

8 Secret Worlds, Democratization and Election Observation in Malawi

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INTRODUCTION

One day in April 1994 a remarkable event occurred in a small village in the Mchinji district in Malawi, where the United Democratic Front was holding a political rally in preparation for the May 1994 general and presidential elections. The elections were going to be the first 'free and fair' elections in Malawi after 30 years of single-party rule. People were gathering in great numbers to hear what this newly formed opposition party would say. As a member of the Lilongwe-based core group of United Nations international observers,¹ I was present that day observing this rally where a large number of UDF officials, all in yellow blouses, happened to be present. Suddenly, I became aware that the atmosphere became tense among the officials and the general public when a group of masked *Nyau* dancers appeared on the scene and stopped about a hundred metres away from the place of the rally. There they hid themselves behind some trees and shrubs and started to sing and ring their bells. They made it clear they intended to dance where the rally was being held and began to work themselves into an emotional state, as is usually the case on such occasions. People whispered to each another: 'Zilombo! zilombo!' (literally meaning: 'wild animals!'), and some officials began to move around nervously, confused about what should be done next. Clearly there was some fear that violence would break out – which is common to *Nyau* dance occasions – particularly against the local population, who knew the way these things can develop. The UDF leaders, aware that they were holding a rally

in an area where the *Nyau* were strong, decided to bribe them to allow the political meeting to proceed. At intervals, piles of *Kwacha* bank notes would openly be carried from the UDF platform to the waiting *Nyau*, in the hope that it would be enough to prevent the rally from being broken up by the dancing. But by 4 p.m., all the banknotes had gone and time had come to end the rally and make a fast exit.

This event may indicate that, apart from political there are also specific *cultural* dimensions to the process of 'democratization' and to projects of international intervention in Africa such as election observing. Although political science studies of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa have become numerous (see Buijtenhuijs and Rijnierse 1993, Buijtenhuijs and Thiriot 1995), studies of political culture have only received little attention (notable exceptions are Schatzberg 1993, Martin 1993 and Robinson 1994). Most of the literature on the subject of monitoring the democratic process deals with the inherent problems of election observing in Africa's recent democratic transition processes (see Buijtenhuijs and Thiriot 1995: 51–2, Geisler 1993, Meyns 1995, Hyden 1996, Bjornlund, Bratton and Gibson 1992). Regarding countries like Zambia, Uganda, Kenya, Ghana and Malawi, the donor community increasingly imposed political conditions for the continuation of aid and financial assistance. In most cases, democratic changes were demanded, to be monitored by independent international organizations. Election observation thus became a hallmark of political conditionality (Geisler 1993: 630–1).

However, in their practical execution election observation missions often turned out to be nightmares, as the procedures they were supposed to witness were seldom in conformity with Western ideal standards. Most authors therefore highlight the intrinsic problems of election observing, such as the many ways in which elections can be rigged, absence of fraud-resistant voter identification and registration procedures, contradicting views of different observer groups during elections, and difficulties in arriving at sound and univocal verdicts over the free-and-fairness of an election.

Indeed, the *cultural* implications of the imposition of democratic procedures and their monitoring are rarely being considered (Robinson 1994). Not without cynicism one could say that whereas the nation-state has been called the 'black man's

'burden' (cf. Davidson 1992), its extension in terms of a democratic system with all that is presupposed by it has become a 'white man's burden' in Africa. Indeed, many of the 'problems' election observers encounter in the execution of a democratic procedure boil down to a clash of cultures, and cannot be translated into 'mere' practical technicalities only. One such area is the recording of personal identities. Referring to Michel Foucault's term, in his analysis of the development of the Western nation state, the 'micro-physics of power' that the state came to command when dealing with the identity of each of its subjects developed into one of its corner-stones in the West. Individuals with their name and identity became registered in records that represented a fixed and independent memory. The state became centralized, lending a central core or framework to this identity. Political authority became dependent on enlisting a majority of these subject identities as voters in discrete election procedures.

In comparison, however, much of this 'micro-power' of governmentality is absent in the African context. Political authority does not exist in this form (see Bayart 1992 and Schatzberg 1993 for an elaboration of this point), and a centralized state with undisputed access to each of its subjects' identities does not exist either. In Ghana and Malawi, for instance, the two countries in Africa with which I am most familiar, names and identities of individuals are not fixed and are not recorded in a state-controlled independent memory. Names and identities rather exist on the basis of the person's social relationships and the phase in life s/he is in. In such cases the often recorded problems election observers meet in establishing voters' identities should be partly explained in terms of cultural differences in what the meaning and political significance of a centralized state actually is and implies.

The literature on election observing therefore faces a problem in that it accepts the formation of nation-states as a reality taken for granted, as a natural order of things, and along with it a process of 'self-evident' democratic participation in state power. The international donor community promotes the establishment of centralized states in Africa as this belongs to what it perceives as a global order of things. Hence it seeks the imposition of democratic systems which in the West have come to be regarded as the only legitimizing procedure for the estab-

lishment of a centralized state. Election observing primarily appears to serve this purpose, irrespective of the cultural differences that exist in the appreciation of political power and political legitimization.

A fundamental question social scientists therefore face is whether their efforts in suggesting ways of improving election observing are not in fact part of a rhetoric of power that persistently defines cultural differences between African political systems and the West as 'problems' and 'irregularities'. What is required is a more culturally oriented approach which empirically seeks to understand when and how people perceive a system as legitimate or illegitimate, or a specific procedure as fraudulent or trustworthy. In other words, what is required is a cultural exploration of normative schemes and imagination before any sensible improvement in the 'political tourism' (cf. Geisler 1993) of election observing can be suggested.

As a large number of studies of processes of democratization in Africa have now been able to show, democratization is both imposed and imagined. In most cases, international pressure to democratize was met by a desire from local groups in society to change the system, a desire most of the time expressed in a myriad of cultural ways. In further defence of cultural relativism here, it is not at all clear from the literature what in most cases the local desire and imagination entailed with regard to the procedures that would lead to a democratic structure; largely because they have not been studied yet. It is this field of popular imagination with regard to election procedures – where cultural factors come into play which usually remain unnoticed by the outside political observer – which I contend as crucial to the 'success' or 'failure' of any attempt at democratization of a society. In this sense, what is striking in the scholarly debate about the democratization process in Africa is the lack of attention to the significance of the 'secretive' and the 'imaginary' in local political culture. As a rare example, Geschiere in his study of the secretive in the context of Cameroonian political changes notes:

The recent democratization movements are accompanied ... by a veritable blooming in politics of occult forces. At the very least, their political role is brought into the open.

(Geschiere 1995: 12, cited in Buijtenhuijs and Thiriot 1995).

He provides various examples of the complex relationship between notions of witchcraft, the occult on the one hand and democratic procedures on the other, which also have been studied by Tall (1995) in Benin and by Meyns (1995) in Mozambique. Here Meyns for instance points at the magical *cum* ritual power of traditional healers with regard to the supposed 'secrecy' of casting a vote in the democratic transition of 1994. He cites the following report of the *Moçambique Peace Process Bulletin*:

It is widely reported that Renamo has told peasants in its zones that the ballot would not be secret because 'curandeiros' (traditional healers) will know how people vote and that they must vote for Renamo.

(Meyns 1995: 42, citing MPPB 1994, vol. 12: 8)

The relevance of this imagination also extends to the Malawian case. The two-staged process of democratic change in this country (in June 1993 the National Referendum, in May 1994 multi-party general and presidential elections) has mainly been studied from the angle of national politics and its different elites – political, religious and ethnic – that became the important players in the field (see Chirwa 1994, Cullen 1994, Kaunda 1995, Kaspin 1995, Newell 1995, Van Donge 1995). Few authors have looked at the local understanding and perception of what the political change might mean to the common people in their own terms (see for instance Englund 1996 for a welcome exception) or by looking at the role non-elite religious groups played in the process (see, for instance, Fiedler 1995 and Van Dijk 1998a, 1998b).

It is, however, clear that in Malawi a local world of secrecy, in which specific secret societies play a dominant part, suddenly came face to face with notions of secrecy which are implied in a democratic procedure. In this chapter I intend to explore some dimensions of what I will phrase as the 'meeting of secret worlds' in the unfolding process of democratic transition. Obviously, an important subsequent question is what the chances of success are for a Western-style democracy if local worlds of secrecy remain untouched by such 'superficial' processes of political transition, leaving the deeper structures of political culture virtually unscathed.

Although much more should be said about the fact that secret worlds and societies may remain intact and in place after a process of democratic transition has taken place, thereby lending support to a thesis of cultural continuity, the focus of this chapter is explicitly on the implications for election observing. It will explore some dimensions of this 'meeting of secret worlds', thus bringing a specific cultural perspective to the understanding of what observing election procedures and political campaigning actually meant in the *local* context.

On the one hand, democracy and the democratic execution of an electoral process, ideologically and practically, imply and presuppose secrecy. Behind the prescribed 'democratic procedures' – with a distinctly Western cultural origin and logic and not immediately translatable into a local African setting – there is, however, a world of the imaginative, of different connotations and meanings. The local understandings of what secrecy in voting is, what it 'guarantees', by whom it is protected and to whom it allows political access, may thus have distinct features as compared to Western political understandings.

On the other hand, in Malawi, as in other Central African countries, communities have their own cultural models, organizations and social groups of secrecy, one of which, the secret society of the *Nyau*, is the most important example. In many localities, secrecy relates to hidden powers – 'powers of the earth' (*zinthu za kunthaka*) – to which one cannot gain unmediated, direct access. Those who gain access to such powers of secrecy are mostly perceived to be in a state of moral ambiguity. In this sense, witches, healers/medicine men, chiefs, and members of the *Nyau* secret society do not differ much as far as common perceptions are concerned. In the process of democratization therefore, domains of secrecy and imagination seem to meet, whereby the role of the election observer, as I hope to show in this contribution, can perform mediating or intermediary functions between the two.

In the first section, a chronology of events is presented leading up to the democratic transition in Malawi in 1994. It will be shown what importance the established mainstream churches had in this process and how they paved the way for international election observing. One of the issues here is that these mission churches from the very onset of their presence in

Malawian society have waged a battle against *Nyau* and its secretive world of ritual practice, initiation and violence. In the following section more is explained about the linkage between *Nyau* and the political machinery. In the final section some conclusions will be drawn concerning the role of international election observing in a situation whereby those involved as observers are hardly aware of such a meeting of secret worlds which the advent of democracy in Malawi *de facto* entailed.

CHURCHES VYING FOR DEMOCRACY

Starting in March 1992, a democratic revolution took place in Malawi which in 1994 led to the removal from power of 'President-for-life' Dr Kamuzu Banda – until then, one of the longest-surviving dictators in Africa. Banda's regime had for 30 years been marked by a despotism which a badly-informed foreign press often described as 'benevolent', but which in reality rested on systematic repression. Although Malawi was one of the ten poorest nations in the world, its government managed to operate and maintain very efficiently-organized police agencies. The only political party allowed in the country, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), was in direct control of paramilitary groups, particularly the widely feared Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP) and the intelligence services. Moreover, in the years following independence in 1964, gradually and systematically, all connections with the outside world were brought under the aegis of the Banda-controlled police apparatus, free news-gathering by both the domestic and foreign media was made impossible, the intelligentsia was silenced and international exchange of people and ideas was drastically curtailed (see Williams 1978, Médard 1991). In view of all this Malawi came to be known as the 'Albania of Africa'.

The first free elections, held in 1994, led to the victory of one of the new opposition groups, the United Democratic Front, and its leader, Bakili Muluzi, forced Dr Banda to step down as president. Although they condemned the many incidents of intimidation which preceded the election period, the election procedure itself was greatly commended by national and international observers, media and intellectuals for its remarkable freedom and fairness and virtual absence of any form of intimi-

dation. Compared with preceding instances in Zambia and Kenya, the Malawian elections appeared to stand out, and were highly praised as such, for the fair reflection of 'the will of the people' they seemed to offer.

In the period immediately preceding the elections, the established churches of Malawi, particularly the Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and Anglican churches, had begun to play a significant public role in the process of democratic transition.² At the same time groups representing the 'traditional' political culture also started to make their voices heard. In what follows, I shall be looking at both these developments, particularly at what they meant for the cultural significance of international election monitoring.

Under the rule of president Banda, churches and other religious organizations had become the only places where people could meet in an atmosphere of relative freedom from close political supervision. Other types of independent social or ideological organizations had gradually been subjected to the MCP's political control, and their freedom to meet was seriously curtailed. This did not mean, of course, that churches were free to criticize the regime openly, as the Jehovah's Witnesses experienced in the late 1960s when they were brutally expelled from Malawi for publicly questioning the legitimacy of Dr Banda's rule. The MCP's paramilitary youth groups, the Malawi Young Pioneers, were sent against the Jehovah's Witnesses and forced many of them to seek safety in neighbouring countries. Unconfirmed reports still speak of hundreds killed in these pogroms.

Although the large established churches in Malawi had, since independence, largely gone along with what the regime expected of them, they nevertheless formed one of the few channels through which reports of the regime's use of terror against the population could reach the outside world. In addition, starting in the late eighties, a growing protest began to be heard within the Roman Catholic church against the worsening economic situation in Malawi and the increasing gap between the poor majority and the small political elite, which had been very successful in filling its own pockets. The first big push in this direction came from the Papal visit in 1989. Not so much because of anything the Pope actually said – his speeches remained rather uncritical of the Malawian government – as from the

discussion brought about by the renewed attention for Malawi from the international media as a result of the coverage of the visit.

In March 1992, following secret discussions within the clergy, the Roman Catholic Bishops published a Lenten-letter in which they, for the first time in post-independence history, protested against the repression, poverty and harassment of political opponents that had become the trademark and result of 30 years of Banda's dictatorship (see Cullen 1994, Newell 1995, Nzunda and Ross 1995, Lwanda 1996). As had been the case for other parts of Africa (see Schatzberg 1993, Diamond 1993, Witte 1993), in Malawi the religious elite called for a democratization of the political system. This represented the first truly open criticism of the Banda regime for many years. The blame for the increasing poverty in the country was placed squarely on the shoulders of the failing political system and the policies it enforced. Corruption, censorship and officially-sanctioned political violence were roundly condemned in unambiguous terms.

The appearance of this Lenten-letter rocked the government profoundly and landed the country in a deep political crisis. It was, after all, the first time that an organisation had been able to publish a critical appraisal of the political and economic situation at more than 2,000 places throughout the country without any of the many branches of the secret services getting wind of it. The political elite reacted violently and, as they did at all other instances when dissenting voices could be heard, deployed the MYP to intimidate Catholic clergy and church members and to install a general reign of terror against all who wanted to take the protests further. Locally the *Nyau* society, sometimes in collaboration with the MYP (see Englund 1996: 117) also installed a reign of terror in an attempt to influence and curb the growing popularity of the religious and later the opposition group's protests (Kaspin 1995: 617, Van Dijk 1998b).

Although the bishops and the other parties involved were initially denounced by the regime as criminals, and the police in many parts of the country started to round-up anyone they thought might have a copy of the letter, there was sufficient international pressure to ensure that in the months that followed the government *did* negotiate with the religious leaders. At this point, representatives of the other established churches in

Malawi, with the help of international mediators, were also able to join these negotiations with the government.

The aim of the churches in entering the negotiation was to bring about a democratization of Malawian society in the hope that this would bring a halt to the continuing spread of poverty. A greater participation of the population in political decision-making, freedom of thought, freedom to form political organizations and political parties, free elections and a dismantling of the repressive paramilitary organizations, particularly those of the youth organizations, were placed at the top of the long list of objectives the churches presented to the government.

The churches, with the help of a number of other civil organizations, established the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) which provided an umbrella-function to the opposition groups that slowly began to emerge in various parts of the country (Ross 1995: 31–2). The PAC began to negotiate the terms for an eventual democratic transition with the Presidential Committee on Dialogue (PCD), and by November 1992 at the so-called 'Kwacha-Conference' an understanding was reached. A National Referendum was to be held on the issue of changing from a single to a multi-party system. The country's opposition was allowed to form itself into 'pressure-groups' which were given the liberty to present their views in public and to run campaigns. In reality, however, intimidation by the two political youth-bodies was rife and proved to be extremely effective in closing off entire districts from activities and propaganda material of the opposition (Englund 1996: 116–19, Kaspin 1995: 617).

These two oppositional groups were named the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), with a stronghold in the Northern Region, and the United Democratic Front (UDF) with a power-base in the South and who, as was mentioned earlier, gained victory in the general elections in the end. At the same time, both the government and the MCP, as the only legal political party, would spare neither effort nor expense to persuade the Malawian population of the advantages of staying with a one-party state.

As the 'pressure-groups' were still rather weak in their organizational structure and resources, the churches, the Roman Catholic and the Presbyterian in particular, ran the better part of the multi-party campaign: they negotiated a 'free and fair

process', mobilized massive support particularly from the youth (see for the implications on generational power-relations Van Dijk 1998b, Englund 1996: 120), and distributed civic education material, monitored the registration and voting centres, and reported cases of intimidation and harassment or any other violation of what in the negotiations had been agreed upon (see for different aspects of the churches' involvement on various levels, Cullen 1994, Newell 1995, Nzunda and Ross 1995). It became extremely fashionable to wear and show the insignia of the PAC, which were a mixture of Christian symbolism of the cross, the rosary, and the *nyali*, the lamp, as the sign of the light that multi-partyism would bring against the powers of the dark that came to be associated with single-party rule (the symbol for the MCP was the black rooster, or in local parlance the 'black cock').

As I myself witnessed many times, PAC youth spend hours and hours on civic education, in explaining to the elderly people in the villages that '*mattipatty*' was not just another party but instead an entire different system that would allow greater participation in the political running of the country. AFORD and UDF rallies were usually opened by young PAC representatives who in prayers and religious songs would request the benevolent heavenly powers to lend support to their just cause.

However, in many parts of Malawi a reign of terror from the combined sources of MCP paramilitary groups, the MYP in particular, the local chiefs and party-headmen and local *Nyau* groups continued, which to a large extent went unnoticed by outsider agencies (see Englund about the secretive forms of oppression in local communities, 1996: 116–19). It was in this period (first quarter of 1993) that international pressure began to bring this still fragile democratization process to the conclusion desired by, amongst others, the donor-country community. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) stood guarantee for the international and independent monitoring of the National Referendum, while the churches took charge of the local monitoring, working through the new opposition groups. The UNDP supervised the registration of voters and organized the media campaign and programme of civic education that preceded the referendum. It also provided the logistical and financial support for the whole operation. The election monitoring would also monitor the operation of the UNDP and

other services associated with it. The UNDP effort was partly supported by the Dutch government and the author became one of the first two international observers sent from the Netherlands to join the UNDP team in Malawi.

The referendum itself was held in May 1993 and two-thirds of the Malawian population voted for a change to a multi-party system. In the months that followed, the pressure groups managed to become recognized as legitimate political parties and new, until then unknown, political parties were permitted to operate. The new political parties worked with the churches to negotiate with the government for the first free general elections, which would include an election for the head of state. Despite the outcome of the referendum, it should be stressed that in the second half of 1993 the machinery of political repression remained menacingly present. There was still no freedom of speech, the new political groups had little access to the media and the logistical and financial resources available to them – in contrast to those available to the government – were insufficient to reach and mobilize supporters in every part of the country.

This, then, was the situation when in December 1993 a dispute between soldiers and members of one of the governing party's paramilitary youth groups, the Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP), got out of control in a northern town. The army, which interestingly had been able to maintain a markedly independent position within the existing political structure, seized its chance and began a hunt for members of the MYP paramilitary organizations that lasted many days (Van Donge 1995: 9, Iwanda 1996: 183–90). Eventually, after a number of fierce, sometimes deadly armed struggles, the power of the paramilitary organizations was broken and some of their members fled abroad. (More than 2,000 of these well-armed paramilitaries presently occupy former territory of the Renamo guerrillas in Mozambique – there had always been strong links between the Malawian paramilitary and RENAMO, dating from when the latter still controlled important parts of the border with Malawi.)

The general and presidential elections were moved back to mid-1994 and the first half of that year was marked by a clear drop in the number of incidents of intimidation and political violence. Freedom of speech was slowly extended by a reluctant

government and opposition groups gained more access to the media. 'Civic education' was set up to inform the public about the rather complicated electoral procedure the various parties had eventually agreed to, and about the positions of the various political parties and presidential candidates.

As the election time drew closer, the largest political parties seemed to differ less and less on matters of policy and, instead, increasingly began to reflect the regional and ethnic identities of their supporters (see Forster 1994, Chirwa 1994, Kaspin 1995, Van Donge 1995 for a further analysis of the intertwined ethnic and regional dimensions of the election results). The governing MCP seemed to draw most of its support from the central region of Malawi, the traditional homeland of the Chewa. This is the ethnic group to which Dr Banda and the most important members of his political elite always had claimed to belong (for locally held critical views of the supposed Chewa ethnic background of Banda see Lwanda 1993, Englund 1996). The Tumbuka-speaking northern region seemed to be a bulwark of AFORD, and the party's political leadership – including its leader, the trade unionist Chikufwa Chihana – still consists mostly of Tumbuka speakers. The southern region has become the heartland of the UDF, which gets much of its financial and logistical support from the Indian population living in the main urban and commercial areas located in this part of Malawi.

The elections were won by the UDF and the presidential campaign was won comfortably by the UDF leader Bakili Muluzi, a member of the Islamized Yao-ethnic minority in Malawi which since Independence had been marginalized under Banda's ethnic policies (see Thorold 1997 on the Yao's dissenting position). The elections also made it plain that Dr Kamuzu Banda was a spent force in Malawian politics. The way in which the elections were carried out, the discipline of the millions of voters and the remarkable radio speech in which Dr Banda accepted defeat, received general international praise. Apart from a number of incidents, partly caused by a group of Commonwealth Observers declaring the elections 'free and fair' before counting the cast votes had even begun in some districts (see also Geisler 1993 for profound criticism of the Commonwealth Observers' problematic participation in other

instances of democratic transition), the elections were judged by the international observers to have been sufficiently well conducted to allow them to be regarded as reliable. (Irregularities which required voting to be repeated were found in only two districts.) Even the transfer of power to the new UDF-dominated government went fairly smoothly.

The attention of international news-services was drawn to Malawi again in 1995 when a committee of investigation brought out its report of inquiry into an incident in 1993 that had taken the lives of one minister and a number of members of parliament. In that year they had all fallen from grace with Dr Banda and their bodies were later found riddled with bullets at the bottom of a ravine in Mwanza-district. A judicial commission tried to have Dr Banda arraigned on grounds of direct involvement in the killings, but his failing mental and physical condition led the court to decide to dismiss the case. This was not an isolated incident and international critics have pointed out that the judicial commissions in Malawi so far have had little success in bringing to trial those responsible for past political crimes.

In general terms it is safe to say that Muluzi's government still deals with a legacy of open and covert political coercion and violence. In remote areas the power of the former MCP party chairmen continues to be significant, despite their defeat in the general elections and despite the UDF control of all government positions. Usually, these party chairmen, unofficially but effectively, still form the main contact persons for outside agencies, NGOs for example, as they maintain to have the longest experience in dealing with such exchanges. Other elements of the former political culture, in which secret societies played an important role such as chiefly authority at the village level, have likewise remained largely unaffected by the democratic changes at the national level and it is here that the cultural construction of secrecy is a dominant factor. Secrecy belongs, so to speak, to the ground layer of the local political culture, and it was clear from the onset of the democratization effort that the international organizations had very little understanding of its salience. In the following section this aspect of the local political culture in its confrontation with a Western-inspired democratization process is further explored.

POLITICAL CULTURE, SECRECY AND DEMOCRATIZATION

Returning to the moment when the first international observers arrived in Malawi, the micro-political process that unfolded can be described and analysed as a meeting of two 'secret worlds' – that of 'democracy' as it is understood in the West, and what might be called the dominant, partly traditional, political culture. To begin with the latter, from the inception of his rule Banda continuously referred to the cultural values and political traditions of the largest ethnic unit in the country, the Chews, and took the Chewa models of authority as the ideal for the post-colonial political order he intended to create. Vail and White note:

As a cultural broker for the Chewas, Banda had a broader vision, however, than formulating an ideological statement for his ethnic group alone. He has instead equated 'Malawian-ness' with Chewa-ness, and he has depicted the Chewas as the very soul of the country.

(Vail and White 1989: 182)

Within this 'reconstructed' political tradition the *Nyau* secret society was and still is perceived as a key institution belonging to the very heart of its culture (Kaspis 1993: 54). Only initiated men are members of the society. When they appear at important public occasions the *Nyau* group consists of masked dancers, drummers, the *akapoli* (free running guardians of the performance/helpers) and others who in their normal outfit participate, sing songs and clap their hands. The masked characters are known as 'animals' (*zilombo*), whereby some of them indeed represent animal figures, while others represent a mockery of important social, political or religious types (for instance, a man dressed up as a white lady and wearing a white facial mask; see for a fuller picture of *Nyau* symbolism: Aguilar 1996). The masked dances were and still are particularly performed at certain rituals, such as funerals, girls' initiation ceremonies and installations of chiefs.

However, in large parts of Central and Southern Malawi the authority of traditional leaders such as village headmen and chiefs is underwritten by the *Nyau* not in the performative sense, but rather in the sense of a masked and concealed form of control and coercion. Developing from forming the backbone

of traditional authority, it became after independence in 1964 a secretive instrument of oppression by Banda's government at the local village level. Close connections were developed between village headmen and local party chairmen, hence between respectively *Nyau* and the Malawi Young Pioneers who became very central in the execution of authority for the local MCP party cadres.

In many villages, the *Nyau* mainly exercised coercive political power at night and as unrecognizable strangers. Writers who have described these acts emphasize the ritual terror and occasional political murders the *Nyau* carry out, and which usually rarely came to light in the daily world of formal authority (see Schoffeleers and Linden 1972, Linden and Linden 1974, Schoffeleers 1976). Englund, writing from his experiences in a village in the Dedza district just prior to the elections, gives a vivid account of what became common practice in the implementation of coercive government regulations:

Although village headmen and local party officials were responsible for seeing that the orders of the government were obeyed, the harshest measures of coercion were usually left for strangers and, significantly, for the masked characters of *Nyau*. The so-called party membership renewal campaigns were initiated by party chairmen in villages, but because they seldom succeeded in persuading all villagers to renew their memberships, the names of defiant villagers were passed on to officials in other areas. These officials, strangers to the villagers in question, came to visit their houses during the night. They were often accompanied by members of the Malawi Young Pioneers ... or by *zilombo*. If the door was not opened, the visitors would break into the house. If its occupants still refused to pay for the renewal of their party memberships, the visitors confiscated property in order to cover the costs of renewal. The possibility of resistance was extremely limited. The Young Pioneers were notorious for their readiness to use violence: the sight and sound of *zilombo* in the middle of the night have prompted many villagers to make, in horror, the required payments.

(Englund 1996: 117)

Professor M. Schoffeleers mentions in personal communication that in the Central region the group of *akapoli* usually was made up of young 'hooligans' who either with or without the formal

consent of the *Nyau* elders to a large extent were responsible for forms of uncontrolled terror. In the Southern part of Malawi where *Nyau* is also active, the young were much more restrained and some *Nyau* groups would prefer not to have *akapoli*.

In terms of a historical perspective, it is interesting to note that in pre-colonial and colonial times with the advent of missionization a dispute developed between the mainline churches, the Roman Catholic in particular, and the *Nyau* societies. As Schoffeleers and Linden (1972) show, the missionaries tried to 'save' the younger generation from hidden and heathen rituals at which *Nyau* was involved, to turn this generation into the bulwark of new nationhood, the generation from which the leaders of tomorrow would emerge (see also Mandala 1990: 154). fighting *Nyau* in this way became a way of contributing to the building of the nation-state.³

However, in the coming to power, after independence, of Banda and the MCP regime, a mirroring process occurred. As Ross (1969) has shown for certain types of witch-hunters in Southern Malawi, Independence became the time of revealing the concealed and of turning what once was concealed into an element of public nationhood. In Southern Malawi *mbisalila*, a specific type of witch-finder, began operating, usually invited to villages by local headmen and by the new party cadres. The term *mbisalila* refers to *ku bisa*, the act of hiding, and to bringing out into the open (*ku tuluka*) of what once was hidden. In other words, political power on the village level made it clearly understood that it could command, control and bring out into the open what once was hidden through another powerful force: witchcraft (*ufiti*).

At the national level, at public ceremonies and celebrations where Dr Banda would be present, *Nyau* dancers paraded out into the open, such as that of the huge Kamuzu Stadium in Blantyre, for all too see; the initiated as well as the uninitiated. For Banda, displaying and applying the hidden elements of a central cultural heritage, formed an essential element in promoting Malawian nationhood.

With it, however, the antagonistic relations between the regime and the mainstream churches were revealed. As I argue elsewhere (Van Dijk 1998b) the mainline churches increasingly were curtailed in controlling or influencing the position of the

younger generation in the development of Malawian nationhood. From the onset of the Malawian independent state, post-colonial nationhood locally associated itself with the effective political force of *Nyau* as something 'of the government' (see Englund 1996: 118). The regime took a position as a protector and defender of this secretive political tradition against other forces, among them particularly the power of the mainline churches. Indeed adding to the perception of the *Nyau* societies as the signs and symbols that constitute the 'substructure of rural Chewa consciousness' as Kaspin defines it (Kaspin 1993: 54), a deliberate political and ideological dimension was introduced to the relationship between coercion and secrecy in Malawian society. To use a felicitous phrase from Taussig, in these public displays there was an element of skilled revelation and of skilled concealment: the state displaying a specific 'selection' of its secretive political apparatus while concealing the rest of it from the public gaze.

The 'formal' political power exercised by the MCP and its leaders during its years in power was not perceived by the local population as being fundamentally different in operation from the political power of the *Nyau*. Both were just as likely to be described in terms of witchcraft which, in its way, was not really very surprising. After all, people simply 'disappeared' without any kind of explanation being offered as to their fate, open political discussion of any kind was forbidden, and real power remained the preserve of initiated individuals. Political power was exercised by bringing out into the open in the villages the *zilombo* (the wild animals), who would then coerce people into participating in the compulsory political rituals of the ruling MCP party. Like witchcraft as a power of the night, political power hence 'devoured' people, killed and destroyed property, while effective protection was hard to find.

The great majority of observers⁴ who arrived in Malawi in 1993 were not aware of this cultural dimension of the political situation. Their activities were coordinated by the UNDP in Malawi, which, of course, had other priorities. During the elections themselves, the observers were mainly concerned with the technical aspects of running polling stations and concentrated on monitoring those parts of the electoral process most open to

fraud. Prior to the elections they needed to pay a lot of attention to the way in which political activities were carried out in public, in order to assess whether freedom of speech and of political organization really was being taken seriously by the authorities. The cultural dimension of Malawian politics therefore tended to be overlooked.

Nevertheless, observers present just prior to both elections (the referendum of 1993 and the general elections in 1994) were increasingly tipped off by local monitors about the influence the secret society could have on the elections. Under the aegis of the PAC, *de facto* the mainstream churches, these local monitors were sent by the political parties to keep an eye on the procedures and to report irregularities to their party or to the PAC. They tended to come from nearby villages and urban districts and were therefore familiar with the local political situation.

In some places the international observers, for instance, were told that the *Nyau* had threatened to turn up at the polling stations before they opened, in full dress, complete with ritual masks. The implication of this, which may not have been apparent to the non-Malawians, was, firstly, that the *Nyau* would then be 'taking possession' of the location, which would then be inaccessible to non-initiates and, secondly, that ritually sanctioned violence against the local population could result. In other locations, the *Nyau* threatened to turn up and demand to inspect the ballot papers. Since the balloting procedure consisted of removing the ballot paper with the symbol of the selected party and disposing of the rest in a sealed box, it would be immediately apparent which party someone had voted for if the remaining papers were taken out of the polling station. In this way, the *Nyau* sought to control the voting in favour of one party. Elsewhere, it was rumoured that the *Nyau* would be placing 'magic eyes' in polling booths.

In a way, as I argued elsewhere (Van Dijk 1998b), the system of local monitoring, as organized by the PAC, allowed the mainstream churches to move back in again, influencing the younger generation's political position within the Malawi nation. It was clear that these young, zealous local monitors would react strongly against the threats of *Nyau* in the process of democratization. Englund writes of a village in the Dedza district of Malawi:

The tensions over the appearances in MCP rallies [of *Nyau*] became apparent shortly before the referendum. Junior members [of the *Nyau*] were increasingly reluctant to force villagers to attend rallies, and some even refused to dance there. At least some members were afraid that they could be attacked by angry supporters of the multiparty cause. Thus according to this view, a complete inversion was possible; instead of being feared for their fierceness, *zilombo* would themselves be attacked by villagers.

(Englund 1996: 118)

An example like this should make it clear that political tension, next to its more open and manifest forms, is also expressed in ways that are indirect but quite perceptible, and it is the latter aspect that gave all the familiar problems of election observing (language barrier, administrative preoccupation, logistics, political pressure) a specific cultural dimension. Local monitors indeed engaged themselves in a process of skilled revelation (namely to the international observers) and of skilled concealment (that of *Nyau* threats) on the basis of a very different political objective as compared to, and running counter to, that of the ruling party and its regime. The term 'skilled' here received a double meaning as local monitors became skilled in terms of the training they received (organized by the PAC), on how the election procedure was set up, on how monitoring should be conducted, and in terms of the academic skills of reading and writing which were expected of them. On the other hand, 'skilled' here also has the meaning of mastering the techniques by which *Nyau* and MYP acts of intimidation could be reported to higher authorities and the international observers without running the risk of becoming the next targets of political violence. The hope and expectation was that the international observers in their turn could report such matters to the Electoral Commission which would have the authority to intervene. Although the Electoral Commission was informed by the core group of international observers and in addition also had its own sources of information in the country, as far as I am aware, traditional authorities were never confronted by the Commission to curtail the activity of the *Nyau* in particular.

Subsequently, and despite the local monitors' efforts in laying bare the concealed forms of coercion and violence, writers

familiar with the influence and social dynamics of the *Nyau* have pointed to the considerable overlap between the areas where the *Nyau* remained active and the districts in which the MCP enjoyed electoral success (see Kaspin 1995).

From the point of view of the local population, the arrival of multi-party elections brought the new, unknown and secret world of 'democracy' into view, next to the 'old' secret world of the *Nyau*. Under the old power monopoly of the MCP, the local population 'voted' by openly and publicly supporting one of the candidates put forward by the regional MCP council. In other words, the MCP did put forward a slate of candidates and the winner was simply the one with the largest number of supporters lined up next to him. In this way, it was quite obvious who had voted for whom, and commonly the government would brag about the openness of its 'democratic' system.

At the referendum and the general elections the voting booth, the ballot paper, the envelope and the sealed ballot box, however, appeared to evoke only rather poorly understood notions of electoral secrecy. For instance, observers would certainly report as an 'irregularity' two persons seen entering a polling booth (usually this happened if one person intended to assist another person in the complicated procedure of casting separate votes for the parliamentary and presidential elections, while not being aware that 'secrecy' prohibits this). Moreover, for many people it was not at all clear what the concept of multi-party democracy actually meant in the first place. 'Mattyppatty', as it is called in the local tongue, was seen by many, and particularly the older generation, as 'just another party' and not as a system for making a choice in secret of one of a number of parties and one of a number of candidates.

It was therefore not surprising that during the negotiations between the PAC and the government about the form the elections would take that the MCP insisted that instead of 'secret' voting, the voters would line up behind their preferred candidate in the traditional way. Although, obviously, they were only acting out of self-interest, hoping that people would be intimidated into supporting them, in popular understanding it indeed signalled a relationship with the dark, hidden world of politics which had threatening connotations for many Malawians. In spite of the 'openness' in voting in the MCP system, politics and political activity had long been associated with a violent, coer-

cive and dark world of powers from which protection was almost impossible to find. Dark, hidden and secret dealings belong to a realm connected with witchcraft and amoral behaviour that fears the light of day. In the PAC campaign of promoting 'mattypatty' the symbol of the *nyali*, the lamp, was therefore well chosen, as it contrasted light with dark, thereby turning the secrecy of the democratic system into something morally acceptable.

The international observers were, in my experience, often regarded by the local people and by the local monitors as persons with special, almost esoteric knowledge about the rituals of democracy and their intricacies. Particularly for the local monitors the international observers remained persons who could not become subject to, nor engulfed in, the secretive machinations of the *Nyau* and intimidation by the MYP. The source of power and authority of the international observers remained unaffected by the local political forces and lay beyond the local political system of control. Furthermore, the international observers were clearly initiated into the secrets of how the democratic system could be tricked and what ways there were to influence the result of the election by means largely unknown to the local political system. International observers therefore sometimes became part of local powerplays in which local monitors, young men as they usually were, attacked the power of the 'old' bearers of authority (a case of this nature has been described in Van Dijk 1998b) under the protection of the observers. Local monitors zealously sought to be 'initiated' in the knowledge about the secrets of the democratic system, the ways in which esoteric means could be applied by those opposing *mattypatty* to befraud the election procedure.

In some cases, as I myself experienced, local monitors of the opposition groups in particular seemed to be suspicious and ambiguous about the international observers' position. After all, such knowledge could also have been placed in the hands of the ruling party, the MYP and even the *Nyau* for that matter, giving these groups an advantage over the local monitors and the opposition groups they represented. The international observers naturally responded to this by going into lengthy technical explanations of such things as what can go wrong with registration cards, but they remained under suspicion as holders of potentially dangerous, almost esoteric knowledge about the

rituals of democracy and the ways in which certain 'techniques' could be applied affecting voting behaviour. International observers hardly ever saw themselves as bearers of such secretive knowledge and seemed not unaware of their culturally mediating position between the two worlds of secrecy in which they operated. Such positions, which in society are occupied for instance by medicine-men and chiefs (as they mediate between the world of men and the world of the ancestors and their spirits), are always regarded with ambiguous feelings of esteem, respect, awe and fear. The long presence of international observers in Malawi (for nearly two years in all), through which they became increasingly aware of at least some of the dynamics of local culture, and in addition the fact that international observers gained access to places where ordinary Malawians never dared to go (such as MYP bases throughout the country), lent force to such feelings of ambiguity.

On the side of the *Nyau* societies, it has remained unknown how they reacted to the presence of international observers to whom their acts of intimidation surreptitiously were reported. There are, however, indications that the power of the secret societies, as the backbone of traditional authority, has remained largely unaffected by the democratic change and implementation of a new political structure after 1994. It is only recently that scholars have begun to record the *Nyau*'s responses to the process of democratization on a systematic basis, as the present political situation in Malawi seems to allow for the exploration of this field of study once heavily embargoed (personal communication with Prof. Schoffeleers).⁵

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that in understanding the process of democratization in Malawi, and perhaps elsewhere for that matter, the exploration of the secretive, the hidden and the concealed needs to be included. They form part of the cultural understanding upon which local normative schemes and perceptions have been built. In discussing the role and position of the observers with regard to the elections in Malawi, I have pointed out that there was in fact on the local level and in the perception of the local population a meeting of two secret

worlds. It was a meeting of which the observers themselves were hardly aware, but which at the same time made them subject to a culturally perceived position as representatives of a political order which presupposes secrecy. In exploring their position in the Malawian local political culture, first of all, the role of secret societies needs to be taken into account. Particularly in the Central and Southern regions, where the ruling MCP had been forming local alliances with the *Nyau*, the *Nyau* had been making it clear from their actions that both the traditional authority of the chiefs and headmen and political power in general were something exercised in secret. The international observers only became gradually aware of this local political culture. For the greater part the international observers only received note of such forms of intimidation by *Nyau* and MYP groups as second-hand information through the local monitors; and their means to respond to it were indeed very limited. Other than occasional reporting to the Electoral Commission in charge of the entire election effort, the relative and cultural distance between the international observers and the local political practices prevented deeper interaction.

Secondly, democratic rituals themselves, as introduced through the intervention of outside agencies, appeared to have their own secretive dimensions in the eyes of the population, and these were therefore not always immediately accepted (for instance, in some cases people would insist they wanted to go into the polling booth only if accompanied by somebody else). This being the case, democratic rituals were not directly separated from the partly tangible and partly imaginary world of hidden evil forces to which local forms of political intimidation – for instance, *Nyau* magic eyes in polling booths – alluded to.

Some important insights emerge from the Malawi experience. In order to perceive and understand the more subtle and, to Western eyes, often somewhat 'irrational' ways of influencing voter behaviour, it would be advisable if election observers have more time to get acquainted with fears and anxieties of the local population as they exist both in the realm of 'day' as well as in the realm of the imaginary. The observers in the Malawi case had inadequate knowledge of the local culture and lacked sufficient time to prepare themselves adequately for it. Moreover, attention to the 'non-rational' and the imaginary in local culture was lacking as well. This led to an over-emphasis

on the more 'rational' technical aspects of the election with the result that the actual observing, as was the case in Malawi, ended up narrowly focused on election procedures, usually concentrated in the periods just before, during and for a few days after the elections. To have a good chance of uncovering the more subtle and cultural forms of intimidation and influencing of voters, the observer would certainly need to be present for a longer time before the election and preferably in one place.

Secondly, in support of Geisler's conclusions (1993: 634) the *local* monitors are crucial in the empirical understanding of local popular culture and its normative schemes. With their continued presence, their broad-based composition and their very broad coverage of the entire election process and the polling stations, they would be the ideal partners of foreign observers. As Carothers also notes:

Domestic election monitors, if properly organized and prepared, have important advantages over foreign observers. ... They know the political culture, the language, and the territory in question and consequently are capable of seeing many things that short-term foreign observers cannot.

(Carothers 1997: 26)

But as Geisler correctly said, this partnership is obstructed by the fact that they remained in the margins of funding by the international community and in the shadow of their foreign colleagues as far as proclamations on the conduct of the election are concerned (Geisler 1993: 634). Certainly in Malawi the continued lack of financial support for their activities as well as the persistent surreptitious threat with regard to their activities from the side of the *Nyau* and MYP affected their stamina. Hence there is a great deal to be said for an increased and direct partnership between local monitors and international observers in all the aspects of the election observing effort. Further, Nevitte and Canton (1997) make a plea for an increased sense of complementarity between domestic and international observers. Instead of pointing at the 'dangers' of the local background and political bias of domestic observers, they stress the fact that becoming a local monitor may provide 'ordinary' citizens with greater knowledge of the 'nuts and bolts' of the democratic process (*ibid.*: 58). In my contribution, however I have hopefully been able to show that there is no one-way

process. It is not only domestic observers who have to be led into the secracies of what a democratic system implies and presupposes, but it is also the international observers who need to have a much greater sensitivity to the secracies of a local political culture.

Thirdly, with regard to the effect of the internal observing activities in Malawi, the conclusion should be that despite their lack of knowledge of the local political culture, the international election observers contributed to the process precisely because of their intermediary position. In their contacts with local monitors, surreptitious acts of intimidation could be presented and openly discussed, information on the various means of 'rigging' the election procedures could be shared and questions on some of the technical aspects of these procedures could be answered (in fact half of my time as an international observer in Malawi was devoted to such 'educational' activities as explaining what the complex voting process consisted of, what a discard box actually was meant to be, and so on). In this way, both the international observers and the local monitors would feel that their status, efficacy and safety were enhanced by mutual close contact and collaboration. The general conclusion from the Malawi case therefore should be that close partnership will prove to be beneficial to a deeper empirical understanding of local political culture and thereby of the effectiveness of international observing.

The elections, finally, led to a greater regionalization and ethnicization of Malawian politics (see Chirwa 1994, Kaspin 1995). When the election result became known, the consequences of the heavily regionalized voting were regularly and widely discussed amongst the UNDP's election observers. Would the country fall apart into warring regions, with an AFORD-dominated North, a UDF-dominated South and a still vigorous MCP in control of the Central region? Despite these concerns, the UNDP presence, with all the civic education and media support services that went with it, ended soon after the elections, with the result that the organization did not remain to look at how the results would be accepted.

To judge from the developments – or the lack of them – in Malawi in the second half of 1994 and into 1995, it looks as if elections and democratization have remained two quite different things. The old political culture of the former MCP

(particularly its gerontocratic nature: see Van Dijk 1998b) have remained largely intact, albeit in a somewhat altered form. This continuity takes many forms, among them the continuing influence at village level of the former MCP party chairmen and the way that many important members of the old political elite have found themselves a place within the UDF. Freedom of news-gathering for the sole radio broadcasting corporation is still not in place, and Malawi remains the only African country without TV: a direct legacy of political thinking under the Banda regime. In addition, the power of the *Nyau* secret society – which helped form the backbone of traditional forms of authority in large parts of Malawi – remains virtually unchanged and contributes to a picture of substantial continuity surviving in spite of elections and democratization. No public debate has ever started on the legacies of that political culture and the atrocities that took place in the period of 30 years of dictatorship that shaped this specific culture. Neither is there a public debate about the tenets of what democratization in Malawi is supposed to mean and what the places of *Nyau* and traditional authority is to be. So far there has been no indication that the new government of Bakili Muluzi is prepared to step into this arena, as it remains preoccupied with defending itself against the many accusations of undemocratic government it receives from the national and international communities. This once more seems to be an indication that the local political culture is of greater 'resilience' than some had hoped for after the advent of democratic change in this country.

NOTES

1. The United Nations Development Programme brought together a group of observers from a variety of Western and African countries under the umbrella of the JIOG (Joint International Observer Group) that also assisted the Malawian Electoral Committee in the execution of the election procedures.
2. The role of the established churches in Malawi's democratic transition is by no means unique. See Buijtenhuijs and Rynierse (1993: 65) and Buijtenhuijs and Thiriot (1995: 59) for a discussion of the active influence of particularly the Roman Catholic and various Protestant churches elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa.
3. It needs to be specified here that these local political conflicts between the *Nyau* and the churches mainly relate to the Central and Southern

parts of Malawi. In the much smaller Northern region of Malawi, where the *Nyau* were absent, local-level contestation between Christianity and traditional authorities developed very differently (see McCracken 1977). Nevertheless, Christianity contributed to the development of a national elite most importantly through the establishment of the first institute for higher education in Malawi in this particular region.

4. The distinction between observers and monitors is that, as will be explained in more detail below, observers came from outside Malawi to be placed under the authority of the JIOG (see note 1), while monitors came from within Malawi and were operating under the aegis of the PAC. These local monitors therefore either could belong to one of the opposition groups, or to the ruling party (MCP), or to one of the churches which were involved in PAC.
5. Particularly for the Central region, where the *Nyau* appeared to have been developing a rather marked symbiosis with one of the three Presbyterian Synods, the so-called Nkhoma Synod, which remained loyal to Dr Banda during the process of democratization, scholarly reflection may lead to further insight on how local political formations react to extraneous processes of intervention. Despite being strange bedfellows, this case (information through personal communication with Prof. Schoffeleers) of a covert alliance between the *Nyau* and members of the Synod may show, although details are yet to be revealed through study and research, how such indigenous political formations forge new and creative alliances to curb external intervention and to preserve internal political supervision.

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