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Factors affecting the growth of the Malawian film industry

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Abstract

Interest in development of Malawian film has occurred like flashes in pans over the years, considering the culture of cinema and film making in the country. Like many Malawian arts genres, attempts to develop the film industry have met lukewarm responses from the market that seems unready to consume Malawian products, given the international competition that the practice has had over the years, whether it be from the British colonial films, moving to Hollywood, the injection of Chinese karate movies and of late the popular Nollywood video films. Besides the market, however, issues of support in terms of non-existent legal frameworks emerge now and again, adding to explanations of failing growth. Critically, the silence on Malawian film making and cinema in international scholarly circles, with the exception of David Kerr's lone voice, should be a surprise, given how other industries in the region and the continent have developed, and continue to develop. This article attempts to ask some of the most basic questions about the practice of film making in Malawi on who, what, and how films have been created, tracing the history of cinema from the British Colonial practice, through Kamuzu Banda's reign to the present. Having done that, the paper samples a selection of films from reputable film makers, and using Steve Chimombo's theory of ULIMBASO, places them within the ideological formations and aesthetics of Malawi and Africa. In the end, what this paper achieves is to further what scholars such as David Kerr have explored as they connected the Malawian film industry to British colonial film making in Central Africa, tea marketing cinema, and its illustrious viewing plans in Nyasaland, as it fills the scholarly information gap that exists.

Key words: *Hollywood, Malawian film, ULIMBASO, Nollywood, Tea Marketing Cinema*

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Introduction

(On) the future of the (Malawian) movie industry ... there is a gradual change... Malawi is a developing country and there are a number of challenges that (it is) facing... I urge companies to look beyond football (soccer) and develop the same interest in the movie industry (Radio broadcaster and film actor, Hope Chisanu, quoted in Orama Chinamulungu, *The Nation*(Malawi), February 11, 2014).

The epigraph by *The Nation* culture reporter Orama Chinamulungu captures Malawian film actor Hope Chisanu expressing the feeling commonly shared in the country about the Malawi film industry. There is frustration amongst the few practitioners about the industry's failure to grow and the commentator here seems to attribute it to, among

other things, financing of the sector. However, the culture of cinema in Malawi goes back to the 1930s when the Colonial British Government introduced it to Central Africa. Is one reason adequate for the lack of growth for all decades that have gone past?

This paper argues that there are many factors that have affected the growth of the Malawian film industry by firstly exploring the historical background, from the introduction of colonial cinema in Central Africa, including Malawi, taking the reader through the three decades of Kamuzu Banda's rule, and events in the post 1994 political environment when Malawi reverted to a multi-party democracy. An analysis of a sample of four films, whose critical analysis evokes comparison to the practice from other endeavours in Africa, comes soon after. The question that the paper attempts to answer is: what is the state of affairs in Malawian film industry, given the scholarly silence that has followed David Kerr's 1998 study. Who are the practitioners? What have they produced? What ideology and approach do they use, given the past history of filmmaking in Malawi and Africa?

Malawian Film in History

David Kerr's *Dance, Media, Entertainment and Performance in south east Africa* (Kerr, 1998) gives the most elaborate account of the development of film in Malawi. Reporting the state of film affairs alongside that of Zambia, Kerr brings to bear the policies and practice of film in Central Africa, besides thoroughly offering the operative ideologies for the industry with the passage of time. The British introduced film in Central Africa, inclusive of Malawi (Nyasaland), Southern and Northern Rhodesia in the 1930s. Wishing to make colonial rule acceptable to the natives, they used mass media, including cinema (Kerr 1998:82). Following the introduction of "Bioscope" in South Africa (Kerr Ibid.), the initial experiment was to bring to their settler communities a connection to what was happening at home in the United Kingdom. Later picked up by the mining industry in Northern Rhodesia, cinema was seen as cheap entertainment for the native workers (Kerr 1988: 84). Armed with films produced in India and Nigeria, the exercise proved to be successful with many natives, away from their "'drunken' leisure which disturbed their productivity". Further than that, an intention to bring in more interest in the films saw the British Educational Kinema Experiment (BEKE) commission sisal farmer Major Ernest Notcutt in Tanganyika to create films that included black Africans, for the Africans themselves. One such film, *Gamu*, inculcated Christian moral behavior in natives. The main character Gamu, defended his white master and their household from native thieves and was awarded ten British pounds by his boss. With ten pounds as plentiful money, Gamu marries two wives and becomes a drunkard. Later coming to his senses, he stops drinking and uses the remaining money on farming, making himself wealthy. Other films taught new methods of farming and healthy living for the Africans. These films were shown to natives around central Africa, including Malawi using mobile film vans. The cinema activities were coordinated at Central Film Unit (CFU) and later Central African Film Unit (CAFU) (Ibid.: 87-88).

The story of British introduction of film in Africa is not only restricted to Central Africa and Malawi. Africanus Aveh in the *Rise of video film industry & its social impact on Ghanaians* reports on the role played by the British colonialists not only in Ghana (Aveh, 2010:122) but in the West African region. They did not only introduce

cinema but also a Film School in which three pioneering Ghanaian filmmakers Robert Ofoe Fenuku, Samuel Aryeetey and Bob Okanta were trained, to later collaborate with their British counterpart Sean Graham at Gold Coast Film Unit in 1946 (Ashuntantang 2010: 133). Still in West Africa, Joyce Ashuntantang, while complaining about the British neglect on the territory as they operated from Nigeria until 1949, writes that cinemas were introduced in Southern Cameroon, the English speaking part of the country, in 1949 (Ibid.). In East Africa, Vicensia Shule (2010) raises the British introduction issue when she explores film in Tanzania. In collaboration with South African production companies, the British had influenced the production of about ten films by the time Tanzania got independence in 1961 (Shule 2010:39). Furthermore, there is evidence of British influence in the territories that they controlled in North Africa such as Egypt. What this means is that the modernization ideology (Kerr, op.cit: 87-88) which became a mission communicated through these films was spread in Anglophone Africa, which makes approximately three quarters of the continent. The question of how the film operated and influenced local film production has been well captured by Kerr who spoke about the expensive film equipment, the operation of the equipment restricted to the White producers as the Africans became involved in acting and menial jobs of production (Kerr 1988.: 85-87). What is more, the control of the cinema operation was under government, a factor that independent African states later adopt and place under their Ministries of Information (Kerr 1988).

In Malawi, the Tea Marketing Expansion Board (TMEB), in addition to the colonial government picked up the cue of using film to create modernization adverts for tea drinking (Ibid. :89). Productions such as *Teapot Town* and *The Travels of Mr. Jack Tea Drinker* were shot with private tea industry money and taken around the country. This cinema culture went on until Nyasaland became independent (Ibid.).

When Malawi became self-governing in 1964, the independent government adopted the Colonial film policy approach to continue under the Ministry of Information, which was mostly responsible for news, whether it be radio, print and cinematic documentation. However, after independence there is evidence that independent filmmakers created some films, though with minimal output. In 1967, Trevor Whittock, who taught in the English Department at the University of Malawi produced *The Dance of Death*, adapted from Bertolt Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (Ibid.:175). The end of the 1960s saw Viznews productions, a British Film company that had been contracted by the Malawi government, producing "*Malawi Army and Police in Search of Rebels*". A propaganda film, the story was based on the search and killing of Yatuta Chisiza (Ibid.:174) who led a rebellion against Kamuzu Banda, after he suppressed all dissent by sending into exile such people as Kanyama Chiume, Masauko Chipembere and Orton Chirwa, making himself the sole leader, and the Malawi Congress Party the only party allowed to operate in the country (Chiume 1982).

In 1973, David Kerr, an academic at the University of Malawi tried to produce a film called *Mbalame*: a story of Sikusinja, a young man who killed his brother Gwenembe after Gwenembe accumulated wealth in the city where the two went to work, as Sikusinja spent his time drinking and womanising. Gwenembe's spirit turns into a bird, breaking into song to report the incident to the elders in their village (Kerr op. cit: 174). Rumoured that the story was about Kamuzu Banda, the film was

stopped from production by the Special Branch on the pretence that David Kerr did not obtain a licence for shooting the film from the Malawi Censorship Board, which had been enacted after the 1968 Publications and Entertainment Act. Kerr later left the country for Zambia, haunted by the Special Branch who openly staked outside his flat in Blantyre (Magalasi 2012:51). Later the Department of Information would become the only film making act, creating documentaries on Malawian football and Kamuzu Banda's rallies and travels (Kerr 1998).

What the colonial government had started in terms of restrictions re-appear in the independent state. The government is the producer and the distributor for the films. Any private hands that want to take part are barred, for fear of bad government policies being exposed. Under Banda's dictatorship, the government failed to create an enabling environment to advance the industry, other than putting up the 1968 Publications and Entertainment Act which emphasized on pseudo-Victorian morality and political protectionism.

In the 1980s, four notable films were made. Entrepreneur novelist Aubrey Kalitera produced *To Ndirande mountain with love*, to a whooping Malawi Kwacha 70,000 (\$35,000.00) (Kerr 1998:176). In an interview later, he stated that he never broke even, though for the first time, a local filmmaker was allowed to show a film in local cinemas that were mostly owned by Asian businessmen and showed only Hollywood movies. By 1996, all the 13 cinemas that the country had, ran out of business, owing to the worsening economic situation. Furthermore, the invasion of video films, mostly from Nigeria contributed to confused growth of the local industry by swarming the market with 'mostly' pirated videos. Small video viewing shops erupted in township and peri-urban market centres, becoming very popular film consumption outlets for people at grassroots level. But another important development was Chris Kamlongera production, *Mtengo wa moyo (Tree of life)*, sponsored by United Nations. His complaint was that the filming was not a success because of interference from the U.N. scriptwriter who had been assigned to the project (Ibid.:177).

However, while the industry was stunted, one's own personal observation was that Malawi in the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a renaissance in literary and stage performance outputs which could have advanced filmmaking. For example, *Parade*, a Rhodesian popular magazine was imported into the country. Notably, it included, as part of its fictional reads, photo action strips. This influenced a Malawian magazine with the same format called *Star* and it included a photo action strip which was commonly known as adventures of Sam Mperu (Magalasi, personal experience). Further than that, Mupa Shumba and James Gibbs had formed the Chancellor College Travelling Theatre, as Steve Chimombo, Adrian Roscoe and David Kerr start the Writers' Workshop. On the other hand, Popular Publications ran by Montfort Priests encouraged publication of stories in Chichewa. Malawian Writers' Series came about and it boasted up to about ten titles, either as novellas, plays or poetry. The 1970s witnessed creation of a lot of popular fiction, poetry and dramatic literature, despite continuing political repression that resulted in exile or detention without charge of some university lecturers, including the only PhD holder the country had, Felix Mnthali (Magalasi Ibid:25).

Coming to the 1980s, the Chancellor Travelling Theatre under David Kerr, Edge Kanyongolo and Robyn Zagwazatha revolutionized the drama scene by producing drama in Chichewa, the national language, adding to efforts by individual

writers like Steve Chimombo who wrote *Wachiona Ndani?* (Card Gambling). As such, popular Drama companies like Kwathu, Umodzi, and Lonjezo were formed (Magalasi Ibid:133). There was a surge in the level of performance amongst ordinary popular drama actors, away from the university trained (Magalasi Ibid:133). Ordinarily, this could have pumped up activities in the film industry, owing to literary and performance creativity that characterized the period. By the second half of the 1980s, things were bad in the country as Kamuzu Banda became old and senile, losing his power-grip, and political repression by Banda's lieutenants intensified, detaining without trial academics like Jack Mapanje, or assassinating firebrand journalists like Mkwapatira Mhango together with his family in Lusaka, or shooting dead Atati Mpakati in the lobby of the Sheraton Hotel in Harare. Then the winds of change that tore the iron curtain blew, and Banda was no longer the anti-communist favourite of the West (O'Mallie, 1999). An interesting delayed development during Banda's rule was the restriction of non-governmental organizations, which allowed only a few such as the Christian Service Committee to operate, as they towed government line (Chijere Chirwa.al:2004): a factor that would change after democratization in 1994 as NGOs swarmed the country in large numbers (Ibid).

After democratization of the country in 1994, drama companies, Izeki ndi Jakobo had some of their popular stage plays, *I am the road you walk*, *Banja* (family) and *Kukhala* (neighbourliness) filmed as videos, sponsored by Candlex Limited, a candle and soap making company (Magalasi *op.cit.* :161), while Wakhumbata Ensemble Theatre produced the film *The Prodigal son* (Chimombo, 1995). Non-governmental organizations such as Action Aid used video as a way of spreading developmental news in *Stepping Stones*, a dialogue enhancing video on HIV and AIDS amongst married couples. Opportunities that had been suppressed were starting to come about with changes on the political scene, and yet the country had gone bankrupt due to financial mismanagement and the slow recovery from the withholding of funds by donors.

In 1999 Television Malawi, a state broadcasting station, was instituted, after a UNESCO feasibility study in the mid-1990s, and was placed under the Ministry of Information (Malawi Government 1998). With staff trained in Namibia and United Kingdom (Kerr *op. cit.*: 197), the station's management promised to fulfill the two sectors of television namely news and entertainment, but the latter became harder to realize. Schooled in radio broadcasting, the management team failed to make a transition from radio journalism, doing well on the news part but failing miserably to produce television drama. However, over the years, the group of young talent they started with moved on to train further on their own, forming private production houses. Maneno Mtawali, Jolly Max Ntaba jr., and Patrick Njawala associated with Public Service International (PSI) and trained in film directing, producing some notable films, some of which will be analysed below. Apart from the three, Villant Nyadausi Ndasowa-Jana went for film studies at Luton University in the United Kingdom to establish herself as a quality documentary maker. Others like Eldred Chagara and Gospel Kadzako, who were in radio, initiated their own training in film and have either become correspondents for international television houses or independent radio broadcasting owners, growing to open their own television stations.

What is also important to note is the presence of satellite television run by Multi-Choice South Africa. Dominant as a corporation, and beaming their programmes, mostly including Hollywood films and the Sky Sports Channels with

European and South American soccer, tennis and rugby, the Malawi Film industry is under threat as it has to compete with the foreign film products on the quality of programmes and films produced locally. On resources, obviously the multi-national has more resources than the government funded broadcaster, resulting in Multi-Choice offering Television Malawi Channel 295 to beam its programmes. What is more, Television Malawi gives space to international media houses like BBC, CNN, Aljazeera, CCTV, apart from buying Nigerian charismatic Christian conventions to broadcast, when the local channel has nothing to show. The difference in quality between the outside programmes and the local one is so stark that the station is unwittingly taking itself out of competition.

On the other hand, other independent filmmakers like Charles Shemu Joyah, Michael Usi and Never Matewere, came about. Trained as a Geologist, Shemu Joyah took part in the literary renaissance of the 1970s as a short story writer, a skill he would turn to create and produce award-winning films *A season of life* and *The last fishing boat*, apart from making a film documentary of a water-shedding anti-British colonial freedom fighter of the 1900s, John Chilembwe. Another independent filmmaker is Michael Usi, who, initially trained as a Medical Assistant, and later as a popular drama actor, and is now working as an HIV and AIDS campaigner for Adventist Relief Agency (ADRA). Usi has produced *Dr. Manga1 and 2*, and *Kale*, a film on Kamuzu Banda. A very complex person to label, Usi quadruples in roles as he roves as popular stage comedian, runs ADRA, especially doing Theatre for Development on HIV and AIDS, besides making videos for broadcast on Television Malawi called *Tikuferanji* (What are we dying for ?). Building on that strength, he created three films as indicated above. What is interesting about this filmmaker is the way he produces the films. His skills in both narrative development and filmmaking are very limited but because he manages to get funds for the projects, films like the above come out, in which he is the director and the main character. He is good at marketing and publicity in that he either invites politically influential people or uses political icons as his subjects for films. In the film *Kale*, he himself plays Kamuzu Banda. In shooting part of the film, he appeared in Blantyre City's main highway, dressed in a white suit like Kamuzu, complete with a Stetson hat and a flywhisk, riding in an open landrover, with bodyguards around the landrover, and actors dressed like the Paratrooper Police. He was arrested for disturbance of traffic and filming without permission. His main contribution is that he is attempting to do something, though Vicensia Shule's ambivalence of being caught in between innovation and incompetence on some Tanzanian films (Shule op. cit) applies to Usi and his film productions.

As for Never Matewere, he created the *Most Wanted Man* and took it to the Sithengi Film Market in Cape Town, South Africa where he was advised to go back and train in filmmaking. Matewere uses home video equipment to put together his films, mostly influenced by Chinese Kung fu movies. With very little resources, his films are of poor quality in terms of the pictures, apart from conceptualization of the films themselves, and some of the DVD's he sells have been found to contain nothing, confirming what Vicensia Shule wonders about some of the Tanzanian films that run in-between innovation and incompetence.

What have we seen about Film in Malawi up to so far? We have viewed the narrative of the development or underdevelopment of Malawian film industry, which started by understanding the initial British influences of cinema, with modernization

intentions and restrictive environment for the growth of local talent. Further than that, we briefly explored how the industry fared during independence under Kamuzu Banda who adopted the restrictive colonial policies, further stunting the growth of the industry, despite an apparent Malawian artistic renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s which could have helped to develop it like in the Nigerian case of Onitsha popular culture market. We have also seen how the introduction of television has not added much to the growth due to artistic leadership problems in the institution, despite the fact that some of the pioneering young artists have gone on to establish themselves in their own small way, winning awards here and there, in addition to some young innovative filmmakers whose products are problematic. What remains, however, is to probably ask the question: what are some of the products of the stunted industry and what do they contain in comparison to other industries in Africa? To respond to that, we sample Patrick Njawala and Villant Nyadausi Ndasowa-Jana's documentaries namely *Iri mu ufa* and *Mystery Mountain*, produced by the two in that order; and *Seasons of a life* and *The Test*, two feature films produced by Charles Shemu Joyah and Maneno Ntawali in that order.

Njawala and Ndasowa's documentary films

(Edzi) Iri mu ufa (AIDS is as common and affects us like maize flour)

Iri mu ufa is a 26 minute documentary telling the story of HIV and AIDS infection and how it was impossible, just by looking at a person, to know that s/he had the disease. Using the Behavioural Change approach of testimonies by victims/affected, the film documents narratives of six people who were infected. Arranging the subtopics of the documentary as questions, *Iri mu ufa* explores perceptions about HIV and AIDS, including unprotected sex, urging people to go for testing to know their status.

What was outstanding about the film was not only the emotional evoking testimonies from the victims, but the dramatic set up between the subjects and the narrator, who in the end also reveals that he was HIV positive. Besides that, the style of structuring the film used ordinary Malawians' lifestyles such as drinking beer at the beer-hall, a family sitting around for a meal of nsima, pupils in a classroom, people at church, young men playing soccer, or tilling the field, showed innovation as these worked as establishing shots for the subsequent scenes. Set in Blantyre, as the introduction stated, *Iri mu ufa* uses typical Malawian ordinary life in the townships and villages, and employs Chichewa language with English subtitles.

Produced by Population Services International, PSI, the film used the Behavioural Change Approach, underpinned by Social Marketing. In using this philosophy, the film identified the problem, which was the growing number of infections coming about because of people's assumptions about the appearance of an HIV positive person: sickly and very thin. Following the problem identification was the further debate on the deadly assumptions, followed by the solution: testing for the disease and use of condoms for safe sex. This flow of the structure alludes to social marketing model developed by the John Hopkins School for Public Health, which was modeled on commercial marketing and advertising (Piotrow 1997).

The social marketing approach, directly influenced by the modernization approach, made the film as a tool for selling products for survival in the time of HIV

and AIDS, namely testing and condoms. While the testing was done for free, the condom they propagated, Chishango (Shield), was sold on the open market for K5.00. What is apparent in this discussion is that *Iri mu ufa*, using the behavioural change approach meant to sell social services and products, and later in analysis, we will view how this qualifies as a Malawian film in light of aesthetic exploration by Steve Chimombo (1988), and to be later fitted in the African film critical debate as posited by a number of authors including Chidi Amuta (1989), Stephen Zacks, Keyan Tomasselli et.al, Keith Harrow and Jonathan Haynes (1999).

Mystery Mountain

Villant Nyadausi Ndasowa-Jana created *Mystery Mountain* as documentation for the disappearance of Dutch Peace Corp Volunteer Linda Pronk. Ms. Pronk went up Mulanje mountain in southern Malawi in 2003 and she never returned. The film documents a dramatization of her walk up the mountain, flimsily dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, carrying a book, a bottle of water and a camera. Later the film shows the hunt for Pronk initially done by local porters, and subsequently by Army helicopters from the Malawi Defence Force, and later still by a Dutch mountain rescue team, armed with sniffer dogs. The part of the mountain Pronk went called Sapitwa, which means ‘inhabited area’, is believed by local residents to be occupied by spirits. People who had disappeared before included local hunters, and tourists. Taking a discursive approach, the film explores the local belief that spirits occupy the mountain, before showing the sacrifices that the local Lhomwe and Mang’anja people offer to the spirits in such occasions. Since some of the local people who disappeared returned after spending about three weeks, the description of their experience informed the movie when they spoke about the finding of fresh food left by spirits, or hearing voices of spirits. Testing food on different temperatures in the Biology laboratory at the University of Malawi, and interviewing a psychiatrist nurse at Zomba Mental Hospital, the film seemed to partly contend with the story of the spirits because of the scientific explanations around some of the happenings like the food and voices stories. Ndasowa-Jana follows the traditional approach to documentary making in which she had a narrator, and footage was presented as evidence for the claims that the narration made. Sound included ambience for the different locations and jazz-fusion was utilized as theme music.

Viewing Ndasowa-Jana’s documentary as a Malawian film, and placed in the meta-criticism of being African will follow below, seeing that it was made by a Malawian, used Malawian setting and touched on traditional Malawian and African topical issue of cosmology by reference to the presence of spirits in the mountain.

Joyah and Mtawali’s feature films

The Test by Maneno Mtawali

Maneno Mtawali’s *The Test* is a film on HIV and AIDS. It tells the story of two young people who are about to marry but to do so, the young woman’s uncle demands that the man be tested first for HIV. The young man, struggling to push for the marriage is

discouraged by a friend who thinks otherwise. The film is so dramatic especially when the confused young man cannot make up his mind on whether to be tested or not, to the point that he at one time escapes from testing just as the nurse goes into a store room to pick equipment for the process. Jumping out of a window and escaping the premises by skipping over a fence, the young man is not sure of whether he has the virus or not and the idea of being found positive scares him.

On the other side, equally pushed by friends, the young woman sticks to her guns as the uncle is so adamant about the testing. Later taking a trip to her home village, she is heart broken but the uncle will not budge. When the young man realizes that he would lose her, he gathers courage and gets tested. Found HIV negative, he follows the fiancée to the home village where things are sorted out and dowry (lobola) is offered for the hand of the woman.

The film is Malawian, looking at the subject matter and the characters, in addition to the topical issue of lobola. However, there are a number of things that bring down the quality. Firstly, there seems to be confusion on cultural issues of lobola. The young woman comes from the Ngoni people of Central Malawi and they practice matrilineal type of marriage where the man leaves his home to build a family at the woman's home, and there is no lobola in this population group. There seems to be an imposition of the issue, possibly because of the way it is commonly spoken about and denigrated in the cities, especially amongst gender cultural activists. My guess is that Mtawali wanted to sound politically correct at the expense of narrative credibility. But probably the most important question will be on how it fits, firstly in the debate of the critical analysis of being Malawian and secondly in the African debate, considering the different positions that characterize the African film debate.

Shemu Joyah's *Seasons of a life*

Season's of a life is a story of Sungisa (keep for me), a housemaid who gets pregnant by the master of the house, Konda (love), a lawyer by profession, because Konda wanted a child which his wife Thokozani (We should be thankful) could not as she was impotent. When Sungisa becomes pregnant, Konda wants to have the child aborted because he is afraid his reputation as a lawyer, as a church elder, and a husband is on the line. He takes her to the hospital for abortion when Sungisa escapes and takes refuge at her aunt's place. Rethought, he advises Sungisa to keep the child. While pregnant, she takes the school certificate examination, passes well and is admitted into the Law Program at the University of Malawi, Chancellor College. Graduating as a lawyer, Sungisa fights to get her child back and with her Lawyer classmate at the University, she fights Konda and wins the case. The film is set within the middle class of Malawi who climb up the ladders from ordinary classes through education.

The story is carefully crafted, benefitting from the short story writing experience which Joyah acquired in the 1970s and 1980s and transferred to the screen in *Seasons of life*. Besides that, the film has evidence of household dramas popularized in Malawi by Nigerian video films, celebrating the upward mobility of African society, registered in the big houses they live in, and the luxurious cars they possess. The careful shots of the film indicate how Joyah planned to tell this story. Thematically, it courts the prevalent debates in gender studies circles by challenging power and masculinity as it takes advantage of vulnerable people like housemaids, but also hitting

straight at the core of patriarchal debate, as one character states that “manhood is destructive, while womanhood is struggling in maternity wards”. Notable also is the soundtrack which uses Malawian dance band traditional musicians like Overton Chimombo and Giddes Chalamanda, who apparently belonged to the art renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s.

It is also apparent that the acting is well done, benefitting from the drama club acting exercises that takes place in secondary schools in Malawi, enhanced by the unregistered drama companies that stage popular plays in the country. The main actor, Ben Msuku is a product of Chichiri Secondary School and by her side was Neria Chikhosi, a graduate of Zingwangwa Secondary. The play has won over five awards including the African Movie Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, the Burundi International Film Festival, Les Prix Africa Numerique, Canada, and Special Schools Prize at the African Film Festival in Verona. However, just like all the sampled films, the question that still remains is: how do they fit in the Malawian and African cinema categorization, put forward by the critics.

Aesthetics and Ideology of the Malawian film industry

Njawala and Ndasowa’s documentaries, plus Ntawali and Joyah’s feature films present a number of interesting scenarios worthy looking at that will help to place them in the debate of aesthetics and ideology. On the theory of Malawian art appreciation, Steve Chimombo, in his book *Malawian Oral Literature*, states that to appreciate Malawian art, the theory of ULIMBASO should be used. Extracted from the abbreviated term theory, UL- is “a theory of inspiration, or creativity. Taken from Ula (instrument for foretelling used by a traditional healers); or laula (to bring about things that don’t normally happen), is the centre or source of inspiration” while MB- is the unifier of all the arts, and is a root of an activity for creation, whether it is *yimba* – sing, *umba* – mould, *kamba* – speak etc. And the SO- is the theory of appreciation, and referred to as kaSO – (artistic appreciation) and luSO- artistic creation (Chimombo *op.cit.*: 61-71).

UL- : What is the creative inspiration and circumstance for the films? Ndasowa-Jana wanted to explore and expose to the world the old belief that Sapitwa peak is occupied by spirits. Inspired by the disappearance of Linda Pronk, she saw an opportunity to explore the old age belief. Through the story, sacrifices and processes traditionally followed are explored in the documentary. Above that, Lhomwe and Manga’anja cosmology is validated. Though trips up the mountain have become dominated by tourists, and that Ndasowa-Jana viewed the story from the eyes of a Scot who was equally a tourist, and furthermore, the belief system battled with scientific explanations, she celebrates the people, who, generation after generation, live around this mysterious place.

As for Njawala’s *Iri mu ufa*, the inspiration seems to be confused as the film comes about because of HIV and AIDS and has an external motivation. Note that the end product is the selling and not necessarily the deaths HIV and AIDS is causing. While the social services of testing and protected sex would benefit the Malawian, the main idea behind it is inculcating consumerism, an agenda for modernization. From the time cinema was introduced by the British, modernization was at the centre, pushing to “civilize” the natives. In this case then, Chimombo’s UL- rejects the inspiration for *Iri mu ufa* to be Malawian. And this conclusion goes for Mtawali’s *The Test* as well. Because its inspiration was more for social marketing than the story of the

Malawians, it also fails the test of UL-, creative inspiration coming from, and to benefit the Malawians.

In the case of *Seasons of a life*, the creative impulse (UL-) is from Malawian socio-cultural experience. While set in the urban areas, the experience of Sungisa, the Malawian vulnerable girl child, in the hands of the middle class, places the inspiration source as a challenge from within and therefore addresses a Malawian need. *Seasons of life*, therefore, tested by the creative inspiration tool passes as a Malawian film. However, if the UL- has weighed films on the creative impetus and revealed that some films have inspiration from without and others from within, what about the MB- which talks about the “creation” activity that points to form?

Njawala’s *Iri mu ufa*, and Mtawali’s *The Test* integrates the content and the form informed by the Behaviour Change Philosophy of using testimonies as a method of persuading clients, (in the case of Njawala), and manipulative participation in the case of Mtawali. Srinivas Melkote gives three levels of participation as the development communication practice moves from the one-way to the dialogic. Describing the first as Dominant Paradigm, which paid no attention to the receivers, the revision of the approach brought about the Alternative Development paradigm. In this, a few traits, whether it be the personalities or the culture of the receivers of development are included in the communication, ‘tokenistically’ bluffing inclusion and consideration of their lives, and yet for all that, the underpinning philosophy remains the dominant paradigm. This approach, tokenist in perspective bluffs receivers of development as if their needs have been considered: a process Nigerian Theatre for Development expert Steve Abah calls ‘facipulation’ (Abah: 2005). Mtawali’s *The Test* uses the socio-cultural story to push forward the social marketing agenda, benefitting consumerism of the PSI underwriters.

As for Ndasowa’s *Mystery Mountain* and Joyah’s *Seasons of a Life*, the subjectmatter and the form has an intention of creating an art piece that benefits Malawians, either by affirming or just debating their belief system, or the relationship between the middle class and the vulnerable poor. What comes out as a *chouMB(a)*- (the molded piece) helps the people and their lives. But the question that stands is the last part of Chimombo’s theory of art appreciation of kaSO – viewing the beauty or excellence of an art piece.

Njawala and Mtawali import an approach to artistic formulation and loses out in the consideration for beauty because the underpinning philosophies is ‘manipulation’. This means that while the art pieces are coated with a Malawian appearance, the inside has no intention of enhancing the Malawian as it prioritises the external agenda of inculcating consumerism. If probably the consumerism benefitted the Malawians, that could have been different but it is the pharmaceutical companies of the West that patent the products and services and benefits thereof are directed to them.

As regards to Ndasowa-Jana and Joyah, the beauty of their art pieces lies in the fact that there is a balance between creativity and the final intention and benefit. Ndasowa puts forward the belief system, therefore validating the people who live around this mountain; and Joyah puts a debate forward on how Malawians treat each other harshly and without feeling, based on class, power and vulnerability. Its kaSO comes out because there will develop a sensitivity and consciousness towards the girl-

child, who is poor and has to sell her services to the rich Malawians. Therefore the two films pass the test of beauty.

Generally, evaluating the four films using Chimombo's ULIMBASO to appreciate the Malawianness, it becomes clear that Njawala and Mtawali's films fail the test because of where the creative inspiration comes from, and how the form and content become tools for manipulation. On the other hand, Ndasowa and Joyah's movies stand out in the placement of being Malawian because of what they intended to do, benefitting the Malawian.

However, the critical question that still remains is: how do they fit in the African cinema debate? The critics bemoan the critical dilemmas that African cinema is mostly faced with. For example, there seems to be a question against a quest for authenticity (Amuta, op.cit, Chapter One), and yet the others trash traditionalism as apolitical and at times romantic. At times the claim is that African cinema is caught in the postcolonial predicament. Then the question becomes: how does Malawian film fit in such critical debates?

Authenticity

Film makers such as Haile Gerima in films like *Sankofa* use myth and legend as a way of dealing with the present. In the film, Mona takes a trip to Africa which becomes a pilgrimage when her conscious is throbbled by the feeling for the past that engulfs her when she is in the slave castle in Gold Coast (Kande. 1989:89-114). In other instances, the Negritudists have been bashed by Marxists as romanticists of the African past and that African memory should be driven by reality, accepting the mistakes and celebrating the strengths (Fannon 1968). However, in all this, it can be proved that those who are rooted in their history and culture are stronger and their creative power is bigger. So while this debate cannot be resolved, the point of strength comes from rooting oneself in one's own culture and history. Europeans are more creative in the cultural forms that form part of their cognitive ethos, with examples, amongst many others, like ballet and rock music.

Whatever form of performance done, such bases for creativity are noticeable. In other instances, the Chinese are strong culturally because of holding on to what makes and defines them as Chinese people. Compare the opening of the Olympics in Beijing, and in Greece and the World Cup in South Africa. Beijing and Greece told their story using their history and culture. The inspiration, creativity, and excellence of the presentations were clear. On the other hand, how did the South Africans perform at the 2010 World Cup opening ceremony in Johannesburg? There was a problem of trying to be politically correct and what they presented as cultural was the so called contemporary dance, created from American dance steps, and yet they could have presented the same creative ethos they used in designing stadiums like the image of the Calabash for Soccer city etc. Where was the Zulu war dance, the Sotho dance, the Shangaan dance, the Afrikaner folk music? All of these excellent cultural pieces were lost in political correctness, and their presentation was weak in comparison to Beijing and Greece. What this means, in the debate of African cinema is that the quest for Malawianness in Malawian film will make the Malawian filmmaker stronger, and therefore the placement of such filmmakers and their art as Africans will bring out stronger, culturally based art pieces. In the Njawala and Mtawali films' case, the creative ethos of the filmmakers is weakened because of paying attention to an outside

agenda and Ndasowa-Janah and Joyah place themselves comfortably in African cinema.

The postcolonial predicament

The placement of Malawian film in African debate of postcolonial predicament is a complicated one, yet simple. Culture is dynamic and will therefore take on traits of the other cultures it encounters. Colonialism left a system of doing things, initially disguised as civilization. The predicament of that dilemma in the independent state is on whether to go back to the roots and abandon the colonial ways or just continue with where the colonialist left off. Looking at the sampled Malawian films, it is clear that while film as a medium is a colonial form, but the Ndasowa-Jana and Joyah films have indicated that the colonial forms can be utilized for the benefit of the Africans. It might sound like a compromised view but practical truth can be traced in Achebe's articulation in *Hopes and Impediments*, that English, for example, can be usefully used to respond to the postcolonial predicament debate in a pragmatic way. At the end of the day, the question should be: who does the art benefit, looking at the inspiration ethos, form and content? Does it continue to enslave the Africans in the hands of those who colonized them? If the answer is Yes, it should be avoided? If it is No, then it should be utilized. Therefore, as we answered the question of placement of Malawian film by looking at what benefits the Malawian, the critical debate on African cinema, whether it is on authenticity or postcolonial predicament, could be responded to in the same way. The ideology for African cinema, whether responding to authenticity or postcolonial predicament, should be the one that strengthens the African cultural, political and economic position.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to expose the state of the Malawian film industry. Starting with the history of cinema in Malawi from the 1930s, it has revealed the British colonial policy, approaches and practice, and the reasons why cinema was being utilized on the natives. Further than that, the paper has also shown how independent Malawi adopted the oppressive approaches that the colonial government followed, ending up suppressing opportunities for the growth of the industry. Taking the debate further, the paper explored a sample of four films from Malawi, subjecting them to Steve Chimombo's ULIMBASO, used for the appreciation of Malawian art. The finding has been that there is a mixture of approaches in Malawian film with inspiration coming from within, to benefit Malawians, and in others, from without, benefitting external players. On ideology of African cinema which Malawian film follows, the ones that benefit the local people has been seen to be able to deal with the debates on authenticity and postcolonial predicament by focusing on what profits the people. To therefore answer the question of what the state of affairs in the Malawian film industry is, it is still stunted though there are efforts, here and there, of trying to put it on its feet. In comparison to what is happening in other parts of Africa, the problems of struggling with ideology and aesthetics seems similar though the other African practices are more developed than the Malawian industry.

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