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9-2014

# Chitenje: The Production and Use of Printed Cotton Cloth in Malawi

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Worden, Sarah, "Chitenje: The Production and Use of Printed Cotton Cloth in Malawi" (2014). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 888.

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NEW

DIRECTIONS: Examining the Past,  
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## Chitenje: The Production and Use of Printed Cotton Cloth in Malawi

Sarah Worden

‘To wear a commemorative cloth is to visually communicate that one has either a relationship with the person or event or identifies with the subject of the cloth’s design’ (Perani and Wolff 1999: 30)

Historic links between Scotland and Malawi date back to the mid-1800s when Scottish missionary explorer David Livingstone first travelled into the territory that is modern day Malawi. Many other missionaries and traders followed and today strong links with many Governmental and Non-Government Organisation exist between the two countries. Since 2009, National Museums Scotland (NMS) has been working in partnership with Museums of Malawi on a number of projects, ranging from skills exchange programmes to exhibition development. Through this partnership it has also been possible to gain insights into the Malawian collections in Scotland and to develop the scope of the collections to include examples of Malawian contemporary material culture ranging from wood carving, beadwork to woven and printed textiles.

Working in Malawi, as in most African countries, one cannot help but be aware of the wide range of multi-coloured printed cotton cloth worn by women everywhere. This cloth is worn in a particular style of dress known as a *chitenje* (pl. *kitenje*), and is clearly a commodity which has huge market appeal. A *chitenje* is a rectangle of fabric (usually 2 x 1 metres) sold in the markets and fabric shops and is commonly worn as a wraparound dress or skirt. Patterns move in and out of fashion with female friends and family members often selecting and wearing the same designs. If not worn as a wrapper the cloth is tailored into an outfit which consists of a *chitenje* and blouse combination. As Clara Henderson and Lisa Gilman (2004:26) have observed, this outfit is often referred to as the national or traditional dress, terms for this style of dress which originate in the post-independence era.

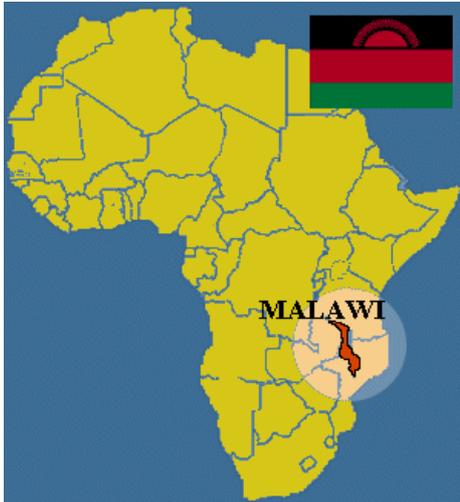
In addition to floral, abstract and geometric patterns are designs which include slogans, logos, portraits, images of objects and of buildings. This type of cloth design is commissioned by political parties, churches and NGOs operating in Malawi. It is such a common sight that my Malawian museum colleagues had not previously considered it a subject for research or museum collecting. However, through this project, a collection of these cloths now exists in both Museums of Scotland and Museums of Malawi. In this paper I draw on fieldwork in Blantyre, Malawi carried out during April 2014 with museum assistant Emmanuel Mwale, from Chichiri Museum. Our objectives on this visit were to find out more about the patronage, supply and use of factory printed cloth in Malawi and collect cloths for the Museum African textile collection.

Although second-hand clothing from European sources now floods the markets and western styles and fashions are widely followed, particularly in the urban centres, every woman I spoke to, whatever her age, owns at least one *chitenje* and this has come to define local dress practice in Malawi. Attention to this tradition reveals patterns of commodification and consumer demand and the role of cloth in regional and international trading relationships, which in turn have been influential in the development of social and political identity.

### Funeral Cloth

I begin however, with a recent moment in Malawian history, one which occurred during an earlier visit I made to the country which showed me first-hand not only how dynamic and responsive the printed cloth industry could be, but how for Malawians, this cloth is embedded in cultural practice.

Within just fourteen days of the sudden death of President of the Republic of Malawi, Bingu wa Mutharika, on 5 April 2012, a commemorative funeral cloth had been designed, printed and distributed. It featured a photographic portrait of the president (see fig.2). On 21 April newspapers reported that the Malawian Government had spent 21 million kwacha (approx. \$125,748) on the production of 50,000 metres of funeral cloth to be distributed through churches and political parties (*Nyasa Times* 21/04/2012). It is a regular feature at funerals for large amounts of cloth to be bought and made up into outfits for all those attending. With this huge and costly gesture the significance of the cloth as the key expression of commemoration to be worn on a day of national mourning was clear even though, or perhaps in spite of, the country's dire financial straits at the time of the President's demise.



*Figure 1. (left) Map of Africa highlighting Malawi ©National Museums Scotland  
Figure 2. Presidential funeral cloth 2012 ©National Museums Scotland*

In this funeral cloth both political and religious spheres merged in a cloth which signified recognition and reverence for a life lived, the end of a political era and a new beginning. As a culturally recognised method of commemoration this cloth chronicled an event with national impact. In life, whilst Mutharika had been leader of the Democratic Progressive Party his portrait had featured on the party's campaign cloth, and his photograph was hung in shops and offices throughout Malawi, and this new cloth ensured a long lasting memorial.

### **Political Party Cloth**

My research visit in 2014 was planned to coincide with the country's first tripartite elections - the first time the people of Malawi voted for their local governments, members of parliament and president in a single election. One of the most visible features of the campaigning which preceded polling day was the use of political cloth. All over the country was evidence of different party cloth, and the distinctive logos of each party printed on flags, banners, worn on garments, including t shirts and caps, badges, even the local mini-buses were 'dressed' in party colours. Amongst these parties competing for attention and voters, in their first election campaign, was the Peoples Party (PP), formed by the incumbent President Joyce Banda in 2011.

The design of a party cloth to establish a distinct and recognisable visual branding had been an important undertaking for the new party. When interviewed in April, officials at the regional party headquarters in Blantyre explained the rationale behind the imagery on the cloth. Created in collaboration with the local textile factory designers, the aim was to illustrate the three pillars on

which the party is founded: Unity, Equity and Development. These slogans in black, white and orange are printed in both English and Chichewa, with the intention of emphasising the inclusiveness of the party. The dominant background colour is orange, chosen by Joyce Banda for its bright and positive qualities, signifies a ripe fruit, whilst the open padlock was chosen to symbolise a party open to all, and also a symbol of security (pers. comm. Rev. Peter Kaleso, Publicity Secretary South, 09/04/2014). Although distinct and innovative in some aspects, in particular the colour, it actually broadly follows an established design model in which the party leader's photographic portrait features as the most dominant repeating motif (see fig.3). Joyce Banda went on to become President after Mutharika's death, stepping into the position from Vice-President. At official events she often wore outfits tailored from party cloth, creating a visual sense of solidarity and uniformity with her supporters. However, leadership dress is more usually chosen to distinguish and confirm status, and indeed Banda's stylish tailored outfits ensures that she was clearly identifiable from those wearing the cloth as a simple *chitenje* wrapper. Political cloth is not only worn, but hung as canopies around the politician at rallies, and as Perani & Wolff (1999: 48) have observed, calls attention to the exalted status of the space around the leader, defining her or his leadership status, and enhancing personal scale and presence.



Figure 3. Peoples Party political cloth ©National Museums Scotland

### Hastings Kamuzu Banda and the Malawi Congress Party

The earliest known African portrait cloths are to be found in the sample books of the United Africa Company, trading in West Africa, dating from the 1920s, with the earliest portrait cloth being worn by a chief in Togo dating from 1939 (Picton 2001:29). Whilst these cloths from the late 20s and 30s were probably meant for mourning ceremonies it is the period leading up to independence in the 1950s and 60s that is marked by a growth in the production and use of portrait cloth (Faber 2010:14). In Malawi, the photographic portrait feature originates with the first post-Independence leader of Malawi, Hastings Kamuzu Banda (Gilman 2009:5). Under his leadership The Nyasaland African Congress (NAC) led the anti-colonial movement in Malawi. When in 1959 the NAC was banned by the British Colonial authorities, it changed its name to the Malawi Congress Party (MCP). After leading Malawi to independence Banda continued to rule from 1964 until 1994 under a one party system.

Banda and the MCP was internationally famous for frequent large-scale events. As Lisa Gilman (2009:5) has discussed, at these events hundreds of women, covered from head to toe in fabric decorated with life size images of the president's portrait, danced and sang songs that promoted his power and prestige. Through the pyramid structure of the MCP, party officials required that all women in the country regardless of age, health, occupation or political leanings, regularly rehearse for and participate in these frequent events.



**Figure 4. (left) Malawi Congress Party commemorative cloth 1958-1978 ©National Museums Scotland**  
**Figure 5. Malawi Congress Party performance rehearsal, Blantyre ©National Museums Scotland**

Preparations for the 2014 elections at the country's southern Party headquarters of the MCP in Blantyre saw women continuing to engage in performance as an expression of their party support. On one occasion, I was invited to observe some fifty or so local women at a rehearsal for a forthcoming election rally. Here women of all ages joined together to practice their songs and organise dances, honing their performance under the instruction of their dance leader. Nearly all wore patterned *kitenje*, many wearing the current MPC party cloth which continues to include Hastings Banda's portrait, on a red, blue or green cloth identifying each regional group (see fig.5). Since the inception of the MCP there have been a number of changes to the original design including the commemoration cloth produced in 1978 on the twenty year anniversary of Banda's return from Britain to his homeland. In this design a powerful message is expressed through simple but evocative graphics, the raised and clenched fists in broken chains (associated with slavery) symbolise Banda's role in freeing Malawi from colonial rule (see fig.4).

Hastings Banda's dictatorship although challenged, suppressed all opposition. A referendum, in which the population voted to change Malawi's system of government from single party to multiparty in 1993, led to Malawi's first multi-party elections in 1994. These elections were the first opportunity for political activists to form parties opposed to the Banda regime. One of the many issues on which the campaigns were fought was to curb the use of government funds to carry out large scale rallies to promote themselves. The United Democratic Front (UDF), under Bakili Muluzi won, to become the first democratically elected party voted into power in Malawi. Some things didn't change, and women's political dance groups continued to be a significant element of rallies and national events. Politicians argued that the dancing at events, in outfits of party cloth, was not a political strategy but rather a celebration of traditional cultural practices (Gilman 2009:8). But whether performing or not, dressing in the party cloth remains an important element of public participation for individuals like market trader Violet Biton, selling ground nuts in Blantyre, who we interviewed about the UDF *chitenje* she was wearing in the run up to the 2014 elections. Violet wore

the cloth, which she had been given at a party rally, with a sense of pride and relished the opportunity dressing in the cloth gave her to express allegiance and group identity (see fig.6).

However, whilst for many, party cloth is a tool for political unity, for some it has also become a symbol of bribery and waste. A number of articles in local newspapers reported the outrage felt by some over the expense incurred in commissioning party cloth. In one article warning Malawians of political exploitation, it was reported that Atupele Muluzi, the leader of UDF said that: ‘Malawians should stop being contented with t-shirts and party cloth handouts from political parties... When elections come after you have been abused and insulted politicians come with two things: a t-shirt and a party cloth...we don’t ask what parties stand for and what their vision is.’ (*The Daily Times Malawi* 2013). This concern about the impact of material goods over political integrity can be traced back to earlier traditions in which local chiefs demonstrated power and wealth, maintaining allegiance and subjugation of their subjects and allies, through the distribution of material goods including cloth (Perani & Wolff 1999:39; Prestholdt 2012:90).



**Figure 6. (left) United Democratic Front political cloth ©National Museums Scotland**  
**Figure 7. Democratic Progressive Party political cloth ©National Museums Scotland**

Issues regarding political cloth had also hit the headlines a year earlier. Political analyst Jimmy Kainja drew attention to the fact that three years after the 2009 election victory for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), President Mutharika had still failed to honour his promise to reveal the names of the business men and women who helped the party with campaign materials including t-shirts, cloths and flags, resulting in the countries zero scoring on party funding accountability (Kainja 03/04/2012). In the run up to the elections the majority of political cloths are distributed free during promotional events, although the cloths of the UDF, MCP and DPP can also be purchased in Blantyre’s textile shops alongside other fashion cloths. Interviews we conducted in Blantyre market also indicated that a certain amount of freely distributed party materials were being sold on by individuals for profit. Whilst this cloth functions as a tool of propaganda, unlike printed paper pamphlets and posters, it has a lasting life as an item of clothing. With ownership, it is taken into the voter’s homes, into the domestic space as personal property, crossing from the public into the private sphere. In a country where so many live on very limited resources, where the cloth is distributed without cost, such a gift becomes a powerful tool for political engagement.

## Cloth production in Malawi

Since the early days of commercial production in the late 1920s imported printed cloths from Tanzanian factories have had a large market share in Malawi. However, the production of the majority of the party cloths comes from a textile factory in Blantyre, the commercial centre of the country. In 1957, as colonial rule came to an end, British textile manufacturers David Whitehead & Sons opened a state run textile factory. They shifted production from England as textiles could be produced more cheaply locally and the local factory was more able to produce new designs quickly and efficiently. Since 2003 the factory has been run as a limited company known as Mapeto (DWSM) Ltd and continues to have facilities for raw cotton cleaning, spinning, weaving and printing. However, cotton growing in Malawi cannot keep pace with demand for processed cotton cloth, and today the company imports plain cotton fabric from abroad, with the cheapest imported from China, which is then printed at the factory and marketed throughout the country (Giglio 2010:7).



*Figure 8. Mapeto DWSM Ltd. Store, Blantyre, Malawi ©National Museums Scotland*

As John McCracken (2012) has documented, cotton imports and exports have played a dominant role in Malawian trading history over centuries. However, it was not until the nineteenth century, as East Africa became more integrated in expanding global markets, that the volume of imported goods, including imported factory produced cloth, exchanged for slaves and ivory, grew significantly. Vast networks of trade routes connected the coast with the interior, with caravans trading imported cloth, beads and other goods moving along vast networks of exchange reaching as far as Lake Malawi and Lake Victoria (Prestholdt 2012: 92). This resulted in Indian, British and American cloth being readily available as far inland as eastern Congo. Once the preserve of the powerful local chiefs as a symbol of status, imported cloth became more generally available, and this access changed the way people dressed, how they related to each other, and how political power was defined. So by the 1880s in Tanzania, bark cloth and skins had been replaced by imported cloth, worn as a measure of rank. In the late 1870s missionary Robert Laws observed that in the central region of Malawi, Ngoni tribesmen still wore skins or bunches of feathers, with rings of hide on their arms and legs. Most women wore pieces of bark cloth, with a few wearing locally produced cotton cloth (Laws, 1878 cited in McCracken 2012:16). He also noted that travellers in east Africa commented on the importance of fashion, with traders having to keep up with trends to ensure the highest prices (ibid: 93). A lasting legacy of this competitive market has been the trademark stamped on the cloth as a mark of authenticity and a signifier of prestige. Today this remains a feature of Malawian printed cloth.

## Women and Church Cloth in Malawi

Whilst political cloth is manufactured in large quantity, patronage for new cloths from church organisations throughout Malawi ensures demand for printed cloths from Mapeto DWSM Ltd factory continues.<sup>1</sup> Amongst the wide range of cloths commissioned by a large number of churches, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) stands out as established and enthusiastic patrons of commemorative cloths to mark a wide range of events. Church cloths, unlike most cloths produced for political purposes, are sold by the church to its parishioners to raise church funds. At the CCAP Blantyre Synod it is currently the responsibility of the Director of Women's Affairs, Rev. Annie Kapinda, to organise the development of new cloth designs. With the scale of investment required to produce a new cloth, which requires a minimum of six thousand metres of 'special print' per order, at a total cost of towards four million kwacha (\$9100), depending on the number of colours incorporated in the design, this is a significant branch of church business activity (Kapinda pers. comm. April 2014). The annual calendar of church events is consulted to establish when to commission a new cloth. The committee sketch out an idea which is then worked up by the designers at the factory until a final computer generated design is agreed. The skills of the design team are enrolled to ensure creation of a distinct product which is both culturally desirable and appropriate to the demands of the client. Each new design from the Mapeto factory is assigned a number and recorded with a sample in small notebooks kept in the studio, which constitutes the textile archive.



*Figure 9. (left) CCAP Women's Conference cloth 2012 ©National Museums Scotland*

*Figure 10. CCAP Dr David Livingstone cloth 2009 ©National Museums Scotland*

Rev. Kapinda and her committee play an important part in this creative process, which she likened to fashion design, each element carefully considered and creating a highly symbolic whole. The cloths

<sup>1</sup> The factory survives, unlike the David Whitehead & Sons factory opened in Kaduna, Nigeria in 1957 which has been the subject of recent research by Salihu Maiwada and Elisha Renne documenting its decline and closure in 2007. (Textile History:2013 pp.171-196)

are an important statement of shared female identity within the church, often dressing many hundreds of women in thousands of metres of matching cloth. Such cloths will be commissioned for church choirs, for church conferences delegates, to commemorate anniversaries of church officials, buildings and events.

Like the use of political cloths, the sense of belonging through uniformity of dress is also a means to distinguish their groups from others in Malawian society. With many having a limited print run the cloths are also agents of memory in the shared history of the individual owner, the group, and of the commissioning institution. One recent and distinctive cloth commissioned for the 2012 conference celebrating CCAP 'Women of Strong Faith' brings together script, graphics and colour to full effect. The iconography is chosen to symbolise the spirituality of women of the church today. On a purple background representing a heavy storm, the women sail their ship (loaded with crucifix and open bible, symbols of Christianity) through stormy waters, depicted as white waves, the reference of *Isaiah 40: 28-31*, writ large on the cloth as an inspiration to draw upon (see fig.9).

### **Celebrating Livingstone**

A large assortment of church cloths have been commissioned to celebrate and commemorate many events and activities but one particular design illustrates the strong and lasting link between Scotland and Malawi. This is the cloth commissioned in 2009 by the CCAP to commemorate the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Scottish missionary explorer David Livingstone's arrival in the territory of what is now Malawi (see fig.10). All the key elements of a commemorative cloth are present, a repeating border pattern with a central portrait, a place, a date, and a patron, with the trademark and design number, symbols of authenticity and quality, recognisable and appealing to consumers within culturally constructed boundaries of dress in Malawi. In an article from 2009, the Chairperson of the national organising committee explained that whilst the anniversary was hosted by CCAP, 'this was not a church matter but a national function because Livingstone contributed to various aspects of life in Malawi' (Scottish Christian, 03/03/2009). In a type of design more usually reserved for figures of political stature Livingstone the Scot was situated both literally and symbolically as a link between Malawian religious and national identity.

### **Conclusion**

Affordable and socially binding across economic groups, factory printed cloth is an important and highly visible element of Malawian material culture. Printed cotton cloths are worn, whether wrapped or tailored, within a framework of dress in Malawi which developed as Arab trade then European missionaries impacted on the country's clothing traditions, and the population gained increased access to imported cloth. As an ever changing range of patterns come in and out of fashion, cloths commissioned by both political and religious organisations continue to be worn. Covered with writing and graphics which convey political issues or spiritual messages of intent and belief this visual language of dress performs a powerful function in cultural expression in Malawi.

Both political and church commemorative cloths have in them the potential to be especially potent signifiers of personal and communal histories. Wearing identical cloths shows group affiliation, on the cloths are printed the dates, the markers of time, whilst within the cloth are the memories of occasions when the cloth was worn. Bound up in the cloths are the interdependent relationships between patronage, production, and consumer.

As discussed in this paper, although these local factory printed cloths are mass produced, many are limited editions, only marketed and distributed within Malawi, and become scarce over time. Whilst

a textile archive does exist in the factory it is unclear whether it is exhaustive. The church officials that we visited during fieldwork in 2014 have no formal record of the cloths they have commissioned over the years. Although it is not feasible to create a systematic collection in the museums either in Malawi or in Scotland, the cross section of printed cloth collected is representative of its significance in contemporary Malawian material culture and a subject for further research into the fascinating subject of dress and identity.

## Acknowledgements

The research carried out in Blantyre in April 2014 and attendance at the Textile Society of America's 14<sup>th</sup> bi-Annual Symposium conference was supported by a grant from Art Fund's Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Award. In Malawi I recognise the support of Acting Director Lovemore Mazibuku and the enthusiastic and invaluable assistance of curatorial Emmanuel Mwale of Chichiri Museum, Blantyre. I would like to thank the political party officials and members of the churches in and around Blantyre involved in the research which informed this paper and assisted in the acquisition of cloths for the collections in Malawi and Scotland. Thanks are also due to Geoff Swinney for his insightful comments on my work.

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