Balancing men, morals and money: Women’s agency between HIV and security in a Malawi village
Verheijen, J.P.E.

Citation for published version (APA):
Verheijen, J. P. E. (2013). Balancing men, morals and money: Women’s agency between HIV and security in a Malawi village
Introduction

Few scholars of AIDS in Africa make an effort to embed their current-day findings in a historical context. As such they miss important opportunities to deepen their understanding of and strengthen their grip on the problems and solutions they study. Unravelling how things came to be as they are should be an essential part of analysing contemporary dynamics. In this chapter I will therefore elaborate upon the historical background of Malawi, focusing on the topics relevant for this specific study: gender relations, poverty, and AIDS. Obviously one chapter does not do justice to the complex interactions that formed a nation and its people nor the variations within this nation and people. As is inherent to all social studies I have had to make choices on what to include and exclude, and how to present the multiple and at times diverging views and facts. The choices I made were to a large extent informed by the specific research questions and topics I explore in this study.

After giving a brief general impression of Malawi’s geographic and demographic characteristics, I attempt to reconstruct how power dynamics between men and women have evolved over time. As noted in Chapter 1, the majority of Mudzi villagers descends from a matrilineal Bantu group, mostly the Yao. Some

---


2 Of all interviewed women, 58 percent are of Yao descent, 23 percent are from other predominantly matrilineal Bantu origin (16% Lomwe, 4% Nyanja, 3% Chewa), 12 percent descend from predominantly patrilineally organized groups (10% Ngoni, 2% Sena), and 7 percent are uncertain because their ancestors descend from different ethnic groups.
anthropological researchers of southern Malawi have chosen not to refer to the (mixed) ethnic designations of their study population but instead consider them a regional people who share language as well as many social and cultural characteristics (e.g. Peters 1997b). However, as the Yao stand out as the majority of Mudzi villagers, and by having a history distinctive from all other matrilineal groups in Malawi, I believe it is relevant to assess their specific ethnic background in more detail. In this chapter I therefore pay particular attention to the historical development of gender relations in Yao³ society. By following a conventional chronological order, this section provides a general overview of Malawi’s history, albeit with a perspective that focuses on gender.

Following this demographic overview, I describe the severe and deteriorating situation of poverty in Malawi. The Malawian population is largely rural and dependent on small-scale subsistence farming, conducted under adverse circumstances. The livelihood insecurity they deal with on a daily basis is situated at the barest level of finding enough food to eat, or not. The focus of this section therefore is the (under)development of the agricultural sector and the resultant fragility of most Malawians’ food security.

Lastly, I describe relevant aspects of the AIDS epidemic in Malawi – its evolution, its current status, the factors that are assumed to drive the continuing spread of HIV, and the national attempts that have been made to temper this spreading.

Geography and demography

Malawi is a relatively small but densely populated country, landlocked between Tanzania, Zambia, and Mozambique. It is globally one of the least developed nations, ranking number 171 of all 187 countries on the Human Development Index of 2011. Over three-quarters of the population live below the official international poverty line, meaning they have less than two US dollars per day to spend (UNDP 2005). Using a nationally calculated subsistence minimum, 52 percent of the population lives below this minimum (the “poor”), and 22 percent far below (the “ultra-poor”) (GoM 2005a). Over the past 30 years the average poverty level has remained virtually static (Chirwa et al. 2008: 21, Conroy 2006: 28), but wealth inequality has increased (Peters et al. 2007: 68-74). For the majority of Malawians, life has become progressively harsher (Frankenberger et al. 2003) due to a combination of factors to be described in this chapter.

As a stretched strip of land, Malawi is subdivided into a Northern, Central and Southern Region. This elongated shape is determined partly by the plateau of the

³ For comparison, neighbouring Tanzania has an average population density of 53 inhabitants per square kilometre, Mozambique 30, and Zambia 19 (CIA Factbook 2012).
Great Rift Valley on which it is located and partly by British colonialist whim.

One-fifth of the country is covered by fresh water, mainly that of the massive
Lake Malawi on the eastern border. The climate is relatively moderate because of
the country’s elevation on the plateau, but gets hot in the low-lying areas in the
south. Savannah woodlands – a mixture of grass, thorn bushes, and scattered trees
– cover most of Malawi. The mineral wealth of the country is negligible – which is
arguably an advantage, considering the many violent conflicts over the ownership
of lucrative minerals elsewhere in the world.

Malawi’s high population density can probably be explained by its once
comparatively fertile soils, nourished by the lake and the perennial streams
flowing to the lake, amidst a drought-prone region (Webster 1980). The size of
the Malawian population remained relatively high but more-or-less stable until the
British colonialists came. By putting an end to inter-tribal warfare and slave trade,
and bringing with it Western medical knowledge, the colonial regime prevented
many deaths and disappearances (Pike 1968: 23). Fertility rates remained
equally high, however, and the population expanded drastically. Being one of the
first inland areas to be colonized is thought to have spurred immigration as the
Europeans offered protection against slave raiders, jobs at their plantations, and
education at their mission posts (Debenham 1955: 145). More recently, civil war
in Mozambique drove over a million refugees into Malawi. As a result of all of
these factors the Malawian population has tripled since independence in 1964, and
doubled in the past 25 years (GoM 2008b). In 2011, Malawi’s population size is
estimated at 15.4 million inhabitants (on average 163 per square kilometre4), and
its population growth rate (2010-2015) is estimated at 3.2 (UNFPA 2011: 118). In
the few cities, men are underrepresented, while about 10 percent more women than
men live in the rural areas (GoM 2008b: 29) – which will prove to be a relevant
factor in answering my research question.

Life expectancy in Malawi has increased over the past decennia from 38 years
in 1960 to 54 in 2010, remaining significantly lower than the world average of
70 years. Over 10 percent of all children born will not survive until their fifth
birthday (GoM 2011a: 96). Like child mortality, maternal mortality in Malawi is
among the highest in the world, but has improved over the past decade (HDI 2011).
Per one million Malawians only 20 doctors are available (HDI 2011), which is
by far the lowest rate in the region (Arrehag et al. 2006: 88). Since free primary
education was introduced in 1994, literacy rates have increased steadily for both
men and women, now reaching to 81 and 67 percent, respectively (GoM 2011:
30). Although enrolment increased significantly over the past 15 years, less than

---

4 For comparison, neighbouring Tanzania has an average population density of 53 inhabitants per square
kilometre, Mozambique 30, and Zambia 19 (CIA Factbook 2012).
half of the children who start primary schooling actually make it to the last grade (Field 2009: 31). About half of all Malawian youth are currently enrolled in either primary or secondary education. Notably, these students consist of boys and girls equally (GoM 2009a: 47-8). A mere 8 percent of the population has managed to complete secondary school (GoM 2011a: 26-7).

Changing gender ideologies and realities

Political, religious, demographic, environmental, and economic factors have affected social relations in Malawi in varying ways and to varying degrees. Overall, these factors have been found to progressively erode women’s once relatively high status. Assessing, for example, how female leadership has changed over time gives an indication of women’s devaluation in the social hierarchy. Historical reconstructions suggest that the ancestors of most contemporary Malawians originally lived in clans led by female chiefs (Phiri 1988: 2). To this day, Malawian villages can be presided over by either a male or female head. As a matter of fact, of the six sub-villages that together comprise Mudzi, four are headed by a female chief, and as a whole Mudzi is presided over by a female Group Village Head. Notably, Malawi’s current paramount leader – the national president – is also a woman. Nonetheless, at present most leaders in the higher ranks of the traditional hierarchy are males. In 2001, of the total 205 Malawian ‘Traditional Authorities’ – the highest position for traditional leaders within the current legal-bureaucratic system – only five spots were occupied by women (Field 2009: 37). In the following sub-sections the dynamics that are likely to have contributed to these changes are assessed in chronological order. It will be concluded that despite some deterioration in relative status, not all is lost for women, particularly not for those living in communities that throughout time managed to retain a matrilineal kinship organization and matrilocal residence pattern.

Pre-colonial era: 14th century – 1891

[A typical Bantu legend] pictures the first men as living on one side of a great river and subsisting on game, while the first women keep to the other bank and live by gathering grass seeds. One day when the hunters could not cook their meat because their fires had gone out, one of them crossed the river and met a woman who took him to her hut, and gave him porridge made of grass seeds for the first time. He said it was very nice, and he further said “I will stay and sleep here.” His companions one by one followed his example, and the institution of marriage was thus founded by the recognized exchange of meat and cooked grain between men and women (Doman 1908: 79 in Richards 1932: 202-3).

Throughout the history of modern-day social sciences, claims have been made about a matriarchal origin of human kind (Amadiume 1997, Bachofen 1861, Diop 1989 [1963], Engels 1884, Morgan 1877, Murdock 1959, Saidi 2010). African advocates of this thesis (and their followers) emphasize that matriarchy should not
be understood as an overall dominance of women over men, but rather as referring to a system with great gender equity in which the roles ascribed to women were considered most central to the social order (Saidi 2010: 18). These highly valued female roles related particularly to procreation, food production and preparation, and management of spiritual relations. Although the argument remains disputed in general, Christine Saidi (2010) has recently convincingly argued that at least throughout Bantu history women seem to have held strong social positions in domains that cut across private and public spheres.

Caldwell et al. (1989) have attempted to sketch a unique system of marriage and sexuality that distinguished African societies from others in the world. While their model, and their attempt as such, has been severely criticized and as a result become outmoded, I believe it deserves re-examination for it has great explanatory power. One characteristic that the authors consider typical of traditional African systems is a separation of the world of women from that of the world of men, with each sex reigning in its own sphere. Women as a group, it can be read between the lines, were thus not controlled by men (Arnfred 2004b). A great emphasis placed on fertility for lineage reproduction, furthermore, meant that women’s sexuality was not as restricted as it came to be in the Eurasian world. Rather, women were highly valued for their reproductive capacities and for the ritual powers associated with this. The emphasis on the lineage necessarily meant that less value was attached to the conjugal bond, which was generally weak as a result. The once-widespread custom of (extended periods of) post-partum abstinence was, according to Caldwell et al. (1989: 215), another distinguishing characteristic of the African system. This too may be interpreted as a sign of women’s relatively strong position in society, as it seems unlikely that men, who personally and directly suffered from this institution, would have been the ones to introduce and uphold it at such a large scale for such a long time.

Zooming in on the ancestors of most contemporary Malawians when these migrated into the Malawi area, historical reconstructions suggest that they lived in matrilineal clans led by female chiefs whose authority rested on their ritual powers, such as those related to rain making (Phiri 1988: 2, Saidi 2010: 85). Pushed by wars and diseases these iron-working Bantus had started their southward migration from Central Africa about 2000 years ago, driving the Khoisan hunter-gatherers who first inhabited the area into the Kalahari desert. By the 14th century various Bantu groups had settled on the comparatively fertile soils around Lake Malawi. A clear ‘gender contract’ divided tasks between the sexes. Women mono-polized the ancient craft of pottery and dominated in ritual activities (Richards 1982 [1956]: 38-9, Saidi 2010: 18), while men performed most physically heavy tasks like

---

5 I return to this point in the concluding chapter.
hunting and clearing the fields of bushes and trees (Mandala 1984: 141-4, Richards 1939, Saidi 2010: 128). As ‘holders’ of the fields, women controlled the production and preparation of food (Koopman 1995: 4, Saidi 2010: 139), while men built and maintained the huts. Both were involved in cloth, iron, and salt making, although each had separate tasks (Mandala 1984: 141-4).

Agriculturalists in an area with enough land for all, the early Bantu-clans were a non-martial people. By the end of the 15th century a new flow of Bantu migrants managed to incorporate the small chiefdoms – which had little military power – into one federation, similar to the governing structure they had known in their original Congo region (Encyclopedia Britannica 2009). By the 17th century this so-called Maravi empire spread from the Mozambican coast to eastern Zambia and included much of current-day Malawi (Mchombo nd).

Conquered chiefs were left in charge of their clans, as long as they paid tribute in kind or labour (Mitchell 1961: 32, Rangeley 2000[1948]: 9, 58). Besides ritual specialists, chiefs now increasingly needed to become political strategists too. Those who had the military skills and resources to protect their subjects attracted most followers and so increased their strength and dominion (Phiri 1988: 15). This political military power largely became a male affair, while spiritual guidance6 continued to be in female hands7 (Mandala 1984: 143, Pike 2000: 92, Schoenbrun 1998: 91-2).

As time went by, various sub-chiefs within the Maravi empire managed to strengthen their position independent of the central authority of the paramount chief, and as a result the empire’s unity slowly began to crumble. The final deathblow to the empire was given by the attacks from two other tribes fighting their way into the southern region of Malawi in the 18th century. The warrior tribe Ngoni came from the south, fleeing Shaka Zulu. The Yao – the first tribe in the region to possess firearms – came from the east, fleeing famine and attacks from surrounding tribes that had become envious of the wealth they had managed to accumulate through trading with the Arabs and Portuguese (Rangeley 1963: 10). The Maravi

---

6 Spiritual power was first and foremost derived from and directed at appeasing the spirits of deceased ancestors. These spirits were believed to mediate between the living and a Supreme Being who controls all natural forces. It is this belief in the existence of one supreme being that distinguishes Bantu cosmology from many others in Africa. This god is considered remote and impersonal, with little interest in the daily affairs of human beings. The ancestral spirits are, however, assumed to be very concerned with the behaviour of their living descendants, watching them closely and not hesitating to interfere when necessary. Defiance in observing time-honoured traditions or neglecting or insulting the conservative ancestor spirits in other ways would be punished by disease, death, and other disasters, it was believed (Mitchell 1961: 58-61, Van Breugel 2001: 260). This belief in the power of ancestral spirits continues to be strong throughout Malawi (Harries et al. 2002: 72; Morris 2000: 221-54, Van Breugel 2001: 73-96), although it is now commonly mixed with Christian or Islamic religious beliefs (Forster 1998).

7 See Aguilar & Birch de Aguilar (1993) for a current-day account of the complementarity and equality of these male and female chieftainship powers.
federation broke into autonomous chieftain clans, each fighting independently against incorporation by the invaders, with varying degrees of success.

These autonomous clans to this day share oral traditions and several cultural practices, although some of their dialects have over time developed into mutually unintelligible languages (Lwanda 2004: 29, Mitchell 1956: 17). The contemporary ethnic groups Chewa and Senga (predominant in the Central Region), Nyanja, and Sena (in the Southern Region) all descend from the matrilineal Maravi people and form the majority of Malawi’s population. The invading groups were also Bantu descendants, the patrilineal Ngoni settling in the Northern and Central Regions, the matrilineal Yao in the south. The Maravi groups conquered by the Ngoni over time adopted many of their invaders’ customs, including patrilineal organization (Phiri 1988: 21).

Mandala (1984: 139) argues that the position of men in the matrilineal societies became strengthened when women began to need physical protection from their male relatives against slave raiders. This argument does not hold for the Yao, however. More than any tribe in the Maravi empire, the Yao were deeply involved in trading with the Arabs and Portuguese (Phiri 2004: 73). At least since 1730 they had travelled to the East African coast to exchange iron, ivory, and tobacco for cotton cloth, beads, and salt (Pike 1968: 69, Rangeley 1963: 9). They then travelled back inland to trade these exhilarating new commodities for more ivory, cattle, and, increasingly, slaves (Rangeley 1963: 14). Initially, the people sold as slaves were the unwanted of the villages – those convicted of a crime and the impotent who would normally have been killed or banished from their communities (Abdallah 1973 [1919]: 12, Rangeley 1963: 14). However, as the demand for slaves increased dramatically at the coast, the Yao ceased being peaceful traders and instead began raiding their neighbours to capture enough men, women, and children to satisfy this demand. Their initial monopoly over firearms and gunpowder, resulting from their early trades with Arabs and Europeans, greatly enhanced their efficacy to extort slaves by force. Only at the height of the slave-trade era, just before the Brits managed to put an end to it, did the Yao begin to raid amongst themselves (Pike 1968: 60). Yao women had thus, during much of the slave-trade era, not been overly dependent on male protection – in contrast to women from the surrounding ethnic groups.

Nonetheless, the thriving slave trade probably did improve Yao males’ relative economic status in society as only they undertook the lucrative journeys to the coast to sell slaves and return with firearms and luxuries. Some resorted to marrying slave women to gain authority and avoid moving away to a wife’s compound and “being treated as a work-horse” on their in-laws’ fields (Mitchell 1956: 412, Phiri 1983), which arguably undermined the bargaining position of free women. Van

8 The Nyanja are also called Mang’anja (Mchombo nd).
den Borne (2005a: 143) speculates that the consequent competition between free and slave wives may have marked the beginning of women seeing men as their livelihood, which, in turn, instigated jealousy among women.

After two centuries of contact with Arab traders the Yao suddenly and massively converted to their allies’ religion. The first to convert were several highly placed Yao chiefs – those who hosted at their houses the Arab visitors, who had ventured inland since 1810 to trade (Bone 2000: 13, Phiri 1988: 22). After these chiefs adopted the Islamic religion, the other Yao were quick to follow. One assumed reason for these voluntary conversions is the economic advantage of strengthening the ties and being associated with the prestigious, well-to-do trading partners (Sicard 2000: 297). The Islamic cosmology could, furthermore, be easily integrated into traditional Yao beliefs and customs, as both systems recognize one supreme being and observe transitory rituals such as those at puberty, marriage, and death (Alpers 2000 [1972], Bone 2000, Sicard 2000). As long as Allah’s power was accepted as absolute, Islamic doctrine tolerated new adherents’ belief in other mystical forces, such as the Yao worship of ancestral spirits (Alpers 2000 [1972]: 29). However, for over two centuries of contact with Islamic trading partners these considerations had not prompted any Yao to adopt the foreign religion. Alpers (2000 [1972]: 43-50) argues that the specific timing of mass conversion – towards the end of the 19th century – is likely to be related to the advent of the British colonialists. This stirred political unrest, creating opportunities to seize power. Some chiefs employed the new form of more-or-less direct contact with the supreme being to legitimize their authority over other chiefs.

By 1921, a British census reports that “every Yao village has a mosque” (Sicard 2000: 297). It is added, however, that generally, the Yao were “not very strict Mohammedans, only using the mosque during the Fast of Ramadan” (ibid). Elsewhere on the African continent conversion to Islam often meant adopting an ideology of female domesticity, and thus tends to be associated with negative empowerment indicators for women (Njoh & Akiwumi 2011). This seems not to have been the case among the Yao Muslims, who only adopted symbolic elements of Islam that did not clash with their own customs (Bone 2000: 18, Pike 1968: 69, Rangeley 1963: 25, Sicard 2000: 297). Traditional initiation rites, for example, have been renamed after Islamic initiation rites, but the content remained largely unaltered (Msiska 1995: 70). Boys’ circumcision had been customary among the

---

9 Compared to the European expeditions and the spread of Christianity, little is known about the history of Arabs and spread of Islam in Southern Africa (Bone 2000: 7, Phiri 2004: 194). Although Arab trading caravans always travelled with a secretary (Sicard 2000: 296) – someone who mastered the art of writing and must have kept records – historians have predominantly relied on the writings of the British explorers and missionaries. This one-sided reconstruction of history corresponds with Eric Wolf’s observation, described in his book *Europe and the people without history* (1982), that the analyses of global history often have a strong Eurocentric inclination.
Yao long before they came in contact with Arabs (Rangeley 1963: 18), and continues to be performed. Girls’ clitoridectomy was practiced among the Yao for a brief period after conversion to Islam, but ceased when it led to many deaths (Tew 1950: 20). Although the Qur’an prescribes 40 days of post-partum abstinence, the Yao continue to practice this for an average of six months (GoM 2011a: 84, Zulu 2001: 475). According to Rangeley (1963: 25), who speaks of a “thin layer of [Islamic] veneer … plastered on the normal matrilineal custom of the tribe”, the only radical alterations that resulted from the adoption of Islam are an abhorrence of pigs and the necessity to cut the throat of any warm-blooded animal before it can be eaten. Pig meat is indeed not consumed by Mudzi villagers, although a few women (some of them Muslim) breed pigs for sale after a development organization had initiated this for them – their ‘abhorrence’ was thus not insurmountable. Mice are also not eaten by the Mudzi Muslims because of their religion. Alcohol consumption does not seem to be a taboo. The mosque is fairly well attended on Friday afternoons, during which time some women wear a headscarf. Fasting during Ramadan is practiced by all adult Mudzi Muslims, which one of them said to be a good preparation for the upcoming hunger season.

After David Livingstone, the first European explorer of the area, reached Lake Malawi in 1859, he was soon followed by Christian missionaries from various denominations. On the eve of colonization one of these first missionaries living in southern Malawi noted that the status of women “was in no way inferior to that of the man. … Frequently … the position of the woman seemed superior to that of the man” (Rowley 1867: 208, cited in Mandala 1984: 143). Apparently, at this stage in history the esteemed position of women in matrilineal Malawi had not been severely affected by potentially undermining forces from within or outside their communities.

Colonial era: 1891 – 1963
The first European missionaries in Malawi were quickly joined by white settlers looking for fertile lands, export crops, and easy money (Davison 1997: 99). When Portuguese military expeditions started to venture into the area from the African east coast, the British decided to formally claim the territory as their Protectorate in 1891 (Mitchell 1956: 28), stating that they were asked to do so by missionaries who were attacked by hostile slave traders (Davison 1997: 98). The British called their territory Nyasaland, after the Yao word for ‘lake’. The official and explicit policy of the Protectorate was to stamp out slavery, in which the Brits were quick to succeed. Domestic slavery and trading slaves to the coast was prohibited, and fined by surrendering of guns (Mitchell 1956: 39). The various Yao chiefs, who

---

10 Whites in Malawi thus are not associated with their role in expanding and professionalizing the slave trade, but rather with rescuing the Malawian population from it.
had started raiding each other to meet the increasing demand for slaves (Pike 1968: 60), did not unite against their common enemy. They were gradually disarmed and within a few years of violent clashes had to acknowledge the British military superiority (Mitchell 1956: 38).

The European invasion altered gender relations especially in the matrilineal groups of Malawi (Davison 1997: 96, Hirschmann & Vaughan 1984: 2-3). Many of those who sought protection at the mission posts against slave raids eventually adopted the white man’s religion and related patriarchal notions (Bennesch 2011, Phiri 1983). The missionaries generally believed no good could come from the matrilineal customs they encountered, and actively attempted to eradicate these (Bennesch 2011: 40). In a review of these missionaries’ impacts, Bennesch (2011) lists that men were granted land ownership and wives were encouraged to join their husbands on his land. Initiation rites instructing on traditional norms and values were replaced by Christian-oriented ceremonies, during which men were no longer tutored to respect women while women were still told to obey men. Overall, conjugal unions (with male household heads) were lauded at the expense of lineage bonds. Where possible, female chiefs were dethroned, and newly appointed chiefs were invariably male. Bennesch (2011) concludes that the adoption of Christian ideologies and practices severely corroded women’s once strong social position (see also Phiri 1983). Nevertheless, in many parts of Malawi, matrilineal and matrilocal organizing structures continue to exist side by side with Christian doctrine (e.g. Benson 2002: 63, Peters 1997b, Morris 1998: 44).

Meanwhile, the abolition of slavery put an end to what was a highly lucrative business for Yao communities. They lost their weapons, their wealth, and the slaves that cultivated their fields and carried out household chores. Yao men lost the source of their increasing economic and marital independence. Not surprisingly, animosity towards the colonialists was deeper among the Yao than among other groups. When the British began to offer (Christian) education, the (by then Islamic) Yao refused to participate, which later led them to be sidelined in the white-collar wage-earning sector (Bone 2000: 20, Lwanda 2004: 31, Njoh & Akiwumi 2011: 5). Until this day the Yao within Malawi have a reputation for not caring about education, instead preferring to marry off their children early (pers. obs.) [also P3 0238, 2344, 3870].

Not only the slave trade withered. As manufactured products penetrated rural markets, so too did the local pottery, salt, cloth, and iron industries which had involved both men and women producers and traders (Mandala 1982: 30). Local economies were increasingly trimmed down to mere subsistence farming.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to create a productive labour force out of the ‘natives’, the colonial regime introduced money and demanded each household to pay a ‘hut tax’ (Phiri 1983: 270). Commonly, the patriarchal presumptions and ideologies of missionaries and colonial administrators are assumed to have
instigated a shift in the gendered power balance by privileging men’s access to education and waged employment (e.g. Davison 1997: 95, Morris 1998: 44, Saidi 2010: 92). Indeed, on the emergent estates within Nyasaland and industries in South Africa and Rhodesia, and in the colonial military exclusively men\textsuperscript{11} were recruited (Davison 1993, Hirschmann & Vaughan 1984, Mandala 1982). Women, perceived by Western employers as destined for child caring and housekeeping, were almost entirely excluded from the colonial and post-colonial wage economy (Bryceson et al. 2004: 11, Kaler 2006: 339). In some cases, unmarried women were even prohibited from migrating to labour centres, in an attempt by the colonial administration to avoid loose morals and prostitution (Davison 1997: 126, 133, White 1990: 4). Nevertheless, it would be incomplete to only assess the impact of Western androcentric capitalism here, and inaccurate to assume that this actually triggered a ‘turn-around’ of gender power relations. The fact that mainly men went to work for money fits in neatly with the traditional gendered labour division. While women concerned themselves with the vital task of food production, men had always ventured out to cover extra household needs. Most likely, it was locally considered merely logical that generating money for tax became a male task (Tew 1950: 13).

Payments were slightly better in labour centres abroad (Davison 1997: 109), and many men left their homes and families to seek employment there. By 1956 as much as one-third of the adult male population of Nyasaland was employed outside their home country (Mitchell 1961: 77), and in some localities the level of male absence reached 75 percent (Coleman 1974: 87). As most ethnic groups had long histories of men leaving their homes and families for extended periods of time – to join trading, hunting, or raiding expeditions (Alpers 1975: 18, Morris 1998: 26) – taking up temporary labour contracts abroad was not out of the ordinary. Abdallah (1973 [1919]: 28-9) writes that in the pre-colonial era Yao men who had participated in the trading caravans to the coast were highly regarded within their community for having seen other places and for being adventurous and courageous, while those who had never left their home area were ridiculed for not being a real man. The same prestige now lured those crossing national borders to find wage employment (Chirwa 1997: 7, Kaler 2003: 360). Men from matrilineal groups in particular had much to gain and little to lose from migrating to find wage labour. They owned no land or other property that they could lose entitlement to during their absence. Describing the situation of young men in 1940, Audrey Richards wrote: “Nowadays they often use the opportunity of wage-labour for Europeans as a means of escape from the domination of the wife’s people” (1969 [1940]: 38).

\textsuperscript{11} Particularly young men were recruited, altering not only gender relations, but also relations between generations (Mandala 1982).
Labour migration offered Yao young men a new means to attain status and achieve relative independence.

During the colonial era scholars (e.g. Richards 1939: 23) and administrators believed that the outflow of able-bodied young men would have disastrous impacts on food security as the main source of labour disappeared, leaving ‘the weak’ – women and the elderly – to do all the rural work (also in Minton 2008: 32-3, Phiri 1983: 271-2). Coleman (1974) however argues that this seemed not to be the case. Women had always formed an important part of the agricultural labour force (see also Alpers 1975: 12, 16, Morris 1998: 26), so that the drain of young men actually made little difference. Furthermore, few children went to school, and they may have helped on the fields too. Specific male tasks like building or repairing houses and granaries only needed to be carried out occasionally, and, as most men returned every two years, these tasks were not necessarily affected by the temporary absences. Some scholars argue, furthermore, that the absence of men and the remittances they sent benefitted women’s autonomy (Cohen & Atieno-Odhiambo 1989, Harries 1994, Mayer 1980).

Ever since money had been introduced in 1893, the need and desire for it intensified. It was not only needed to pay hut tax, and to acquire new consumer goods like paraffin, matches, and sugar, but also, increasingly, to supplement declining yields. The yields declined because both the quantity and quality of land available to the local population diminished (for reasons discussed in the following section Food Insecurity). As land size, soil fertility, and yields decreased, so did women’s productive autonomy and relative position of power (Berheide & Segal 1994, Davison 1993: 406, Hirschmann & Vaughan 1984, Vaughan 1987: 128). Food security increasingly depended on the ability to purchase fertilizer and supplementary food, which intensified households’ reliance on men’s income for financial support.12

Matrilineal women’s control over fields and food is often argued to have further declined due to the patriarchal presumptions of missionaries, commercial settlers, and colonial officials (e.g. Davison 1997: 101, 134, Mayoux 2002: 14, Potash 1995, Phiri 1983: 268-9, White 1987). These either assumed that men were households, or felt they should be. Therefore, when allocating land to locals they tended to grant it all to men – irrespective of traditional ownership and inheritance

---

12 For several decades a thriving export of Malawian cotton assured female farmers financial independence, but during the global economic depression of the 1930s revenues dropped to a bare minimum. Colonial officers lamented the plight of the many unmarried women farmers, whose diligence had impressed them earlier, and planned to temporarily exempt these women from paying taxes. Local male authorities objected, however, claiming it unjust to reward women for remaining unmarried and arguing that it would further encourage female looseness. They arranged that instead the colonial administration taxed each man for only one hut, no matter how many wives (and thus huts) he had – so pushing the previously independent women farmers into (polygynous) marriage (Mandala 1982: 37).
regulations (e.g. Moore & Vaughan 1987: 530-4). As discussed, however, the Yao, due to their Islamic orientation and larger aversion towards the colonial regime, are likely to have been less involved with patriarchal Westerners and may therefore have been less affected by this than most other groups in Malawi.

In sum, men’s control over material resources increased while that of women diminished. Men’s privileged access to education and wage labour gave them a virtual monopoly on cash, on which women increasingly depended. As a result, men’s independence from and authority over women is generally said to have increased13 (Davison 1993, Hirschmann & Vaughan 1984, Mandala 1982, Semu 2002). In 1962, Mitchell wrote that through marriage Yao women acquired the “right to support” (Mitchell 1962: 37). This could suggest that that by the end of the colonial era, Yao women’s position had declined from being equal to and relatively autonomous from men, to needing (entitlement to) support. But Mitchell’s comment can also be read to indicate that women, through marriage, found a way to harness men’s access to money. Based on my empirical data from Mudzi, which will be discussed in the following chapters, I believe it is these two readings combined that seems to reflect most accurately women’s current-day agency within a resource-limited environment.

Post-colonial era: 1963 – 2012
As profits failed to materialize, Britain’s overseas territories came to be seen as a drain of money and were thus ordered to cover their own costs. Supporting issues related to education, health, and agriculture was left to missionaries, and economic development to commercial plantation owners (Pike 1968: 95). Taxes were raised even when the country faced famine (Conroy 2006: 15). While the Nyasaland population felt increasingly exploited and discriminated against, the British felt increasingly uncomfortable with their colonies. Eventually, the British parliament planned to rid itself from its colonial responsibilities by handing over the country to the European estate owners who had settled on Nyasaland’s most fertile grounds (Pike 1968: 108).

However, due to missionary support the group of Nyasaland men with Western training had grown substantially by the mid-20th century. This group objected strongly to the British plans, foreseeing an apartheid regime like those in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia (Pike 1968: 110-4). As elsewhere in the African

13 Interestingly, Silberschmidt (2004) and Nguthi (2007) argue that the reverse happened in some patrilineal societies. They found that in rural Kenya, men’s labor wages are often insufficient to maintain a family, which forces women to find their own means of generating an income. Unable to live up to their responsibility as breadwinner, men lose (self)respect. Although men own the land, women cultivate it. Managing both food and cash crops, women have become crucial for the survival of the household. As a result the power balance between men and women has shifted towards the latter.
colonies, demands for independence gained strength. Initially, protesters were killed or imprisoned, but this only stirred the disapproval of colonization on the British mainland. When in 1959 a handful of young locals were permitted to sit in the Nyasaland parliament – a decision that the colonial administration hoped would soothe the escalating situation and silence the opposition – these men instead grabbed every opportunity to publicly question and criticize the racist colonial regime (Pike 1968: 136). There was no way back and Britain eventually agreed to gradually release their grip on Nyasaland, which culminated in full independence in 1964.14

Most Nyasaland nationals involved in the independence movement were youngsters. They needed a leader that radiated authority, and asked the senior Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda to be their representative and symbolic father figure, a role which the youngsters intended to be largely ceremonial (Pike 1968: 139). Running his own medical practice in London15 – a position unequalled by any other Nyasaland national – Banda was a highly esteemed local hero and therefore perfectly suited for the job. He accepted, but only on the condition of a life-long chairmanship.

Soon after being installed as president, Banda made sure his most outspoken collaborators within the movement were removed from the political scene and even expelled from the country (Pike 1968: 168). Banda renamed the country after the pre-colonial Maravi empire, established himself as supreme chief, and founded a repressive one-party political system that lasted for 30 years. Not much changed for the rural masses: Banda privileged the small, local, Western-oriented upper class, much like the British had advantaged the whites (Lwanda 2004: 32). He imposed his own mother tongue ChiChewa as the national language (since taught at all primary schools), together with English (the lingua franca at all higher levels of education and the national newspapers).

Banda reigned like a traditional chief. Surrounding himself with symbols customarily associated with chiefs and radiating the autocratic authority assigned

---

14 Between the 1950s and 1970s virtually all colonies in Africa went through similar decolonization processes.

15 As a youngster, Banda allegedly walked from Nyasaland to South Africa, longing for further education. Working in the mines during the daytime and studying in the evening hours, he eventually managed to obtain an education in the United States where he studied philosophy and medicine. To be able to work as a medical doctor in his home country, as he wished, he had to obtain a British medical degree and therefore continued his studies in Scotland. World War II prevented him from obtaining the necessary permits, and to kill time he opened a – successful – medical practice in one of London’s suburbs. Having personally experienced the racism in South Africa and the southern US, he strongly objected to Britain’s plan to hand over Nyasaland to the European estate owners in the country (Pike 1968: 108). From England, Banda became increasingly involved in the struggle for independence both morally and financially, mediating between the nationalists and the colonial office in London. When he returned to his home country to be installed as leader of the national party, he had not been there for 45 years (Wolf & Pendergast nd).
to the paramount chief, he became quickly recognized and accepted as such throughout Malawi (Pike 1968: 170). In his hands he had a country lacking mineral resources, capital, skilled labour, industries, and domestic markets of any significance. Banda decided to focus on developing an agricultural export-oriented economy, in which the Malawian masses would generate income by working on large modern estates (Blackie & Conroy 2006: 93). To create such estates many villagers were forced to abandon their home and gardens and move elsewhere. A former Malawian colleague of mine was one of these villagers. When I asked him about the issue, he answered that Banda had given no compensation and the villagers had not protested. Moreover, he seemed to feel that Banda had had no reason to compensate, nor had he and his family had any reason to protest, because, he explained, Banda was the owner of Malawi, and could possess all lands as he wished. Apparently, the people of Malawi generally granted their president the same rights and power as they had to their traditional paramount chiefs. Banda’s authority was based both on hegemonic consensus and approval (Chirambo 2004: 147, Forster 1994), and excessive violent repression. During his many speeches Banda openly threatened to make crocodile meat of anyone daring to counter him – a comment which made it to the Guinness book of records as the most inhuman and dangerous statement made by a state president (Mkamanga 2000: 101).

Banda imposed upon the arbitrarily unified people of Malawi an invented but supposedly shared ideology with a strong normative gender component. It was based on his personal matrilineal background, but interlarded with patriarchal Western and Christian gender norms that reflected his 28 years in the US and England (Segal 2008). Women were explicitly granted a central position in his pursuit for modernization, but particularly as supporters and facilitators of husbands who were to do the real work. Women were glorified as embodiments of the traditional African ways, while men, like himself, represented Western progress (Gilman 2009: 65-6). During his 30-year reign, Banda continuously asserted that Malawian women had been oppressed and pitiable before he came to their rescue16 (Gilman 2004: 39-40). In practice, this ‘rescue’ existed mainly of educating women in typically Western housewives’ chores such as cooking, sewing, hygiene, and house decoration (Semu 2002: 84). Hence, while rhetorically claiming to empower women, Banda actually confined their role to the private sphere. Largely rural and uneducated, the Malawian masses were susceptible to Banda’s dictatorial

---

16 In 1958 for example, Banda stated that: “Women were trampled down by everybody ... everybody. ... Nobody thought about women except to make them cook for them. That’s all. ... So, I made up my mind even before I came that I was going to do something about my women. Therefore when I see my women happy and singing and dancing with their heads high, their necks bent with pride like that ... it makes me happy, very happy.” (in Gilman 2004: 39-40).
manipulation of culture and history (Forster 1994, Semu 2002: 80), and it is likely that the impact of his ideology is still discernible in people’s minds. Banda’s persuasive and long-lasting influence on gender ideology is missed by many other historical accounts on changing gender relations in Malawi (e.g. Bennesch 2011, Davison 1993, Hirschmann & Vaughan 1984, Phiri 1983). It was pointed out to me by Mudzi’s Group Village Headwoman (aged 61), who remarked that ever since Banda’s reign, women can no longer tell their husbands how to behave [P3 2542].

Despite the apparent violations of human rights, Banda was generally treated favourably by Western governments because of his strong anti-communist stance. When the Cold War ended in the 1990s, however, the West had no reason to ignore Malawi’s horrific human rights record any longer (Conroy 2006: 20). With backing from the international community and missionaries within Malawi, national protests increased. In 1993 Banda succumbed to allowing a referendum, in which Malawians – much to Banda’s surprise – opted for a multi-party democratic system. The country has since been prone to discord among the various political parties.17

During and after Banda’s reign, Western development programs too have unwittingly undermined women’s position in Malawi, as they have elsewhere in Africa. Based on Western household models and gender stereotypes, productive interventions were, and often still are, directed at men as the presumed household heads and main food producers (Boserup 1970, Baerends 1994, Doss 1999, Ferguson 1994, Quisumbing & Meinzen-Dick 2001, Rogers 1980). Men received information on new agricultural technologies and the tools to apply these, while women – responsible for most farming activities but considered mere housewives – were excluded. Besides this material privileging of men at the expense of women, the tendency of development agencies to see and treat African women as subordinate to men and in need of empowerment may have further degraded the female (self-)image (Arnfred 2004a: 12). As we shall see in Chapter 8, however,

17 As an update to the most recent political situation: The president who reigned in Malawi during the fieldwork for this study, Bingu wa Mutharika, was appreciated by the international donor community for his anti-corruption policies and his efforts to address other issues high on international development agendas. Indeed, many development indicators have improved under his presidency (2004-2012). The share of the population living in poverty declined; infant, child and maternal mortality decreased; and literacy and gender parity in education increased (GoM 2010a: xi). Unfortunately, since 2008, the impacts of the global economic crisis became felt in Malawi too, driving up prices and unemployment. As popular discontent proliferated, Mutharika became repressive. This eventually led to violent clashes between protesters and the national police, and to major international donors suspending their financial aid to the country. In April 2012, Mutharika died abruptly of a heart attack. After some turmoil, he was succeeded by vice-president Joyce Banda – whom he had earlier expelled from his party as she had refused to accept the nomination of his brother as his future successor. Joyce Banda is Malawi’s first and Africa’s second female president. Soon after installation she sold the private jet and the fleet of 60 Mercedes cars that came with the job, a deed considered “iconic for an African leader” (UK Secretary for International Development Andrew Mitchell, quoted in the UK Telegraph June 1, 2012). Relations with the international donor community were soon restored.
the actual effect (positive or negative) of external development aid on community levels seems quite minimal – at least for the case of Mudzi.

Besides the various advances of men’s position vis-à-vis women, it should also be mentioned that meanwhile, some of the arguably most masculine traditional tasks have become decimated or annihilated due to external circumstances. Conquering new fields from nature is no longer necessary as almost all land has been cleared (Mandala 1982: 30), hunting for large mammals is impossible as the few that are left reside in protected wildlife reserves, raiding for slaves has been prohibited since the colonial era, and adventurous long-distance trading journeys ceased as a result. While the tasks through which women can confirm their gender identity continue to be diverse – cultivating fields, preparing food, bearing and caring for children, and housekeeping – those for men can have increasingly narrowed down to the provision of money.

It appears, in conclusion, that men’s contemporary role as provider was not produced by colonialist and capitalist influences, as assumed by many gender analysts, but is rather a continuation of far older local norms and customs. Nonetheless, a number of factors, which partly result from colonialism and capitalism, have over time led to a concentration on monetary provision as the measurement of a man’s worth.

In recent years, however, monetary provision has become increasingly difficult to achieve. The international economic crisis (beginning in 2007) is being felt severely in Malawi, as both prices and unemployment rise. Even prior to the global crisis, Malawian men’s access to relatively well-paid jobs in the better endowed countries of Southern Africa has declined drastically – due to technical improvements that reduced the demand for manual labour, the Zimbabwean economic collapse, the decision of the South African government to deport all Malawians (arguing that they brought HIV into the country\(^\text{18}\)), and the recent violent outbursts against migrants in South Africa. Nevertheless, during my fieldwork period male labour migration to South Africa remained an important, albeit less profitable and less easy, source of income for many households in Mudzi.

**Food insecurity**

The colonial government allowed in their towns only locals who worked there. To avoid having poor, unemployed, urban masses who might demand social support from their government, the colonial administration deemed it better for all if migrants returned to their rural place of origin as soon as they became unemployed. Permanent urban settlement was thus strongly opposed (Mitchell 1961: 84). Banda

---

\(^{18}\) Lwanda (2004: 38-9) argues however that it is more likely that Malawians brought HIV into Malawi after having worked in South Africa. See the next session for further elaboration.
too forced much of the Malawian population to remain in their villages as subsistence farmers, arguing that “cities breed poverty”, and presumably hoping to prevent the organization of political opposition. As a result, Malawi is one of the least urbanized countries worldwide, with almost 80 percent of the population residing in rural areas (GoM 2011b: 25). Not surprisingly then, Malawi has a predominantly agricultural economy. About 90 percent of the Malawian households grow crops (GoM 2006a); 80 percent of the population are small-scale subsistence farmers (GoM 2005a), thus depending largely on their own agricultural produce to survive.

Compared to some other countries in the region, Malawi’s agricultural production levels are extremely low. The value of net agricultural output per hectare in Malawi is on average only one-fifth of that achieved in Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya, with the gap worsening for lower-income households (Ellis & Freeman 2005). While East African farmers can harvest their fields twice per year because of two rainy seasons, Malawi has rains only once a year. Expansive growth of the Malawian population increased the need for land to cultivate as well as fuel wood to cook with, which has led to extreme deforestation and degradation of soils. Global climate change, furthermore, has increased the incidence of drought as well as flooding, severely affecting yields throughout the country.

But ecological factors only partly explain Malawi’s low agricultural productivity. Both the British and Banda’s regime have to some extent purposefully neglected developing the rural areas (Conroy 2006: 17-8, Ellis et al. 2003: 33), prioritizing the development of a small elite instead. Estate agriculture was rapidly expanded at the expense of smallholder agriculture through easy acquisition of land, and smallholder agriculture was taxed to develop the estates (Chirwa et al. 2008: 5). Furthermore, smallholders were prohibited from growing certain cash crops so that estate owners could monopolize them (Conroy 2006: 18, Frankenberger et al. 2003: 2). To the elite a hungry peasantry had its advantages, as it facilitated the recruitment of cheap labour on commercial estates (Mandala 2005). Uneducated, isolated, and preoccupied with day-to-day survival, the rural masses were, furthermore, less likely to oppose the abusive regimes. The legacy of this neglect is a rural population that, in comparison to surrounding countries, is markedly deprived of infrastructural, educational, agricultural, and health services (Bryceson & Fonseca 2006). The most fertile lands have been granted to the commercial estates where export crops are grown, occupying over 40 percent of all arable land in Malawi (Arrehag et al. 2006: 65, Sahley et al. 2005: 13). Smallholder farming households have a median land size of 0.6 hectares to cultivate (Chinsinga 2008: 8) – which is far below the estimated 1.5 hectares needed to feed a family for a full year (Kamwendo 2006: 5). If the crops are not affected by dry spells, floods, or pests, an average Malawian household can harvest just enough to feed itself for six to seven months (Chirwa et al. 2008: 15). Buying sufficient food in the remaining months is difficult for many as income-generating opportunities are
limited and prices are high at this time due to scarcity and huge demand – leading to an annually recurring ‘hunger season’.

Although reduced land availability due to population pressure is usually mentioned as a reason for the small plot sizes, dependence on manual labour too plays a restraining role (Madzonga, pers. comm., Hyden 1980: 152, Moore & Vaughan 1987: 538, Phiri 1983: 263). As few Malawian smallholder farmers own animal draft power – let alone mechanized power – cultivation is mainly dependent on human labour. During the exhausting heat that precedes the rainy season, the fields must be cleared and ploughed using a handheld hoe. Sowing, weeding, and harvesting are all done manually as well. Having depleted the stores of their previous harvest before the next harvest is due, many villagers survive by doing ganyu: in exchange for some money or food they work on the fields of wealthier farmers, which are usually those who receive remittances from husbands or relatives working in town or in South Africa.

Malawi’s main food crop is maize, grown by 97 percent of the farmers (GoM 2005a), and contributing to 80 percent of daily calorie intake for most Malawians (Blackie & Conroy 2006: 87). It is primarily used for making nsima, a thick porridge that is the basis of the Malawian diet, usually accompanied by a small side dish to dip into the nsima. For these side dishes, seasonal vegetables or legumes are generally used, such as pumpkin leaves, beans, or okra. When the budget allows, tiny dried fish may be bought to accompany the nsima; meat is a luxury that is rarely eaten. Malawians commonly say that without some heavy nsima in their stomach, they feel they have not properly eaten. Maize is not indigenous to the region, but was imported from the Americas by the Portuguese in the 17th century and quickly adopted because of several advantages over local crops like sorghum and millet: higher yields, quicker maturing, better taste, and grains that are protected from birds by sheaths (Carr 2004, McCann 2001). To make most of the little land available to them, farmers grow maize on it almost exclusively. This monocropping has led to the depletion of soil nutrients, and the one-sided diet to the severe malnourishment of the rural population. Agricultural research institutes have developed higher yielding maize varieties, but most smallholder farmers continue to rely on local varieties, because hybrid maize needs costly fertilizer input, is more prone to pests, and cannot be used for replanting the following season.

Besides a general lack of capital to invest in cattle, the long dry season in Southern Africa makes the region less suitable for big livestock, which need year-round grasslands to graze, compared to Eastern Africa with its two annual rainy seasons (Blackie & Conroy 2006: 101).

Malawi has one of the highest prevalence of protein-energy undernutrition in the world. Furthermore, iron, zinc, vitamin A, and iodine deficiencies are high (Maleta 2006).

“Farming”, a Malawian colleague once said to me, “is actually for rich people: only those who can afford improved seeds, fertilizer, and ganyu labourers can benefit.”

---

19 Besides a general lack of capital to invest in cattle, the long dry season in Southern Africa makes the region less suitable for big livestock, which need year-round grasslands to graze, compared to Eastern Africa with its two annual rainy seasons (Blackie & Conroy 2006: 101).

20 Malawi has one of the highest prevalence of protein-energy undernutrition in the world. Furthermore, iron, zinc, vitamin A, and iodine deficiencies are high (Maleta 2006).

21 “Farming”, a Malawian colleague once said to me, “is actually for rich people: only those who can afford improved seeds, fertilizer, and ganyu labourers can benefit.”
The colonial presence had a drastic impact on traditional farming practices. Following the halting of intertribal wars and slave raids, and the availability of Western medicine the local population increased to such an extent that fallow periods had to be shortened. As a result productivity diminished. Before peasants could adequately adapt to this new situation, however, the colonial regime intervened aggressively. They set out to change local agricultural practices by force, penalizing peasants who did not take up the new, more labour-intensive methods (Davison 1997: 106, Pike 1968: 159). Believing they must always respect the ways of their ancestors to assure survival in their highly precarious environment, farmers were averse to the new practices forced onto them by the foreigners. At independence, Malawians widely hoped they could return to their traditional cultivation practices, and were upset when Banda continued to push for agricultural reform (Pike 1968: 162).

Seasonality is key to understanding the daily lives of smallholder farmers in Malawi (see Figure 2.1 for a timeline). Just like each year brings a season of hunger, so too it brings a season of plenty. After harvesting, villagers eat big plates of nsima several times a day, and regularly sell some of their maize to buy ‘luxury’ products like meat, oil, tea, sugar, or clothes. At other times of the year, their diet almost exclusively exists of what the land has to offer at that specific time, be it mangoes, pumpkin leaves, or cassava. Whenever a farmer has any crop in abundance and can sell some surplus, prices hit bottom, because all farmers in the area have plenty of that same crop at that same time. Food prices thus also fluctuate throughout the year: low just after harvest and high during the hunger season. Daily activities too depend on the season. Before the rainy season commences the fields have to be cleared from weeds and ploughed. When the first rains fall the seeds must be planted. Later weeds must be removed and – if available – fertilizer applied. After harvest the maize kernels are ripped of the cobs and stored. Ceremonies such as initiation rites or tombstone revealings often take place soon after harvest, when the food required for such celebrations is readily available.

Figure 2.1: Timeline of the agricultural seasons in Malawi
Source: USAID/FEWS NET 2012

---

22 Some trading is done between regions, as ecologies and timing of the rainy season differ, and therefore also the availability of crops. However, transport costs are an impeding factor.

23 Deceased persons are usually buried soon after death, either the same day or the next. The grave remains without a tombstone until the family manages to gather enough money for it – which may never happen at all. But if it happens, the placing of the stone is accompanied by a lavish celebration.
Approximately one-third of Malawi’s smallholders cultivate cash crops in addition to food crops (Conroy 2006a: 24). Malawi’s main export crop is tobacco, grown by several large estates as well as many small-scale farmers – but sales continue to steadily diminish due to the global decline in smoking. Other export crops include tea, sugar, cotton, coffee, and groundnuts. Contrary to free-market-proponents’ belief, smallholder cash-crop growers in Malawi are not in the position to negotiate reasonable minimum prices for their produce. In dire need for some money to buy the next meal they simply have to accept whatever price is offered to them (pers. obs., Bryceson & Fonseca 2005). Without direct access to the sea, transportation costs for export are relatively high, making it difficult to compete with other countries, further squeezing the prices offered by traders to the absolute minimum. The domestic market to sell produce and products is small because of the low level of urbanization, the small number of people living above the poverty line, and the negligible size of the tourist industry.

Over the past century, it must be noted, Malawi’s smallholder agricultural sector has not been fully self-sustaining. As mentioned, large numbers of men migrated to better-endowed countries in the region in search for work, sending some of their earnings to their families in Malawi (Bryceson et al. 2004: 11-2). Vaughan (1987) describes how these remittances kept many from starvation during the severe famine of 1949. Besides being used to buy supplemental food, money remains particularly needed to purchase agricultural inputs like chemical fertilizer and pesticides. At a large scale it is also used to hire extra labour to meet the need for manual labour power. As mentioned, however, income opportunities, both abroad and within Malawi, have declined over the past decades.

The governments that succeeded Banda’s regime made some efforts to reduce rural food insecurity by investing in education, irrigation, roads, communication, and market infrastructure. But international donors have long considered investing in agricultural development outdated (Conroy & Blackie 2006: 6). Instead, they urged that government expenses – which were to be minimized in the first place to pay off foreign debts – should focus on market liberalization and commercial export (Sahley et al. 2005). Only recently did the international aid community revalue agricultural development as vital for poverty reduction in low-income countries like Malawi (the World Bank’s 2008 World Development Report titled Agriculture for Development exemplifies this paradigm shift).

Resulting from the combination of factors described in this section, the majority of Malawians suffer from chronic food insecurity and malnutrition (see Chapter

---

24 Since 1990 Banda allowed also smallholder farmers to grow this cash crop, under pressure from the World Bank (Blackie & Conroy 2006: 95).

25 As a comparison, Carr (2004: 16) describes a thriving market for high-value horticulture in Kenya due to the large urban population of several million topped up by the million tourists that visit annually. For South Africa these numbers are even higher.
1). Hunger, it must be emphasized, is not simply one of many forms of poverty. It is the deepest, most basic form of poverty. Not having sufficient food also means not having anything else, as most other items will have been exchanged for food. Surplus for investment in agricultural, educational, or any other kind of development is structurally lacking at the household level because food remains the main concern. For almost two decades now, malnutrition levels have remained virtually unchanged in Malawi (Field 2009), with detrimental impacts on the mental and physical development of individuals (Maleta 2006: 18-20), and consequently on the development of the entire nation. The recurring hunger seasons that rural Malawians have to deal with each year are not the exceptional famines that reach our television screens and trigger big fundraising events. Instead they remain unnoticed and disregarded by most of the world’s population.

HIV and AIDS

History and statistics

HIV is generally assumed to have originated in west-central African chimpanzees and transferred to human beings in the early 20th century (Worobey et al. 2008). When US scientists first identified AIDS and HIV in the early 1980s, the virus must already have been rampant in southern Africa. In 1986 the first HIV tests were carried out in Malawi, and almost half of the tested urban sex workers were found positive (Chiphangwi et al. 1987). As with other issues troubling his nation (such as food shortages – Mandala 2005: 23), Banda enforced silence and denial by prohibiting medics from keeping records of the disease and journalists from reporting on it (Lwanda 2004: 35). By the end of his regime, HIV prevalence among urban sex workers had increased to 70 percent (UNAIDS/WHO 2004). It was estimated that over the same ten-year period infection rates among the general population rose explosively, from 2 to 33 percent (Geubbels & Bowie 2006: 31). This estimation was based on HIV prevalence among pregnant women attending urban antenatal clinics, as these were assumed to roughly represent the general population. When it was later realized that there were substantial differences between urban and rural infection rates and between prevalence among men and women, calculation methods and national estimates were revised (GoM 2008a).

Currently, it is estimated that in Malawi 11 percent of the population between 15 and 49 is HIV positive (GoM 2011a) – the majority unaware of their status. This number has remained stable over the past decade, partly because the spread of the

---

26 Not only Malawians face an annual hunger season, rural populations of the other countries in Southern Africa do too (Lambrichts & Barry 2003).

27 This percentage does not include the estimated 20,000 babies that are born with HIV annually (Whiteside & Conroy 2006: 76).
virus has slowed down in the urban areas, but also as a result of increased death rates (Conroy & Whiteside 2006: 50) prior to the introduction of antiretroviral treatment. As elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, AIDS started out as mainly striking urban, educated men – those who travelled and could afford extramarital relationships. Infection rates have remained highest in the urban areas, while the spread of HIV accelerates in the rural areas (GoM 2006b, UNAIDS 2008). Urban HIV prevalence is currently estimated at 17 percent, and rural prevalence at 9 percent (GoM 2011a). In absolute numbers, due to its low level of urbanization, Malawi has over twice as many rural infected as urban infected (GoM 20012: 2).

As is the case throughout sub-Saharan Africa, more women than men live with the virus (13% versus 8%). As a result of these disproportionate infection rates, women currently represent almost 60 percent of all infected Malawians (UNAIDS 2008). Throughout the continent women are especially overrepresented among the younger generations. The latest statistics from Malawi show that infection rates among women aged 15 to 39 are significantly higher than those among their male peers. Young women between the ages 15 to 19 are four times more likely to be infected than their male peers (4% versus 1%), and those aged 20 to 34 are infected roughly twice as often (14% versus 7%) (GoM 2011a: 196). Comparing the data with those from earlier national surveys, however, some hopeful signs can be discerned (see Figure 2.2). In the age group 20 to 34, HIV prevalence dropped for both men and women. Among women aged 20 to 24 and men aged 30 to 34, the rates even dropped by almost half (for women from 13% to 6%, for men from 20% to 11%). It appears that women currently in the age group 20 to 24 (born between 1986 and 1990) have been best able to reduce their risk of infection. Meanwhile, however, HIV prevalence continues to rise among the group of women that is currently aged 30 to 39 (born between 1971 and 1980).

Figure 2.2: HIV prevalence in age and sex groups
Source: GoM 2012: 2
For both men and women infection rates are highest among the wealthiest quintiles of the population, roughly double that of the lowest quintile (for men 11% versus 6%, for women 20% versus 9%). The level of education seems unrelated to men’s or women’s likeliness of being infected. Being employed does make a difference, for both men and women, but particularly for men: 2 percent of unemployed men are HIV infected, compared with 9 percent of employed men. Among women, 9 percent of the unemployed and 14 percent of the employed live with the virus (GoM 2011a: 198).

Ever since the monitoring of HIV prevalence started towards the end of Banda’s regime, infection rates have been substantially higher in the Southern Region (15%) than in the Central (8%) and Northern (7%) Region (GoM 2012: 13). A number of interrelated factors may help to explain the disproportionately high HIV rates in the Southern Region. Labour migration has been most substantial from this region (Bryceson et al. 2004: 27) and is found to be a major risk factor for HIV infection, as will be discussed in the following sub-section. This migratory pattern may in turn be related to higher levels of poverty and population density in the Southern Region, as well as the predominantly matrilineal organization of society, as argued earlier. The relatively high population density is a likely result of the comparatively fertile soils, which both attracted more Bantu settlers during pre-colonial periods and led to a concentration of commercial estates during the colonial period and beyond (Conroy 2006a: 16). These estates attracted labour migrants from the Northern and Central Regions, where the population size decreased as a result (Pike 1968: 24). A massive influx of refugees fleeing the Mozambican civil war further added to the population pressure in the south. The expansive population growth and expropriation of the best lands for commercial plantations (Sahley et al. 2005: 13) intensified food insecurity, which pushed men to search for alternative sources of livelihood security and thus into labour migration.

Drivers of the Malawian epidemic

In Malawi and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa HIV is predominantly transmitted through unprotected heterosexual intercourse, and to a far lesser extent from mother to baby (GoM 2012, UNAIDS 2008). It seems reasonable, therefore, to consider risky sex as central to the AIDS epidemics of sub-Saharan Africa (De Walque et al. 2012: 4). Here I describe the dynamics that are generally considered to underlie the (sexual) transmission of HIV in Malawi.

It is assumed that HIV first entered Malawi via migrants who worked abroad (Lwanda 2004: 35). In 1993 it was estimated that nearly half of the Malawian mine workers returning to their rural home areas from South Africa brought with them the deadly virus (Gould 1993 in Kalipeni et al. 2004: 60). The links between mobility and HIV transmission have been well documented (see Collins & Rau 2001: 8-12 for a review). Long-distance labour contracts often mean that workers
leave their families behind for extended periods of time. Their loneliness and cash to spend, combined with lower levels of social control than in their home villages, lead many migrant workers to engage in casual sexual encounters and to turn to commercial sex workers for their satisfaction (Ahlburg & Jensen 1998: 148, Chirwa 1997). Both these men and their sex partners often have multiple partners, enhancing the risk of HIV transmission. It has been convincingly argued that the particular colonial history of eastern and southern Africa28, which generated an exceptionally extensive migrant labour system, played a decisive role in shaping the current geographical pattern of the continent’s AIDS pandemic (Hunt 1996: 1294–5, Yeboah 2007: 1136). Mobility continues to be an important risk factor for HIV infection in southern Africa in general, as well as Mudzi in particular, as here too labour migration is a common strategy for men to try improve their livelihood security.

Another factor increasingly pointed to as underlying the high levels of HIV transmission in sub-Saharan Africa is the high incidence of concurrent partnerships (Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009, GoM 2010b: 36, Epstein & Morris 2011, Nattrass 2009, Shelton et al. 2005, Uchudi et al. 2012). HIV is one of the least contagious viruses around. Under normal circumstances29 the probability of contracting HIV during unprotected sex with an infected partner is estimated to be as low as one in one thousand30 (Gray et al. 2001). In a context with high rates of untreated sexually transmitted infections (STIs), like rural Malawi, chances may increase to three in one thousand (Watkins 2004: 683). Only in the early and late stages of infection, when the viral load peaks, is the likelihood of transmission relatively high (Pilcher et al. 2004). Unprotected sex with a new partner soon after infection thus significantly increases the risk of HIV spreading. Simultaneous sexual partnerships increase the likeliness of this occurring. Reliable quantitative data on overlapping sexual relationships are difficult to obtain, as reporting bias tends to be high in surveys on respondents’ intimate sex lives (Clark 2010, Helleringer et al. 2011) – a topic generally considered inappropriate to openly discuss with strangers. Sexual concurrency may be particularly underreported by women, for whom it is socially disapproved of, and overstated by men, from whom sexual

---

28 Europeans settled in Eastern and Southern Africa rather than West Africa because of the relatively favourable climate. Valuable minerals, which were extracted with African labour, were found particularly in Southern Africa, leading to concentrations and flows of migrant workers in this region (Yeboah 2007: 1137).

29 ‘Normal’ here means heterosexual vaginal intercourse, in which the vagina is sufficiently lubricated, and the partners are free of genital ulcers. Anal intercourse, dry sex, and genital ulcers significantly increase probability of transmission.

30 This figure is based on studies in Europe, the US, Thailand, and Uganda among heterosexual couples of whom only one partner was HIV positive. The deliberate selection of such discordant couples may have biased the findings though, as the uninfected partner possibly escaped infection because of a partial immunity or selective resistance against HIV.
prowess is expected (Nnko et al. 2004). Of the few Malawian men and women who reported having had at least two sexual partners in the year prior to the national Demographic and Health Survey, 46 percent of women and 80 percent of men said the relationships had been overlapping (GoM 2011a: 178, 180). A unique study on sexual networking conducted among the rural population on an island in Lake Malawi revealed a large web in which half of all sexually active respondents were linked in one enormous network, and more than a quarter were connected through multiple chains of sexual relationships (Helleringer & Kohler 2007). Wealth inequalities are believed to play an important role in the establishment of such sexual networks, linking those with assets to those in need through the practice of transactional sex (Shelton et al. 2005: 1058).

As mentioned, only in sub-Saharan Africa are more women than men infected with HIV. While all women are biologically more susceptible to HIV infection than men (see Chapter 1), their predicament becomes particularly problematic when combined with severe gender inequality, as this inhibits them from negotiating the conditions under which sex occurs. For one, when a woman has to engage in sexual intercourse without being aroused, the risk of tissue tearing and thus infection becomes much higher. Secondly, it is often argued, unfavourable gender constructs render women subordinate and secondary to men, make them culturally and economically dependent on men, and so withhold them from abstaining from sex, demanding faithfulness, or insisting on condom use.31 Furthermore, malnutrition, which is widespread throughout Malawi and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa and which generally affects women more than men due to social inequalities, weakens the immune system and slows down the healing of genital ulcers, increasing the risk of HIV infection (Collins & Rau 2001, Gillespie & Kadiyala 2005, Stillwaggon 2006a).

Crosscutting these factors that are considered important drivers of the spread of HIV in Malawi (and beyond), many reports emphasize, are the structural inequalities and insecure livelihoods that the general population faces on a day-to-day basis.32 Such structural inequalities, as already discussed in Chapter 1, predispose marginalized people to higher health risks while hampering their access to health care. Malnutrition has just been mentioned; suboptimal, unhygienic living and working circumstances are another result of marginalisation that is likely to affect people’s health. Poverty is furthermore assumed to push men to migration and women to survival sex, and so too increase their risk of HIV infection (see Chapter 1). Gender inequality and low family incomes may curtail access to

---


education, particularly for girls, which some studies have found to be associated with higher HIV risk (Krishnan et al. 2008: 103, Rodrigo & Rajapakse 2010: 12, but see also Baird et al. 2009: 5). Taken together, these interrelated factors form what is called an HIV ‘risk environment’ (Barnett & Whiteside 2006: 86) – the recognition of which is, as discussed in Chapter 1, an important step ahead from the earlier focus (and consequent blame) on individual sexual decision-making. However, as I will argue throughout this book, the acknowledgement of structural disadvantageous factors should not override our perceptiveness to other, less direct or more voluntary, factors that entice men and women to ignore safe-sex recommendations.

**Preventive interventions**

Official HIV prevention in Africa has focused by and large on informing the population about the existence of the new fatal virus and ways to avoid infection. The message that has been most widely promoted is usually summarized as ABC, short for Abstain, Be faithful or use a Condom33 (Barden-O’Fallon et al. 2004: 131, GoM 2010b: 64, Mbugua 2009). Especially the first recommendation, to completely abstain from sex, has been overemphasized in Malawi, at the cost of promoting condom use and partner reduction (Hardee et al. 2008: 3, GoM 2006b). This official emphasis on abstinence may have resulted from a strong, conservatively religious lobby within Malawi but also because large US donor agencies34 have objected against condom promotion because this is believed to encourage promiscuity. In the current national response to HIV and AIDS, however, condoms are explicitly recognized as an important prevention tool against HIV infection (GoM 2012: 31). Behaviour change campaigns are no longer concerned only with prevention messages, but increasingly also with treatment, care, support, and crosscutting issues like gender equality and human rights (ibid: 27). Print media, radio, television, band performances, drama shows, and interactive community sessions are used extensively by the Malawian government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to transmit the various HIV and AIDS messages, leading Bryceson et al. (2004: 24) to speak of a “bombardment of educational information”.

---

33 More precisely, UNAIDS defines ABC as standing for “Abstinence (not engaging in sex or delaying first sex), Being safer by being faithful to one’s partners or reducing the number of sexual partners, and Correct and consistent use of condoms” (UNAIDS 2004: 6). The ABC slogan was first coined in 1992 by the Filipino Secretary of Health, and subsequently picked up by major players in the field of HIV prevention, e.g. WHO, UNAIDS, USAID, and PEPFAR (Hardee et al. 2008). However, even before this specific slogan became en vogue, the international response to the spread of HIV largely revolved around the ABC recommendations, albeit under different formulations and in varying combinations (ibid).

34 Soon after his installation in 2009, US president Obama dismantled the law against the funding of agencies that promote condom use.
As a result of the focus on raising awareness, knowledge of Edzi – as AIDS is locally called – is nearly universal in Malawi (GoM 2011a: 166), and has been so for many years. In 1993 a survey undertaken in rural Southern Malawi found that virtually all respondents, male and female, already knew that the new disease was sexually transmitted and could not be cured. Most also knew that a healthy-looking person can be infectious, and infection can be prevented (Tavrow 1994 in Watkins 2004: 679, see also Foster 1998: 537). The most recent national Demographic and Health Survey indicates that almost 80 percent of all Malawians know that abstinence, monogamy, or condom use can reduce the risk of HIV transmission (GoM 2011a: 167). Equally high percentages know that HIV can be transmitted through breastfeeding, that mother-to-child transmission can be reduced through medication (GoM 2011a: 170), and that the virus cannot be transmitted through mosquito bites, the sharing of food, or supernatural means (GoM 2011a: 168). About half of the Malawian population answered all questions about HIV and AIDS correctly. Such comprehensive knowledge is highest among younger adults, and found to increase with wealth and education level. UNAIDS found that Botswana and Malawi scored best on knowledge of HIV and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa (in Arrehag et al. 2006: 17).

Knowledge about HIV and AIDS is thus impressively accurate, considering the fact that education levels in Malawi are extremely low, only half of the households own a radio, and a mere 6 percent possess a television (GoM 2006a: 80). However, despite consistently correct answers to most survey questions concerning HIV
and AIDS, and a steady increase in respondents that affirm an intent to change behaviour and go for testing in the future, no actual, large-scale change in behaviours regarding the ABC recommendations has yet been observed (GoM 2012: 27, Peters et al. 2007: 94). Watkins (2004) has argued that this should not necessarily be taken to mean that Malawians do not respond to the threat of AIDS at all, pointing to several locally developed and applied strategies of prevention that fit better within the daily lives of rural Malawians than the ABC formula. These include reducing the number of partners, selecting partners more carefully, using condoms with partners considered particularly risky, persuading unfaithful partners to adopt safer practices or otherwise divorce, and seeking support for resisting temptations in religion (see also Forster 2001: 251, Kaler 2004a: 292-6, Peters et al. 2007: 43, Schatz 2005, Smith & Watkins 2005: 655).35

Besides awareness raising and behaviour change campaigns, HIV-prevention efforts in Malawi also entail biomedical interventions. These include STI diagnosis and treatment, HIV testing and counselling, prevention of mother-to-child transmission, male circumcision, post-exposure prophylaxis, and prevention of blood transmission of HIV (GoM 2012: vi). Antiretroviral treatment (ART) also reduces transmission risk, and is therefore also mentioned here. ART has in Malawi been accessible free of cost since 2003, initially distributed at nine urban sites. By the end of 2009 the number of distribution sites had increased to 337 (a minority of these are private health centres that charge money for treatment) (GoM 2009b: 8, GoM 2010b: 69). It is estimated that 65 percent of Malawian adults and children with advanced HIV infection received antiretroviral treatment in 2009 (GoM 2010b: 19).

Conclusion

In 1932 the British missionary Alexander Hetherwick working in Nyasaland wrote that “Africa stood still while the great human world outside was generation upon generation developing” (Chanock 1971: 434). His evolutionary view was shared by most other missionaries and colonial administrators. One such administrator wrote that the task of the colonial rulers was to “deliberately raise the races of our backward fellow men out of the Stone Age into the Age of Steel” (ibid: 435) – apparently unaware that the Bantus of Nyasaland had mastered the skill of melting iron into hoes, spears, and knives centuries ago. The so-called backward natives were, as a matter of fact, far from ‘untouched’ by time or change. When Livingstone arrived in the Lake Malawian area, signs of contact with outsiders were found everywhere. The people he ‘discovered’ were growing maize brought from

---

35 In Chapter 6 on sex, HIV, and AIDS I discuss the extent to which these alternative prevention strategies are practiced in Mudzi.
the Americas via the Portuguese, dressed in brightly coloured cotton cloths woven in Europe, and adorned with beads from Asia. The houses were built in an Arab style and the landscape was scattered with mango trees and coconut palms brought home after travels to the coast. An extensive tributary empire had risen and fallen, and the farming population had developed adequate means to grow sufficient food within a fragile ecology.

With a second agenda of self-advancement, the colonialists set out to ‘develop’ the ‘backward fellow men’ they encountered in Africa. After Independence until this day these international development efforts intensified, partly fed by a feeling of guilt about the preceding era of colonization. Nonetheless, as described in this chapter, for the majority of Malawians life has become harsher over the past 150 years. Their livelihoods have crumbled due to exploitative policies during the colonial era and Banda’s regime, corruption and disastrous donor policies during succeeding governments, diminishing land-holding sizes, severe soil degradation, climate change, high morbidity and mortality rates due to AIDS, and reduced employment opportunities abroad. Only recently has some progress become discernible, but this is now seriously jeopardized by the 2007 global economic crisis.

The various historic processes have over time had varying impacts on the matrilineal groups in Malawi, leading to different blends of matrilineal and patrilineal principles. The Chewa, for example, who were conquered by the patrilineal Ngoni and later sought refuge from slave traders at the Christian missions, have gradually transformed from a matrilineal into a more patrilineal organized society, exemplified by a shift towards virilocal settlement patterns, (occasional) payments of bride-wealth, and greater authority for husbands (Phiri 1983, Mair 1951b, Mtika & Doctor 2002). Several facets of Yao history, including their sufficient military power which allowed them to avert conquest by patrilineal groups and their conversion to the more eclectic Islam, allowed for the endurance of their essentially matrilineal organization in an increasingly patriarchal world – proving wrong the consensus among early anthropologists about matriliny’s unsustainability in modern times (e.g. Douglas 1969, Levi-Strauss 1969 [1949], Richards 1950, Schneider & Gough 1961).

This is not to say that Yao women’s social position has remained unaltered. A mix of material and socio-ideological factors has affected the power dynamics between Yao women and men. When reconstructing the historical development of Yao gender relations, several possible explanations emerge for the apparent paradox between women’s control over food and shelter, and their expressed need for male support. Firstly, the dwindling of plot sizes and soil fertility reduced the quantity of food under women’s control, and generated a need for purchasing power to supplement their own production. The job opportunities created by white settlers and the colonial regime were granted almost exclusively to men – who,
moreover, had long been responsible for extra-agricultural food supplementation (hunting) and wealth generation (long-distance trading). With more economic opportunities accessible to them, and the appropriate socio-cultural position to draw upon these, men’s position vis-à-vis women improved. Women’s control base diminished, while men’s increased. Subsequently, the charismatic and brutal ‘president-for-life’ Kamuzu Banda imposed upon Malawians his invented gender ideology which glorified women, but mainly as housekeepers for men who were to do the ‘real work’ of developing the economy. The perception of women as essentially inferior to men has then been reproduced by international development programs that commonly portray women as victims in need of empowerment.

These multiple historical factors seem to have led to a socio-ideologically advancement of men over women. However, as also noted in this chapter, actual fulfilment of the male role has become increasingly difficult in recent times. In the following chapter I will focus on one particular village community in Malawi – the fieldwork site which I call Mudzi – to assess how the processes described in this chapter materialize in the daily lives of contemporary men and women.