

The *Nyau* Masquerade

DAVID KORPELA

The *Nyau* Masquerade

*An examination of HIV/AIDS, power
and influence in Malawi*



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Layout

Soile Levälähti

Cover Design

Mikko Reinikka

Pictures

Claude Boucher and David Korpela

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ISBN 978-951-44-8394-3 (print)

ISBN 978-951-44-8399-8 (pdf)

Tampereen Yliopistopaino Oy – Juvenes Print
Tampere 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



I want to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation for the work of Father Claude Chisale Boucher who has devoted himself to the study and appreciation of Chewa culture and tradition in Malawi. His work has captured elements of Malawian life and experience that have been largely unknown outside the country, making this study possible.

I also want to thank my academic mentor Professor Pekka Korhonen, who has provided invaluable guidance and supervision for this research.

To my dear friend Mikko Perkiö, thank you for your insightful comments, encouragement and support that has resulted in the publication of this book.

Lisa and Melissa, you have walked beside me from the classroom to field research and beyond. I appreciate the honesty, wisdom and academic legwork that you have put into this project as life-long friends and colleagues.

David Korpela

CONTENTS



Acknowledgements	5
Editor's Note	9
Foreword	11
List of Abbreviations	13
Introduction.....	17
Why Masquerade?	21
Approaching Performative Art	27
Performance, Carnival and Power-knowledge	37
The <i>Nyau</i> Ritual Masquerade	53
Challenges to <i>Nyau</i> Traditions.....	77
Aids, Power and Influence	89
Conclusions	111
Endnotes	121
References	131

EDITOR'S NOTE



David Korpela was born in Canada in 1983, and moved to Kenya when he was 10 months old. He spent most of his childhood in Sub-Saharan Africa, and lived in Malawi specifically from 1998 to 2002. During his upbringing, David witnessed the destruction and despair caused by a silent killer sweeping across the continent. This work, based on his master's thesis, is David's examination of the role that traditional tribal performance plays in the HIV/AIDS awareness of the Malawi people. The intended audience of this book is broader than that of his thesis, so David asked us to rework his original material into a format more fitting this medium. His thesis featured extensive methodology, theoretical exposition and research notes. In some cases we have removed sections of theory that we felt were not truly necessary for a grounded understanding of the topic. David's primary methodology was discourse analysis, which he has applied to a wide variety of discourse mediums, including spoken words, printed material, radio broadcasts, visual performances, and more. Some of these sections have been significantly paraphrased in an effort to make them more easily understood by a reader unfamiliar with these concepts, or their cultural context. Most cited references that were within the text have been reassigned as endnotes, which the casual reader can safely ignore, but those interested in further study should definitely follow.

Research in the domain of HIV/AIDS raises several ethical considerations, which David had to take into account. We feel it is worthwhile to inform you that all the information from his surveys was collected anonymously. Questions regarding the HIV status of respon-

dents were avoided so that there would be no pressure on respondents to share private and confidential information. Ethical considerations also arose in the study of the performance tradition itself, due to traditional secrecy rules. Collecting data about the masquerade ritual can also be dangerous, and to study and expose the workings of a secret tradition against the will of its people is unethical. For this reason, David chose to approach the *Nyau* masquerade through the work of an anthropologist, Father Claude Boucher, who has done research in this field for decades and is an initiated member of the Chewa society. All the information about the *Nyau* masquerade presented in this study is used with Father Boucher's consent. While this approach does limit the scope of the study, it must be understood that this unique subject matter is very difficult to approach in any other way. David's personal familiarity with the culture, traditions and history of Malawi makes this approach more viable than it may have been otherwise. We praise David's dedication to ethical research, and we extend David's thanks to Father Claude Boucher, without whom this work would be impossible.

Jonathan Puddle and Maija Puddle, M.Soc.Sci.
– *Editors, and friends of the author*

FOREWORD



This book is a personal exploration of the dynamic performative culture found in Malawi but also present in various forms throughout the African continent. Growing up in Africa but living for several years in Europe and North America, I was struck by the fact that time was set apart to *experience* art in an art gallery or theatre instead of it being part of the beat of everyday life where the lines between ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ are not so distinct. It seems that scientific knowledge and rational explanation have trumped the creative world that does not constantly seek to explain or understand, provoking the senses to a new level of emotive or sensual understanding beyond the constraints of rational explanation. I lived part of my childhood in Malawi, surrounded by a world where creativity is unleashed through mystical creatures and characters in all shapes and sizes that come to visit the community to share the wisdom of past generations. Through music, dance and performance, complex tales of success or misfortune unravel as the entire community becomes part of the event. The distinction between performer and observer are broken down in this lived experience. This is art that wraps around you and draws you into a world where anything is possible and the deepest wisdom and life lessons are learnt. This is the world of the *Nyau* masquerade.

As a practitioner in the field of international development cooperation, my interest in political anthropology extends to the practical implications of the understanding of culture and the ways both governmental and development organisations interact with and affect culture. Development practitioners have recognized the importance

of oral and performative tradition but it is difficult to engage with this evolving, fluid medium that is based on lived experience. The increasing discourse surrounding the use of drama for development or performative art in development cooperation as a tool for education or raising awareness should more fully take into account the meaning of lived experience. Cultures exist where lived performance is a way of life. Education is carried out through performance where ancient truths and everyday realities mix in a cocktail of subtle meaning and multiple layers in a language of performance.

In order to engage with such a culture, researchers, development practitioners or individuals must understand and be able to appreciate performative art and learn to speak the 'language of performance'. Although 'outsiders' may never fully understand the messages being transmitted through traditions such as the *Nyau* masquerade, there is a need to recognize that local perceptions of HIV/AIDS, for example, do not necessarily correspond with Western scientific understandings. Development efforts are likely to be ineffective without first acknowledging the traditional knowledge and beliefs that often shape an individual's way of perceiving the world, and the alternative channels through which these are transmitted. Furthermore, modern development cooperation must better understand the political and cultural implications of its interactions with a society and country. Development agencies, practitioners, and projects will ultimately benefit from a deeper understanding of the changes in power dynamics in a society resulting from an increase in the international presence and aid.

This book begins to scratch the surface of this incredible wealth of knowledge and intricate communication system that has been used for centuries by the people of Malawi. As one of the pressing challenges facing the African continent, the issue of HIV/AIDS is used to explore the discourse circulating Malawi through the language of performance. It is my hope that this book will help to give development practitioners a better understanding of some of the knowledge, values and beliefs that are being transmitted through *Nyau* masquerade, in order to better engage in the joint struggle against the spread of HIV/AIDS.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS



AIDS – Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ARV – Antiretroviral
EAM – Evangelical Association of Malawi
EU – European Union
HIV – Human Immunodeficiency Virus
MCP – Malawi Congress Party
MCSR – Malawi Centre for Social Research
MHRC – Malawi Human Rights Commission
NAC – National Aids Commission
NAF – National Action Framework
NICE – National Initiative for Civic Education
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation
STD – Sexually Transmitted Disease
UDF – United Democratic Front
UN – United Nations
UNAIDS – United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

NON-ENGLISH WORDS USED IN THE TEXT

Chichewa words

Bona – a rite that takes place after the harvesting of corn
Bwalo – performance arena for the *Nyau* masquerade
Chilangizo – Christian version of the girls' initiation

Chinamwali – traditional girls' initiation
Chiwau – one who was burned or disfigured
Chokolo – traditional practice of wife inheritance
Dzakonda – that which makes someone happy
Edzi – Chichewa term for AIDS
Fisi – hyena. The term refers to a man or woman hired to perform cleansing rituals.
Gule Wamkulu – The Great Dance performed by members of the *Nyau*. This term is also used interchangeable with the term *Nyau* to refer to members of the male masking society.
Kachiroambo ka Edzi – the little beast that causes AIDS
Kuchotsa fumbi – removing dust (name for a traditional ritual)
Kulowa kufa – bewitching death (name for a traditional ritual)
Lekhani kutamba anthu adatha – stop bewitching others; people are on the point of extinction
Matenda a boma – government disease
Mbumba – extended family
Mdulo – a wasting disease believed to be caused by the breaking of sexual taboos
Mfumu yalimbira – the chief's rival
Miyambo ya Chewa – Chewa tradition
Munthu – human being
Mwambo – traditions and customs
Mwini mbumba – head of the extended family
Mzimu - spirit
Mzungu – person of European descent
Njolinjo – the one who stands erect or the one who jumps
Nyau – male masking society involved in the masquerade performance.
Nzeru za yekha – following one's own wisdom
Sing'anga – medicine man
Umbuli – ignorance
Utaya – burial rite
Zirombo – wild animals

Other foreign words

Ars erotica – emotional, sensual understanding

Bloc au pouvoir – power block

Connaissance – deeper understanding

Grand diablerie – great devilish spectacle

Heterglossia – many voices

Pouvoir-savoir – power-knowledge

Savoir – understanding/knowledge

Scientia sexualis – scientific understanding

INTRODUCTION



A typical billboard found in Southern and Eastern Africa raising awareness about the spread of HIV/AIDS.

HIV/AIDS came as a shock to Africa. Never before had a disease spread so rapidly and silently, shaking the very foundations of a society. Young and old grew weak and died in a matter of months or weeks. No one knew who the next victim would be. Mothers, fathers, aunts, cousins, people of all ages started to die with no evident explanation. Seeing statistics like 2.1 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa dying due to AIDS in 2006 (72% of the AIDS-related deaths that year) do not properly capture the feelings of anxiety and despair when the victims are loved ones, friends or relatives. Rumours about the causes of the disease spread. Was it a curse from a jealous neighbor? A sinister plot to wipe out Africa with some new chemical weapon? Revenge from the ancestors for breaking community taboos? There were as many explanations for the cause as suggested 'cures', which continue to circulate.

Foreign doctors and health professionals arrived under the auspices of international development and aid agencies saying it was transmitted through sexual intercourse, marketing condoms as prevention and selling drugs to prolong life post-infection. How can reproductive sex, something that creates life and ensures the continuity of families and village communities, bring death at the same time? This seemed unbelievable but people continued to die. Societies throughout Sub-Saharan Africa were thrown into turmoil. Huge campaigns were launched with funding from Europe and North America toting lines like "No Condom, No Way", "Say no to Sugar Daddies", "ABC – Abstain, Be Faithful, Condomize". This literature was combined with the scientific explanation of a virus attacking white blood cells with very convincing arguments to change behaviour. Why was there very little immediate effect? People were not changing their behaviour. What went wrong? Was the message not communicated clearly enough? What did local people really think about this disease and its causes? What messages were really being communicated among the local people?

In this process, a fundamental mistake was made in focusing on *what* to communicate instead of *how* to communicate. The rich oral tradition and vibrant culture of Africa is well-known but few deve-

lopment practitioners have delved deep enough to try and understand the communication system within these oral and often performative traditions to see how societies communicate some of their most important messages. An oral tradition does not mean that important messages are spoken in conversation or delivered in a lecture, as is common in western culture. Through a long and often brutal colonial history, many African societies became very good at communicating 'behind the back' of Europeans through the language of performance that seemed harmless to colonial masters but was laced with hidden messages that went undetected. Distrust for western lecture-style teaching and writings developed when everyone knew that the real communication between people happened through the stories, songs, dances and performances of masked characters that were intrinsic to the culture of sub-Saharan Africa. Understanding this history, it is easy to see why the 'western-style' HIV/AIDS campaigns that focus on public lectures, radio advertisements, leaflets and billboards have been met with distrust or have fallen on deaf ears. This history is the foundation of this book, which turns to the performative *Nyau* masquerade tradition in Malawi to explore how local people communicate and identify what is really being said about HIV/AIDS.

This book builds on the interviews and research carried out in 2008–2009. Trying to balance my own professional interests in international development cooperation with a personal interest in performative art, culture and tradition, this book begins bridging the gap between performative tradition and awareness raising campaigns to allow development practitioners to be in more in tune with the cultures they find themselves interacting with everyday. It also sheds light on the complexity of issues posed by the interactions between development institutions and cultures. It advocates for pedagogical reform and new approaches that are context-specific and in-tune with the local culture. Practical lessons and recommendations are drawn from the *Nyau* masquerade in Malawi.

WHY MASQUERADE?



A personal encounter with a life-size carving of a Malawian musician in Mua, showcasing amazing craftsmanship expressing a love for music.

While I lived, studied and travelled around the country of Malawi, I witnessed the terrible effects of HIV/AIDS. With an official prevalence rate of 14 per cent,¹ Malawi is one of the worst affected countries in the world. Yet, in the midst of poverty and HIV/AIDS there is a vibrant local culture centred on songs, dances, drumming and elaborate masquerade performance that beats to the rhythm of communal life. I am captivated by the culture of the Chewa that revolves around ritual masquerade that is called *Nyau* or *Gule Wamkulu*.² The more I have explored and studied this anthropological phenomenon, the more I am amazed by the intricacies, nuances and complex communication methods of this performance. The fact that the inner workings of the *Nyau* masquerade are a closely guarded secret also served to increase my intrigue and desire to understand this element of local culture and tradition.

Within the *Nyau* ritual performance, masked performers dance to the beat of drums. The features of the masks or elements of the costumes they wear tell a story, reinforced by the songs that accompany the performance. The masked characters educate, inform, instruct and communicate various messages to the local communities. These messages include the passing on of community norms, values and traditions. This oral communication forms the basis of traditional authority as a system of influence and power in Malawi. Malawi is predominantly rural, and *Nyau* often comes in contrast to 'modern' scientific systems of knowledge and authority. These modern influences are vying for dominance through the growing role and presence of the national government and international NGOs.

The methods and strategies employed in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Malawi are varied. I am especially interested in identifying and analysing the messages communicated by the *Nyau* masquerade. Little attention has been diverted to using traditional forms of communication to spread information regarding HIV/AIDS in Malawi. There exists an inherent bias in privileging 'western' medical expertise³ (in the form of medical drugs and education) over a traditional understanding of the causes, consequences and preventive measures.

The issue of HIV/AIDS appears to be a particularly significant intersection between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ knowledge systems and sources of authority.

Masquerade and HIV/AIDS

As HIV/AIDS has spread across the globe, it has become an international problem. The countries of Southern Africa have been especially hard-hit, and many international organisations have become involved to help reduce the spread. Infection and transmission of disease occurs within people’s sex lives, making it a very private issue on the micro scale. But on the macro scale, HIV/AIDS has become highly politicized, and poses interesting problems as governments, international organisations, aid groups, and local communities all try to influence people’s personal, intimate behaviour.

The purpose of this study is to identify and analyse the strategies that are being used in Malawi to control the spread of HIV/AIDS. My focus is on traditional authority and communication structures, since they are important in the fight against HIV/AIDS and have received little scholarly attention. Local understanding of the disease within the culture and religion of Malawi are keys to understanding the high prevalency rates and thus the basis for forming strategies to reduce them. This study investigates the messages that address HIV/AIDS within the community, through characters in the *Nyau* masquerade. The ritual masquerade is then considered within the wider system of traditional authority and religious practices. The main campaigns of the government and international actors are then analysed in the same light, to better understand their strategies and potential to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS. Real conclusions about the effectiveness of the different strategies are beyond the scope of this study. However, I do attempt to arrive at some preliminary conclusions about the significance

and relative importance of different strategies and sources of authority concerning HIV/AIDS.

It is my belief that the unique performative culture of Malawi, embodied in the Nyau masquerade, is a vital means of combating HIV/AIDS. This ritual is an important part of traditional tribal authority, which operates parallel to the modern democratic system of government that was created at Independence. Thus, it wields influence within local rural communities that will affect behaviour relating to the spread of HIV/AIDS. While traditional religious cleansing practices conflict with medical science surrounding HIV/AIDS prevention, the masquerade also acts to preserve traditional authority against external influences. This paradox, and the power conflict between tradition and scientific understanding is a reoccurring theme within this research.

APPROACHING PERFORMATIVE ART



Telling the tale of masquerade in village culture through murals painted on the walls of buildings in Malawi.

The subject matter of this study poses some challenges in methodology. The very study of culture and tradition questions the interpretation and stance of the researcher. This is further complicated by the secret and sensitive nature of the *Nyau* masquerade, which is kept hidden from foreigners. Public discussion about the performance ritual is forbidden, even punishable by death in the past.¹⁸ The regulations requiring secrecy are not as drastic today but the ritual remains difficult to approach as a non-Malawian researcher. The nature of oral and visual tradition are challenging to research. It is important to note that a literary study cannot capture the whole essence of the subject matter, nor transform it into something that can be written about and analysed, without changing the nature and representation of this phenomenon. This change must be taken into consideration, but efforts have been made in this study to minimise these effects.

This particular study is the culmination of several years of research on Malawi and its rich cultural heritage. I first moved to Malawi in 1998 and lived there for 4 years, becoming increasingly fascinated with the culture and traditions of the Chewa. The *Nyau* masquerade in particular caught my attention and I began to conduct interviews and collect information concerning this unique tradition. This research interest continued through my undergraduate studies as I continued my research based in Canada (2002–2006). This topic has followed me into my graduate studies at the University of Jyväskylä, in Finland. The fieldwork for this study was conducted in December 2007 and January 2008 as I returned to Malawi to collect the data presented in this book.

The approach to this study is multidisciplinary, drawing from anthropology, political science and performative arts to analyse communication strategies concerning HIV/AIDS in Malawi. It would be most straightforward to provide an anthropological account of the *Nyau* masquerade in the context of HIV/AIDS. However, this study seeks to go a step further, in situating the *Nyau* masquerade into the wider context of traditional practices and discourses that concern HIV/AIDS. This discourse will then be analysed against the

various discourses put forward by non-governmental organisations and government actors in this field. This approach represents three different levels of analysis that are interrelated, though distinct levels of analysis will be maintained in this study for the purpose of clarity. I will proceed from a specific analysis of masquerade ritual to a wider analysis of cultural practice; and, finally explore national HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns carried out by the government and NGOs. This wider approach is particularly necessary not only for attaining a deeper understanding of the Malawian culture, but also for understanding the ways in which this culture interacts with development institutions and practitioners. This approach allows for a more holistic approach to examining current international development cooperation practices and also provides a more nuanced set of recommendations for those approaching HIV/AIDS education in developing countries.

Ethnography of masquerade

The dynamic performance of the *Nyau* masquerade and the secrecy that surrounds this tradition poses the biggest challenge within this study. Ideally, I should have been able to witness and analyse the performances of the masked characters that address HIV/AIDS. However, this was not possible due to the regulations and secrecy that still surround the performance. Masked characters do perform for tourists, but only in situations that are meant to entertain. The actual ritual performances that have significance within the Chewa communities occur within the confines of the village community and are not open to uninitiated members or foreigners. It takes years of living within the local community to gain the people's trust before being allowed to participate in this ritual. Permission to participate requires a traditional initiation where the initiates are taught about the masking tradition and the ways in which the performances of the

masked characters are to be interpreted. Relatively little research has been conducted on the intricacies of meaning within the masquerade because of the difficulties in gaining access to the research data. Very few researchers have committed themselves to this research sufficiently enough to have access to the *Nyau* masquerade in order to decipher the messages communicated within this hidden tradition. Anthropologist Claude Boucher Chisale is a rare exception and has become a resident expert on the *Nyau* masquerade and the traditions and culture of the Chewa within Malawi.

This study has been made possible by the work of Claude Boucher and draws heavily on the documentation of over 200 *Gule Wamkulu* masks and characters that Boucher has collected over the four decades he has lived in Malawi. This research is currently being published by Witwatersrand University Press in a book entitled “When Animals Sing and Ghosts Dance”. The documentation of the 4 masked characters presented in this book is based on the notes for this publication provided to me by Claude Boucher. Boucher is an initiated member of the Chewa society and has carried out extensive research on the different masks used within the *Nyau* masquerade. He has collected and documented over 150 masks in the Chamare Museum at Mua. This study takes the ethnographic description and explanation provided by Boucher as the foundation for this research. Information about the masking tradition and its significance was collected during interviews and discussions with Boucher, visits to the Chamare museum and research at the Mua library. This data represents the interpretation and understanding of one anthropologist but the sensitive nature of the subject matter and very limited research conducted in this field does not allow for a wider collection of data concerning the meaning of specific *Nyau* masks.

In this book, four different masks that address the issue of HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) are analysed. These particular masks were chosen based on their representation of different aspects of behaviour and issues relating to HIV/AIDS. The information communicated by each mask is nuanced and operates on

various levels of understanding, allowing many different messages to be communicated by one mask during the same performance. This ethnographic data provides a glimpse of the messages and understanding of HIV/AIDS circulating within the local communities. However, in order to go beyond a simple description and ethnographic analysis, a series of interviews were conducted in conjunction with this research to solicit the views and knowledge of local people and practitioners in the field.

Masking phenomenon

The *Gule Wamkulu*, translated as ‘the great dance’⁴ is the most important institution of the native Maravi religious culture in the central region of Malawi. The *Nyau* are traditionally a secret male society consisting of village community members. The *Nyau* are part of Chewa tribal tradition and have also been documented in parts of Zambia and Mozambique.⁵ On certain occasions members enter the village from the woodlands, dancing and wearing animal and ancestral masks that cover the entire body, hiding their identity. The *Nyau* masquerade is described as a “ritualistic reconciliation between man and animals before the cataclysm or fall of man”.⁶ The *Nyau* performance revolves around the dance performed by masked characters. Performers dance to the beat of drums and other instruments. These performances are often accompanied by songs. Dancers stamp their feet and grunt but do not speak. The audience is actively involved in the performance, clapping its hands and responding to the singing chorus and the dancing of the performer.⁷

Malawi has a great variety and abundance of *Nyau* masks. More than 150 different masks are known in the area of Mua alone. Dr. Martin Ott,⁸ an anthropologist in Malawi, explains that “the meaning of each mask is taught by the accompanying songs and the history

of its origin and use. The terminology used in these songs is often ambiguous and enigmatic, making it quite difficult for outsiders to find out the ‘true meaning of a mask.’” It is forbidden for members of the *Nyau* to share what they know about the means of constructing the masks or the identity of the dancers.

There are two primary categories of masks: large animal constructions and carved face masks.⁹ Both categories are called *zirombo* (wild animals).¹⁰ This book is limited to an exploration of four carved face masks, which are images in human-like forms. Carved face masks generally relate to human action and relationships so they address issues of behaviour and the spread of disease. The masks are made of carved wood and may have a combination of feathers, hide or cloth attached. These face masks are known as *mzimu*, which is the word for spirit, and more specifically, ancestor spirit, or spirit of a deceased person.¹¹ This highlights the importance of ancestors in traditional Chewa religion and cosmology.

The origins of the masking tradition are unclear. The Chewa tribe believe that the masks originally came from the Luba area of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The tradition has been carried with migrating people for years until their eventual settlement in Malawi. However, documented masks in Malawi bear little resemblance to the masks of the former Zaire.¹² It is possible that masking in Malawi has taken on a different character due to the movement of the people, different experiences and the different ideas of mask makers. However, the Congolese and Malawian masks may still be rooted in the same tradition. The origins of masking are based on a pragmatic, transitional society where change is a way of life.

The origins of the *Nyau* performance are not known, though several theories exist. One of the most probable is based on the arrangement of lineage and ancestry within the society.¹³ Malawi was (and largely still is) a matrilineal and matrilineal society where women control the house, village and fields.¹⁴ Men married into the family and were responsible for hunting, fishing and the woodland. The woodland was the graveyard of the village and people believed dead spirits inhabited

it. The *Nyau* masquerade represented the spirits of the dead visiting the village; men could thus influence the community through their appeal to ancestral spirits.¹⁵ The *Nyau* performance became the centre for male power in society, as women are not allowed to participate directly as mask-wearers.

Analysing lived experience

The analysis of lived experience is an interesting notion. How do you treat a lived experience that is based on movement, sound and emotion and write about it in a book? We need to push the boundaries of traditional methods of analysis drawing out messages communicated through masquerade and inserting these messages into a discourse analysis framework that explores the messages in relation to other sources and forms of discourse. In this endeavour, a broad definition of discourse must be employed and several theoretical frameworks are used to draw out the messages communicated through performance.

The discourse concerning HIV/AIDS that is put forward by different sources of power and authority is where I focused my efforts. I turn to the work of Michel Foucault to engage in the analysis of the relations of power and knowledge within the field of HIV/AIDS communication in Malawi. In this, I echo the critical approach put forward by Norman Fairclough, where he argues that there are two main insights to discourse within Foucault's work that are useful to discourse analysis.²⁰ The first denotes the constitutive nature of discourse insofar as discourse constitutes the social, including 'objects' and social subjects. The second emphasizes the primacy of interdiscursivity and intertextuality, implying that any discursive practice is defined by its relations with others, and draws upon others in complex ways. The dynamic, varied nature of the research material does not allow for a traditional deconstruction of a text or speech. The language of

performance employs the same principles of persuasive communication but the object of analysis is atypical. We must take a broader view of the subject matter and engage in discussion about the messages being communicated and forms of communication being employed. In the analysis of discourse I also draw on the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) and his notion of *heteroglossia* ('many voices'). This concept can be expanded to acknowledge and explore the different levels of communication within performative language. The recognition of multiple levels of discourse arising from the same phrase or performative situation is an important notion in this study as it forms the basis of the analysis of the *Nyau* masquerade.

We are effectively faced with the task of further deconstructing and analysing an ethnographic description of performance. Researcher Edward Schieffelin (2005) questions whether performance can be transcribed in a way that is objective and transparent; and how this transcription should be carried out. Schieffelin advocates a form of transcription in the recording of aural data that attempts to leave nothing out (including coughs, pauses, tone of voice, etc.) because they all have an impact on the flow and nature of the performance. Such an in-depth analysis was not feasible for the purposes of this study so I have chosen to apply performative analysis to Boucher's ethnographic account of the performance. This account has already been coloured by Boucher's own interpretation and choices to report and transcribe what he has deemed important. However, as it is the most logical method to approach this subject matter, I rely on Boucher's expertise and unique insight in understanding and analysing the ritual masquerade.

Schieffelin also raises questions about the definition of performance. From a western, outsider perspective, ritual is viewed as a "performance" (in a theatrical sense), but to the actual participants in the *Nyau* masquerade it is not simply a theatrical performance. In the ritual context, the masked characters coming to visit the village community are believed to be actual spirits, not simply performers. It is a serious matter to claim that 'actors' are 'deceiving' the audience in the

masquerade ritual by simply portraying or representing spirits. In this study, I will adopt Schieffelin's approach to classifying performance and observe that "(1) however one characterises "performance" it is a contingent event, and (2) any human social event that involves expressive and communicative aspects can be usefully subjected to performative analysis – that is, analysis in terms of its performative aspects".²¹ The ethnographic description provided by Boucher does not record every pause and noise advocated by Schieffelin but it applies the principles of a lived event in which audience participation is also taken into consideration. Boucher has already begun the work on deconstruction and analysis of the performative event, but this study extends the analysis by applying Richard Bauman's performance theory. I am interested in analysing the discourse that arises from performance to be able to decipher the dominant messages and strategies being communicated to change behaviour concerning HIV/AIDS, so that they may be analysed against the discourse from other forms of authority.

PERFORMANCE, CARNIVAL AND POWER-KNOWLEDGE



The shores of Lake Malawi are home to communities where *Nyau* are very much alive.

The *Nyau* masquerade is more than a just a tribal dance or a community performance. It is a unique phenomenon that combines politics, education and entertainment into a ritual that is core to the traditional culture of Malawi. To date, it has received little attention by researchers. It is far too nuanced and multi-layered to understand it completely in this book, hence I focus solely on the issue of HIV/AIDS within the masquerade.

In the village communities where this study was conducted, men marry into their wife's family and move to the wife's village. These communities become larger extended families. There is little room for individualism and privacy in these villages; everything takes place within view of the community.²² The messages within the *Nyau* masquerade performances are essentially the most grassroots level of communication to which people are exposed. A review of the work of Richard Bauman helps to analyse this.

Performance

Richard Bauman is a theorist who has studied performance art and the way that meaning is communicated in a performative setting. Published in 1977, Bauman's classic *Verbal Art as Performance* explores the way in which performance creates discourse through the use of signs and symbols. Bauman's performance theory provides a way to analyse and understand performative oral discourse in its range of meanings. The intricacies of the *Nyau* masquerade ritual can be explored using Bauman's framework. The performer and the spectator enter into communication and dialogue through an exchange of codes and signs that create meaning in a specific cultural context. The *Nyau* masked performance has several different levels of meaning that are created through obscure references, innuendo, and other culture specific signs and cues that frame interpretation.

Performance art is part of a rich history of oral tradition. Performances constantly change and evolve each time they are presented. The audience is taken out of the constraints of society and asked to imagine a reality where anything is possible. Performance has a set of rules, symbols and cues that are different from the everyday rules and constraints of society. The interpretive frame created within performance is described thus by Bauman:²³

Performance represents a transformation of the basic referential uses of language. In other words, in a performance of this kind, there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, ‘interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally would convey.’ This may lead to the further suggestion that performance sets up, or represents, an interpretive frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal.

Words, actions, sounds, masks, costumes, poses, and so on, all take on new meanings; there is a transformation of referentiality. These meanings are activated by the performance situation.²⁴ Reality has changed, to allow new meanings and references for the time of the performance. In order to understand this new reality and the messages that are being conveyed, one must understand this new referentiality. These references are performance specific and develop through cultural understanding. A good knowledge of culture and history is necessary to be able to understand the subtleties of meaning and to attribute new meaning to language, references to events, tone of voice, poses, etc.

Performance is, by its nature, a special occasion. People gather in expectation. Murray Edelman is a political theorist who links performance with the political and argues that “performance constitutes a political spectacle and has a strong symbolic use”.²⁵ The *Nyau* masquerade is a strong political phenomenon with both religious and political significance. By entering into the arena of performan-

ce, people depart from their daily routine and enter into a sphere of framed action. Murray Edelman believes that people are allowed to believe whatever they want to believe, within a specific performance, which departs from Richard Bauman. This idea introduces greater subjectivity and highlights the individual instead of emphasising an intended collective understanding.

It is true that the interpretive frame created within the *Nyau* masquerade leaves room for variation in individual understanding (or misunderstanding) and application to one's life. However, this does not negate the specific, intended meaning within each performance that is transmitted by the performers. Even though personal interpretation is an element of performance that cannot be avoided, I prefer Bauman's view, which leaves less room for subjectivity by emphasising the transmission and reception of intended messages. Performance theory is clear in emphasising a specific interpretive frame that directs communication and understanding in performance. Subjective, individual interpretation is most common when people from outside the tradition try to understand what is happening, without knowing the interpretive frame.

An interpretive frame sets the rules for expression on the part of the performer, and for reception by the audience. Insinuation, joking, imitation, translation and quotation are all tools the performer uses to convey a different meaning than what is actually being said.²⁶ This draws on culture, morals, values, shared history, politics and many other points of reference to weave meaning into the discourse. The audience interprets meaning within this interpretive frame, picking up on references given by the performer. The messages conveyed through this medium are intentional and specific, not all audience members will pick everything up but this does not negate their existence. This reality appears to support Edelman's subjective view of interpretation but the different levels of communication are intended by the performers. Failing to recognise the subtle cues that create a new level of understanding does not leave the individual to create his or her own subjective meaning; she or he is still receiving the intended messages

within the lower levels of understanding. As such, performance is conceived as a “mode of language use, a way of speaking”.²⁷

Social theorist Erving Goffman uses the term ‘keyed’ to describe the process by which interpretive frames are created and shifted. The different levels of meaning and understanding are created by different keys to the performance. Keys are hints that help the audience pick up on the interpretive frame and understand the deeper levels of communication. Keys include special codes, figurative language, parallelism, special paralinguistic features, special formulae, appeals to tradition, or disclaimers of the performance.²⁸ The *Nyau* masquerade will be analysed from this perspective, looking for keys to help identify the different levels and understanding, and the messages communicated by each. In the *Nyau* masquerade, visual cues are particularly important in this regard. Many of the visual cues are based on the appearance of the mask. Exaggerated facial features convey meaning that is created through reversal. For example, big ears indicate that the character does not listen to the advice of others.

The audience also plays an important role in performance theory. They do not simply receive and interpret messages communicated; they react to the messages being conveyed. The audience also enters into communication with the performer through verbal cues (cheering, laughing, booing, singing, etc.), clapping, facial expressions and gestures. In the language of performance, these cues create dialogue between the performers and members of the audience.

Bauman’s theories draw on the use of symbols, which is based on semiotics. Semiotics is a theory of communication that originated in the Prague Linguistic Circle in Czechoslovakia.²⁹ Charles Peirce explains that as soon as an object is put on a platform and shown to an audience, it loses its nature as a mere object.³⁰ The framed object has a new nature that is determined by its context. Performance is a series of signs that are read, interpreted and responded to by the audience. These signs convey meaning between the performer and the audience; semiotics is the study of the different signs and cues that create meaning.

Semiotic theory has been criticised for being a simple stimulus-response model of communication, that is limited in its understanding of communication.³¹ This is a valid criticism provided there is a clear distinction between the audience and the performer, as in most western theatre. In African theatre, the distinction between performer and audience is much less distinct. Edward Schieffelin is a researcher who argues that in some cases, the audience is so much a part of the performance that they must be included in the analysis of the performers.³² These events are not thought of as performances by the people participating. The *Nyau* masquerade falls into this category of interactive performance, where all participants can be viewed as performers. The *Nyau* masquerade is not a spectacle; all participants are a part of the events that unfold, thus it can be seen as a form of carnival.

Carnival

Mikhail Bakhtin wrote *Rabelais and His World* in the 1930s at the height of the Stalin era. In it, he analyses the carnival rituals of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. His personal experiences within the Soviet period give him insight into subversive folk and popular culture. Bakhtin's insights into carnivalesque ritual are applied to the *Nyau* masquerade to understand political meaning within a ritual that suspends the norms and hierarchies of everyday society and creates a world outside official culture and repression. The oppressive, controlled Soviet state can be likened to the history of totalitarian rule under Kamuzu Banda in Malawi. Carnival and the grotesque are a symbolic rebellion against official culture and doctrine, and are a renewal of popular culture.

To Bakhtin, carnival is not a spectacle or a performance, it is a lived experience. Participants are as much performers in the ritual as they are spectators. People enter the world of the carnival as they walk onto the grounds and they become a part of the entirety that makes

up the carnival. Participation in this alternate reality is temporary and participants consciously enter this space. This notion of physically entering a different realm is also a part of the *Nyau* masquerade. The village community gathers in the *bwalo*, which is the designated performance arena in the community, to view the *Gule Wamkulu*.³³

In the carnivalesque world there are fools and clowns that wear costumes and interact with the participants. These characters are real in the world of the carnival. The distinctions between carnival and ordinary life are blurred when the characters of clowns and fools enter the streets of a city to announce the arrival of the carnival. In both realms, these costumed characters can get away with mockery and unacceptable behaviour because observers know to relate to them differently. The costumed appearance of the characters changes the interpretive frame that surrounds them, so people change their expectations of behaviour and language. The masked characters of the *Gule Wamkulu* can also be seen in the streets as they announce a performance and make their presence known. The characters frighten children and are unpredictable in their behaviour to emphasise the fact that they do not operate under the normal rules of society.³⁴

During the carnival there is a “temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life”.³⁵ Social status no longer matters in the world of the carnival, where a nobleman can be spoken to or mocked in the same way as a peasant. At the same time, a new type of communication is created within the realm of the carnival. This new communication is reflected in new forms of speech. For example, when two people establish a friendly relationship within the carnivalesque world, their speech also changes, “they address each other informally, abusive words are used affectionately, and mutual mockery is permitted”.³⁶ Profanities and oaths can be used freely within carnival, as the verbal etiquette is suspended.

Physical touch is introduced into carnivalesque communication, where patting the shoulder or the belly of another individual is common. All of these are acceptable in the name of laughter and jest, as

people are allowed to cast off the constraints of society and official culture to engage in free communication and interaction. Bakhtin argues that this brings about renewal in people's lives, as they are allowed to express themselves in this temporary alternate reality. These elements of the carnival are also evident in the *Nyau* masquerade as the masked characters perform lewd gestures and portray inappropriate behaviour. However, not all social hierarchies are suspended, as social status is reflected and maintained within the seating arrangement of the *bwalo*. The messages communicated by the masked performers reinforce traditional power structures and authority.³⁷

Bakhtin's analysis of the grotesque nature of the carnival is a further suspension of official culture. Through the portrayal of 'indecent' images, acts, and allusions to sex, carnival reveals the degraded and incomplete state of human life. The grotesque shows life as incomplete and stripped down to the essential body in all its imperfections. Bakhtin argues that the unfinished nature of the body is kept hidden in the modest official culture but is revealed in the grotesque images of the carnival. Sexuality is displayed more openly in the realm of the carnival, which also serves as renewal and a temporary casting off of the constraints of official culture and society. The portrayals of sexuality and the 'grotesque' within the *Nyau* masquerade occur in a more hidden and coded way, where subtle keys to the interpretive frame are used to denote sexuality.

Masks are used in the carnival to portray and emphasise elements of reality, and are connected with the joy of change, and reincarnation. Bakhtin cites the example of masked and costumed devils that perform during the "grand diablerie" of the carnival.³⁸ Before the performance, the devils run through the streets making much noise and insulting people, running against the Christian mores of the time. Bakhtin argues that carnival highlights the constant renewal of human life through emphasis of the life cycle of birth, growth, degeneration of the body and death. The characters of the fool, clown and devil all represent the "destroying and renewing force of the material bodily lower stratum".³⁹ The parallel between these characters and the *Nyau*

masquerade is striking. However, the masked characters within the carnival are relegated to more of an entertainment role and do not play the same function in the communication and education of the population as the characters within the *Nyau* ritual. Bakhtin does not analyse any educational aspects of the carnival, except that people are exposed to sexuality and images of the body that are otherwise kept hidden within society. The *Nyau* characters go beyond this simple exposure, to communicate specifically with the audience on various topics and levels of understanding.

The rebellious nature of carnival is also important. People are allowed to participate in an alternate, free reality for a temporary period of time. The constraints of official culture, laws, hardship, and social standards are cast off to participate in a world where people are allowed to express themselves freely without a fear of punishment. In the name of laughter and festivity, people are allowed to live out a reality contrary to the oppression of their current society. Bakhtin argues that a carnivalesque crowd in a marketplace or other public space is not merely a crowd, “it is the people as a whole, but organised *in their own way*, the way of the people”.⁴⁰ From one perspective, this allows people to vent their frustration so that they can enter back into their repressed existence obediently. Alternatively, one can follow a Freirean line of thought and argue that this temporary experience of freedom allows people to recognise how they are being oppressed and make demands for freedom.⁴¹ There are two levels of freedom embedded in these alternatives, individual realisation and a collective exercise of freedom that is not coerced or planned. Collective freedom is a spontaneous, united organisation and interaction between people that is void of the laws and social constraints imposed upon the people during everyday life. However, Bakhtin argues that the sense of unity created in carnival is not a static image of unity. The people are aware of carnival’s uninterrupted continuity within time, its “relative historic immortality”.⁴² The tradition of carnival, with its images, indecencies, and curses affirms the people’s immortal, indestructible character.

Power-knowledge

The *Nyau* masquerade represents a certain discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS. As a component of a wider cultural tradition, the masquerade has a role to play in the reinforcement or the opposition of that tradition. It also forms part of the traditional response to external elements that influence the traditions of these local communities. Visible within the masquerade are specific discourses and power relations that relate to external institutional authorities concerning HIV/AIDS. These different discourses constitute the strategies that are employed to bring the spread of the virus under control.

I am interested in the control and influence that is exerted on a community through power-knowledge and the choices that individuals make concerning opposing discourses. The issue of HIV/AIDS is tied up in medical knowledge and understanding of the disease, which is possessed by medical professionals. In order to reduce the spread of the disease, they must try to influence and control the behaviour of individuals in the society. HIV/AIDS education and awareness campaigns are attempts to do just that. Certain elements of Foucault's theory are of direct relevance to exploring how knowledge is used as a form of power and influence over people through different forms of communication.

In *The History of Sexuality* (1990) Foucault provides an interesting analysis of the development of discourse surrounding sex, refuting the notion that sex is repressed in western society. Some of the ideas he presents can be applied to the Malawian context, as a western construction of knowledge and discourse meets the discourse of traditional knowledge systems in the domain of sexual practice and HIV/AIDS. Foucault's 'repressive hypothesis' provides a good framework for understanding discourse surrounding sex and HIV/AIDS. Foucault argues that the West has seen a transformation of sex into discourse. The western man is drawn to be open and explicit, to tell everything about sex: "This carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation and modificati-

on of the desire itself”.⁴³ An increase, or multiplication, of discourse around sex is needed to bring the issue into the open so as to exercise power and influence over this domain. In this sense, the existence of discourse creates the possibility to reorient and modify the beliefs and sexual behaviour of people. Foucault links “an intensification of the interventions of power to a multiplication of discourse”.⁴⁴ In Malawi, there has been a clear multiplication of discourses surrounding sex and HIV/AIDS.

In western society, Foucault identifies the emergence of new discourses where “things were said in a different way, it was different people who said them, from different points of view, and in order to obtain different results”.⁴⁵ Employing a Foucauldian approach to studying the origins and nature of the discourse being disseminated in Malawi, the various strategies used to bring the spread of HIV/AIDS under control are easily identified in their efforts to reorient sexual behaviour. This actor-oriented research identifies the discourses and then looks beyond the discourse at the origins of the authority and the way that power is exercised through these discourses.

Foucault traces the origins of this shift in thinking and discourse about sex, to the 18th century, when the value of population and population growth for future prosperity was realised by nation-states. When birth and death rates began to be measured officially as important elements in the existence of a nation, sex moved from the private sphere to the public sphere. In addressing sex, “one had to speak of it as of a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum”.⁴⁶ The medical profession was at the forefront of these changes; regulating, advising and measuring fertility. As a relatively young country (independent since 1964), Malawi is now entering into the sphere of attempted public regulation of sex for the greatest good. Due to the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS, utilitarian regulation of sex has taken the form of attempted restriction and control of sexual activity, rather than that of mere guidance of population growth.

Foucault makes an important distinction between countries and traditions that are based on *ars erotica* versus *scientia sexualis*.⁴⁷ Even though this is an oversimplified distinction, it has value in approaching the different knowledge systems that are at work in Malawi. Traditional communication in the form of the *Nyau* masquerade is based on an artistic, sensual understanding of sex (*ars erotica*) where it is understood and discussed as a part of life experience. A more western, medical, utilitarian (*scientia sexualis*) discourse is being disseminated by organised HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns and medical institutions, funded by international development donors. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault provides an analysis of *scientia sexualis* and the developments that have occurred within this understanding of sexuality.

Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1974) also explores discourse and statements in their historical context. To an extent, *Order of Things* (1970) begins the discussion on truth and discourse. Order and meaning are established differently depending on what is said, who says it, when, and with what authority. Discourse has the power to determine meaning and truth as a precondition for what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. "Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention".⁵⁰ For example, the concept of madness rests upon a definition of what is normal and acceptable in society.⁵¹ Thus, meanings do not arise specifically from language but from the power relations that are behind them. The possibilities for meaning and definition are presupposed in the power relations behind discourse. The order and groupings of words and phrases constrain meaning. Discourse and meaning are also characterised by the inclusion or exclusion of what can and cannot be said. "Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy".⁵² According to the principle of discontinuity, discourses are in conflict with other discourses, meanings and claims. The conflict between the messages may directly relate to the institutional conflicts between the sources and authority of the discourses.

Discourse marks the starting point of our analysis of power relations. The discourses of the *Nyau* masquerade are analysed in the way they relate to other discourses in the domain of HIV/AIDS. Opposing discourses mark different sources of power and authority as they attempt to exert control or influence over people. The existence of several different appeals to authority in Malawi and the discourses that arise from them make for an interesting analysis. In the western discussion about HIV/AIDS there is often only one dominant discourse, which has its roots in medical science. In Malawi, however, there are several opposing discourses that address HIV/AIDS as later discussed.

Foucault highlights the power of hidden surveillance, of seeing but not being seen. He terms the concept of a prison where inmates cannot see the jailer as “power of mind over mind”.⁵⁴ The illusion of surveillance is enough to bring about obedience and control without ever needing to intervene. There is a need for a constant, subtle exercise of power to bring about real change and control over people’s lives. The sudden, violent and discontinuous exercises of sovereign power simply produce resistance and opposition. These principles apply to prisons, schools, hospitals, and other institutions where the exercise of power can be hidden and disguised. Foucault identifies a double process of increasing power as these institutions and mechanisms of hidden power improve and develop. Experts and professionals constantly conduct research and form new knowledge which gives them more power over people, reinforcing their position as professionals and allowing them to form new knowledge.

In Malawi, this power of surveillance and subtle, continuous change takes two primary forms. The first relies on institutions to raise awareness, educate and advocate behaviour change with regard to HIV/AIDS. This includes health centres, churches, NGOs, the government and various other organisations that rely on the reality and consequences of HIV/AIDS to motivate people to change their behaviour. The second major form of power comes from tradition and the tenets of traditional religion and witchcraft. A fear of witchcraft or the harmful consequences of disobeying cultural beliefs and practices

is a serious issue. The spirits are always watching and the constant fear of the consequences of deviant behaviour produces control.

Foucault examines the reality of power exercised but does not explore any concepts of opposition to this power. Gramsci and other Neo-Marxists represent this side of the debate, by arguing that discursive power can be dismantled, especially when faced with a 'crisis of authority'.⁵⁵ This debate is not about the removal or dismantling of power relations, it is about replacing existing relations with new ones that take a different form. Opposition to power will simply take the form of an alternate discourse that is more attractive, but which is also embedded with power relations. This gives rise to two questions which will direct the analysis in the following chapters: Which authority on HIV/AIDS dominates the discourse? How is discourse disseminated to the public so that they prescribe to it?

The theoretical base

Three very different theories form the foundation of this analysis. How do they all fit together? The three main theories presented are also used in a different way within this book. Bauman's performance theory is very operational, it helps us to understand the context of performance and the way in which performance can be used to communicate concrete messages in a variety of ways. In a performance, the majority of discourse is not verbal. Visual cues, sounds and actions form the basis of the messages communicated. This theory is used to understand what is being said in the language of performance.

Bakhtin's carnival takes this process a step further in contextualizing the language of performance. In performance, communication goes beyond the actions of the performer to include the audience as agents of discourse as they form part of the messages communicated.

Finally, having understood some of the discourse communicated through performance we are ready to explore the power relationships between the messages communicated through performance in relation to other forms of discourse, like the education campaigns launched by international NGOs.

All three are necessary to arrive at a situation where we can compare apples with apples. This is by no means a flawless process and I am left questioning whether it is even possible to make such a comparison having had a glimpse into the wonderfully complex and nuanced world of the *Nyau* masquerade but, for the moment, I see no alternative. While these theories help better explain the *Nyau* masquerade, they are also of importance beyond the narrow field of this book. It is vital for development practitioners to have an understanding of the world of oral tradition and draw out meaning relevant to his or her work. Oral tradition is found all over the world, in a variety of forms, and every time constituting a world of performance with its own signs, meanings, and interpretations. Moving towards an understanding of the context of this world is essential to the construction and utilisation of a more meaningful education dialogue. Furthermore, a modern understanding of development cooperation compels practitioners to more carefully consider the power relations within which they operate. This comparison and analysis of competing messages and discourse reflects the type of analysis that should be undertaken at all levels of development cooperation programs and projects.

THE NYAU RITUAL MASQUERADE



Mtu wa Nsomba (Man of Fish), one of hundreds of *Nyau* masks in Malawi.

The *Nyau* masquerade represents an oral, performative form of discourse that tackles important issues in people's lives. It is a dynamic tradition that lives, evolves and responds to the current issues facing the lives of Malawians through the performances of masked characters. The *Nyau* masks convey meaning through their design, and the actions and verbal cues of the performers. There are several cues for the audience or 'keys' to the performance that help the audience understand the interpretive frame of each mask. There are a great number of masks in Malawi; the collection at the Chamare Museum displays over 150 masks. It is not possible for one mask to travel and perform all over Malawi so local communities tend to make their own version of an important mask. These variations are taken into account in some of the masks analysed in this study.

The identity of the mask makers and the performers behind the masks are intended to remain a closely guarded secret. The masks represent the spirits of dead ancestors visiting the village to instruct the community. This mythology is a source of power and authority for the masquerade. To talk openly about it would be to break its power, and the power of its messages. There would be much less incentive to listen to and obey the messages communicated through masks without the appeal to mythical, supernatural authority.

The masks presented in this book represent an integral part of the traditional strategy to bring the spread of HIV/AIDS under control. The masks were collected by Claude Boucher and are portrayed at the Chamare Museum at Mua Mission, Malawi. The masks were used in ritual ceremonies mainly in the rural Mua area and the surrounding communities. Each mask is analysed separately to draw out the symbolic meaning it brings to the masquerade. The description of the masked characters and translation of the accompanying songs was done by Claude Boucher, whose contribution to this study is invaluable.

Chiwau



Figure 1. The Dedza version of *Chiwau*. Photo taken by Claude Boucher.



Figure 2. The Mtakatata version of *Chiwau*. Photo taken by Claude Boucher.

Chiwau is a day mask from the Mtakatata, Mua and Dedza areas.⁵⁶ *Chiwau* means ‘the one who was burned or disfigured’. The character was introduced approximately 45 years ago but the messages about sexual disease conveyed by the mask have adapted to include HIV/AIDS.⁵⁷ The mask uses two colours, red and black, to divide the face vertically. The colours of the mask provide the first visual clues to frame its interpretation. Fire and heat are important concepts in the Chewa tradition so the black colour of the mask expresses the idea that the person was burned. The carved details in the black sections of the mask portray how the facial features were damaged by fire. The squinting eye indicates a loss of vision and the black ear is deformed. This is in contrast to the red side of the face that shows healthy features. In this case, the colour red portrays health and vitality though it is also

used in other masks to indicate the presence of evil. The expression of the mouth is confused, suggesting a lack of understanding of what has happened to him and why.⁵⁸ The visual elements of the mask begin to create the interpretive frame that will dictate how the performance is understood and what messages are communicated.

Chiwau is a good example of a mask that was adapted to different areas in Malawi. The Dedza version of the mask is different from the typical vertical separation of black and red on the face. The Dedza version is bald, whereas some others have a piece of goatskin on the forehead for hair. The character of *Chiwau* is not restricted to any specific type of ritual; it can perform anywhere. Baboon skins may be added to the rag headgear of the mask to cue the audience to the fact that he is a *sing'anga* (medicine man) but otherwise *Chiwau* is interpreted as an ordinary man in the community.⁵⁹ The dancer wears a suit that is tattered. Hanging from the dancer's waist is a short kilt made of fertiliser bag laces. Armllets and leglets also adorn the body. If *Chiwau* is being portrayed as a *sing'anga*, medicine containers will be hung from his waist. The final prop is a long whip intended to warn people not to follow his example.

As *Chiwau* performs, the character comes into the *bwalo* (performance arena) steadily swerving his feet. He moves forward swinging his arms to push away women, indicating that he wants them to move far away. These initial movements start to communicate the story behind the mask. It is clear that the character is afraid of women, suggesting that his past trauma involved women. Masks often tell their life stories to account for their current appearance in the performance. In response to *Chiwau*, the women in the choir and members of the audience tease him with the following songs: "Sex (the penis) is nice in the early morning sunrise. I will grab it myself and put it in, *Chiwau*." Or, "*Chiwau*, you have put it outside! Come, come with it".⁶² The women are entering into communication and interaction with the mask. The women may also spontaneously create new songs or adapt the songs to reflect changing circumstances or events in the community.⁶³ This interaction allows

the audience to play their own role in the communication of messages through the performance.

While *Chiwau* is dancing and interacting with the women in the audience, the men sing to explain what has happened to him. The Dedza choir sings: “*Chiwau was burned. He was pretending he was going to work, but, he managed to get himself burned.*” In the Mtakataka version, where *Chiwau* is a medicine man, they add: “*He was crippled, Chikanga (a famous medicine man) crippled him.*”⁶⁴ The red colour of the mask symbolises the fact that *Chiwau* encountered heat, which is associated with sex and bad blood. Within Chewa culture, hot and cold are important concepts that are attributed to sex. During menstruation, a woman is ‘hot’ so she will burn a man if they have sex. The concepts of hot and cold are strongly linked to sexual practices and rituals within the culture, and dictate when sex is permissible and when it is banned.⁶⁵ It is believed that the breaking of these sexual taboos leads to *mdulo*, a wasting disease. HIV/AIDS is frequently associated with *mdulo* because it is an STD that often results in a person wasting away and becoming weak before death. *Mdulo* is not one particular disease but is a general concept of disease and sickness caused by breaking sexual taboos and customs.⁶⁶

The first analysis of the mask examines *Chiwau* as a medicine man, symbolised by the medicine containers hanging from his waist and the monkey skin in the headgear. The song indicates that he takes advantage of his profession as a medicine man and uses his female clientele for sexual favours.⁶⁷ The song is sung by a choir but villagers also join in when the song is known to them. The song sung in association with the performance provides the clearest explanation of the character. However, the symbols and references within the performance also deepen understanding and add to the messages communicated.

In the song, *Chiwau* is considered arrogant as he boasts that he is the best medicine man in the world. His pride, vanity and arrogance distract him from devoting himself to the study of plants and herbs. Instead, he takes advantage of women, enjoying illicit sex with his patients while pretending to be on duty. According to his tale, he

had relations with a woman who was menstruating, and thus ‘hot’, but she hid this fact from him. *Chiwau* contracted *mdulo* and was in great danger of death. His sexual organs withered and turned black under contact with her bad blood, her heat. This is how he got the name of *Chiwau*.

Chiwau remained proud and arrogant, believing in his own abilities to cure himself instead of seeking help from other medicine men. However, he could not cure himself and his condition worsened. Finally, he reluctantly asked other medicine men in the area for help. The other medicine men saw their opportunity to take revenge on *Chiwau* for his arrogance and to teach him a lesson. They prescribed a potion with which *Chiwau* was to wash his face. Desperate for a cure and humbled by the disease, he did as he was told. After he had carried out the prescribed remedy, he discovered that he had been tricked. One side of his handsome face turned black, he lost sight in his eye, and his mouth and ear were deformed. Left disfigured and in danger of death, no woman is attracted to him anymore. He fears women and blames them for his disfigurement, so he pushes them away during his performance.⁶⁸

Not all areas perceive *Chiwau* to be a *sing’anga*, however. In Dedza, for example, he is a villager who pretends to leave the village to seek employment but is really only interested in being a playboy.⁶⁹ Within this context, his burnt face and disfigurement symbolises the sexual diseases (including HIV/AIDS) that he has acquired through his behaviour. Within both contexts, the messages of promiscuity and the spread of sexual disease are still applicable.

The tale of *Chiwau*’s misfortune is communicated to the audience through visual and verbal cues as the character dances and performs. These different ‘keys’ to the performance enable the audience to understand both the explicit and implicit messages communicated by the mask. This mask conveys several different messages that address character, morality, power structures, cultural practices and STDs. In the domain of character building, *Chiwau*’s example demonstrates the dangers of arrogance and vanity within the community. It is wrong

for anyone to trust only in his or her own abilities, power and wisdom. The community is a public domain where interaction and mutual support are expected. Pride and arrogance isolate the individual from the counsel and assistance of the community. In following their own wisdom, ‘*nzeru za yekha*,’ the individual shows stupidity.⁷⁰

This is one of the major differences in western and Malawian concepts of society and the individual. In western society, personal independence, wisdom and abilities are generally encouraged and appreciated. In Malawi, “the individual is just being born and may be in town but he is not completely free from the whole framework”.⁷¹ *Chiwau* warns against the dangers of individualism, which is perceived as arrogance and pride within a rural society where the community is paramount. In this way, rural authority, power structures and tradition are all emphasised through the masked performance. The concept of individualism and individual rights is still a new phenomenon finding its place within Malawi’s traditional culture.

In the story of *Chiwau*, the blame for his misfortune is placed on women, which is typical of Chewa mentality.⁷² Men commonly deny their social responsibility. This mentality is linked to a matrilineal rural structure where men leave their own village to marry into the wife’s family. Within this structure, a man has no entitlement to the children because they belong to the wife and her family. Males only gain status when they are married; and even then, their influence is limited because they live in their wife’s village. This situation reflects a dichotomy between the position of women in the public and private spheres. The matrilineal tradition favours the authority of women in the private lives of the family and village community. However, the *Nyau* masquerade reflects a male desire to exert power in the public sphere of traditional authority. Elements of this struggle for gender authority are played out through the character of *Chiwau*.

Boucher explains the two roles of the husband in this structure, “The husband is seen as the one who gives life, as the father. He is seen as the provider, and that is it”.⁷³ A husband who lacks social status and authority in the community structure also shirks responsibility.

With the growing influence of a cash economy, husbands can claim their salaries for themselves. If the wife has access to cash, it is even more of a license for men to abandon responsibility of the family and act irresponsibly. This is especially true as mobility has increased and men can visit towns more easily, where they are anonymous and their actions are less visible. In village life, everyone knows when a husband is unfaithful. *Chiwau* warns against the dangers of going to town under false pretenses in order to be a 'playboy'.

In the Mtakatika version, the song sung about *Chiwau* references Chikanga Chunda. This reference is a cultural 'key' to understanding the deeper messages being communicated. This is only evident to those who understand and pick up on this subtle cue. An outsider would surely miss this cue and be oblivious to this deeper interpretive frame. Chikanga Chunda is a well known historical figure in Malawi. Chunda was a *sing'anga* who practiced witch-hunting in the Mua and Mtakatika areas in the mid-1960s.⁷⁴ This was the period surrounding Malawi's struggle for independence, transitioning from Nyasaland (a British protectorate) into the current state of Malawi. This period of unrest also included a witch-hunting movement. Chikanga Chunda identified witches in the rural communities and was said to purify the land from all evil. He exposed the immorality and wrongdoings of people like *Chiwau*.⁷⁵

Malawi's first President was Kamuzu Banda. He had studied medicine in Europe before returning to Malawi, and it is no coincidence that *Chiwau* reappeared during this time. Banda is well known for surrounding himself with crowds of women whom he called his '*mbumba*', his extended family. Women would be summoned from all parts of the country to come and dance and sing praises for the President. This service was compulsory and women risked their lives travelling all day on crowded lorries to entertain the President, ministers and guests. The practice became a form of legalised rape and adultery, dictated by the President, as the women were expected to continue to 'entertain' political officials and dignitaries at parties in the evening. Banda took pride in calling himself a Chewa, and appropriated Chewa songs and

dances for his own political gains. However, Banda blatantly ignored the *mwambo*, the traditions and customs, of the Chewa and had no concern for the harm his legislated practices were causing.

In a state of extreme dictatorship and control, the character of *Chiwau* was a veiled rebellious political protest. Hidden behind the masquerade, rural communities could break the rules and criticise the President and his wrongdoings through the very culture he was trying to appropriate. The carnivalesque nature of the ritual masquerade makes this type of political and social rebellion possible. Carnival allows the communication of subversive messages because they are hidden in the laughter, jest and entertainment of the festive occasion. In the performance, *Chiwau's* misdeeds are brought into the open and he is punished for his deviant behaviour. In this deeper interpretive frame, the reference to Chikanga Chunda can be understood as a call for the people to stand up and expose the wrongdoings of the President. A referendum in 1993 ended Banda's life Presidency and the one party system in Malawi. Banda's Malawi Congress Party (MCP) went on to lose the Presidential election in 1994, and suffering from disease, Banda died just three years later. Though the *Nyau* masquerade no longer addresses Banda, messages that criticise the government are still common and relevant. The character of *Chiwau* is still warning about the dangers of abusing position and power, and not heeding the counsel of tradition. This tradition, organised and owned by the people, has a sense of historical immortality that gives people the boldness to say what is on their minds within the obscured language of the carnivalesque. Banda's wrongdoings were never brought to justice, but his ill health can be interpreted as divine retribution within Malawian cosmology.

Dzakonda



Figure 3. *Dzakonda*. Photo taken by Claude Boucher.

Dzakonda is a yellow day mask from the Diamphi, Nathenje and Mitundu areas.⁷⁶ *Dzakonda* means ‘That which makes someone happy’. The large 40 centimetre mask is recognisable as a Chewa through the tribal markings on his face.⁷⁷ The yellow colour of the mask acts as a visual cue to symbolise that he has lost his own identity and his behaviour has turned him into a stranger. *Dzakonda*

is portrayed with a bald head, long thick side burns, moustache and a bushy goatee to emphasise that he is still relatively young and will never reach old age. The bushy facial hair adds to his appearance as a foreigner. These details are rendered with Samango monkey fur in order to demonstrate his wild behaviour.⁷⁸ Local people will recognise this fur and interpret this visual cue, which requires familiarity with local animals and their behaviour in order to understand this key. The eyes are squinting slightly and the black labial lines that curve downward from his eyes indicate that he is worried. His behaviour has made him tired, thin and aged beyond his years. His nose is straight and angular like a European’s. The mouth is frowning and unhappy, showing gaps between the teeth in his lower jaw. The size of the ears is exaggerated to teach through reversal, symbolising the fact that *Dzakonda* has been deaf to everyone’s advice.⁷⁹ *Nyau* characters often

teach through reversal, which is a vital piece of information when constructing the interpretive frame.

Dzakonda first appeared in the 1940s and has been a relevant mask since then.⁸⁰ The meanings associated with the mask have changed and adapted over time to reflect current societal trends. The character of *Dzakonda* is completely swept away by modernity. The tattered suit he wears, his foreign features and yellow skin tone establish the interpretive frame to reflect that he has set his heart on foreign values and novelties. Like *Chiwau*, *Dzakonda* carries a whip. The whip is a symbol of his deviant behaviour that rejects traditional morals and values pertaining to sex and marriage, and warns the community to not make the same mistakes.⁸¹ The men sing a song that tells about *Dzakonda*'s mistakes: "*For me, I say this is what makes me, Dzakonda, happy! Yes, some prefer to behave like this, here! Yes, some like to behave like this! Yes! Others come back ooh-ing and aah-ing, feeling that they have wasted their saliva* (in giving advice). *Dzakonda* answers: *No!* (I will not listen!) The choir continues: *Some of your friends, as you know, have left their wives in order to marry young chicks! They went, those who did what made them happy! They left (died), those who did what made them happy, Dzakonda!*"⁸² *Dzakonda* performs by moving his feet pompously and flirting with the women, trying to lure them into a simulation of sex, as the drummer beats a rhythm.

The character of *Dzakonda* accuses those who blindly accept all that is foreign as desirable and positive. The character is appropriate at any occasion, to warn against the dangers of being swept away by modernity. *Dzakonda* warns against people who lack critical judgement and maturity as they face the western world and its influence in Malawi. People instinctively rush for things that are new without an assessment of the risks, until they find themselves in trouble. *Dzakonda*'s relatives and friends tried to warn him about the dangers of what he was doing but he would not listen, and continued to indulge himself. *Dzakonda* abandons his wife and sets his eyes on a young, attractive woman who later reveals herself to be a prostitute. As HIV/AIDS and other venereal diseases begin to take their toll, *Dzakonda* realises

that he has made a mistake. Sick and worried, he goes back to his first wife, which is only to her misery as he infects her as well. Men are not the only ones cautioned in this character, as this performance also warns women of the dangers of taking back a husband who has been chasing other women. At his wife's home, *Dzakonda* finally dies. At the funeral, neighbours and friends gossip about his activities and lifestyle and give him the name *Dzakonda*, the stubborn man who died for what had made him happy.⁸³

Dzakonda is a character that attempts to educate young people about HIV/AIDS. He is trying to stop the younger generations from rushing to their death prematurely through unprotected sex and other activities that may result in them contracting the disease. The character of *Dzakonda* stresses faithfulness in marriage as a way to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS and venereal disease. If *Dzakonda* had remained faithful to his wife, he (and his wife) would still be alive. This message also supports the traditional structures of the village community and reinforces norms and morality associated with marriage and sex. Modernity and western influence are blamed for the destruction of traditional morality and behaviour relating to sexual activity. Being faithful to one partner is a common message associated with HIV/AIDS campaigns around the world.

Another important message communicated through the character of *Dzakonda* is respect for the counsel and advice of the village community. The same message was evident in the character of *Chiwau*. The masks teach that it is vitally important to listen to the advice of the village community, or else negative consequences will follow. The use of fear and intimidation is evident here. Those who abandon the traditions and customs of the village to chase after new and exciting things will come to regret their decision when they get sick and eventually die. This message is evident in many masks because it reinforces the authority of tradition and ritual, which are necessary for the continuity of village power structures and authority.

Finally, *Dzakonda* serves to warn the village community against the influence of western society and foreigners. The facial character-

ristics of the mask portray European features. This serves to create an intriguing but highly problematic link between modernity and the spread of HIV/AIDS. The character of *Dzakonda* establishes a direct connection between foreigners in Malawi, and the spread of deadly diseases (specifically, HIV/AIDS). Numerous conspiracy theories exist concerning HIV/AIDS, and it is a common belief that HIV/AIDS was introduced to Africa by Europeans or Americans to control the population, or annihilate it completely. Robert Chizimba, the Head of Behaviour Change at the National Aids Commission, explains that this myth has also carried over into the domain of condom use to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS. Chizimba states: “There are some sections that say, you know, condoms are manufactured by people in Europe to wipe out the African population, or condoms are porous or they easily break”.⁸⁴ The suspicion and mistrust of Europeans can be traced back to the colonial era when the *Nyau* became the dominant institution of resistance against European rule.⁸⁵ Chewa linguists maintain that the word for European, *mzungu*, is not semantically included within the category ‘human being’, *munthu*; only Africans are people, while Europeans are another phenomenon altogether.⁸⁶ This aspect of the messages communicated by the masquerade is fascinating. According to research carried out by Deborah Kaspin, “*Nyau* cosmology absorbs new categories of ‘other,’ turning foreigners into *Nyau* beasts.”⁸⁷ Thus *Nyau* reclaims representational authority.” The character of *Dzakonda* is an attempt to reinforce the divide between modernity and the Chewa way of life, in the domain of HIV/AIDS.

This misconception and suspicion of anything ‘foreign’ to Malawi is a major challenge in reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS. The National Aids Commission and other NGOs are trying to address these misconceptions, but they are reinforced through traditional messages that seek to insulate the community from foreign influence. The character of *Dzakonda* communicates messages that are beneficial in the battle against HIV/AIDS, but which also create a dichotomy between rural and urban, modern and traditional approaches to the problem. This distrust of foreign intervention also poses problems

in the domain of antiretroviral therapy (ARVs); when people mistrust medication, they are unlikely to take it properly, if at all. This situation exemplifies the power struggle between authority and influence over power structures and communication. On the village level, a strong power structure exists under the leadership of the chief and others in the rural setting. Conversely, the National Government of Malawi has generally embraced modernity and is seeking to tackle the issue of HIV/AIDS in cooperation with foreign NGOs. This urban-based authority is also seeking to have influence in the rural communities to transmit information that includes condom use and ARVs, which are foreign to traditional Malawian practice.

Lekani kutamba anthu adatha

Lekani kutamba is a red day mask from the Mua area. The mask portrays a man within the family leadership who is exposed to be a witch. His name means ‘Stop bewitching others; people are on the point of extinction’. To understand this mask, one must first be familiar with the structures of families and leadership within them. In the majority of communities in Malawi, husbands have very little say in the family. Senior women with children and grandchildren hold high status. However, the family head is usually an unmarried man who is taking care of the affairs of his sisters and their children. This man has status within the community but his authority extends only to the affairs of his family group.⁸⁸ The character of *Lekani kutamba* portrays a man in this position, a family head.

The character appears as a man who is old but has not yet become weak or frail. The first cue to the character and interpretation of the mask comes through the frightening features portrayed. The head shows unkempt, bushy hair, a moustache and goatee made of Samango monkey fur. Again, this fur is used to cue the audience to wild and deviant behaviour. His facial features are entirely covered by wrinkles

and furrows over the forehead, nose, cheeks and area surrounding the mouth. These features betray mistrust and aggression, with frowning eyebrows that convey his dual nature. His eyes are inset and covered with foil so that they glitter in the light and bulge out of their sockets. The eyes betray witchcraft and evil. The nose of the mask is broad and flat, indicating that the character has typical African features. *Lekani kutamba's* mouth appears to have a sly smile that conveys anger and jealousy. Large protruding teeth emphasise the cruel, frightening character of the mask.⁸⁹

Similar to *Dzakonda*, *Lekani kutamba* has large and pointy ears, a key to the understanding that he does not listen to the advice of others. As family head, he is deaf to the complaints of his family members for whom he should be caring. The character's involvement in witchcraft is conveyed through the use of red in the mask in combination with his dramatic features, which indicate greed and malice under the cloak of an honest citizen. Horns are the common indicator of witchcraft in masks but they are missing in this case, suggesting that the witchcraft is hidden under the guise of his status and authority. The character wears a smart jacket and trousers, which contrast dramatically with the headgear that is made of rags. The smart clothes indicate wealth and are a cue to the audience that he has enriched himself at the expense of his family. The character also carries two props: a flywhisk and a staff. Used to swat flies, a flywhisk is a status symbol in the community, reinforcing his position of authority. The staff is a status symbol but is also a cue to the ill-treatment of his family members.⁹⁰ Different elements of the mask and costume indicate duality, suggesting that the reality of the situation is different from the appearance. This is an important element in the interpretive frame for this mask and cues the audience to look at both sides of the coin when interpreting the meaning of the character.

Lekani kutamba uses his secret powers of witchcraft to abuse and exploit his family. In the *bwalo*, he is rude and menacing. Within the confines of the performance, his true character is revealed. He shuffles his feet aggressively and spins around, changing direction of-

ten. He flails his flywhisk savagely and his staff is threatening. *Lekani kutamba*'s dancing style, choreography and the rhythm of the drums copy those of the character of *Mfumumu yalimbira*, the chief's rival.⁹¹ This interpretive key is only available to those who are familiar with the different masks and have witnessed a performance by *Mfumumu yalimbira*. The masks make both implicit and explicit references to each other, enabling deeper communication in the language of the masquerade. There is interaction and communication within the entire subculture of masking, where masks build off the meaning of others and inform the audience by making reference to each other. Within the context of this mask, the association adds to the message of evil plotting and greed and suggests a challenge to the authority and structures of the village community.

The male choir tells of *Lekani kutamba*'s behaviour: "Yes, yes stop bewitching others! People are on the point of extinction!" To this song, the women add more details: "Here is the (nasty) old man who is coming. Ignore him! Here is the (nasty) old man who is coming".⁹² The message of the song is divided into parts sung by men and women. An examination of the messages conveyed by the different choirs reveals the structures of power within the community. The women, who are likely under the leadership of the family head, complain about the true nature of *Lekani kutamba* and advise the audience to ignore him. This suggests that they do not have the power or authority to confront and address the deviant behaviour, but can inform the community and try to ignore him. It is the male choir who confronts *Lekani kutamba* and tells him to stop bewitching others. This suggests that it is the responsibility of the chief and traditional male leaders of the entire community to discipline and correct the behaviour of a family head. The head of the extended family group (*mwini mbumba*) is meant to look after his sisters and their children and grandchildren but in this case he has given himself over to selfishness and greed. Within the family, he is no longer the responsible protector, but instead a 'nasty old man.' As traditional culture holds the head of the family responsible

for the health and safety of the family members, any sickness or death to young family members is considered his responsibility.

The character of *Lekani kutamba* addresses the issue of death causality within the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic spreading through the Mua region. Witchcraft is blamed for the death of young people before they reach old age. Within this context, a disease itself is never a sufficient explanation of causality. For example, Claude Boucher explains that “There is no such thing as a heart attack in Malawi.”⁹³ If someone dies, it is because she or he was killed (through witchcraft) by a neighbour who coveted something she or he owned. The strong belief in witchcraft leads people to question: ‘Who sent the disease that took the life of someone in their prime of life?’ This is part of the way people explain causality. Boucher explains further, “There is nothing fortuitous; there is nothing that just happens. Everything is read in terms of personal responsibility or interrelationship between two people.”⁹⁴ Thus, someone is always responsible for the misfortunes or disease of another. In the case of *Lekani kutamba*, the maternal uncle is to blame for the ill health and the spread of HIV/AIDS within his family. The reason for wanting to cause misfortune or disease on another is usually attributed to greed or jealousy and the mechanism for carrying out this malice is witchcraft.

The notion of witchcraft is an interesting socio-political tool because it provides a mechanism of control (through fear) and a source of authority. The perceived threat of disease and malice through witchcraft is a strong motivation for rural communities to follow the customs and norms prescribed by traditional authorities. The authority of the *Nyau* comes from the belief that the characters are the spirits of the ancestors visiting the village. In this sense, spirits and witchcraft are very real forces, so anyone who can claim authority or understanding in this realm will wield power in the traditional context. Within traditional society, witchcraft takes the form of power that is “mind over mind”,⁹⁵ a theory Foucault builds on the notion of surveillance. The concept of panoptic control, in the form of constant surveillance that sees but is not seen, is a mechanism that produces restraint wit-

hout needing to intervene. The spirits of the ancestors are constantly watching the actions and practices of the villagers. A breaking of the *mdulo* will result in punishment in the form of disease. This threat of supernatural punishment is a strong exercise of power over the lives of people. Those who know the workings of witchcraft wield great influence within the society. The character of *Lekani kutamba* seeks to bring understanding and to explain the very existence of HIV/AIDS, through witchcraft. In this domain, power structures and traditional authority are strongly reinforced.

Witchcraft and the mysterious also play a role in carnival. Fortune tellers claim to have knowledge of the future. Costumed devils that perform in the '*grand diablerie*' appeal to notions of good and evil. Carnavalesque freedom and alternate reality also bring to life people's superstitions and fears. As imaginations run wild, the supernatural becomes a part of reality, and a force in people's lives. Questions of right and wrong, and good and evil, arise in the exercise of freedom as people break the rules and constraints of society within this carnivalesque reality. In the *Nyau* masquerade, characters representing evil perform and act out their evil deeds and actions in a public domain. Carnival gives the freedom to portray evil and the grotesque in order to emphasise the death and rebirth of society as a whole. The very carnal and imperfect nature of humanity is portrayed as a cycle of death and regeneration. It is within the portrayal of this cycle that *Nyau* masks seek to influence the behaviour of the people in order to ensure the health and survival of the entire community, by seeking to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Njolinjo



Figure 4. *Njolinjo*. Photo taken by Claude Boucher.

Njolinjo is a black mask from the Dedza area that is also used in Mozambique.⁹⁶ *Njolinjo* means ‘The one who stands erect’ or ‘the one who jumps’. The tribal markings on *Njolinjo*’s face indicate that he is a Chewa. The features of his face cue the audience that he is a young man that is potent and sexually active.⁹⁷ His large pink lips convey sensuality and his nose is pointing upwards indicating frequent erections. The black colour of the mask represents fertility and promiscuity. The headgear around the mask is made from the skin of wild animals to cue the audience to his wild, impulsive behaviour in regard to sex. As with the other masks that address HIV/AIDS, *Njolinjo*’s ears are emphasised with the pink colour. They are pointy and protruding, suggesting to the audience that he has not listened to the advice of the community about sexual promiscuity.⁹⁸

The features of *Njolinjo*’s face are equivalent to the ‘grotesque’ portrayal of sexuality and the carnal nature of humanity as conceptualised by Bakhtin. The portrayal of the grotesque is an interesting element of carnival that takes on a slightly different nature within the *Nyau* masquerade. The costumes of the masked characters cover the entire bodies of the male dancers so the portrayal of sexuality is not directly through an overt display of sexual images. The actions of the characters can mimic sex but other features, such as big lips and a pointy nose, are used to convey messages of virility and sexual practice instead.

This coded and hidden approach to sexuality is adopted because of the presence of children, who are not meant to learn about sex and sensuality until their initiation ceremony. To the adult members of the audience interpreting the performance of *Njolinjo*, his appearance is the height of sensuality and the ‘grotesque.’

Njolinjo can perform at any ritual and his purpose is to teach and entertain. His only prop is a long stick that he uses for acrobatic movements. During the performance, he climbs the stick and falls back with it. In the *bwalo* he jumps here and there with his stick as he climbs it. The long stick also emphasises his virility and youthful energy.⁹⁹ The male choir sings during the performance: “*Up! Up! Here is a real man because he jumps (he is capable sexually)! It is true – He is called Njolinjo, is up (in erection)! Yes my friend Njolinjo is a real man but he jumps!*”.¹⁰⁰ The song suggests that *Njolinjo* has already proven his virility by fathering several children. However, his popularity and success with women becomes his downfall. He jumps here and there having sex with many different women, despite being married. He boasts about his sexual accomplishments and virility by climbing the stick and standing erect. However, his falling down with the stick represents the sexual diseases that he has contracted as a result. In the end, he contracts HIV/AIDS and dies.¹⁰¹

This mask conveys a strong, direct message to the younger generations. It shows a young man in the prime of his life behaving promiscuously and dying as a result. The character serves as a warning to young men to heed the counsel of the community and be faithful in marriage. Characters like *Lekani kutamba* portray the effects of the disease on the community by emphasising collective extinction. *Njolinjo* brings the disease to an individual level, stressing personal sexual behaviour and responsibility. The character warns young women to resist the advances of handsome, young men. The messages conveyed by the character of *Njolinjo* are direct and straight-forward (in relation to the other masks analysed). The mask lacks the nuances and subtle messages of some of the other characters, due to the escalating reach and seriousness of the effects of HIV/AIDS on the community. The

messages of the mask educating the new generations of young people are explicit and overt, reflecting a growing desperation at the spread of the disease. Within the last ten years, countless numbers of young men and women have contracted the disease and died. It is hoped that masked characters like *Njolinjo* will continue to highlight the dangers of unprotected sex with multiple partners.

Masquerade and HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is at the heart of politics and development because it is dramatically changing the socio-political landscape. The disease is challenging traditional power and authority as community members are dying in the prime of life. Traditional authorities are expected to find a solution to the problems of the community members and as they fail to do so, the people will increasingly look elsewhere for answers. The urgency to control the spread of HIV/AIDS is reflected in the masks, as teaching about the disease is coming alongside traditional messages relating to power, authority and behaviour. The disease is also being addressed explicitly by the specific masks created for that purpose. There is a danger that communities will lose faith in traditional village leadership over their failure to control the spread of the disease and will look elsewhere for help, undermining village power structures.

Over ten years ago, Peter Probst studied the response of the *Nyau* masquerade to HIV/AIDS. His findings revealed a lack of respect among young people for traditional authority and a general decline in morality according to traditional values.¹⁰² Probst documents his discussions with local leaders concerning the creation of new *Nyau* characters to address the issue of HIV/AIDS.¹⁰³ At the time it was a relatively new idea that was being taken into consideration. This study explores some of the progress made within this area, documenting the

messages of some of the new masks created to address HIV/AIDS and revealing how the messages of some older masks have evolved to advocate behaviour change.

The carnivalesque nature of the *Nyau* masquerade opens up communication and criticism on different levels of political authority. It is clear that masks criticise the national government and the actions of ‘outsiders’, to the culture and traditions that have existed in the country for a long time. However, the *Nyau* masquerade also provides a forum for discussion and criticism about the other elements of traditional culture and practice that form local authority. For example, the character of *Dzakonda* criticises the shortcomings of a family head as these relate to traditional authority. Tradition cannot be viewed as a monolithic whole. The discourse of the *Nyau* ritual masquerade is in opposition with some of the discourses surrounding other elements of tradition and culture practiced in the country. The next two chapters will discuss these two spheres of influence in turn, first looking at the power struggles that exist within tradition.

CHALLENGES TO *NYAU* TRADITIONS



Statue portraying the influence of Christianity in Malawi.

While the *Nyau* masquerade communicates important messages about HIV/AIDS, it is not the only voice within Chewa culture. There are in fact numerous traditional institutions vying for power, who communicate conflicting messages regarding HIV/AIDS. Traditional religion also propagates numerous extramarital sexual encounters through various rituals, which can expose village members to a great risk of contracting HIV/AIDS.

Initiation

Traditional initiation is an important part of local culture and tradition. Boys and girls who reach puberty undergo separate initiation ceremonies that mark their entrance into adulthood. During these ceremonies, boys and girls are taught about the culture and traditions of the tribe and are instructed in the norms and values of the village community.¹⁰⁴ The initiation includes teaching about sexual practice and the reproductive roles of both men and women. Boys and girls are also taught about the *Nyau* masquerade. Boys are given the most comprehensive teaching about ritual and are shown the masks outside of the performance. They learn that men from the community make the masks and wear them during the performance.¹⁰⁵ Boys and girls are taught how to interpret the masked characters and the meaning of the masquerade within the society. During the initiation, they are also warned to never speak of what they have learned about the *Nyau* masquerade and are threatened by punishment, or even death, if they break this veil of secrecy.^{106, 107}

The Malawi Centre for Social Research (MCSR). The MCSR gathers and disseminates research data from various national and international research centres about different issues in Malawi, presenting data and findings to interested researchers and members of the public. According to the data gathered by the MCSR, 44% of

rural females and 35% of rural males are reported to have undergone an initiation ceremony. The rates were slightly lower in urban areas (30% of females and 25% of males), but not dramatically different. These findings suggest that tradition still plays an important role in society, both in urban and rural settings.

The data suggests that the majority of the population do not report having undergone an initiation ceremony. A proportion of these people are entirely outside the masquerade culture and do not participate in the masquerade performances. However, it is important to distinguish between an 'official' initiation ceremony that lasts several days and a more informal initiation accomplished through normal cultural and social conditioning. There exists a subset of people that have not undergone an official initiation but do still attend the masquerade performances, due to the social and communal importance of the ritual. Not all children have the opportunity to undergo a full initiation, as it can be expensive for the family to pay the instructors. This does not bar them from attending the performance but they will not have full access to the inner workings of the male masking society.¹⁰⁸ Only initiated male members can participate in the creation and actual performance of the masked characters. However, individuals that have not undergone a full initiation will learn the communication patterns through repeated exposure and inevitable discussion within the community about the messages communicated through the performances. This reality is not reflected in the statistics of people reporting to undergo initiation.

Interviews with Malawians suggest that traditional practices actually promote the spread of HIV/AIDS infection. Cited examples of these cultural practices include, *'fisi'* (hyena), *'kuchotsa fumbi'* (removing dust), *'kulowa kufa'* (bewitching death), and *'chokolo'* (wife inheritance).¹⁰⁸ These practices are outside of the *Nyau* masquerade but are a part of the wider tradition in which the masquerade is embedded, as later discussed.

Cultural practices and HIV/AIDS

A study carried out by the Malawi Human Rights Commission in 2005 has documented over 40 different cultural practices that involve sex, and which have put people at risk of contracting HIV. These practices are also documented in a study published by the Evangelical Association of Malawi in 2007. Since the population of Malawi is Bantu, almost all tribes share similar customs and traditions, with slight variations.¹⁰⁹ Within traditional thought, sex is a form of cleansing. The mixing of body fluids brings about a ritual purity that cleanses the individual or the family from the misfortunes of an accident or death in the family. Sex also marks entry into adulthood. Within official government and NGO discourse, cultural practices that are conducive to the spread of HIV/AIDS have been labelled “harmful cultural practices.” This term accuses traditional authorities and anyone who follows them, of irresponsibility and damage to society. I have made an effort to avoid using this term, common though it may be.

Kuchotsa fumbi (removing dust) is sexual intercourse practiced immediately after the girls’ and boys’ initiation, where the initiates are encouraged to look for a partner to prevent a bad omen that may present itself through disease, or appearing dirty at all times. In some parts of the country, the parents of the initiates are required to abstain from intercourse during the initiation and then perform the ritual by resuming after the initiation. This practice is not unsafe except in cases where a child has only one parent. In this situation, the parent is expected to hire a man or woman to have sex with for a period of time.¹¹⁰ There are usually a few men and women in the village who can be hired for this purpose. Because the same hired individual performs this ritual many times with different partners, the chances of them having HIV/AIDS is very high. If a child only has one parent it is also very possible that the deceased parent died from HIV/AIDS related illnesses, so the single remaining parent may be infected and pass it on to the hired individual.

A *fisi* (hyena) is a hired man from the community that serves two ritual purposes. The first is to prepare newly initiated girls for marriage by having sex with them to see if they have 'grown'. The second is to impregnate a woman whose husband is impotent.¹¹¹ *Kulowa kufa* (bewitching death) is sexual intercourse by a hired man (or relative) with a woman whose husband or son has just died, to put to rest the spirit of the deceased. If no relative is willing to perform the duty, then a man from the community is hired. This cleansing involves repeated sexual encounters.¹¹² After this ritual cleansing, *Chokolo* (wife inheritance) is common where the widow is inherited by one of the brothers of the deceased man.¹¹³ Reports show that the brothers use the *kulowa kufa* ritual intercourse as a way of trying to influence the widow to choose them in *chokolo*. There are numerous other practices and beliefs that involve ritual cleansing through sex that are seriously problematic for the spread of HIV/AIDS.

These traditional practices are in direct conflict with the messages of abstinence and faithfulness conveyed by the masked characters in the *Nyau* masquerade. People are told to be faithful to their partners and are warned to choose partners carefully, but in the context of ritual cleansing these rules do not seem to apply. There appears to be a clear distinction between ritual, and the practices of ordinary life. Sex in the ritual context is separated from casual sex and is viewed as completely different from other sexual contact. This arises from a belief in the mystical power of sex to cleanse bad omens and purify the family and community from death or misfortune. In the context of ritual, sex with close relatives is permitted and even expected in order to purify the family.

The relationship between the *Nyau* masquerade and ritual cleansing is interesting. Both rituals are important to the tradition and cultural belief of Malawi. The *Nyau* masquerade entertains and educates about village norms, and warns against the dangers of foolish behaviour. The masked characters perform at funerals and initiation ceremonies, which are the very times when ritual sexual cleansing is practiced. People hear of the dangers of sex with multiple partners and the

devastating consequences of HIV/AIDS, but then turn around and ignore them in the name of ritual cleansing. It would appear that the dangers of HIV transmission are not believed to apply in the ritual context, and that ritual sex may be separated from sex for pleasure. It is also possible that the people's fear of witchcraft overrides their fear of contracting HIV/AIDS in the performing of ritual cleansing.

Religion

We are faced with a situation in which two different forms of traditional authority are disseminating opposing discourse. This challenges the notion of homogenous traditional authority and creates a new reality of mixed messages and multiple discourses within tradition. This situation is highly problematic for the spread of HIV/AIDS, as traditional ritual practices are an unfortunately effective method of spreading the disease to the entire community. The belief in witchcraft and the harmful consequences of not performing the rituals is so strong that it is difficult to bring about the behaviour change needed to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. We must question which discourse dominates. On a ritual level, is it a fear of the diseases and the bad omens that come with disobeying the cleansing ritual prescribed by the culture that is the most serious? Or is it more important to listen to the counsel of the ancestral spirits that visit the village to instruct the community? One authority is static, relying on an appeal to witchcraft and the practices of previous generations, whereas the *Nyau* masquerade is dynamic, living and evolving with the community. In the *Nyau* masquerade, the dangers of STDs have featured for decades but the lower severity of non-HIV/AIDS diseases has not yet been able to challenge the authority of ritual cleansing customs.

The carnivalesque nature of the *Nyau* masquerade allows for the transmission of a variety of different messages to be communicated to

society. Subversive commentary warns about the external influences to tradition. However, the failings of traditional leaders or authorities are also criticised. The character of *Chiwau* portrays the abuse of power by a medicine man, and *Dzakonda* criticises the failings of a family head. The actual source of these messages remains anonymous but it is very likely that the chief and traditional authorities know and control what messages are communicated. As such, the *Nyau* masquerade is not quite the “mass of people organised in their own way, exercising free individual expression” that Bakhtin conceptualises in the carnival. However, it can be viewed as a collective, community exercise of freedom from the constraints of traditional society and traditional religion. The chiefs and traditional authorities are as much under the control of traditional practices and beliefs as are the rest of the community; they simply have a different role to play within the structure.

The *Nyau* masquerade is an opportunity to disseminate messages that challenge the cultural practices and rituals of the village community, which are mandated by traditional religion. Witchcraft and the fear of *mdulo* that comes from breaking tradition is a strong controlling power. *Mdulo* applies to everyone in society, including the traditional authorities. These relatively static traditional religious beliefs existed before HIV/AIDS became a problem in Malawi. Thus, local community faces the problem of addressing and changing traditional religious practices that are based on sexual intercourse in order to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS without dismantling the very elements of tradition that constitute the society and the power relations within it. Traditional authorities have influence within the community based on the power given to them through the structures and beliefs of traditional religion. Traditional authorities cannot turn on the institution that gives them authority. The *Nyau* masquerade provides a way to introduce education about HIV/AIDS and messages that challenge traditional cultural practices, in order to bring about change that comes collectively. As community members realise the impact of their cultural practices in the spread of HIV/AIDS and suggest or accept changes that do not involve sexual contact (such as herbal remedies or symbolic intercourse)

or even accept the use of a condom, behavioural change comes about that does not challenge the existing power structures or organisation of society. The fear of witchcraft and *mdulo* is a uniting and controlling element that keeps the society intact, so any challenge to this belief must be a collective action that agrees to change the stipulations of cleansing practices, etc.

The masquerade performance introduces a new, open discourse about sexuality and the spread of HIV/AIDS. The introduction of this discourse is meant to exert power and influence over community members in order to bring about changes to the *status quo* in sexual behaviour. Parallels can be drawn to a similar process in Europe, where new discourses surrounding sexuality were introduced as a way to exert influence over a domain previously relegated to the privacy of the bedroom.¹¹⁴ It is important to note that through the masquerade, these changes are happening within the power and authority of tradition, traditional belief and the confines of rural community, minimising the threat to the overall power and authority of traditional leadership.

HIV/AIDS has only come to the forefront of public discourse in the last 15 years, which poses the biggest challenge to the existence of cleansing rituals involving sex. It is a mistake to think of these cleansing rituals as entirely static elements of the culture. Steve Bowler, the regional coordinator for Vision Led (a faith-based NGO working in the field of HIV/AIDS) argues that cultural practices that were originally created to protect people have twisted and changed into their modern form, which violates newly initiated girls and forces widows to have sex.¹¹⁵ It is very likely that traditional practices have evolved over time, but it difficult today to know what the 'original' version looked like, if such a version ever existed.

In Malawi, life expectancies are short, at 46.3 years, so culture and tradition are particularly volatile, and HIV/AIDS is further reducing life expectancies.¹¹⁶ In western culture, it is usually the grandparents who teach children about the traditions and practices of previous generations, which creates cultural stability and slows change. In the absence of this intergenerational tutelage, change occurs more quickly,

with each generation making up their own rules as they go along. It is interesting that the *Nyau* masquerade appeals to the spirits of ancestors. In many cases, the ancestors, in the form of grandparents and senior members of society, are no longer alive to give advice, so the culture must appeal to their spirits to provide instruction. The volatile nature of Malawi's culture means that traditional practices involving unprotected sex should be reversible.

Recent studies and reports suggest that some of these cultural practices are indeed changing. The MHRC reports that *chokolo* and *fisi* are falling out of favour.¹¹⁷ In some areas, a *fisi* is no longer hired for the girls' initiation, or if one is hired, he inserts a piece of wood to simulate sex. Other practices that involve sex have been replaced with herbal treatments that are also believed to purify and cleanse.¹¹⁸ However, the findings of these reports are inconclusive because the practices remain cloaked in secrecy. It is likely that a reduction in the practices involving unprotected sex has occurred, but they are still continuing in many parts of the country. Even within the same villages people will differ in levels of commitment to tradition. The challenges to the cultural practices come from the people themselves, who refuse to carry out cleansing rituals with people they know are infected with HIV/AIDS.

While doing the field research for this study, I heard several reports of women who had refused to carry out sexual cleansing rituals with a relative or *fisi* whom they suspected had HIV/AIDS. In one particular instance I was told about, a woman who refused to carry out the cleansing with a *fisi* who was showing signs of having HIV/AIDS, so one of her female relatives offered to do it on her behalf. Within the two years both the *fisi* and the female relative died. Masked characters performing at the funerals of both of these individuals will reinforce messages about HIV/AIDS and warn the community. Even though the masked characters do not directly link ritual cleansing with the spread of HIV/AIDS, people can make the links based on what they know about HIV/AIDS transmission and what happens during the rituals. It is actual examples such as this that will bring about real behaviour change.

Changing Behaviour

It is difficult to know what exactly is bringing about these changes. To whom are people listening? The government and NGOs claim that their education campaigns are beginning to have an impact on the population. It is likely that this impact is most clearly seen in the messages of the *Nyau* masquerade. The culture and tradition of rural Malawi filters the messages of these external influences and expresses the new teaching through the structures of traditional authority, such as the masquerade. We must remember that even though HIV/AIDS has been discussed in the west since the 1980s, in Africa it has only come to the forefront fairly recently. After many years of denial and ignoring the problem, it is truly only within the last ten years that the issue has been mainstreamed in Malawi. When I first moved to Malawi in 1998, there was little public knowledge or acceptance concerning the disease. Malawi is still in transition: trying to come to terms with the existence of HIV/AIDS, while the extent of the disease is still being determined.

This research indicates that HIV/AIDS is indeed challenging traditional institutions and practices. The practices of traditional religion are in part contributing to the spread of HIV, so they are being forced to change and adapt rapidly. However, belief systems and religion are not changed easily, because they appeal to supernatural authorities. Supernatural authority is the ultimate tool for surveillance that exercises 'mind over mind' power. The world of invisible spirits represents the ultimate power that is always seeing but never seen. People are afraid to change their practices involving sexual contact due to the strong fear of punishment associated with disobedience. External education about the dangers of HIV/AIDS and its consequences does not address this religious fear of supernatural retribution.

The key to change is discourse on the same level, with the same authority and appeal to the world of the spiritual. The *Nyau* masquerade operates within the traditional culture and has this spiritual authority. Thus, it is likely that the changes occurring within tradi-

tional culture, and practices that are substituting sexual contact for other forms of ritual, are coming about through the discourse of the *Nyau* masquerade. The messages of the masquerade are supported and informed by the external institutional influences acting in the field of HIV/AIDS. The dangers of HIV/AIDS and the messages communicated about the disease through the masquerade performances are proven to be true through real events in village communities. This discourse is becoming dominant within the traditional structures but it will take time to dismantle and change existing practices that are engrained in the culture.

AIDS, POWER AND INFLUENCE



The Lake of Stars (Lake Malawi), conceptualized as a source of life in Malawian traditional religion.

Within the framework of HIV/AIDS, questions of knowledge, influence and power arise. HIV/AIDS is a widespread disaster in Malawi, which affects the lives of the entire population and shakes the foundations of society and behaviour. In the midst of untold tragedy and death, people are forced to rethink culture, behaviour, education and knowledge. With different sources of information and a historical lack of open communication and education, the ordinary person is faced with the choice of who and what to believe. This chapter examines the different voices external to traditional authority, and attempts to assess their influence and power within society. There is a complex interplay between different forms of authority and regional settings in the country, making this task all but straightforward.

Individuals are faced with opposing discourses from competing power sources. Each tries to exert influence and control over people in order to bring about changes in behaviour. To control HIV/AIDS, it is necessary to bring about changes in behaviour and attitudes in one of the most private areas of an individual's life - his or her sex life. How does a public authority or institution attempt to exert control over such a private sphere? In modern, democratic nations one of the only tools left to exert control is the power of education and public discourse. In *The History of Sexuality* (1990), Foucault analyses the increase and nature of discourse in Europe as a means for exerting greater power and influence over sexuality. Similarly in Malawi, there has been a dramatic increase in discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS through several awareness raising and education campaigns.

In this chapter, I look at the influence of the national government (in the form of the National AIDS Commission cooperating with international NGOs), health centres and religious bodies. According to Foucault, all of these institutions possess a form of deeper *connaissance* knowledge that gives them power over subjects within existent societal power-relations. The 'knowledge is power' argument is the starting point for this discussion. The primary research data analysed in this chapter consists of a series of interviews with key informants in major national and international organisations working in the field

of HIV/AIDS. These institutions draw on their unique authority and ability to communicate through different mediums, to exercise influence over behaviour relating to sex and HIV/AIDS.

The Elite Approach

The Government of Malawi faces a difficult situation in trying to govern a state that is relatively new. Malawi only gained independence in 1964. A European-style government, separate from traditional local tribal leadership, was instituted to govern the nation. The challenge for the government was, and still is, to establish itself as a ruling authority and national influence. In Malawi, this type of nationalism is severely hindered by the existence of strong, local, power structures that dominate political organisation. People see themselves as part of the local communities they live in, rather than a diffuse, western-style nation that has been constructed to fit global territorial politics. HIV/AIDS is just one point of contact within this ongoing struggle for authority.

In the field of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, Malawi's national government works closely with United Nations Organisations (especially UNAIDS). The discussion on HIV/AIDS is framed as a development issue. This enables significant action and influence from foreign governments that are engaged in development, who often operate through specialised NGOs. NGOs typically operate through a *de facto* alignment with the national government, and are dependent on the finances and resources from external development actors. As is the case in many developing countries, the government is obliged to align itself with the global fight against HIV/AIDS and accept foreign influence in this domain.

Within the *Nyau* masquerade, the character of *Dzakonda* links the existence and spread of HIV/AIDS to western influence and the

presence of foreigners in Malawi. An underlying distrust of western influence makes it difficult to bring about change when foreign NGOs are the main actors in the fight against HIV/AIDS. This situation is further complicated by the history of the very definition of HIV/AIDS in Malawi. When the disease first appeared in Malawi, the Banda government gave it the name *Edzi*. This is a meaningless term in Chichewa, and the government missed an opportunity to give it a name that would have conveyed meaning about the origins or spread of the disease. *Edzi* was basically a made-up word, and was communicated widely through the radio.¹²⁰ After *Edzi* was coined, the HIV virus was translated as *kachikombo ka Edzi* – the little beast that causes AIDS.¹²¹ This name encouraged the belief among patients and some traditional healers that this little beast could be treated and removed, curing AIDS. This perception still exists. The made-up name, vague treatment options and the government’s repeated message that “there is no HIV cure” led people to suspect a family planning plot and labelled HIV/AIDS the ‘government disease’ (*matenda a boma*).¹²² There was widespread scepticism surrounding the claim that western medicine had no cure for this disease; this was commonly thought to be scare tactic to exert control over reproduction. The suspicion that the government was colluding with foreigners to control the people still persists to this day, some elements of which can be seen in the character of *Chiwau*, as discussed previously. The belief that HIV/AIDS is a foreign disease introduced into the country must be overcome in order to operate effectively in the domain of HIV/AIDS prevention and actually influence behaviour change.

With the power that NGOs wield through foreign political and financial support they can even challenge national elites. There was a hope that NGOs would take the role of civil society actors, joining with the masses to challenge the elite ‘from below.’ Unfortunately, having conducted extensive research on this relationship, political scientist Harri Englund found that NGOs and their personnel “maintain the same distinctions toward ‘ordinary’ subjects as [do] the elites”.¹²³ Today, NGOs often tacitly support the state not “from below” but as

agencies with capacities that are equal, and in some cases superior, to those of the national government.¹²⁴ Challenges for power exist within the elite sector of government and NGO activity, but the two can be grouped together in their relationship with ordinary citizens. This top-down authority has developed a strategy to combat HIV/AIDS in the form of the Malawi HIV and AIDS National Action Framework (NAF) 2005–2009. The NAF identifies eight priority areas that will ‘drive’ the Malawi national response:¹²⁵ Prevention and behaviour change; Treatment, care and support; Mitigation: socio-economic and psychosocial impact; Mainstreaming, partnerships and capacity building; Research and development; Monitoring and evaluation; Resource mobilisation, tracking and utilisation; and, National policy, coordination and programme planning

These objectives reveal a top-down elite approach that assumes the need to change, mould and control peoples’ behaviour to bring about the desired outcomes. As the recipients of help are defined, so are the actors that possess the ‘correct’ knowledge and the means to disseminate it. This strategy also assumes an acceptance and wilful participation of the people to reformation and re-education. In the west, the influence and authority of the state are taken for granted, and the state that has the power and authority to bring about actual change. However, when a competing political authority exists within national boundaries, as is the case in Malawi, the political reality is different and a new dynamic enters the equation. People must be convinced to believe in the discourses put forward by the national government, rather than the competing discourses by traditional authorities. When the government has distanced itself from the people and is associated with what is perceived to be a negative western influence, it is very difficult to establish credibility and influence.

HIV/AIDS Campaigns

The National AIDS Commission (NAC) has employed several different campaigns against AIDS to target the population. Based in urban areas, the NAC lacks personal contact with rural people, who are out of reach of newspaper circulation and who typically do not have access to television. Malawi's adult literacy rate is only 64 per cent, so print media has a limited impact.¹²⁶ Robert Chizimba, the Head of Behaviour Change at the NAC states that "the most preferred means of communication is the radio".¹²⁷ The NAC produces radio dramas, and spreads information about HIV/AIDS through the radio. The radio is an effective tool for mass communication but it lacks interpersonal contact. As a medium, it further reinforces the mentality of a 'distant authority' that is imposing its knowledge and beliefs. The National AIDS Commission are aware of the impersonal nature of the radio and the limitations of trying to dictate HIV/AIDS awareness. Thus, messages about HIV/AIDS have been weaved into the plot lines of popular dramas. In this way, the exercise of power and authority is being hidden within popular culture and entertainment.

In Malawi, like many African countries, radio is a common means of communication, with the ability to reach both urban and rural populations. In addition, radio is widely listened to amongst all segments of the population. This suggests that radio brings HIV/AIDS to the people's attention and reaches a large proportion of the rural, and urban, populations. However, a simple awareness of radio programmes does not mean that this campaign has been successful in bringing about behaviour change or a real understanding of HIV/AIDS. Further research is required on this gap between awareness-raising and actual behavioural change to arrive at meaningful conclusions.

After many HIV/AIDS awareness raising campaigns, awareness levels appear to be high but knowledge levels are still very low. The Demographic Health Survey (2004) indicated that respondents can answer simple questions about HIV/AIDS correctly but only 22% of women and 39% of men have a comprehensive knowledge of the disease. A comprehensive knowledge means that they identify condom use and limiting sex to one uninfected partner as HIV prevention methods; that they are aware that a healthy-looking person can have the AIDS virus; and that they reject the two most common local misconceptions that HIV can be transmitted through mosquito bites and through supernatural means.¹²⁸ The level of knowledge in rural areas is lower than in urban areas and the youngest and the oldest respondents have the lowest levels of comprehensive knowledge. Government elites, NGOs and healthcare professionals possess knowledge that needs to be passed on to common people who lack this information. I have criticised the top-down assumptions of the NAC but these assumptions are not unfounded as there is clearly a need for deeper education about HIV/AIDS in Malawi.

The question remains, how should this be done? Political scientist Harri Englund has also conducted extensive research on the human rights movement in Malawi and the NICE initiative. Englund criticises the way civic educators have distinguished themselves as a privileged class and objectified the targets of civic education, despite the ever-popular discourse of participation and responsibility. This discourse is remarkably similar to that surrounding HIV/AIDS. Education is needed to dispel the misunderstandings and ignorance of local communities about the disease, but this mode of education does not develop critical thinking or cooperation. This approach raises awareness about a topic, but without creating truly meaningful dialogue. In official government and NGO discourse in Malawi, the concept of ignorance is linked with issues of illiteracy. The Chichewa term for “ignorance”, *umbuli*, has frequently been used to refer to illiteracy.¹²⁹ The perpetuation of the notion that illiterate people cannot function or act in society is common. The Minister of Gender and Community

Services has even addressed television cameras at the International Adult Literacy Day saying: ¹³⁰

Anybody who is illiterate cannot do anything, even in the family. You cannot do anything, because the understanding, the understanding level is low. So anything cannot go well, even HIV/AIDS. Anybody cannot understand if he or she is illiterate. You need to know what you are doing or what you want to do.

This view entirely discounts the capacities of illiterate people to comprehend and understand the situations they live in and the complex oral and visual communication structures of the *Nyau* masquerade. Literacy is being used to separate those with skills and knowledge from the 'ignorant' masses.

Civic education rests on the assumption that some elites have knowledge and truth, that needs to be taught to those who lack it. The power of knowledge about HIV/AIDS is exercised over a population deemed 'ignorant' and backward. In Malawi, there are still displays of 'sovereign' power that exist as remnants of the old dictatorship. The country was ruled by Banda for 30 years, so it is not surprising that elements of this type of rule and the attitudes that it spawns are still present. In western democracies where power is 'hidden' and the freedom of democracy is celebrated, the sources of power to subjugate individuals are not always so clear. In Malawi, the sources of power, knowledge and domination are more easily identified because they are used to legitimate rule and authority.

In the field of HIV/AIDS, civic education takes many forms that attempt to create participation and communicate in a culturally-sensitive manner. Chizimba speaks about the communication strategies of the NAC:

We do print but largely we try to promote an interactive form of communication. We are promoting folk and popular media. We are talking about drama. We are talking about traditional dances,

storytelling. Other models where people could be interacting between the audience and the sender of the messages are good because of the high illiteracy levels.¹³¹

These strategies are an attempt to engage with the people and hide the messages concerning HIV/AIDS in popular communication, and thus exert a subtle, continuous influence on society. This form of exercising power has the capacity to bring about real reform and change, when people are led to believe it is best for themselves, their families and communities. However, it is not enough to simply produce interactive media, as people still know the authority behind these messages. There is a need to actually enter into the traditional communication structures, rather than to continue producing parallel ones.

Competing Authorities

The government has recognised the need for communication within the traditional communication structures, but this is difficult to accomplish living and operating outside the local community. Government elites and educated urban employees of the government remove themselves from the local village communities and, as suggested by the masked character of *Dzakonda*, pursue modernity and abandon the village. It is problematic to try and influence communication within a traditional sphere that operates relatively independently of the national government. Boucher goes as far as to say that “The local government is the main government. The other government can only monopolise people if it is operating through the village structure”.¹³² Thus, there are two levels of government that operate rather independently; the national government has influence in urban areas, but the villages are ruled by the local traditional government that operates through a Paramount (head chief), other local chiefs or village headmen or headwomen.

The national government that was introduced in 1964 on a 'borrowed' European model lacks legitimacy and authority. The traditional structures have existed for centuries. Both forms of government have their own knowledge structures and try to communicate messages to the people, especially regarding HIV/AIDS. The government's messages about the disease are very similar to those advocated internationally. They are based on the ABCs of disease prevention; Abstain from sex, Be faithful to one partner and use a Condom. This simple message prescribes behaviour that will help prevent infection based on a *scientia sexualis* understanding of the disease. It lacks the *ars erotica* portrayal of sexuality in practice and the destructive effects of the disease on the lives and community of the people, which is portrayed during the *Nyau* masquerade. This emotional impact is where the messages from these two sources of influence diverge, concerning HIV/AIDS.

Recognising the importance of traditional leadership in controlling the spread of information concerning HIV/AIDS, the government and NGOs have sought to meet the chiefs and traditional leaders to try and influence them to bring about changes in tradition and practices to reduce the risk of HIV/AIDS. The Matron¹³³ of Mua Hospital, Henry Kangulu, expresses the difficulties of trying to influence traditional leaders to bring about change: "It is very difficult. At least, for them it is very difficult to go and start talking something against the practices, it is difficult. But still we are fighting, we are fighting."¹³⁴ Traditional leaders are embedded in a traditional system of power that gives them authority and legitimates their position. For them to begin speaking against elements of traditional belief is tantamount to undermining their own position. This creates conflict between 'modern' messages concerning HIV/AIDS and the traditional way of explaining and understanding the disease.

Healthcare institutions are an important and influential authority in Malawi, and with healthcare institutions go foreign religious institutions. The two cannot be separated entirely because rural health centres are often linked to churches or mission stations. This is the case with the health centres included in this study. Nearly 80% of

the population of Malawi is reported to be Christian,¹³⁵ so I will focus primarily on this influence.

Christianity and traditional authority have a long history of struggle in Malawi. Christianity and missionaries are a part of the Chewa experience since the first mission sites appeared in Malawi in the mid nineteenth century.¹³⁶ Researchers have presented how missionaries classified the *Nyau* masquerade as unchristian and set out to eradicate the cult in order to increase their own influence.¹³⁷ Kaspin's research shows that these missionary efforts reinforced the Chewa claim that *Nyau* was part of their "tradition" (*miyambo ya Chewa*) in contrast to the Christian influence, which was viewed as an 'imported' political and social influence.¹³⁸ The *Nyau* became a means to retaliate against European incursion and gained strength and influence. According to Kaspin,¹³⁹ "While the *Nyau* is identified with the rural Chewa community, Christianity is, to Chewa, identified with all outsiders...: to be part of the government – and, more generally, the urban elite – is to be Christian and vice versa." The authority of the government, Christianity and external European influence are linked in the perceptions of the people.

This history has created distinct spheres of influence and mistrust between these two groups. However, the long parallel existence of these two forms of authority has blurred the distinctions between them. Kaspin acknowledges that of the many traditional authorities that she interviewed as a part of her research, "most claimed to be Christian, though few were regular church attendants, and none offered a theological explanation for becoming Christian".¹⁴⁰ In this sense, Christianity might be seen as a symbol of rank, as a source of divine authority and connection. This creates a complex relationship of authority and influence between these two sources.

During this study, three individuals that represent different branches of Christian influence were interviewed. Steve Bowler is the regional director for Vision Led, an NGO that works with the leaders of various church associations to promote HIV/AIDS prevention strategies and interventions. Molly Longwe belongs to the Baptist Church

and is the author of a recent book exploring initiation traditions, “Growing up, A Chewa Girls’ Initiation”.¹⁴¹ As previously discussed, Father Claude Boucher is an anthropologist and a Catholic Father based at the Mua Mission Station, and has done extensive research on Malawian culture and tradition. These interviews revealed the strength of traditional practices and culture within churches.

In Malawi, conversion to Christianity has not meant an abandonment of traditional and cultural practices. Rather, the two exist simultaneously in the lives of most people. A baseline survey report done by the Evangelical Association of Malawi in 2007 describes approximately 30 different cultural practices that involve sexual intercourse as a part of ritual cleansing or duty. Some of the practices involve intercourse with hired men or women. The study reports that “Members of the church are practicing these traditions to the extent that some of the hired men and women are leaders of the church at different positions”.¹⁴² The influence of tradition is so strong that it continues within the church, a situation is historically common in the spread of Christianity.

The Christianisation of tradition is also an interesting feature within Malawi. Researcher Kenji Yoshida has documented the Christianisation of some elements of the funerary rituals in Malawi, highlighting an interesting coexistence between Christian and traditional authority. The funerary ritual starts with *utaya*, the burial rite, and is completed by *bona*, a rite that takes place after the harvest of corn in the subsequent year. Yoshida observes that “*Utaya* today is largely Christianised: the Bible is read and prayers are offered even when the deceased was not a Christian. Although elders have said that *Nyau* members used to carry the corpse from the village to the grave on a stretcher, they now play no role in the *utaya*”.¹⁴³ It is interesting to note that burying the corpse is still done by members of the *Nyau* society, although they no longer disguise themselves behind *Nyau* masks. However, the *Nyau* ritual (complete with masked characters) is “indispensable to the rite of *bona*, which marks the end of mourning”.¹⁴⁴ This reflects a complex relationship between these two sources of authority. Even though

there is overlap and cooperation between these two authorities, they are also very distinct entities.

In regard to HIV/AIDS, these authorities represent opposing discourses, where the practices of traditional religion and culture are in conflict with the teachings of Christianity in the domain of sexual practice. Christianity condemns extramarital intercourse, which would help to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS, but traditional practices that require this intercourse are so strong that it is not abandoned in many cases. In the Evangelical Association of Malawi (EAM) study,¹⁴⁵ focus group discussion revealed that some church members believe that “these practices cannot be changed and the people can never stop doing these practices.” Steve Bowler, regional director for Vision Led, reported the findings of another study carried out in the church that asked how many church members had abstained from sex before marriage according to the teachings of the church.¹⁴⁶ The study indicated that 98% of men and 92% of women did not abstain from sex before marriage. From a conservative Christian perspective, these figures reveal a dichotomous situation where individuals are reporting to prescribe to Christian belief but this influence clearly does not extend into the domain of sexual practice. Similar trends towards more liberal practice can be identified within western Christianity but these figures are extremely high, and could be attributed to the continuing influence of traditional practice.

Author Molly Longwe, belonging to the Baptist Church discusses the existence of two distinct initiation ceremonies for girls. The *chinamwali* is the traditional initiation ceremony and the *chilangizo* is the Christian version of initiation. Longwe stresses the importance of *chinamwali* in society as marking the transition into womanhood. *Chinamwali* is performed upon a girl’s first menstruation and signifies entrance into adult community life and responsibility, including that of sex and childbirth.¹⁴⁷ However, some of the practices associated with the *chinamwali* expose girls to the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, such as hiring a *Fisi* to have sex with initiates. The alternate *chilangizo* does not expose the girls to any risk of contracting HIV/AIDS but

is widely believed to be inadequate in properly instructing the girls on being a woman. The *chilangizo* is a relatively short ceremony, at around 2.5 hours, that involves the girls listening to the reading of a published booklet that outlines the importance of cleanliness and other issues relating to adulthood. Longwe also notes that within this ceremony, little instruction is given about HIV/AIDS.¹⁴⁸ This practice fits with a western literary approach where everything is written down and documented for the girls to read about for themselves. It lacks the dynamic visual and oral portrayal of the *chinamwali*, which includes five days of in-depth, practical teaching. The *chilangizo* in its current form does not mark the importance of the occasion like the traditional *chinamwali*. Longwe expresses the need to reform the *chilangizo* in order to make it more relevant to the culture and more similar to the *chinamwali* in structure, but to educate the girls according to Christian beliefs rather than traditional religion.¹⁴⁹

This situation marks the very issue that is limiting the influence of the churches. Steve Bowler, regional director for Vision Led, argues that the church needs to be relevant to the everyday lives of the people in order to have an impact on the population.¹⁵⁰ This includes sensitivity to the customs and forms of communication to which people are accustomed. Currently, churches lack a collective strategy to address the issue of HIV/AIDS and to support the people in the church who contract the disease. There are reports of individuals being excommunicated from the church when they are found to be HIV positive. In a sense, churches are attempting to provide a parallel, but separate, reality and belief structure for people to follow. The Catholic Church at Mua mission has adopted an inculturation approach that seeks to capture the Christian message within the cultural structures and beliefs of the people. The principles and messages of Christianity are maintained but these are understood within the culture and traditional practices of the people. There is an attempt to mould tradition so that people can embrace Christianity but still preserve their culture and tradition. Some traditions need to be changed and moulded in order to make them acceptable within the morality and beliefs of Christianity,

especially in relation to sexual practice. This approach addresses the issue of relevance to the population.

The church also employs a similar strategy as the government and NGOs, who make an effort to influence local chiefs and traditional authorities. All three interviewees stated this as a strategy. Several chiefs are reported to have converted to Christianity.¹⁵¹ However, based on the EAM survey results in 2007, their commitment to all the tenets of Christianity must be questioned. It appears that in cases where Christian discourse comes into conflict with traditional discourse, the people choose tradition. Churches have also used drama groups, dance groups and choirs to convey messages of Christianity and HIV/AIDS to the people. In general, the church appears to lack the authority to control discourse and truly influence the behaviour of people in the context of sexuality. It does not have enough presence in people's lives to constitute a dominant influence. This is linked to the issue of cultural relevance, stemming from the existence of parallel cultures and belief systems. Lacking a coordinated strategy to address HIV/AIDS and sexual practice, the church is not presenting a discourse dominant enough to challenge traditional beliefs, even though the majority of the population reports to be Christian. With a plurality of differing discourses, it appears as though people select particular elements of each, rather than prescribing to one full set of beliefs and practices. This situation is not unique to Malawi; Christianity continues to search for its place and outlook within different cultures around the world. However, in order for the church to be an influential actor in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Malawi, a more coordinated, consistent response is needed as religious influence still falls outside the traditional power structures and authority of local communities.

Health centres are in short supply in Malawi, especially in rural areas. In this study, representatives from two rural health centres were interviewed. Dr. Chris Brooks is the Director of Lifeline Malawi, a Christian medical NGO that currently operates two health centres. Henry Kangulu is the Matron of the Mua hospital at the Catholic Mua Mission. Health centres undertake extensive counselling and awareness

raising campaigns concerning HIV/AIDS. They are places of treatment and care in the local communities. Their ability to diagnose and treat illness automatically gives them a place of prominence and respect in communities. The knowledge that the doctors and health care professionals possess gives them influence and power over the people. Generally, this is a positive exercise of power and the doctor prescribes a treatment that is intended to treat the disease of the patient.

Health centres are the front lines in dealing with HIV/AIDS. They are given the task of looking after those who have contracted the disease, witnessing the harsh, terrible realities of the destruction caused by the disease. Health centres are places of testing for HIV/AIDS so they are generally points of first contact when people learn that they are infected. Centres are generally located in the local, rural communities operating in permanent buildings and interacting daily with the local communities. Thus, the centres have the potential to truly exercise power in order to bring about behaviour change. Dr. Brooks and Mr. Kangulu expressed a close working relationship with the chiefs and traditional authorities in the communities surrounding the health centres. Chiefs turn to the health centres for help because they know the extent of the destruction HIV/AIDS has on the communities they are responsible for. The health centres exist and have the ability to operate because the chiefs approve them, so there is cooperation and dialogue from the very outset. In a sense, health centres do not threaten the power of the chiefs or traditional authority in the same way that government, NGO or even religious involvement does. They enter into more of a collaborative relationship with local authority in looking after the health and wellbeing of the community. Health centres operate in the same domain as traditional healers and herbalists but these traditional authorities also play their own role in explaining the causality of the diseases and dealing with the accusations of witchcraft in the community, so direct competition between the two is not a major issue.

In our interview, Mr. Kangulu admits the challenges of trying to influence traditional authorities to bring about behaviour change.¹⁵²

The traditional structures and practices are so ingrained in society that it is difficult to bring about significant change quickly. This is the challenge for health centres, to move from the domain of simply treating disease to having a significant impact on disease prevention, especially in reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS. In order to make this transition, the health centres have undertaken awareness-raising and education campaigns in the local communities. They use drama, dance and singing groups to create opportunities to educate people about HIV/AIDS prevention. Community gatherings are also organised where a health worker speaks to the community about HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention. Dr. Brooks highlighted the creation of a football tournament on the grounds of the clinic at Ngodzi.¹⁵³ In 2007, ten local teams participated, drawing over 50 000 spectators to the games during the tournament. At half-time, issues of HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention were presented to the spectators. Events like these serve two tasks: they raise awareness during the event but more importantly they demonstrate commitment to the local community in partnership and cooperation. Dr. Brooks says that it took approximately 5 years to gain the trust of the local chiefs and people in Ngodzi through the operations of the health centre. This long-term commitment to a particular community is important in bringing about change.

It is evident that health centres play a critical role in educating and informing the population about HIV/AIDS. The primary messages communicated by the health centres relate to the ABC (Abstain, Be faithful, use a Condom) approach, which is common throughout Africa. The other primary message is to receive testing for HIV/AIDS by the health centres to know one's status, however there has been such a stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS that people have not wanted to be tested. A Lifeline Malawi baseline study carried out in October 2003 in Ngodzi found that only three clients (0.02% of the local population) were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS through voluntary testing.¹⁵⁴ There is a great need to overcome the stigma of HIV/AIDS and have people tested for the disease. This will allow HIV positive patients to begin

treatment and the spread of the disease can be reduced. Currently, approximately 300 clients are tested at the Lifeline health centre in Ngodzi every month, with increasing numbers tested through mobile out-patient programs.¹⁵⁵ This situation makes it very difficult to know if prevalence is increasing or decreasing in the population. This same situation is true for other parts of the country as well, especially in the rural areas that still lack health centres. It is very difficult to ascertain accurate national prevalence rates because levels of testing are still so low.

Through the collection of this kind of data, health centres play an important observatory role in society. This type of discreet observation is an important element in the exercise of power-knowledge.¹⁵⁶ Healthcare professionals are aware of what is happening in the communities in health-related issues and have the power and authority to exercise control and influence over people. This authority comes from the knowledge that they possess. As the healthcare professionals exercise power in the treatment of patients they also gain more knowledge and information, which reinforces their position of authority. Health centres also introduce discourse that competes with traditional discourse, especially in the domain of ritual sexual practices that expose individuals to HIV/AIDS. This is based on a *scientia sexualis* approach to the disease, appealing to a fear of the adverse physiological consequences of contracting the disease. This medical discourse has the power and authority of knowledge and proven effectiveness in the practical lives of people as they are healed from various diseases and illnesses, so it can truly challenge the authority of traditional discourse. However, this impact is relatively limited as there is a severe shortage of medical doctors in the country. In 2002 there were fewer than 500 medical doctors in the whole country.¹⁵⁷ In comparison, there were at least 50 000 registered traditional practitioners in Malawi during the 1980s and there is no reason to believe that their numbers have decreased.¹⁵⁸ Though traditional authority is still the dominant force, health centres are in a key position to influence the behaviour of individuals through their continued discourse and the evidence of improved health.

Whose knowledge counts?

The ultimate question in this situation is: Whose knowledge counts? To which knowledge system(s) do Malawian people subscribe? The national government and NGOs, churches and health centres are all major institutions that seek to exert influence in the domain of HIV/AIDS. However, they are all relatively new influences that have only gained authority since Independence. Most western countries have only the government that seeks to exert control and influence over the population, as the dominant political authority. In Malawi, the existence of village communities, chiefs and traditional authority marks a diffuse political power that operates locally and challenges the government's discourse and exercise of power. Generally speaking, all of these institutions recognise their weak position and have begun to try and influence traditional authority to gain access to the rural people and bring about behaviour change that will reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS.

It is clear that traditional discourse and authority are largely dominant in the rural areas. Outside influences lack the power and authority to influence this internal power base. There has been a change of strategy from opposing discourses to attempted cooperation with the traditional authority, so that messages about HIV/AIDS can be disseminated within this traditional structure rather than be imposed from outside. The *Nyau* masquerade is an interesting phenomenon that may reflect the influence of these external authorities on the messages being disseminated within the culture. New masks, such as *Njolinjo*, that directly address issues of behaviour in the spread of HIV/AIDS can be seen as an inclusion of the messages of the external HIV/AIDS authorities into traditional communication structures. Older masks, such as *Chiwau* and *Dzakonda* have addressed issues relating to STDs but only recently has HIV/AIDS become the most prominent one.

The older masks speak about morality and values, but do not reflect the same sense of urgency and explicit messages to change behaviour as *Njolinjo* does. Discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS is at the centre of a political struggle for influence and authority. Modernity and tradition are competing for the attention and trust of the people, through the various strategies I have explored in this study.

CONCLUSIONS



Chamare Museum, home to the largest collection of *Nyau* masks in Malawi.

The different levels of analysis within this study reveal complex relationships of power, knowledge and influence within the domain of HIV/AIDS and the strategies employed by different actors to control its spread. Traditional ritual belief and *ars erotica* understanding of the disease is often confronted by a 'modern' *scientia sexualis* framework of knowledge that is vying for dominance. These two broad categories form the basis of the appeals for change in sexual behaviour in Malawi. The issue of HIV/AIDS brings traditional authority and practice to a critical crossroads. When traditional religious practices become a vehicle for the spread of a deadly virus, change is imminent in the face of complete destruction. The *Nyau* masquerade is the dynamic instrument that ushers in change within the traditional system.

Within the masquerade, the increasingly explicit appeals to change sexual behaviour that puts people at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, are woven into a traditional structure that is fighting to retain its dominant power and influence within rural society. Masked characters like *Chiwau* and *Dzakonda* reinforce the authority of traditional leadership and the importance of community, warning against the dangerous influence of modernity and external power. The dynamic carnivalesque nature of the masquerade allows a platform for open communication about sexuality and change, within a more rigid traditional religion that dictates behaviour and controls through fear. The representation of the masked characters as spirits that have returned to instruct and educate the rural communities bestows them with supernatural authority that can have influence and bring about change on the level of religious practice.

As a result of this situation, there is internal traditional conflict in the perceptions of the people. Malawian people are caught between pressure to follow traditional practices involving sexual intercourse as a form of cleansing and the increased education, advocacy and witnessed destruction of HIV/AIDS that is spread through the same medium. The perception that traditional religious practices are harmful and destructive will undermine traditional authority and influence, causing people to look elsewhere for solutions to the rising death toll. The

urgency to resolve this situation is reflected in new masked characters, such as *Njolinjo*, which are explicit in their message concerning sexual behaviour and the spread of HIV/AIDS. The *Nyau* masquerade is the driving force behind change that is adapting traditional religious practices that involve unprotected sex into safer forms that no longer poses the same penchant for spreading the disease.

This study only examines four masks that address the issue of HIV/AIDS. These represent only a minute portion of the masks that exist and perform in Malawi. The documentation and study of other masks that address HIV/AIDS or a variety of issues that are meaningful to the rural communities is a major area for future research. A specific mask for *Edzi* (AIDS) exists in Malawi but was outside the scope of the documented masks included in this study. Thus, there is further potential to study more masks that relate to HIV/AIDS and reveal a greater depth of the rural understanding of the disease and its consequences. As new masks are created and messages evolve, an understanding of this fascinating phenomenon is necessary to stay in tune with the heartbeat of the rural Malawian communities. It is an opportunity to understand and enter into the dialogue of masked performance that forms the backbone of rural communication. This cultural understanding is vital to truly comprehend the lives, circumstances and nuanced communication of Malawian people. An understanding and appreciation of this cultural phenomenon is necessary for all development actors that seek to work and have an impact in Malawi.

Influences external to tradition are also working hard to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS in Malawi. These influences tend to appeal to a *scientia sexualis* understanding of HIV/AIDS that draws on western medicine and disease causality to advocate changes in those behaviours that puts people at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. This approach confronts the traditional understanding of disease causality and challenges the authority and influence of traditional power structures. With competing sources of authority and influence in Malawi, a dominant discourse or united strategy is yet to emerge. The influences external

to tradition possess vital information relating to the prevention and treatment of the disease. This information is increasingly presented to traditional authorities who are then free to disseminate this knowledge to the people within the traditional structures of power and mechanisms of communication. It is likely that the messages conveyed through the *Nyau* masquerade reflect this nexus of cooperation and will increasingly continue to do so as more information is disseminated and true knowledge of the disease increases.

The politicised nature of HIV/AIDS poses a challenge to the entire problem. Strong authority and political influence are necessary to be able to control and influence the sexual behaviour of people. The health and wellbeing of an entire population are at stake. The authority that gains the trust and loyalty of the people through this crisis will wield increasing power within the nation. This study reflects an interesting time of transition within the country. Politically, a democratically elected government is attempting to consolidate its rule from a system of diffuse local traditional rule through chiefs and village communities. This political struggle also reflects an ideological struggle between a traditional religious knowledge system based on witchcraft, and a 'modern' knowledge system based on scientific discovery and understanding of disease causality. These divisions also extend along geographical lines to reflect a rural/urban divide between sources of authority.

There is a need for further research into the remarkable political and social situation within Malawi. This time of transition will have far reaching consequences for the future. HIV/AIDS is at the centre of this change as it shakes the foundations and beliefs of society. It is hoped that this study will be followed by many more that take into consideration the unique cultural landscape. It is vital not to overlook the importance of the *Nyau* masquerade in explaining the current situation in Malawi and its role in forging the future of the country. This applies to all development actors in the country who need to try to better understand its culture and traditions in order to operate effectively and efficiently within the Malawian context.

The *Nyau* masquerade also makes interesting inroads in the increasingly popular domain of 'theatre for development.' Theatre for development refers to performances conducted in aid of specific development projects.¹⁵⁹ The strategies of those influences external to tradition can certainly be classified as theatre for development, as they employ drama, dances, songs, etc. to bring about change. The goal of this engagement is complete participation by the populace. However, there is difference between true theatre for development and engaging in the propaganda model of popular theatre that seeks to impose the will of ruling elites on the masses. It is difficult to classify the *Nyau* masquerade entirely within one of these models. Depending on the context in which the masquerade is viewed, arguments can be made for both of these positions. In relation to the national ruling elite, the *Nyau* masquerade is an excellent example of a grassroots theatre for development where there is genuine participation and ownership by the populace.

This type of theatre has been influenced by Augusto Boal (1979) and Paulo Freire (1974), who conceptualise it as an opportunity for the least empowered to bring about social change. The *Nyau* masquerade exemplifies a local movement that uses performance to criticise, satirise, inform, educate and enter into discussion about important issues facing local communities. The continued significance and nature of the *Nyau* masquerade demonstrates the power of performative art and *ars erotica* in creating local solidarity and participation. Oral and visual representations within a lived experience have remarkable potential to create solidarity and truly engage with local populations in a participatory manner. In the context of Africa (especially Malawi) where the groundwork of theatre for development already exists, it is critical to recognise the importance of this genre of communication to ensure development strategies and approaches that are appropriate to the culture and experiences of the people.

This study has also highlighted the intrinsic exercise of traditional power and authority within the messages of the *Nyau* masquerade. It is not an entirely participatory entity that allows the opinions of

the least empowered to be heard, as the ideal model of theatre for development suggests. Despite its hierarchical nature, the *Nyau* masquerade exemplifies a community-based initiative that retains local autonomy in communication. As such, it is a real example of theatre for development that is organised and operated by local communities in Malawi to engage the local citizens.

The *Nyau* masquerade has lived and evolved for centuries as a vibrant expression of local culture and its intricate communication systems. It will be interesting to follow how this age-old tradition continues to evolve and adapt in the changing context of modern Malawi.

Recommendations for Development Practitioners

Practitioners in the field of international development cooperation are mandated to be agents of change, bringing about improvements to the health and wellbeing of the people they work with. This is a challenging task as it often implies advocating for a change in behaviour and/or the adoption of new approaches or ways of understanding. People make rational choices according to their perception and understanding of the world. In order to engage with people and influence these choices, their perceptions, rationale and worldview must be understood. Drawing on this particular case study in Malawi, some important lessons can be synthesized and applied more broadly to the challenges faced in this field.

I. Parellel Knowledge vs Change

As an outsider arriving into a community with a possible answer to a particular problem, it seems most logical to begin sharing this knowledge with people. However, cultures have very different perspectives, knowledge systems and understanding of how things work so it is often as important to focus on how to communicate as it is what to communicate. Without understanding and engaging within the cultural frame of a particular society, these efforts form a parallel knowledge system rather than engaging with the existing structures. People are put in a difficult position where they have to choose between knowledge systems. This can have an adverse effect on the intended outcome as the propagators of a knowledge system view parallel knowledge as a threat to their authority and can actively advocate against the messages being communicated. It is necessary to exercise caution in the way information is presented, taking the time to understand the cultural context and ways of communication. Culture is not homogenous and variations exist within communities so this task is not easy, but parallel systems breed conflict.

2. Innovative approaches

Even though theatre for development in Malawi will never communicate on the same level as the *Nyau* masquerade, it is an attempt at engaging with people who enjoy performance and appreciate entertainment. It takes education, learning and awareness-raising off the pages of a book/leaflet and out of classroom to become a lived experience. Embedding important information and teaching in popular culture has also been very successful in bringing important issues to the forefront. Innovative ways of engaging with people and communicating beyond simply telling someone what they should do are often much more successful than conventional methods. The field of develop-

ment cooperation has still not tapped the full potential of various art forms in communication and engagement with people. It has been encouraging to see drama groups performing for waiting patients in the hospital rooms weaving messages of public health into the story lines. Television and radio dramas have also taken up previously taboo subjects by approaching them in a non-threatening way within the plot of a story. This kind of approach can be vital when dealing with difficult or intimate topics in contexts where open communication is taboo or sometimes outright banned.

3. Intricacies of local knowledge

The wealth of local knowledge has been discussed extensively in the field of international development cooperation. Development practitioners that have been brought up in literary traditions often find it difficult to recognize and understand oral or performative traditions for the knowledge and information that is transmitted. The *Nyau* masquerade is a highly advanced form of communication that has been designed to exclude foreigners due to the historical censoring and control of knowledge. Local knowledge is guarded and not shared openly beyond the boundaries of those initiated into this tradition. It takes time and effort to build trust and gain a better understanding of this local knowledge and information management systems to be able to engage with the people and appreciate the intricacies of local heritage. I am not advocating for a probing of local culture and tradition to 'extract' knowledge but an open-minded engagement with local people to better understand this knowledge. An understanding of tradition and history is a key to effective programmes that tackle the relevant issues. The complexity and intricacies of local knowledge and institutions must never be underestimated as advanced oral and performative communication systems have developed around the world that are in contrast to the literary traditions of Europe and North America. The

challenge is seeing beyond the entertainment value of performative tradition to identify what is really being said through the language of performance. Greater investment and research into the intricacies of such forms of communication is necessary for all practitioners who work in contexts where this type of communication dominates.

4. Lived experience

The purpose of this book has been to provide a small glimpse into the complex language of performance as demonstrated by the *Nyau* masquerade. It is a communication tool that is still largely unknown to the world. Thanks to the dedicated work and long-term research of Claude Boucher, this tradition is being documented and appreciated. Malawi is a poor country that has suffered from drought, famine and poverty for many years. Despite these challenges, this rich culture of masked performance has flourished and evolved, communicating hidden messages beyond the grasp of foreigners arriving in the country. Few foreigners have bothered to try and understand the true meaning of the masked characters and have missed one of the keys to understanding, communicating and engaging with the local people. The levels of communication through masked performance will never be understood in their totality as visual art lives and changes with each performance. This is the beauty of a lived experience.

ENDNOTES



Why Masquerade

1. This official statistic is an estimate based on limited pre-natal and voluntary testing. It is very possible that the actual prevalence rates are higher as the status of the large majority of the population still remains unknown. NAC 2007
2. Although the mask societies and the mask dance are usually called Nyau in the scholarly literature, Gule Wamkulu is used by the members themselves. In this study, both terms are used to refer to the same tradition. Nyau is a general term for the masking society whereas Gule Wamkulu refers to the performance of the masked characters.
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9. For more information on the distinctions and nature of these forms see Birch de Aguilar (1996: 78,99, 186-188), Van Breugel (2001: 138-139,156-160).
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Approaching Performative Art

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