by which the recovery of the sum “of at least MK 150 million in the cases of large-scale corruption” was to be pursued. This remarkable list has to be placed in historical context: In 2000 the “donor community” grew more confident in expressing concern about widespread corruption in the government and criticised the way it had been dealing

with cases of corruption. The IFIs therefore expected a firm commitment to the fight against corruption.

The government's commitment to deal with particular cases of corruption was a condition for the Fund's acceptance of the loan request. The list quoted above is a Structural Benchmark, a "soft" condition which, in principle, did not affect the effectiveness of the loan although that is exactly what happened in 2002 when the IMF blocked the disbursement of US\$ 45 million balance-of-payment support because of government overspending and serious corruption allegations against several Cabinet ministers, senior civil servants and politicians. This move reflected the more flexible approach of the Bretton Woods institutions. The shift away from too many "hard" performance criteria was presented as an acknowledgement that more flexibility and ownership were required to make conditionality work. It was finally time for the government to get into the "driving seat", the representatives of the IFIs argued. Benchmarks were supposed to be more open to dialogue and the participation of the borrowing government. This, it was claimed, would strengthen "ownership". In actual fact, however, benchmarks widened the margin of appreciation for the World Bank and the IMF rather than strengthening "ownership".

In line with Wolfensohn's redefinition of corruption as a social and economic problem the PRSP summed up the negative effects of corruption:

The Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy (MPRS) district consultation process showed that corruption is one of the major concerns of the people. High levels of corruption and fraud reduce economic growth by discouraging legitimate business investment, and reduce the public resources available for the delivery of services to the poor. In addition, corruption gives disadvantages to the poor in selling their agricultural produce, and reinforces the unequal distribution of wealth and power in society – only those who can afford to pay a bribe benefit while the poor, the weak and vulnerable suffer (GoM 2002: 81).

The shift from the relatively straightforward emphasis on simple Performance Criteria to the highly complex mixture of "hard" conditionality and structural conditionality of the PRSP occurred gradually between the late 1980s to the late 1990s. Until the mid-1990s the Bretton Woods institutions relied almost entirely on hard conditions aimed at improving economic performance. This changed soon. For example, already in 1997 the delegates of the Consultative Group "applauded the continued progress made by Malawi in good governance, respect for human rights, and in consolidating democratic institutions (particularly Parliament and the Anti-Corruption Bureau) over the past 17 months". Yet there was a discernible shift from the emphasis on the reform of institutions and management systems that pervaded the documents signed in the mid-1990s to forms of interference that were both, much bolder and more intrusive, at the beginning of the 21st century.

Conclusions

This chapter traced the reorganisation of Malawi's civil service to its source: the good governance reform agenda, as it had been promoted by the World Bank and the IMF since the 1990s. It shows how the IFIs actually set the development agenda for civil service reform in Malawi, where national policy is rarely the product of the sovereign government or the national legislature. The paper trails described in this chapter provide the background for the subsequent chapters that show in detail how the World Bank's and IMF's policy prescriptions were operationalised and what they meant for Malawi's civil servants.

The close reading of the loan documents revealed how the World Bank and the IMF ensure that supposedly government-owned policy documents, such as the Letter of Policy, the Letter of Intent and the Poverty Reduction and Strategy Paper, reflect World Bank and IMF standards. One way to ensure that the government documents meet the standards of the lending agencies is to rely on consultants and staff hired at the behest of the Bretton Woods institutions to supply the government with the required data. The involvement of these external consultants already during the planning phase is not perceived as political interference by the management of the World Bank and the IMF. According to the dominant view within the Bretton Woods institutions, they merely respond to a request for "technical assistance" or "tools" to deal with technical problems, such as "administrative bottlenecks" and "management problems".

The use and the collection of numbers were important means of legitimising the Bank's and the Fund's "advice". The introduction of standardised accounting and management systems relieved the World Bank and the IMF of the necessity to exercise more direct control. "Tools", such as the Personnel Management Information System (PMIS) or MTEF by government agencies, supplied the Bank and the Fund with the required numbers to monitor Malawi's public sector. They also enabled the Bank and the Fund to insert instruments such as the "enclave approach" into the civil service when required.

The following chapter turns from policy documents and reports to the implementation process of the civil service reform in Malawi between 1994 and 2002 in order to observe the actual operation of the instruments of control and surveillance provided by the Bretton Woods institutions. It shows how the already existing fragmentation of the civil service deepened during the implementation of the civil service reform and how underlying conflicts erupted, because of changes to the *status quo*. Civil servants responded in unforeseen ways to what most of them perceived as a threat to their cherished privileges. Their responses ranged from silent resistance to more or less overt attempts at manipulating the reform to pursue particularistic interests and certain elements

within the civil service were able to use a potential threat to their privileged positions to their advantage.

The implementation process

Deconstructing policy implementation

In 1996, the government of Malawi adopted a Civil Service Action Plan (GoM 1996b), following the World Bank's advice. This plan, primarily drafted by consultants of the British ODA at the World Bank's behest,¹ listed eight "strategic" objectives:

- (i) To confirm the role and core functions of government, taking account of the government's policy priorities, plans for decentralisation and the scope for outsourcing and privatisation.
- (ii) To secure performance improvements through the reduction of overlap and duplication in the machinery of government
- (iii) To design and implement organisation and staffing structures and management systems which enable ministries and departments to achieve their objectives efficiently.
- (iv) To design and implement a retrenchment programme which will assist in the move to an affordable and sustainable civil service.
- (v) To improve the recruitment, retention, motivation and work ethos of civil servants through the implementation of revised remuneration and grading systems.
- (vi) To develop the capacity of civil servants to undertake the core functions of government and deliver higher quality services to the public.

¹ See previous chapter.

- (vii) To improve planning, resourcing, monitoring, management and accounting systems so that resources are more sharply focused on priorities and public expenditure is more effectively controlled.
- (viii) To develop understanding and commitment to civil service reform both within and outside the civil service through effective leadership and management of the reform process (GoM 1996b: 2).

These objectives can easily be subsumed under the primary *topoi* of civil service reform, promoted by the World Bank and the IMF: privatisation (i, ii), expenditure control and retrenchment (iii, iv, vii), performance improvement (vi, vi) and “ownership” of the reform (viii) (Dia 1993; IMF 1997; World Bank 1992, 1994). But what was actually done to achieve these objectives? Which actions were taken, which orders were issued and were these orders obeyed?

This chapter addresses these questions and turns from the realm of policy discourse to the actual implementation process of the civil service reform and investigates their relationship to each other. Many studies have shown that it is not as simple to determine the outcomes of policy intervention as the proponents of social engineering claim. The implementation of policy cannot be adequately captured with a linear model that distinguishes the planning phase, implementation and outcomes. This simplistic approach isolates the “project” from the social “context”. However, the inside and the outside of policy intervention might not be as easily separated as this model suggests (Long 1992; Shore & Wright 1997). Instead the analysis of policy intervention must transcend the parameters defining the space and time of a particular policy measure and approach them as a subject of study rather than an *a priori* given. According to Long (1992), policy interventions consist of complicated, contested and multi-stranded processes, “which involve the reinterpretation or transformation of policy during the implementation process, such that there is no straight line from policy to outcomes” (Long 1992: 34).

Transcending the instrumentalist vision of social engineering requires a much wider scope of inquiry, including “factors” that seem to have no direct causal relationship with the policy intervention and unforeseen side-effects. A number of studies investigate how unintended consequences may undermine the efficacy of policy measures (e.g. Long & Long 1992; Moore 1973; von Benda-Beckmann 1993). As early as 1967 the famous development economist Hirschman drew attention to the importance of influences outside the scope of the project design and the occurrence of unexpected side effects:

[E]ach project turns out to represent a unique constellation of experiences and consequences of direct and indirect effects. This uniqueness in turn results from the varied interplay between structural characteristics of projects, on the one hand, and the social and political environment, on the other (Hirschman 1967: 186).

This chapter presents another layer of the “vertical slice” (Nader 1980) of the implementation process. It shows how the civil service reform was shaped by a number of influences outside the scope of the policy measures. Whereas the previous chapter was mainly concerned with documents the focus now shifts to the actual practice of policy implementation by “studying up” (Nader 1972). It argues that the implementation of the civil service reform revealed and widened already existing fault lines within the bureaucracy. The policy intervention constituted a threat to the *status quo* and triggered various attempts at manipulation, co-optation and appropriation from within the civil service. My account of the implementation process focuses on two central elements of the civil service reform, the retrenchment of redundant civil servants and the introduction of housing allowances. These measures had the stated objective to make the civil service smaller, more efficient and transparent.

Retrenchment of employees made redundant

Two World Bank missions visited Malawi in 1991 and 1993 to assess problems in the civil service and present possible solutions (World Bank 1993, 1994b). These studies recommended reducing the number of support staff like watchmen, cleaners, workmen and messengers, occupying the lowest grades in the civil service, the Industrial Class (IC) and the Subordinate Class (SC). Employees made redundant were supposed to be laid off “after payment of appropriate disengagement compensation” (World Bank 1994b: 84).

In March 2000, I had an interview with the representative of the World Bank at the local offices of the World Bank in Lilongwe’s business centre, aptly named Development House. When we discussed the progress of the civil service reform he complained that in Malawi reform had been bogged down, since there was “no champion of reform”. On the issue of retrenchment he told me that the Bank’s objective was not so much the downsizing but the “right-sizing” of the civil service, since the lower ranks were overstaffed and senior positions often remained vacant for years. He quoted a few figures to support the case for right-sizing. According to the civil service census, financed by the World Bank, 18.9 per cent or 21,179 of the 112,975 civil servants counted in 1995 had no formal education at all; 16.2 per cent or 18,267 civil servants only had primary school education and 37.4 per cent or 42,289 only had attended secondary school for two years. Many professional posts were vacant and only 4.6 per cent or 2,576 civil servants had a diploma or university degree (GoM 1996a: 24). He argued that the fact that management and professional positions remained vacant, whereas the junior grades were overstaffed, seriously skewed the staff composition. When asked about severance payments or a social plan for employees made redundant, he replied that according to his knowledge these

issues had not been addressed in negotiations between the World Bank and the government. He pointed out that the implementation of retrenchment and payment of severance settlements was the government's responsibility, not the Bank's.

The unbalanced staff composition was partly attributed to the uncontrolled growth of IC and SC workers whose employment was the responsibility of individual departments.² Heads of departments and senior civil servants at the departmental level used their authority to employ staff in non-established posts without interference or pressure from the Public Service Commission (PSC) or the Department of Human Resource Management to employ large numbers of clients or to create so-called ghost-workers, non-existing employees whose salaries were pocketed by rackets led by senior civil servants. From the Bank's perspective the remedy seemed clear: establish the exact number of employees in the IC and SC, reduce staff numbers in these grades through a retrenchment programme, outsource these tasks to the private sector, improve personnel and payroll management and create more favourable salary structures for highly qualified professionals in senior posts (World Bank 1993, 1994b).

In terms of staff numbers, the Secretary of Human Resource Management set the target of 16,000 people, formerly employed in the IC and SC, to be incorporated in the civil service establishment. The others were to be made redundant. This measure affected tens of thousands of government employees who were dismissed between 1995 and 2002. It is impossible to establish exactly how many were actually dismissed, since prior to the civil service census in 1995 the exact number of IC and SC staff was unknown. Yet, according to estimates, the civil service employed about 50,000 IC staff in 1994 (World Bank 1994b: 18). The government's Letter of Development Policy, requesting a loan of US\$ 106.4 million to finance the first phase of the civil service reform programme, informed the World Bank that 20,000 civil servants in the IC and SC had already been dismissed between February and September 1995. This number, however, should be treated with caution since the reduction of support staff constituted one of the conditions for being granted the World Bank's loan, a so-called Prior Action (see Chapter 3: 39). The government, therefore, had an interest in reporting a high number of dismissals before the civil service census was conducted. Since the number of 20,000 was not doubted by the World Bank officials, this meant that a further 14,000 people had to be made redundant. Most of them were dismissed between 1997 and 1998 but dismissals continued until 2002, albeit on a smaller scale.

² These are non-established positions as compared to established posts, which had to be approved centrally by the PSC and were managed by the Department of Human Resource Management and Development, see also Chapter 1: 12.

The actual implementation of this plan was of course much messier than the documents signed between the World Bank and the government suggested. Targets were not met, deadlines were not kept, and implementation was often subject to ad-hoc decision-making, particularistic interests and unanticipated events. Nevertheless, the World Bank and the IMF maintained just enough pressure to keep the government on track. This was not met with enthusiasm by government officials, as can be seen in a circular by the Secretary to the President and Cabinet, the head of the civil service, distributed to the heads of departments in November 1998. The circular explicitly made reference to “the World Bank/IMF agreement with the Malawi Government” in connection with the retrenchment exercise.

While conducting fieldwork in Lilongwe and Zomba, in late 1999 and early 2000, I met many who had been the victim of the last wave of dismissals in 1997 and 1998. Whereas some had “returned to their villages” to farm, as my interlocutors told me, many lingered on, doing piece-work and hoping to find a new job. One of them was Mr. Kangame, a former security guard. During one of our meetings he carefully unfolded a crumpled piece of paper, a letter he had often shown officials at the Labour Office as well as his friends and colleagues, in the hope they might be able to assist him. The letter was a letter of notification:

Herewith you are being notified that your service will be terminated on grounds of redundancy. The last day of service is 31 January 1998. May I thank you for the services you have rendered to the government during the period you have been with us and to wish you all the best in your future undertakings. Monthly wages will be paid in lieu of notice. All outstanding debts will therefore be recovered from any payments due to you.

The letter was delivered on 19 January 1998. Between March 1993 and January 1998, he had worked as a security guard for the Veterinary Department in Zomba. As security guard he belonged to the Industrial Class (IC) and was paid on a daily basis. The Malawi Public Service Regulations (MPSR) provided only little job security for IC workers. Since Mr. Kangame had been employed for less than five years, the notice period was only two weeks.³ For two weeks notice he had received a payment of about US\$ 10, not more than a handout in the late 1990s, with prices soaring. The fact that he had been dismissed just one month short of completing five years of service constituted a personal insult in his eyes.

Mr. Kangame was desperate after losing his job and asked his former boss for help. Yet, no assistance had been forthcoming. He had pleaded with him several times and had been a lot on the premises of the office in the hope to get

³ Government of Malawi (1991) *Malawi Public Service Regulations*: 3: 104 (1), (2b).

his job back. Mr. Kangame was very bitter about this refusal and complained about the “selfish bosses” who wouldn’t help juniors like him. He was one of those who were laid off in the second retrenchment exercise between 1997 and 1998. During that time security services for government departments were earmarked for outsourcing to the private sector and, as a security guard, there was no need for him any longer. The contracts to guard government buildings were awarded to Securicor, a British security company. Many of the former government security guards were able to find employment with private security companies such as Securicor but a considerable number was less lucky and faced social decline, such as Mr. Kangame, who had only enjoyed a few years of primary school and was not qualified enough to compete for the scarce jobs that were available.

Others had more luck than Mr. Kangame. I often met people who had been dismissed months ago but who still hung around offices in hope of getting their jobs back. By staying close to their former offices, they hoped to apply some pressure on their former superiors by reminding them of their social obligation as *bwana* or master. Many a superior officer proved to be receptive to this subtle pressure and re-employed their clients as soon as the budgetary pressure eased. They were creative in finding ways to re-employ their clients and dependants. Although they could no longer employ support staff without the approval of the PSC, they retained the authority to employ project staff, which they used to find employment for their clients.

The implementation of the Civil Service Action plan was to be coordinated by a specialised agency with a cross-cutting mandate, the Public Sector Change Management Agency (PSCMA). Its establishment was a condition attached to the second institutional Development programme in 1994. PSCMA had the mandate to conduct functional reviews in all ministries and make recommendations on how to improve performance and the internal command structure. Amongst the measures recommended were the privatisation of non-core tasks and the reduction of staff levels “to cut the wage bill”. Most of the senior staff of the PSCMA were quite young, not older than 40, held college degrees in economics or human resource management and represented the professional elite of the civil service. They had been seconded from various ministries for the duration of the project. The work at the PSCMA was seen as challenging and interesting, offering possibilities to be promoted. Furthermore, the PSCMA offered far more attractive work conditions, because of the generous funding provided by the World Bank, the sponsor of the PSCMA. Due to World Bank funding, the PSCMA was able to rent spacious and comfortable offices, send staff on workshops abroad, pay allowances on time and maintain a fleet of project vehicles at the PSCMA staff’s disposal.

The prospect of a new agency with the task of reducing staff levels and assessing the functioning of the ministries and departments was not greeted with much enthusiasm by the ministerial top brass who feared outside interference and took every opportunity to delay the establishment of the PSCMA. It thus took the PSCMA until 1998 to become fully operational and conduct the first functional reviews. Most top officials in the so-called line ministries, the classic ministries such as Health and Agriculture, continued to resort to delay tactics and silent resistance. Because of this resistance, the last functional reviews were only conducted in 2002, well behind schedule.

The introduction of new housing allowances

The government's plans to introduce a new system of housing allowances also triggered unanticipated responses. On 28 September 2000, I was on my way to the Ministry of Lands and Housing in Lilongwe's business district. While I was walking towards the ministry, shots rang and clouds of teargas drifted down the street. People came running from the direction of the ministry. As it turned out, the riot police had chased a group of protesters away with tear-gas and warning shots. The protesters were landlords who let their houses to the government, which in turn allocated these houses to civil servants. A few months earlier, the government had announced that it would terminate the lease agreements with the landlords but had failed to pay all arrears to the landlords.

This measure was part of the restructuring of the civil service. In line with the donor agencies' recommendations, the government intended to change its long-standing policy of providing housing for civil servants. To this end, the Ministry of Lands and Housing had rented thousands of houses owned by private landlords. Under the new scheme, this would no longer be the government's task. Instead, it would pay housing allowances to civil servants, who were, in turn, supposed to pay for their accommodation themselves. The ministry, however, had not paid rent to a number of landlords since April 2000. These landlords decided to voice their concern before the agreements were terminated, and had gathered at the ministry to demand payment of the arrears. After they had waited the whole night, the riot police arrived in the morning and dispersed them with tear gas and warning shots.

This vignette exemplifies many aspects of everyday life in urban Malawi in the second half of the 1990s. Demonstrations and strikes had become common. Every group with grievances, ranging from street vendors to civil servants, was quick to take to the streets to voice their demands and concerns. This was unprecedented and would have been unthinkable under Kamuzu Banda's authoritarian regime. On the other hand, demonstrations such as the one described above also reflected the widespread disillusionment with democracy and the

dire economic situation in Malawi. Since market liberalisation in 1994, the economy had plummeted, and many people were facing social decline or even abject poverty.

The incident on 28 September 2000 also illustrates the debates and conflicts that characterised implementation of the civil service reform programme. It should not come as a surprise that the issue of government-provided housing and housing allowances proved to be so contentious. Housing provided by the government for civil servants has always been a central and sensitive issue in Malawi. Malawian civil servants considered the provision of housing as one of the most important benefits of government employment. The provision of housing was perceived to be one of the primary duties of the government as employer.

Government housing was a legacy of the colonial period when the administration offered generous housing to the expatriate officers, a considerable strain on the budget of the cash-stripped territory. The cost of institutional housing continued to be a burden after Malawi became independent. As early as 1963, the report of a commission of inquiry argued that rents for civil servants should be brought into line with prevailing economic conditions. The report also recommended “bringing to an end the artificially created demand among civil servants for larger houses” in order to stop the “drain upon development funds” (Skinner 1963: §§ 240, 273). These recommendations were never implemented due to resistance among civil servants of the new state who regarded cheap institutional housing as a privilege of the colonial masters, to which they felt entitled after independence. To keep the bureaucratic elite of the country in line, Kamuzu Banda retained the colonial system of institutional housing after Malawi’s independence in spite of his criticism of civil servants’ greed.

The housing issue resurfaced again in the early 1990s when the World Bank evaluated the state of Malawi’s civil service. These reports noted that government housing was highly subsidised and that rents were only at 10 per cent of the market value (World Bank 1994b: 49). In line with the neo-liberal perception that non-essential government functions, such as the provision of housing for civil servants, had to be privatised, the report recommended monetising benefits like housing to make the salary structure more transparent and equitable (World Bank 1994b: 85).

On 30 June 2000, the newly appointed Minister of Finance, Mathews Chikaonda, a former World Bank economist, announced in a statement on the annual budget that the government intended to withdraw from the lease of houses for civil servants and to pay a housing allowance instead. In July 2000, the Ministry of Lands and Housing announced that all lease agreements between the government and landlords would be terminated by November 2000. This announcement signified the change of the long-standing government poli-

cy to provide housing for many civil servants. Theoretically, all civil servants were eligible for government housing, but the government and the state-owned Malawi Housing Corporation (MHC) had never been able to build and maintain housing for all civil servants. There were no statistics available on the exact number of civil servants living in the houses leased by the government, but the number was estimated at about 20 per cent, most of whom held senior positions.

There were two categories of civil servants: On the one hand, those living in houses owned or leased by the government and, on the other, those who were not housed by the government and received a housing allowance instead. The first category included civil servants living in houses owned by the government and those living in houses leased by the government from the MHC and private landlords. Most of the former were teachers in rural areas who lived in houses on the premises of the school, extension workers in rural areas, and soldiers and police officers living in staff quarters. The latter lived in houses leased by the government from the MHC and private landlords. Most of these houses were of a relatively high standard and were situated in the urban centres. Generally, most of the senior ministerial staff lived in houses leased from the MHC and private landlords in one of the more up-market townships of Lilongwe and Zomba. Civil servants living in institutional and leased houses paid only a nominal rent of less than 10 per cent of their salary, equalling only a few US dollars.

The second category comprised civil servants who were not housed by the government. They received a housing allowance of 15 per cent of their basic salary. This meant that most civil servants in this category received less than US\$ 10 housing allowance in 2000. Most of the junior grades in Zomba and Lilongwe, such as support staff and clerks, fell into that category and were forced to find housing on the free market. Rents were relatively high, especially in Lilongwe, and many civil servants had to pay rents much higher than their monthly housing allowance. For example, a so-called servants' quarter, one room with communal washing and cooking facilities, cost almost US\$ 15 per month in Biwi, one of the central townships in Lilongwe. Houses with more than one room and electricity in Biwi started at US\$ 40 per month. Therefore, many civil servants were forced to live in the outlying townships, such as Area 25, where rents were still affordable and housing available. However, what was saved on the rent was spent on public transport to and from the city centre, at distances between 5 km and 15 km from Capital Hill and City Centre.

Two issues caused considerable unrest among civil servants. First, the measure announced by Chikaonda only applied to civil servants who lived in houses leased by the government and, second, the new policy entailed a complete restructuring of the whole system of government housing. Civil servants would no longer rent their houses from the government, which, in turn, leased them

from the MHC or private landlords. Instead, they would rent their houses directly from the landlords without interference from the government. To this end they would receive housing allowances. The new policy would result in the reduction of capacities used to administer thousands of houses, one of the main objectives of the civil service reform.

A few months after the initial announcement in July, the Secretary of Human Resource Management issued a circular on 18 September 2000, which introduced housing allowances for those civil servants previously living in houses leased by the government. It announced that the last rental payments to landlords would be made in October 2000.⁴ The new rates were based on the standard rents of the MHC, the largest provider of housing for civil servants and the only landlord with standard rents in the country. The allowances would be paid as a monthly lump sum. Payments would be based on the respective salary grade. Generally, the new rates exceeded basic salaries by 30 per cent, resulting *de facto* in an enormous increase in total monthly remuneration.⁵ The circular provided that those civil servants who were not living in houses leased by the government and who had received the 15 per cent monthly housing allowance would receive 25 per cent of their basic salaries as housing allowance, an increase of 10 per cent.

This measure resulted in a huge gap between housing allowances paid to those living in previously leased houses, who would receive an average of 130 per cent of their basic monthly salary, and those receiving only 25 per cent of their basic monthly salary as housing allowance. This discrimination was acknowledged in the circular that stated that “this rate will be revised subject to the availability of resources in the next financial years with a view to bringing it in line with the allowance payable to employees who are currently housed”.

The Secretary of Human Resource Management’s circular stirred up a nest of hornets because of its bias in favour of the mostly senior civil servants living in houses leased by the government. In September 2000, senior officials of the Office of the President and Cabinet admitted that the scheme was not equitable, since it gave preferential treatment to a small group of civil servants. Another serious problem was the funding: the new scheme was estimated to cost about 100 per cent more than the old scheme. However, no extra funds had been made available, neither from donor agencies nor from domestic sources, and it was still unclear how the whole scheme would be financed.

⁴ Circular of the Secretary of HRMD 18 September 2001
Ref/HRMD/102/4/OC/IV/22.

⁵ Senior officers in the Superscale grades would receive MK 12000-15000 (about US\$ 125-163 in July 2000), the middle administrative, technical and professional grades MK 6000-9000 (about US\$ 75-113 in July 2000) and junior grades MK 2000 (about US\$ 25 in July 2000).

As the October deadline for the introduction of the new housing allowances approached, the opposition gathered momentum. The junior civil servants, who did not enjoy the benefit of institutional housing, were especially critical of the new scheme and started to exert influence on the trade unions. They attacked the CSTU, which initially had supported the new rates, for failing to represent the interests of those who did not live in leased houses. Several former members of the CSTU accused the union leaders of “pure treachery” in the press.⁶ They argued that the new scheme was unfair, since it would create two categories of civil servants: those receiving 25 per cent of their basic salary and those who would receive a lump sum, which would be many times higher than what the rest would receive. Opposition against the new scheme spread among the “juniors” who threatened to take action without the approval of the trade unions. In August 2000, the union’s dissidents even planned to hold a demonstration against the scheme on Capital Hill. Hence, to regain their influence, the union leaders abandoned their conciliatory position and adopted a much harder line, demanding that the new rates apply to all civil servants.

Government negotiators eventually gave in to these demands, since Muluzi’s government depended on the civil servants’ support. After the 1999 elections, in which Muluzi’s UDF only won by a narrow margin, the president’s position had been considerably weakened and he tried to drum up support in the run-up to the local elections in September 2000.

The confusion around the new allowances grew when the press reported that the scheme had been put on hold until January 2001.⁷ Finally the new housing allowances were paid in January 2001 to those civil servants living in houses formerly leased by the government. During 2001, government representatives negotiated with the representatives of the trade unions. The government representatives tried to exclude certain categories, such as teachers living in government-owned houses in rural areas, from the new scheme but the trade union representatives adopted an uncompromising stance and pushed for the payment of the new rates to all civil servants. Eventually, the negotiators of the government gave in and introduced a new housing allowance scheme for all civil servants on 1 January 2002.⁸

Meanwhile, funding had also been secured. Parallel to the negotiations with the representatives of the trade unions, the functionaries of the Ministry of Finance and OPC had negotiated with the IMF, which agreed to compensate the extra burden on the budget, resulting from the introduction of the new scheme

⁶ *The Nation*, 25 September 2000, “Civil Servants hit own union”.

⁷ *The Nation*, 3 October 2000, “House allowance on hold”.

⁸ Circular of the Secretary of Human Resource Management, 2 January 2002, Ref. No. HRMD/4/1/7E/IX/21.

with balance-of-payment support to promote the implementation of good governance in Malawi. Due to the changes, the costs of the new schemes were about 100 per cent higher than the old system and only the support of the IMF enabled the government to implement the new scheme 15 months later than originally planned.

Increasing fragmentation of the civil service

The account of the retrenchment exercise and the introduction of the new housing allowances warrant a closer look at the fissures within the civil service that were revealed and widened by its implementation. Two major fault lines can be distinguished. The first one is the competition between new agencies, which had the task of promoting the civil service reform, and the classic line ministries. The second one is the growing gap between “bosses” and “juniors” that can be traced back to the colonial period under British rule. Both of these fault lines, in turn, were influenced by ethnic-regional rivalries, a distinct characteristic of Malawian society since colonial times.

In line with the “enclave approach” described in the previous chapter, the World Bank singled out government departments and agencies. These enclaves were expected to operate as centres from where the reform would spread throughout the whole civil service. Enclaves were either already existing ministries, usually with cross-ministerial mandates, such as the Ministry of Finance,⁹ the Department of Human Resource Management and the National Economic Council (NEC), specialised departments such as the National Statistics Office (NSO) or newly established agencies such as PSCMA, with the mandate to implement the various measures of the civil service reform. These agencies received considerable logistical and financial support to implement the reforms. The National Statistics Office, for example, received World Bank funding and assistance to improve data collection and the Department of Human Resource Management received assistance to implement the new computerised payroll system.

Due to the financial and logistical support of the World Bank, these “enclaves” tended to have more resources and better qualified staff at their disposal. The working conditions in a project were considered much more attractive than regular work in the civil service. There were more workshops, more financial resources, better training possibilities, more vehicles and more allowances than in departments that depended on government funding. Training

⁹ The Ministry of Finance usually had the “overall responsibility for managing the programme, and for monitoring and reporting responsibilities” (interview at Ministry of Finance, March 2000) and functioned as principal contact for World Bank staff and visiting missions.

courses abroad were especially attractive for civil servants, considering the limited possibilities within Malawi to receive training.

Generally, cooperation of individual government departments or agencies with donor agencies was often better than between government departments with different donors. Considerable differences existed between bureaucratic routines and requirements of the various multilateral and bilateral donor agencies, which resulted in different bureaucratic practices between and even inside ministries depending on the donor agency funding the projects.

With regard to the implementation of the civil service reform, conflicts emerged between the “enclave” agencies and parts of the senior staff of the classic line ministries, who tended to resist what they perceived as interference in their affairs. The partnership between the World Bank and the Ministry of Finance soon resulted in isolation of the latter from other ministries that were targeted by the reform programme (Botchewey *et al.* 1998: 81). The heads of departments preferred to maintain as much discretion in running their departments as possible. For example, the possibility to hire IC employees without outside interference or the freedom to allocate resources as they saw fit constituted valued privileges they were not willing to give up. Consequently, the senior management in the line ministries viewed measures such as the introduction of job descriptions, computerised payroll management and functional reviews, with suspicion – sometimes even with alarm.

Resistance was rarely open, and the senior civil servants who rejected the reform opted for delay tactics, such as ignoring the PSCMA and feigning indifference. No one challenged the retrenchment exercise openly; they had been too long in the civil service to jeopardise their positions by resisting openly and actively. They rather chose the chameleon tactics of camouflage and survival developed under Kamuzu Banda’s despotic rule (cf. Dzimbiri 1998; Englund 2002b; Mapanje 1981) and tried to delay what seemed to be inevitable without attracting undue attention, rather than voicing any concerns they might have had.

The conflicts between the “enclaves” and the line ministries had a generational dimension. The senior functionaries, who had been socialised under Kamuzu Banda’s autocratic rule and, in fact, often owed their positions to him, were confronted with younger civil servants who were mainly employed in the new “enclave” agencies. The “enclave” agencies employed a high percentage of younger university-trained professionals, many of them economists. By contrast, the senior civil servants in the line ministries belonged to an older generation who began their careers in the 1970s. I denote the former as technocrats and the latter as old-school officials. Most of the technocrats were in their thirties and had joined the service in the late 1980s. They had enjoyed a better education than the older generation, either abroad or at the University of

Malawi, established in the 1970s. Their outlook was more international, and the most ambitious aspired to a career in an international organisation or in the consultancy business.

The old-school bureaucrats had entered the service in the 1970s. They had usually enjoyed less education due to the scarcity of educational facilities during the colonial era and had progressed slowly up the ranks by accumulating years of service. Their outlook was more national and they primarily perceived of themselves as being rooted in Malawian society. Owing their position to Kamuzu Banda, considered the father of the nation who secured independence from the British, they were brought up in a highly hierarchical culture where superiors' decisions were never questioned. Under Kamuzu Banda, decisions were usually referred to the top, often to Banda himself, and people were often simply afraid to take decisions for fear of being accused of being a dissident or "confusionist". Moreover, many of them had served as junior officers in the colonial administration, where Africans were required to follow the orders from their European superiors without questioning, a characteristic of the Malawian civil service addressed in more detail below. Many of those civil servants suspected of harbouring "confusionist" ideas or feeling unable to subject themselves to Banda's strict regime had left the country and pursued an international career, such as Bingu Wa Mutharika, elected president in May 2004, and Mathews Chikaonda, one time governor of the Reserve Bank and Finance Minister.

The culture of fear under Banda and the colonial experience had shaped those men who had remained in Malawi, and, after democratisation, they continued to display the *habitus* of obedient and loyal functionaries. This attitude goes a long way in explaining the absence of open protest by the old-school officials who resisted civil service reform. Furthermore, they were afraid of losing their positions after the transition to multi-party democracy and preferred to keep a low profile in order not to attract too much attention from their new political leaders who sought to replace those suspected of being too closely associated with the previous regime.

The younger technocrats were usually more in favour of reform than the older generation, although not necessarily always along the lines of the World Bank's ideas. Having been brought up in the 1970s, they were familiar with the oppressive atmosphere under Kamuzu Banda, but many of them had longed for change, although they were very circumspect in expressing these views openly for fear of persecution from the security forces. Having been exposed to economics, and being aware of the deepening economic crisis during the later days of Banda's rule many of them were more open to new ideas and many tacitly supported the reforms of the 1990s. Due to their age, they had been less involved in the practice of hiring large numbers of support staff and, therefore,

did not have the same sense of loyalty towards those threatened by retrenchment as the old-school bureaucrats in ministries such as Health, Agriculture or Labour. Being mainly employed in the “enclave” agencies supported by the IFIs, these younger professionals often found themselves pitted against old-school officials in the line ministries (Adamolekun *et al.* 1997: 215-217).

Dezalay and Garth (2002) describe a similar development for Latin America, where economists trained in the elite universities of the United States, formed bureaucratic and political elites in their countries of origin, creating a transnational class of bureaucrats who “approach problems of economics and the state from precisely the same perspective” (Dezalay & Garth 2002: 28). In Malawi, the influence of economists, most of whom have worked either for the World Bank or the IMF, is striking. President Bingu wa Mutharika, for instance, used to work for the World Bank and his Minister of Finance Goodall Gondwe used to work for the IMF.

This generation gap, however, does not imply a complete rift between the older and younger generations. Like their cousins elsewhere, the young technocrats were connected to the older elites by kinship ties and shared many similarities with the generation of their uncles and parents, although their outlook and style was different from the older generation. The competition between technocrats and old-school officials, therefore, constituted one dimension of the multi-faceted competition between the newly created “enclaves” and the classic line ministries – a direct consequence of the implementation of measures to improve governance in Malawi.

The dismissal of employees made redundant revealed a widening gap between top officials or managers, on the one hand, and the rank and file of the civil service, on the other. In the Malawi civil service, the former were casually referred to as “bosses” and the latter as “juniors”. When my informants referred to the “bosses”, they usually meant functionaries high up in the hierarchy occupying administrative and professional positions, with the authority to issue orders and make decisions, as well as other senior officers who supervised subordinate staff in a department. “Bosses” constituted not more than five per cent of all civil servants, i.e. about 5000 persons (GoM 1996a: 29). The rank and file were casually referred to as “juniors” by my informants. This category constituted all civil servants who were considered to be subordinate, including lower-ranking civil servants, such as support staff, unskilled labour and extension workers with no or little formal education. It also included middle-ranking officers, such as teachers and office clerks with no authority over other civil servants.

This rigid division between “bosses” and “juniors” is one of the characteristic elements of the postcolonial state in Africa that can be traced back to the notorious colour bar between European expatriate officers and African employ-

ees found in all African colonies.¹⁰ Under British colonial rule, all senior positions in the civil service of what was then Nyasaland were held by Europeans, whereas Africans were only found in junior positions such as teachers, clerks and labourers. According to Africans who served in the colonial civil service, they were looked down upon by European officers, who considered the African civil servants to be inferior, only emulating the manners of their colonial masters. Under colonial rule, it was unthinkable for an African to challenge the decisions taken by Europeans and Africans were required to refer all decisions of importance to their white superiors.

The colonial division between superiors and subordinates was retained after independence in 1964, since Kamuzu Banda strongly discouraged any questioning of his authority, which he interpreted as criticism of his regime. Juniors were not to challenge the orders of their superiors, while they, in turn, were not to challenge Kamuzu Banda's orders, who exercised absolute power between 1964 and 1993. In addition, Kamuzu Banda continued to rely on Europeans to run the civil service because he considered them to pose no threat to his claim to absolute power. He only reluctantly embarked on a programme of Africanisation and, until the early 1980s, a number of Britons who had already served in the colonial administration continued to hold key positions in the civil service, the police force and the army. This continuity with the colonial civil service did much to maintain colonial attitudes between "bosses" and "juniors", even after the retirement of the European officials.

It should also be noted that, in spite of the ritualistic invocation of a shared African culture, there was actually a considerable social distance between "bosses", many of whom were trained abroad and enjoyed a formal western-style education, and the "juniors" who often hailed from more humble origins. The "bosses", either old-school officials or technocrats, belonged to Malawi's tiny elite and considered themselves to be more "modern" or "civilised" than their cousins with less social status, whereas many "juniors" looked with a certain envy at the affluent lifestyle of "those at the top", referred to as *apamwamba* in Chichewa, the country's main language. Although society as a whole, in Malawi, avoids the more ostentatious consumption, observed in other African countries, and people generally emphasise harmony and egalitarian values, it is obvious that a considerable degree of alienation between "bosses" and "juniors" existed even prior to retrenchment. Because of that social distance, the heirs of the colonial masters, the high-ranking functionaries, did not really go out of their way to protect people with whom they often had very little in common, and whom they tended to look down upon in spite of the pervading rhetoric of clientelism and solidarity. Instead, the "bosses" preferred to keep a

¹⁰ cf. Ba (1994) for French West-Africa and Eckert (2007) for Tanganyika.

low profile in order not to jeopardize their own precarious positions following the change in government after 1994.

Since the implementation of the civil service reform constituted a condition for financial assistance of the IFIs, the government did not really have a choice regarding the retrenchment of redundant support staff. Of course, the president, the ministers and the top functionaries in the “enclave” agencies knew that this decision would be extremely unpopular among the tens of thousands of “juniors” who would be threatened with the loss of their jobs. Therefore, those responsible for the retrenchment exercise tried to put at least part of the blame for the unpopular measure on the World Bank and IMF, the institutions that had demanded staff reductions. Malawi’s new democratic rulers feared the wrath of the civil servants who had become accustomed to going on strike to lend more weight to their demands.

Because of civil servants’ propensity to go on strike, the absence of large-scale or organised protests against retrenchment is surprising. Several factors have to be taken into account in this regard. First, the level of organisation among civil servants was very low during the second half of the 1990s, the time when most of the support staff were dismissed. Trade unions had been prohibited during one-party rule and the new trade unions, which were founded after 1994, remained weak, with insecure funding and few members. Owing to their weakness, trade unions played a relatively minor role in the often spontaneous strikes prior to 2000. This changed after 2000, when the CSTU was recognised by the government as the representative of the civil servants’ interests. Although this was too late to affect the retrenchment exercise, which had largely been concluded at the time it proved to have an influence on the extension of the new housing allowances to all civil servants in spite of the initial reluctance of the leadership of the CSTU to endorse the junior civil servants’ demands for equity. Second, many of those made redundant found employment elsewhere, while their less fortunate peers still hoped to find employment in the civil service. Many dismissed “juniors” thought it unwise to alienate their patrons by openly resisting retrenchment. They preferred to hover close to their patrons, constantly reminding them of their obligations towards their clients. Some of them even succeeded in finding other employment in the civil service or in the private sector due to the brokerage of patrons who succumbed to this subtle but strong social pressure. This attitude derives from the well-documented clientelistic logic permeating African bureaucracies (cf. Bayart 1993; Chabal & Daloz 1999).

The belief in the efficacy of clientelistic relationships, however, was thoroughly demystified when thousands realized that their patrons would not help them and many junior civil servants I worked with during my fieldwork expressed their alienation from the “bosses”, whom they accused of being

selfish, an accusation not taken lightly in a society where the duty to share one's wealth is a fundamental moral principle. The alienation between "bosses" and "juniors" was exacerbated by the implementation of the civil service reform programme and the juniors' readiness to resort to strikes and other forms of open protest can be read as a reflection of their growing disenchantment with clientelism.

My interlocutors had a tendency to frame the conflicts triggered by the dismissal of staff made redundant and the introduction of the new housing allowance scheme in terms of ethnic and regional rivalries. Within the civil service there was a great mutual distrust between people from the country's three regions. Northerners and Southerners accused people from the central region and in particular those with a Chewa ethnic background for conspiring against them. People from the central region, in turn, would often point towards conspiracies of Northerners against people from the centre.

To express conflicts in the idiom of ethnicity and regionalism has been a general characteristic of Malawian politics since the country's independence. President Banda, a Chewa from Kasungu in the central region, aggressively promoted Chewa tribal identity as the national identity at the expense of other ethnic groups in the north and south (Chirwa 1998; Kaspin 1995; Vail & White 1989). As Kaspin (1995) notes, ethnicity and regionalism provide distinct, although partly overlapping, registers in Malawi's cultural politics. The northern region is mainly associated with the Tumbuka and to a lesser extent Tonga and Ngonde. The central region is considered to be Chewa, although there are sizeable Ngoni populations. The south is primarily associated with Yao and Nyanja/Mang'anja, although there are also large numbers of Lomwe in the southeast who arrived in the early 20th century from Mozambique to work on estates in the British protectorate. The Chewa and the Nyanja/Mang'anja speak the same language, which is referred to as Chinyanja in neighbouring Mozambique and Zambia, where there are sizable Chinyanja-speaking populations. In Malawi, Banda decreed this language to be Chichewa in order to strengthen his claim that Chewa tribal identity represented the nation.

Banda pursued a policy of discrimination and exclusion, in particular against the Northerners. Already in 1964, he dismissed several cabinet ministers, who had challenged his claim to absolute authority, during the Cabinet Crisis. All of them hailed from the North or the South and were forced into exile (Baker 2001). Many civil servants who were suspected of supporting the dissident ministers also left the country, among them Bingu Wa Mutharika, who returned in the early 1990s to Malawi and was elected president in 2004. The fear of dismissal or even imprisonment was ever-present during the 30 years of one-party rule. During the 1970s, when Banda consolidated his grip on power, thousands of civil servants, most of them from the North, were purged from the

civil service. For example, my informants remembered that in 1977 several hundred employees of the National Statistic Office (NSO) in Zomba were suspended, some even dismissed and detained on sedition charges. Kaspin reports the forced transfer of Northerners teaching in the central and southern regions to the North for allegedly “miseducating their students” in 1989 (1995: 609).

Banda’s hostility towards Northerners has to be considered in the context of colonial history. Northerners, in particular people with a Tumbuka and Tonga ethnic background, had dominated the colonial civil service because they had better and earlier access to missionary education. In the late 19th century, Scottish missionaries had established several mission stations in the North and Blantyre in the South, where they provided formal education to the surrounding areas, which afforded the graduates of these schools access to employment in government service, the missions and the settler economy throughout Central and Southern Africa (McCracken 2000; Ross 1996). As a consequence, the majority of African civil servants at the time of independence came from the northern region. Banda wanted to correct what he perceived as a distorted staff composition, inherited from the colonial administration, by replacing Northerners with loyal Chewa and people from the central region. The civil service strike in 1963 in Zomba, which had mainly been carried by Northerners, had already raised his doubts regarding their loyalty towards him. The thinking in ethnic and regional categories soon permeated society and the civil service, and influenced many a conflict in government departments.

Ethnicity and regionalism did not vanish after the end of Banda’s rule. The power of ethnic and regional thinking was manifested during the referendum on the introduction of multi-party democracy in 1993 when the North and the South overwhelmingly voted in favour of multi-party democracy whereas the central region voted to retain one-party rule. The presidential and parliamentary elections the following year also showed the extent to which the country was split. The UDF and the other opposition parties received most votes in the North and the South whereas the MCP won the majority of votes in the central region (Kaspin 1995). Ethnic and regional stereotypes about Chewa, Northerners and Southerners permeated all social strata. In the civil service, ethnic and regional background often played a role, for example, with regard to recruitment or promotion. Especially at the senior level, the origin of a civil servant could become an issue if he or she was from the “wrong” region. Because of this it was still common practice to strive for a regional balance in senior government positions during my fieldwork.

Conclusions

The retrenchment of government employees made redundant and the introduction of the new housing allowance scheme were widely resisted by civil servants because these measures were perceived as a threat to the *status quo*. Their resistance, however, was not the result of a shared political agenda or class interest, and was largely uncoordinated, spontaneous and situational. In spite of the frequent strikes and the involvement of the trade union with regard to the introduction of the new housing allowances, civil servants' resistance to the new policies never resulted in a co-ordinated political struggle. The widespread discontent and anxiety in the civil service was more diffuse and self-oriented, and rarely transcended the mundane stratagem individual civil servants employed to protect their privileged positions. The countless individual acts, nevertheless, succeeded in transforming the implementation of the civil service reform programme and delaying it considerably.

Implementation of the reform measures intensified tensions within the civil service, often expressed in terms of ethnic and regional rivalries. The World Bank's enclave approach widened the gap between the classic line ministries and the enclaves, agencies with cross-cutting mandates, such as the Ministry of Finance and PSCMU, often staffed by younger technocrats and supplied with ample funding by the "donor community". These centrifugal tendencies were exacerbated by other donor agencies that supported individual projects implemented by specific ministries and departments. As a result, government agencies and departments were often better equipped to link up with their respective donor agencies than with other units in the civil service. An important aspect of this fissure was the difference between an older generation of old-school officials, who made their careers in the 1970s, and the younger generation of technocrats who entered the civil service during the 1980s and 1990s. The reorganisation of the civil service constituted a threat to the position of the older generation and the *modus operandi* to which they had become accustomed, whereas the younger generation generally displayed fewer inhibitions about civil service reform.

A far deeper fault line existed between the "bosses", the bureaucratic elite, and the mass of middle-ranking and junior civil servants. In fact, there was a continuation of the colonial divide between expatriate senior officers and indigenous junior officers. The top officials in the ministerial headquarters were in a better position to benefit from the implementation of civil service reforms due to their seniority. The retrenchment exercise did not affect them and the monetarisation of benefits actually constituted a barely hidden salary increase for the highest grades. This was well understood by junior civil servants who were threatened by dismissal and initially excluded from the new housing al-

allowances. In the latter case, they were able to exert sufficient pressure, partly by mobilising the trade unions to ensure they also benefited from the new housing allowance scheme.

In the context of the attempts to exploit or co-opt the reform, the term “ownership”, the government’s responsibility for reforms, acquires a completely different meaning. There was no ownership, as was evoked by the documents of the World Bank and the IMF. Instead, I understand the civil servants’ efforts to manipulate and appropriate the civil service reform as mundane and subversive attempts to “own” the reform or at least parts of it to protect their immediate material interests. In a sense they drew “errant trajectories” in de Certeau’s terminology (1984: 35) infiltrating, as it were, the civil service reform process.

Eroding salaries and doing business

The African entrepreneurial spirit

This chapter shifts from the “vertical slice” (Nader 1980) of the implementation process to the perspective of civil servants’ everyday experiences. It takes a horizontal perspective and explores the interconnections between the spheres of work, private business enterprises and farming in order to understand the motives, desires and dilemmas of Malawian civil servants in the times of good governance and the free market.

The same World Bank report that identified “bad governance” as one of the causes of lagging African economic growth praised the potential of African entrepreneurship as one of the main forces stimulating economic growth. The report sketched a particularly favourable picture of the “dynamism of the informal sector”. The authors considered the informal sector as a “seedbed” for a capitalist free market economy that “thrives because of its responsiveness to market forces” (World Bank 1989: 135-147).

While I was spending time in government offices in Lilongwe and Zomba I could observe this African entrepreneurial spirit in practice. The offices were hubs of all kinds of commercial transactions, places where deals were being made, goods were being sold and merchandise was being traded over the desks. Virtually all civil servants I met in the course of my fieldwork were engaged in some kind of commercial activity – often informal and usually during working hours. Business was one of the buzzwords on everybody’s lips and, together with advances and allowances, formed “the Holy Trinity of the good civil servant”, as one of my friends pointed out sarcastically.

This was certainly not the kind of entrepreneurial spirit the authors of the World Bank report had in mind when they mentioned “public service employees seeking to supplement their official incomes” as an important group of entrepreneurs (World Bank 1989: 139). A World Bank study of the Malawian civil service in 1994 lamented Malawian civil servants’ poor performance. It stated:

Until about 1992, such indicators of low productivity as idleness, late arrival and early departure to and from the office, absenteeism and moonlighting were much less in evidence in Malawi compared to many other sub-Saharan African countries. However, there is increasing evidence that these negative attitudes to work are gaining ground. This new trend is confirmed in the recent management audit [...]. The study revealed that slack time among the staff [...] exceeds 30 per cent. Therefore, there may still be significant opportunities for improving the manning levels and productivity in the Malawian civil service (World Bank 1994b: 27).

And indeed, instead of discharging their official duties many a Malawian civil servant moonlighted and spent time in the garden to grow food. However, this display of African entrepreneurial spirit did not stimulate economic growth as predicted by the authors of the 1989 World Bank report. On the contrary, for most of my informants business had become a necessary means to fend off the effects of a severe economic crisis that had deepened since democratisation in 1994. Several devaluations of the Kwacha and a high inflation rate of about 30 per cent had eroded salaries. Jobs and privileges, once taken for granted, were threatened, as the previous chapter illustrates. For most civil servants business was a desperate attempt to keep alive a dream of modest wealth and material security. The scope of this dream was quite *bourgeois*: building a house, acquiring furniture, providing the children with a good education so that they can lead a better life and enjoy the amenities of “modern” or “civilized” urban life.

By the late 1990s, this dream had become increasingly difficult to realise and a government job did not command the same respect as it had in the past. Many of my informants complained about the loss of respect since democratisation; one complained that even “the vendors at the market look down on us civil servants and the little money we earn”. Instead of acting out Banda’s ideal of the diligent, obedient and loyal servant, many civil servants adopted the cunning and successful entrepreneur as a role model.

The high inflation rate, the general economic *malaise* and the civil service reform all contributed to a profound sense of insecurity among civil servants, a section of the population that had previously enjoyed the privilege of state employment and the security that came with it. The experience of crisis was a dominant feature of everyday life not only in Malawi but throughout Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s. Most parts of the continent had been in the grip of economic decline since the 1980s. Mbembe & Roitman, for example, sketch

everyday life in Africa in terms of a deep anxiety caused by “economic depression, chain of upheavals and hibulations, instabilities, fluctuations and rupture of all sorts (wars, genocide, large-scale movements of populations, sudden devaluations of currencies, natural catastrophes, brutal collapses of prices ...)” (1995: 323). The decay of the “entire material and symbolic architecture” resulted in “surprise, perplexity and stupor” of people who struggled to make sense of the crisis (Mbembe & Roitman 1995). Ferguson (1999) describes a similar experience of crisis and loss in his ethnography of retrenched mine-workers in Zambia, who experienced economic and social decline during the 1980s. He also emphasises the experience of crisis and the dream of progress that never came true: “when the Copperbelt mineworkers expressed their sense of abjection from an imagined modern world ‘out there’, then, they were not simply lamenting a lack of connection but articulating a specific experience of *disconnection*, just as they inevitably described their material poverty not simply as a lack but as a loss” (Ferguson 1999: 238).

From these descriptions emerges a narrative of social decline and “abjection” experienced by the African *avantgarde* of modernization during the 1980s and 1990s comprising mineworkers, urbanites and civil servants. Those who expected to benefit first from modernization were especially disappointed when a dream that had appeared to be within their grasp dissolved like a mirage. Both present and future had become less predictable and any kind of contingency could trigger an acute crisis. The precarious situation of all strata of the population was sharply revealed during the food crisis in 2002. In February and March 2002, the mood in the country was grim and desperate, food shortages had turned into a full-blown famine, with many people dying by the beginning of 2002. Outright despair reigned among those who did not have enough money to supplement their depleted granaries and those in rural areas where no maize was available for months.

Although the World Bank report was wrong in seeing Africans’ entrepreneurial spirit as the motor of economic development, the growth of private – usually informal – business activities also had a positive side: they were a sign of the new political and economic liberties since 1994. The introduction of the free market was visible everywhere. In Lilongwe, Zomba or Blantyre privately owned minibuses filled the streets, private schools of often dubious quality were mushrooming and the pavements were lined with stalls where hawkers sold anything from drinks to stamps. The free market had also reached rural areas where the licensing system had been deregulated and everybody was free to cultivate tobacco and sell it on the market. Previously, smallhold farmers had been excluded from the cultivation of cash crops and ADMARC, the agricultural marketing board, had held the monopoly over all agricultural produce.

The deregulation of the market and the crumbling discipline in the civil service created opportunities for a small emerging class of influential business-people cum public officials who used their high position in the civil service to establish promising business contacts. Even junior civil servants who were relatives of the people “up there” or “at the top”, or who were otherwise related to them, could use these newly won freedoms to their advantage as the case studies presented in this chapter will show.

The meaning of having a job in the civil service

In a setting in which not only peoples' incomes but the whole economy fluctuates heavily due to the seasons of the agricultural cycle, drawing a regular monthly salary is an asset, the importance of which cannot be exaggerated. Only 2.5 per cent of the economically active population in 1994 were employed in the civil service (World Bank 1994b: 2, 3) but, according to World Bank figures, one in every three persons employed in the formal non-agricultural sector was employed in the civil service.

In Malawi, the salary was more than just an amount paid for services rendered. According to Mbembe, the salary in Africa should rather be conceptualised as an “allocation”. It is not perceived as “remuneration obtained for work done or service or duty performed” (Mbembe 2001: 45). Instead, the salary “acted as a resource the state could use to buy obedience and gratitude and to break the population to habits of discipline” (ibid.). In Malawi, as elsewhere in Africa, employment in the civil service constituted one of the scarce opportunities to benefit from the admittedly very limited social security provided by the state. Thus, relatively few civil servants were willing to quit the service, despite their frequent complaints about low salaries and unfavourable working conditions. Many informants in all salary grades pointed out that government employment itself constitutes a form of social security for them. The experience of being employed and drawing a regular salary was a central element in the construction of civil servants' subjectivity, i.e. the way they perceived themselves as a subject in relation to the world they lived in.

Besides the salary, government employment gave access to other benefits. Civil servants were also eligible for salary advances or government loans. During my fieldwork, civil servants made extensive use of these facilities, sometimes becoming indebted to the government to the extent that 80 per cent of the salary was deducted to pay off various loans. Other important benefits were pension payments after retirement, paid maternity leave and paid sick leave, as well as payment of funeral costs, terminal benefits to the deceased's spouse and a housing allowance. These benefits were invaluable considering

that Malawi only had rudimentary legislation on labour rights and social security.

A job in the civil service granted access to workshops and field trips, a considerable source of income for many civil servants. Allowances from workshops and trips to “the field” were part of the “Holy Trinity of the good civil servant” and every civil servant I met considered the per diems paid for the attendance of workshops or during trips outside the service station as a necessary supplement to their salary. Salaries had been eroding continuously due to the high inflation rates. Real income had fallen drastically. According to government estimates, the urban inflation rate between November 1998 and March 1999, for example, was more than 60 per cent, in April 1999 and May 1999 it dropped a little to 59 per cent, and in June and July inflation was at 56 per cent (GoM 1999: 46). The inflation rate had rarely dropped below 30 per cent since 1994. Even before that, during the 1980s, real income had been steadily shrinking. According to the World Bank, real basic salary in 1992 remained about 50 per cent below the 1982 levels (World Bank 1994b: 38).

The importance of government employment could be observed in Zomba, one of my field sites. Zomba did not offer much else than employment in one of the government departments, the university or the army. Usually a sleepy town, it livened up at month’s end when the government paid the monthly salary, a moment awaited with great impatience. The banks were crowded with civil servants, university employees and soldiers, waiting in long queues while they clutched pay slips and money orders, while others searched for a desk and a pen to fill in a withdrawal form. On the weekend after the salary was paid, soldiers from the army base flocked to town to spend their salaries on drinks and female company in one of the bottle stores (bars) and “resthouses”, as brothels were euphemistically referred to. The aisles of the supermarkets of Kandodo and PTC were crowded with civil servants’ wives buying necessary household items, such as soap and cooking oil. The market was busier than usual and people bought and bargained for meat, vegetables and other food. The wholesalers and Asian¹ shopkeepers made brisk business with government employees replenishing their stocks. The streets were crowded with private cars and government vehicles transporting civil servants and their purchases to and from the town. The bus station was teeming with people who wanted to travel to Limbe and Blantyre to buy goods from the wholesalers there, who offered better prices than the traders in Zomba. Others went to visit their relatives and it was difficult to find a seat in the packed buses.

¹ In Malawi, as generally in East Africa, people of south Asian origin whose ancestors came as contracted labourers during the 19th century are referred to as “Asians”.

Malawi was still far removed from a situation described by Mbembe & Roitman for Cameroon of the late 1980s and early 1990s where “one of the most flagrant signs of the decline of public power is what surely appears to be ‘the end of the salary’ and its substitution by occasional payments, the amounts of which are steadily declining” (Mbembe & Roitman 1995: 347). Generally, salaries were paid more or less on time, although occasional delays occurred, especially in the payment of primary school teachers’ salaries. These delays can be explained by the difficulties of managing the tens of thousands of teachers spread out across the country. Nevertheless, the prompt protests provoked by these delays highlighted the paramount importance of receiving the salaries on time. Even though salaries in Malawi were generally paid more or less on time civil servants experienced a kind of existential insecurity. Due to the rapidly rising prices it became more and more difficult to “make ends meet”. Most civil servants, especially those in junior and middle positions, had spent their month’s salary within two weeks. During the “hungry season” between January and March, when food prices were high and granaries largely depleted, the situation was even worse and it was no exception that people spent their monthly salary in the first week of the month. During the last two weeks of the month, the bars and rest houses in town were empty. It was also the time that many of my acquaintances went “hunting” for loans, as they said.

Many of them relied on salary advances paid by the government. The ministries and departments operated loan facilities for salary advances for specific purposes such as emergencies, the purchase of furniture or a car.² Interest on the loans was very low (at the time about 15 per cent) and the rates of repayment were very generous compared to private moneylenders or commercial banks, who often charged 50 per cent interest. Yet it became more and more difficult to obtain a salary advance. Under the impact of endemic illnesses and widespread poverty, demand for salary advances had outstripped the available resources. For civil servants outside the ministerial headquarters, like primary school teachers, these loan facilities had never been really accessible but, since the late 1990s, it had become extremely difficult even for officers at the headquarters to get a salary advance. Since the government had introduced the so-called cash budget system³ to improve budgetary discipline, it had become virtually impossible for the rank and file to obtain salary advances. The negative effects of the austerity measures and the overwhelming demand were com-

² Malawi Public Service Regulations (1991) 1: 701-708 (Part A: Advances of Salary Generally), 1: 710-715 (Part B: Education Advances), 1: 718-722 (Part C: Emergency Advances), 1: 725-731 (Part D: Bicycle Advances), 1: 733-745 (Part E: Motor Vehicle Advances).

³ Cash budget is a measure to check overspending and means that a department cannot spend more money than allocated by the annual budget.

pounded by the high inflation rate that not only eroded salaries but also the ministerial funds for loans.

The costs of living had exploded since 1994. Prices for electricity and water had gone up after the privatisation of the electricity and water sectors. People had no financial reserves to be used in case of illness or accident. It was virtually impossible to plan ahead. Any day a new misfortune might drain savings that were already under heavy pressure from the high inflation rate. A friend of mine, for example, who occupied a relatively senior position in the civil service, had planned to build a house for years and finally he had been able to save enough money to buy a plot and begin construction work. But just after the foundations had been laid his mother-in-law was attacked by burglars and needed support and medical care. Shortly afterwards, his own mother was diagnosed with cancer and had to be treated at an expensive private clinic in Blantyre. Again, it was he who had to step in to foot the medical bills and drugs. Luckily he was able to secure a salary advance of more than MK 100,000, which enabled him to cover all the costs for the medical treatment of his mother-in-law and mother. This meant, however, that the completion of the house would be delayed for years and he would be indebted for years to come.

Indebtedness was a common phenomenon among civil servants during the 1990s. It was no exception that two thirds of the basic salary was deducted to pay back salary advances and interests. For example, one of my informants presented his payslip of 30 September 1998, in which more than two thirds of the basic pay had already been deducted. Basic pay was MK 2,937 (at that time about US\$ 80) plus MK 15 duty allowance. The following items had been deducted: MK 67.30 rent for a house leased by the government from the Malawi Housing Corporation (MHC), MK 547.99 income tax, MK 85.72 interest on a General Purpose Advance, MK 84.72 interest on an Emergency Advance, MK 78.39 interest on a Motor Vehicle Advance, MK 385.97 payback for the salary advance for the car, MK 500 back for the Emergency Advance and MK 422.75 repayment of the General Purpose Advance, leaving the civil servant in question with MK 806.16. e.g. about US\$ 10, for the whole month. Considering the urban inflation rate of 42.9 per cent in September and 51.9 per cent in October 1998 (GoM 1999: 46), it must have been very difficult indeed for him "to make ends meet".

Only a few options were available to the average civil servant. Under pressure to repay loans and interests and due to the increasing difficulties to secure a salary advance, people resorted to so-called welfare committees in offices or schools, revolving funds for funerals and emergency loans that had been established to compensate the loss of the government loans. However, many of these funds had also collapsed. Firstly, they shrank under the influence of the high inflation rate and, secondly, demand for advances was growing due

to the general crisis. Especially junior civil servants, who could not activate a resourceful network to raise money, were often forced to resort to moneylenders known as *katapila*, who charged at least 50 per cent interest on a loan. Commercial banks were not an option either, since they demanded collateral and also charged 50 per cent interest. Many of my informants were so indebted that they serviced loans with other loans, never breaking even.

In spite of these difficulties employment in the civil service still gave access to a number of benefits including paid sick leave, maternity leave, pension benefits, death benefits and payment of a housing allowance. According to the Malawi Public Service Regulations (MPSR) a civil servant was entitled to six months' sick leave with full pay, a pension after 20 years of service or upon reaching the age of 55, payment of the funeral costs in case of death and payment of a death benefit to the heirs. Female civil servants were eligible for up to three months paid maternity leave. The Workers' Compensation Act provided for compensation payments in case of injuries sustained or illnesses contracted while working.

One of the vital benefits was the payment of funeral costs. The payment of funeral costs was considered to constitute an essential part of civil service employment, as important as the salary. The MPSR paid for the coffin and provided a maximum of four vehicles "for the purpose of transporting, by the most direct route, the body of the deceased and the accompanying persons and personal effects from the mortuary or other place where the body lies to the place of burial" (MPSR 1: 192.1). The same provision applied for a civil servant's family members "living at the service station", although, in case of a family member, only two vehicles were allowed (MPSR 1: 192.2). The government differed in this respect from employers in the private sector, who often tried to avoid paying the funeral costs of their employees or their dependants. It occurred regularly that angry relatives and co-workers "dropped" the corpse of a deceased in front of the entrance of the company building in order to force the employer to pay the costs of the funeral. In the end, it was usually the employer who gave in to get rid of the corpse and restore peace among the employees (Otanez 2000).

Funerals were a dominant feature in people's lives during my fieldwork between 1999 and 2002. The mortality rate among all segments of the population was very high and life expectancy was estimated to be less than 40 years. About 20 per cent of the population was HIV/AIDS positive, according to official estimates. The army, police and the civil service were believed to belong to the professions most affected by HIV/AIDS (only truck drivers and prostitutes had higher infection rates). Death was ubiquitous and hardly a week passed without the funeral of a friend, colleague, relative or neighbour. Obituaries where the cause of death was a "long sickness", a euphemism for HIV/AIDS,

filled several pages in the newspapers. Road accidents, caused by drunken or reckless driving, also took a heavy toll; accidents with dozens killed or injured were common.

Funerals were part of my daily fieldwork routine. Whole departments closed down for one or two days because the staff was attending the funeral of a colleague or a colleague's family member. It happened more than once that I arrived at an office or a school only to find the premises deserted because most of the staff were attending a funeral. Usually the corpse would be on display in the family's house in town before being transported to the home village to be buried. Most funerals in Malawi took place in the home village and it was of great concern to people whether they could be buried in their home village. Since the cost of a coffin and its transportation to the home village was so high, the MPSR's funeral allowance was highly valued by civil servants. Burial ceremonies in the home village strengthened and reproduced kinship and ancestral ties. For the villagers it was an important sign of respect if the successful son or daughter, who had worked for the government, was buried in the village graveyard, *manda*.

Funerals had become so much part of everyday life that people used them as a resource. They gave them the opportunity, not only to pay respect to the deceased, but also to visit their own relatives and friends, or to attend to other matters. Funerals had even become sites where deals were made and goods were purchased, as one of my friends wrote me:

A new phenomenon of late is that people collect maize from the villages when escorting the body of the dead office mate, friend or relative from town to the village. It is more common than not that those residing in town when they die or when they get seriously sick, should be taken to their home village for burial or 'treatment' or to wait for their last day. As such, it is common practice that a lorry (3 toner and above) is provided for colleagues, townmates, relatives and ferrying goods from town to the village. Those coming from far away places (the existing stereotype is that this practice is more common among Northerners than any other group in Malawi, though it is also practised by others) collect maize, fish, relatives, etc. on their return journey. This is a cost saving mechanism, as they cannot go on their own funding to most of their remote villages to collect maize (e-mail of July 2001).

According to my friend there was a direct link between people attending funerals and the economic crisis. Due to the high inflation rate, people were no longer able to visit their home villages. Prices for bus tickets had been continuously rising: In 2000, the trip from Zomba to Lilongwe cost about MK 250 and the one from Lilongwe to Mzuzu on the northern cost about MK 500. These were substantial amounts, considering that the average monthly salary was MK 3000 to 4000, of which half or more was deducted beforehand to service debts.

Consequently, a funeral in the home area was a welcome opportunity to visit relatives and friends for free.

Funerals were a heavy burden on the government budget: The cost of coffins, the use of government vehicles and the loss of work time were substantial. A senior officer in the OPC complained that “half of the government vehicles drive through the country carrying corpses” and I was told that the ambulances in Zomba were mainly used for the transportation of deceased employees of the Ministry of Health or their deceased relatives, instead of being available for the transportation of patients and victims of accidents.⁴ Even the IMF expressed concern about the high cost of funerals of government employees and their families. At the end of March 2000, the IMF sent a confidential memo to the government of Malawi that urgently “recommended” more controls on expenditures for funerals, and restrictions on civil servants attending funerals and the provision of vehicles. In Zambia, for example, the government had introduced the rule that funerals were to be held on Saturdays only. In Malawi, however, a similar measure was not being considered, since it was expected that any infringement on the payment of funeral costs would be met by fierce resistance from civil servants and trade unions, as a Deputy Secretary at OPC told me. He said the government was not prepared to deal with angry employees “dropping dead bodies” at the ministries’ doorsteps.

My informants were obsessed with allowances for the attendance of workshops, field trips and travels abroad. In principle, the allowance or per diem is meant to compensate the civil servant for extra expenses incurred while being away from the service station. In practice, however, allowances were considered to be a necessary supplement to the salary in difficult times. Often civil servants stayed with relatives or friends and saved the allowances they received for the trip. The per diem amounts were significant: for the attendance of a workshop or a trip to “the field” an officer could earn as much as his or her monthly salary in one day.

The top officials in the ministerial headquarters in Lilongwe benefited most from workshops and travel allowances. Foreign travel allowances for trips abroad were as high as US\$ 260 per day paid in foreign currency. Of course civil servants had to use the money for their expenses made on the trip, but usually people were able to save money if they wanted to. The opportunity to save foreign currency when the national currency was depreciating rapidly due to inflation was very attractive indeed. Considering that the annual salary of an

⁴ There were no official statistics or estimates available at the time of writing. My information on the issue of funerals was provided by senior civil servants in the OPC who were in a position to assess the impact of civil servants’ funerals on the government resources.

officer with a Superscale-post⁵ was less than US\$ 2000 and that the salary of civil servants in the professional, executive and technical classes rarely exceeded US\$ 1000⁶, it should not come as a surprise that travels abroad, workshops and “field trips” were very popular among civil servants. Allowances were paid as a lump sum, thus offering the civil servant a considerable amount, which could be invested in a business venture or used to buy a plot, for example. In the houses of my informants, each luxury item, such as a fan, refrigerator, television set, video recorder or cupboard, signified a field trip or workshop.

I could observe the almost redemptive force of allowances during my visits to the usual workshop venues, such as the Capital Hotel in Lilongwe, the Mount Soche Hotel in Blantyre or one of the lakeside resorts near Mangochi. The arrival of the accountant with the government-issued brown envelopes, containing the per diems was anticipated with tension and excitement, dissolving into laughter and banter after the envelopes have been handed out. To be deprived of one’s allowance and to be forced to rely exclusively on one’s salary was almost as threatening as losing one’s job. Allowances, however, were unpredictable and sometimes it could take months before a civil servant was sent to a workshop or a field trip. Especially in the lower ranks of the civil service, the chance to attend a workshop was considered a rare stroke of luck, only comparable to winning a lottery prize. Unlike the salary, allowances depended to a large extent on the grace of the superior officer who had the authority to grant or deny the permission to attend a workshop or go on a field trip. Consequently many of my informants in the lower salary grades were in a constant state of anxiety, trying to please their superiors on whose goodwill they depended.

By the late 1990s, workshops had become a familiar feature of my informants’ lives. After the democratic elections in 1994, many donor agencies and NGOs flocked to the country to promote development, civic virtues and human rights (Englund 2006). The main means to transmit the necessary knowledge to civil servants and “stakeholders” were workshops: workshops on HIV/AIDS, management, human rights, accounting, “sensitising” workshops, workshops for traditional leaders, for extension workers, for controlling officers, etc. Most of these workshops were organised and paid by one of the donor agencies. Hotels and resorts were often fully booked on the weekends with workshops for civil servants, and many hotels depended on the income generated by hosting

⁵ S5/P5 and below; in 2000 Superscale officers in the grades P4/S4 and above who participate in the contract scheme earned more than US \$ 36,000 per annum.

⁶ Revision of salaries and wages in the civil service, Circular of the Secretary for Human Resource Management and Development 12.7.1999.

workshops for civil servants and NGOs. Often civil servants could choose from several parallel workshops and they would attend the workshop in the best hotel or where the highest rates were paid.

Per diem rates were not standardised and there were considerable discrepancies between the rates paid by different donor agencies. Most workshops were fully paid by the donor agency organising the event, including the per diem for attending civil servants. From time to time, the government issued a circular, setting the allowances paid for the attendance of workshops and training programmes. The donor agencies, in turn, set their own rates. Some would pay the minimum rates set by the government, whilst others paid more. These discrepancies led to disagreements. In 1999, the government and the donor agencies agreed that the donor agencies would pay a minimum daily subsistence allowance of MK 600. On 12 January 2000, however, the government revised subsistence allowances and set the per diem rate at a minimum of MK 880, without consulting the donor agencies. Consequently the civil servants demanded payment of the new rates. Several donor agencies initially refused, arguing that the government could not revise allowances for the workshops without prior consultation. In the end, however, the donor agencies had to give in because the civil servants simply refused to attend workshops that paid rates lower than those set by the government.

It proved to be difficult to meet civil servants, especially in the higher positions, because they were constantly “temporarily out of office”, as the phrase went. Of course, it can be expected that top functionaries are extremely busy, but it was striking how many workshops they visited. The report of an external consultant hired to assess the civil service reform nicely illustrates this phenomenon:

The main drawback to his [the consultant’s] work programme was the general non-availability of Principal Secretaries during the visit. The Principal Secretary at the Department for Human Resource Management and Development (DHRMD) [...] was absent for the entire week in South Africa together with one of his Deputy Secretaries. The Deputy Secretary to the President and Cabinet [...], together with most other Principal Secretaries, was committed to attending a workshop in Mangochi. All of senior management of the Ministry of Education were on a visit to Mozambique until early June, Ministry of Agriculture top management was committed to a World Bank mission for the week, and the Secretary to the Treasury was in South Africa for the week (KPMG 1996: 4).

In 2000, the situation had got so out of control that the donor agencies and the government took action. In May 2000, the Cabinet issued a directive that in the future all workshops and seminars should be held in Lilongwe and Blantyre. At a workshop in Blantyre, the Community Services Minister announced that the measure was intended to “check the movements of civil servants as they

carry out their duties and thus to improve efficiency and productivity in the public sector.” The newspaper ironically reported that the meeting was poorly attended because half of the NGO community was having a policy meeting in Mangochi” at the lakeshore (Nation, 18 May 2000). A few days later, the newspapers reported that representatives of the tourism industry had warned of the negative effects for the national tourism industry because the hotels and holiday resorts of the country depended to a large extent on the income from the workshops. It might not be coincidental that this measure was announced in the same week that the meetings of the consultative group were held in Lilongwe, where all representatives of the donor agencies had urged the government to stop wasteful spending. According to my information, the circular was never implemented and the lake resorts continued to host workshops for civil servants.

Workshops were not only a source of income for many civil servants, they also constituted a refuge, and it is apt to speak of a veritable “workshop culture”. Workshops were the place to drink alcohol and have extramarital sex with one of the numerous “bar girls” that crowded the hotel bars. Workshops provided one of the few ways to have a good time and escape from the depressing reality of inflation, illness and death. I was present on more than one occasion, where the laughter of civil servants, who had drunk themselves into a stupor, seemed to create some distance to the experience of the crisis, but often their derision tasted of despair and hopelessness, instead of joy and sociability.

Drinking and sexual encounters often already started on the way to a workshop and it was no exception for civil servants to arrive drunk at the workshop venue. A short story published in March 2002, in the literary section of the newspaper *The Nation*, provides an illustration of “workshop culture”. The title of the story was “A night in Zomba” and described the journey of a civil servant and his boss from Blantyre to a workshop in Mangochi, at the lake. The author’s boss, Mr. Deseki “was at home at almost all entertainment places along the road to Mangochi. A letter addressed to one of those places was bound to arrive safely.” The boss announced that they would make several stops on the way to Mangochi: “we need to enjoy ourselves sometimes, after all we only live once”. And indeed the boss decided to make a stopover in Zomba, about 60 km north of Blantyre on the M 3 road to Mangochi.

The atmosphere in the restaurant was inviting: “We found everybody as busy as a bee, taking drinks of their choice. They played beautiful *kwasa* music [dance music from Zaire] that made most of us forget that we still had a long way to get to our destination” and by “10.30 p.m. the bar was full. Young ladies had outnumbered men. Mr. Desiki was already engaged in a serious talk with one of the ladies. The mood was tempting. Suddenly, a feeling landed in me to get myself closer to a lady sitting at the entrance”. However, the author resisted, he thought his boss might decide to proceed to Mangochi. This fear,

however, was unfounded: the boss “advised us that it was not safe to travel in the night. He directed that we spend the night in Zomba, and proceed the next morning”. All officers received money from the boss to pay for accommodation and everybody went to bed in a nearby guesthouse where the author of the story is lulled into sleep by the “happy noisy voices of young men and women”.

The reforms and the crisis had fuelled a sense of insecurity and unpredictability among civil servants. In the government offices, the atmosphere was tense and frenzied. Everybody was hoping to attend workshops and be sent to the field or to training courses outside the country. Often civil servants did not save the allowance to invest in their businesses or redistribute among their dependants, but rather to indulge in the consumption of alcohol and sex. In this sense, the workshop constituted a place of inversion where everything that was usually forbidden was allowed. So workshops served both as a refuge and as a major source of income for civil servants.

“How to make ends meet”

Virtually all civil servants were engaged in business and trade. Their business enterprises ranged from selling second-hand clothes (*kaunjika*) and raising poultry to running restaurants, bars and resthouses, as well as taxis or minibuses, maize mills, saw mills or tailor shops. Others traded tobacco or travelled to neighbouring countries and to South Africa to buy wholesale goods. Most of them did so “to make ends meet”, as they said. It was also common practice to cultivate a plot or “garden”, either in the home village or near town, where they grew maize and vegetables mainly for subsistence.⁷ Some had more land and cultivated maize and cash crops. Especially in the central region and the North, many senior civil servants owned estates where they cultivated tobacco and maize.

This was not a new phenomenon. Already during the 1940s, African employees of the colonial administration doubled as businessmen. Vaughan, for example, mentions a “small group of clerks and retired clerks [in Domasi Area] who were also involved in timber trading” and maize traders in the Blantyre district who were retired government employees (Vaughan 1987: 104, 105). This pattern did not change after independence. A civil servant would set up a business, such as a maize mill or a grocery store, after retirement. The retirement age was 55, but after 20 years of service he or she could opt for retirement and the payment of the retirement benefits. The payment of a

⁷ A “garden” denoted a plot of land where people cultivated cash crops and foodstuff, in Chichewa *munda* (sg.), *minda* (pl.). Gardens were of widely varying size, in the southern region only rarely bigger than 2 acres. Gardens were distinguished from estates where maize and cash crops such as tobacco or tea were produced.

gratuity as a lump sum after retirement enabled the pensioner to invest in a business and start a second career at a relatively young age. In the 1990s, the emphasis appeared to have shifted from business after retirement to business parallel to the official function. Representing a sort of insurance that enabled civil servants to maintain a reasonable standard of living after retirement, the business served to compensate for eroding salaries.

Business was the buzzword of civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba. In Zomba, “Asians”, people of south Asian origin, dominated the commercial sector, while the few businesses owned by Africans were mainly in the hands of government employees. For example, one of Zomba’s popular clubs at Three Miles, a township and trading centre three miles southwest of Zomba, was owned by an army officer, a major posted at the army base in Zomba. The club was a large building with a parking lot and a spacious porch. Inside there were two rooms, a bar and a large dance floor. The major told me that he did not intend to stay in Zomba after he retired but wanted to open a nightclub in Lilongwe because Zomba was too poor: “There are only civil servants, they have no money you know!”

The term business denoted any private or informal commercial activity and covered a wide range of activities. After 1994, many civil servants invested in commerce and trade. This had previously not been possible under Banda when the economy was strictly regulated and government employees had very little leeway. During Banda’s time civil servants were considerably restricted in their out-of-office activities; they lived in constant fear of being arrested or dismissed from service as a suspected dissident. Subjected to strict control, they had to live up to Banda’s credo of diligence, obedience, loyalty and unity, the four cornerstones of Malawi nationalism.

When the strict discipline that used to be enforced under Banda weakened, civil servants invested heavily in the private economy. They were able to do so because of a favourable starting position. By virtue of their employment they enjoyed a regular salary and access to monetary benefits, such as salary advances and allowances. Furthermore, their employment gave them privileged access to all types of infrastructure, such as vehicles and telecommunications, that were used for private ends, not to mention the valuable contacts that come with a privileged position in the civil service. All these assets functioned as capital, which they could invest in their private businesses.

It is impossible to provide an exhaustive list of businesses of civil servants. Relative large-scale businesses included minibus or taxi businesses, private schools and fishing boats. Medium-scale businesses might involve the breeding of poultry, second-hand clothes shops, a restaurant, a bar, a shop or a maize mill, while small-scale businesses ranged from selling *mandazi* (local donuts), *samosas* (local stuffed pastries) to soft drinks, potato chips or *freezies* (water

ice). The scale of a business operation depended on the amount of money invested. A bar could be a hut with a thatched roof or it could be bottle store in town owned by a senior civil servant with electricity, bottled beer and food served, or anything in between. The scale of the business reflected the social status and wealth of the civil servant: high-ranking civil servants ran large-scale businesses that required substantial investment and know-how, while junior civil servants were engaged in small-scale businesses requiring only a small investment. Rarely civil servants worked in their businesses themselves; usually they supervised the work of employees and relatives. Yet many of my informants devoted a considerable amount of time to managing their businesses. Many of them owned more than one business, often together with their spouse. The income from these activities could be the equivalent of a month's salary or more.

Agriculture was the other pillar on which many civil servants relied. Virtually all people had plots where they cultivated maize, groundnuts, pumpkins or cash crops, such as tobacco and cotton. During my fieldwork, between 1999 and 2002, agricultural production had become more important than ever before. For many civil servants, it had become necessary to grow food to feed their families. Hence, people tried to spread the risk by combining their jobs with various business endeavours and the cultivation of foodstuffs and cash crops.

Common cash crops cultivated by civil servants were maize, cassava, vegetables and tobacco. This was done at all levels of seniority, from the junior civil servant who sold cassava to earn some extra money to the senior civil servant who owned a large tobacco estate in the central region. Between these extremes, government employees operated farms of all sizes, where they cultivated maize, vegetables or groundnuts. Others raised cattle or poultry. It was well known that many high-ranking officers from the ministerial headquarters in Lilongwe owned large tobacco estates in Kasungu district. The reason for this was Kamuzu Banda's decision to promote tobacco as Malawi's main cash crop. He had promoted the expansion of the large-scale tobacco sector as a national development strategy and had acquired large estates in Kasungu district where he established tobacco estates to produce high-quality flue-cured tobacco. He urged the elite of party officials and bureaucrats to follow his example and hundreds of party officials and senior civil servants received soft loans from the Agricultural Division of the Commercial Bank to develop their estates. They established large estates on former Crown land that had been confiscated by Banda himself where they grew tobacco, which was to become by far the greatest earner of foreign currency (by the end of the 1980s, tobacco accounted for about 70 per cent of Malawi's export earnings) (GoM 2001: 70; Williams 1978: 280).

Apart from cash crops, it was common to grow maize to feed the household. This was both a matter of necessity and pride. *Nsima*, the porridge made from maize flour (*ufa*), is at the centre of every Malawian meal and, according to Malawians, one has not eaten without a helping of *nsima*.⁸ “We Malawians are proud to grow our own food” was an often heard statement. To be able to grow one’s own food was a source of pride in Malawi, symbolising respect for tradition. Even people in wage employment, living in urban areas, cultivated maize along with cassava and vegetables.⁹ To grow one’s own maize was a means to increase the food security of a household and to reduce dependency on dwindling salaries. The location of civil servants’ gardens varied. Some rented a garden close to their service station, whereas others had a garden on family-owned land in their home village, often not far from where they lived. Types of landholding also varied widely. Some rented a plot from private landowners or village authorities, while others cultivated a plot that had been acquired by relatives or allocated to the family by the village headman.

Two types of garden need to be distinguished: the garden in the home village and the one close to the place of residence. The former was usually situated on what people referred to as “family land”, while the latter was bought or let as an individual title against payment. Family land was a broad term covering land under customary law tenure allocated by the village authorities to the family and land that had been bought. In a village, the headman had the authority to allocate gardens to the families that made up the village. This was their right as members of the village and they did not have to make any payments for the rights to use the land. Family members with traditional authority such as the *asyene mbumba* (ChiYao) or the *mwini mbumba* (ChiChewa), the guardians of a sorority group consisting of their sisters and their sisters’ children, allocated plots of family land to individual family members. It is important to note that it was legally impossible to acquire ownership of customary land, according to the Customary Title Act. The village headmen and the representatives of the families could only confer usufruct rights. An individual’s claim to a certain plot of land was only effective if the person cultivated the plot; uncultivated and thus unclaimed land could be assigned to other individuals or families by the village authorities.

Having a garden on family-owned land in the home village had many advantages and was of highly symbolical significance. It was tangible proof of the sense of belonging to the village and to the rural kin. Economically, a garden on

⁸ *Nsima* is served with a side-dish or “relish”, *ndiwo*. Typical ingredients are pumpkin leaves, peas, cassava leaves, sweet potatoes, cabbage, eggs, fish, meat, fungi and insects such as *ngumbi*.

⁹ On urban agriculture in East Africa, see Foeken (2006).

family land was very attractive because it came without charges. For many, the distance to their place of residence was a problem. If the garden was too far away, the disadvantages outweighed the advantages because transport costs were too high and tending to the garden became too difficult. Therefore, junior civil servants, such as teachers and extension workers, were usually posted close to their home area to enable them to make use of the customary land in their home village.

Cordial relations with the relatives in the village were vital for civil servants with gardens in the home village. Those who lived at a distance were not able to supervise the work in their gardens themselves but had to rely on relatives to keep an eye on things in their absence. The role of the relatives in the village was ambivalent. Usually they looked after the civil servant's garden during his or her absence and helped to maintain the garden. And yet there was a good deal of distrust between the civil servants from town and their rural kin in the home village. Stories of thefts of crops or whole harvests by relatives in the village were widespread among my informants.

As a result of these problems, many civil servants decided to rent or buy a garden closer to town. From their perspective, a garden close to town had many advantages: it was easy to supervise, transport costs were low and one did not have to deal with jealous and stealing relatives. Many civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba rented one or more plots in one of the surrounding villages. This land was either let by the village headman himself or by villagers, with the permission of the village headman. Without the permission of the village headman, it was not possible to rent a plot on the territory under his jurisdiction. In theory, these transactions were illegal, since it was not possible to acquire a legal title on land regulated by customary law. Nevertheless, the lease and sale of land was common among the traditional authorities in the vicinity of Lilongwe and Zomba.

The size and location of the plots depended to a large extent on social status and income. Junior civil servants with only little capital depended exclusively on the produce of the garden in the home village, while others, who were wealthier, were able to have one or more gardens close to town, in addition to the one in the home village, which they kept to display their attachment to the village rather than to produce food for themselves. Many civil servants had abandoned their claim to land in their home village and relied exclusively on their gardens close to town for their food supply.

The motives for the decision to focus on the garden close to town were diverse, but the distance to the home area was of prime importance, as one of my informants observed:

Because of migration to towns in search for work or 'greener pastures', many people have developed the attitude of 'home is where you are comfortable and you have

your own land'. As such, many have bought land elsewhere and built their homes there, too. Because of this they can't go home to collect maize which they didn't cultivate.

Others had to rent a garden because of the scarcity of land in the home village. In many districts, especially in the southern region, land had become an extremely scarce commodity. Population growth was so high in many areas that individual plots had become too small to produce sufficient yield for people's livelihoods. This forced many of the civil servants I met during the course of my fieldwork in the South to rent plots elsewhere, where land was still available. Another important factor in the decision to withdraw from the home village and focus instead on gardens closer to the service station in town was the ambivalent relationship with rural kin, a complex issue that will be addressed in more detail in the following chapter.

Malawians' dream of food security proved to be precarious during the famine that affected large parts of Malawi in 2002.¹⁰ The famine revealed the importance of a regular income and the limitations of subsistence farming. Generally, people employed by the government and the formal sector did not suffer too much from food shortages, although many people encountered serious difficulties in paying the high maize prices. In February and March 2002, I was staying with a friend in Biwi, a township in Lilongwe. The hungry villagers, who flocked to the towns in a desperate search for help, had nothing to fall back on: their granaries had been depleted a long time ago and they had no money to buy food. Almost every day a hungry relative from the village would find his or her way to the house of my friend where they would receive a warm meal and some money to buy one of the little five kg bags of *ufa* that were sold at exorbitant prices in town. Everybody complained about the high prices that had quadrupled since the beginning of the food crisis, in September 2001, but those with a regular salary could get by, whereas those with no regular income had nothing but the pity of their relatives to fall back on.

The famine revealed the risks of subsistence farming. The harvest might be excellent one year while a season's labour might be destroyed by floods or a draught the following year. During the famine, even salaried people were in dire straits and had many dependants to look after. One of them, a junior civil servant in Domasi, a peri-urban settlement 20 km north of Zomba, supported two young sons, four daughters and three grandchildren who depended on his support. Furthermore, he occasionally supported his mother, his five sisters and their children, the *mbumba*. In 2000 and 2001, he had a good harvest that lasted until November 2001. In November 2001, he had bought two bags (50 kg each)

¹⁰ For more details on the famine see Chapter 1. Devereux (2002) published the most comprehensive study on the causes of the famine yet.

for MK 850 (compared to MK 450 in July 2001 and MK 250 in 2000) from ADMARC. Since his mother and his sisters did not have any food left at the time and no money to buy food, he shared the maize he had purchased from ADMARC with them and by the end of December there was nothing left. In December 2001, he went back to ADMARC to buy more maize but by this time ADMARC's reserves were almost depleted and it was only with the help of a friend of his late father, who worked for ADMARC, that he was able to buy 75 kg of maize. During our conversations in February 2002, he told me "the maize will be finished next week". His situation was especially difficult because he had to buy fertilizer for the crop of the harvest seasons of 2001 and 2002. He had bought two bags of fertilizer for MK 1200 and half a bag for his mother. Unlike the previous years, he was not able to buy fertilizer for his sisters: "They were disappointed because they depend on me. I promised to share my harvest with them". He expected a bad harvest for April 2002: "People in the village have no fertilizer, this year there is a lot of adult malnutrition, people are dying of hunger!" Unlike them, my informant was lucky. By means of his salary he was able to buy food and also seeds and fertiliser for his gardens, and even provide support for his relatives although he was stretched to the limit.

Many who had dreamed of achieving affluence and financial stability one day saw their dreams crumble during the food crisis. In February 2002, furniture like a sofa, a cupboard, a dining table and chairs cost between MK 10,000 and MK 50,000. A mattress cost between MK 2,000 and MK 5,000, a television set MK 20,000, a stereo set MK 10,000, and a refrigerator MK 15,000. Private school tuition cost between MK 4,000 and MK 10,000 per term, depending on the school, and a plot of undeveloped land in one of the outskirts of Lilongwe cost about MK 80,000. For a middle-ranking civil servant who earned MK 10,000, including all allowances per month, these things had always been difficult to attain, but through iron discipline and salary advances, many civil servants had succeeded in making this dream come true. However, in February 2002, not one of my acquaintances could even think of buying a refrigerator or a television set. Confronted with a bad harvest and the demands of starving relatives in the rural areas, they were forced to buy *ufa* for MK 800 to MK 1000 per 50 kg bag. All other plans had to be shelved and all resources had to be used to fend off the effects of the food shortage.

Winners and losers of economic liberalisation

It should be noted that the economic crisis and the 2002 food shortages did not affect all my informants to the same degree. Obviously those in higher positions had more resources at their disposal, but even within the lower salary grades some were doing better than others, as two detailed case studies will exemplify.

In February 2000, I was conducting fieldwork in Zomba where I accompanied two extension workers from the Ministry of Health, so-called Health Surveillance Assistants (HSA), who were posted at a health post in Domasi township near Zomba.¹¹ They formed a team whose task was to educate people on health and hygiene issues and to administer drugs and vaccines as well as chlorine for clean drinking water. They also assisted the Clinical Officer and the staff at the health post, a dilapidated compound of three buildings dating back to colonial times. Two to three days a week they were supposed to tour the surrounding villages assigned to them with bicycles provided by the government. Both were from the area and belonged to the same ethnic group, the Yao.

The Yao are descendants of various groups originating from present-day northern Mozambique that entered the territories south of Lake Malawi at the beginning of the 19th century as slave and ivory traders, acting as intermediaries with Arab and Swahili traders on the East-African coast. When they settled in present-day Malawi, they mixed with the local Nyanja population and adopted local customs. The Yao are organised matrilineally with the *mbumba*, the local sorority group of sisters and their children, as the central family unit. The brother, usually the oldest one, acts as their guardian or warden, *asyene mbumba*, and is responsible for his sisters' and their children's well-being. He settles quarrels within the *mbumba*, is responsible for his sisters' children, distributes the family land among his sisters and their daughters and represents the *mbumba* (Mitchell 1956). Marriage is said to be generally uxorial although virilocal residence patterns increasingly seem to replace uxorial residence patterns, especially among people who live in towns and are employed in the formal sector.

Mr. Kabula¹² was the typical example of a junior civil servant of the older generation with only little formal education and no connection to people with wealth and influence. He was engaged in various small-scale business endeavours and subsistence farming to secure his and his family's livelihood. His business enterprises had met with mixed success and he was barely able to "make ends meet", even in years with a good harvest, such as in 2000. He was 47 and had been working as an extension worker for the Ministry of Health since 1975. From 1975 to 1993, he had served as a Grade 3 Industrial Class employee with daily wages and no retirement benefits. In 1993, he was integrated into the establishment of the civil service and became a civil servant, Subordinate Class Grade 2, with a monthly salary and pension benefits. In 2000

¹¹ Both informants spoke Chiyao, Chichewa and English. Interviews were conducted in Chichewa and English.

¹² All names of informants are fictive to protect their identities.

he earned about MK 2000 (about US\$ 25 at that time) per month, including a housing allowance of 15 per cent of his basic salary (MK 300).

He was a widower and had four daughters and three sons, all of whom lived with him and depended on his support. He commanded considerable respect in the village and he acted as an advisor, *nduna*, to his village headman. Once he had had higher aspirations. He expressed regret that he had not been able to finish secondary school because of health problems in his adolescence. He had dropped out after two years at Likuni Secondary School, a Catholic boarding school considered to be one of the best schools in the country. Since he had left school without a certificate, his career opportunities were limited and he was never promoted in the years he had been working as an extension worker.

Nevertheless, he was dedicated to his work. For example he planned his trips to the villages carefully: "I always make a plan: I am the only person at the hospital who does that". He complained about his colleagues and superiors at the health post who were jealous and preferred to stay at home, attending to their private businesses. According to Mr. Kabula "a good HSA should be interested in his work, should be dedicated to his or her duties, should be knowledgeable and have skills; he or she should be co-operative, show respect to villagers and superior officers and should know what she or he wants to do. Otherwise he could not manage to work with the community. A good HSA should know the community".

Mr. Kabula knew his village well, since this was his home area. He lived on a compound, consisting of several houses on family land, at a distance of about two km from the health post. The houses were ordinary village houses, built of mud bricks with a grass-thatched roof and a stamped mud floor with no glass windows. All houses only had one room. He owned almost no furniture, only a few chairs and a bed frame. Cooking was done with firewood in a small shed and there was a pit latrine close by. His compound was not connected to electricity and water. Close were two gardens of about one acre each where Mr. Kabula cultivated maize for subsistence. Under ideal circumstances, the two gardens produced enough food for himself, his children and grandchildren, and even provided additional reserves for relatives in need until December. In a good year, he was able to harvest ten bags of maize (50 kg each). To shore up reserves for the hungry months of January and February, when food prices would soar, he would occasionally buy a 50 kg bag of maize from ADMARC for MK 250. However, subsistence farming required considerable investments. For his gardens he needed at least two bags of fertiliser at about MK 800 each and he had to employ casual labour, *waganyu*, for weeding and harvesting. In addition, he had to buy fertilizer for the plot of his frail mother and pay for *waganyu* working there.

Mr. Kabula had not remarried after the death of his wife in the previous year. He lived in one house, together with his youngest son of six years. A fifteen-year-old daughter and her child lived in the second house. The father of the child, who was 16 years old, had deserted them and stayed at his brother's in Blantyre. Two younger daughters and one son, who attended primary school, lived in the third house. His fourth daughter, who attended secondary school in a nearby trading centre, had left. She recently moved to her husband's village nearby where he operated a maize mill but he had gone bankrupt after a short time. The young couple was in dire straits financially, and her two children lived in Mr. Kabula's household. The fourth daughter visited him frequently and often stayed several days on his compound. In other words, all his children and grandchildren depended on Mr. Kabula.

His children and grandchildren were not the only relatives depending on his support. Mr. Kabula had eight sisters who lived in the same village, some of whom were married and all of whom had children living with them. His only brother, who was older, lived in Mangochi and had severed the ties with the family. Therefore Mr. Kabula bore the family responsibilities as the guardian of his sisters and their children, the *mbumba*. In this capacity, he mediated if there was quarrel among his sisters and represented them externally. Being the *asyene mbumba* was not easy: "Sometimes the sisters are rude; if you do not assist them they hate you". Mr. Kabula lamented the ingratitude of his sisters who "hated" him even if he helped them. His mother also lived close by, in her own house, just a few hundred metres away. She was very old and frail and depended on his care and support. He expressed the relationship with his parents in somewhat ambiguous terms. On the one hand, he felt a strong attachment to his mother who could not live on her own but, on the other hand, he built his own compound because "it is better to isolate yourself and stay away from your parents. If someone stays with his parents it is difficult to prosper". It appeared that the few hundred meters distance to his mother's house were not sufficient to "isolate" him. His attachment to his mother also had a material dimension. He wanted to protect his family's usufruct rights on the family land and was afraid that he would not be able to protect the land rights of his *mbumba* if he moved away. The access to land was crucial for his survival, since he and his matrikin depended on the food crops grown in their gardens. Land had become a very scarce commodity around Zomba and he did not have the means to rent a plot of land to cultivate enough food to secure his own and his dependants' livelihoods.

Mr. Kabula's compound bore testimony to his various often ill-fated business endeavours. One old house, the first one built in 1984, used to function as a grocery store where he sold matches, soap, batteries and razor blades that he would buy wholesale in Zomba town. The grocery store came to an abrupt end

in 1990 when burglars stole all his money and goods. He was not able to raise enough money to start the business again. Another simple building was the “bar” where he sold Chibuku beer (popular industrial-made beer made of maize and millet), “Chibuku has its ups and downs, at the moment [February] the bar is not operating. In the hungry season, all the money goes into the garden.” In the hungry season, between December and March, it was pointless to sell beer because most people in the surrounding villages had nothing left to spend and even those with jobs were in a similar situation as Mr. Kabula and could not afford to spend a single Kwacha. In good times, Mr. Kabula bought 10 crates of Chibuku. Usually he was able to sell all and make a profit of MK 400. If he was able to buy more crates his profit was even higher. Chibuku, however, cannot be kept longer than two to three days without a refrigerator. A refrigerator cost at least MK 10,000 and was well beyond his financial capabilities.

Two other buildings had only been partly completed: one was supposed to serve as a “restaurant” and the other one contained five very simple and small rooms, which he intended to let to primary school teachers. He had not been able to complete these buildings since he lacked the necessary capital. It was impossible for him to get credit. His requests for a loan from the office had been rejected and he had no collateral for a credit from the bank. There were also informal moneylenders, known as *katapila*, who offered loans but Mr. Kabula did not want to borrow money from them because they charged 50 per cent interest. None of his friends would lend him money and his older brother, who used to work as a fish-trader in Mangochi, had stopped working due to old age and was unable to provide any support. In spite of these setbacks, Mr. Kabula planned to build yet another building to function as a shop but it was unlikely that he could muster the necessary financial resources.

Two central issues emerge from Mr. Kabula’s case. The first one is his job, where he works diligently but has no access to any benefits other than his monthly salary. Since he lacks formal education he had never been promoted. Furthermore, he did not enjoy the protection of senior officers who would give him access to lucrative workshops or fieldwork where he could earn allowances for accommodation and subsistence. Most civil servants were able to save part of their allowances and thus supplement their salaries. In a bid to supplement his income, Mr. Kabula engaged in various small business enterprises and relied to a considerable extent on the food grown in his gardens. However, these businesses did not flourish because he lacked access to financial capital. The lack of connections and resources is linked to the second issue that emerges from Mr. Kabula’s case. He was the most successful member of his family and a large number of relatives depended on his support. In the event of a mishap, there was no relative he could rely on, for example, to lend him money. His relatives, however, did provide one vital resource, the access to family land in the village,

which he was free to cultivate without paying rent. Yet access to land seemed to be a double-edged sword, since he had to stay in his family's spatial proximity to effectively claim the land. Since his salary was not sufficient for him and all his dependants he had to fall back on the only resource he had access to, his family's land in the village.

His colleague Ms. Malula, on the other hand, could be considered a winner of liberalisation. Aged 27 when I met her, she had joined the civil service in 1996 and had always been posted at the health post at Domasi. Like Mr. Kabula, with whom she formed a team, she was a Health Surveillance Assistant (HSA), Subordinate Class Grade 2. She earned about MK 2000 net per month, including a housing allowance of MK 300. Unlike Mr. Kabula, she had enjoyed a good education. As a child she had lived with an aunt in Blantyre and had attended primary school there. When she was older she went to a highly regarded missionary secondary school in Malosa, about 30 kilometres north of Zomba, where she obtained the Malawi School Certificate for Education (MSCE). She finished school in 1994 and lived with her grandmother in Blantyre for two years. Her grandmother was a successful businesswoman. When I met Ms. Malula her grandmother was already very old and had moved to her home, the place where Ms. Malula was posted. She looked after the grandmother who lived in an adjacent house. The grandmother used to be a primary school teacher before she went into business in the 1980s and earned a fortune. The grandmother had bought land and built several houses in Blantyre and her home village near Zomba.

Ms. Malula lived in a comfortable house with a concrete floor, glass windows and a corrugated iron roof made of burnt bricks – quite luxurious compared to Mr. Kabula's more modest dwelling. Her house had a kitchen, a bathroom, a living room and two bedrooms. The house was connected to electricity and water. She owned a lot of furniture, including two armchairs, a couch, a cupboard, two beds with mattresses and a dining room table with several chairs. In the cupboard she had plates, cutlery, cups, and a thermos flask on display. The living room was decorated with some posters and the windows had curtains. She also had a stereo-set and a stove. She lived together with two younger brothers, two daughters, one of whom had a young toddler, and a classificatory sister, *cemwali*. Her second youngest brother worked as a teacher at a private secondary school and her youngest brother attended the Training Centre in Zomba town where he was being trained as an electrician. Her classificatory sister attended primary school. Her older daughter lived at her maternal aunt's in Blantyre, Malawi's commercial capital. This aunt had a good job as a branch executive for Malawi Telecom and was married to the executive director of a private company. Ms. Malula's mother was divorced and worked as a secretary for the District Health Officer in Zomba. She paid the school fees

for the younger brother attending the Training Centre. The mother had six sisters and one brother, most of whom lived in Blantyre and had well-paid jobs at banks or the government. Ms. Malula entertained a cordial relationship with her relatives in Blantyre and Zomba paying them regular visits.

Ms. Malula was not married; the father of her daughters was a student at the Malawi College of Accountancy in Lilongwe. They wanted to marry as soon as her grandmother passed away so that they could move together to Lilongwe or Blantyre where her boyfriend hoped to find employment as an accountant. When I met her she had taken the responsibility of looking after her grandmother and, together with her mother, she managed the family land in the village. Ms. Malula supervised other relatives to look after her grandmother when she was on duty, but in the evenings she would prepare dinner for the grandmother and stay with her until bedtime. The grandmother was highly respected by her daughters and grandchildren. She had financed both houses in which she and Ms. Malula lived. Ms. Malula referred to her grandmother with the Yao-word *likolo*, the word for the founding ancestress of a village, and thus underlined the central role of the grandmother in the family.

The grandmother had acquired several gardens, *minda* (pl.), nearby where Ms. Malula and her mother cultivated maize, mainly for subsistence, and employed wage labourers, *waganyu*. In a good year the harvest was about 15 to 20 bags (50 kg each), which provided her household with maize porridge, *nsima*, until December. Her aunts had their own gardens. The younger aunt from Blantyre had a large garden on family land close by and the aunt from Lilongwe rented a large garden near Lilongwe. Whenever Ms. Malula would fall short of food she could rely on the support of her aunts.

Ms. Malula participated in a small-scale credit scheme with FINCA, a micro-finance scheme run by an international NGO and financed by Western donor agencies. Together with 28 other women, she formed a group called *Tupochere* (meaning “we are happy”). She was one of the leading members of this group. She invested the money borrowed from FINCA, rarely exceeding US\$ 10, in her second-hand clothes trade, *kaunjika*. Usually, once a month, she bought one or two bales of second-hand clothes (donated in European countries) and sold clothes in the villages and markets nearby, often on one of her tours of duty. With this trade she earned about US\$ 20 per month, thus doubling her total cash income. Furthermore, she had started another women’s group with eight other women, mainly primary school teachers. This group had received a loan from the Malawi Rural Finance Company (MRFC), another micro-credit organisation. Ms. Malula planned to use this credit to buy stationery in South Africa and sell it in Malawi.

Sometimes she did business together with one of her aunts. She might, for instance, travel with her aunt from Lilongwe, a rich businesswoman, to Tanza-

nia by bus to buy textiles, kitchenware, plastic slippers and other items to sell them to acquaintances and relatives. These goods were more expensive in the south of Malawi and a handsome profit could be made by selling them there. The aunt, who had provided the money for this trip and the goods, allowed Ms. Malula to sell a share of the goods and keep the earnings without paying her a commission. Trips like the one to Tanzania were lucrative but required a lot of time and money. The bus trip to Mbeya in the southwest of Tanzania took twenty hours and accommodation there was expensive. Ms. Malula could not leave her work too often and, besides, she would have had difficulties, in any case, in raising enough cash for the trip herself.

Ms. Malula pointed out that she was “business-minded”. However, her work did not figure prominently in her stories. She mainly perceived her job as a source of social security, providing her with a regular salary and leaving her enough time to do business. From our conversations, I deduced that her mother had helped her get the job in the health sector in order to have a family member located close to the grandmother and to ensure her access to the property in the home village. With her education and social background, Ms. Malula could have found a better job but the obligation towards her family weighed heavier and she had accepted the subordinate position in the civil service to be in a position to look after her grandmother. She was not unhappy with the arrangement, since she enjoyed a regular salary, lived rent-free in a comfortable house, had enough time to run her various businesses and entertained cordial relationships with her mother and her maternal aunts on whom she counted on for support for her business enterprises.

Since her mother worked as a secretary for the Clinical Officer in the District Health Administration, she was in a position to help Ms. Malula. Once, for example, she had pulled a few strings and secured her daughter’s participation at a donor-funded workshop on HIV/AIDS education in Lilongwe. It was quite unusual for an officer holding such a junior rank to be selected to attend a workshop, since there were always more applicants than places in workshops for the junior grades. The workshop lasted three days and she earned MK 880 per diem subsistence allowance. She saved the total amount of MK 2,640, since she could stay at her aunt’s house in Lilongwe. With the extra money earned from the allowances she bought more bales *kaunjika* than usual.

A different picture emerges from Ms. Malula’s story than from Mr. Kabula’s. She depended to a lesser extent on her salary than Mr. Kabula. For her business endeavours, she relied on her aunts’ support, who also helped with supplies or food when she needed it. She knew how to access credits through the micro-finance schemes, how to write a proposal and submit it. Due to her mother’s intervention, she even participated in a workshop. Her close relatives did not seek her assistance as Mr. Kabula’s sisters did. Instead, she could al-

ways count on the support of her wealthy relatives in Blantyre and Lilongwe, who had paid for her education, provided support when she needed it, and helped her in her business endeavours. Ms. Malula had the necessary financial and cultural capital to make use of the free market opportunities in “New Malawi”, whereas Mr. Kabula’s capital as *asyene mbumba* was not suitable to be exploited for his business plans and instead constituted a burden on his limited resources but, on the other hand, granted access to customary land. His high social status in the village was a mixed blessing since his relatives expected his assistance whenever they needed it.

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to present a number of horizontal slices of civil servants’ everyday lives. The general theme of these slices was the civil servants’ attempts to regain their lost security. Civil servants relied on salary advances and used benefits, such as workshop allowances, to supplement their salaries. Employment in the civil service ceased to be the main source of income for many civil servants who were “business-minded”. The deregulation of the market and the end of Kamuzu Banda’s autocratic regime had created room for them to start businesses to become less dependent on their jobs in times when they could no longer count on lifelong employment. Subsistence farming was also a popular means of reducing the dependency on cash, although the famine of 2002 revealed that subsistence farming was not without risks.

The neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s redrew the borders between those included and those excluded from benefiting from the free market economy, and it seems that only a happy few were included in the “New Malawi” of the 1990s. Employment in the civil service was no longer sufficient for a secure existence. People like Ms. Malula, who had kinship ties with the elite were able to benefit from the freedom in “New Malawi”. She was the proof that it was no longer sufficient to have a job in the government to prosper. Without the social capital provided by wealthy and influential relatives, it became very difficult to strive for the dream of material wealth. For them, democratisation, economic liberalisation and the civil service reform meant freedom: they could buy furniture, television sets and other luxury goods, while the rank and file lived on advances and *katapila*. They had the financial means to send their children to expensive private schools while the government schools were overrun by pupils; they could invest money in a large-scale business that promised profits and they did not depend on maize grown in the home village.

My discussion on the location of the garden raised another important issue: the relationship between the civil servant who had a garden in the home village

and the kinsfolk living there was characterised by distrust and ambivalence. Mr. Kabula had access to the land in the village by virtue of his status as warden of his *mbumba* but his sisters were also a constant source of irritation and a considerable burden on his limited resources. Many of my informants complained that their rural kin provided only little assistance, stole the harvest and had exaggerated expectations. Hence, many civil servants preferred to rent a garden close to town, out of the reach of their relatives in the home village. The relationship with kin was of vital importance and the source of great anxiety for civil servants. The tensions my informants experienced in their relationships with relatives and dependants are not represented in the stereotypical image of African civil servants whose “primordial” affiliations are said to have negative effects on their functioning as servants of the public good. This simplistic representation of African civil servants ignores the anxieties and ambivalences that shape the relationship between civil servants and their rural kin, as the following chapter will show.

“Distance saves me”

I want to avoid unnecessary family problems. That must be avoided. You know I have stayed in town for quite a long time, I don't want to get entangled in the way people live, I have been away from the village for so long I doubt I can manage. They know their policies and I doubt I can cope. [...] Distance saves me.

Mr. Mkandawire, civil servant in Zomba

Introduction

Mr. Mkandawire was preparing for his retirement when he shared his anxieties about his relatives' "policies" with me. For 30 years he had been posted far away from his home region and he did not intend to return after his retirement. Mr. Mkandawire opted against a return to the home village or *kubwerera kumudzi* because he had been "away from the village for so long" and rather preferred a "neutral place" at a safe distance from his relatives and in-laws.

This chapter investigates the importance of social and spatial distance in relation to civil servants' relatives in their home areas. Their relationships with a wider circle of kinsfolk were characterised by their desire to maintain a comfortable social distance. All of my informants were confronted with demands for support from their rural kin and all of them were concerned with the pertinent question of how to deal with these demands. Civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba provided accommodation for the children of relatives, many of them orphans, and paid their school fees. It was common practice to send remittances to their parents and other relatives in the home village. Many provided agricultural inputs, such as fertilizer and seeds, and brought them gifts in cash and kind when they visited the home village.

My informants experienced a tension between their dream of material wealth for their own nuclear family and the numerous demands on their resources by kinsfolk often only vaguely related to them. This tension, it should be noted, is not to be equated with a dualism between individualism and communitarianism, as recent Africanist studies point out. With regard to Malawi, Englund draws attention to the fact that personal growth or *kukula* and the support of dependants are two sides of the same coin (Englund 1996, 2001). He describes *kukula* as “a continuous process by which a person ideally consolidates his or her moral standing in the course of his or her life cycle. Crucially, the process is less a matter of individual virtues than of being able to ‘care for’ (*kusamala*) many dependants” (Englund 2001: 99). Thus, one’s growth as an individual and the care of kin are not mutually exclusive. Seen from this perspective, the personal ambition to grow as a moral person entails responsibilities towards others. Dependent relatives, in turn, do not perceive someone’s success as a personal but rather as a collective achievement. Consequently, successful nephews and nieces, sons and daughters, are expected to redistribute their alleged wealth with their kinsfolk by sharing, known as *kugawa*.

My informants in the townships of Lilongwe and Zomba expressed their predicament in terms of a dualism between their “modern” or “civilised” way of life in town and the “traditional” way of life led by their kinsfolk in the home village. A “modern” way of life was associated with formal education, a white-collar job, the nuclear family, the neighbourhood and the church, whereas the latter was associated with a wide circle of relatives (*abale*) in the home village who had no education and tended to expect support from their wealthier relatives in town. Although the village was usually described in terms of backwardness and underdevelopment, the feelings of the comparatively privileged urbanites were ambivalent. On the one hand, they complained about the uncivilised and backward life in the village, with jealous and ungrateful relatives who should be avoided and, on the other, they imagined an idyllic life in the village where one could still find traditional solidarity, a place not yet corrupted by the modern world.

This dualism between “modern” and “traditional”, which still influences Western views of Africa, has attracted considerable criticism by anthropologists (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997; Piot 1999) who argue that this dichotomy does not reflect African experiences of modernity. In this respect, it is crucial to differentiate “categories of practice” and “categories of analysis”, as Cooper (2005: 62-64) argues. So, while anthropologists have tried to transcend the modern *versus* traditional dichotomy, civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba insisted on framing the relationships with their rural-based relatives in these terms. This discrepancy between the anthropologist’s analytical categories and the categories of practice cannot be glossed over, as Ferguson noted during

his fieldwork in the Zambian Copperbelt: “Listening to informants discuss the contrast between ‘the village’ and ‘the town’, or ‘African’ tradition versus ‘European’ modernity, I often had the unsettling sense that I was listening to an out-of-date sociology textbook” (Ferguson 1999: 84).

This chapter addresses civil servants’ experience of a tension between their “modern” way of life and “traditional” village mores in four parts. The first part illustrates the ambivalent nature of their relationship with relatives in the home village by means of two case studies of two civil servants who had to make a decision about where to settle after retirement. The second part deals with the influence of formal education on the process of social stratification between the educated elite and the poor. The third part places the reliance on voluntary social networks in the context of the ambivalent relationship with the rural kin and the fourth part discusses the moral dilemma that arose from the desire to maintain social and spatial distance to the relatives in the home district.

Kubwerera kumudzi

As I have said in the previous chapter my informants’ attitude towards the home village and rural kin was ambivalent. Often people hinted at anxieties and conflicts below the surface of kinship harmony. Social pressure by relatives could not be avoided, a feeling aptly illustrated by the Chichewa proverb *chibale chringati chipsera* (relatives are like a scar). One informant explained the proverb in the following words: “Relatives are like a scar, you never get rid of them, they are a pain in the ass”. Others mentioned the fear of witchcraft, *ufiti*, used by jealous villagers against them. However, these negative feelings were often juxtaposed with images of idyllic village life without the anonymity, stress and crime of urban life. On the one hand, the village was perceived as the source of exaggerated expectations by less affluent relatives and a place where there was the constant threat of jealousy (*nsanje*)¹ or witchcraft attacks. On the other, the village was viewed as a security one could fall back on in times of need, a place where life was still predictable and safe.

The choice of the place of residence after retirement nicely illustrates my informants’ attitudes towards their ancestral home. In a sense, residence patterns can be understood as the spatial expression of the social distance my informants sought to maintain after retirement. Their desire to move to “neutral ground” at a “safe distance” is in marked contrast to the findings made by Englund in Chinsapo, a poor township on the outskirts of Lilongwe, where the overwhelm-

¹ Please note that the Chichewa word *nsanje*, which is usually equated with the English word jealousy by Malawians, has a much broader meaning and may denote any kind of open strife or conflict. *Nsanje* is usually associated with witchcraft attacks and accusations. See Marwick (1965) and van Velsen (1964: 67 fn. 2).

ing majority (89 per cent) of his respondents expressed the desire to eventually return to the village (*kubwerera kumudzi*) (Englund 2002a: Table 4). Unlike my informants, many of whom had grown up in town, Englund's respondents were mainly people who had recently migrated to Lilongwe from rural areas elsewhere in Malawi.

As government employees my informants had only limited influence on where they were posted or transferred to. Only after retirement they were in a position to choose a place where to settle. A civil servant could either retire at the age of 55 or after twenty years of service. According to the Malawi Public Service Regulations (MPSR), the retiring civil servant could choose between two options: the first was a lump sum payment and a small monthly pension, the second, no lump sum payment but a higher monthly pension. Most retiring officers chose the lump sum payment to set up a business or another income-generating enterprise.

Unlike Englund's respondents, my informants stated that they did not intend to return to their home village after retirement. Instead, they wanted to settle "on neutral ground". They had a clear idea of the nature of this "neutral ground". It should offer opportunities for business such as a trading centre or market, have access to urban infrastructure such as public transport, electricity, schools and hospitals and be situated at a distance that would prevent relatives from visiting too often while at the same time allowing the retired civil servant to visit them if necessary. In practice, "neutral ground" was usually a trading centre or township where land was still available and cheaper than in the urban centres. These trading centres were situated on main roads and were connected to electricity and telecommunication networks.

Two case studies illustrate the economic and spatial dimensions of the decisions taken by civil servants after retirement. Both case studies present men who decided to settle on "neutral ground", at a "safe distance" from relatives and in-laws in the home district. The first one describes a civil servant who had been retired for more than twenty years when I met him, a man who was deeply involved in community affairs, both in his chosen home and his home village. The second case study presents a man at a different stage in his lifecycle, who had yet not moved to "neutral ground" and was more anxious about his ability to maintain a safe distance than his peer, who already had succeeded in establishing a certain distance to his home village.

Mr. Kachopoka had retired from the civil service in 1981. He was in his late 60s and had held a senior position in the Office of the President and Cabinet. He was also the village headman of his native village, a position he had inherited from his father. He was a respected member of the community in Lunzu, a quickly growing trading centre about 20 km north of Blantyre, on the main road to Lilongwe, where he had settled after retirement. He was also the founder of a

district association and very active in various church groups in Lunzu. Mr. Kachopoka came from a village in the lower Shire valley near Chickwawa, about 50 km south of Blantyre. He received his primary education from the White Fathers missionaries who had come to the area in the early 20th century. Later he attended the Catholic seminary in Zomba.

Mr. Kachopoka was a typical representative of the first generation of African civil servants after independence who had benefited from the new career possibilities that opened up for Africans after the departure of most expatriate civil servants. He had served in the colonial government since 1956 and, after having received six months of training as part of the localisation programme, he was posted to Blantyre in 1968. In 1976, he was transferred to Lilongwe where he worked until his retirement. After retirement, he settled in Lunzu where he had already built a house in 1971. This turned out to be a far-sighted decision. In the 1970s, a new road was built to connect Blantyre in the south directly with Lilongwe, the new capital in the central region, and Lunzu soon developed into a bustling and quickly growing trading centre. The small house that he had built “to occupy the place” in 1971 was later replaced with a larger house.

He explained his motivation to move to Lunzu after his retirement in the following words: “If you would go to your home village, people would demand a lot from you, to safeguard your children’s future you have to be at a neutral place. If you retire and go to the village your children would not have a place when you die, it is a security for them”. But the care for his children was not the only motivation to move to “neutral ground”. He had been away for so long and got used to life in town with all its amenities: “You might feel as a stranger after having been away for such a long time and you would not feel comfortable in the village without electricity and running water”.

Mr. Kachopoka ensured that his children received a good education. All of his children, three daughters and three sons, had attended college or university, except for the youngest daughter who had just finished secondary school. The eldest son had even received a Ph.D. in the United Kingdom and worked as a lecturer at the University of Malawi. One daughter and one son were employed as secondary school teachers. The youngest son attended the College of Accounting in Blantyre. Mr. Kachopoka’s second daughter worked as a senior nurse at a health post in Lunzu and the youngest daughter had a temporary job in a family planning clinic in Lunzu, while she was waiting for a response to her application to the College of Nursing. His children earned enough and did not have to rely on their father’s support, as he proudly told me.

He lived in a comfortable house with a corrugated iron roof and four rooms, a few hundred metres from the main road. The house was connected to the mains electricity supply and had running water. The house had also been connected to the telephone network, a gift from his children who had paid for the

connection. Mr. Kachopoka owned several houses and gardens in Lunzu as well as three shops. With the gratuity (the lump sum payment after retirement) he had built the first building in 1981 where started a tailor shop. He had bought four sewing machines and employed four tailors. However, in the early 1990s, business deteriorated due to cheap imports of second-hand clothes from Europe and he was forced to close the tailor shop. Instead, he let the shop premises and two other commercial premises which he had built later. The income from the rents was relatively high by Malawian standards. In 2000, he earned about US\$ 30 per month for the three shops he let. The reason for this was Lunzu's development since the 1970s. The town had grown dramatically since the construction of the new road and had changed from a sleepy village into a bustling little township and marketplace where property prices soared. He also owned two gardens with a total of six hectares where he cultivated maize for subsistence and sale. This was large considering that the average size of gardens in the south was less than one hectare.

He told me that he did not have any other sources of income than his salary while he was employed in the civil service: "Everything was paid from the salary, civil servants lacked capital and they were not encouraged by government to engage in other businesses. The average civil servant was not interested in business in those days." Usually a civil servant would invest the money from the gratuity in a business, such as a maize mill or a grocery-shop, supplemented by subsistence farming after his or her retirement.

In Lunzu, Mr. Kachopoka was deeply involved in the affairs of the local community and was a member of several committees: the School Committee, the Development Committee, the Committee for Justice and Peace of the Catholic diocese and an HIV/AIDS project sponsored by the Catholic Church. Lately, he had been working a lot on the HIV/AIDS project to raise awareness and influence people's behaviour. He visited surrounding villages to raise awareness and distribute drugs. He attended to the sick, gave medication and advised the relatives on proper care. He promoted abstinence to check the spread of the epidemic, since he was very sceptical about the use of condoms, an attitude quite in line with the official position of the Catholic Church. For this work, the Church paid him a modest monthly allowance of US\$ 17.

His involvement in local politics and community affairs was not limited to Lunzu. He was the chairman of the "Friends of the Lower Shire", a district association of people from the Lower Shire in Malawi's far south, between Chikwawa and Nsanje. He and a few other civil servants from that region had founded the "Friends of the Lower Shire" in Lilongwe in 1977. The association started as a burial association and slowly developed into a revolving fund for funerals, sick pay and weddings. Furthermore, it assisted migrants from the Lower Shire to find housing and employment in Blantyre and Lilongwe. There

were branches in Lilongwe and Blantyre and the association numbered about 500 contributing members when I met Mr. Kachopoka.

Like his father before him, he was the village headman of the village bearing his name. Headmanship in Mr. Kachopoka's village was passed on patrilineally, although kinship in the village was generally organised along matrilineal lines. It is not uncommon to find hybrid forms of descent, merging elements of patrilineal and matrilineal kinship logics in many matrilineal areas in Malawi today. This is a result of extensive migration in the 19th century when patrilineally organised groups, most notably the Ngoni, migrated to the territory of present-day Malawi and mixed with indigenous matrilineally organised groups. The village was a large and thriving settlement and "many people come to live there", Mr. Kachopoka told me. Since he lived in Lunzu, his sister handled the daily affairs of the village together with the advisers, *induna*, and his nephews. He visited the village only in the case of more serious disputes, usually about land demarcations. As village headman and *mwini mbumba*, he was an easy target for backbiting and witchcraft attacks of disgruntled and jealous relatives² and he pointed out that it was vital for him to maintain a "safe distance" from the kinsfolk in the village. Therefore, it is apt to conclude that Mr. Kachopoka was able to maintain the ties with the home village, not in spite of his spatial distance but because of it.

In a sense, Mr. Kachopoka epitomised the ideal retired civil servant. Financially independent, in good health, living in his own house, loved by his wife and children, highly respected in the community and an authority figure in the clan, acting as mediator and arbitrator in family affairs. For many retired civil servants such a life remained a dream. Plagued by financial difficulties, some embarked on ill-fated business ventures that left them destitute and dependent on the support of their children. Not everybody was in a position to move to "neutral ground", with all the amenities of urban life. But complete failures were the exception. Generally, those who had held white-collar jobs were able to build a house and start a business or a farm, which would provide them with an income after retirement. Of course, like everybody else, they suffered from the economic crisis and the high inflation rate.

The next case study presents a senior civil servant in Zomba, Mr. Mkan-dawire, who was preparing for his imminent retirement when I met him in June 2000. He had reached the retirement age of 55 after having served in the civil service since 1969, slowly advancing through the ranks to his present position in the Superscale (highest salary grades in the civil service). Originally, he came from the Mzimba district in the northern region of Malawi. Since his early

² See Marwick (1965: 95-97) and Mitchell (1956b: 137, 138) on conflicts and witchcraft within the matrilineage among the Chewa and Yao.

youth, he had been away from the village. He grew up with his father who had worked for the Kandodo supermarket chain in Mzuzu. When he entered the civil service he was posted to Zomba. During the 1970s, he was sent to Lilongwe and, in the 1980s, he was transferred back to Zomba.

He pondered where to settle after retirement when he would have to leave the house provided by the government. Eventually, he decided to move to Mzimba, a small town and the administrative centre for Mzimba district. In 1998, he had acquired a plot there and since 1999 he had been assembling building materials such as iron sheets, nails, door-frames, window-frames and a toilet at a storage place in Zomba. All of these goods would be transported to the site in Mzimba by the government because, according to the MPSR, the government takes care of the transportation of the belongings of a retired civil servant to the new place of residence. In total, he had already spent about US\$ 900 for the plot and the construction material over the years. The preparations to settle in Mzimba town had been progressing slowly or *pang'ono pang'ono* (little by little), as Mr. Mkandawire said. Whenever he had some extra money he would buy more construction material but often he had to wait several months before he could acquire the next items. He planned to spend part of his gratuity to purchase the rest of the material he still needed to construct a house with four bedrooms on his plot in Mzimba town where he and his wife could live “comfortably”.

Mr. Mkandawire chose the place where he wished to retire very carefully. Eventually, he and his wife decided to move to “neutral ground”. At first he had wanted to move to Enkwendeni, a trading centre and CCAP (Church of Central African Presbyterian) mission station situated on the main road between the central region and Karonga in the North, about 40 km northwest of Mzuzu. However, his wife objected. She was worried that Enkwendeni would be too close to his family. His father lived in a trading centre a few kilometres south of Enkwendeni, about 20 km away from his family’s village. To complicate matters his mother’s clan lived in a village just a few kilometres from Enkwendeni and his wife’s home village was also close. Mr. and Mrs. Mkandawire agreed that such a proximity to their relatives would constitute a burden they wanted to avoid. “To avoid crowding is much better, we do not want to open a wing of the Enkwendeni mission hospital”, as he put it.

Due to his long absence from the village and the spatial distance to his home district, Mr. Mkandawire was afraid of returning as a stranger who had become too used to urban life to adjust to a village life he had barely experienced: “I want to avoid unnecessary family problems. That must be avoided. You know I have stayed in town for quite a long time, I don’t want to get entangled in the way people live. I have been away from the village for so long I doubt I can manage. They know their policies [sic.] and I doubt I can cope”.

It is important to note that the high status associated with a “cosmopolitan” urban life-style observed by Ferguson (1999: 82-122) in his research on the Zambian Copperbelt was much less distinct and pronounced among urbanites in Malawi (cf. Englund 2002a). My informants repeatedly emphasised their respect for village customs, *miyambo yakumudzi*, and tended to express their anxiety about adjusting to village life in terms of their own inadequacy rather than their superiority. Apart from Mr. Mkandawire’s anxiety about the lifestyle *kumudzi*, he also had well-founded fears regarding the exaggerated expectations of jealous relatives who could accuse him of selfishness and greed, *umbombo*.

Mr. Mkandawire used the phrase “distance saves me” to express his desire to stay outside of family affairs in the home village and to keep his distance after retirement. He therefore chose to move to Mzimba town, about 150 km distance from his and his wife’s home villages. The town had all the amenities of urban life and several of Mr. Mkandawire’s acquaintances from Enkwendeni and Mzuzu worked there for the district administration and planned to settle there too. Obviously, he preferred the social contact with his peers than with the villagers whose “policies” were alien and potentially threatening to him.

It is important to note that the house “on neutral ground” was usually not the only house a civil servant built in his lifetime. It was quite common to build a house in the home village as a place to stay while visiting, and thus to demonstrate one’s commitment to the home village. However, people did not intend to live there permanently. For informants with a matrilineal background, such as Mr. Kachopoka, the home village was the village of the mother’s clan, whereas for people with a patrilineal background, like Mr. Mkandawire, the home village was the village of the father’s clan. Several of my male informants with matrilineal backgrounds, who were also married to women with a matrilineal background, had built houses in the wife’s village. The motivation to do so was the uxorilocal marriage custom among matrilineal groups in the central and southern regions, according to which the husband moves to the village of his wife’s matrikin, known as *chikamwini* (guest) in Chichewa.

However, none of my informants intended to live for any length of time in this house; it was merely meant to reflect their adherence to custom. In fact, the men strongly opposed the idea of moving to their wife’s village after retirement, as they feared the influence of their wife’s matrikin and their precarious position in the village, especially in the event of their wife’s death. Hence, it was not unusual for a retired civil servant with sufficient means to build a simple house in the wife’s village after their marriage, another house for visits to his own home village, and a third house “on neutral ground”, where he intended to settle after his retirement.

The desire to move to “neutral ground” contrasted with the custom to be buried in the home village. According to the literature on the subject the burial

in the home village is an expression of the strong sense of attachment of African townsmen to their home area (Geschiere & Gugler 1998; Gugler 2002). And, indeed, in Malawi most townspeople were brought to the home village and buried there, often with considerable effort and at a high cost. The payment of the costs of transporting the corpse to the home village was therefore considered by many civil servants to constitute one of the main perks of government employment (see Chapter 5). According to my informants, it was very important for the relatives in the village to claim the deceased as one of theirs and bury him or her in the home village. Most of my informants also wished to be buried in the home village but in practice the issue of the place of burial proved to be very controversial. It was common for the village of the deceased and the wife's village to compete to host the burial, especially if it concerned an influential and wealthy senior civil servant. Others preferred to be buried in town but expected that their corpse would be "hijacked by relatives" after death, as one of my informants remarked wryly.

It was exactly this kind of village politics my informants wanted to avoid after retirement. They had a strong preference to settle on "neutral ground" at "safe distance" from the relatives in the home village, their squabbles, policies, jealousy and expectations. In order to establish a place at a safe distance, civil servants acquired property and built a house. Sometimes this occurred during their careers, as with Mr. Kachopoka, who had already bought land in Lunzu in the early 1970s and built a house there before he retired; sometimes it was done in phases, as with Mr. Mkandawire who depended on the available financial resources.

An important motive for moving to "neutral ground" was the protection of status and wealth. Civil servants with a matrilineal background, for example, expressed concern about moving to the wife's village after retirement because they feared being thrown out of the village if the wife died. Part of the explanation for this anxiety is the uxorilocal marriage pattern among parts of the matrilineal ethnic groups. All the rights a husband can claim in his wife's village are derived from the union with his wife. If the marriage is dissolved or the wife dies, the husband is forced to leave the village in which he was only a guest, *mkamwini*. A senior female civil servant commented on her male colleagues' desire to settle on "neutral ground":

Now they are becoming more sophisticated, they don't want to go back to the village. The reason is that once they go back to the village and their wife dies, some of the people would chase them out. They cannot build a house elsewhere, that's why they want to go to a place that is neutral. Should the wife die the man could stay, so they do that now.

Women who followed the husband to his home village had the same fear of isolation or exclusion in case of their husband's death. Generally, people were

very afraid of the greed of relatives in the home village. Stories of “property-grabbing” by the relatives of the deceased were ubiquitous and dominated newspaper reports on “gender issues”. Property-grabbing denotes a widespread practice when relatives of the deceased spouse literally “grab” everything from the widow/widower. Generally, both men and women can become the victim of property-grabbing, although all informants agreed that widows whose husbands were wealthy were the prime targets of the man’s customary heirs, i.e. in a matrilineal setting uncles and cousins from his “mother’s side”. They were all afraid of being in a vulnerable position in the village of the deceased where his or her relatives had relatively easy access to the estate.³

The position of the children was the other central concern for people who moved to “neutral ground”. Mr. Kachopoka stated that “to safeguard your children’s future you have to be in a neutral place”. One of the main motives for moving to “neutral ground” was to protect the acquired social status for themselves and for future generations. The fear was that the accumulated wealth could not be protected from the claims of kinsfolk if one settled in the home village. As we have seen in Chapter 5, it was essential to start up a business to maintain the social distance the civil servant had built up during his or her career. Another important means to ensure self-reliance and to counter the effects of the economic crisis was subsistence farming. These activities enabled the retired civil servant to keep a “safe distance”. Business and agricultural production “on neutral ground” were situated outside the sphere of the home village and were at least partly removed from the reach of the kinsfolk there. In order to protect their wealth from what they perceived as “jealous” rural kin and to pass it on to their children, they had to move to “neutral ground”, out of reach of their rural kin.

And last but not least, the desire to maintain an urban lifestyle should not be underestimated. Due to their socialisation and the life in town, both men had developed a distinct lifestyle they could not maintain in the village. In the trading centre they had shops, health facilities, electricity, running water, telecommunications and easy access to the road network. Furthermore, they could expect to find more people with the same socialisation and “modern” lifestyle in towns and trading centres, people with whom they felt they had more in common than with their rural kin.

³ Property-grabbing is illegal and violates the Wills and Inheritance Act (Amendment 1998). Enforcement, however, is often lacking. Unfortunately there is no empirical quantitative data available on this phenomenon. In 1999, an unpublished survey sponsored by DANIDA merely recorded people’s perception of property-grabbing but failed to collect empirical data on the phenomenon itself.

Education and social stratification

People like Mr. Kachopoka and Mr. Mkandawire not only had doubts about their ability to cope with village life, they also experienced a sense of alienation as “civilised” or “modern” people. The main marker that set them apart from their rural cousins, aunts and uncles was their formal education. Access to formal education had always been extremely limited in Malawi. Until the 1930s, there were almost no government schools. The education of Africans was mainly provided by Christian missionaries, most notably at the Presbyterian mission stations in Livingstonia in the North and Blantyre in the South (McCracken 2000; Ross 1996). The missions operated an impressive network of schools and trained Africans who were employed by missions, the administration and European businesses, not only in Nyasaland but in the whole of British central and southern Africa. Clerks from Nyasaland dominated the top positions for Africans in the copper mines of northern Rhodesia and the mines of the Witwatersrand. Nevertheless, coverage was limited to a few places and the total output of educational facilities was so low that the report of the Localisation Committee, an advisory body on the Africanisation of the civil service, concluded: “The estimated output of the secondary schools [...] is totally inadequate to meet the requirements of the Civil Service [...]” (Nyasaland Protectorate 1960: 27).

The lack of qualified Africans should not have come as a surprise, since the first secondary school opened as late as 1942. Institutions of tertiary education were non-existent during colonial times and only a fortunate few were able to follow courses at Makerere College in Uganda, Fort Hare in Rhodesia and other colleges in South Africa or abroad. The Localisation Committee estimated that in 1960 only 33 Nyasalanders held a degree, while about 40 followed “various degrees and professional courses” (Nyasaland Protectorate 1960: 22). This was an alarmingly low output rate considering that there were 480 posts requiring a degree (*ibid.*).

After independence, the output of secondary schools remained low. There were only a few secondary schools and school fees were mandatory. Kamuzu Banda did not show much interest in expanding secondary and tertiary education to the masses, and even primary education was restricted by the obligation to pay school fees, a considerable hurdle for poor households. Instead, he focused on providing high-quality secondary and tertiary education for a very limited number of students. Under Kamuzu Banda, the few hundred graduates of the University of Malawi found secure employment in the senior grades of the civil service and state-owned companies. This changed in the 1990s when the number of graduates began to outstrip demand. After that, a diploma was no longer a guarantee for life-long employment in the civil service. Only those

with training in accountancy or information technology had no difficulty finding a job, since these skills were central to the quickly transforming economy.

In a sense, this development was the continuation of a trend that had existed since the 1970s and 1980s. As a result of the introduction of the dual economy and the colonial administration a small indigenous elite had formed during the colonial period. Due to the expansion of the state and the Africanisation of the civil service after independence, this elite expanded considerably until the 1970s. This process slowed down and access to the political and bureaucratic elite effectively became blocked when the impact of the debt crisis hit the African countries. This was a general trend in Africa at the time, according to Bayart, who notes that in the 1980s “hierarchies close up, and tend to the reproduction of the governing classes, particularly in schooling” (1993: 69).

Social stratification by means of formal education and employment in the civil service was evident from the family histories of my informants. Employment in the civil service was rarely limited to one family member. It was very common for the parents, uncles, aunts and siblings of my informants to also be employed in the civil service or state-owned enterprises. Especially among the middle- and high-ranking civil servants, it was common for one or both parents to be employed in the civil service. Often uncles and aunts were also employed in the civil service or the formal economy. It was the moral and financial support of this older generation that had enabled many of my informants to pursue secondary and tertiary education and the gratitude for this support characterised the attitude of my informants to their benefactors. Other informants had received support from older brothers or sisters who had paid school fees and provided accommodation for their younger siblings. One important consequence of this process was the social distance between the “modern” family members employed in the formal sector and their rural kinsfolk in the villages. The following paragraphs aim to further elucidate this complicated relationship and the social distance between civil servants and their rural kin.

The importance of associations

One of the effects of an urban “civilized” lifestyle at a “safe distance” was the growing reliance on other social networks than those based on kinship. Traditionally the village had been perceived as the last refuge one could fall back on in times of crisis. During my fieldwork this perception seemed to have changed. The civil servants in the townships of Lilongwe and Zomba had a clear preference for relatives with a similar social status and voluntary associations, such as district associations, church groups and welfare committees, to serve as social security in case of unanticipated contingencies. However, this preference for people with similar social status and lifestyle, whether they were relatives or

not, did not result in an open fissure with the kinsfolk in the home village. As Mr. Kachopoka and Mr. Mkandawire strove to carefully negotiate a course at a safe distance from their rural kin, they sought to check access to their resources, on the one hand, whilst maintaining cordial ties with their home village, on the other.

The church congregation, the colleagues at the workplace and various other organisations, such as district and burial associations, played a central role in civil servants' life in Lilongwe and Zomba. These forms of voluntary association are not the manifestation of traditional or primordial ties with the home region, but should rather be understood as urban phenomena (Englund 2001; Gluckman 1960; Mitchell 1956a).

Faith and the participation in church affairs were matters of extreme importance for the civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba and pervaded all aspects of daily life. In Zomba many government employees assembled in their lunch break in groups of ten to twenty people in the adjacent Botanical Gardens to pray and sing together. The same could be observed on Capital Hill, Lilongwe's modernist government quarter, where groups of civil servants gathered in their lunch break in the shade of the trees between the office buildings to sing and pray together. Sunday morning was the time that most of my informants would crowd the benches of one of the various churches.⁴ Many participated in neighbourhood prayer groups, referred to as *mphakati* in the Catholic Church and Jesus' Way by the Seventh Day Adventists, for instance.⁵ These neighbourhood groups constituted important hubs of support and solidarity and a manifestation of both people's engagement in the church and solidarity among neighbours. Their most active members tended to be women who generally played a more active role in church affairs than men. The members of a prayer group usually had a similar social status and *habitus* due to the high degree of social stratification in Lilongwe's and Zomba's neighbourhoods and townships with clear borders between more affluent "low-density" areas and poorer "high-density areas".

⁴ The largest churches in Malawi were the Catholic Church, C.C.A.P. (Church of Central African Presbyterian), Seventh Day Adventists, although the new charismatic or born-again churches quickly gained ground. See e.g. van Dijk (1998).

⁵ I was not able to check whether all churches had these neighbourhood prayer and support groups although I suppose that the established churches (Catholic, Seventh Day Adventists, CCAP) and some of the smaller more institutionalised churches (Lutheran, Assemblies of God and other born-again churches) had this form of organisation – at least in the urban and peri-urban areas. My empirical material is limited to the Seventh Day Adventists and the Catholic Church in Blantyre, Lilongwe and Zomba.

The workplace also formed an important hub for networks of support and sociability. In most government offices, schools, hospitals, offices and barracks employees were organised in so-called welfare committees or social welfare funds. Typically, all employees of a department or school would be organised in the committee, a revolving fund to which they paid monthly contributions, with a secretary, a chairperson and a treasurer. Two different types of support for members existed: emergency loans and condolence money in the event of a member or one of their relatives dying. For example, the preamble of the statute of one of the welfare funds at the National Statistics Office in Zomba stated that the fund had the objective “to provide financial assistance to members of the fund in case of need, like funeral, sickness and other genuine personal problems, and to reduce the heavy burden experienced through borrowing from other sources.”

All welfare committees had these and similar objectives. The welfare committee at a primary school in Biwi, for example, offered condolence money and emergency grants to its members. It consisted of a chairperson, vice-chairperson, secretary, vice-secretary, treasurer, executive committee and all 75 teachers of the school. The headmaster selected the chairperson of the committee, the other executive members were elected by the staff members. According to the committee’s constitution, the members had to pay a monthly contribution of MK 20 and received money in the event of illness, death and other emergencies. In case of illness a member received MK 10, a member who was admitted to the hospital received MK 20, and other members who paid him or her a visit were paid the bus fare. The fund paid MK 100 condolence money if one of the parents, the spouse or a child died, MK 50 if one of the grandparents, an *amalume* (MB), a maternal aunt or one of the parents-in-law died, and MK 20 if the paternal uncle, aunts, cousins or other in-laws died, thus reflecting the predominantly matrilineal setting in the central region. The executive committee decided on applications for an emergency grant. In 1999, the committee ran out of funds several times because “there are too many funerals these days”, as the chairwoman put it. In these situations, the committee borrowed money from the wealthier staff members who did business and had more cash at their disposal than the others. These amounts were minimal ranging from US\$ 0.20 for a member in hospital to US\$ 1 in case of the death of a spouse but their importance as signs of respect should not be underestimated. In addition, the members of welfare funds provided invaluable support in serious situations such as funerals.

Funerals were events where several support networks converged and complemented each other. For example, one of my female informants, a primary school teacher at Biwi Primary School, was the secretary of a *mphakati*, which counted about a dozen families. One day in February 2002, one of the members

died unexpectedly. While we were having dinner we heard whistles blown by boys to announce the funeral. They walked the streets to inform the neighbourhood. This was the sign for people to put firewood in front of their houses to be collected later and delivered to the house of the deceased. These boys had received orders by the traditional chief⁶ of the neighbourhood who had been immediately informed of the death by the widow of the deceased. After dinner, my informant went to the house of the deceased to see what had to be done and to discuss matters with the other members of the *mphakati*. Then they organised the night vigil, prepared food for the guests and co-ordinated the collection of condolence money and food. The next morning, the day of the burial, the members of the welfare committee, some of which had already attended the night vigil, organised a government vehicle from the city council, the authority responsible for primary schools, to transport the corpse to the home village in Kasungu district, about 30 km north of Lilongwe, where preparations for the funeral were already underway.

District associations were another important form of organisation in the urban areas. They were organisations with a written statute and which were managed by a secretary, a treasurer and an executive committee. Most district associations managed revolving funds that provided assistance for funerals and weddings. Some of the wealthier associations in Lilongwe and Blantyre also supported charitable projects in their respective home district.

District associations are not a recent phenomenon. Their antecedents can be traced back to colonial times. In fact, Malawi has one of the strongest and longest traditions of this form of organisation in Central Africa (Rotberg 1972). Originally, district associations or “native associations”, as they were called during colonial times, were an attempt by the small African elite, consisting of people who had enjoyed missionary education and were employed by the missions or the government, or who were traders and commercial farmers, to influence colonial politics. The colonial government was very sceptical of these modern demands made by supposedly tribal “natives” and ignored the demands and complaints voiced by these associations. Instead, the colonial administration promoted and strengthened the “traditional” chiefs as representatives of the African population following the British doctrine of indirect rule (Chanock 1975; McCracken 1983; Rotberg 1972).

⁶ The urban areas, especially Traditional Housing Areas (THCs), the squatter townships and older townships within the municipal boundaries have also *chiefs* although only *chiefs* outside the municipal borders are officially recognised.

The nature of kinship duties

Whilst my informants in Lilongwe and Zomba mainly turned to church groups, neighbours, social welfare funds and district associations when they needed support, they felt a strong sense of moral duty towards a wide circle of kith and kin. These obligations were felt to be a burden and many an informant complained about the exaggerated expectations of their relatives who expected to benefit from my informants' alleged wealth. Consequently, they were torn between striving for the material security of their nuclear families, on the one hand, and meeting the expectations of their rural kin who sought to benefit from their wealth, on the other. To finance the education of their cousins' children in the home village and to send remittances often meant postponing the purchase of the refrigerator or the television set. With little or no savings to fall back on, the medical treatment or funeral of a relative could result in indebtedness for many years to come.

But what was the exact nature of these extensive kinship obligations? Did they constitute binding obligations circumscribing precisely the scope of solidarity or were they very general principles open to interpretation and negotiation? The study of morality in Africa often draws on proverbs and popular culture. With the help of my research assistant, I conducted a survey of pop songs, cartoons in newspapers, theatre plays and the performances of comedians, searching for clues. Most manifestations of popular culture centred on adultery, marital fidelity and the institution of marriage. Many pop songs addressed HIV/AIDS, politics, corruption and the economic crisis in the "New Malawi". One of the best songs dealing with the problematic side of kinship obligations was *amalume*, meaning uncle in Chichewa, by Albert Khoza, a Kwaito-artist based in Blantyre. The song is sung by a boy, an orphan, addressing his uncle, his mother's brother. In a matrilineal context, the *amalume* (MB) is a person with great authority and responsibility, acting as guardian for his sisters and their children. The boy addresses the uncle in the first person, "*amalume*, on the *bwalo* you promised to look after me but here in town you spend all your money on women and drinking. *Amalume* what should become of me if you do not help me?" To address a song in the first person to the listener or a fictitious character is a very common form for songs in Malawi and is a way of expressing grievances that cannot not be raised in reality. The *bwalo* is the centre of the village; it is the place where the chief and his advisors (*induna*) listen to complaints. The *bwalo* is located within the realm of the village, governed by the "traditional" customs, *miyambo yakumudzi*, of kinship ideology. A promise or an oath made on the *bwalo* is public and witnessed by the village headman, the *induna* and the other villagers.

The boy complains that the *amalume* broke this promise and neglects him in town. Instead of taking an interest in him and supporting him, the uncle spends his money on women and alcohol. The song juxtaposes the village as a place of “traditional” kinship solidarity with the town as a place of moral corruption, selfish indulgence in worldly pleasures and individualism. With regard to the opposition between the individualized corrupt town and the collective “traditional” village, it is important to note that the artist himself is a member of the urban elite and that the audience is primarily the younger generation growing up in town. By invoking the image of the promise on the *bwalo*, the artist tries to remind both his generation and the older generation of the “traditional” obligations of the uncle. In this sense the song has a very explicit moral message. The song criticises the hypocritical use of “traditional” moral values to maintain social status among kin. The uncle made a promise on the *bwalo* but as soon as he and his nephew leave the village he drops the façade of the responsible uncle and shows his true face.

It is striking that the boy complains directly to the uncle, the *mwini mbumba*, instead of directing his complaints to a third party such as the village headman or some other person of authority. The reason for this is the taboo that rests on making public conflict within the lineage (Marwick 1965; Mitchell 1956b; Velsen 1964). The Chichewa-proverb *Apawo ndi mizu ya kachere*, “the clan is like the roots of the Kachere-tree (fig-tree)” encapsulates this strong rejection of revealing infra-kin conflicts to outsiders. A multitude of roots is invisible to the eye of the observer who only sees a strong and unified tree. Hence, the boy cannot complain to anyone other than the *amalume*, who acts as mediator in internal conflicts and on whom he depends for support. The only thing he feels he is able to do is to remind the uncle of his duties, in the hope that he will eventually fulfil his promise.

We do not hear the voice of the *amalume* in the song. How would he respond to his nephew if confronted with the charge of neglect and selfish behaviour? Most of my informants belonged to the category of the uncle, i.e. they were supporting a relative’s child staying in their household – paying school fees, providing food and clothes, etc. Many complained about wildly exaggerated expectations of these children who often failed in school and used the money they received to buy schoolbooks and stationery for consumer goods instead. Some even accused the children of acting as “spies” for relatives who wanted get information about their material wealth.

During my fieldwork, I witnessed several cases of adolescents taking advantage of the relative they were staying with in town. For example, I spent several months in the household of a senior civil servant in Zomba. The son of his sister who had passed away stayed with him. The young man was nineteen and had just finished secondary school. He was staying at his uncle’s house to

find a job in Zomba. Unfortunately, he had failed the Malawi Secondary Certificate of Education (MSCE) exam, and without a degree, his chances of finding a good job were slim. However, he told me he was confident that his uncle would find him a job. During the three months I was staying in the household, the nephew mainly loafed around, watching television, hanging out in town to pick up girls and spending the evenings in bottle-stores with his friends. As far as I could see, he did not do anything to find employment, instead relying completely on his uncle to find him a job. Of course, these are the problems to be expected with adolescents but, as this vignette highlights, there are two sides to the story of the neglected child and the selfish uncle.

Exaggerated expectations of kin and the strong emphasis on intra-kin harmony soured many relationships and resulted in backbiting and witchcraft. The discrepancy between expectations and the actual support provided by civil servants was a source of insecurity and anxiety among my informants. The following account of a senior civil servant illustrates this ambiguity:

In all the situations I have failed to assist I have discerned the feeling that the people couldn't understand how I was unable to assist them. As for my wife's relative, who first came to the husband of my sister-in-law and he couldn't help because his truck has been down for a month, they were complaining that my wife and her relatives are not like their father who was assisting them. They were being accused of being stingy and selfish and inconsiderate to their plight. This, I think, is a source of conflict and disputes. The only reason it doesn't become a dispute is that the villagers are unable to speak their minds to the concerned persons e.g. they tell me about the husband of my sister-in-law, yet they can't tell him in his face. I also suspect that they talk about me to the others behind my back. I also perceive that lack of appreciation and understanding as to how much one can help. This is true with my family, no one appreciates the burden I shoulder and the extent to which I can assist. I have to control myself nearly always for fear of making myself stupid while trying to be reasonable with the concerned peoples. I believe strongly that many others who don't have that patience can end up flaring up and heightening the existing tensions. In all this, I wouldn't be surprised that issues of witchcraft, *ufiti*, can easily crop in.

Within kinship groups jealousy, witchcraft and gossiping were constant undercurrents and those who were perceived to be wealthy were constantly confronted with demands for support. Often they were either accused of being a witch or fell victim to witchcraft attacks by other relatives. He continued his reflection on moral principles and their interpretation:

The problem here is who sets the value range of importance for the obligation to help? How does one understand the categories and differentiate at which level one is operating on? The obligation to help relatives in need is our custom cast in iron, *miyambo*. I am expected as part of *miyambo* to do anything possible, even put myself in critical debts, to pay for my mother's hospital expenses or the death of my brother and I can't abscond from such responsibility without being considered

morally bankrupt. Yet, I can be exempted or people will understand my failure to contribute towards my brother's wedding or education or my mother's house, but not her food. Since there is no rule governing the importance of one custom in relation to the other, there are ultimately differences in understanding or application in certain circumstances. It is as if the ideal vision has now become blurred and, even though the same principles still apply, people act differently and this tends to loosen the binding character of certain *miyambo* on rural and urban people. This difference in applicability depends also on ability: how much does one have to provide so as to be able to fulfil certain expectations depends on one's resources: where a small-scale vendor is expected to help with a lot of cash, even with issues of life and death, the *miyambo* loses its binding character since the person can't fulfil his obligations.

My informant complained that there was no authority or meta-rule to interpret the moral obligation to help and determine the scope of the obligation. Instead, different people interpreted the moral principle of kinship solidarity differently. The moral principles of kinship ideology proved to be very flexible and their interpretation was subject to constant negotiation. Interpretations varied since there was no third party available that might have provided an authoritative interpretation of the moral obligations.

Yet the interpretation of the moral principle to help was not arbitrary. Kinship obligations were differentiated by grade of relatedness, availability of resources and the perceived need. The request of a distant kin who needed money to start a business could be refused, usually by reference to one's own limited resources, without offending anyone, including the requester. However, if a first-grade relative was in need of urgent medical treatment or had died, one "can't abscond from such responsibility without being considered morally bankrupt", as one of my interlocutors put it. Thus, in case of illness and death of first-grade relatives such as the spouse, parents, children, siblings and other close relatives, there was little room for interpretation.

Indeterminacy crept mainly in through the assessment of the need and the extent of support in less vital situations. In this respect, the crucial issue was who ought to decide what kind of support was appropriate and which situations warranted a request for support. All civil servants emphasised their freedom to decide whom to help, in what form and under which circumstances. It was vital to them that it was their decision in what situations they would provide assistance and in what form, unaffected by social pressure. They denied that their relatives had a claim to their resources. If they could assist it was them who decided what to do, not the relatives who should show more gratitude and have less exaggerated expectations. It was important for my informants to assert their autonomy and to stress that they were by no means obliged or forced to help. They represented themselves as acting out of pity and a moral sense of duty to help. In reality, however, they often responded to considerable social pressure

to provide support but it was important for them to present themselves as being in charge; *they* controlled access to their resources and no one else.

This interpretation of kinship duties differed from that of less affluent people as Rohregger's (2006) study shows. She conducted research in a poor squatter area in Lilongwe (Area 25, Sector 7) and her informants stressed their claim on the resources of their wealthier relatives. According to her informants, the moral principle of sharing one's wealth and displaying the spirit of kinship solidarity and neighbourliness constituted an entitlement (Rohregger 2006).

My informants were not willing to honour every request. They made a clear distinction between sensible demands, such as school fees, and foolish ones. Relatives who would just ask for money without a specific and "useful" purpose could not count on their support. After all, it would be inconsistent for "civilised" urbanites to be under the control of the "uncivilised", uneducated kin from the home village. Reality was often different: stories about jealous relatives in the home village were ubiquitous. Many of my informants admitted that they feared witchcraft attacks and lived in fear of being accused of being a witch because of their alleged selfishness and greed.

Witchcraft thus came into these matters in two ways: on the one hand, people who were perceived to be rich were accused of being witches and, on the other hand, many of my informants were afraid to become the target of witchcraft attacks by jealous relatives.⁷ With regard to the former, a selfish and greedy person, *munthu wa umbombo*, was accused of being a witch or sorcerer based on the idea that material wealth is acquired through the use of medicine, *mankhwala*, made from human organs. Rumours about the sorcery practised by rich people to accumulate more wealth were ubiquitous, although no one would ever have dared to utter these accusations in the face of the respective person for fear of being bewitched. With regard to the latter, witchcraft was used against the relative in town, who adopted an air of aloofness. To be "proud", *onyada*, or to "boast", *kusitu kumula*, was strongly disapproved of and could be punished through backbiting, social isolation and witchcraft. Therefore it was very important for most of my informants, especially those with a higher social status like Mr. Kachopoka and Mr. Mkandawire, to create and maintain a "safe distance", both spatially and socially. The importance of witchcraft in modern Malawi should not be misunderstood. As Geschiere (1997) shows, both forms of witchcraft are not remnants of traditional African culture but rather constitute ways of making sense of a modernity characterised by discontinuities and social change.

⁷ For a more in-depth investigation of these views and the nexus between new forms of wealth accumulation and witchcraft, see Cameroon, Fisiy & Geschiere (1991, 1996) and Geschiere (1997).

Although the interpretation of what was appropriate varied according to the social status, neither the response nor the request was posed directly, allowing both parties to save face. Some of my informants devised the most elaborate strategies of evasion to control access to their resources. One senior civil servant in Zomba, for example, lived in a very spacious house leased by the government. However, this blessing was a curse in disguise, since an increasing number of relatives came to settle in his quarters to enjoy his hospitality. Since there was sufficient space there was no apparent reason to refuse them and soon he started to feel claustrophobic in his own house, he told me. After a couple of months he decided to do something about this, since the rising water and electricity bills were becoming a serious threat to his budget. He started to spread the rumour that his transfer to Lilongwe was imminent. His relatives, in turn, started to get worried and wondered what would happen to them if their patron moved to Lilongwe. Soon, I heard that one family had moved out to honour another relative in town with their visit. Of course, he was never transferred but that could be blamed on the unreliability of the bureaucracy. In the meantime he had found another house that, not coincidentally, was much smaller and did not have enough space for all the relatives who wanted to visit him.

Conclusions

The adherence to kinship solidarity proved to be highly situational. Those civil servants who had the necessary means preferred to move to “neutral ground” at a “safe distance” from their relatives after their retirement. It was revealing to observe how social distance was translated into spatial distance. The civil servants were keen to maintain the distance they had established during their careers after retirement. However, the decision to create spatial distance in order to protect the accumulated wealth and to avoid squabbles with the rural kin did not imply that civil servants wanted to sever ties with the village. On the contrary, both men, Mr. Kachopoka to a greater extent than Mr. Mkandawire, had maintained ties with the home village and felt a sense of attachment to it. Mr. Kachopoka’s case is particularly revealing in this respect, since he maintained ties at different levels with his home village.

This attachment was expressed in terms of a tension between the “modern” and the “traditional” way of life. Yet, despite this sense of attachment they preferred to keep the distance they had established during their career in the civil service. It was telling that the “neutral place” was at a distance prohibitive to the poorer relatives in the village but not insurmountable for the retired officer. The fear of jealousy, witchcraft, backbiting, theft and property-grabbing were a source of great anxiety among civil servants when contemplating retire-

ment. A “neutral” place promised more security than the village, where their status of being “civilised” and “modern” would set them apart and their material wealth would be threatened by the claims of their relatives.

Kinship groups had become increasingly socially stratified as a result of the process of class formation, with formal education and a “modern” lifestyle as the primary distinctive features. It was common practice for the employed and educated family members in town to form a sub-group to discuss support for relatives from the wider kinship group. People in town relied more on other relatives in town and forms of association, such as district associations and welfare committees, for their own social security than on their relatives in the village. To avoid some of the tensions arising from personalized support, the ties with the home district were transformed into a more abstract form of attachment through membership in district associations, which were an urban form of solidarity rather than the manifestation of kinship and ethnic identity.

One of the main motives for the desire to move to “neutral ground” seemed to be the ambiguous and all-encompassing character of kinship obligations. My informants were willing to share part of their wealth with their relatives but they also wanted to maintain control over their resources. Otherwise, they feared, they would not be able to maintain their “civilised” way of life and the standard of living they had become accustomed to. The civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba felt the need to assert their autonomy with regard to the support they offered their relatives, the foundation on which their sense of being “modern” rested, although in fact they often felt compelled to provide support because of the fear of social isolation, backbiting and witchcraft. Hence, they manoeuvred carefully to avoid alienating themselves from their relatives in the village.

The democratisation of appropriation

Bwana – zimakukomerani ife tikatuwa, pa lunch hour tikuwerenga manyuzi, kuyenda bawo inu muli ndi mahule, muku njoya mukukadya ku Ryall's.

Boss – it pleases you to see us reading newspapers and playing *bawo* [East-African board game] during lunch hour while you spend your time with hookers, enjoying and eating at Ryall's [expensive hotel in Blantyre].

Lucius Banda and Zembani Band, '*Njoka mu udzu*' (1999)

Introduction

During Kamuzu Banda's rule, Malawi's civil servants had a reputation for integrity and discipline. This changed in the 1990s and in the 21st century. The country now seems to have caught up with the rest of Africa, although the situation is a far cry from countries such as Angola or Nigeria where corruption is supposedly much more deeply entrenched. Since the country's transition to multi-party democracy in 1994, corruption appears to be on the rise and has become a hotly debated topic. It was striking how my interlocutors drew a clear line between the time before 1994, when corruption was virtually unheard of, and the time after 1994. Even people who had suffered under his autocratic regime would admit that, under Kamuzu Banda, corruption was negligible and government officials discharged their duties more diligently than under his successor Bakili Muluzi. The expansion of graft and embezzlement was so clearly associated with the introduction of democracy that it is justified to see a connection between the two phenomena.

Since 2004, corruption accusations have become a dominant feature of Malawi's political culture. Bakili Muluzi, who served two terms as president, was

widely perceived to tolerate or even condone corruption among his cabinet ministers and the UDF, his party. This changed in 2004 when the newly elected president Bingu Wa Mutharika embarked on a high-profile campaign against corruption. Several politicians and high-ranking functionaries have faced investigations and even Bakili Muluzi himself was briefly arrested on corruption charges. There have however been critics, especially within the government and the UDF, who accuse Mutharika of employing corruption charges to get rid of political rivals rather than being genuinely interested in curbing corruption.

The international donor agencies have also levelled accusations of corruption against Malawian politicians and bureaucrats. Concerns over bad governance and corruption figure prominently in their policy prescriptions and the loan documents (see GoM 2002 and Chapter 3: 45-49). World Bank and IMF reports blame Africa's underdevelopment on the "dysfunctional" state, which is alien to and disconnected from African society. For example, Dia, who conducted a large survey for the World Bank,¹ observes a

[D]isconnect between formal and informal institutions that largely explains problems in capacity building and institutional performance in both the public and the private sectors in Africa. On the one hand, formal institutions in Africa, being mostly inherited from the colonial period, do not generally reflect actual societal behavior and incentives and thus suffer a crisis of legitimacy and enforcement. Unrooted in local culture, they lack the local "ownership" needed for voluntary self-enforcement (Dia 1996: 29-30).

This chapter suggests a different interpretation and places corruption in the context of the country's recent transition to multi-party democracy and the influence of the global anti-corruption movement. Far from blaming an imagined disconnect between "local culture" and "imported state" for the current state of affairs it presents a more nuanced picture that, on the one hand, suggests more similarities between the bureaucratic order inherited from the colonial era and post-colonial patrimonial rule than often assumed and, on the other, questions the existence of a homogeneous "African society". First, the chapter examines corruption and the talk about corruption in the light of Malawi's recent past and current political developments. Second, it discusses the significance of a parallel informal order in the bureaucracy and, third, it highlights differences within a society that is often reduced to patrimonialism, kinship and ethnicity. Unlike the previous chapters, which cover events up to 2002, the present chapters deals with events until late 2007.

¹ The African Management in the 1990s Research Programme (AM90s).

“Bad politics”

While doing fieldwork in Lilongwe and Zomba it was hard to avoid talk about corruption. The newspapers regularly ran stories about corruption scandals, songs denouncing corrupt politicians and bureaucrats were popular in bars and clubs, politicians hurled corruption accusations against one another and my informants indulged in stories of bribery and nepotism. There was a general consensus among Malawians that corruption had been on the rise since the 1990s. This popular assessment cannot be taken at face value, since there is no reliable data. Current indices are methodologically weak and there is no data at all on corrupt practices during Kamuzu Banda's regime. Hence, the common perception in Malawi that corruption had been on the increase has to be put in perspective.

Under Kamuzu Banda's rule, the boundaries between his own private property, the state apparatus and the MCP had become increasingly blurred. Practices, which would qualify as corruption after democratisation, were considered to be part of the political system, in which the autocrat exercised absolute control. Banda used his control over the state-owned companies that dominated Malawi's economy until the 1990s to strengthen his rule. For example, he ensured that party functionaries and senior civil servants could obtain soft loans from the Commercial Bank, a bank owned partly by the state and partly by Press Corporation, Malawi's largest company. Press Corporation, a conglomerate with substantial interests in all sectors of the economy, was Banda's personal property and he used its resources for his patronage network and personal prestige projects in order to ensure the absolute loyalty of his clients in the economy, the bureaucracy and the party.

In the early 1990s, discipline and the enforcement of official rules crumbled as a result of dramatic political and economic changes. Freed from the constant fear of being disciplined, senior officials and politicians of all parties seized their chance to establish themselves as patrons in their own right and appropriated the resources they controlled. According to both senior and junior civil servants, the misuse of the public office started among the top cadres of the civil service and quickly spread down to the junior grades who imitated their superiors in an attempt to benefit from the political turmoil of the mid-90s. In contrast to Kamuzu Banda's system, in which only a small circle around the autocrat appropriated the resources of the state, the time after the introduction of multi-party democracy was characterised by what I call the democratisation of appropriation. The term refers to two interrelated developments. On the one hand, the alleged rise of corruption has to be seen in the context of Malawi's transition to representative democracy and the liberalisation of its political system and, on the other, the appropriation of the state's resources by a wider

circle of people than before. Some informants even went so far as to frame human rights in terms of a regime that allowed one to exploit the new freedom for personal enrichment or as “the right to grab as much as you can”.

The end of one-party rule ushered in an unprecedented era of civil rights and openness. For the first time since the colonial period it was possible to openly discuss political affairs without having to fear censorship or reprisals. Ordinary citizens felt free to criticize the government without the fear of being reported to the authorities by their neighbours. Topics, which had been taboo under Kamuzu Banda, such as the widespread poverty or corruption, could now be discussed by journalists and politicians. Newspapers mushroomed and, although most of them were only short-lived, a number of professional national newspapers survived. During my fieldwork there were three national newspapers which were available in towns and the larger trading centres along the main roads. The Nation had been established in 1994 and was more sympathetic to the newly elected government headed by Bakili Muluzi, although it regularly reported on corruption scandals involving members of the UDF and cabinet ministers. The Daily Times used to be the only newspaper until the transition to democracy and adopted a more critical stance towards the government after the end of the one-party rule. The Chronicle, a weekly, was only available in the larger towns and quickly acquired a reputation for investigative journalism, uncovering a number of corruption scandals.

A more important influence on public opinion proved to be popular music because it reached a much wider audience than the newspapers with their limited circulation. The musicians perceived themselves as the mouthpiece of a disappointed population and criticized the government harshly in their songs. Their songs were widely played by radio stations and proved to be extremely popular, especially among the younger generation. The most famous of them was Lucius Banda who came to fame in the early 1990s when he criticized Kamuzu Banda’s regime. Later he became a vocal supporter of Bakili Muluzi and the UDF. After the elections in 2000, however, he fell out with Bakili Muluzi’s government and wrote songs like *Njoka mu udzu* to express his disenchantment with Malawi’s political class who misused their public offices for personal gains (Chirambo 2002).

During a follow-up visit in 2007, I found that corruption allegations had become a feature of bitterly fought battles within the government and parliament. The 2004 elections had been won by the UDF candidate Bingu Wa Mutharika. Mutharika was a relatively unknown economist who had left Malawi in 1964 because he feared persecution by Kamuzu Banda. He had pursued an international career and worked for several international organisations, including the United Nations Development Programme. In 1992 he returned to Malawi and joined the UDF. In 1997, he left the UDF and formed his own

political party, the United Party (UP), for which he ran as presidential candidate in the 1999 elections. He gained less than 1 per cent of the vote, and after dissolving the UP, he rejoined the UDF. Muluzi offered him a post as deputy governor of the Reserve Bank of Malawi and in 2002 Mutharika was appointed Minister of Economic Planning and Development.

Mutharika's candidacy for the 2004 elections came as a surprise both to the population and the UDF. For a long time Muluzi himself had harboured hopes that he would gain the necessary quorum in parliament for a constitutional amendment that would have allowed him to serve a third consecutive term as president. After this plan faltered, because it became clear that there would not be sufficient support in parliament to amend the constitution, Muluzi picked Mutharika as presidential candidate. Muluzi's move met considerable resistance by the UDF stalwarts, some of whom had presidential ambitions themselves. They considered Mutharika, who had virtually no support within the party, a weak candidate who would act as Muluzi's proxy. This view was widely shared by the public who assumed that Muluzi had chosen a relative outsider because he planned to continue to exercise influence on the government and the party. Muluzi was able to overcome this resistance because of his authority within the UDF, as chairman and its biggest financier. Mutharika, who was put forward by Muluzi as an "economic engineer", promised to restore economic growth and fight corruption.

Soon after the elections in May 2004, Mutharika fell out with the UDF top brass and Muluzi, his former patron, accusing them of sabotaging his campaign against corruption. He moved swiftly and only one month after being elected, President Mutharika ordered the arrest of a high-ranking UDF functionary on corruption charges. Shortly thereafter, Friday Jumbe, then Finance Minister and former director of the agricultural state marketing board ADMARC, and several high-ranking officials were charged for their alleged role in the illegal sale of the strategic grain reserve in 2001 that had triggered a devastating famine (see Chapter 2: 22-24). The conflict between Mutharika and Muluzi escalated and in February 2005 Mutharika left the UDF and formed the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), together with a number of UDF parliamentarians. This resulted in a rift between Mutharika and several of his cabinet ministers who refused to leave the UDF. Soon Mutharika took action against them. Yusuf Mwawa, the Minister of Education, was arrested and charged with corruption in March 2005 after he was reportedly seen at a UDF meeting. One year later, he was found guilty on four charges of corruption and became the first minister to actually be convicted of corruption. In August, the government reopened a corruption case, dating back to 1994, against UDF speaker and former Education Minister Sam Mpasu. In November 2005, Chilumpha, the Vice President and UDF strongman, was also briefly arrested on corruption charges. The conflict reached its

peak when Muluzi himself was arrested on corruption charges at the end of July 2006, although he was released soon afterwards.

Except for the case against Mwawa, who was found guilty on four charges of corruption in February 2006, only a few of these investigations led to a trial and none to a verdict at the time this chapter was written in late 2007. Usually cases once opened would neither be closed nor transferred to court but rather kept in suspension, an indication that it was in the interest of the authorities to delay the trials. For example, the former Secretary to the Treasury Milton Kutengule, against whom the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) had opened an investigation in July 2005, was still waiting for the opening of the trial in late 2007. He did not expect that the trial would be opened at all because of “bad politics”, as he told me. Sam Mpasu commented the re-opening of the case against him in the following words: “What I know is that they want to use the Department of the Public Prosecutor and the courts in the name of criminal prosecution. That is very dangerous politics”.² Obviously claims such as this cannot be taken at face value and ACB officials insisted that they “follow the clues where they lead us” and did not succumb to political pressure. However, it is undeniable that since Bingu Wa Mutharika’s split from the UDF, the number of corruption investigations against political opponents have increased dramatically and that these investigations produced only very few results.

The recent debate about corruption in Malawi cannot be considered in isolation from the global anti-corruption movement and the shift in development policies towards the promotion of good governance, as discussed in Chapter 2. Since 1994, the government of Malawi has been under considerable donor pressure to tackle corruption and several times donor agencies have withheld financial aid because of the alleged misuse or misappropriation of funds. Donor support was key in creating instruments to fight corruption. One of the first pieces of legislation passed by the newly elected parliament in 1995 was the Corrupt Practices Act. This statute was one of the main instruments to curb corruption demanded by the “donor community” and was drafted with the support of World Bank consultants (World Bank 1998).

The ACB, mandated with the task to fight against corruption, was established in 1998. It was mainly funded by the British development agency DFID and has the mandate to examine “the practices and procedures of public bodies and private bodies in order to facilitate the discovery of corrupt practices and secure the revision of methods of work or procedures which in the opinion of the Bureau may be prone or conducive to corrupt practices” (Section 10(1) Corrupt Practices Act). It also has the task of “disseminating information on the evil and dangerous effects of corrupt practices on society” and “enlisting and

² *Daily Times* Fieldyork scandal revived, 4 August 2005.

fostering public support against corrupt practices” (Section 10(1) Corrupt Practices Act). After a slow start, the ACB became more active after 2000, focusing on a few high-profile investigations and a media campaign, ranging from billboards to radio broadcasts, to raise awareness among the general public. Since 2005, the ACB has drastically increased the number of investigations, although at least part of these are politically motivated according to critics.

Apart from supporting and financing measures, such as the establishment of the ACB, Western donor agencies also intervened directly in the domestic debate on corruption. On several occasions, payments were suspended because of “governance concerns”. The suspension of aid because of corruption and mismanagement was unprecedented and would have been unthinkable during the Cold War when Kamuzu Banda was a reliable ally of the West. When the Cold War ended, however, such restrictions were by and large abandoned and Western governments and donor agencies became more vocal in demanding democracy and better governance in Africa, as Abrahamsen (2000) argues. For example, in 2000, the British government suspended aid to Malawi because of “governance concerns”. In November 2001, the European Union and USAID suspended their financial assistance because of the mismanagement of funds and, in January 2002, the new Danish right-wing government decided to pull out and terminate all development projects in Malawi due to concerns over bad governance and corruption. In 2002, the IMF postponed the disbursement of balance-of-payment support during the famine because of the alleged corruption of senior government officials. In total, payments of US\$ 75 million by various Western donor agencies remained blocked from 2002 until 2004.

Manifestations of the global anti-corruption movement were also directly appropriated in public debates in Malawi. For example, the publication of Transparency International’s corruption index in September 2007 coincided with the conflict between Mutharika and Muluzi. The parliamentarians of UDF and MCP picked up the news that Malawi had slipped from position 105 in 2006 to 118 in 2007 with relish and criticised Mutharika’s performance as a self-professed champion against corruption. Mutharika responded by drawing on the Ibrahim Index on African Governance, which was published at the same time and ranked Malawi 12th of 48 African countries. Critical statements of foreign diplomats and representatives of international organisations invariably elicited furious reactions by the government. When the Danish ambassador allegedly insulted then president Muluzi at a private meeting in 2001, the government protested vehemently against what was seen as Danish interference in matters of national sovereignty. The ambassador who had led an investigation into the alleged misuse of Danish aid was finally called back to Denmark in October 2001. The Danish accusations became the subject of a heated public debate about governance. The government launched a media campaign against

the Danish allegations in the national newspapers whereas the opposition and civil society groups took the opportunity to cite the Danish allegations in support of their criticisms of the government.

In everyday conversations in Zomba and Lilongwe, people used the English word “corruption” quite frequently but in a very broad sense, covering corruption in the legal sense of the term, i.e. bribery, and all kinds of illicit practices like fraud, theft, embezzlement, etc. In everyday conversations, newspaper reports, official documents and statements by politicians, practices labelled as “corrupt” were invariably condemned as something poisonous that had to be eradicated or stamped out. However, the general rejection of anything associated with “corruption” did not imply a clear and unequivocal rejection of practices considered to be corrupt among average Malawians in the vernacular languages.

In many conversations people used the Chichewa word *katangale*. *Katangale* denoted any kind of illegal, dubious or shady deal or practice connected to the place of work or the office in the formal sector that served the enrichment of the employee. *Katangale* also covered nepotism and patronage since the two practices were often connected. When people referred to corruption by the English word they generally expressed their strong disapproval. *Katangale*, on the other hand, was more ambiguous. Although people did not approve of it they often talked about it in a rather ironic fashion, acknowledging the fact that it was an intrinsic aspect of formal employment. Not surprisingly, civil servants and their relatives often justified *katangale* as a way of making do. To them *katangale* was not so much an individualist action but rather an aspect of “the system” or “the way of doing things”. Usually *katangale* was not considered as an act of free will but rather something one is drawn into. It was presented as something you do because “that is the way things are done around here”, a system that does not really leave an alternative way of doing things. The denial of the individual’s freedom of choice and the emphasis on the systemic character of corruption are common registers used to justify corruption, as Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2001) point out.³

Two other words were also used to refer to corrupt practices: *ziphupu* and *madeal*. *Ziphupu* is a minor act within the meaning of *katangale* and denotes activities associated with theft or embezzlement. *Madeal* is also a practice that falls under the term *katangale* and is derived from the English word “deal”. The word describes illegal and semi-illegal deals and transactions between two or more people. *Katangale* has strong redistributive connotations and is often linked to the notions of “allocating” and “sharing”, *kugawira* and *kugawa*. If

³ On the systemic character of corruption see e.g. Maas’ (1973) report on corruption in the New York police force.

others benefited from *katangale* and no one was harmed – except for the state of course – people tended to consider corrupt behaviour as acceptable and morally right.

Of course, these are very general observations and often *katangale* was also criticised as being harmful and anti-social. Lwanda (2005), for instance, draws a linguistic distinction between *katangale* and *ziphupu*. According to Lwanda, the original meaning of *katangale* refers to the custom of selling food from a basket. He argues that this distinction became blurred between 1999 and 2004 when “neo-*katangale*” and a “culture of we are all corrupt” became entrenched (Lwanda 2005:53). But, even though he perceives of neo-*katangale* as something bad, Lwanda also acknowledges the positive connotations the term *katangale* is associated with.

Katangale was clearly differentiated from ordinary theft, *kuba*. Theft was an individual act for one’s own benefit. *Kuba* did not evoke the redistributive associations of *katangale*. Theft was legally and morally wrong and could not be justified as *katangale*. For example, in the markets it was common practice that a thief who was caught red-handed was subjected to spontaneous mob-justice that often resulted in severe physical punishment or the killing of the thief. These observations regarding the concept of *katangale* indicate that the attitude towards the use of the public office for “private” ends was more complicated and multi-layered than simplistic notions of African “primordialism” suggest. The following sections explore these ambiguities in more detail.

The office mores – a parallel social and moral order

African bureaucrats are famous for their often mind-boggling formalism. Comaroff & Comaroff (2006), for example, comment on the excessive legal formalism and the meticulous care for procedures, stamps and documents in the postcolony, which they describe in terms of a “fetishism of the law”. Malawi is no exception in this regard. Official rules were often applied with meticulous care and there was an array of legal instruments regulating the conduct of government officials. The primary code was the MPSR regulating salary scales, conditions of employment, and the rights and duties of all government employees. Therefore, it was commonly referred to as “the bible of the civil service” by civil servants.

The MPSR contained a chapter on conduct and discipline sanctioning for example the use of information for personal gain, the use of public monies or property for private purposes, activities which conflict with the interests of the government or are inconsistent with a civil servant’s official duties, etc. Only two editions of the MPSR had been published, in 1978 and 1991. They had been altered, updated and supplemented by a vast number of circulars, which

were usually issued by the Secretary of the President and the Cabinet and the Secretary of the Human Resource Department. These regulations were supplemented by the penal code prohibiting theft and fraud by civil servants, the 1995 Corrupt Practices Act and the Public Finance Management Act. Both the Corrupt Practices Act and the Public Finance Management Act were conditions set by the World Bank and the IMF for their financial support. In addition, numerous circulars of the Secretary of Human Resource Management addressed specific problems such as the rampant misuse of government vehicles.

Several agencies were mandated to deal with the wrongdoings of public officials. Since colonial times the Auditor General's Office had been the primary department controlling the ministries' accounts. The ACB, the Department of the Public Prosecutor and the Public Accounts Committee of Parliament were all established in the late 1990s, following Malawi's transition to democracy.

Thus, state legislation and institutions were not a homogeneous system but a rather heterogeneous mix with different genealogies determined by changing geopolitical constellations. From independence in 1964 until 1994, Kamuzu Banda retained and even strengthened the highly hierarchical and centralised structure of the colonial civil service since it suited his interests. This started to change when the new government under Bakili Muluzi was elected in the first multi-party elections in 1994. The new government had a reformist agenda and implemented a number of reforms to transform the service into a "performance-driven", "transparent" and "accountable" provider of public services, controlled by democratic institutions and the general public under the guidance of the World Bank, the IMF and bilateral donors. But instead of creating a new structure these reforms merely grafted a new bureaucratic layer on top of the structures inherited from the period of British colonial rule (cf. Skinner 1963; World Bank 1994b).

In spite of the new legislation and Mutharika's anti-corruption campaign the actual risk of discovery and punishment for corrupt civil servants remained very low. Of course, the President and the ministers were eager to point out that corruption is an evil and that no one stands above the law. However, control by the ACB, the prosecutor's office and the notoriously understaffed Auditor General's Office was incidental at best, and enforcement of the various statutes and official regulations was mostly restricted to a few isolated cases that were supposed to have a deterrent effect or serve the purposes of political rivals. Furthermore, the competition between these institutions had counter-productive effects, hindering rather than enhancing anti-corruption measures. Finally, it should also be noted that in any country respecting the principles of fair trial and the rule of law convictions on corruption charges are extremely rare due to the well-known difficulties in collecting evidence.

During one-party rule, a bifurcated system of control was operating in the civil service. Official regulations and a patronage network personally controlled by Kamuzu Banda reinforced one another and were used to ensure discipline and loyalty. Banda himself appointed all senior functionaries and he could also remove them from their posts any time. It is reported that the title Permanent Secretary, the most senior position in the civil service, was changed to Principal Secretary because he stated that no position was permanent. The personal loyalty of bureaucrats and party cadres was ensured by a highly efficient patronage system. After independence Banda had appropriated great tracts of land in the central region, formerly designated as crown land or owned by European farmers. This land was converted into tobacco estates and distributed to high-ranking civil servants, managers of state-owned companies and MCP functionaries. The beneficiaries of this scheme received soft loans from the Commercial Bank, which was also under Banda's personal control (GoM 2001: 70; Williams 1978: 280). By contrast, the rank and file of the civil service was subject to strict enforcement of official regulations. Arbitrary arrests of suspected dissidents created a culture of fear that ensured obedience. During the 1970s and 1980s any misstep could lead to one's dismissal or even arrest. Banda relied on an impressive network gathering intelligence and monitoring the population. The Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP), the paramilitary youth wing of the MCP, had spies and informants everywhere and sudden unexplained wealth would inevitably lead to inquiries. Thus, it seems that the reportedly low levels of corruption Malawi used to be famous for prior to the 1990s depended on Kamuzu Banda's system of brutal oppression rather than the rule of law.

All bureaucracies know informal arrangements or codes of conduct at the shop floor level. In Africa, this parallel order appears to be particularly strong and well-developed. Beneath the layer of statutes, regulations and organisational charts a complex web of interpersonal relationships seems to amount to a parallel structure within the state apparatus, running mainly along the lines of patron-client relationships. This phenomenon is variously described as "neopatrimonial state" (Médard 1982), "rhizome state" (Bayart 1993), "shadow state" (Reno 1995, 2000) or even "criminalization of the state" (Bayart *et al.* 1999). In Malawi this parallel order did not amount to a "shadow state" in Reno's sense who describes a much more institutionalised parallel system in Sierra Leone, where formal structures had been hollowed out completely during the civil war, but parallel office mores were easily discernible in the Malawian state apparatus.

This parallel social order is best described in terms of an unofficial code of conduct based on the principle of "respect for the master", *ulemu kwa bwana*, that guide the interpretation of official regulations and prevails over them in

case of conflict. This system soon emerged after independence and constituted one of the main instruments used by Kamuzu Banda and the MCP to ensure absolute control over the civil servants who were considered a potential threat to the MCP regime. The emergence of this parallel order can be traced back to the colonial administration, an aspect often overlooked by “neo-patrimonial” readings of African states. The basic principles of the office mores are a colonial legacy which were retained and adapted after independence to ensure Kamuzu Banda’s absolute control of state functionaries. “Respect for the boss” was a feature of the British colonial administration with its notorious “colour bar” between European expatriate officers and African employees. Under British colonial rule, Europeans held all senior positions in the civil service of what was then Nyasaland, whereas Africans were only found in junior positions such as teachers, clerks and labourers. According to Africans who had served in the colonial civil service, the European officers looked down upon them and considered them to be only mimicking the manners of their colonial masters. Under colonial rule, it was unthinkable for an African to challenge the decisions taken by Europeans, and Africans were required to refer all decisions of importance to their white superiors.

According to the junior civil servants I talked to during my fieldwork, “respect for the boss” was the most important virtue in Malawian government institutions. “Respect for the boss” overruled the official regulations, the MPSR. One informant pointed out that “we have laws but we also have by-laws”. The superior officer “knows that there is some government regulation but he may divert” whereas the junior civil servant had to obey. “In the office you cannot challenge a senior officer, if you do that he can transfer you” as a junior civil servant put it. My interlocutors often alluded to the office mores as “know how to manoeuvre” or the “rules of the game”. Obviously there existed differences between the various departments and sub-units like offices and schools. According to the old adage that the fish stinks from the head, the conduct of superior officers and managers heading a sub-unit usually set the tone for the rest of the staff. Opportunities for corruption also depended on the functions of a department. The Fisheries Department, for example, differs from a primary school and police officers or accountants tend to have more opportunities than clerks or messengers. Nevertheless there is a set of basic informal rules and codes, which can be found to some extent in all ministries and departments down to the smaller units of police posts, health posts and schools.

I was struck by the disillusionment and discontent of the junior civil servants I talked to. One of the techniques I used was to ask civil servants to draw their department as an animal.⁴ All of them would draw wild animals such as lions

⁴ Thanks to Kevin Quinlan who suggested the use of this technique.

and leopards with sharp claws and teeth, ready to strike. One of my informants, a Technical Officer at the Ministry of Natural Resources, described his department as a leopard:

It looks beautiful, sometimes it is quiet but it can become aggressive. It becomes aggressive when you trespass. I am saying that because from the outside people think of our department as a place where they can get scholarships but when you come and join the system you start realizing. It looks beautiful from the outside but inside it is dangerous.

I asked him what he meant by trespassing – trespassing official regulations or the rules of the office mores? He answered:

Not the ones in the book. There are some other ones, we take them like the ones in the village, *kumudzi*. Sometimes people say *alibe miyambo*, meaning that you have no manners. Bosses who have just been promoted, not because of their qualifications but because of favouritism, that's when you start to meet obstacles. You have to show respect, *ulemu*, if you do not show respect they say *alibe miyambo*. The new bosses are afraid of being underrated [to underrate someone = *kunderera*], they start thinking this young guy is underrating me. This is not because of the MPSR but because of the rules of the *bwana*.

The problem for the civil servant was that the master, *bwana*, was in a position to induce compliance to the informal rules of the office mores because of the authority conferred on her or him by the official regulations. The subordinates depended on the goodwill of their *bwana*. They needed authorization from the superior officer and the head of department to be sent to a workshop or to the field, to be selected for training abroad or to be granted a salary advance. Promotion and transfer to an attractive post required endorsement by the superior officer. Any display of disloyalty could result in being left out in the course of promotions, never being sent to a workshop, not being sent to the field, etc.

Allowances often functioned as rewards in the patron-client relationships which pervaded the civil service. Whether a civil servant went on a trip and received the allowance depended on the grace of the boss who granted permission. Since allowances exceeded the salary by one or two times, civil servants depended to a large extent on the grace of their patron for their income. Consequently they found it hard to resist a request to sign a cheque or turn a blind eye.

The subordinate position of junior officers does not imply that they have no leverage at all on their bosses. The patron who ignored his subordinates' needs and expectations faced silent resistance or even revenge in the form of corruption allegations, for instance. Junior officers tended to tolerate or even condone corruption by the superior officers as long as it was *katangale*, a system of redistribution in which everybody involved benefited. This attitude of junior civil servants is nicely illustrated in the song *Ndiphike Nyemba* by Charles Nsaku that was very popular in early 2002: A driver accuses his boss of being

selfish, “I am your driver, we left Lilongwe together the previous day coming here to the field to work, there you are with money boss, food you are just eating alone, while your driver ate two days ago”. These accusations of being selfish are not something to be taken lightly in a society where the obligation to share is a central principle of conduct. In the song *Njoka mu udzu* by Lucius Banda, the junior officer compares his boss to a snake lacking basic human qualities: “You are like a snake in the grass, when passing us by you smile, deep down in your heart you harbour bad feelings towards us, what is that you are missing boss?” He also warns his boss that one day he might have to depend on his subordinates since “life is like a card game, today we are working for you but your children might be employed by us”.

A “primordial public sphere” or a patchwork of moralities?

Scholars writing about corruption in Sub-Saharan Africa usually emphasise the role of informal or traditional networks (Blundo & Olivier de Sardan 2006; Chabal & Daloz 1999; Médard 1982, 2002; Olivier de Sardan 1999). Due to the absence of universal and substantial social welfare services, people tend to rely on their networks with kin, colleagues, neighbours, etc. for their social security. Civil servants are no exception and act as brokers and patrons within a web of interdependent social networks that transcends the sphere of the public office. This position makes them receptive for the temptation of corruption, as Olivier de Sardan points out: “One cannot refuse a service, a favour, a bit of string-pulling or compliance to a relative, neighbour, party comrade or friend” (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 256).

To yield to the social pressure exercised by relatives and friends is not without reward. The generous patron enjoys considerable status among his clients. In turn, the connection with a powerful patron enhances the social status of a client. The achievement of an individual is seen as a collective achievement by a potentially wide circle of relatives, which grows to the same extent as a civil servant moves up the social ladder and the senior civil servant or the successful businessman are not surprised to find “relatives” at their doorstep of whose existence they previously have not been aware. It is considered to be an essential social obligation for kin to support each other and there is always the implicit threat of ostracism and witchcraft accusations if someone appears to be selfish or too individualist.

The prevalence of kinship solidarity should not be confused with an idealised picture where all corrupt behaviour by public officials is a logical consequence of demands for support. For the analysis of corruption it is crucial to distinguish motives from mere justifications of corrupt behaviour. Social pressure and the principle of “sharing and caring” often serve only as an excuse for

misconduct (Blundo & Olivier de Sardan 2001). My informants pointed out that it was no wonder that other officers (of course it was always the others) were corrupt when they were confronted with the expectations of extended families and the limitations of low salaries eroded by inflation. Such a statement must not be accepted at face value and has to be seen in the context of actual practice. Probing and participant observation in hotel bars and nightclubs revealed that often kinship solidarity was merely used as excuse for corrupt behaviour.

Of course, one has to be extremely careful to generalize. Not everybody was the same: some were not corrupt, others only manipulated and circumvented official rules under exceptional circumstances, and some were downright corrupt, indulging in hedonism and escapism. The numerous civil servants whom I encountered in the bars and nightclubs of Lilongwe and Zomba or at the workshops held in tourist resorts at the lakeshore where they spent a month's salary in one night give ample testimony of this type of corrupt behaviour. The latter type of corruption attracted most criticism in the public, exemplified by Lucius Banda's song *Njoka mu udzu* quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

As I showed in the previous chapter, civil servants maintained an array of relationships with neighbours, colleagues, old schoolmates and fellow members of the church congregation. In an urban and modern environment, networks based on residence, social status and church membership were very important. Often these relationships were described in terms of fictive kinship, especially with regard to solidarity. Yet one should be careful to lump all social relationships and personal exchanges under one heading as many authors seem to suggest (Chabal & Daloz 1999; Ekeh 1975; Médard 1982, 2002; Olivier de Sardan 1999; Scott 1979). Civil servants themselves often made a distinction between kin and friends, stating that social pressure and expectations of kin weighed more heavily but my observations did not reveal a correlation between kinship solidarity and corrupt practices. Of course, relatives expected and received support, often drawn from government resources, and police officers, for example, tended to let relatives off the hook more easily. Yet personal ambition appeared to be more important as a driving force for corruption than kinship solidarity.

Ethnicity and regionalism clearly played an important role in the talk about corruption. Corruption accusations, in particular, were framed in the idiom of ethnicity and regionalism. Usually the accusers would hint at a network of Northerners, a southern racket or Chewa conspiracy, depending on their own affiliation. This reflected the general tendency in the civil service to frame conflicts in terms of ethnic and regional rivalry, described in Chapter 4.

Describing the principles governing morality in terms of a coherent normative system of defined rights and obligations is difficult and fails to account for their fluidity and flexibility. It was rather a cluster of basic principles, which determined the sphere of personal relationships. Instead of speaking of rights

and duties it seems more appropriate to speak of expectations and feelings of obligation embedded in social relationships. The feeling of obligation towards relatives was generally very strong. It was virtually impossible to reject a demand for support from kin, and people devised the most complicated schemes to avoid or at least to control the demands of their relatives. Exchanges were often never fully consummated to maintain a sense of indebtedness, which left open the possibility of asking for more favours or services at a later point in time. Terms and conditions of exchanges tended to be implicit and vague, thus leaving space for changes in interpretation and a continuous process of negotiation.

For example, the responsibility of the employer was not limited to the employees. Generally, employers were expected to support employees and their families in times of distress. The employer was expected to arrange for or to pay the funeral and costs of transferring the corpse to the funeral site, usually the home village. The circle of possible beneficiaries of this principle was ill-defined and negotiable. The moral norms did not set a clear rule for whom the employer has to pay funeral costs. This flexibility was not an undesirable side-effect but considered advantageous by both parties. The employer wanted to avoid giving the impression that he or she was keen to limit their obligations and it is obviously in the employee's interest to have as few restrictions as possible regarding the support given by the *bwana*.

This is well exemplified by the experience of one of my informants, a senior civil servant, who used government resources for the funeral of his housekeeper's mother. The housekeeper had been in my informant's service for more than ten years and when his mother died he naturally turned to his master for support. My informant felt obliged to assist and organised two vehicles from his department to be used for the transportation of the corpse and the funeral guests to the village where the housekeeper's mother was supposed to be buried. In doing so, my informant violated the official regulations that only provided for the transport of a dead family member. The housekeeper's mother did not qualify as such, although she was considered to be part of my informant's household. He, in turn, approached his superior and was granted the permission to use two government vehicles for the funeral. He justified his request with his moral obligation towards his housekeeper and financial difficulties that prevented him from paying the transport himself. The following day, two drivers drove the corpse and the guests to the village and returned a day later. For this trip they received a field allowance. Hence, the illegal use of the government vehicles was declared an official trip and authorized as such by the superior officer. My informant and his superior were of course aware of the breach of official regulations but they argued that these rules only "exist on paper". His superior recognised my informant's moral obligation towards his housekeeper

to which he himself felt bound. Further, my informant hinted at a favour his superior still owed him from another occasion when the latter depended on my informant turning a blind eye.

This brief sketch of principles defining social relationships in Malawi seems to correspond with Ekeh's concept of the "primordial public realm" instead of the "civic public" associated with colonial rule, which is devoid of moral imperatives. He seems to suggest that a homogeneous set of moral imperatives operates in the 'primordial public' and influences the private sphere. The idea of a primordial moral realm is outdated at best and has been subject to a thorough critique. However, my point is not superfluous. While the notion of primordialism already slipped into obscurity in anthropology during the 1960s, the concept has influenced many studies of the "underdeveloped" state in Africa (Clapham 1982; Epko 1979; Hyden & Bratton 1992; Hyden *et al.* 1999; Médard 1982, 2002) and has had considerable influence on the policies of the World Bank, the IMF and other donor agencies that have the aim to "make transplanted institutions work" or try to "take Africans' primordial affiliations into account".

Ekeh distinguishes two public realms in the postcolonial state. On the one hand, the "primordial public" realm associated with traditional kinship relationships, which is "moral and operates on the same moral imperatives as the private realm" and, on the other, the "civic public" of the state's institutions based on the ideology of the colonial administration, which is "amoral and lacks the generalised moral imperatives operative in the private realm and in the primordial public" (Ekeh 1975: 92).

He seems to suggest that a homogeneous set of moral imperatives operates in the "primordial public" and influences the private sphere. In my view, this conceptualisation is misleading. In general, the idea of a primordial realm is anachronistic at best and seems to be inspired by a search for authenticity rather than reflecting the social realities in modern Africa. In present-day Malawi, there exists not one universal morality but rather a patchwork of different moralities. Mbembe makes a similar argument in his analysis of power in the post-colony when he states "that the postcolony is made up not of one 'public space' but of several, each having its own logic yet liable to be entangled with other logics when operating in certain contexts (2001: 104). Often the differences are negligible, as for example between different ethnic groups who have similar moral imperatives, but sometimes they are significant. This is certainly the case with Christian morality and kinship morality, which are often at odds and gave rise to tension and conflict. Ekeh's concept of the "primordial public" in Africa, which he primarily associates with kinship and ethnicity, ignores the profound influence Christian missionary activities have had on Malawian society (cf. McCracken 2000; Ross 1996; White 1987).

Often civil servants who were devout Christians, especially the rising number of “born again” or “charismatic” Christians, had high moral standards with regard to an individual’s personal conduct. Christian ethics differ in important aspects from kinship-influenced moral imperatives. Charity, for example, is a moral duty for Christians but, unlike solidarity between kin with strong social pressure applied by members of the group, the obligation is based on the belief in God and the hereafter, where good deeds will be rewarded or bad deeds will be punished. For the major Christian denominations, corruption and *katangale* constitute sinful behaviour and for some charismatic churches the devil himself tries to seduce the believers from the path of God by tempting them to act wrongly. This strong rejection of illegal acts, which can be traced back to the acknowledgement of secular power in all Christian churches,⁵ differs from kinship solidarity, which does not recognise the distinction between public office and private sphere. Differences between charismatic Christian ethos and kinship morality, however, do not imply that charismatic Christians were less prone to corruption than other denominations or non-believers. I merely suggest replacing the notion of a “primordial public” by conceptualising a mix of alternative moralities that may have conflicting elements.

Conclusions

Good governance policies in Africa are informed by a reductionist culturalism that blames African “primordialism” or “patrimonialism” for corruption and underdevelopment. There is a tendency to represent state institutions as alien transplants “unrooted in local culture” (Dia 1996: 30) harking back to notions like the “primordial public realm” (Ekeh 1975). The imagined disconnect between institutions imported by the colonial powers and African society or culture is seen as the cause of “weak” and “failed states”. The ethnographic evidence presented in this chapter shows that these simplistic dualisms do not account for the complex political and social realities in Malawi. Instead of reifying the ethnocentric and politically biased categories that dominate development discourse, I have presented detailed descriptions from the perspective of civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba. What does it mean to receive a monthly salary and how important are allowances? How does someone make ends meet with an inflation rate of more than 30 per cent and why do people prefer to maintain a “safe distance” to their rural kin? What does it mean to be a corrupt civil servant? Are the corrupt civil servants I met in the course of my fieldwork

⁵ Of course there are differences between the various Christian churches. Protestant churches have a more pronounced tradition of being apolitical and recognising secular power than the Catholic Church. Yet most churches recognise secular laws and adhere to the private/public distinction.

“good” or “bad” civil servants? I must admit that I find it difficult to pass judgement on these people. I agree that one ought to refrain from romanticising corruption, praising the creativity of the African civil servants and losing oneself in the “poetics of clientelism” (Zinn 2001). On the other hand, it is very difficult to condemn the actions of people who go along with the system of *katangale* because of the dire economic situation, the social pressure from relatives and the highly clientelistic relationships with superiors who expect their subordinates to display unconditional loyalty.

Good governance policies and the civil service reform do not provide answers to these questions. In a sense, the focus on parasitic and corrupt civil servants abdicated the donor community from the responsibility to address issues of income distribution and the failure of the economic programmes to alleviate poverty. Instead of asking what went wrong they simply pointed an accusing finger at the African civil servants who prevented development aid from reaching those who really needed it. Good governance, therefore, has to be subjected to scrutiny. It is not simply an instrument or tool to repair dysfunctional bureaucracies. Instead, the historicity of the concept should be fully recognised and analysed as one of the manifold manifestations of the neo-liberal political agenda that exacerbated the crisis it claimed to address. The reforms and the new agencies did not result in a stronger state apparatus but actually contributed to the transformation of the parallel order that had been used by Banda to strengthen his grip on the state apparatus. By 2007 the policies and institutions that were supposed to fight corruption had by and large been appropriated by political rivals who tried to extend their influence, following the conflict between Mutharika and his opponents in parliament.

Conclusions: The state in society

The reorganisation of bureaucracies according to neo-liberal principles during the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century was a global phenomenon. The activities and policies of state agencies, universities, development agencies and NGOs influenced both employees and clients in a myriad of unforeseen ways but the countless mundane individual acts also shaped the ways in which these organisations operated and affected people's daily lives. It is the aim of this book to contribute to an understanding of the links between quotidian practices and global processes, between the micro-level of day-to-day tactics and the macro-level of development discourse. It does so by focusing on this dynamic in a particular place, the urban areas of Lilongwe and Zomba, during the last years of the 20th and the first years of the 21st century.

During my fieldwork, it soon became clear that these connections were far more complicated and elusive than originally anticipated. In the encounter with "the field", assumptions on the causal relationships between policy measures and people's actions evaporated and gave way to a sense of a far more complex and subtle interconnectedness. Hence, the main challenge in writing this book was how to conceptualise the "impact" of "tools" such as MTEF, Poverty Reduction Strategy or Fiscal Restructuring and Deregulation on my informants and the ways they transformed these "tools" during implementation.

By tracing their movements between workplace, neighbourhood, church, home village, garden and business, by talking to experts of various *couleur*, by delving into archives and libraries and by studying Malawi's colonial and post-colonial history a more layered picture emerged, which was not represented in organisational charts, implementation plans and strategy papers. In contrast to

the one-dimensional and a-historic view of the Malawian bureaucracy pervading policy documents, this book presents a detailed account of the design and implementation of policy measures, on the one hand, and civil servants' everyday experiences, on the other.

The paradoxical policies of the World Bank and the IMF

The detailed ethnographic account of the various aspects of civil service reform presented in this book reveals two contradictions underlying the governance reforms promoted by the World Bank and the IMF. The first one is the contradiction between the principles of ownership and conditionality. The second is the one between two conflicting conceptions of the state informing good governance policies. It is seen as both a modernizing influence and as an obstacle to the development of society. The book then shows how the indeterminacy resulting from these contradictions created considerable room for manoeuvre for my informants who struggled to come to terms with the almost complete overhaul of Malawi's political and economic order during the 1990s.

Chapter 3 shows how conditionality was used as a means to create openings for the insertion of good governance reforms into Malawi's national polity. It dissects the construction of conditionality as the logical consequence of country ownership. The chapter does so by showing the inherent tension between the idea of a government "in the driving seat" and the policy prescriptions recommended by the Bretton Woods institutions was resolved by splitting the loan documents and the normativity of numbers. The loan documents were split into the loan agreement, signed by the IFIs and the government, on the one hand, and the government's letter, setting the conditions of the loan, on the other. Since the letter was a government document, the representatives of the World Bank and the IMF took the position that conditionality did not contradict country ownership and was, in fact, a result of ownership. As a consequence, measures, such as the retrenchment of thousands of government employees, the establishment of new agencies, the privatisation of government services and the introduction of new personnel management systems, could be presented as government-owned, which perfectly matched the World Bank's governance approach and the principles of New Public Management.

The second technique used to resolve the contradiction between country ownership and the requirements of the IFIs is what I dub the normativity of numbers. The term refers to the use of economic data and the introduction of systems of number collection and management, as conditions attached to the loans. The policies that were introduced in the late 1990s, most notably the Poverty Reduction Strategy, were linked to a highly complex mix of different conditions, ranging from traditional quantitative performance criteria to the

more sophisticated quantitative and structural benchmarks. The reliance on numbers and economic data, of course, is a crucial element of development discourse, which depends on the scientific and technical character of policy prescriptions (cf. Apthorpe & Gasper 1996; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994).

The reforms falling under the label of good governance differ from classic development interventions influenced by the modernization paradigm. Good governance is not about building roads or transmitting knowledge, it is about establishing systems of management and self-control to increase “efficiency” and “transparency” by means of auditing and new public management (cf. Abrahamsen 2000; Mosse & Lewis 2005; Murray Li 2007; Shore & Wright 1997; Strathern 2000). The World Bank missions that visited Malawi to collect data, to conduct workshops and to negotiate programmes differed from the activities of the extension workers described by Arce & Long (1992) or Lipsky’s “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 1980), which were concerned with improving agricultural techniques (Arce & Long) and policing (Lipsky). In a sense, all civil servants in Malawi, from the Principal Secretaries (PS) down to the junior staff, constituted the “target population” of the first major civil service reform since the colonial period. Even the highest government functionaries, who participated as members of government negotiating teams, had virtually no influence on the formulation of civil service reform. Apart from the World Bank representatives in Lilongwe and the odd consultant in the ministerial headquarters, the extension workers of good governance, so to speak, were not present. The principal encounters with government officials occurred during the visits of World Bank or IMF missions. These visits were usually brief and representatives of the Bank and the IMF were not involved in the actual planning and implementation of the reform measures. Hence, there was no continuous interaction at a “knowledge interface”, in Long’s terminology (1992). The control and monitoring of reform measures was actually outsourced to the government, the sovereign “owner” of the reforms from the perspective of the donor agencies.

In order to operate these systems of self-control, the national government required the transfer of expert knowledge. To this end, the IFIs took an active interest in the training of national cadres (cf. Dezalay & Garth 2002). This strategy was also employed in Malawi, albeit on a much smaller scale than in Brazil or Argentina. The World Bank financed the establishment of the Malawi Institute of Management (MIM) where civil servants were to be trained in the new management and accounting techniques. Furthermore, the World Bank and the IMF regularly organised workshops to train civil servants and “stakeholders” in the basic principles of the new thinking. However, these efforts only reached a small minority of civil servants and the few Malawian civil servants

who were trained in the new techniques rarely identified with the discourse on New Public Management and good governance as Chapter 4 shows.

The focus on technologies of control and management goes a long way in elucidating the workings of good governance reforms but two caveats must be made. Most of the literature, which is heavily influenced by Foucault's ideas about governmentality (Abrahamsen 2000; Barry *et al.* 1996; Burchell *et al.* 1991; Miller & Rose 1990; Rose 1999), is limited to the analysis of documents and policy statements. The majority of these studies are only marginally concerned with empirical evidence. Such a narrow focus ignores the multitude of mundane practices that exist beyond the ambit of the technologies of surveillance and management investigated. Both, the vertical and horizontal slices of the civil service reform presented in this book show how a whole range of issues mattered to my informants that were not addressed by the reform measures, such as the fault lines that riddled the civil service, the necessity to develop alternative sources of income or the ambivalence of kinship relations.

The second caveat concerns the apparent effectiveness of development interventions. Ethnographic observation teaches us that development institutions and interventions do not constitute the all-powerful homogeneous machines we find both in the self-representations of the World Bank and IMF and in their critics' accounts. Proponents and critics of the IFIs alike make the mistake of taking the claims to efficacy made in reports and documents at face value, as if these claims reflect actual practice. Mosse (2005a) draws attention to this when he observes that "in anthropology, overstatement of the capacity of international development to objectify and control third world people, and the mistaken idea that donors rule through representations, arises in part from the fact that, at first, critics of development gave so much importance to donor policy texts as representations of discourse" (Mosse 2005a: 14-15). This tendency resulted in the reproduction of the development agencies' hyperbolic self-representations and unrealistic claims regarding the efficiency of their "instruments".

Chapter 4 traces the unravelling of what on paper appeared to be an all-encompassing management system during the implementation phase. The majority of the civil servants, whether they were high- or low-ranking officials, resisted civil service reform because it constituted a threat to the relatively privileged positions they had become accustomed to under Kamuzu Banda's rule. To conclude that most civil servants perceived the reforms to be a threat to their privileged positions, however, does not imply a common interest or the existence of a "strategic group" (Evers 1988). In spite of the frequent strikes, civil servants' resistance to the new policies never resulted in a co-ordinated political struggle against the neo-liberal reforms in general. The widespread discontent and anxiety in the civil service was more diffuse, and resistance to the civil service reform rarely transcended the mundane tactics and ruses of

individual civil servants who pursued their personal agendas in de Certeau's sense. The countless individual acts, nevertheless, succeeded in transforming the implementation of the civil service reform programme.

The disorganised character of the civil servants' response to the reform measures was partly due to the relatively weak position of trade unions in Malawi. Except for the TUM, all trade unions had been banned under Banda and, even after democratisation, membership levels remained very low and the trade unions' impact was negligible until 1998. This changed somewhat during the 1997 civil servants' strike (van Donge 1998), which was initiated by the trade unions. Yet the conflict surrounding the introduction of the new housing allowance in 2000 demonstrated that, in fact, the CSTU only had limited influence on the rank and file civil servants.

The civil service proved to be fragmented and deeply divided. The World Bank's enclave approach had widened the gap between the classic line ministries and the enclaves, agencies with cross-cutting mandates, including more established ones such as the Ministry of Finance and the Department of Human Resource Management and Development (DHRMD) as well as a host of temporary task forces like the PSCMA, often staffed by younger technocrats and supplied with ample funding by Western donor agencies. An important aspect of this gap was the difference between the older generation of old-school officials who had made their careers in the 1960s and 1970s and the younger generation of technocrats who had entered the civil service in the 1980s and 1990s.

A far deeper fault line existed between the "bosses", the bureaucratic elite, and the mass of middle-ranking and junior civil servants, a legacy of the colonial divide between expatriate senior officers and indigenous junior officers. The top officials in the ministerial headquarters were able to benefit from the implementation of civil service reform. The retrenchment exercise did not affect them and the monetarisation of benefits actually constituted a barely hidden salary increase for the highest grades. This was well understood by junior civil servants who were able to exert sufficient pressure on the government to ensure they were included in the new housing allowance scheme. The "juniors" observed the behaviour of their superiors with growing discontent and openly complained about their selfish "bosses". They had lost respect for their masters and regularly resorted to protests and strikes to add more weight to their demands.

The conflicts fuelled by the implementation of the civil service reform were expressed in the idiom of ethnic and regional rivalries, a ubiquitous characteristic of Malawi's colonial and postcolonial history. People hailing from the North, mainly Tumbuka and Tonga, constituted the majority of African employees in the colonial administration because of their privileged access to missionary education. After the country's independence from Britain, Banda

gave preferential treatment to Chewa, his own ethnic group, and discriminated against Northerners whom he suspected of disloyalty towards his regime. After the transition to multi-party democracy, the rivalries between Northerners, people from the central region, and Southerners – Tumbuka, Chewa and Yao – became a dominant feature of Malawi’s political landscape and the internal conflicts riddling the civil service. It was these three fissures – between old school officials and technocrats, “bosses” and “juniors”, and between people from the North, Centre and South – that shaped the implementation process of the civil service reform. By presenting a detailed account of their implementation, Chapter 4 shows how measures, such as the dismissal of staff and the introduction of the new housing allowances, immediately turned into battlegrounds between the various groups and factions within the civil service, all trying to turn the reform to their advantage.

The horizontal slices of civil servants’ everyday lives, presented in the subsequent chapters, expose the second major paradox underlying the good governance policies promoted by the World Bank and the IMF. Good governance is based on the idea of a dichotomy between state and society, a division that has informed most conceptualisations of the modern state. The World Bank and IMF-sponsored policies actually rest on two conceptualisations of this dichotomy that contradict each other, as Ferguson (1998) notes. In this sense, good governance is a truly post-modern hybrid concept, drawing on a disparate mix of ideas from modernization theory, on the one hand, and the neo-liberal paradigm of the free market, on the other. According to good governance thinking, the state is both an instrument to effect social change and an impediment to the development of the free market. The former idea is based on a concept of the state as an instrument of social engineering that ought to push back or check primordial affiliations and patrimonial structures in Africa. Seen from this perspective, the state is the principal agent of modernization and African society a potential threat to progress because of its backwardness and traditional “culture”.

This conceptualisation is at odds with the neo-liberal faith in the potential of the free market and the belief that civil society is stifled by the state found in the World Bank Report *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Economic Growth* (1989), quoted in Chapter 5. Good governance aims at transforming the state institutions into more efficient, transparent and accountable providers of public services. According to the authors of that report, the African “entrepreneurial spirit” has been forced into informality by predatory and inefficient state institutions. The rule of law and respect for private property are expected to unleash the “entrepreneurial spirit” that will bring about Africa’s economic recovery. This report optimistically represents African society as “seedbed” of the development of a free market. Good governance mysteriously resolves the

contradiction between these two conceptualisations of the state in a call for leaner and more efficient state institutions that are supposed to create the “enabling environment” for the market by establishing the rule of law and an efficient administration.

Chapter 5 shows that the reality lived by civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba did not match the optimistic predictions of the authors of the World Bank report. The deregulation of the economy during the mid-1990s did indeed create more economic freedom for those with money to invest. Civil servants, in particular, were in a position to invest in business enterprises, since they could draw on a regular salary – an invaluable privilege in an economy still primarily structured by the agricultural cycle. Freed from the restrictions that had been imposed on economic activity under Banda, civil servants invested in all sectors of the economy. For most of them, however, this did not lead to social advancement or prosperity. My informants became entrepreneurs, not out of choice but out of necessity. Faced with the erosion of their salaries due to monthly inflation rates running as high as 50 per cent and a general economic crisis, they turned to a large variety of income-generating activities to fend off threatening social decline. Petty trading and subsistence farming, always prone to bankruptcy and lack of money, were desperate attempts to regain the sense of security they had lost and to “make ends meet”. Only those with ties to the wealthy elite, the *apamwaba*, actually benefited from economic liberalisation, whereas the rest were forced to diversify their sources of income in order to maintain their middle-class dreams of wealth and a “civilised” lifestyle.

The account of the diverse nature of my informants’ social life presented in Chapter 6 lends little support to the idea of a homogeneous African society, as it is presented in the 1989 World Bank report and Dia’s studies (1993, 1996). The concept of civil society informing the neo-liberal vision of society as a hotbed for the development of a free market is as devoid of substance and history as its opposite, the neo-liberal idea of the state as the provider of public services and guarantor of individual rights. The horizontal slices of the everyday practices of civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba reveal how far removed this image of a homogeneous primordial morality is from the dilemmas of people who wanted to maintain a “safe distance” from their rural kin. My informants maintained closer relationships with relatives, neighbours, fellow churchgoers and friends who were also employed in the formal sector and lived in town than with relatives “in the village” who were considered to be less “modern” or less “civilised”.

Relationships between civil servants and their rural kin were highly ambivalent and charged with tension. None of my informants in Lilongwe and Zomba wanted to sever ties with their relatives in their home district. Good relations with their relatives were deemed a necessary form of social security in

case of future mishap – the village constituted a potential refuge where they expected to find support and land if needed. However, in practice, virtually no one wanted to leave town and return to the village. The village was considered to be a last resort, to be avoided at all costs. My informants feared the exaggerated expectations of kin in the home village, they were afraid of witchcraft and a hard life without the amenities of urban life. Furthermore, the village no longer provided social security in the manner it once had. This became clear during the food crisis in 2002 when hungry and cash-stripped villagers flocked to the town in search of support from their relatives. Because of their salaries, civil servants did not experience hunger to the same degree as the villagers but the desperate appeals for help caused them considerable difficulties.

The 2002 famine also highlighted another issue that had gained salience since the 1990s: corruption. In 2001, the maize harvest had been far below expectations and, when food shortages affected large parts of the country, it transpired that the complete Strategic Grain Reserve (SGR) had been sold. Very soon, accusations of corruption were levelled against senior officials of the National Food Reserve Agency, the body set up to manage the SGR, and ADMARC, the agricultural state marketing board. Although a Presidential Commission of Inquiry presented a damning report, the ACB and the public prosecutor did not succeed in prosecuting the alleged culprits, including the former general manager of ADMARC, so that even at the end of 2007 there were still no convictions.

This was typical for corruption investigations in Malawi, as Chapter 7 illustrates. Most criminal proceedings eventually petered out without having ever been formally concluded and, especially after 2004, there was a tendency to use corruption allegations against political rivals. These observations shed doubt on the apparent increase of corruption during the late 1990s, which has to be seen in the context of the arrival of the global anti-corruption movement and the introduction of a multi-party democracy in Malawi. The chapter mainly takes issue with simplistic ideas, according to which corruption in Africa stems from an imagined disconnect between the state and society. It presents a detailed ethnographic account of the existence of the parallel informal office mores that often superseded official regulations and the complexity of public morality, which lends little support to the notion of a homogeneous African morality and a modern state “unrooted in local culture” (Dia 1996: 30).

A note on theorising the postcolonial state

The main argument of this book is not merely aimed at debunking the international donor agencies and their instrumentalist vision of good governance. It also seeks to contribute to current academic debates about the nature of the

postcolonial state in Africa. The dichotomy between state and society at the heart of the IFIs' vision can be traced back to academic debates about the importance of the state in developing countries. The basic premise of most social-scientific approaches since Weber (1990) has been the notion of the state enjoying a certain degree of autonomy from society.

This was the case with the modernist approaches of the 1960s. Authors such as Huntington (1968), Leys (1965), Scott (1979) and Wertheim (1961) argued that a gap between the transplanted state and society was responsible for the dysfunctionality of state institutions in the newly independent countries in Africa and Asia. Although these authors emphasised the postcolonial states' dysfunctionality, they reflected the general optimism of these years because they assumed that this would merely be a transitory problem. Marxist critics of the modernization paradigm, such as Rodney (1972), retained the modernist dichotomy between state and society but emphasised exogenous factors for lacking development. From the Marxist perspective the postcolonial state does not act as an autonomous agent of social change but rather as a proxy serving the interests of global capitalism and neo-colonialism.

During the 1980s both modernization and Marxist dependency theory came under attack by a group of mainly French political scientists including Bayart (1993), Médard (1982) and Chabal & Daloz (1999) who drew on Weber's typology of domination (1990) and Eisenstadt's (1973) concept of the neo-patrimonial state. The latter studies in this vein by Bayart and Chabal & Daloz differ somewhat from the studies of the 1970s and 1980s because they stress the endogenous nature of the modern state in Africa. These authors substituted modernization theory's naïve belief in progress with a more pessimistic outlook, whilst ascribing to African elites more independence from the forces of global capitalism than dependency theory. They also assumed a fundamental divide between state and society but saw the state as being co-opted by the clientelistic logic pervading African societies – famously dubbed “politics of the belly” by Bayart (1993). The idea of the state's lack of autonomy from society also informed studies of “failed” or “collapsed” states in Africa (Zartman 1995).

Recently, a number of authors have criticised the dichotomy between state and society (Blom Hansen & Stepputat 2001; Das & Poole 2004; Ferguson 1994, 1998; Gupta 1995; Mitchell 1991, 2002) informing conventional approaches to the postcolonial state. They argue that this dichotomy is a product of the state's self-representation and, therefore, should be treated as a category of practice rather than an analytical category. Instead, they propose investigating “imaginaries” of the postcolonial state, popular ideas about the state, and the practices of governing ascribed to the state. The distinction between the state as an idea and as a practice was already advanced by Marxist sociologists in the

1970s (Abrams 1988; Miliband 1969; Poulantzas 1978). Abrams (1988), for example, distinguishes what he refers to as “state-system: a palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centred in government” (1988: 58) and “the manner and means by which the *idea* of the existence of the state has been constituted, communicated and imposed” (ibid: 69). In support of this distinction he quotes Radcliffe-Brown’s dictum that in “writings on political institutions there is a good deal of discussion about the nature and the origin of the State, which is usually represented as being an entity over and above the human individuals who make up a society [...] The State, in this sense, does not exist in the phenomenal world; it is a fiction of the philosophers” (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: xxiii).

Whilst authors such as Blom Hansen & Stepputat (2001) have done a lot to transcend the pervasiveness of “state thought” (Bourdieu 1994: 1) in the social sciences, less attention has been paid to the practices of individuals employed by the state and representing it. Arguably this is due to the emphasis on representations in the majority of anthropological studies on the state. The ethnography of civil servants’ quotidian practices presented in this book aims at shifting the focus from representations of the state to what African government employees actually do both inside and outside their offices. In a sense this study therefore harks back to Radcliffe-Brown’s radical empiricist stance although it does not deny the importance of imaginaries of the state. By virtue of the attention paid to civil servants’ “ways of making do” in de Certeau’s sense this is a study of the state in an African society rather than the modern state and African society.

The ethnography of horizontal slices, including the private realm and the public office, de-exoticises African bureaucrats and shows that they are “subjects in times of crisis”, in Mbembe & Roitman’s (1995) words. It does not reify the dichotomy between Western state institutions and African society but, instead, focuses on the lives of people in the midst of processes that restructured state institutions all around the globe. From this perspective, it is possible to address questions such as what does it mean to be an African employed by the government in the times of neo-liberalism or what are the effects of the general scarcity of resources on the day-to-day functioning of the state apparatus? Only anthropological studies addressing these fundamental issues have the potential to elucidate the workings of African states at the turn of the 21st century. This study constitutes a modest contribution towards this end.

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