

RECURRENT THEMES IN CHICHEWA VERSE IN MALAWIAN NEWSPAPERS

PASCAL J. KISHINDO

University of Malawi, Malawi

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses verse written in Chichewa, the national language of Malawi, that is published in Malawian newspapers, specifically the weeklies; the *Weekend Nation* and the *Malawi News*. The paper contends that the verse appearing in these newspapers are topical, essentially socio-political commentary that at the time of publication preoccupies the Malawi nation. Because the newspaper as a medium is populist the verse itself tends to be populist as well. This entails that the verse is largely ephemeral and its interest to a large extent lies not in its intrinsic quality but rather in the implications it may hold for the development of Chichewa poetry.

Keywords: image, persona, personification, simile, stanza

INTRODUCTION

Conventionally published creative work in Chichewa does not appear regularly. The reasons of this may be legion but two stand out. First, publishers are dubious about the existence of a market for it hence their efforts are directed towards publishing school texts where the market is assured. Second, writing in Chichewa is not taken seriously as is writing in English. Again reasons for this are complex, but they include the enormous prestige that English has in the country (see Kishindo 1990 and Kayambazinthu 1998). There is a modest corpus of children's literature though. This mostly consists of "warmed-over" folktales or stories heavily laden with moral lessons. However, the scarcity of conventionally published Chichewa creative writing does not mean that there is no thriving creative activity going on. Of course there is. The outlet for this is mostly the radio and the newspapers. In the written form, the Chichewa pages of the bilingual weeklies, *The Weekend Nation* and the *Malawi News* are the most popular. These newspapers carry short stories, vignettes and verse. In this paper we will discuss some of the poems that appeared in these newspapers between 1998 and 2001. For convenience, we will discuss these poems under the following recurrent themes: virtues of education, AIDS, the environment, human rights, traditional culture and miscellaneous. This is not to claim that the themes

are mutually exclusive. There are of course, frequent overlaps. We will be making the observation that the poems are topical; reflecting the current socio-political issues making headlines in the media. In light of this, the verse is complimentary to the views of the paper in which it is published. This, therefore, has consequences for the quality of the verse itself.

1. VIRTUES OF EDUCATION

One of the favourite themes among the newspaper poets is the importance of education. This is not surprising because education has always been given priority in African countries as a means of eliminating illiteracy and under development. Media campaigns have been launched on many occasions to support one or other education project. The poets themselves have recognized the importance of education. Each of them seem to have an opinion about its importance and as a result takes it upon himself to advise people, especially young men and women, about its importance. Education is, therefore, viewed as a panacea of ills.

“Sukulu ndilo dzina langa”¹ (school is my name) by Chikondano Matewere is typical of these poems. The poem celebrates the importance of school and lists would be consequences for those who do not take school seriously. The poem has four stanzas. The first stanza opens with these lines:

Sukulu ndilo dzina langa
Ondizemba ine yabwino ntchito sayipeza,
Kumvera aphunzitsi
Ndi yankho londigonjetsera ine njira

(School is my name
Those who run away from me won't find a job
Listening to teachers
Is the way to come to terms with me.)

In this same language, the personified school notes the first hurdle in the education system, namely the primary school leaving examination in standard 8 which decides who goes into the second cycle of education; the secondary cycle. For those who overcome this hurdle all is blissful, according to the persona.

In the third stanza, the persona claims that those who do not send their children to school are those who do not love them. They forget that “...uli poyamba mmera” (... you cannot straighten an old tree). In the final stanza a

¹ Chikondano Matewere, “Sukulu ndilo dzina langa” *Weekend Nation*, 22 – 23 May, 1999.

contrast is made between those who loved school and those who did not. Those who took school seriously are now:

Ayenda m'magalimoto, maofesi,
Apamwamba akhalamo

(They are driving cars, in high class offices
They work)

Those who despised school are consigned to a drab and hard existence. Now that they realize how foolish they were, they, of course, blame their parents:

Makolo athu adatilakwira
Kodi sizichititsa manyazi kukhala mbutuma
Yankho lake ndi sukulu

(Our parents failed us
Is it not shameful to be illiterate
School is the answer).

The importance of education is further underscored in Joseph Bzakulima's poem "Mudzandilira"² (You will cry for me). The poem makes it clear that those who do not value education will end up in "hell". This is stated in the first stanza of this three-stanza poem which opens as follows:

Sukulu imene mukuyikana leroyi anzanu akuyilira
Kubadwira pabanja lopata sikuphunzira
Mudzamva mutu uli mumphika

(The school which you are despising today others are crying for it.
Being born in a wealthy family doesn't make you educated.
You will understand when your head is in the pot).

In the second stanza we are being advised that we should not mix school with smoking and drinking. These, we are told, do not go together. If the addressee continues smoking and drinking he should simply forget ever achieving his ambition of becoming a medical doctor.

In the third stanza we are told that the addressee is up to no good. He spends his time flirting with girls. He is so lazy that he wakes up at midday. The consequences of these activities are implied in the question:

Ntchito kucheza ndi atsikana
Uja mtsikana m'macheza naye wapiti kulichete

² Japhet Bzakulima, "Mudzandilira" *Weekend Nation*, 27 – 28 March 1999.

Nanga mnzanu ankayenda ku Dubai uja ali kuti?

(Your job is flirting with girls
Hasn't the girl you were flirting with died
What about your friend who used to go to Dubai,
Where is he?)

From the questions that the persona is posing, it is very clear that he doesn't think that things augur well for the addressee. The future is certainly bleak.

It is true that not everyone finds school easy. Some people may find the intellectual demands too difficult, others may not have the financial wherewithal. For the poets, the answer lies in perseverance. People are encouraged not despair. A typical poem with this message is "Zokoma zili mtsogolo"³ (Good things are yet to come) by Baxter Banda. The message is very clearly articulated in the proverbial title and all one has to do is recognize that fact. One therefore simply has to:

Lowa m' matope lero.
Vala chisanu lero
Palana ubwenzi ndi inki
Popeza zabwino zili mtsogolo

Step into the mud today
Wear the cold today
Befriend the ink
Since good things are yet to come

While it is important to persevere there is need to proceed cautiously. For if one does not, we are told "Ndithu udzandikumbukira/utagwa chagada". (You will remember me/when you fall back first).

Finally, the narrator observes that those who persevered with their education they are today "Lero akudya zonona" (eating delicious food). This can only mean one thing; hard work and perseverance pay.

While these poems address the youth generally, there are some which address the female student. In Malawi, as in most African countries, girls are considered to be disadvantaged and vulnerable. C. M. Mgomezulu's poem "Lako Lako"⁴ (Truly yours) is in his mould. This poem has eight stanzas and its main thrust is to advise the vulnerable girls to persevere. The poem opens with this injunction.

Pilira, pilira mtsikana iwe
Lako lokoma tsogolo tengulira

³ Baxter Banda, "Zokoma zili mtsogolo", *Weekend Nation*, 16 – 17 June, 2001.

⁴ Mgomezulu, "Lako Lako". *Weekend Nation*, 16–17 June, 2001.

Tengulira inde polimbikira sukulu

(Persevere, persevere you girl
Take care of your sweet future
Yes, take care of it by working hard at school).

Perseverance is not enough, we are told, in the second stanza. The child also has to respect her parents “amvere makolo” (respect parents) and teachers, too, “Lako khutu kwa aphunzitsi pereka” (Give ear to what the teachers says).⁵

If she does not listen to her parents the consequences are loose morals. She has to guard against these because her friend Namaluzi died in her pursuit of sexual pleasure:

Inde adatsamira mkono Namaluzi
Kaamba ka luso
Luso loponya miyendo pa msewu ndi anyamata
Akuda, odula tsogolo la atsikana
Wapitadi Namaluzi
Edzi yachita phwando.

(Yes Namaluzi leaned against her hand
Because of her talent
The talent for walking the streets with men
Dark men who cut short girls’ future
Namaluzi has indeed gone
AIDS has feasted on her).

The life of the dead wayward girl is juxtaposed with the life a diligent girl, Namulesi, who we are told, persevered. Because of her diligence and perseverance, “Namulesitu lero akudya tonona/Atakhazikika inde malipiro asukulu” (Namulesitu is today eating delicious things/unperturbed, the wages of education).

Apart from dealing with the consumers of education, the poets also have sympathy for the plight of the provider of the much-vaunted commodity, the teacher. It boggles the mind that the teacher, who everyone recognizes as indispensable, does not have the respect he/she deserves and hence he/she i.e. receives a meager pay and has a lowly status. Felix Afunika Chiuta in his poem “Kulira kwa mphunzitsi” (A cry of the teacher) summarizes the Malawian teachers plight. In five stanza the poet manages to bring together the pitiful lot of a teacher. In the first stanza the persona tells us about the teacher’s preparation for the day on empty stomach:

⁵ Felix Afunika Chiuta, “Kulira kwa mphunzitsi”, *Malawi News*, July 11 – 17, 1999.

Nthawi zonse ndidzuka mmawa
Inde kukonzekera kalasi
Ndipita kwanga kumimba
Kuli phati, inde chifukwa cha njala
Changa chakudya ndilo fumbi
Fumbi la choko

(Everyday I wake up early
Yes, getting ready for class
I go to school on an empty stomach
My food on an empty stomach
Chalk dust).

However, despite being hungry the teacher is expected to do his/her job without complaining. He/she is expected to eliminate “umbuli” (ignorance), remove the “phula m’maso” (wax from eyes) of the children.

What is puzzling to the teacher is that having performed his noble duty of eliminating ignorance, for example, of creating managers and ministers from no so promising material he finds himself unrewarded, unrespected; the unsung hero. This confusion results in this *cri de coeur*:

Ndidalakwanji ine mphunzitsi
Anga malipiro ndi ochepa
Maina ambiri adandipatsa
Kulira kwanga imvani
Ndiganizireni chonde
Ine mphunzitsi wolira

(What wrong have I done, I, the teacher
My wages are low
I’ve been given so many unflattering names
Listen to my cry
Please think of me
I, the crying teacher).

The teacher finds himself in an awkward position while he is entrusted with the education of the children; he is not provided with the wherewithal or rewarded accordingly for his efforts.

From the poems, it is clear that the newspaper poets consider education as a be all and end all – a panacea of all ills. To the poets education is a means to an end – a good job and hence the good life. The contentious issues of what sort of education for a poor country like Malawi or education for what is never explored. The injunction “seek ye first the kingdom of education and everything else will be added onto thee” seems apt in describing the belief the poets have for the efficacy of education.

2. THE ENVIRONMENT

The environment as a concern of the poets is a relatively new theme for the poets. This is not an accident though. Its appearance in the newspapers coincides with the emergence of organizations concerned with the preservation and clearing up of the polluted environment. The global movement on the environment “the greens” has spawned local movements. The government, too, has set-up its own environmental offices to oversee how the environment can be preserved. The environment then is currently a topical issue in Malawi as elsewhere. Since our poets reflect what is happening in the wider society and record it, it is not surprising that they have also taken it on as a theme worth exploring.

One of the poems which deals with the environment is “Manja ankhwiti”⁶ (Greedy hands) by Julius Gustino. The poem has the characteristic three stanzas. In the first stanza the destruction of the vegetation on the mountains is likened to a funeral:

Tikulira maliro a mapiri
Ometedwa mipala ngwee!
Ndi nkhwangwa zankhwiru
Tikukhudza maliro a mapiri
Poti adali mafumu a ndwi! Kuwirira
Ndi majasi a nkhalango ya mitengo.

(We are mourning the death of mountains,
Who have their heads completely shaven
By gluttonous axes
We are mourning the demise of mountains
Since they were stalwarts densely covered
In blankets of forests).

To the persona the mountains standing majestically covered in forests gave them a chiefly aura. With the forests gone, destroyed by the hand of man, one cannot help but weep.

The second stanza proceeds in the same vein, augmenting what has been said in the first stanza. More images of what the mountains have lost are conjured up. The lost flora include “udzu wobiliwira” (green grass), “mitengo ya mkungudza” (pine trees), and the fauna “afisi ndi akambuku” (hyenas and leopards), “ntchenzi, agologolo ndi asimba” (reed rats, squirrels and mongooses). All the flora and fauna were in abundance in the mountains but man has destroyed them all. In the final stanza the persona mourns their loss:

⁶ Julius Gustino, “Manja ankhwiti”, *Weekend Nation*, 28 – 29 July, 2001.

Lero mapiri amera dazi
Manja ankhwiti adawasambula
Miyala ili gambalagambala,
Ngati mbale zosatsuka
Pansi pathandala

(Today the mountains are bald
Shaven by destructive hands
The rocks exposed
Like unwashed plates
Underneath a plate drying bench).

The image of “hard rocks” is quite effective in this stanza. For those who have witnessed or observed a treeless hill cannot fail to recognize this image.

In “Phiri”⁷ (Mountain) by Julius Gustino is a kind of ode to a mountain, the “Phiri” of the title. It has six stanzas. The mountain is personified. The first stanza describes the mountain as it appears to the rainy season:

Dzinja ukavala udzu obiriwira,
Umakongoletsa dziko,
Alendo amabwera kudzaona iwe,
Nayo miyala ya mtengo wake usunga.

(In the wet season you are clad in green grass
You make the land beautiful
Visitors come to see you
You keep precious stones).

The mountain is not only admired for the lush green vegetation which appears in wet season but also the precious stones which apparently are in its bowels.

As in “Manja akhwithi” above, the second stanza simply lists the sort of things the mountains preserves, “nyama” (animals), “mitengo” (trees). In the third stanza, the persona tells us the benefits the mountain provides to the human kind:

Miyala yako,
Imateteza kukokoloka kwa nthaka,
Mbeu za tea, coffee ndi rubber,
Zimasangalala ndi mphepo yako,
Akasupe ochokera m’maso mwako
Amakumba akasupe otininkha madzi.

⁷ Julius Gustino, “Phiri”, *Weekend Nation*, 11 – 11 March, 2001.

(Your rocks
Protect the soil from eroding;
Tea, coffee and rubber plants,
Thrive in your breeze,
Springs emanating from your eyes
Provide rivers which give us water).

The final stanza proceeds in the same ponderous way, singing the virtues of the mountain. The mountain is praised, as would a benevolent chief. Indeed it is being referred to as “mfumu yoleza” (placid chief). Unfortunately the promise of the first stanza is degenerates into the mundane. The poems in the end reads like secondary school efforts at poetry writing presented to a Wildlife Society.

“Madzi”⁸ (Water) also by Julius Gustino is in many ways similar to the others we have seen in this section particularly “Phiri”. Like “Phiri” this is an ode to water “madzi”. The first stanza opens with the omniscience of water. Water, the persona, is engaged in self-praise:

Ndine mfumu ya za moyo,
Manthu wa magetsi
Pazovuta ngakhale pamtendere,
Silisowa dzina langa
Pamaliro andifuna posambitsa mfumu
Paukwati andifuna pofulula mowa ndi thobwa.

(I am the king of all living things,
The source of electricity
In sickness or health
My name is always there
They want me at the funeral to wash the corpse
They want me at the wedding when
Brewing beer and the sweet brew).

After declaring himself as “king of all living things”, he goes on to describe what happens when he is not there:

Zikasowa ine zomera, zimanyala
Zina zofooka zimauma
Ndikasiya kutuluka m’ mipope yam’ tauni
Amayi akhala yakaliyakali kundifuna
M’ magalimoto sindikaikamo kupezekamo
Nsomba, ng’ona ndi mbalame zina
Ndizininkha nyumba.

⁸ Julius Gustino, “Madzi”, *Weekend Nation*, 14–15 April, 2001

(Plants wither when they don't have me
The weaker ones dies
If I don't come out of taps in town
Women scamper looking for me,
There is no doubt I will be found in car engines
Fish, crocodiles and some birds
I give them a home).

The poem proceeds at the same prosaic pace. It concludes with these halting lines: “Dzuwa ndiye mdani wanga wamkulu/poti akandiona/sindichedwa kuuma” (The sun is my number one enemy/since when he sees me/I don't take long to dry up). The poet seems to echo the theme of Nature as mother of Life itself. Tampering with Mother Nature implies a risk for all life. However, much as the issues raised are interesting, there isn't much in the poem that can engage the mind in terms of language and sophistication of thought.

From the poems above, it can be concluded that the poets view the pristine environment as the original unspoilt “garden of Eden” in which animals and plants live in perfect harmony. However, this harmony is destroyed when man appears on the scene. Man is, therefore, blamed for everything that has gone wrong with the environment. Coincidentally, this is the same message the environmental activists put out. In this regard, the newspaper poets can be viewed as propagandists for the environmentalists.

3. HUMAN RIGHTS

With the advent of plural politics and democracy in most of Africa, and Malawi in particular, human ‘rights’ is the new magical word. It is therefore inevitable that poets should take it on as one of more fashionable themes since there are a thousand and one non-governmental organizations advocating one type of human rights or another. As a result human rights have become a banner that is waved rather abusively to justify very strange undertakings sometimes. “Ufulu wanga”⁹ (My freedom(s) by Jimmy Gama is characteristic in this theme. In this four-stanza poem, the persona demands his rights which he feels have been trampled upon. He/she does not want anyone to interfere with his/her rights:

Uli kuti nanga, wanga wachibadwidwe ufulu
Mundipatse osabenthura
Mawu onyoza adzadza, kaya ndi ndale chitani
Kunjatu kuno kuyanja lichero

⁹ Jimmie Gama, “Ufulu wanga”, *Weekend Nation*, 4 – 5 April, 2001.

(Where are they, my human rights
Give them to me whole without portioning
Too many insults, if its politics just do it
You do not know what the future holds).

In stanza two, the persona warns the addressee (presumably, politicians, it is not clear from the text) against vanity and doing things contrary to God's wishes. In this the persona invokes the biblical adage "the first shall be the last".

In the third stanza, the persona observes that he chose his own religion/church. He wonders therefore, whether by so doing he wronged anyone. And finally declaims:

Ndine nzika muno
Kwina kolowera ndilibe
Ndikhumba wanga wachibadwidwe

(I am a citizen here
I have nowhere else to go
I want my human rights).

This is a short poem but there is an obvious confusion in the way it has been organized. The poet's ideas do not seem to have been worked out as to create a recognizable whole. The third and fourth stanzas do not seem to form an integral part of the poem.

"Mwantani mwana"¹⁰ (What have you done to the child) by Thomas Chitseko deals with a section of human rights; namely the rights of the child. This, too, is a short poem of three stanzas. Each stanza deals with a right which a child has been denied. In the first stanza, the persona hears a child crying and he asks why:

Watani mwana akulirayo
Imani kaye mayi mumuone n'kale wayamba
Nanga ufulu wake mukuulabadira?

(Why is the child crying
Woman stop first and check
He has been at it for long
Do you care about his/her rights)?

In the second stanza the persona explores the idea that the child might be hungry. He therefore suggests that he/she be given a breast to suckle. From this solution, which is perfectly sensible, we move into the final stanza where the addressee is harangued by demands of rights:

¹⁰ Thomas Chitseko, "Mwantani mwana", *Weekend Nation*, 9 – 10 May 1998.

Mwana watani
Mpatseni ufulu wake
Poti kumpondereza wakana

(What has the child done
Give him his/her rights
He/she has refused to be oppressed).

One feels that there are too many assumptions being made. The idea of the rights of the child has been denied and has not been explored. There is a giant leap made from an instance of a child crying to the conclusion that the child is protesting against oppression. One feels the persona is reading too much in a simple cry of a child.

Within the general concept of human rights the issue of gender equity looms large. Unlike the other rights, gender equity is viewed as something amusing and not to be taken seriously. This reflects perhaps the confused nature the gender advocates have presented the issue. This is the general view of the Malawi society, and the newspaper bards are no exception. The general view seems that women demanding equality is the epitome of moral decadence. In “Musanamizire jenda”¹¹ (Don’t blame it on gender) by Mumderanji Ezekiel, gender, the persona, responds to some of the excess people have attributed to gender equity. This poem has three stanzas and each deals with the ‘evil’ that is attributed to gender. In the first stanza, the persona observes that the uncle is now cooking for the family (a traditional role of a wife). He, however, vehemently denies that the behavioural change can be attributed to gender:

Musanamizire ine
Ha! Siawo a malume ati
Ayamba kupanira miphika
Ndiwo ati afuna agawe atero
Eti chifukwa cha ine jenda

(Don’t blame it on me
Ha! There is uncle
He is cooking
He wants to serve the relish he says
All because of me).

Similar changes in behaviour are recorded in the second stanza. In this case women are performing their duties as supervisors in the field; lording it over men. While the women are in the field, the husbands are at home washing plates and changing babies’ nappies. Again, this gender claims is not his/her doing.

¹¹ Mumderanji Ezekiel, “Musanamizire jenda”, *Malawi News*, 11 – 17 July, 1998.

Finally, the persona focuses his/her gaze on the behaviour of the youth. He/she observes the more extravagant dress modes of the youth, and the decadent behaviour and, in emphatic terms, says he/she is not responsible. These are just the youth's own vices:

Musandinamiziretu inu anyamata
Taonanitu siawo anyamatawo
Avalavala ndolo, tsitsi alinyolola ngati
Tizinyau tothawitsa atsamunda
Onsewa ati chifukwa cha ine
Ndikuti musandinamizire inu Asungwana
Taonaninso asungwana ali yakaliyakali
M'misewu ndudu za fodya zili pakamwa
Ngati agogo azilumika zakale, n'kumatinso
N'chifukwa cha ine jenda

(Don't blame me, you boys
Look at the boys
Wearing earrings, their hair permed like
Masks used to scare colonialists
All this they claim it's because of me
I am saying do not blame me, you girls
Look again at the girls loitering in the streets
Cigarettes hanging from their lips
Like granny long ago, they too, say
It's all because of gender).

This is certainly a humorous poem. Gender equity, a serious issue, has been reduced to a ridiculous concept by deliberately associating it with the more banal aspects of life. Although the persona, gender, insistently denies this association, it is in fact these very caricatures that most Malawians associate it with. This poem therefore undermines gender equity seeks to achieve.

The poems about human rights are particularly banal not only because the poets are not up to it, but also because they do not seem to have a clear understanding of the concept. One has a feeling that the poets understanding is superficial hence the lack of serious reflection on the issues involved.

4. AIDS

The killer disease AIDS has spawned its own poetry. It would be surprising if it did not consider the epidemic proportions it has reached in Malawi and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. In most cases, the poems are grim reminders

of the devastating nature of the disease but sometimes rare humour is injected. In this section we examine some of the poems.

“Iwe Edzi Watitha”¹² (AIDS you have finished us) a four stanza poem by Sylvester S. Namiwa is a characteristic AIDS poems. It begins with a stanza evoking the devastating nature of the disease.

Ha! Watitha
Ndinenatu iwe Edzi
Ulibenso chisoni, kaya psete
Onse okonda chiwerewere
Psiti, atha ndithu, nthaka itawameza

(Ah! You have finished us
I mean you AIDS
You have no mercy, you don't joke
All those who love promiscuity
Have been finished, swallowed by the earth).

The disease AIDS has been personified. The persona is condemning the disease for being devoid of any human feeling, such as mercy. However, with a sudden change of mind, he makes a self-righteous generalization that all who are promiscuous will be decimated by the disease which does not sit well with the accusation that AIDS does not have any mercy. The persona seems to imply here that AIDS is a deserved punishment for the promiscuous.

In the second stanza, the helplessness of the society in the face of AIDS is depicted: “Nanga ndi mtengo wanji/woti n’kugwira/poti onse makolo kulichete anatsikiradi”. (What can we do/since all our parents/descended to the place of quite). The destructive nature of AIDS is underscored by the fact that the persona’s parents have succumbed to the disease, leaving him alone, an orphan. What is even more horrifying is the fact that the disease has no cure. This feeling of helplessness continues in the fourth stanza where we are told the persona’s uncle has succumbed to AIDS. After the demise of his/her parents, the persona depended on the uncle for his/her welfare.

“Ndimvere”¹³ (Hear me) by Mabvuto Njale is about a parent warning his offspring about the dangers of being promiscuous. The poem has three stanzas. The first and second stanzas warn the offspring generally about the dangers of living a fast life. The last stanza zeroes in on the dreaded disease. The persona, without mincing words, states clearly that the world has changed: AIDS is the omnipresent danger lurking everywhere;

Lidali kale dziko likadali ndi mphonje
Koma lero kunja kwaopsa

¹² Sylvester S. Namiwa, “Iwe Edzi Watitha”, *Weekend Nation*, 18 – 19 September 1999.

¹³ Mabvuto Njale, “Ndimvere”, *Malawi News*, 28 August – 3 September, 1999.

Edzi siyiona nkhope
Samala poti magwiragwira amapha manja.

(Time was when the world was pristine
But today danger lurks everywhere
AIDS knows no face
Be careful with what you do
Grabbing kills the hands).

The warning to the offspring is encapsulated in the idiomatic “magwiragwira amapha manja”. Which may be rendered as “continued evil practices lead to personal disaster of yourself”.

Slightly different, in the sense that it’s not a warning against the killer disease, is “Edzi ikutitha”¹⁴ (AIDS is finishing us) by Chimwemwe Kandani. The poem acknowledges the devastating nature of AIDS and the fact that the disease has reached epidemic proportions in Malawi. The persona observes that the disease has not been contained since the number of sufferers is increasing.

Zafikadi, poyipa zinthu
Koma n’kuteroko
Chinkelankelabe chiwerengero nacho
Achulukirenji odwala Edzi m’Malawi

(Things have reached crisis point
But in so doing
The population is increasing
Of those contracting AIDS in Malawi).

The idea that things have reached crisis point is enhanced in the second and third stanzas where we are told that despite the number of organization working to stem the tide of AIDS the number of sufferers is increasing. What is even more distressing to the persona is that the number of youth dying from the disease is also increasing. In the third stanza their pathetic appearance is describes as, “Ali songole, tewatewa thupi lidanka kwao” (They taper without any strength).

In the final stanza the persona vents his frustration and dismay at the state of affairs:

Anzanganu kodi n’kutere zinthuzi?
Otilangiza achulukirenji
Kunyoza koma kumeneko
Edzi ikutitha

(My friends, is this the way things have turned out to be?
Amazing the number of advisors
Yet we don’t take heed
AIDS is finishing us).

This stanza contains the persona's ultimate puzzle: "How is it that with all the medical advise, warnings and the overkill of the anti-AIDS campaigns we go about with business as usual?" With this conundrum the persona fatalistically admits "Edzi ikutitha"¹⁴ (AIDS is finishing us).

In terms of craft, this poem is not really a poem. In fact, it is chopped up prose. Not much attention has been paid to the use of language. There is neither imagery nor metaphor. It seems the poignancy of the message is all there is.

The final poem that we will deal with this section is "Mwandilephera"¹⁵ (You have failed to defeat me) by P. R. Chipiko. This is the only poem in the oeuvre that AIDS is the persona. What is even more interesting AIDS is celebrating its own devastating power and bragging about the untold suffering he has brought on the human race. This is therefore, unusual. This is a five-stanza poem. The two opening stanza set the scene to the self-congratulations:

Mwandilephera anzanga
Mwandilephera ine ngati mtsitsi wa mwala
Nzerutu anthu athedwa
Langa lotchuka dzina "EDZI" lawandadi

Awa ndi awa mankhwala alepheleratu
Ambiri nako kulichete atsikirako
Adotolo nawo tulo osagwa
Mwandilephera

(You have failed to conquer me my friends
You have indeed failed to conquer me
You have racked your brains to no avail
My notorious name AIDS has spread like bush fire.
All your drugs have failed to conquer me
Many people have descended to the quite place
The doctors have spent sleepless nights
But you have failed to conquer me).

In these stanzas AIDS is boasting that people have failed to conquer him/her. Even brilliant minds do not know what to do. No medicine has any known efficacy against him. He/she particularly brags about the fact that he has killed legions. This bombast continues in the third stanza where he observes that a lot of people have travelled long distances seeking remedies to conquer him but to no avail.

¹⁴ Chimwemwe Kandani, "Edzi ikutitha", *Weekend Nation*, 18 – 19 July, 1998.

¹⁵ P. R. Chipiko, "Mwandilephera", *Malawi News*, 29 – 30 September 2001.

In an unexpected twist to one so pompous, AIDS himself provides a remedy to his own devastation in the final line of the third stanza “Kudzisunga” (sexual abstinence). In the final stanza, the AIDS provides other remedies:

Komanso osabaitsa majekiseni osaphitsa
Njira zimenezi ndiye anga mankhwala
Otsata izi wautali moyo adzapeza
EDZI ndipo langa dzina.

(But don't inject yourself with unclean needles
These are my remedies
He who follows these instructions will have a long life
AIDS is my name).

Unfortunately this is a very weak stanza in any otherwise promising material. Instead of enhancing the poem it has made the poem degenerate into a medical dos and don'ts. It gives the impression that the poet had no idea of how else to proceed; how to elevate this banal language to the level of poetry.

5. TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Poetry dealing with matters of tradition takes the view that there was something called Malawian culture and there was time when it was pristine. This time was before the devastating influence of Western culture. Once Western culture appeared on the scene, Malawian culture declined. This decline is invariably attributed to the Malawians desire to imitate Western traditions. From the poems it would appear that the poets would have been happier had Malawian culture remained unchanged and unchanging, caught in a time warp. That culture or traditions are dynamic does not seem to be something the poets recognize. The debate, therefore, has always been in simplistic terms of the beautiful unspoiled past versus the ugly spoilt present.

“Chikhalidwe chili kuti?”¹⁶ (Where is the culture?) by Hamilton Kachimoza is typical of poems dealing with this issue. This is a typical three-stanza poem and the opening stanza is typical:

Chapita kuti chikhalidwe
Chokhutala ngati jekete ya umembala?
Chosilirika ngati nsalu ya ukwati?
Mwachisiya kuti ichochi?
Yakaliyakali ngwanji?
Chitani manyazi ngati nkhono

¹⁶ Halmiton Kachimoza, “Chikhalidwe chili kuti?” *Malawi News*, 20 – 26 November, 1999.

Dzivundikire ndi ulemu.

(Where have our traditions gone
Thick as tweed jacket
Beautiful as the bride's clothes?
Where have you left it?
Why are you wandering about
Be ashamed like a snail
Cover yourself in respect).

In this stanza the addressee seems to be the general public. In the second stanza, however, it is more specific. The traditions that are being decried seem to do with the manner of dress especially that of women:

Kodi chidafutala
Udachiiwala?
Nanga chidengule
Suchidziwa?
Tavalani chigelo
Chomwe ankhazi ankavala
Suja ankadzokodzera
Mawondo pansi
Ngati mphoyo zodwala
Chigodola

(Chidafutala
Have you forgotten it?
What about chidengule
Don't you know it?
You should be wearing chigelo
Which aunt used to wear
To cover her knees
Like a bull suffering from
Cholera).

According to the poet Malawian women should go back to wearing “chidafutala”, “chidengule” and “chigelo” (old fashioned dress styles) to retain their cultural traditions. It's doubtful whether any one would really want to retain a type of dress that would make one look “ngati mphoyo zodwala chigodola” (a bull suffering from cholera). The simile is not a particularly flattering image. No one would admire a woman who looks like that. Beside, whether the poet himself would be happy to be captured in this time capsule would be interesting to speculate.

Apart from dealing with the global issue of Western versus indigenous culture, poets also tackle specific issues which involve individuals who are

perceived to be deviating from the traditional moral code. In these poems, the object of scorn or advice is the individual, who in the eyes of the poet, is morally degenerate. The poet therefore sets himself/herself up as a (moral) counselor offering timely advice.

“Chenjera mwanawe”¹⁷ (Be careful child) by Caiphas M. Issa is typical. In this poem, the persona is warning a young man not to fall prey to a girl who is perceived a *femme fatale*.

Chenjera mwanawe
Usaputsitsidwe ndi anamwaliwo
Usatengeke nawo mavalidwe awo
Kwao kuseka kusakunyenge
Izo ndi nyambo yokukolera

(Be careful young man
Don't be fooled by these young women
Don't be taken in by their dress
Their laughter should not seduce you
They are lures to trap you).

To the persona the only person who can make a young man end up in difficulties is a woman. In the second stanza he describes the kind of lures young woman use to lure young men. These include “kuyenda mothimbwidzika” (sexually suggestive walking), “timawu tozuna” (sweet voices). Although these, admittedly, are attractive, the persona using proverbial wisdom warns “chikomekome chankhuyu m’kati muli nyererere” (All that glitters is not gold).

For the persona associating with women can only lead to one thing: disease. To drive his point home he concludes with the observation that patience pays. There is no need in hurrying; there will always be beautiful women.

“Uchengete mtima Naba”¹⁸ (Be patient Naba) by Dennis Mphepo moves the limelight from the young man to a young woman. The poem is a typical ‘advice’ poem. The persona is addressing a young woman Naba about the evil ways of the world.

Uchengete mtima Naba
Posathimbwidzika ndi zilakolako
Popeza kunjaku kwaopsa
Zedi dyabulosi wamera mano

(Be patient Naba
By not tempting danger with suggestive walking
Danger is lurking everywhere
Indeed the devil has grown teeth).

¹⁷ Caiphas M. Issa, “Chenjera mwanawe”, *Weekend Nation*, 13 – 14 October, 1999.

¹⁸ Dennis Mphepo, “Uchengete mtima Naba”, *Weekend Nation*, 3 – 4 July 1999.

In this dangerous atmosphere where the ‘devil has grown teeth’ how can one survive? The persona offers this solution to the girls:

Makope ndiwo akhale ako abwenzi
Popeza sukulu ndilo lako tsogolo
Koma ukadana ndi izi
Dziwa kuti mtsogolo udzanong’oneza bondo.

(Books should be your friends
Since school is your future
But if you hate this
You can only regret in future).

As already pointed out elsewhere in the essay, Malawians put so much trust in the efficacy of Western education. It is not surprising here that the advice is that the young woman should concentrate on education; it is the future. The final stanza underscores this point and urges Naba to take heed of free advice offered by those who have experience the world.

A few poems have been directed towards the clergy. Of late the clergy have been in the media because of the decline of standards in the way they conduct themselves. They have been blamed for various ungodly activities including witchcraft, adultery, covetousness and general misconduct. Dennis Mphepo’s poem “Mwalichitisa manyazi”¹⁹ (You have shamed it) captures the general feeling of ordinary folk:

Mwalichititsa manyazi dzina la Yesu
Posintha manga ngati birimankhwe
Polowerera zoyipa pakuti mwayiwala
Ambuye.

(You have brought shame on Jesus’ name
For changing your colours like a chameleon
By immersing yourself in evil deeds
You have forgotten God).

In this opening stanza the persona admonishes the clergy for being preoccupied with matters of the world rather than the spiritual. This feeling of betrayal by the clergy continues in the second stanza where we are told time was when the clergy were beyond reproach but “Lero mukuyamba kumwa” (Today you have began to drink). In the final stanza asks what exactly has gone wrong for the priests to lose their way: “Tsono ndiuzeni ichi chatsitsa dzaye/kuti anthu a Mulungu alowerere n’za kwayipa” (Tell me the cause of this/That God’s people should lose their way).

¹⁹ Denis Mphepo, “Mwalichititsa manyazi”, *Weekend Nation*, 16 – 17 May, 1998.

The clergy come in for criticism again in Cedrick Abdul Nsanama's "Alibe Chilungamo"²⁰ (They are not just). As the title suggests in this poem the clergy are taken to task for hypocrisy. In the first stanza, the persona warns the addressee not to be taken in by the appearance, dress or smiles of the clergy for "Alibe mkhalidwe" (They have no manners). In the second stanza he spells out why he objects to their deception:

Ngakhale avale chimkanjo choyera
Namayankhula malilime mwanthetemya
Sikuti ndi abusa amenewa,
Popeza kunjaku kukada,
Ndi anamatetule ajuga ndi chiwerewere.

(Even if he wears a white robe
And speaks in melodic tongues
He is not a man of God
For when darkness falls
He wallows in gambling and promiscuity).

The third and fourth stanzas deal with general dishonesty in society. The persona warns people to guard against being deceived by appearances and sweet talking individuals. The message seems to be "be ware of the wolf in sheep's skin".

6. MISCELLANEOUS VERSE

Apart from the poems with serious themes explored above, there are some which deal with everyday issues in a light-hearted manner. These poems cover various issues. "Miseche"²¹ (Gossip) by Rhodreck Salima is typical of this type of verse. The poem deals with gossip tongue-in-cheek. The opening lines praise the beauty of the word "miseche":

Likomerenji dzina miseche
Longa tsache losesera
Kadzina kotsekemera bwino

(What a sweet name is gossip
like a broom for sweeping
a sweet name indeed).

²⁰ Cedric Abdul Msanama, "Alibe Chilungamo", *Weekend Nation*, 2 – 3 October, 1999.

²¹ Rhodrick salima, "Miseche", *Malawi News*, 7 – 13 April, 2001.

An interesting feature of these opening lines is a play on the phonetic similarity of the word “miseche” (gossip) and “tsache” (broom). However, once this has been achieved the poem degenerates into a mere listing of the havoc that gossip can cause. The whole of the second stanza is a list of these:

Kadzina kachionongeko
Kodulitsa mutu wa zizwa
Komemeza ukhondo
Kolenga zidani
Kogwetsa mabanja
Kopasulitsa mabungwe

(A name of destruction
A name which causes zizwa to be beheaded
A name which causes wars
A name which causes enmity
A name which has broken marriages
A name which has destroyed groups).

Despite the fact that the role of gossip has been depicted as negative in the lines above, it is still treated with a diminutive form Kadzina (a little name), a term of endearment in Chichewa. The ironic nature of the poem, therefore, is still retained in spite of the ponderous nature of the listing. Students of Chichewa poetry will recognize the influence of E. J. Chadza’s “Likongolerenji Bokosi”²² (What a beauty the coffin is), a famous poem which also ironically praised the beauty of the coffin.

“Ndisiyeni”²³ (Leave me alone) by Francis Tayanja-Phiri is a slight poem dealing with the issue of freedom; the desire to be left alone; to do as one pleases. It is a playful poem but nonetheless making an important point, namely, one should be left alone, choose one’s spouse. The poem opens with these lines:

Wosauka,
Mphuno yokhota
Alibe sitepi
... ndinso ndi lova.

(He is poor
Has a crooked nose
A crooked walk
... and he is unemployed).

²² E. J. Chadza, “Likongolerenji Bokosi?” *Ntchito ya pakamwa: Ndakatulo za m’Chichewa* (New edition) London: Macmillan.

²³ Francis Tayanja-Phiri, “Ndisiyeni”, *Weekend Nation*, 22 – 23 August, 1998.

In spite of these negative attributes that people point out about the would-be spouse, the persona, Nangondo is not impressed. She insists she loves her man and he loves her. She is not prepared to listen to anybody. Her response to the critics is:

Kayabe
Tokhota takondana
Anuwo maganizo ngoola, tisiyeni...
Ikakhala mphuno yokhotayo,
Ndiyo ndafuna
Sitepiyo ikakhala
Manyazi sin'chita nayo.

(Let it be
We love each other
Your views are rotten, leave us alone...
If it's the crooked nose,
It's the one I like
If it's the walk
I am not ashamed of it).

The love-struck infatuated Nangondo cannot be dissuaded. The very faults that people point out about her would-be spouse are the very things she says she loves. As she points out she was not party to her relatives decisions when they were choosing their spouses. She believes she should be left alone because “Yemweyo ndiye wanga/Chauta adandininkha” (That one is mine/God gave me).

“Nkhwidzi”²⁴ by Hastings Banda is a short one stanza poem. However, within the ten lines of the stanza he manages to capture domestic violence vividly. A portrayal of drunken husband coming home from a drinking spree and beating up the wife for not providing food is well captured.

Zandizandi mbwee!
Afika a Phiri, fungo lili goo!
“Naphiri, nsima ili kuti?”
Ndisanayankhe lagwa khofi,
“Mwamuna mpamimba udziwe”
Katulo konse balala!
“Uko munali kunalibe nkhalii?”
Lagwanso lina khofi, waa!
Ndimvereke phuu!
“Umati utani”.

²⁴ Hastings Banda, “Nkhwidzi”, *Weekend Nation*, 7 – 8 July, 2001.

(Staggering he arrives
Mr. Phiri smelling beer
“Naphiri, where is my food?”
Before I answer a slap
“Man is the stomach, you should know”.
All the sleep gone
“Were there no pots where you are coming from?”
Another slap
I fall down
“What did you think you would do”.

What makes this little poem rise above the mundane is the poet’s use of idiophones, sound pictures. By using idiophones such as “zandizandi” “mbwee”, “goo”, “balala” he manages to conjure up vivid pictures of the action, sound and smell he is describing. One can therefore, visualize what is happening in the poem.

“Mudzakhutilitsidwa liti?”²⁵ (When will you be satisfied?) by Novala Banda is a short two stanza poem. This poem explores the concept of satisfaction. Why is it that people are not satisfied even though they keep on acquiring material wealth and other things? While this is a general statement, the persona is specifically interested in sexual satisfaction. The woman does not seem to be sexually satisfied even by men with a “Kamure” (Camry), a Japanese car, which is a status symbol. This mania drives her to sleep with charcoal sellers. This baffles the persona:

Mudzakhutilitsidwa liti anthuni
Ndawonera inuyo amayi
Uku mwapita uku mwapita
Mudzakhutilitsidwa liti nanga
Poti wa kamure mwati sapanga kanthu
Koma wamakala
Akakhala wosauka ndiye ayi
Mudzakhutira liti?

(When will you be satisfied people
I have watched you woman
You wander all over the place
When will you be satisfied then
Since you say the camry man doesn’t satisfy you
But the charcoal seller
If he is poor you don’t want him
When will you be satisfied).

²⁵ Novala Banda, “Mudzakhutitsidwa liti?” *Malawi News*, 18 – 24 September, 1999.

The lack of gratification is augmented in the final stanza. It compels the persona to liken the woman to a cemetery which never gets satisfied till it gobbles all.

7. SOME OBSERVATION

Poetry is by far the most popular literary genre in Malawi. There are more people trying their hand at writing verse than any other literary form. Although this is the case, the quality of the verse itself is very low. There are a number of reasons for this state of affairs.

First, Chichewa having no tradition of written literature like, say, Kiswahili or Hausa has forced writers to imitate English poetical forms or adapt such forms and techniques to their own language. Thus, for example, rhyme has been attempted but with little success. So, too, has rhythm based on English metre. Rhythm in English poetry is based on the varying recurrence of strong, and weaker stresses; but Chichewa does not have variable stress, so the achievement of a rhythm effect must be based on different factors, such as a number of syllables, length of words, the penultimate length characteristic of words or groups of words. Without any conventional understanding of what Chichewa verse should look like, the poets have resorted to free verse which in this case is really “chopped prose” strewn with proverbs and inverted syntax. The assumption seems to be that anything in stanza form is poetry. This form is so dominant that it has tended to produce stereotyped poetry. The low quality of Chichewa verse has also been lamented by Benedicto Malunga, a leading Chichewa poet, who makes this pertinent point as regards verse broadcast on the national radio:

In the past they (sic) were beautiful poems being aired which had diversive (sic) themes, but these days producers have a problem because they do not understand what poetry is all about. Instead they pick anything [sic] in verse form and air it as poetry.²⁶

Kazembe, the man in charge of the cultural and music bureau at the national radio station, observes in response, in the same article that “producers are failing to create good programmes because what writers give them is not mature enough and satisfactory. The problem is that schools don’t deal with poetry”. The observation made for the radio poets also holds for the newspaper poets because in most cases they are the same people. The culprit being blamed for this state of affairs seems to be the school system which does not offer poetry as a course. Be that it may, we hasten to say that we do not believe that it is necessary for any Chichewa poet to go to English or any other foreign language for inspiration or for a model. He or she has at his disposal the almost inexhaustible stock of traditional songs which can inspire him/her and be used a

²⁶ Gracious Chitakata, “Save Malawi Poetry from Vanishing”, *Malawi News*, 28 July – 3 August, 2001.

model for developing genuine Chichewa poetry. As Ulli Beier (1966: 11) observes:

Poetry has occupied a central place in the life of traditional African societies. Praise singers, drummers, priests, hunters, masqueraders – they all had to recite and invent poetry. (...) Equally important is perhaps the poetry of everyday life. The young girl pounding yams sings about her lover. The hunter on his way to the forest sings in praise of the animals he is going to hunt! In the absence of written language, everybody becomes a bit poet himself.

In the light of this comment then the literary Chichewa poet job is cut out. The song organizational patterns of the song may offer the poet at least a certain rudimentary knowledge of the metrics, which may be refined by more research into other poetic traditions.

Secondly, the newspaper as a medium for poetry is questionable. While it may possess enormous potential for reaching the people whose joys and sorrows, whose lives and deaths, whose triumphs and travails, are the stuff of poetry, and again while it may be easily accessible, relatively cheap; it is the very nature of the newspaper which works against the poetry. As Niyi Osundare (1998: 84) points out “poetry is an “elevated” genre while the newspaper is a populist if not a popular outfit. Writing poetry for a newspaper would require a considerable balancing act. The ropes are particularly precarious in a largely non-literate society”. The challenge, therefore, is find the right language for a newspaper audience without allowing the mode to slip into banality, and the subject into the vulgar. However, having failed to achieve this balance, most of the writers throw their arms up in despair and resort to the banal and mundane. As a result we end up with work which is essentially ephemeral. Its only interest lying in the implications it holds for the growth of Chichewa poetry rather than any special intrinsic quality it may reveal.

8. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have discussed the poetry that appears in the two leading Malawian weeklies; the *Weekend Nation* and the *Malawi News*. It has been observed that the poems therein reflect the current topical issues that also appear as news items such as education, the environment, traditional culture, AIDS etc. The poems emphasize the message rather than the craftsmanship involved in the writing. As such the poems are invariably weak lacking in artistry as well as serious reflection. This, it may be argued, is because the poems are seen not as artistic creations in their own right requiring serious craftsmanship but mere appendages to the topical issues being dealt with in the news items. The paper has suggested the way forward for those poets who want to grasp the essence of Chichewa poetry.

REFERENCES

- Beier, U. 1966.
African Poetry: An Anthology of African Traditional Poems.
Cambridge University Press.
- Chadza, E. J. 1963.
Ntchito ya Pakamwa. Lusaka: Zambia Publications Bureau.
- Kayambazinthu, E. 1998.
The Language Planning Situation in Malawi. **Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development**, 19(526): 369–439.
- Kishindo, P. J. 1990.
An Historical Survey of Spontaneous and Planned Development of Chichewa. In: I. Fodor and C. Hagege (eds.), *Language Reform: History: History and Future.* Vol. 5, Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag.
- Osundare, N. 1998.
Bard of the Tabloid Platform: A Personal Experience of Newspaper Poetry in Nigeria. In: A. V. Adams and J. A. Meyes (eds.), *Mapping Intersections in African Literature and Africa's Development.* Trenton, NJ: African World Press.

About the author: Pascal J. Kishindo is Associate Professor of African Languages and Linguistics, Chancellor College, University of Malawi. His articles have appeared in variety of journals and books including *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, *Ufahamu* and *Journal of Southern African Languages and Literature*. His area of interest is Syntax and Socio-Linguistics of African Languages and literatures written in African languages. He currently edits the University of Malawi's *Journal of Humanities*.