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## 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 m'maliro, kuntunda, wow-inawina, komanso 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 choyamba*  
*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 *msonkhano* 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

## Dance in Malawi

As is the case in many African contexts, music making and dancing intertwine with the sociocultural fabric and permeate much public life in Malawi. People sing and move informally while engaging in all sorts of occasions from work to play to worship: weddings, collective farming sites, athletic events, installations of leaders, political rallies, parties, tourist venues, dance clubs, religious and healing rituals, and places of worship (Kamlongera et al. 1992).<sup>4</sup> Each ethnic group in Malawi participates in a repertoire of dance genres associated with that cultural group.<sup>5</sup> Each genre is usually performed by a particular category of people—based on age, gender, and social role—and most are associated with particular secular or sacred functions. To illustrate the varieties of dance forms associated with specific ethnic groups and geographic regions, here I briefly outline the types of dances that were performed during my stay in the Nkhata Bay District in 1998–1999. The majority population in Nkhata Bay District identify as belonging to the Tonga ethnic group, though many Tumbuka families have lived there for multiple generations, as do people from other ethnic groups. Many of those from other ethnic groups participate in Tonga dance genres while living in the district.

Teams of young men and boys danced the all-male malipenga militaristic secular dance at intervillage competitions, political rallies, and tourist venues (Kamlongera 1986; Kerr and Nambote 1983; Gilman 2000a). The mostly women chilimika dance teams, also secular, performed at intervillage competitions, an event at a Catholic church, tourist venues, the installation of a village headman, and political rallies. The sounds associated with *vimbuza/masiawe*, a dance usually performed by a single healer to drumming and women's singing, echoed faintly in the distance almost every night of my Nkhata Bay stay. My hosts explained that *vimbuza/masiawe* healing rituals often take place at night (Friedson 1996; Chilivumbo 1972). I observed some of these same healers performing in the secular contexts of tourist venues and political rallies. *Honara*, a dance developed when many Tonga men traveled regularly to South Africa to work in mines, is a secular dance performed by men and women in elegant clothing to the melodic turns of live accordion music. I was told that *honara* was the dance of weddings, though during my stay, recorded Congolese rumba (*kwaskwasa* and *domboro*) was the music of choice for most wedding organizers. The Phaka Town Band, one of the few remaining *honara* dance groups, generated great enthusiasm when it entertained at the rallies of several politicians in the district. *Chiwoda*, an all-women circle dance, used to be one of the most popular dances in the district. Whenever large groups of people gather, women join in a rotating circle and move rhythmically to the beating of drums and call-and-response singing. *Chiwoda* used to be associated with intervillage dance competitions, weddings, and other

community events (Chilivumbo 1971). By 1998, women danced *chiwoda* almost exclusively at political rallies, a change I explain in the final chapter of this book. I did witness a *chiwoda* performance with only a handful of women at a tourist venue, and a larger number of women gathered to dance at the installation of a village headman. I have been told that the island of Likoma in Lake Malawi is the one place where Tonga women still dance *chiwoda* in intervillage competitions. *Visekese*, a dance performed by women to the shaking of reed rattles, is rarely performed outside of Usisya in the northernmost reaches of the district. *Kamchoma*, a secular dance once performed by Tonga men, women, boys, and girls for entertainment in the evening hours, is no longer performed and exists only in the memories of elders.<sup>6</sup>

Other ethnic groups in Malawi participate in a similarly diverse range of dance practices. Although the histories of the dances vary, people in Malawi generally refer to all such dance genres in Chichewa as *magule wa makolo athu*, “the dances of our parents/ancestors” or “traditional dances.” Similar phrases are used in other Malawian languages. These dances are fluid and flexible forms that can easily be adapted to meet new expressive needs and can be made appropriate for new contexts, as is clear from the example of *masiawe* performers dancing both in healing rituals and to entertain foreign tourists. Though, *magule* or *zovina*, which I translate as “dances,” is the generic label for these forms in Chichewa.

Although I follow local conventions in my use of the word *dance*, as do most Malawians when speaking English, these genres are as much about singing, instrumentation, and costume as they are about movement. As explained by Ruth Stone, “African performance is a tightly wrapped bundle of arts that are sometimes difficult to separate, even for analysis. Singing, playing instruments, dancing, masquerading, and dramatizing are part of a conceptual package that many Africans think of as one and the same” (1998: 7). Though I use the term *dance*, my description and analysis necessarily engages the movement, singing, costuming, and musical components of the performances.

In addition to these emically categorized local genres, Malawians also engage in other types of dance and musical practices. For example, during our 1998–1999 stay, people danced at clubs and parties to popular music by Malawian artists, by musicians from neighboring countries, especially the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania, and by some artists from the United States. Many youths, mostly male, were committed aficionados of rap and raga (Jamaican dance hall music), and many of these performers moved rhythmically as they pounded out their original lyrics (Fenn 2004; Gilman and Fenn 2006). Many churchgoers moved and sang hymns to local melodies in their churches (Henderson forthcoming; Henderson and Gilman 2004), and sports fans sometimes sang and danced to encourage team members and celebrate victories.

A selection of my video recordings along with my detailed annotations that further describe and analyze dance performances inside and outside of Malawi's political arena, mostly performances in the Nkhata Bay District in 1998-1999, is accessible through the Ethnomusicological Video for Instruction and Analysis Digital Archive Project (EVIADA) in two collections: "Dances of the Nkhata Bay District of Malawi" [<http://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/eviada/5-C5818>] and "Music and dance in Malawi's presidential elections 1999" [<http://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/eviada/5-C5833>]. Citations to specific events within these collections are provided throughout the book (see Appendix D).

## Villages, Towns, and Cities

The distinctions between urban and rural settings in Malawi are complex and must be explained to clarify the circumstances of the women who dance. So much about women's social and economic identities in Malawi, in addition to their distance and relationship to political party centers, is tied to where they live. The definitions of villages, towns, and cities in Malawi, as in other African countries, are fuzzy, making these distinctions somewhat problematic. In the Nkhata Bay District, for example, Tonga people call varieties of settlements *muži*, or "villages," and "it depends on the context whether this word refers to a hamlet of one hut or to a large village of one hundred huts, or for that matter Johannesburg, London or Chicago" (Van Velsen 1964: 28–29). The Ngwira family, for example, lived in a small cluster of houses on top of a hillside. The residents of this hamlet comprised only one extended family: eight houses for ten to twelve adults and their offspring. The land and by extension the people were under the jurisdiction of a village leadership structure, though the hamlet was physically and socially isolated from others belonging to this loosely defined village. This hamlet and the larger entity to which it belonged were also multicultural, comprising some people who identified as Tumbuka and others who identified as Tonga.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, Msani Village (also in the Nkhata Bay District), where I spent much time with the American State chilimika team, comprised numerous families living in proximity within a well-constituted community under the leadership of Group Village Headman Chilelawana. Within Msani were an elementary school and a church. Nkhwali where I spent time with the Mweluzi chilimika team and Zabweka Tembo, a famed performer who was also the father of a number of Mweluzi's most committed dancers, was even bigger, comprising two villages, each with its own leadership. Because of its proximity to the Vizarra and Chombe rubber estates and the Kawalazi tea estate, Nkhwali attracted people from across the country seeking employment. Many came for work and later settled, making the locale more multicultural than most communities in the district. Nkhwali included several churches, a school, two small restaurants, and several small stores.

Agriculture is the economic mainstay of most people living in rural settings in Malawi, though fishing, small businesses, and wage labor frequently supplement or replace agricultural efforts. A majority of houses within rural communities or villages are constructed using local materials and methods, usually mud-brick walls and floors with thatched roofs. The houses range from very small one- to two-room houses to fairly large dwellings with four or more rooms. Towns and cities comprise political entities distinct from villages, have well-established roads, and include such institutions as municipal governments, hospitals or clinics, banks, markets, stores, post offices, and schools. Housing ranges in size, quality, and access to amenities, though far more large, Western-style houses are found in cities and towns than in villages. Tucked within and often adjacent to cities and towns are clusters of houses and sometimes small businesses in which people live similarly to those in more rural areas. Some of these are institutionally structured as villages with a local leadership framework. Others are less formal; people at lower economic strata build houses near one another using similar materials and methods, as do those in rural areas. Residents in high-density neighborhoods—urban settlements in which houses are often small and close together—belong to a range of economic strata from the very poor, to those subsisting on steady, but small incomes, to up-and-coming professionals. These neighborhoods are often bustling business districts with active nightlives and lively youth cultures.

To further complicate distinctions between *urban* and *rural*, and *city* and *village*, many people in Malawi have relatives living in a variety of situations, providing opportunities for travel and experience in a range of settings. Many travel between rural and urban areas for work, business, performance opportunities, and so on. Many live in cities or villages at different times in their lives. Regardless of where a Malawian lives, she or he usually refers to either a mother's or father's (or sometimes both) natal village as "*ku muzi*" (Chitonga) or "*ku mudzi*" (Chichewa), translated literally as "at the village," but more accurately as "home." When Malawians ask me where my *mudzi* is, they are not asking me whether I am from "a village" but, rather, where my home is. I could answer with the United States, the state or city where I currently reside, or where I lived as a child. Even when a family has resided in a city for generations, they maintain the connection with their home villages, visiting on occasion, and providing needed resources to individuals and communities; at death, most are buried in their home villages.<sup>8</sup>

Distinguishing individuals as belonging to rural or urban communities is therefore problematic. All Malawians, whether living in a village, town, or city, are cosmopolitan in that they "partake in a social life characterized by flux, uncertainty, encounters with difference, and the experience of processes of transculturation" (Piot 1999: 23; see also Hannerz 1987; Turino 2000). Despite obvious problems, I follow widespread local usage and make these

distinctions, only because it provides an orienting framework for discussing the social contexts and class structures in which women dancers live and operate. Though people in all Malawian socioeconomic strata live in villages, towns, and cities, people at the lowest economic strata of the population, including most of the women who dance politically, tend to live in villages in rural or urban areas and in high-density urban neighborhoods. Some do live within more expensive sectors of cities, for example, in house-worker quarters located in the yards of many urban homes. Most people belonging to the country's elite own houses in the most expensive city neighborhoods, and sometimes also own large houses in towns and villages. Distinctions among village, town, and city life are significant to this project for at least two additional reasons. First, the dancing included in political rallies is most commonly performed in village contexts rather than cities in non-political events. Second, because party headquarters and the most active party activities occur in towns and cities, women living in or near towns and cities have more opportunities to participate politically than do those more isolated from political centers.

## Performance and Power

Jane Cowan (1990) effectively illustrated ways in which dance events can be sites for both reinforcing and contesting dominant ideologies, especially those having to do with gender (cf. Hanna 1988). In Malawi, as in many countries across the globe, the preponderance of patriarchal social systems—both local leadership structures and imposed or adopted European ones—produces gendering of power structures in which men fill a majority of leadership positions in local and foreign-based institutions, relegating most women to subordinate roles. In some, such as political parties, the majority of women play roles of supporting and legitimating, at least symbolically, those in leadership positions.<sup>9</sup> Malawian political performances are the product of and interact with these gendered power differentials.

The songs women political performers sing can be categorized generally as belonging to a corpus of panegyric or praise singing and poetry genres widespread across the African continent. Ruth Finnegan detailed some common features of these genres, many of which are characteristic of political songs in Malawi. These forms can express self-praise and praise for other humans, supernatural entities, inanimate objects, political organizations, or countries (Finnegan 1970: 112).<sup>10</sup> Composers frequently exploit metaphors and other poetic devices to embellish their elaborate homage, which highlights the often exaggerated qualities, achievements, or abilities of the individual(s) being extolled.<sup>11</sup> The relationships between praise performers and the people they praise are frequently asymmetrical: those uplifted through songs frequently enjoy higher economic, social, cultural, religious, or political status than do those

who exalt them. By singing songs of praise, performers symbolically legitimate and accept a leader's authority and can reinforce social hierarchies (Timpunza Mvula 1990; Hale 1998).

However, relationships of power between the praised and the praisee are often much more complicated than those overtly displayed through performance: the possibility of expressing multiple contradictory messages combined with the sometimes liminal status of the performer can obfuscate and complicate locations of power (see, e.g., Hoffman 1995). Here, it is important to recognize that manifestations of power rarely occur only in top-down dualistic relations, but rather within multidirectional webs. All those engaged in relationships have varying access to power, some more overtly articulated than others (Foucault 1990 [1978]: 92–94). In situations where binaries of authority are explicitly delineated, such as in political relationships of leader and led, those in subordinate positions often creatively manipulate resources at their disposals to increase their opportunities for self-expression or to improve their social or material well-being. In *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, James C. Scott explained that most subordinate classes do not have the luxury of carrying out open organized political action against those who dominate them. Rather, they frequently pursue more subtle forms of everyday resistance that either go unnoticed or occur indirectly and may not be recognized by those in authoritative positions (1985: xvi). In situations across the world, subordinated women have often capitalized on performance forms as avenues through which to resist domination.<sup>12</sup>

In many African contexts, song texts are one of the more widely recognized channels through which women have historically been able to express discontent or criticize those who have authority over them, such as their husbands or community leaders.<sup>13</sup> Leroy Vail and Landeg White elaborated that in much of southern Africa, there is “the convention that criticism expressed in song is licensed criticism.” Through songs, singers define “pungently and accurately the terms of their exploitation” (Vail and White 1991: 41; White 1989; cf. Gunner 1995: 193; Abu-Lughod 1986). Similarly, the *oriki* as described by Karin Barber do not always flatter their subjects, but sometimes point to their most salient trait even if it is negative (1991: 13; 1999). Because song lyrics can be metaphorical or can otherwise express ambiguous messages, it is possible for people to compose songs that outwardly appear to be saying one thing, such as praising an individual or institution, while in fact they are criticizing or making fun of it, through what Joan Radner and Susan Lanser call “coded messages” (1993: 3).

These two patterns—praise and social commentary—in performance practices often occur simultaneously in that people who sing songs praising a leader sometimes use veiled messages or metaphors to criticize the leader within the same song texts.<sup>14</sup> The individual who is being criticized can hear his or her subordinates' complaints while saving face, and he or she is expected

to change his or her behavior (cf. Yankah 1995: 11). If the criticism continues without any change, then community leaders may intervene and confront the leader more directly. For example, Enoch Timpunza Mvula (1987) described how Maseko-Ngoni women in Malawi sing songs that criticize their husbands and other people who have authority over them while they pound maize collectively, well within earshot of others in the community. Though these song texts include overt articulations that are considered inappropriate for a woman to express in other public forums, this criticism is socially acceptable within the context of women's collective singing. People who hear these songs usually do not respond directly to the comments made; however, the person criticized is expected by the community to hear the song and to subsequently change. Through their singing, these women are able not only to express themselves, but also to resist domination when it goes too far.<sup>15</sup>

This combination of using singing for expressing praise and for social commentary provides a means through which subordinates can have a voice and to some extent resist domination while at the same time confirming and even reinforcing asymmetrical power structures. Hale provided an example from a female Songhay griotte in Niger, in which she uses the format of a "typical praise-song for a canton chief":

Father of the poor people  
 Husband of beautiful ladies  
 At whose absence the city is not interesting  
 At whose absence people are not happy . . .  
 Be our mother  
 Be our father  
 Provide us with clothing  
 Be the salt we need for our gravy  
 Be the oil we need for our porridge. . . .  
 You are our eyes  
 You are our mirror  
 You are our hands and legs  
 That we use to walk

Hale explained that this song glorifies a chief while simultaneously reminding him of his responsibilities to the community. "A prince who does not serve as the 'hands' and 'legs' of a people simply does not measure up to the ideal as articulated by the griottes and is therefore, by implication, less of a prince" (Hale 1998: 29). Kelly Askew similarly provided an example of *taraab* musicians who took advantage of the poetic license afforded song texts to overtly criticize Tanzania's president Ali Hassan Mwinyi during an official visit to Zanzibar in 1991 (2002: 228–30).<sup>16</sup>

Women's singing within Malawi's political arena integrates the potential for using performance to bolster leadership structures with the potential for using performance to resist, with both processes often occurring simultaneously despite obvious contradictory goals. Women, at the lowest rungs of the economic and political hierarchies, are often the ones who sing songs that glorify the higher status and mostly male political leaders. Their performances thus affirm gender and power hierarchies. Yet, their performances can also serve as channels for socially sanctioned commentary and activism. At times women have capitalized on their own performativity to achieve social or individual change, for example, in their strategic use of singing and dancing during the movement for independence and during the transition to multipartyism. At other times, those in power-wielding positions have organized women to dance to further their own goals or as strategies for suppression, exemplified by the Banda government. In all situations, performance and power have intersected in ways much more complicated than was immediately apparent. In situations in which performance has been used as a tool for liberation, it has also contributed to social asymmetries, and when it has been exploited as a tool for oppression, dancers have found creative means of using it for personal or collective gain.

Song lyrics comprise only a small part of the possible webs of meanings that can be expressed or interpreted through women's dancing and over the course of the larger events of which they are only one part. Drawing from Bakhtin, I consider a rally to be a complex genre, a communicative style that is at once emically defined as an individual genre at the same time that it is composed of constituent styles, each of which is also emically defined as a genre. This multigenicity of rallies—that they comprise numerous genres, such as speeches, singing, slogan shouting, visual symbols, and dancing—creates multiple channels of communication, producing complementary and contradictory signifiers that radiate during the course of a single event. The multigenicity of a political rally complicates the task of analysis because of this exponential potential for making meanings and accomplishing social goals created by each genre in conjunction with how they interact as the complex event unfolds (Bakhtin 1986: 62; Briggs and Bauman 1992). An individual at a rally, for example, could sing a song supporting a party while wearing a visual symbol for another party, creating a cacophony of confusing messages. A more subtle example would be a woman who sang about how happy she was with the government while moving lethargically to a dance generally expected to be fast paced and cheerful. Her dancing might belie the message in her song. That different actors exert control over the manifestation of different genres during the course of the event further complicates issues of power, intentionality, and meaning—a point I return to throughout this study as I interrogate relationships between performance and power.

## Some Issues

Language has been a consistent issue in this research. Because Malawi was formerly a British colony, English is the country's official language, greatly facilitating my research endeavor. However, because of the unequal distributions of educational opportunities, many of the people whose perspectives most interested me did not speak English. This was especially true of most adult women at lower socioeconomic levels, many of whom had had limited opportunities for schooling. When I arrived in 1998 to settle in Nkhata Bay District for the year, I had studied Chichewa in the United States and had achieved conversational proficiency. Chichewa is the second official language of Malawi (after English) and the lingua franca in the central and southern regions. After moving to Nkhata Bay District, I transferred this knowledge to the closely related language Chitonga, widely spoken in the district, and I was able to learn enough to get by in day-to-day living and socializing.<sup>17</sup> To supplement this basic knowledge, I hired assistants to help me conduct tape-recorded interviews with non-English speakers. Most of the time, an assistant translated a question that I asked in English into the language of the interviewee. She or he responded in her or his language. Depending on how well I understood, I either followed with another question or asked for a verbal translation. I later hired people to transcribe and translate the interview tapes. I conducted interviews with English speakers in English alone, though sometimes other people were present depending on the situation (see Appendix B). I videotaped all political rallies I attended. During the events, I understood some of the speeches, slogans, and songs that were performed in local languages. Later, I hired people to transcribe and translate the audio tracks of selected recordings (see Appendix C).

The transcriptions of song texts were difficult given that the recordings occurred in loud settings with lots of overlapping noise. Because of technology limitations, I gave people I hired audiotapes rather than videotapes to transcribe, which often made it difficult for them to follow and to tease out the performance from other distractions or to identify exactly who was performing at any given moment. A further complicating factor was that the songs themselves were often heterophonic in that multiple melodic and sometimes textual lines were sung simultaneously, making it difficult to hear and also to transcribe linearly. Furthermore, call lines usually overlapped with response lines, making it difficult to hear and also difficult to differentiate voices. Because of these problems, my inclusion of song lyrics is intended more for the textual content than as representative of how they were performed. Distinctions between call lines and response lines are often omitted, as is much repetition. When feasible and applicable, I do provide some of this detail, and at times I describe the musical aspects of the performances in more detail.

As a foreigner, and a *mzungu* (white/European/American person)—often perceived to be wealthy and powerful—I was often accorded privileged status. I was usually escorted to the VIP section of rallies, where I was almost always given comfortable seating and a prime view of dance performances, which allowed me to obtain quality video recordings, and I was usually introduced to the leading politicians and sometimes mentioned in their speeches. My position was problematic. Some politicians used me as a symbol to promote themselves, pointing out that only the most powerful and capable politician could attract an American to come to their rallies. Though this made me uncomfortable, the politicians knew that I was also attending the rallies of their opponents. I am hopeful that most in the audience were familiar enough with political propaganda to evaluate the attention given to my presence as only one of many boasts made by speakers. As I elaborate later, the same dancers often performed the praises of opposing politicians on different days, making my presence less marked, as it fell within well-established patterns.

Because of the sensitive nature of this research, the question of how to refer to people has confounded me. Most people whom I interviewed gave me permission to use their full names in publications. However, I am acutely aware that what might be safe in one political climate might suddenly become problematic, even dangerous, at a later date. Further, people interviewed, especially those at the grassroots level—the term used in Malawi to refer to the country's poor majority—did not necessarily always understand my intentions. Though I explained that I was a researcher from the United States intending to write articles and books, for many—most women I interviewed at the grassroots level cannot read or write—the categories of researcher and even journals and books were something with which most had little familiarity. I have therefore chosen to refer to people at the grassroots levels in such a way as to obfuscate their identities. I use the prefix *Mayi* followed by a family name when referring to women dancers. *Mayi* is the Chichewa word for *mother* and is used as a term of respect for adult women.<sup>18</sup> The family names are common, and most people in Malawi have several names that they use in different contexts, assuring me that it would be difficult for readers to trace the women's identities from the information provided. Those familiar with naming practices in Malawi will undoubtedly recognize inconsistencies in the way I refer to people. My intention is not to provide accurate names or to follow the numerous naming practices in the country, but rather to provide enough information to allow a reader to differentiate among individuals.

Others interviewed participated in their capacities as public figures—politicians, human rights activists, and journalists. These individuals were familiar with various types of publications and expected to be quoted in different venues. I attribute names to their quotes most of the time. For those who requested anonymity, I provide only as much information as they specified.

In a few cases, I have made the subjective decision not to include individuals' names when I have felt that a quote is especially sensitive or when I have not wanted to come across as unduly critical.

I recognize that by using a different system for those at the grassroots and those in more powerful positions, I enact the same gender, economic, and political gulfs that I critique. Though uncomfortable and dissatisfied with my decision, I feel that ascribing greater anonymity to highly public and visible figures might lead some to question the validity of some of my accounts, and providing more identification to those at lower levels could increase possible risks. I therefore choose a compromise.

Another problem has been identifying people's political positions and affiliations. Many are no longer in the same positions that they were at the time of research, and many have since changed political affiliations and continue to do so. At the time of writing, some people's allegiances were shifting literally on a day-to-day basis, making it largely impossible to update everyone's current status. My attributions of affiliation are therefore those pertinent to the moment of research. When relevant, I do provide clarifying information about changes either in the text or in endnotes.

Finally, I am saddened by the frequency with which I have had to insert *late* before the name of a friend or acquaintance appearing in this book. The causes of death vary and point to the general lack of adequate medical care available to most Malawians. However, one also cannot ignore the catastrophe wrought by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which has hit Malawi especially hard and which continues to be a stigma for those personally affected by it. As I insert each *late* into this text, I sadly hope that the government will attend productively to the HIV/AIDS crisis (and lack of adequate medical care more broadly), so that treatments will be made more widely available, people will change their behaviors, and the epidemic will subside.

## Chapter Breakdown

The book continues in Chapter 2 by detailing the processes through which the political use of performance developed during Malawi's movement for independence. In their rebellion against British colonial rule, activists capitalized on dance and praise-singing traditions to construct a national identity, disseminate information, and rally support for their cause. The organizational and symbolic structures through which women's participation was organized created a framework that linked gender, performance, economics, and political power, which became the basis for the oppressive use of women's political dancing during the authoritarian rule of Banda. Chapter 3 describes how Banda's government appropriated women's political dancing, transforming it into a mechanism for social control and for disseminating images of its legitimacy. The institutionalization of women's political dancing through the

MCP party structure further entrenched the intersections among gender, economics, and power.

Chapter 4 begins with an examination of the early 1990s, when women's political dancing was a central issue during the campaign for the referendum vote and again during the campaign for the first multiparty elections, held in 1994. I then trace how the practice has evolved since the transition to multipartyism by describing women's participation in rehearsals, in travels to and from events, and in the rallies themselves, in addition to providing information about other types of performances that commonly occur at rallies since the transition. In the post-Banda political context, intersections among gender, economics, and power manifest as patronage relationships, exemplified in rallies in the interactions between politicians, the patrons who provide for the general population, and the women who dance, representatives of the clients who receive from politicians and express their gratitude through performance.

In Chapter 5, I analyze one political rally, the 1999 launch of incumbent president Muluzi's presidential campaign in the northern region. This analysis demonstrates how a rally serves the purposes of political power wielders in its capacity to attract people, disseminate messages, display symbols, and reinforce hierarchies. Women political dancers are especially important because of their multiple roles as wearers of symbols, shouters of slogans, dancers, praise singers, and receivers of material gifts. The potential for dialogism and intertextuality in this complex performance results in the simultaneous diffusion of contradictory messages, some of which directly conflict with those intended by rally organizers.

Chapter 6 answers the question, "Why do women dance?" by first outlining many of the reasons why women participate as praise performers. Many participants are critical of their positioning within the political realm, and human rights activists have at different times contested the practice. I therefore consider complicated issues of agency and resistance by exploring ways in which women dancers manipulate the system to maximize their benefits. Although many such examples exist, I argue that many participants for the most part go along with the practice, and that it is therefore just as important to explore why women choose not to resist as it is to consider their acts of defiance.

Chapter 7 situates the practice within the context of women in Malawian politics more broadly. Discourse about improving gender parity in Malawi's economic and political spheres abounds in contemporary politics, and human rights NGOs are engaged in numerous projects aimed at improving the social, economic, and political status of poor Malawian women. My examination of this discourse in relationship to the activities of male political power wielders, women politicians, and NGOs suggests that few are challenging the cycle that positions women dancers at the lowest levels of political

structures, from which they have few opportunities for political and economic mobility.

The concluding chapter highlights how people variously involved—including women who dance, politicians, human rights activists, and journalists—often use discourse of its traditionality to explain why political dancing persists. I contend that women's political dancing is an effective and culturally empowering avenue for political participation at the same time that it perpetuates the political marginalization of poor women. I then consider this discourse about traditionality from a different angle in my examination of how the political use of dance has impacted dance practices outside of the formal political sphere.

## Notes

1. See Drewal 1992; Barber 1997; Fabian 1997; Cowan 1990; Bauman 1989, 1992; Stoeltje 1992, 1996; Stone 1988; Turner 1988 [1987], 1969; Askew 1999; Del Negro and Berger 2004.

2. See Lwanda 1993; Mkamanga 2000; Chirwa 2001; Semu 2002.

3. Similar practices occur in Uganda (Tripp 2000: 93), Tanzania (Geiger 1997: 67; Geisler 2004: 24–25), Zimbabwe (Hove 1997: 35; Geisler 2004: 24–25), Mozambique (Geisler 2004: 24–25), Niger (Alidou 2005: 102–3), and Zambia (Crehan 1994: 260; Geisler 2004: 24–25).

4. See Gunderson and Barz, ed. 2000 for a collection of essays on music and dance practices in the region.

5. The term *ethnic group* is problematic in Malawi as in many other African contexts because of complicated relationships among cultural groupings in the region. Contemporary ethnic categories are partly the result of politically motivated groupings and divisions of people in various phases of Malawi's history that sometimes have little to do with people's own cultural identification (Kaspin 1995: 598–602). My use of ethnic names and groupings corresponds to those used by Malawians during my research.

6. These genres are associated with Tonga people, as the numerically dominant population in the district, and by extension with the Nkhata Bay District. However, those identifying as belonging to other ethnic groups living in the district are often just as involved as their Tonga neighbors in these dance forms. Many of the most active chilimika performers I knew, for example, identify as Tumbuka—complicating whether it is more appropriate to identify these genres with an ethnic group or geographic demarcation. People from other ethnic groups living in the district also sometimes perform dance forms associated with their own cultural identities both among themselves and for wider multicultural audiences, and their dances are also featured at the rallies in the district.

7. The Ngwira family was not originally from the Nkhata Bay District. They are Tumbuka from Rumph District who settled into this location in the early 1990s. A number of the women married to the men in this family are Tonga. The residence pattern for this family is patrilineal. The adult men living in the hamlet are related to one another; the adult women are wives and daughters of Ngwira men. The numbers of adults fluctuate. During our short stay, the two wives of one son each left him on various occasions to return to their home villages. Some of the sons in the family worked and lived outside the district and occasionally returned to their father's home to live.

8. Some ethnic groups in Malawi are matrilineal, others are patrilineal, and still others are bilineal. Additionally, many Malawians have parents from different ethnic groups,

further complicating whether a person considers her or his mother's, father's, or both parents' villages as the home village.

9. That a number of Malawian ethnic groups are matrilineal complicates my statement about the centralization of authority within males in local power structures. Women do enjoy important positions of power within matrilineal systems, and in both matrilineal and patrilineal contexts in Malawi, women do hold chieftaincy positions. Even within matrilineal systems, however, power is often vested among males within kinship structures, such as maternal brothers and uncles, rather than fathers and husbands, as is more common in patrilineal systems (De Aguilar and De Aguilar 1999).

10. For example, see Barber 1989, 1991; Coplan 1994; Hale 1998. Praise-singing traditions have also been incorporated into Christian and Muslim religious practices (see, e.g., Mack 2004: 61). Clara Henderson and I, for example, noted similarities between the songs sung by Presbyterians in Malawi that praise Jesus and those sung at political rallies that praise politicians (Henderson and Gilman 2004).

11. See Cope 1968: 26; Opland 1983; Schapera 1965.

12. See, for example, Raheja and Gold 1994; Koskoff 1989; Danielson 1997; Heath 1994.

13. See Timpunza Mvula 1985, 1986a, 1986b, 1987; Vail and White 1991: 231–77; Hale 1998; Hoffman 1995; Gunner 1999: 51.

14. David Coplan objected to the label *praise* for these genres because “these texts so often include characterizations that are contradictory, inconvenient, and even sharply critical” (1994: 14). The imposition of etic generic categories is necessarily problematic. The peoples engaged in these cultural practices across the continent have their own systems of categorizing and labeling their expressive forms, categories necessarily associated with sets of ideological and formal conventions that are fluid and dynamic (Ben-Amos 1976; Shuman 1993: 72–74; Flueckiger 1991: 182–83). Though it is problematic, I nevertheless use the term *praise singing* because of its wide usage and recognizability. Agreeing with Coplan and following many scholars, I highlight the ways these genres are used to simultaneously praise and resist.

15. For another Malawian example, see Van Alstyne 1993.

16. Using song texts to criticize those in authoritative positions is not always accepted by authorities, and the offending musician can suffer repercussions, as in the examples given by Askew (2002: 224–67).

17. As a child living in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then Zaire) (1969–1978), I spoke the Bantu language Kiswahili fluently. As a result, I easily acquire linguistic proficiency in closely related Bantu languages when immersed in a new linguistic setting.

18. Though many of the women interviewed are not Chewa, I use *Mayi* for everybody so as not to confuse the reader and because the term is familiar across the country.