

Evolution of Political Terminology in Chichewa and the Changing Political Culture in Malawi

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INTRODUCTION

According to Ullman (1970: 193) the vocabulary of a language is an unstable structure in which individual lexical items can acquire and lose meaning with the utmost ease. With regard to change in meaning, however, we can trace the basis of current meanings of lexical items in the earlier stages in the evolution of a language's vocabulary. A lexical item in some cases, for example, acquires new referents, which it had not previously denoted, while in others, the semantic range may be restructured to specific referents. The latter case would result in specialized vocabulary such as terminology of the sciences, the arts, business etc. In most, if not all such cases, one is able to observe that whatever the cause may be the old and the new meanings are transparent. However, for these shifts to be so recognized, one condition has to be satisfied, namely, that a relatively large number of speakers be involved in their effective and consistent use.

To appreciate a lexical change one often requires thorough historical knowledge of a situation. The formal apparatus of language is much more conservative than the changes in the culture or human experience, which expands constantly and necessitates new semantic divisions. In short, there are always more meanings than words, and one of the truly impressive facts about languages is its ability to adapt to such semantic challenges (Anttila 1972: 136).

This paper discusses how political terminology has evolved from its non-political origins and how at any particular time it has reflected the political culture. The study will focus on Chichewa, the national language of Malawi. I will use Scott and Hetherwick (1929) dictionary to complement my own fieldwork findings.

The political history of Malawi can be divided into three epochs: the colonial, the independence/single party and the multiparty/democratic periods. For the sake of convenience, I have divided the political terminology into four categories. The first three reflecting the historical phases of the changing political cultures, and the last one reflecting the more stable terminology that spans all the three phases. The categories are anti-colonial terms, the independence/single party terms, the multiparty/democratic terms and the stable terms. These categories will be discussed in turn.

1. ANTI-COLONIAL TERMS

The anti-colonial agitation brought to the fore three terms, namely, *tsamunda*, *kapilikoni* and *chitaganya*. These terms were used invariably, in Hayakawa's (1974) terms, as snarl words. That is as terms of abuse, scorn and contempt. In this section I will discuss how these words evolved to acquire political meaning from their non-political origins.

The word *tsamunda* consists of two morphemes *tsa* and *munda*. According to the dictionary, the prefix *tsa-* denotes 'master of ' or 'director of' and *munda* denotes 'garden/field/farm'. In other words a *tsamunda* is the owner or a director of a farm. How then did the word evolve to connote 'colonialist'? The answer seems to lie in the fact that the largest landowners during the colonial period were the Whites. It is claimed that by the late 1880s, a handful of white settlers and companies occupied nearly one million acres of prime agricultural land.¹ Since the white landowners employed Africans as cheap labour, they made sure that they remained that way through legislation. The results of the legislation were that the Whites ended up not only being the masters of the estates they owned but also the Africans who toiled on them.

At the administrative level, the Whites also run the colonial machinery of government as governors, provincial commissioners, district commissioners, army officers, police officers etc. Thus, the master/merit relationship of the estates had its mirror image in the machinery of the colonial government. The parallels of being a master of the estate and being a colonial government official is clearly transparent. In both domains the master was predictably a white person. Hence the word *tsamunda* shifted its meaning from the narrow field of agriculture to politics.

In politics the term is not a neutral one, simply describing a white master. It was a term laden with scorn and contempt for the person so termed. Although the circumstances that created the use of the term no longer prevail, the term is currently used to refer to a white person who betrays racist tendencies.

Another term, which came into being in the colonial period, is *kapilikoni*. The word is not native to Chichewa but it has been part of the political vocabulary for the past three decades. What are its origins? The roots of this term can be traced to the Capricorn African Society (Phiri 1974: 60). This was a South Rhodesian white-run multiracial organization whose aim was to undermine the then nascent nationalist movement in Malawi by more subtle methods of cultural rather than crude racial discriminations. Those Africans who accepted the European way of life, 'the civilized life', were promised equal treatment with Europeans.

¹ Magomero estate with its single block of 169,000 acres was perhaps the most graphic example in the whole of the Nyasaland (Malawi) protectorate of land alienation. For the consequences of this alienation, see White (1987).

The society held its first convention in Salima. Delegates from various parts of the British East and Central Africa were invited.² A few Malawians who joined the society were denounced as ‘Capricornians’ rendered in Chichewa as *kapilikoni* implying that they were renegades from the nationalist movement. The denotation of the term shifted from that of a society to a political term of abuse and scorn. Because of the change in political circumstances, the term is not currently in general political parlance.

The last term, which was in vogue during this era, is *chitaganya*. This is a Chichewa word for ‘patchwork’ as would be seen in a quilt made out of different pieces of clothes. It was used to refer to the federal government of Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi) which was imposed on the Africans of British Central Africa. Why *chitaganya*? To the majority of Africans, the federal government was a patchwork for all intents and purposes. The three territories were unequal in terms of economic and financial resources they had, and additionally they had different constitutional statuses. The patchwork which was created out of these disparate entities is what Malawians then contemptuously termed *chitaganya*. It was patently clear that the *chitaganya* was established on very weak foundations. It is not surprising that by 1960 it had completely collapsed.

2. INDEPENDENCE TERMS

Once independence was gained, new terminology was needed to describe the prevailing state of affairs. The new leadership sought to consolidate its power by basing it on traditional structures such as chieftaincy and family. As a result the language used was appropriated from kinship terminology. To this end the terms so appropriated were *nkhoswe* and the corollary *mbumba*.

The words *mbumba* and *nkhoswe* are defined in terms of each other. *Mbumba* is defined in the Dictionary as “kindred those sustained by one, thus one’s female relations, the sustainers being called *nkhoswe*; thus ruled and sustained by him, his kingdom”. Anthropologically, it refers to the so-called ‘sorority group’ or matrilineage, which has been placed within a wider framework of matrilineal kinship. In more concrete terms it is group of sisters and their children living under the authority of the maternal uncle or brother, the *nkhoswe* or *mwinimbumba* (owner of the land). The *mwinimbumba* also known as *mwini dziko* (owner of the land) controlled the land and as such was responsible for allocation of land to his sisters and sisters daughters.

² Prominent delegates were Alan Paton, author of *Cry the Beloved Country*, and Noni Jabavu, author of *Drawn in Colour*. The most prominent Malawian was Charles Matinga (see Phiri 1974: 60 for details).

The two terms were appropriated and put into service during the single party rule when Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda was the supreme leader, the so-called life president. The term '*Nkhoswe Number One*' referred to Dr. Banda and *mbumba* to the members of the Women's League of the then only and ruling Malawi Congress Party. As the *Nkhoswe Number One*, Dr. Banda considered himself as the supreme *nkhoswe*. Why was this the case? The president has over the years considered himself as the head of a modern republican state as well as paramount traditional ruler. And it was in the latter capacity that he saw himself as a *nkhoswe* of the women of his party. In this capacity the president behaved in the same manner as a traditional *nkhoswe*. For example, he distributed land to a chosen few, built them houses, appointed some to positions of power and sent others on 'educational' tours abroad. As White and Vail (1991: 296) point out:

...the attention paid to the Women's League was no mere formality. Their praise songs became central to the official speeches, with Banda taking up their themes, reiterating and reinforcing their messages and accepting their agenda. President Banda would say, "as the women just sung now" and then proceed to discuss the issue about which they had commented. The impression was fostered that, in the final analysis, everything that Banda was doing in the large world of power and diplomacy was being done on their behalf.

By acting this way, Dr. Banda was fulfilling his duty both in the political as well as traditional sense of this role of *nkhoswe*, albeit the supreme one. One observes here how kinship terminology had been manipulated to fit political needs.

The cosy family atmosphere, which was reflected by the two terms discussed above, was counterpointed by the oppressiveness of the regime. This, too, was reflected by the language used at this time. The most pervasive term was *chigawenga*. The original meaning of the term being 'thug'. However, during this period it took on the meaning of 'rebel' and consequently 'dissident'. At the time this meant anyone whose political views were not consonant with those of the ruling party. The word became semantically loaded and was used to discredit and silence real or imagined political opponents. It should be noted that *chigawenga* is in class 7/8 in accordance with the classification of nouns in Bantu languages. This is the same class to which *chirombo* (beast), for example, belongs. Ordinarily *chigawenga* as a human being should be assigned to class 1/2, the class of persons. But the fact that it is in class 7/8 shows that the person so referred to was beyond the pale. During Dr. Banda's era calling someone a *chigawenga* was sentencing the person to either imprisonment or death.

With the advent of multiparty democracy the three terms discussed above have lost their political connotations. Dr. Banda lost power in 1994 and died 1996 hence there is no *nkhoswe* number one and the *mbumba* has lost their guardian. The word *chigawenga* has no currency since different political views are competing in the political arena.

3. MULTIPARTY/DEMOCRACY TERMS

The multiparty era has brought with it its own terminology. The most important being *demokalase* and *ufulu wachibadwidwe*. In the discussion below I examine the content of the two terms.

The word *demokalase* (democracy) cannot be easily defined in the current political dispensation since it has been observed that the average Malawian's understanding of the term varies. According to Poeschke and Chirwa (1998: 75-76), some of the meanings are:

- A government policy, equivalent to the policy on mother tongue education;
- A form of emancipation or liberation from the oppressive past. People are now free to choose to do, or not to do what they used to do in the past. *Demokalase* is thus a historical time, an era in the political process that demarcates the present and the past.
- A mode of thinking and behaviour - something that determines people's actions such as freedom of speech, dress and choice. In this case there is no distinction between democracy and fundamental human rights or civil liberties;
- A situational condition of welfare; to have enough food, a sturdy source of income and to enjoy a decent living;
- Multiparty politics associated with the ruling party (the UDF). The members of the ruling party mostly hold this understanding. Those of the opposition parties especially are not for democracy.
- A time or opportunity for revenge against those who were in the previous oppressive regime.

From the above views, the commonest understanding is that *demokalase* has something to do with freedom and particularly with civil liberties - understood narrowly to mean freedom of choice.

This understanding originates from the manner in which the political transition occurred. The accent of the campaign for the political change was on civil liberties: the basic freedoms of expression, association, the right to vote etc., and the re-introduction of a multiparty political regime. These constituted the contents of *demokalase*.

It would be wrong to assume or indeed argue that all Malawians have a narrow view of the concept of *demokalase*. Poeschke and Chirwa's (1998) study reveals that a reasonable number of people are able to relate it to a system of government, choice of representatives, popular participation, individual and collective responsibility, respect for the law, observance of human rights, and socio-economic development. It should be noted that the majority of those who were able to make

such linkages have a reasonable level of education, the modern elite such as teachers, church leaders and those who have been exposed to the outside world through travel abroad.

Another term which has gained currency in the new political dispensation is the expression *ufulu wachibadwidwe* (literally 'freedom of birth') which is a Chichewa rendition of human rights. It has been argued that the Chichewa equivalent is restrictive in the sense that it does not capture the totality of 'rights' and 'obligation' as enshrined in African culture (Poeschke and Chirwa 1988: 86). The point that the critics seem to miss is that Chichewa simply does not have a concept for human rights as understood in English. *Ufulu wachibadwidwe* is a new coinage and not a translation. It is, therefore, up to legal experts and other stakeholders in the concept to give it content. In addition, languages are not semantically isomorphic and one cannot expect a one-to-one translation of human rights in English and Chichewa. Indeed *Ufulu Wachibadwidwe* is perhaps the best approximation of the term. Be that as it may, evidence shows that Malawians do demonstrate elements of individual and communal/collective rights.

The root of present understanding of *Ufulu Wachibadwidwe* can be found in the process of political change itself. During the period of transition, 1992-1994, the accent was on civil liberties. As expected most Malawians have been made to understand the concept in political terms: meaning basic freedoms relating to association, dress and the right to vote as pointed elsewhere in the essay.

4. STABLE TERMINOLOGY

In this section I will discuss the terminology which is fairly stable in its use. In other words, the terms have been in currency regardless of the political changes experienced. The terms are *boma*, *chipani*, *ndale*, *nduna*, *phungu* and *ufulu*. Let us now examine the evolution of these terms.

The word *boma* refers to government. The term is of Kiswahili origin and it means 'enclosure'.³ It would appear that the origin of the term is the fences or enclosures around the dwelling units of traditional chiefs, slave owners/traders and important people in the pre-colonial Swahili society. Since the colonial administrative centres were fenced the term *boma* was used. The Dictionary defines *boma* as 'fort', now used to denote the Government Office, also Government itself. Four conceptualizations of *boma* have evolved from the historical experience.

³ Perrot (1965) translates it as 'fort; government office'. The present United Democratic Front government has reinforced the idea of government as fort by building fences around its properties such as schools, offices and hospitals.

- The administrative regime and/or the physical entity of the state and/or government, hence *boma la Malawi*, meaning the government or the state of Malawi.
- A distinct, such as an administrative or/and geographical section or subsection of government or state, hence *boma la Zomba* meaning Zomba district.
- The offices (including staff) of government, the physical place where these are found. It is interesting to note that these are often fenced, with guards at the gate(s). This is the way government makes its presence felt and recognized.
- As a rule or reign, hence *boma la Kamuzu* meaning Kamuzu's rule/reign. It can also be understood as a system of government/rule, *boma la chitaganya*, federal government.

The four conceptions are clearly distinct in the way the term is used in Chichewa.

The term for political party in Chichewa is *chipani*. In ordinary parlance the term is used to refer to identical clothes especially those worn by the wives of a polygamous man as a kind of uniform. In relation to these women, one is likely to hear the expressions, *avala chipani* (they are wearing identical clothes) or *x wagulira akazi ake chipani*. ("X has bought his wives identical clothes"). This is the original meaning of the word and has no political connotations. In this sense it may also mean society or group. For example, *chipani cha amai* (women's guild). In its evolution *chipani* compares favourably with its Kwiswahili counterpart *chama*. The word *chama* was used to refer to any group, including musical groups.

But just like the Chichewa counterpart *chipani*, the term *chama* is now very closely linked to politics. One of the parties in Tanzania is *Chama cha Mapinduzi* (The Party of Revolution). When one compares the prototypical meaning of *chipani* and its connotation the parallels can easily be seen. If it is assumed that people in a given political party share the same ideas as people of a particular group or society such that they can be identified as such; be it by wearing a uniform or not, then the meaning between the original and shifted meaning is transparent. It is not a coincidence that members of the same party in Malawi, especially in women, wear identical clothes.

The word *ndale* is Chichewa for politics. In its origins it has no political connotations. The Dictionary defines *ndale* as "a mode of wrestling in which one overthrows the other, the men grip each other, the one gives the other a fall by tripping". The verb used with this noun is *kupinga/kutchera*. *Kupinga/kutchera ndale*, then, is to "throw an obstacle in the path that your fellow may stumble". Were this definition provided now the example that would come more readily to people's mind would have been that of a game of football and not wrestling. In football tripping an opponent is considered foul play; an offence. The question is what does *ndale* in football have in common with politics. It would appear that the word and the concomitant image it conjures up is highly appropriate for politics. Politics is concerned with the winning and holding of government power at

whatever level, central or local. When one considers the nature of politics in the emergent nations, winning political power entails not only that one's opponent 'stumbles', but better still, disappears from the field of play completely. The image of 'overthrowing' an opponent in wrestling match or 'tripping' an opponent in a football game parallels what actually happens in the political game. The terms is, therefore, apt.

Ndale has a negative connotation, because it implies negative contestation. Despite the political changes that have occurred in the country, Malawians have a negative view of politics. They understand it as a 'dangerous game' in the literal sense of the word. The implications are such that:

- Politicians cannot be trusted because they can perform 'any tricks' to deprive one of one's property, or put one in trouble.
- Some people are not free to discuss politics because past experience had shown that politics was a prerogative of the party and its leaders. For the ordinary person to engage in politics is regarded as an instrument of settling scores and punishing those that hold opposing views

It is instructive that the advent of multiparty politics instead of changing people's attitudes towards politics has ironically reinforced them. Members of the ruling party have often used politics as an instrument to intimidate those in the opposition. Because of this, the ordinary peoples' understanding of *ndale* has decidedly been negative.

The term *nduna* refers to the chief's counsellor/jury: these traditionally consulted their wives prior to the discussion of the issue in order to arrive at a decision to be regarded as fair. In current usage, *nduna* refers to a cabinet minister. In a modern state a cabinet minister also plays an advisory role to the President or Prime Minister. The job of the cabinet minister and that of his/her traditional counterpart is therefore that they mirror each other.

Another term, which refers to an elected official, is *phungu*. This term refers to a Member of Parliament. In the traditional setting a *phungu* is a nephew or appointee of the village authority. He functions as the chief's representative at the *dambwe* (a place where masqueraders create their masks, usually at graveyard) and other important occasions. Most of the times he is found at the *dambwe*. Why has the term been extended to include Member of Parliament? When one compares the function of an MP and his traditional counterpart the parallels are striking. An MP is the one who is expected to deal with people at the constituency level by conducting clinics in the same way as the *phungu* conducts the affairs of the *dambwe*. The relationship is therefore quite transparent.

One can, therefore, see in these two examples how the working of a modern political system can reflect a traditional one.

Perhaps one of the most important terms which has spanned the various phases of political culture is *ufulu*. The dictionary defines *ufulu* as "freedom, also the

power to give, of a man who is of some standing”. In everyday usage the term translates into several concepts and categories.

A person regarded as *mfulu* is a freeborn as opposed to a slave. This includes a person born of parents in a recognized marriage. Thus a *mfulu* is a person who has relations to whom he/she is socially and politically linked. This entails that a person enjoys all the basic freedoms of life. The concept is thus associated with the right to identity and the freedom of association – belonging to a social group such as a family or clan. If understood this way, *ufulu* is founded on citizenship. A person enjoys it where he or she socially and politically belongs.

Consequently, *ufulu* is a concept that implies absence of restrictions or barriers in an individual’s life, thoughts and actions as determined by the social and political morality of the society to which the individual belongs. The contents of the term are thus similar, if not identical, to the concepts of liberty and freedom.

In its political usage the term changes according to the changing political culture. During the colonial rule it was freedom from the colonial bondage. In current usage, the concept refers to freedom from the oppression, which is associated with the single party era of Dr. Banda. The changes in the usage of the term demonstrate that *ufulu* is a political concept. It describes the material and socio-political status at a particular time, and that it can be contested and by the same token it can be fought for, gained and maintained. The above analysis shows that, whether used culturally, or in the modern context, freedom is determined by politics and it is negotiable.

5. DISCUSSION

In the changing tide of politics, it has been observed that certain terms are given prominence and others de-emphasized. During the struggle for independence political terms in Chichewa were essentially snarl words reflecting the unequal relationship between the white rulers and the ruled Africans.

After independence, Dr. Banda’s regime sought to give itself a cosy family feeling by exploiting kinship terms to refer to its leader and his followers. Thus traditional values of family and chieftaincy were emphasized and highlighted to fit in with the image that Dr. Banda was cultivating of being both a paramount chief and a leader of a modern state. However, the repressive nature of the regime could not be hidden and this was also reflected in the political parlance of the time.

What has been observed above also applies to the democratic period. The population’s conceptions of democracy is heavily influenced by the legacy of one party state. During the transition period people were moved, not by the attractiveness of the alternative system, i.e. democracy, but by their previous and immediate experience. As a result, *demokalase* was simply understood in terms of an alternative to the status quo. Whether it was beneficial or not, was not an issue.

Misconceptions and misinformation thus marred the campaign for change. For example, the status quo referred to multipartism as ‘confusion’, cause for ‘civil war’ and recipe for retarded development. Dr. Banda in his response to demands for multiparty democracy stated that:

The multiparty politics they want to introduce will only bring in vicious political propaganda of one party against the other. This will only bring disunity and political chaos. My people must, therefore, tell the dissidents that they are lying and reject them openly. My people have been under one-party-system for 28 years. The Malawi Congress Party has served them well all these years (**The Michiru Sun**, November 1992).

After the transition, the misconceptions have resulted in non-acknowledgement of achievement of any kind in the previous regime, so *demokalase* becomes the opposite of what the previous regime did or was not able to do. On the other hand, the current opposition (the previous regime) and all those who feel disappointed by the change do not appreciate and acknowledge the achievements and the changes that have taken place. As a result apathy has set in because people do not know whom to believe. They are also unwilling to discuss the issues. The legacy of the one party is also reflected in the lack of understanding of separation between party and government.

6. CONCLUSION

In sum then, what is interesting about these terms is that although they are part of the political vocabulary their relationship with their prototypical meanings are transparent. One can relate the original meaning with their prototypical meanings. It is also clear that the terms evolved in specific political cultures, i.e. the (anti) colonial single party and multi-party/democratic cultures. In other words, the terms reflect a historical time. As a result words which are no longer meaningful to the changing political culture become obsolete and ‘new’ ones are created through semantic shift or extension or coinage.

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