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# DR. H. KAMUZU BANDA'S LANGUAGE POLICY: A STUDY IN CONTRADICTIONS<sup>1</sup>

Pascal J. Kishindo

*So, I am interested in Chichewa, spoken Chichewa, written Chichewa, linguistics, yes but first let's get Chichewa.*

H. Kamuzu Banda (1974)

*I have established the Academy for the main purpose of teaching classics. If you are not prepared to learn these subjects, you must not come here, [because] such subjects as Latin are there to discipline your mind and brain.*

H. Kamuzu Banda (1981)

## 1.0 Introduction

The past three decades of Malawi's independence have been marked by the unique situation where all aspects of political power came to be concentrated in the hands of one man, Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda, the so-called Life President. During this period Malawi came to achieve the rare and dubious distinction of shifting from a one-party to a one-man state. His domination extended to other spheres of life including language policy. Dr. Banda's pronouncements on language constituted what has been called "Malawi's language policy". He himself was considered as the highest authority on matters linguistic.<sup>2</sup> However Dr. Banda presents a cultural paradox. Educated according to the best academic traditions of the Western World and completely wedded to the material comforts of that world, he demonstrated remarkable partiality for traditional African institutions and usages, such as dances, praise ceremonies, emblems of authority, etc. (Vail and

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to express my deepest gratitude to M.K. for technical assistance on this and other papers and for enduring. This paper is dedicated to the memory of J.H.A.K.

<sup>2</sup> P. J. Kishindo, "An Historical Survey of Spontaneous and Planned Development of Chichewa," in I. Fodor and C. Hagege (eds.) *Language Reform: History and Future, Volume 5* (Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 1990) 67.

White 1991).<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, nowhere is this apparent contradiction better demonstrated than in his language policy. While he elevated his mother tongue to the status of national language he himself ran the country using interpreters. This paper, among other things, will attempt to unravel this contradiction. To understand Dr. Banda's language policy we will examine his pronouncements on language and suggest what they meant to achieve both in short and long term. The paper will first discuss Banda's formative years as regards his interest in language. Secondly, it will examine the rise of Chichewa as a national language and the concomitant process of "Chichewanization", and finally his waning interest in Chichewa and subsequent interest in the classical languages, namely Greek and Latin.

## 2.0 Dr. Banda's Early Influence On Languages

Dr. Banda's interest in languages can be traced back to his student days at the University of Chicago where he acted as an informant to Mark Hanna Watkins, an African-American who was preparing a Ph.D. dissertation on Chichewa, Banda's own mother tongue. At this stage Banda was an up-coming scholar who enjoyed the patronage and support of Professor Edward Sapir, a leading anthropological linguist who had an abiding interest in the development of African studies.<sup>4</sup> In regard to his association with Dr. Banda, Watkins observes:

All the information was obtained from Kamuzu Banda, a native Chewa, while he was in attendance at the University of Chicago, from 1930 to 1932. Some of it, however, consists of letters which he received from home and kindly permitted me to study. He read the letters and aided with the translation. A portion of the material utilized in the revision was obtained

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<sup>3</sup> See L. Vail and L. White, *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History* (London: James Currey, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> K. M. Phiri, "Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda: His Cultural Philosophy, and its Implications for the "new" Malawi," Seminar on Social Change in Malawi, Chancellor College, University of Malawi, Zomba, 24-25 March, 1995, 2.

from him during "spare moments" since 1932. Mr. Banda was a very excellent informant, and without his cooperation this study would contain more defects than it does.<sup>5</sup>

On the eve of the outbreak of World War II, Dr. Banda found himself in the company of his relation, Native Authority S.C. Mwase of Kasungu who had been invited by the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London to act as a Chichewa informant. In regard to this visit Dr. Bargery and Cullen Young, had previously arranged with the Colonial Office that Dr. Banda should live with the Chief during the early days of his stay in England and show him around in return for a grant offered to him for his medical studies. But beyond showing Chief Mwase around;

... during the early part of the research, Dr. Banda often accompanied the chief and helped me explain the various phonetic and grammatical points I wished to investigate.<sup>6</sup>

It is quite clear that the period that Banda was a student was quite instrumental in the development of his views on language. One can discern the origins of his passion, at a later date, for the correct usage of Chichewa, and its development.

Thus by the time Dr. Banda returned to Malawi, through his association with Professor Sapir and his colleagues at the University of Chicago, and African language scholars at SOAS, he had amassed formidable anthropological linguistic knowledge of his mother tongue, knowledge which he flaunted when the opportunity arose.

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<sup>5</sup> M. H. Watkins, *A Grammar of Chichewa. Supplement to Language No. 24.* (Linguistic Society of America, Philadelphia, 1939) 7.

<sup>6</sup> See Guy Atkin, "Chinyanja Linguistic Research, General Report of Chief SC Mwase's visit to England," August 15, 1939 to February 10, 1940. This project set out to find out whether there was enough distinction between Chichewa and Chinyanja to justify separate orthographies. Malawi National Archives (MNA) File No. 526/8/1/1.



### 3.0 Chichewanization Period (1968-1978)

Malawians had been drawn to the importance of having a national language since the colonial period.<sup>7</sup> With the attainment of independence, it was perhaps expected that the question of having a national language embodying the spirit of the nation would be raised. What Malawians with strong views on the subject expected was that a certain amount of consultation would be conducted before a decision was implemented. At independence Chinyanja (of which Chichewa was just one of the dialects) would have for most people easily rated as a variety that deserved to be elevated to the status of "national language". It was evidently the most widely spoken and used variety. In 1968, however, before any consultations had been conducted, Dr. Banda announced to the Malawi Congress Party Annual Convention his interest in having Chichewa declared a national language. Following his speech the convention delegates passed a resolution to that effect. Thus the delegates recommended that in the interest of national unity:

- (i) Malawi adopt Chinyanja as a national language;
- (ii) that the name Chinyanja [should] henceforth be known as Chichewa;
- (iii) that Chichewa and English [should] be the official languages of the state of Malawi and that all other languages would continue to be used in everyday private life in their respective areas.<sup>8</sup>

These recommendations became the basis of Malawi's language policy. However, the adoption of the above recommendations sparked a wave of resentment not only among those who feared that it would have the effect of suppressing the development of major indigenous languages such as Chitumbuka in the North and Chiyao in the South, but also among those who resented the replacement of Chinyanja by

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<sup>7</sup> See P. J. Kishindo, "The Impact of a National Language on Minority Languages: The Case of Malawi," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 12.1 (1994): 127-150.

<sup>8</sup> See *Malawi Congress Party Convention Resolutions 1965-1983*, 6.

Chichewa.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, one of the glaring consequences of the new policy was the banning of Chitumbuka on the radio, the print media, and as the language of instruction in the first five years of primary education in Chitumbuka speaking areas.

Dr. Banda's decision was, however, not without justification. He had both historical as well as linguistic evidence to justify it.<sup>10</sup> In his public lectures he went to great lengths to demonstrate the fact that Chichewa was the "original" language and Chinyanja and Mang'anja were merely dialects. In these efforts he had the support of both local and foreign scholars. For example, Mchombo, using historical records, found linguistic unity between Chichewa, Chimang'anja, Chinyungwe and Chisena.<sup>11</sup> In what can be called a *tour de force* of reductionism, he concludes his observations as follows:

Surely the distinction . . . between the Chewa and Man'ganja can no longer stand in the face of the facts presented. Beyond this Sena and Nyungwe which have been recognized as dialects of Chimang'anja can now be seen to be dialects of Chichewa. The fact that there is a reasonable degree of mutual intelligibility between Chinyungwe, Chisena and Chichewa lends support to this claim.<sup>12</sup>

It is worth noting that this conclusion was arrived at without any field research or any comparison of texts of the said languages. Were this done the conclusion would have been different.<sup>13</sup> Mchombo further claims that "the Chichewa spoken at Kasungu is perhaps the

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<sup>9</sup> See L. Vail, and L. White, "Tribalism in the Political History of Malawi," in L. Vail (ed.) *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London: James Currey Limited, 1989) 151 - 192; P. J. Kishindo, "The Impact of a National Language on Minority Languages: The Case of Malawi;" and W. C. Chirwa, "The Politics of Ethnicity and Regionalism in Contemporary Malawi," *African Rural and Urban Studies*, 1 (1974): 93-118.

<sup>10</sup> See P. J. Kishindo, "An Historical Survey."

<sup>11</sup> S. A. Mchombo, "A Note on Chichewa," ms, 1975, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Kishindo, "An Historical Survey."

extant variety of the real Chichewa."<sup>14</sup> Writing much earlier but using arguments similar to Mchombo's, Marwick states:

All these people, including the Cewa, Cipeta and Zimba, speak dialects of the same language, the standard written form of which has become known as Nyanja (ciNyanja). This designation, the more specific reference of which is to the dialect spoken on the South-Western shores of Lake Nyasa, has arisen fortuitously. Either "Cewa" or "Malawi" would have been more appropriate--"Cewa" because of the numerical preponderance of this division; or "Malawi" because the so-called Nyanja speakers are descendants of a tribe of federation of related tribes referred to in the seventeenth century and late Portuguese records as the Maravi, Maraves etc.<sup>15</sup>

Thus both Mchombo and Marwick are of the view that Dr. Banda was merely correcting a fortuitous ascendancy of a dialect over the parent language.

In concert with the nationalization of Chichewa was a larger scheme which sought "to promote the idea that Chichewa culture was synonymous with Malawian culture."<sup>16</sup> In this scheme the pre-colonial history of the Chewa people was more or less regarded as the history of the Malawi nation. As Marwick puts it "the Chewa are . . . the most important descendants of the Malawi (the Maravi or Maraves of Portuguese records)" and their kingdom was a forerunner of the Malawi nation.<sup>17</sup> Their elaborate social and cultural traditional, and legal political systems were the foundations of the Malawi nation. All other pre-colonial kingdoms in the country were not as large and as organized as that of the Amaravi. Because of the stability the Chewa

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<sup>14</sup> Mchombo, 6.

<sup>15</sup> M. G. Marwick, "History and Tradition in East Central Africa through the Eyes of Northern Rhodesian Chewa," *Journal of African History* 4 (1963) 377.

<sup>16</sup> *Africa Watch* (1991) 35. This scheme has been well documented in Vail and White, "Tribalism in the Political History of Malawi," and Chirwa "The Politics of Ethnicity".

<sup>17</sup> Marwick, 375.

enjoyed, and the fact that "language develops from institutions", according to Banda, Chichewa at Kasungu is very rich.<sup>18</sup>

This was the type of pre-colonial Malawian history taught in schools and University respectively. Its objective was simple: to portray the Chewa as the "real" Malawians, the dominant group and the founders of the nation.<sup>19</sup> This scheme dubbed the "process of Chichewaization" effectively erased out histories of other ethno-linguistic groups.

To effect the process of Chichewaization, a number of institutions were put in place. In the following sections I will discuss the relevant institutions.

### 3.1 The Chichewa Board (1972-1995)

Although the Chichewa Board was set up in 1972, its evolution began in 1970 when Dr. Banda appointed and financed a Chichewa Research Committee. This committee's main function was the collection of Chichewa words from every Chichewa speaking district in the country in preparation for the compilation of what was termed a "National Dictionary of the Chichewa language" Not quite satisfied with the pace at which the committee was working, Dr. Banda "appointed a special group known as the Chichewa Working Group under the chairmanship of [Dr. Banda] himself to tackle the more difficult tasks connected with the preparations for the Dictionary compilation,"<sup>20</sup> so that it would be published within a reasonably short span of time. Thus, eventually the Chichewa Research Committee was absorbed by the Working Group. In 1972 Dr. Banda directed the formation of the Chichewa Board under which the Working Group was to operate. The stated functions of the Board were (a) to provide the

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<sup>18</sup> H. K. Banda, "Verbatim Transcription of H.E.'s Speech on Chichewa to Members of the MBC, University Chancellor College etc.," 2 August, 1974 at State House, Zomba, 23.

<sup>19</sup> See Vail and White, "Tribalism in the Political History of Malawi," and Chirwa, "The Politics of Ethnicity".

<sup>20</sup> "A Brief History of the Chichewa Board (1970-1971)" Ref. No. ADM /1/40, 1.

national dictionary of the Chichewa language, (b) to produce Chichewa orthography rules, and (c) develop the Chichewa language.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, the Board was to provide guidance to Chichewa users in education, media and publishing. It was to encourage, as well as carry out research, with the goal of standardizing the description of Chichewa. The results of this effort would be reflected in the media, publishing in general and the materials used in educational institutions. The Board would thus be a prescriptive body in the tradition of the Academies of France and Italy, as will be shown below.

### 3.2 The Ministry Of Education

The Ministry of Education was a crucial institution in the implementation of the language policy. During the 1969/70 academic year it declared that English become a mandatory subject for educational and general purposes up to the school certificate level. At primary level Chichewa was to serve as a language of instruction for the first five years, and thereafter English was to take over while Chichewa remained a subject. At the secondary school level, Chichewa was to continue as a subject. This policy contrasted markedly with Tanzania, where Kiswahili is a language of instruction for all pre-university education.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.3 The University

Research in Chichewa is done at the University of Malawi, particularly in the Department of Linguistics and African Languages. Scholars in this department have published a great deal on the structure of Chichewa. This work has in turn spurred research on the language in other centres especially in the USA. As a result more work on the structure of the language has been published over the past twenty years

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<sup>21</sup> See Chichewa Board 1984 Malawi Congress Party Convention fliers. Ref. No. CD/4/25/104.

<sup>22</sup> Bokamba and Tlou "The Consequences of Language Policies of African States vis-à-vis Education," in P. Kotey and H. Der-Houssikian (eds.) *Language and Linguistic Problems in Africa* (Columbia: Hornbeam Press, Inc., 1977) 38.



than the first hundred years of its existence as a written language.<sup>23</sup> The department offers courses in Chichewa leading to either a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Education degree.

### 3.4 The Media

The role of the Chichewa Board assumed greater proportions in the media. The Board used to provide advisory services directly to the sole radio station and to newspapers and magazines which engaged in bilingual broadcasts and dissemination of information as well as entertainment.

#### 3.4.1 The Radio

The radio was used to employ both didactic and entertainment programs to encourage the use of Chichewa. An example of a didactic program was "Tiphunzitsane Chichewa" (Let us teach each other Chichewa). Listeners used to write to this program to express their views about a particular expression, word, or syntactic structure. Their views were then discussed by a panel headed by a member of the Chichewa Board. At the end of the program a conclusion/solution was suggested and recommended to the listener.

The tone of most of these discussions was legislative, setting out how the language ought to be used, not necessarily how it actually was used by the majority of the people. For example:<sup>24</sup>

- (1) a. Atsibweni anga adapita ku Mzimba dzana.  
b. Ankolo anga anapita ku Mzimba dzana.  
(My uncle went to Mzimba the day before yesterday.)
- (2) a. Amayi onse mmudzi muno amathandizana kholola.

<sup>23</sup> See S. M. Made et. al. *100 Years of Chichewa in Writing, 1875-1975* (Zomba: University of Malawi, 1970) for a list of publications in Chichewa from 1875 to 1975.

<sup>24</sup> Examples taken from Chichewa Board 1984 Malawi Congress Party Convention flier, Ref. No. CD/4/25/104.



b. Azimayi onse mmudzi muno amathandizana kholola.

(All women in this village help each other in harvesting crops.)

- (3) a. Mlimi azithira feteleza ku mbewu zake zonse.  
 b. Mlimi ayenera kuthira feteleza ku mbewu zake zonse.  
 (A farmer should apply fertilizer to all his/her crops.)

We owe it to the Chichewa board for legislating against borrowing and dialectal variation as in (1)b, and in (2) and (3) respectively.

“Tiphunzitsane Chichewa” was supplemented by “Chichewa cha kumudzi” (Chichewa of the village). In this program, recordings from typical village situations were explained with the aim of broadening the scope of other Chichewa users, especially those in the cities where multilingualism is the norm.

In brief, Chichewa programs could be categorized as purely musical (entertainment), didactic (non-formal education) and educational (school programs). In this way every opportunity was exploited to bring standard Chichewa into every Malawian home. However, these programs have ceased since the demise of the Chichewa Board (see section 5.0 below).

### 3.4.2 The Print Media

Prior to 1993 there were two main newspapers in Malawi: the *Daily Times* and the *Malawi News*.<sup>25</sup> The *Daily Times* publishes exclusively in English. The *Malawi News* devotes a quarter of its

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<sup>25</sup> The *Malawi News* was established when the country was agitating for independence as a mouth piece of the nationalist movement. Currently the *Malawi News* and the *Daily Times* are published and distributed by Blantyre Print and Packaging which is owned by Dr. Banda.

pages to Chichewa. The Chichewa items are carefully selected to appeal essentially to rural communities.<sup>26</sup>

There were also other publications prior to 1993 such as *Odini*, *Moni* and *Boma Lathu*. These publications are still in circulation. *Odini* newspaper is published by Likuni Press. It covers both national and international events bilingually. *Moni* magazine is published by Montfort press. It is a family magazine whose bilingual children's section guarantees popular reading material to the learning mind. *Boma Lathu* is a monthly newspaper published by the Department of Information. It is published exclusively in Chichewa and distributed free of charge.

The role of the print media was not only that of bringing information to, and entertaining, Chichewa readers but also that of fixing the language's orthography to eliminate variation in the spelling.

### 3.4.3. Publishing

Publishers, especially those of religious mission, did a great deal in promoting Chichewa. The reason was simple; they wanted to ensure the presence of the Holy Scriptures in every Christian home. The leader of the mission publishers was and still is Montfort Press, a Catholic Printing and Publishing house. It is currently responsible for the longest list of Chichewa general reading materials (i.e. novels, plays, biographies etc.). In the private sector, Dzuka Publishing Company specialized in educational publishing.<sup>27</sup> Until 1994 it was responsible for publishing all primary school textbooks and all Chichewa secondary school texts which were previously published and printed abroad. Recently, however, textbook publishing has been liberalized.

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<sup>26</sup> Since Dr. Banda and the MCP government lost power, these pages are now used to attack the new government. Put differently, the two newspapers are now used as the opposition's mouth-pieces.

<sup>27</sup> This company is a subsidiary of Blantyre Print and Packaging. See note 23.

#### 4.0 Dr. Banda And The Classics

Dr. Banda presented his last lecture on Chichewa in 1978. In this lecture he dealt mainly with Chichewa kinship terms. From this point on, Dr. Banda shifted his efforts to the re-establishment of the Classics in schools. To put his ideas in practice he, in 1981, opened his own school, the Kamuzu Academy. The avowed intention of the school was to subject academically gifted children to a vigorous but stimulating program which, in Dr. Banda's view, was lacking in other schools. At the core of the curriculum was to be the Classics, according to Banda, without which "no man can truly call himself educated."<sup>28</sup> To make this point absolutely clear, at the opening ceremony, he declared to the public that "if you are not prepared to learn these subjects you must not come here [because] such subjects as Latin are there to discipline the mind and the brain."<sup>29</sup> To demonstrate his knowledge of the classics Dr. Banda would go into a long-winded history of Ancient Greece and Rome, and embellish it with extracts of Latin which, to the amusement of his audience, his usual interpreter could not interpret.

His decision to introduce the Classics at the Academy was not simply a private affair. It also had repercussions in the public educational institutions. For in Banda's Malawi whatever he decided was law. The Ministry of Education was, therefore, obliged to re-introduce Latin in its schools after a fifteen-year break. The Ministry was nonetheless handicapped in this venture. There were no textbooks and no qualified Latin teachers on the ground. In order not to disappoint the Life President, the Ministry went ahead. Old retired teachers were rehired and put into service.

The University was also caught unawares. A Department of Classics was hastily founded without books and with a recent graduate as the only lecturer. The intention was to accommodate Kamuzu

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<sup>28</sup> See "Kamuzu Academy Programme of the 5th Anniversary of the Founder's Day, Friday 21st November, 1986 and a Brief History of the Academy," 13.

<sup>29</sup> See "New Era in Education," *Daily Times* Monday, 23 November 1981, 1.

Academy students who were selected to Chancellor College as well as to produce secondary school Latin teachers.<sup>30</sup>

It was during this period when Banda was flirting with Classics that Chichewa lost the momentum of attaining the level of development that Swahili attained in Tanzania. In the eyes of the public Banda had undermined Chichewa by not making it a subject at the Academy. Banda the Africanist had given way to Banda the Classicist. What is perhaps of interest is how public institutions responded to Dr. Banda's whims. That he wanted Classics at the Academy was just a hollow grand gesture for he was neither a renowned Classicist nor an intellectual. It is not surprising, therefore, that when the Academy fell on hard financial times, there was talk of scrapping the Classics. The usefulness of such a subject in a poor country has always been suspect.<sup>31</sup>

#### 5.0 Post-Banda Language Policy: Some Outlines

On May 17, 1994, Dr. Banda lost the multi-party general elections. His defeat, and that of his political party, ushered in the advent of multi-party politics and the rule of the United Democratic Front and its leader Elson Bakili Muluzi. The new era has been characterized by the issuing of directives by the Head of State and government officials rather than a well-wrought language policy. Unlike Dr. Banda, the new president, lacking a solid academic background, has hitherto demonstrated that he has neither strong views on language nor culture, and besides does not seem to have a clear vision of what he wants to be achieved in this area. Nevertheless, in order to appear different, Muluzi and his government have sought to subvert what Dr. Banda put in place. Linguistically, the first assault on Chichewa was to undermine its position as the only indigenous

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<sup>30</sup> The University went out of its way to accommodate the needs of the Classics department, even to the extent of offering the staff members of the department higher salaries than their qualifications warranted, and a larger staff establishment than the long-established Department of Chichewa and Linguistics.

<sup>31</sup> The Ministry of Education is quietly abandoning the teaching of Latin in its schools

language used on the radio and the print media.<sup>32</sup> Thus Chitumbuka was re-introduced on the national radio by a presidential decree after a twenty-seven year hiatus. The directive caught Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) unawares. There was no Chitumbuka service personnel on the ground when it was made. However, the Chitumbuka service was on the air two days after the directive. The presentation was, perhaps not surprisingly, decidedly of low quality.

On July 31, 1995, Chichewa was further undermined. The Chichewa Board, the main engine for Chichewaization, was officially dissolved by a Cabinet directive, ostensibly to be replaced by an establishment that would reflect the linguistic diversity of the country. Following this directive the Ministry of Education and the Department of Statutory Corporations mandated the University of Malawi, Chancellor College, to establish a Centre for local Malawian languages. The Centre which would initially be funded by the Government of Malawi, would formulate the country's language policy as well as promote the teaching and learning of non-African languages of socio-economic and political relevance to Malawi, for example, Portuguese, German, French and English.<sup>33</sup>

The overall goal of the proposed centre for language studies is the development and promotion of indigenous languages in Malawi in order to contribute towards the country's socio-economic development. Its objectives are:

- (i) to establish orthographic principles of Malawian languages;
- (ii) to develop descriptive grammars for Malawian languages;
- (iii) to compile lexicons of Malawian languages;
- (iv) to promote and preserve Malawian languages;
- (v) to teach various languages of socio-economic and political relevance to Malawi;
- (vi) to provide translation, interpretation and editing services and
- (vii) to promote research in language studies.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Even this name is now being challenged in favor of the former name Chinyanja.

<sup>33</sup> See Chancellor College "Proposal for the Establishment of a Centre for Language Studies" Ref No. CC/2/1/3/1, 1.

<sup>34</sup> See Chancellor College "Proposal," 2-3.



The objectives seem to us to be all-embracing and rather unfocused. What, for example, will the relationship be between the centre and the existing departments of English, French, African Languages and Linguistics if it is going to be a teaching institution as well? Presently the Centre is beset with serious financial problems.

The undermining of the status of Chichewa has gone unabated. Recently the Ministry of Education issued a directive that:

... with immediate effect, all standards 1, 2, 3 and 4 classes in all our schools be taught in their own mother tongue or vernacular language as a medium of instruction. English and Chichewa will however, continue to be offered as subjects in the primary curricula. In the past Chichewa was used as both a medium of instruction and subject, making it very difficult for beginners to grasp ideas. However English will be used as a medium of instruction beginning in standard 5.<sup>35</sup>

According to the directive, this new policy has been instituted because research has revealed that "children learn better and faster if they are taught in their own mother tongue or in their own vernacular language during the first four years of their formal education than when they are taught in a second language as a medium of instruction."<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps predictably, the authorities who are championing "mother tongue" education have deliberately ignored data which has proven the contrary. Modern psychoeducational research in bilingual education has established that *as a matter of principle*, the "linguistic mismatch equals deficit" hypothesis is actually false. The St. Lambert

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<sup>35</sup> Secretary for Education's letter Reference No. IN/2/14 dated 28 March to all Regional Education Officers, all Educational Secretary Generals, the Secretary General Teachers' Union of Malawi and the Director, Malawi Institute of Education. See also A. Kulemek'a's polemic "Rethinking the Language Issue", *Moni*, 354, 19-22.

<sup>36</sup> See Secretary for Education's letter Reference No. IN/2/14.



immersion experiment,<sup>37</sup> for example, and many follow-up projects, which are renowned for thoroughness of their experimental methods and monitoring have demolished the "mismatch" myth. It has been demonstrated that bilingualism may, in some circumstances, even have advantageous results: "becoming bilingual . . . can positively influence aspects of cognitive functioning."<sup>38</sup> This discovery, fueled by the St. Lambert experiment, has been corroborated by a number of experiments and investigations which have produced similar results, for example, Ianco-Worrall, Ben-Zeev and Oller.<sup>39</sup> Besides, it is not a very wise thing to base one's language policy on research done in other countries. I believe a country's language policy should be based on the situation in that particular country after thorough linguistic investigations.<sup>40</sup>

The Ministry of Education's argument provided for this move is highly reminiscent of UNESCO's (1953) recommendation "that the best medium for teaching is the mother tongue of the pupil". The new language in education policy, consequently, supports the principle of linguistic self-determination and seems to hold that what is immediately best for the individual should determine the major features of its program. While it is much easier to formulate this policy declaring it

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<sup>37</sup> See W. Lambert and G. Tucker *Bilingual Education of Children* (Rowley, Mass: Newbury House, 1972).

<sup>38</sup> J. Cummins, "The Influence of Bilingualism on Cognitive Growth: A Synthesis of Research Findings and Explanation Hypotheses," *Working Papers on Bilingualism*, 9 (1976) 10.

<sup>39</sup> A. Ianco-Worrall, "Language in Culture and Society," *Child Development* 43 (1972): 1390-1400; S. Ben-Zeev, "The Influence of Bilingualism on Cognitive Strategy and Cognitive Development," *Child Development* 48 (1977): 1009-1018; and J. Oller, "The Language factor in the Evaluation of Bilingual Education" *Georgetown University Roundtable on Language and Linguistics* (1978): 410-422.

<sup>40</sup> It is perhaps curious that this directive came at a time when language experts were out in the field researching on attitudes towards mother tongue education; a project which the Ministry of Education was well aware of, participating in through the Malawi Institute of Education (see "Malawi Institute of Education and Ministry of Education Report on the Workshop on Introduction of Other Local Languages in the School Curriculum in Malawi, Boadzulu Holiday Resort, 12-17 November, 1995"). That the directive was issued even before the survey was completed turns the question of language planning in Malawi into a travesty.

politically and socially correct, it is actually very difficult to implement, or even to know how to implement it.

Given the situation in Malawi, this policy seems destined to fail for two main reasons. First, linguistic self determination conceived in the face of potential fifteen plus languages and dialects is hopelessly unattainable when expressed in terms of the economics of a modern education. Second, too much stress on the immediate benefits for the individual endangers the elaboration of a long-range program compatible with the needs and the potentials of modern society. I do not, therefore, subscribe to the Ministry of Education's views and subsequently UNESCO's recommendation. It is an impractical proposal, as pedagogically sound it may be.

The post-Banda era has also witnessed a proliferation of newspapers. These newspapers for a while further undermined the hitherto unassailable position of Chichewa by publishing items in other local languages such as Chilomwe, Chitumbuka, Chisena, Chitonga and Chiyao, thus, in a sense reflecting the new political thinking on language. One characteristic feature of these items is that the spelling varied from item to item and from newspaper to newspaper. This is because, unlike Chichewa, there are no standard orthographies for these languages.

Economically, the price of the newspapers are simply beyond the means of the average Malawian. It is not surprising therefore that after the general euphoria generated by the attainment of "freedom of expression", most of the papers have died a natural death, and no one really has mourned their passing. Currently, the remaining newspapers publish only in English and Chichewa.<sup>41</sup>

## 6.0 Evaluation

Dr. Banda did not have a clearly defined language policy or indeed cultural policy such as Julius Nyerere produced for Tanzania, or a political philosophy such as Kwame Nkrumah produced for Ghana,

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<sup>41</sup> At the peak of newspaper publishing Malawi had close to two dozen newspapers. Now only four appear regularly viz. the two dailies, *Daily Times* and *The Nation*, the weeklies *Malawi News* and *Saturday Nation*.

but rather a series of ideas and opinions about those things he considered important. These ideas when examined seem to contain apparent serious inconsistencies.

One of the glaring contradictions of his language policy was manifested at a personal level. While he championed Chichewa as the national language, he himself never spoke the language in public; he always used interpreters to communicate with the public. Some of his detractors have used this as evidence that Dr. Banda was not really a Malawian but an impostor of African-American origins.<sup>42</sup> Yet in spite of this apparent lack of proficiency in Chichewa he regarded himself as an ideal speaker of the language. On one occasion he had this to say:

Gwanda was surprised when I was speaking to a woman from Nsanje. Perfect Chichewa, I was speaking. She understood me and answered me in what I considered was perfect Chichewa, because, why, I am a villager, she is a villager.<sup>43</sup>

When it suited him, Dr. Banda would ridicule his interpreter by correcting him on the spot. On national religious occasions when he would be asked to read the Bible, he would make it a point to "correct" the text as he haltingly went along on the grounds that the missionaries' Chichewa translation was well below standard. This attitude of linguistic superiority seems to stem directly from the associations he had with some leading linguists/anthropologists in the USA, and the knowledge that he had an education that was far superior to that of his interpreter.<sup>44</sup>

Ironically, while Dr. Banda did not speak Chichewa in public, he took pride in "speaking" Greek and Latin, both dead languages. He would spice his post-1978 speeches with quotations from Homer,

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<sup>42</sup> See G. T. Ngubola Kamwambe, *The Tragedy of Malawians: The Legacy of one Party Rule*, (Mojo Press Limited, 1993).

<sup>43</sup> Banda, "Verbatim Transcription," 18.

<sup>44</sup> Watkins, *A Grammar of Chichewa*.

Plato, Aristotle, Caesar, etc.<sup>45</sup> It would appear that this was Banda's way of demonstrating that he was a highly educated and learned person since, in his own estimation, without the classics "no man can truly call himself educated."

The contradictions also extended to his attitude towards the English language. Even after declaring Chichewa the national language, English remained unaffected in terms of its function. It continued to be the language of education, the judiciary, government, social promotion as well as a ticket to white-collar jobs.<sup>46</sup> Besides, English remained the language of parliament even though Banda's parliament was comprised mainly of MPs with a junior secondary school education and lower<sup>47</sup> while Chichewa remained the language of lower elementary school and lower public administration. Thus the prestige of Chichewa was in practice never enhanced. The question that needs a response is why did Dr. Banda not exploit the language of the masses to his own advantage? Why did he stop short of developing it to reach the level where it could be used to access more advanced knowledge and information?

There appears to be three interrelated solutions to this puzzle. First, at a personal level, there is one consideration that could have contributed to the contradictions in Banda's language policy but which is not easy to prove, that is a tinge of racism or self-denial. Dr. Banda made no secret of his contempt for his fellow blackmen.<sup>48</sup> The

<sup>45</sup> These speeches were in form of graduation addressees at Chancellor College, University of Malawi, and later at the Founder's Day ceremonies at the Kamuzu Academy.

<sup>46</sup> Kishindo, "An Historical Survey."

<sup>47</sup> I believe that the insistence on the use of English in Parliament contributed to the low standard of debate in the house because most of the parliamentarians were simply not proficient in English. See also Matiki (1994) for similar views. Banda's failure to introduce Chichewa is in marked contrast to what Kenyatta did in Kenya (see T. Hopkins, "The Development and Implementation of the National Language Policy in Kenya," in Kotey and Der-Houssikian, eds.: 84-93) and Nyerere in Tanzania where Kiswahili is the official language of parliamentary proceedings.

<sup>48</sup> In public addressees Dr. Banda put it very bluntly that there would be no "mitu bii" (black heads) teaching at the Academy because he wanted to see very high standards there. The implication is that Africans would lower the standards. In fact, when the Academy opened its doors to its first pupils the teachers were "nearly all of them Britons" since "no single African [is] qualified enough to teach at the school . . ." See "Academy for Best Teachers," *Daily Times* 3 (February 1982). See also "Life President Opens Kamuzu Academy," *This is*

standards that he emulated were strictly European, specifically British. He was happy, therefore, to be associated with anything British including language. He was, for example, very proud of his knowledge of English:

And this if I may say so, why when I am talking to the English people, they may not like me, but at least they cannot say I do not know what I am talking about. Some of them admit to my face that they are amazed at my knowledge of their language, their history, when they don't know anything about it. But this is a fact.<sup>49</sup>

Besides, in order to retain his aura of mystique and authority Dr. Banda had to remain above the ordinary citizen in everything he did and the use of English to communicate with highly illiterate masses allowed him to stand aloof from the citizens he lorded over.

Second, it was for practical reasons. Dr. Banda needed to have the country firmly under control, and avoid any challenge to his position. To achieve this he clamped down on opposition and placed severe restrictions on basic freedoms. At one level, this necessitated the control of information through censorship. At another level, it meant doing nothing to develop Chichewa so as to create a linguistic barrier, since the critical literature was in English and this could be accessed by only a small elite. Since the masses could not access the information in their own languages, and English was beyond them, Banda could go on lying to them that Malawi was a paradise on the African continent. This was sabotage by Banda to maintain the domination of the educated over the uneducated.

Third, language is the most visible symbol of ethnicity. Thus Dr. Banda appropriated Chichewa as a national language to mark the ascendancy to political prominence of the Chichewa-speaking people of the central region. In Dr. Banda's scheme of things the symbolic value

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*Malawi* 1.1 (January 1982). These pronouncements led many uninformed Malawians to believe that the Academy was somehow a much higher institution of learning than the University. This misrepresentation was deliberately cultivated by the politicians.

<sup>49</sup> Banda, "Verbatim Transcription," 4.



of Chichewa was arguably paramount. By 1978 by all accounts, the Chewa ascendancy was complete, hence Dr. Banda did not need any linguistic symbols, he could, therefore, venture into his other pet projects.

What of the Chichewa Board, the main agent of Chichewaization? Did it succeed in its endeavor? Without Dr. Banda directing its activities, the Board was a moribund institution. The Board was charged with the duty of producing a Chichewa dictionary, yet none of the members of staff employed by the Board had the necessary qualifications. From its inception, it was manned by retired primary school teachers of Chewa origin.<sup>50</sup> The Chairmen of the Board were politicians appointed by Dr. Banda himself. This left the impression that this was the linguistic arm of the ruling party. The appointees, therefore considered their jobs as sinecure. They did not want to rock the boat by doing something "risky". The Board always waited for Dr. Banda's initiative hence when his interest shifted the Board marked time. There was no effort at the Board to improve matters. The old guard resisted any changes.<sup>51</sup> It is not surprising that the Board, after twenty-two years of existence, failed to produce a new Chichewa dictionary.

There are other areas where the Board seems to have had a measure of success. For example, although it did not succeed in suppressing variation in language, it succeeded in codifying a set of conventions appropriate for the written language. The orthography, for instance, is used in all Chichewa materials published in Malawi. Clearly the Board was answering the need of a developing nation for reliable communication in writing. In this domain the Board was generally successful.

The Board had much less success in preventing change in the spoken language. The economic and social upheavals of the past thirty years have resulted in the growth of urban centres whose distinctive

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<sup>50</sup> The first members of the Chichewa Working Committee were S.J. Nthara, B. Mbuka Banda (retired teachers) and W. Chakwera (politician). All the chairmen of the Board, from the first J.D. Msonthi, were politicians, again of Chewa origin.

<sup>51</sup> The present author is aware of the resistance he met when he, as the Head of the then Department of Chichewa and Linguistics, suggested that Prof. Charles Bird of University of Indiana, who was visiting his department, assist the Board with the dictionary.



dialects differ from the rural areas around them and from the form the Board advocated.

On the whole, although Chichewa did not fulfill Banda's goal of creating national unity,<sup>52</sup> the idea of a national language was a step in the right direction. Chichewa has maintained its status as a *lingua franca* in the region, something that cannot be said about the other contending languages. Besides, as was the case during the colonial era, Chichewa is still the local language that people want to learn.<sup>53</sup> The rise of Chichewa has stemmed perhaps not so much from it being a national language but rather from its usefulness as a *lingua franca*. As Greenberg points out, the more useful the language becomes the more pressure it exerts on others to learn it.<sup>54</sup> At this point, Chichewa seems to have benefited in its spread from the non-existence of a rival *lingua franca*.

In the final analysis, however, Dr. Banda's conflicting needs and his fervent desire to be the supreme "language planner" resulted in stagnated language planning. This meant that although the language policy was ostensibly aimed at developing Chichewa as a *volkssprache* in practice, as shown above, the policy favored the use of English in most spheres of national significance.

## 7.0 Conclusion

In this paper I have, among other things, traced the origins of Banda's interest in Chichewa to his undergraduate years in the USA. This interest led him years later when he became head of state of Malawi to champion Chichewa as a national language. Secondly, I

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<sup>52</sup> The results of the general elections of May 1994 paid to the illusion that language alone could bring national unity when people voted according to their regions of origin (see Chirwa). But as B. Harlech-Jones, "Policy and Implementation in Bilingual Education," *Logos*, Special Edition, 7, 1 (1987): 37 has pointed out, "there is nothing that is inherently unifying in a language," other factors have to be favorable for unity to be achieved.

<sup>53</sup> E. Kayambazinthu, "Patterns of Language Use in Malawi: A Sociolinguistic Investigation in Domasi and Malindi Areas of Southern Malawi," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 8/9, 1/2 (1989/90): 109-131.

<sup>54</sup> J. H. Greenberg, "Urbanism, Migration, and Language," in H. Kuper (ed.) *Urbanization and Migration in West Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965): 50-59.

have explored the process of Chichewaization and suggested areas in which it succeeded or failed. Finally, I have discussed Banda's flirtation with the classics following his waning interest in Chichewa. From the discussion, it can be concluded that Banda's policy of elevating Chichewa to the status of national language was a very sound one and the language would have attained greater heights had his personal agenda not interfered. It is this personal agenda that led to resentment in some quarters. However, it is perhaps unwarranted for the new government to change Dr. Banda's linguistic legacy simply for the sake of change as it is doing now. In so doing it is risking throwing away the baby with the bath water.