



Data Sources: Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI); Southern Africa Humanitarian & Disaster Management GIS Library (SAHIMS GIS Library).

Introduction

Gender, Power, and Performance

In April 1999, I was in Malawi researching women's political dancing during the campaigns leading to the country's second multiparty elections. I had already spent several months attending political rallies in the country's northern region when Kaliyoma Phumisa—at the time a high-ranking member of the ruling United Democratic Front (UDF) party, a member of Parliament, and a cabinet minister—and his wife, Jane Phumisa, generously invited me to join them as they rigorously campaigned in Phumisa's constituency in the Ntcheu District in central Malawi. On April 23, the Phumisas, several UDF party officials from the Ntcheu District, and I made our way in a four-wheel-drive Toyota covered pickup from the town of Ntcheu to Phumisa's home village of Mphepo Zinai. Bumping along on narrow rocky roads for several hours, we knew we were finally nearing the village when we encountered women lining both sides of the roadway. Many wore clothing made from bright yellow fabric decorated with the turquoise letters *UDF* and the party's symbol of clasped hands. We opened our windows as more women appeared and swarmed around us. As the car slowed and gradually moved forward, the women's singing flooded our vehicle:

Tikuthokoza
Ife tikuthokoza
Oh! Ife tikuthokoza
Tikuthokoza kubwera
Kwa anduna athu
Oh amatikonda tonse
Tikuthokoza kwa anduna athu

We thank you
 We, we thank you
 Oh! We, we thank you
 We, we thank you
 For our minister's presence
 Oh, he likes all of us
 We are thankful for our minister

Phumisa grinned as he held a megaphone to the open window and cued a high-pitched siren. The swarms around the vehicle grew even larger, as did the fevered pitch of the siren combined with the women's singing voices. The car gradually stopped as we arrived in the center of the village. We emerged and followed Phumisa, who was wearing a dark suit over a pale yellow shirt, as he descended into the singing and dancing throng. The women, still singing and moving rhythmically, escorted us to a special seating area consisting of two rows of chairs borrowed from local residents. The women then joined the rest of the audience, who sat around a large open space, and positioned themselves on the ground closest to us.

After local leaders greeted us, the master of ceremonies, a middle-aged man wearing black pants and a bright yellow T-shirt, also decorated with the image of clasped hands and the letters *UDF*, announced the beginning of the rally by yelling out slogans. The audience, led by the women, responded enthusiastically:

MC: U!
 AUDIENCE: DF!
 MC: UDF
 AUDIENCE: *Boma lenileni*
 MC: *Pulezidenti wathu ndani?*
 AUDIENCE: *Dr. Bakili, Bakili Muluzi, pulezidenti wopanda nkhanza, wosapha, wachitukuko, woyenda ni'naliro, kuntunda, wow-inawina, komianso ali wosawumira eee!*

MC: U!
 AUDIENCE: DF!
 MC: UDF
 AUDIENCE: The real, authentic government
 MC: Who is our president?
 AUDIENCE: Dr. Bakili, Bakili Muluzi, a president without cruelty, one who does not kill, who promotes development, who attends funerals, who is highly regarded, who is victorious, yet he is also very generous!

Throughout the speeches made by local leaders, the women occasionally burst into songs praising Phumisa and Bakili Muluzi; the latter was both the state president and chairman of the UDF. Occasionally, the women rose to sing praises or move into the center of the performance space; their undulating bodies interrupted, yet propelled, the event while they sang songs, including the following:

Anduna athu
Anduna athu atukula dziko
Atukula dziko la Malawi
Pa kanthawi kuchepa
Atimangira choyaniba
Chipatala

Our minister
 Our minister, he has developed the country
 He has developed the country of Malawi
 Within a short time
 He first built us
 A hospital

The MC allowed their performance to continue for a moment, and then asked them to return to their positions seated on the ground.

During the entertainment component of this rally, men and women sang while they performed varieties of local dance forms as members of single-sex and coed dance teams, and groups of women party members performed variants of circle dance genres. At one point, about one hundred women crowded into tight concentric rings in front of the politician's entourage. Their bodies, a few with babies tied to their backs, squeezed together, their hips swayed in accented rhythmic patterns, and their arms swung back and forth as they stepped to the drums pounded by two men seated in the center of the circle. Their cheers and ululating punctuated song texts that thanked Phumisa for both his visit and his leadership. During each group's performance, the MP and members of his entourage took turns entering the entertainment arena to give dancers small gifts. At the conclusion of the event, Phumisa and his entourage slowly moved toward the vehicles, again surrounded by singing and dancing women whose songs thanked us for coming and wished us a safe journey back to the town of Ntcheu. Our vehicle slowly accelerated; the dancing women gradually faded into the background.

This political rally resembled many others I attended during the 1999 election campaigns as well as in subsequent years. Political party leaders in

contemporary Malawi regularly organize national and local events, salient features of the country's political culture and key components of political strategizing. Women dressed in party colors and dancing and singing songs that extol a party and its politicians almost always feature prominently, whether the event is a large-scale rally held in an urban center that brings together people from all parts of the country, a small localized rally in a single village or urban neighborhood, or a gathering that falls somewhere in between. During election campaigns, rallies are numerous as parliamentary and presidential candidates try to increase their support bases. During noncampaign periods, parliamentarians and other party leaders hold rallies to meet with their constituents, increase party membership, mobilize support for causes, point to the failings of their opponents, and welcome or see off party dignitaries at airports. Other public functions are not explicitly political; yet, because the president of the country or other leading figures in a party attend, they exhibit many of the same characteristics as those organized by political parties. Examples include national celebrations, such as Independence Day, and special days designated by government ministries, such as National Education Day. All such events are usually called *munikhano* in Chichewa, which translates as "meeting" or "gathering." I use the English term *rally* to refer to all such public political functions to distinguish these events from business meetings, which usually do not include explicit entertainment components.

As with this rally for Phumisa, women almost always participate in these events while clad in party paraphernalia—fabric, T-shirts, buttons, hats—in the sponsoring party's colors decorated with its emblem and acronym. They contribute by attracting crowds, many of whom are enticed by the promise of performances. They welcome guests with their singing and dancing, and they often interrupt speeches with their singing and ululating. They participate more formally by performing circle dances during scheduled entertainment segments. Their song texts always fill the air with praise for the sponsoring party and its politicians and disdain for its opponents. Speakers frequently address themselves directly to the party women, and when they initiate slogans, they count on these women to be the quickest and loudest respondents. Besides being seen and heard at rallies, party women are visible when they walk down streets wearing party symbols; newspapers depict their images; recordings of their singing and dancing are broadcast on local radio and television; and their rehearsals are regularly seen and heard in urban neighborhoods and rural communities. Women praise performers make substantial contributions to political parties in their capacities as symbols, advertisers, voters, morale boosters, and mobilizers of support.

This book examines this institution of women's political performing to detail how the practice emerged and continues to transform in relationship to shifts in the political environment; what roles women's performances have

in the political arena; and how women's participation as political performers relates to women's status in politics more broadly.

The practice of women's political dancing in contemporary Malawi, which is rooted in the movement against British colonial rule, has long been fraught with controversy. During the independence movement, women activists in what was then the British colony of Nyasaland capitalized on local performance practices and incorporated singing and dancing in their political activities as a means to draw support, convey messages, and covertly criticize the British. Nationalist leaders also brought together people from across Nyasaland to perform similar dances together and share culturally distinct dances as part of a strategy to invoke feelings of solidarity and construct a national identity based in cultural difference.

After independence in 1964, the country's first president, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, established an authoritarian single-party government, which he ruled until 1994. Banda was internationally famous for the frequent large-scale events organized by his Malawi Congress Party (MCP). At these events, hundreds of women covered head to toe in fabric decorated with life-size images of the president's face danced complicated variants of local circle-dance forms while singing songs that deified him and vilified those deemed to be political dissidents. Through the pyramid structure of the MCP, party officials required that all women in the country—regardless of their age, health, occupation, or political leanings—regularly rehearse for and participate in these frequently orchestrated political events. They also required all men and boys to regularly participate in these events, sometimes as performers, more often as audience members. The Banda government appropriated and transformed what was the liberatory practice of political activists in the independence movement into a widespread mechanism for controlling the population. By requiring all Malawians to participate in these ubiquitous events, the party ensured that the whole population contributed to projecting images of Banda's legitimacy and performing national identity. This identity was expressed especially powerfully in the togetherness of hundreds of identically clad women dancing in one throbbing mass. The climate of fear generated by the Banda government—known for jailing and sometimes killing dissidents and their family members—largely silenced public debate about Banda's use of women as his embodied cheerleaders (Mkamanga 2000; Chirwa 2001; Lwanda 1993).

Changes in the global political climate and internal ferment in the early 1990s led to a referendum on June 14, 1993, in which the population voted to change Malawi's system of government from single party to multiparty. For the first time since independence, political activists emerged, formed parties, and vied for legitimacy and leadership opportunities. One focal point of opposition politicians' campaigns leading up to the referendum and then in the first parliamentary and presidential elections, held on May 17, 1994, was the

issue of women's political dancing. In their rallies, the opposition promised that if the population voted first for multipartyism and then for them as elected officials, women would no longer be forced to dance. They also pledged that they would not devote money intended to develop the country to orchestrating large rallies to promote themselves (Dzimbiri 1998: 92).

Bakili Muluzi of the UDF was the first democratically elected president of Malawi. During the first two years of his presidency, the practice of women's political dancing greatly subsided, and the president confirmed his pledge on two points: not to spend large amounts of government money on elaborate events and not to use women as his personal or party's symbols. I first visited Malawi in the summer of 1995, one year after Muluzi was elected. My intention was to identify a research site where I could explore how women use music and dance forms to negotiate power relations in their day-to-day lives, what I consider to be "informal politics." In my conversations with Malawians, many explained that I had come too late: I had missed the elaborate and ubiquitous political ceremonies staged by the previous government. Some referred to this past under Banda nostalgically, while others credited the opposition politicians who had campaigned for the referendum with freeing women from the ongoing rehearsing and performing.

In a second visit in the summer of 1996, I was visiting friends in Malawi's largest city, Blantyre, on July 6, National Independence Day, a holiday especially associated with the elaborate events of Banda's rule. Controversy erupted in the newspapers when the government decided to hold a celebration in Blantyre's stadium to commemorate this holiday, something it had promised not to do when it first took power in 1994. I made my way to the stadium, video camera tucked into my backpack, walking several miles alongside hundreds of others on the busy four-lane highway that runs through the city. Given the amount of criticism I had heard about the ways in which the Banda government had organized women to dance at its functions, I was struck when I saw at this purportedly nonpartisan event not only dance performances by the Malawi National Dance Cultural Troupe, an ensemble of professional dancers sponsored by the government, as promised in the newspapers, but also the participation of women members of the ruling UDF. The women came clad in bright yellow UDF political fabric in styles similar to those worn by women during Banda's rule. They welcomed Muluzi by surrounding his vehicle upon its arrival while singing praise songs for him, and then they sat together to create a visually prominent presence in the VIP stand. Their participation signaled the resurgence of women's political dancing.

In the days following, Malawians battled over the appropriateness of both this event and the participation of women party members in letters-to-the-editor and articles in local newspapers. Human rights activists complained of the wasted money and claimed that the event echoed the past oppression under Banda. President Muluzi and the event's organizers defended themselves

against criticism on the grounds that they did not force anyone to dance, and that this was a national event, not a party function.

I returned to Malawi in 1998 with my husband, ethnomusicologist John Fenn, to the Nkhata Bay District in the northern region. During my visit to the district two years before, I had met the late Simeon Nyirenda, an avid *malipenga* dancer who was actively involved in trying to maintain the liveliness of dance practices in his community. He and I had corresponded in the interim and had arranged that he would help me initiate my research project. Unfortunately, I found him seriously ill and hospitalized when we arrived. We therefore arranged to stay with the Ngwira family, who lived in a rural community near Nyirenda's home. As he gained strength, I hired Nyirenda to be my research assistant. He frequently joined me as we traveled to dance performances across the district, and he was my translator during a number of interviews.

When we settled with the Ngwira family, I was still intent on studying women's performance practices in their day-to-day lives. The Nkhata Bay District attracted me because of the fame of some of its dance practices, especially the all-male *malipenga*, which I had read about in a number of scholarly articles (Kamlongera 1986; Kerr and Nambote 1983). Their authors mentioned in passing the existence of women's dance forms, but little other published information existed, stimulating my desire to help fill this void in the scholarly literature.

Malawi is divided into three administrative regions: north, central, and south. The southern region is the most developed; the central is the second. Each region is broken down into districts. In each district is a town or city that serves as the government center, or *boma*, for that district. Nkhata Bay District, consisting of hundreds of villages and a number of towns, is located in the northern region along the shore of Lake Malawi. The town of Nkhata Bay is the government center for the district. In my efforts to observe dance performances and spend time with dancers, I frequently traveled to villages and towns throughout the district. As I present material from my research, I therefore distinguish between Nkhata Bay District and the town of Nkhata Bay.

A benefit of settling in this district was that it had been a source of political activism and controversy throughout Malawi's recent history. A number of the most prominent activists during the independence movement came from the district, and because many of these individuals fell out of favor after independence, Banda was especially suspicious of people from Nkhata Bay District during his rule. In the transition to multipartyism, people from this district were once again among the most active. Admittedly, I also fell in love with the district's breathtaking beauty. Hillsides covered in tropical foliage descend into the turquoise blue lake, with occasional beaches tucked within. Canoes dot the lake, appearing especially mysterious at night when fishermen light lanterns; dancing lights flicker across the vast darkness, a strategy for catching fish.

Many living directly on the lakeshore rely on fishing for part of their livelihoods. Almost all in the district, as in much of rural Malawi, engage in small-scale subsistence agriculture, growing crops mostly to meet their family's needs, though many also sell anything left over or grow extra for added income. Women are in charge of most of the day-to-day agricultural and household duties, while men are largely responsible for earning money needed for such things as school fees, clothing, oil, sugar, meat, medical needs, and so on.

My plan when we settled with the Ngwira family was to research *chilimika*, a secular dance form unique to the Nkhata Bay District, performed mostly by young women and girls, though a few boys and men sometimes are also members of dance teams. As my research on *chilimika* picked up in December 1998, so too did the campaigning for the second multiparty elections, scheduled for June 1999. More and more, members of dance groups informed me that if I wanted to see them perform, I should go to rallies. I eventually changed my research focus to the political arena. We then moved into the town of Nkhata Bay so that I could have greater access to information about rallies and be closer to party headquarters and transportation. In addition to attending and videotaping rallies, I spent time with party members discussing politics, attended dance rehearsals, and conducted formal interviews with dancers, party organizers, and politicians in the Nkhata Bay District and the nearby city of Mzuzu. I also continued my research on *chilimika* and attended many different types of events that featured dancing, which proved useful for situating political dancing within the larger context of performance practices in the district. In April 1999, we said our good-byes in Nkhata Bay, packed up, and traveled south to Ntcheu District, where we stayed with the family of Kaliyoma Phumisa. We appeared at the height of his reelection campaign, and he and his wife graciously invited us to join them as they tirelessly traveled from village to village, holding sometimes three or four rallies a day, including the one described earlier.

Both the rallies and women's dancing in the current dispensation follow the formulaic structures so well established during Banda's regime. However, contemporary politicians differentiate themselves from the previous government by emphasizing that women now choose whether or not to dance and which party to support. Politicians also frequently assert that they incorporate dancing into their events not as a political strategy, but as a celebration of traditional or local cultural practices. In the name of tradition, politicians have also started giving small material gifts to performers as tokens of their appreciation.

In the year following the 1999 elections, I lived in Blantyre, and I followed women's political dancing as it occurred outside of campaign periods; there, I also had greater access to urban women who participated as dancers in addition to journalists and high-ranking politicians. During this stay, in February 2000, a heated debate broke out in the newspapers between human

rights activists and politicians over the practice of using women's dancing at rallies and more specifically over the practice of gifting dancers. Human rights activists challenged politicians' continued use of women's dancing, pointing to the similarities between the current practice and that of the Banda regime. They argued that politicians exploit women's poverty by enticing poor women to dance at their rallies through the possibility of remuneration. Politicians defended themselves, touting the freedoms of association and expression enjoyed by all Malawians and the traditionality of both dancing and the gifting of performers.

I returned to the United States in the fall of 2000. Because of my work obligations, I followed from afar the controversy rampant in the period leading up to the 2004 elections, relying heavily on Web sources. We returned to Malawi five days before the elections were scheduled on May 15, 2004, only to hear that they had been rescheduled for May 18. Allegations of party defections, corruption, violence, and campaign fraud filled the air. When the elections were finally held, on May 20, we sat with our friends in the city of Blantyre, clustered around the radio, as did Malawians across the country, waiting for the outcome. Inaccurate information was announced on some radio stations, causing outbreaks of violence. Official results were not made public until the evening of May 23. Bingu Mutharika, who had been hand-picked by Muluzi to run on the UDF ticket, won the presidential bid.

One issue that became especially prominent in the 2004 campaigns was the importance of improving gender parity within political party and state structures and within the society more generally. At the vanguard was then state president Bakili Muluzi, who, along with other southern African heads of state, signed the Declaration on Gender and Development at the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Summit in Blantyre, Malawi, in September 1997, committing Malawi to achieving at least 30 percent female representation in political and decision-making structures by 2005. The 2004 elections were pivotal for achieving this goal. Parties made efforts to endorse female candidates, and a number of Malawian human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) established programs to identify qualified women and provide them with the necessary training and resources (see Geisler 2004). I was curious during these elections to discover how attempts to improve women's political status impacted those women who dance, who for the most part participate at the lowest ranks of the political hierarchies. I sought out human rights activists who had worked hard to promote women candidates, along with some of the women who had run successful campaigns, to discuss their strategies, experiences, and perspectives on women's political dancing. I also met with women who danced during these elections to trace how the practice continued to emerge and to examine how their roles were or were not impacted by politicians' emphasis on improving gender parity.

This book is about women's political dancing in Malawi. It focuses on the contemporary political culture that has emerged since the transition to multi-partyism and that continues to develop into the future. In order to understand the present, it is also necessary to understand the process through which the practice has unfolded over time and in relationship to transitions in the political environment. I examine women's political dancing in the present and the past within the webs of social, economic, political, historical, and cultural frameworks that surround the practice and all the actors involved. This project emphasizes the important contributions that women make as political dancers in addition to examining ways in which their performing operates in negotiations of power. Exploring women's participation as performers yields insight into intersections between gender and economics within Malawi's political sphere, highlighting inequities built into the political structures that are affirmed and perpetuated through discourse valuing a local cultural identity exemplified in women's performances. This study also elucidates how this cultural practice continues to emerge in relationship to ongoing political change, and, consequently, how the political use of dancing impacts dance forms, affecting how they manifest outside the political arena.

In my analysis, I consider both women's dancing and the rallies of which they are a part from a performance studies perspective, understanding that performances are often simultaneously reflective and constitutive of political and social realities and that people use performances to establish and sustain relationships, making them crucial sites for social action.¹ Performances do not exist in a vacuum but rather operate as genres: a single political performance in Malawi is modeled on previous ones and influences those that come after (Bakhtin 1986: 61–67; Briggs and Bauman 1992). Unraveling the significance of a performance in the present therefore requires information about how the form first emerged and continues to develop. The steps involved in organizing and rehearsing for an event, and all the discourse that surrounds the performance, are equally important for untangling relationships between any given performance and the social environment in which it takes place. In my examination, I therefore follow Beverly Stoeltje's framework for studying performance and attend to the ways in which the practice developed in the past and continues to transform into the future; the stages of production; details that manifest in situated performances; and the competing discourses that surround it (Stoeltje 1993).

My focus on artistic expression in the political realm necessitates an interdisciplinary approach that draws from scholarly perspectives in the humanities and social sciences. Examining the practice through these multiple lenses yields a nuanced and in-depth explication of the phenomenon. I take into account the perspectives of actors involved in many different capacities, including the women who dance, party organizers, elected officials, journalists, and human rights activists, all of whom have variously

been involved in either producing the performances or the discourse that surrounds them.

Women's political dancing is not unique to Malawi; the performative presence of women wearing fabric decorated with party or state symbols who liven up political occasions by dancing and singing songs that promote politicians and political bodies is common across the African continent. The case in Malawi is unusual to the extent that all women during Banda's rule were required to perform, thus contributing to an especially strong linkage between women's dancing and the national political culture. The institution of women's praise performing during Banda's presidency has been the subject of a number of publications, though little has been written about the practice in the post-Banda years.² Similarly, though they are widespread, these phenomena in other African contexts have received limited scholarly attention, usually only referred to in passing and or as illustrative of the limited political roles available to women.³ Yet, in Malawi as in some other African countries, praise performing has become one of the only ways that poor women, who constitute the majority of women in the country, can and do participate in the political process. These women's political performances therefore provide an important entry point for exploring the political status of one of the most underrepresented and marginalized segments of Malawi's population. This study contributes one piece in a large and complicated puzzle that could explain the significance of the widespread use of women's performative bodies across the continent. Those engaged with political realities in other African countries will recognize similarities in patterns of usage and emergence, and probably notice differences as well. My hope is that this book will invite more dedicated and critical attention to these phenomena, eventually crystallizing in a more coherent understanding of the role of women as political performers across the continent.

My descriptions and analyses of women's political dancing are the product of my synthesis of conversations (some informal and others formal tape-recorded interviews) with numerous people involved with political dancing; scholarly literature relevant to performance, gender, and politics in Africa; and my own experiences and reflections. As with any cultural phenomenon so ideologically laden and so controversial, I encountered numerous contradictory opinions about how performance contributes to the political arena and about the political, economic, and cultural ramifications of the continuing participation of women as political praise performers. I attempt to provide a wide range of viewpoints on the topic, but the tone of my analysis and many of my conclusions are my own and do not represent the perspectives of any one constituency involved. My intention is not to provide a definitive statement about the practice, but rather to initiate a conversation about a phenomenon that has serious implications for those marginalized politically because of gender and class, but that has up until now received scant scholarly attention.