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Rethinking Hastings Kamuzu Banda's 'Discriminatory' Practices against the People of Northern Malawi

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Abstract

This article challenges existing scholarship that portrays Malawi's first leader, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, as responsible for the alienation of the people of Northern Malawi. It argues that Banda's policy choices were pursued to enhance national unity by eradicating ethnic and regional disparities in public spaces. Situated within a historical study design, this article approached qualitatively, using both primary and secondary data to support this perspective. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions, archival research, and desk research. Evidence suggests that events such as language policy changes in 1968, changes in the education sector in 1969, 1987, and 1989, and the transfer of government seat from Zomba to Lilongwe in 1975 have been analytically inconsequential in justifying Banda's perceived 'discriminatory' practices against the people of Northern Malawi. Nevertheless, the portrayal of Banda as having been discriminatory affected relations among the people of Malawi's three regions, since his policy choices and actions were said to be motivated by his desire to uplift his Chewa ethnic identity.

Keywords: People, Northern Malawi, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, ethnicity, ethnic favouritism, state discrimination

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Introduction

This article challenges existing scholarship that portrays Malawi's first leader, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, as being responsible for the alienation of the people of northern Malawi from broader Malawian society (Mkandawire, 2010; Chirwa, 1998; Vail and White, 1989). It argues that Banda's policy choices and actions were driven by his quest to enhance national unity by eradicating ethnic and regional disparities in public spaces which had been dominated by the people of northern Malawi at the time. However, the flagging of Banda's 'discriminatory' practices appears to hold ground because, at independence in 1964, no signs of politically motivated ethnic or regional stratification manifested in Malawi (Virmani, 1992). According to Chipembere (1976: 80), the "nation was one vast extended family, [in which] unity and goodwill prevailed among [the] people." In fact, Banda was only preoccupied with ensuring that the people, regardless of ethnic affiliations and loyalties, cultivated a spirit of hard work as a prerequisite for prosperity in the soon-to-be independent Malawian nation (Chipembere, 1976).

Soon after independence, Banda became increasingly autocratic, enabling him to consolidate enormous political power (Rotberg, 2023). To sustain his whims, Banda is said to have appealed to his Chewa ethnic kin for political support (Vail and White, 1989). This approach is consistent with quid pro quo logic, which suggests that the leaders' desire to garner broader political support compels them to look to their fellow ethnic group members and provide them with material benefits (Franck and Rainer, 2012). However, Banda's turn to his Chewa ethnic kin is said to have been achieved at the expense of the people of Northern Malawi, whose superiority in education and professional spheres during both the colonial era and this immediate post-independence period surpassed those of the people of Central and Southern Malawi (Mkandawire, 2010; Kaspin, 1997; Chirwa, 1998; Vail and White, 1989). Events such as the language policy change in 1968; changes in the education sector in 1969, 1987, and 1989; and the transfer of the government seat in 1975 from Zomba in Southern Malawi to Lilongwe in the central region (his home/Chewa-dominated region) include some of Banda's policy actions, which have been interpreted as constituting tactics for safeguarding his Chewa interests at the expense of the people of Northern Malawi. This article uses both primary and secondary data obtained through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), archival research, conversations from Northern Political Bloc (NPB) and Voice of the North (VON) WhatsApp platforms, and desk research to dispel this perspective and demonstrate that Banda pursued these policy choices as a means of enhancing national unity.

The article begins by defining the people of northern Malawi to locate their socio-cultural and political significance in the political history of Malawi. Thereafter, this article presents a theoretical exploration of state discrimination. This is followed by a discussion of Banda's aforementioned policy choices as embodiments of his perceived discriminatory practices against the people of northern Malawi. Before concluding, the chapter justifies Banda's pursuit of these policy choices as a means of enhancing national unity by eradicating ethnic and regional disparities in public spaces, as opposed to perceptions of ethnic favouritism.

The social-cultural and political position of the people of Northern Malawi

The confinement of the people of Northern Malawi into one ethnic and regional basket requires befitting historiographical consideration. This is because Northern Malawi, as one of Malawi's three administrative regions, is home to multiple ethnic groups. Specifically, Tew (1950) indicates the existence of over 18 ethnic groups in this region compared to only three and seven ethnic groups in Central and Southern Malawi, respectively. Critically, such a composition of multiple ethnic groups in Northern Malawi has not been without political repercussions. Just as Easterly and Levine (1997) indicate that ethnically diverse societies are prone to internal strife, Northern Malawi experienced political and cultural rivalries among its ethnic groups prior to colonial occupation,.

The hallmark of instabilities in Northern Malawi ought to be traced to the Ngoni invasion of Tumbuka, Henga, and Tonga ethnic groups around 1855 (Vail and White, 1989). This resulted in deaths, experiences of cultural alterations, and displacement to places by these ethnic groups (McCracken, 1977). For instance, Tumbuka, who had been placed in Ngoni captivity, experienced a loss of their cultural values (Vail and White, 1989). This manifested through a severance of their allegiance to the Chikang'ombe deity; they underwent Ngoni baptism defined by the perforation of earlobes, and they embraced the patrilineal system of descent and inheritance away from the matrilineal system (McCracken, 1972). The Tonga, had to get the help of missionaries to ward off frequent raids by the Ngoni (McCracken, 1977). Tumbuka-speaking Henga escaped northward and settled among the Ngonde (Vail and White, 1989). However, autochthones resented and derided them as slaves and agents of Swahili slave traders (Vail and White, 1989). They also resisted Henga's growing influence by rejecting Chitumbuka, which the Scottish Missionaries had elected to use for instruction in schools and prayer in churches because of its use mostly among the Henga who had embraced missionary education (Vail and White, 1989). Instead, they

showed a preference for Chinyanja, which is widely spoken in Central and Southern Malawi (McCracken, 2012). Geschiere (2009: 4) aptly underscores the exclusionary impact of such attitudes by the autochthones, demonstrating that they have resulted into the "exclusion of strangers" in Ivory Coast, Congo, Cameroon, and Senegal.

Thus, the attribution of a unified ethnic and regional identity to the people of Northern Malawi is a challenging endeavour. In reality, however, an encompassing ethnic identity as 'Tumbuka' and a regional identity as 'Northerners' exist among the people of Northern Malawi. Arguably, such a unified ethnic and regional identity exists within Benedict Anderson's (1983) Imagined Community thesis, which suggests, that although not everybody knows the other in the region, an image of their communion reigns supreme in their minds. This is reflected in practice by the people of northern Malawi's reference to each other as wakwithu,[1] outside their northern regional geographical and cultural boundaries. They also acknowledge and embrace the ascription of Tumbuka ethnic identity, regardless of their original ethnic affiliation. This was apparent when a research participant of Ngonde ethnic descent stated that "*ise ni baTumbuka imwe muli baChewa*" (We are Tumbuka and you are Chewa) (Grace Mwanjabe, FGD, Karonga, July 27, 2023). This statement was made to emphasise the cultural dichotomisation between Northern Malawi as inhabiting the Tumbuka and Central and Southern Malawi as a distinct home for the Chewa. Hence, despite being of Ngonde ethnic descent, this study participant identified herself as Tumbuka and attributed the Chewa ethnic identity to the researcher because of his Southern Malawian background.

An important force behind the emergence of the 'Tumbuka' ethnic and 'Northerner' regional identities included the work of the Scottish Missionaries in northern Malawi, which produced a Christian elite, consisting of teachers and catechists (Vail and White, 1989). As McCracken (1977:215) observes, this helped to create "an environment where new ideas could be successfully disseminated and new leaders could emerge." Through extensive educational opportunities created by the Mission, culture brokers emerged and helped promulgate the use of the Chitumbuka language. Importantly, Chitumbuka gained the status of the region's *Lingua Franca,* but since 1947, it existed alongside Chinyanja as colonial Malawi's two national languages (Vail and White, 1989). Again, through extensive educational opportunities in Northern Malawi,

[1] *Wakwithu* colloquially implies a 'homie." It is an expression commonly used by people from northern Malawi in their social interactions outside their regional and cultural boundaries. Its invocation is intended to inspire solidarity as a necessary weapon for moral support as well as to collectively confront any forms of adversity that those concerned may be subjected to in the 'land of the stranger.'

the majority of the people were able to enter the colonial civil service as clerks and teachers (Vail and White, 1989), while others seized employment opportunities in the gradually but steadily industrialising southern Malawi (McCracken, 1977). McCracken (2012) reveals that the ability to seize employment opportunities constituted the only meaningful economic activity among the people of Northern Malawi. As such, it induced significant labour migration trends among them, mostly to Southern Malawi and other countries within the southern African region (McCracken, 2012). These trends persisted for some time, including during the immediate post-independence period, and resulted in the dominance of public workspaces by the people of northern Malawi. Vail and White (1989: 182) emphasise this point by demonstrating that in 1969, "out of 113 highest level Malawian civil servants, the northern region, with but 12% of the population held over 50% of the places."

State discrimination: A theoretical survey

The portrayal of Banda as discriminatory should be situated within the theoretical debate on state discrimination. According to Fiske (1998), discrimination is a form of behaviour, procedure, or policy that directly or indirectly disadvantages members of certain categories compared with others, simply because they happen to be members of that category. From this understanding, state discrimination can be understood as follows:

> Practice for the state…to refuse, withhold from, or deny to a person any local, state, or federal funds, services, goods, facilities, advantages, or privileges because of race, creed, religion, sex, marital status, colour, age, physical or mental disability, or national origin, unless based on reasonable grounds (Montana Legislature, 49-2-38, 2023).

Alcorta et al., (2020) recognised the existence of this phenomenon in multiethnic societies. Importantly, they have been able to make theoretical differentiations regarding the forms of politically discriminated groups of people within the state. They identify two groups as (i) those who experience political discrimination in the hands of the state, and (ii) those without political power that are not explicitly discriminated against by the state. This dichotomy entails who those that experience political discrimination in the hands of the state are more likely to experience grievances that heighten the likelihood of a conflict. The apparently discriminatory practices of Hastings Banda towards the people of northern Malawi thus carried the possibility of such conflictual repercussions. This is because "groups that face active, intentional, and targeted discrimination by the state are significantly more likely" to raise more grievances "than excluded groups who do not face this explicit form of discrimination" (Alcorta et

al., 2020: 251). Gurr added that while economic and political disparities among different groups can give rise to collective grievances, more profound grievances will only occur if the marginalised group has been subjected to intense discrimination.

However, it is important to acknowledge that, to a considerable extent, state discrimination occurs against the backdrop of ethnic favouritism practices by those in power. According to Burgess et al., (2015), ethnic favouritism entails a situation in which members of the same ethnic group benefit from patronage and public policy decisions and receive a disproportionate share of public resources when members of their ethnic group control the government. However, Li (2018) appears to caution against the tendency to make wholesale consumption of such an understanding of ethnic favouritism. In agreement with Li's perspective, it is useful to understand ethnic favouritism within a multidimensional context underlined by the three questions. First, does ethnic favouritism primarily benefit the sitting president's fellow ethnic group members? Second, does it disregard those without ethnic commonalities with the president? Third, does it only benefit those without ethnic commonality with the president when they reside in areas where the majority are the president's fellow ethnic group members?

McGrath (2020) validated the pertinence of these three questions by underscoring the role of ethnic favouritism as the primary foundation of political competition. This is suitably extrapolated by Bates (1983:152) in his argument that "ethnic groups represent, in essence, coalitions which have been formed as part of rational efforts to secure benefits created by the forces of modernisation, benefits which are desired but scarce. Thus, this viewpoint privileges the instrumentalist regard of ethnicity which tends to view ethnic groups as political coalitions formed to extract material benefits from others (Fearon, 1999).

A growing body of literature points to a prevailing tendency among political leaders in power to enact policies that tend to benefit their fellow ethnic group members (Li, 2018; Ejdemyr et al., 2018; Burgess et al., 2015; Franck and Rainer, 2012; Oucho, 2002; Hodler and Raschky, 2014). This tendency becomes responsible for the feeling of being at the receiving end of discrimination among those without ethnic commonality with their leaders. Ilorah (2009) summarises this phenomenon by suggesting that the behaviour of leaders in such societies inclines toward in-group solidarity, which benefits fellow ethnic group members and marginalises those outside this socio-cultural identity circle. Mamdani (1996) and Herbst (2000) concur with this perspective and consider it the cause of socioeconomic deprivation in many polities on the African continent.

However, it is not always the case that leaders would be bound to favour fellow ethnic group members. This has been suitably exemplified by Kasara (2007), who observed that in the 50 countries she studied, cash crop farmers who were ethnically identified with the sitting president faced higher taxes relative to those with no ethnic commonality. Similarly, a study by Kudamatsu (2009) in Guinea revealed that a change in the ethnicity of presidents did not affect the relative levels of infant mortality among the country's ethnic groups.

Nevertheless, a significant body of literature has demonstrated the extensiveness of the ethnic favouritism phenomenon on the African continent. Franck and Rainer (2012) found that ethnic favouritism is detrimental to primary education outcomes and infant mortality rates in sub-Saharan Africa. Specifically, those who do not ethnically identify with leaders appear to be negatively affected. Kramon and Posner (2016) used Kenya as an example of such a correlation. They observed that sharing the same ethnicity as the president during one's school-age years often translated into higher levels of educational attainment. Another Kenyan example of road infrastructure by Burgess et al., (2015) revealed that districts that share the ethnicity of the president receive twice as much expenditure on roads and have five times the length of paved roads built. Ahlerup and Isaksson (2015) aggregated data from Afrobarometer surveys conducted in 2005 and 2006 to demonstrate that individuals belonging to the president's ethnic group, as well as those residing in the president's region of origin, have a lower likelihood of experiencing unfair treatment from the government. Amodio and Chiovelli (2016) found that individuals from the Zulu ethnic group in South Africa are more likely to secure employment in the agricultural sector and in municipalities where the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) holds the majority vote. Similarly, Walters et al., (2023) observed a correlation between ethnic favouritism and the provision of water and electricity infrastructure in South Africa. Separate studies by Hodler and Raschky (2014) and De Luca et al. (2018) reveal that the birth regions of incumbent political leaders experience higher levels of nighttime light density compared to regions not associated with current political leadership in a panel of countries. Dreher, et al., (2019) also found that the birth regions of leaders in power receive substantially more funding from China than other subnational regions.

One important explanation for ethnic favouritism is the leaders' quest for power, which they can only sufficiently obtain if they provide co-ethnics with public or private goods (Bandyopadhyay and Green, 2023). The desire here is to safeguard the interests of a significant electorate, which often succeeds because voters tend to hold strong preferences for candidates and parties associated with

their ethnic communities (Dionne and Horowitz, 2016). The construction, deconstruction, and creation of ethnicity by political actors in Kenya as a way of obtaining electoral support from fellow ethnic group members, in view of access to state resources, is one case in point (Lynch, 2006). Similarly, the pursuit of tribal hegemony by Zimbabwe's political actors has been critical in nurturing and prolonging the country's political and/or electoral culture (Gumbo, 2020). Furthermore, local tribal identities in Zambia have been pivotal in forming an axis of political coalition building and electoral competition (Posner, 1998). Anthony (2002) shows how tribal politics have been central in shaping electoral processes in Uganda. This Ugandan experience was validated in 2021 by an ethnically fragmented electoral map of opposition candidate, Robert Kyagulanyi, and President Yoweri Museveni (Taylor and Matsiko, 2021).

The appeal of ethnicity itself also forms a significant push for practice among leaders. In other words, it is easier to provide materials to ethnic kin than to other forms of groups such as class, religion, gender, occupation, party platform, or single-issue interest groups (Banton, 2008). The 'pork' analogy by Fearon (1999) also underlines ethnicity's appeal to leaders. Thus, ethnicity would limit the numerical value of those who would be able to share pork, a phenomenon that could be different if the criterion used was, for instance, party affiliation. Arguably, these factors have been critical in supporting the scholarship, which has considered Hastings Banda to have been significantly inclined toward his fellow Chewa ethnic group members at the expense of the people of Northern Malawi. The following section focuses on Banda's policy choices, which underpin the perception of his discriminatory practices against the people of northern Malawi.

Language policy change

As alluded to, Chitumbuka was, alongside Chinyanja, Malawi's national language at independence (Kishindo, 1997). Arguably, the elevation of Chitumbuka to national language status in 1947 (Vail and White, 1989) solidified the position of the people of Northern Malawi and sustained their political and cultural relevance at the national stage. However, this position changed in 1968, when Chichewa acquired national and official language status alongside English (Kishindo, 1997). This entailed the official release of Chinyanja and Chitumbuka on the national ladder. Accordingly, a new language policy came to life through the following resolution:

Malawi [to adopt] Chinyanja as a national language; that the name Chinyanja …henceforth be known as Chichewa; [and that] Chichewa and English [be made] 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 (The Malawi Congress Party, 1985: 6).

The stated rationale for this language policy shift was Banda's desire to promote "national unity" (The Malawi Congress Party Resolution, 1985: 6). Nonetheless, scholarly interpretation of this move has often pointed to Banda's determination to annihilate the socio-cultural and political relevance of the people of Northern Malawi through the release of Chitumbuka (Vail and White, 1989). Specifically, Mkandawire (2010: 23) regarded the shift as a form of "cultural violence" perpetrated by Banda on the people of Northern Malawi. Kishindo (1997) appears to sympathise with scholars holding this view when he highlights the contradictions in Banda's language policy. Mkandawire (2010: 26) underlines this contradiction by arguing that any genuine desire to nationalise Chichewa should have entailed pushing it into "key areas such as parliament and education just like Swahili in Tanzania" and that Banda should have himself used Chichewa in his public addresses rather than needing the services of interpreters for his usually English speeches.

However, these concerns need not detract from the argument that Banda's elevation of Chichewa at the direct expense of Chinyanja and Chitumbuka was intended to advance his agenda for national unity. Indeed, this goal could not have been achieved if Chitumbuka were to be maintained on the national language ladder. In other words, maintaining Chitumbuka could have implied the consolidation of the political and cultural importance of a specific ethnic entity over other ethnic groups in the country. Consequently, this could have resulted in other ethnic groups also pushing for the recognition of their languages at the national scale, hence adopting many national languages.

However, this does not to suggest that a country has multiple national and/or official languages. South Africa in the post-apartheid era, with 11 official languages, is a useful case (Tshotsho, 2013). Nevertheless, Louw (1992) strongly contends that this phenomenon represents a legacy of the divide-and-rule policies of the apartheid regime, a model that clashed with Banda's aspirations for national unity through the adoption of one national language. Thus, Banda effectively corrected this divisive colonial policy, which was also pursued in colonial Malawi on the basis that the "spread of one dialect through the country would … tend to merge the various tribes at greater rate, [which is] undesirable... [and] individualism of the various tribes [would] safeguard against any combined rising" (Vail and White, 1989: 164).

Four explanations help show that Chichewa was not elevated simply out of Banda's mere discontent with the people of Northern Malawi. First, Chichewa was widely spoken in the highly populous central and southern

regions of Malawi (Vail and White, 1989). In the same vein, Chinyanja possesses a significant lexical resemblance to Chichewa, thereby making its grasp easy among Chinyanja speakers. Chitumbuka, it was mainly confined to Northern Malawi, indicating that fewer Malawians were able to use it. This point is validated by the realisation that even within the Northern Malawian region itself, not everyone spoke (speaks) it. One member of the region asserted this in the following way:

Why do you force us to use Chitumbuka in this group? Do you know that our friends from Chitipa and other districts in the region cannot speak about Chitumbuka? Even myself, I am Tonga. I struggle to speak about Chitumbuka. I am more comfortable using Chichewa than Chitumbuka (Allan Mphande, personal communication through VON WhatsApp Forum, October 23, 2023).

This statement offers a clear testimony that Chitumbuka is not easily grasped by every member of the northern region of Malawi. Second, Chitumbuka maintained its *Lingua Franca* status in Northern Malawi. Evidently, both the Livingstonia Synod of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian, and the Mzuzu Diocese of the Catholic Church in Northern Malawi continued to use Chitumbuka in their pastoral work (Kamwendo, 2005). Third, Chitumbuka was still being used in official public spaces. Chitumbuka literature through *Nyimbo za mmaboma* continued to feature on the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (Kamwendo, 200). Fourth, Banda, permitted Chitumbuka's use during official engagements in Northern Malawi. By allowing other speakers before him to speak in Chitumbuka and allowing the interpretation of his English speeches in Chitumbuka, he himself showed proficiency in Chitumbuka (Banda, August 25, 1972). The latter point was particularly evidenced by his diversion from English to emphasise a point, which he believed could be better grasped by his audience if he employed a Chitumbuka word or phrase (Banda, November 16, 1975). He also occasionally corrected any inaccurate interpretation of his English statements, providing the interpreter with appropriate Chitumbuka phrasing (Banda, August 25, 1972).

It is important to emphasise that Hastings Banda's skills in Chitumbuka resulted from him having Tumbuka traits. He emphasised this point when he argued that:

Chitumbuka is not my language; I am a Chewa. However, in Kasungu (his home district), we are bilingual. Many people … speak both Chichewa and Chitumbuka, and I happen to be one of those because my grandfather spoke very little about Chichewa. He was a Tumbuka more than a Chewa by language. Therefore, I learned about Chitumbuka as a child. That being the case then, at least I know village Chitumbuka, not chiMishon…. Reverend Chinula used

to say that I knew Chitumbuka and that I pronounced Chitumbuka much better than many of the people… because they are using the missionary pronunciation of Chitumbuka and not true Tumbuka (Banda, November 16, 1975).

These sentiments reveal the fundamental cultural reality of the Banda. Specifically, they point to his sense of cultural inclusivity with regard to the people of Northern Malawi who spoke (speak) Chitumbuka. Indeed, Banda's ability to pronounce Chitumbuka perfectly suggested a deep immersion in Tumbuka culture, and his critique of the missionary version of Chitumbuka indicated his concern for maintaining linguistic purity and resisting external influences that may have altered the traditional Chitumbuka. Thus, Banda showed a strong sense of linguistic identity and commitment to preserving the traditional form of Chitumbuka. Given this, therefore, claims that Banda relegated Chitumbuka out of mere discontent with the people of northern Malawi, requiring careful re-examination.

Changes within the education sector

In the following years, the people of Northern Malawi became "over-represented in important positions" in public service due to the many educational opportunities they acquired during the colonial days (Vail and White, 1989: 182). Macdonald (1969:542) indicates that, "over two-thirds of the students accepted for the initial intake at Blantyre Secondary School in 1940 were from the far north." Similarly, the composition of the first class pursuing a degree course at the newly established University of Malawi in 1965-1969 was dominated by students from northern Malawi (McDonald, 1969). According to Vail and White (1989), Banda was poised to curtail this dominance by the people of Northern Malawi in the education system to spread education opportunities across Malawi. Consequently, the education sector experienced significant shakes from the late 1960s to the late 1980s.

However, suggesting that Banda shook the education sector on the mere basis that it was dominated by the people of Northern Malawi may be factually misleading. It is important to emphasise that Banda was more inclined to meritocracy than to ethnic affiliations. He stressed this through his belief in "giving jobs or posts to the people who are best suited for those posts" (Banda, November 2, 1977). This was verbally corroborated by Banda's former cabinet minister, who recalled that "three permanent secretaries in the various ministries [he] I held were from the North. If Banda was biased against the people of Northern Malawi, these professionals could not have been in these ministries" (Former Cabinet Minister, personal communication, July 2, 2024). Hence, it is important to locate Banda's actions within his desire to counter tribalistic and nepotistic tendencies in the education sector,

which he argued was perpetrated by officials of Northern Malawian origin. In 1989, Banda was blatant about this reality when he warned the people of Northern Malawi "not to monopolise" public spaces because people from other regions were equally deserving (Boma Lathu, 1989).

In this regard, Banda institutionalised the quota system in 1969 and 1987, arguably achieving regional parity with regard to enrolment in public schools (Vail and White, 1989). However, Carver (1994) interpreted this move as only constituting a tactic to victimise the people of Northern Malawi. Galafa (2019) emphasises this perception by arguing that the people of Northern Malawi were denied their meritocratic right to attain education, benefiting from their 'natural' intelligence and enormous interest in education as a result of colonial legacy.

Nevertheless, prevailing evidence supports Banda's pursuit of policy actions in the education sector as a way of countering ethnic favouritism practices by officials from Northern Malawi. One historian illuminated this point:

Kanyama Chiume in 1964 as a cabinet minister of education seized this opportunity to promote his *wakwithu* syndrome. He did this by offering every scholarship at his disposal to his kinsmen to study abroad. He did not stop there, and he ensured that most students selected secondary schools from the north. This meant that many university spaces would also go to children from the north. He did this tactfully by devising a system whereby children in the central and southern regions would use black pens while the northerners would use blue pens during exams. This made it easy for the markers to separate sheep from goats. This became the genesis of most northerners dominating the academic sector, including many institutions (Historian, personal communication, in-depth interviews, Blantyre, April 26, 2023).

It was in this context that in 1989, Banda issued a directive that teachers were to teach in their regions of origin (Staff Reporter, 1989). This directive followed Banda's belief that teachers from the North taught "to the best of their ability" only when in their own region and failed to replicate their efforts when serving in Central and Southern Malawi (Staff Reporter, 1989). The sincerity of Banda's directive was arguably underpinned by three factors. First, the realisation that if teachers from Northern Malawi taught well in the Central and Southern regions, and given their numerical significance in these regions, there should have been a considerably competitive performance across the three regions. This should have yielded parity in the number of children selected from public secondary schools and the universities. Second, Banda appeared to have made the move without regard for its counter-productive effect. Specifically, Moyo (1992)

revealed that the move resulted in the Northern region benefitting more. According to him, the North enjoyed the 50:1 pupil-teacher ratio at the primary school level, which was in contrast to the 76:1 pupil teacher ratio in the Southern region. Third, the reassignment of teachers has resulted in a lowering of education quality in the country (Moyo, 1992). This is because the resources spent to effect the transfers could have been used to provide additional teaching/learning materials which would directly boost student achievement (Moyo, 1992). Hence, if Banda had indeed executed this move out of ill-intention against the people of Northern Malawi, he could have abandoned it after considering the devastating impacts of the move in the Central and Southern regions.

Transfer of the government seat

In 1975, Malawi's government seat was relocated from Zomba in Southern Malawi to Lilongwe in the Central region. Several factors necessitated this change. One included the fact that Zomba was deemed too small to accommodate further expansions and retained remnants of colonialism (Potts, 1985). Accordingly, it is possible to argue that Banda might have aimed to promote a sense of national unity by developing a new capital that symbolised a fresh start for the newly independent nation, rather than continuing to use Zomba, which was associated with colonial administration. Furthermore, the lack of sufficient land in Southern Malawi and the surrounding districts, which had been leased by white settlers (Vail and White, 1989), might have also helped strengthen Banda's urge to look to Lilongwe to establish the capital there. In Banda's own words, Lilongwe's suitability as capital was underlined by its central geographical location (Banda, January 29, 1968). This entailed the provision of equidistance to those from the furthest points in Northern and Southern Malawi. Importantly, the relocation of the government city was recommended by an expatriate physical planning expert, who stated that the relocation would promote economic development and serve as the central region's centre of growth (Banda, January 29, 1968).

However, extant scholarship has regarded Banda's decision to move the capital as a signification of practices of ethnic favouritism (Connell, 1972; Vail and White, 1989). In particular, Banda's situation of the government seat in Lilongwe was believed to constitute the means of serving the interests of his Chewa ethnic kins, whose concentration is in Lilongwe and most part of Central Malawi. This scholarly regard resonates with similar views that have often associated African leaders with channelling development programmes to their home regions (Hodler and Raschky, 2014). Ahlerup and Isaksson (2014) show how Ivory Coast's Félix Houphouët-Boigny transformed his previously rural

birthplace, Yamoussoukro, into a national capital with mesmerising features such as an artificial lake populated with crocodiles, a six-lane highway, a five-star hotel, a large airport, and, arguably, the largest church in the world. Similarly, Meredith (2006) writes about Mobutu Sese Seko of formerly Zaire, who turned his small village of Gbadolite into a luxurious city often nicknamed 'Versailles of the jungle'.

In the case of Hastings Banda, however, assertions of ethnic favouritism regarding this move provoke significant analytical interest. Connell (1972) suggests that the choice of Lilongwe was necessitated by its closeness to Kasungu, his birthplace, and generally because of the prevalence of the Chewa in Central Malawi. This viewpoint is supported by Kaspin (1997), who argues that Banda's development policies were biased towards his home region. Chirwa (1998) emphasises this point by suggesting that Banda's desire was to change the face of the region in terms of economic development because colonialists and Christian missionaries had neglected it the most educationally and socially. Hence, Banda was poised to ensure that the region became the focus of national development by allocating a substantial amount of financial and technical support at the expense of northern Malawi which remained socioeconomically stagnant (Chirwa, 1998).

However, evidence suggests that the decision to shift the capital was hatched during Banda's days in Gwero prison in Zimbabwe before independence. Chipembere (1976) argued that no signs of ethnic favouritism existed in pre-independence Malawi. But again, McCracken (2012) has even suggested that the idea to move the capital was initially proposed by Dunduzu Chisiza from Northern Malawi, who was a planner by profession and a powerful righthand man of Banda at the time. It is also important to acknowledge that if Banda had so wished, given his immense political power underpinned by dictatorial tendencies (Rotberg, 2023), he could have easily established the capital in his home district of Kasungu, which is close to Lilongwe and has nearly similar topographical features similar to those of Lilongwe. Crucially, Kaspin's (1997) use as evidence of the overwhelming electoral support Banda received from his ethnic and regional kin in the 1994 general elections as proof that he was indeed bent towards Central Malawi is empirically troubling. This is because, in the same elections, Bakili Muluzi won the majority of his native Southern region votes and Chakufwa Chihana triumphed in his home region, Northern Malawi (Englund, 2002).

Crucially, it is apparent that Banda's own explanations for the relocation of the capital have not been sufficiently dissected. In other words, there have not been enough historical or other accounts to discredit the implausibility

of Banda's explanations on scientific grounds. In the same vein, Vail and White's (1989) work fails to recognise the value of other literature to achieve a balanced interpretation of Banda's policy decision on this matter. For example, an earlier work by Debora Potts (1985) on this issue adequately synthesises factors that were at play at the time. Therefore, making use of such work could have helped to offer Vail and White balanced perspectives regarding the issue. Similarly, Kayira and Banda (2022) fall into a methodological inconsistency, as evidenced by their attribution of views by Connell to Potts. A quotation from the work is helpful in illustrating this point: "Deborah Potts has argued that Banda might have [moved the capital because] Lilongwe is near Kasungu district, Banda's birthplace" (Kayira and Banda, 2022: 288). This contrasts with Pott's acknowledgement in her work that this was not her own view. Again, a quotation from Potts' work is helpful in demonstrating this point:

Connell, for instance, has speculated upon whether Lilongwe was chosen partly as the result of regional or ethnic loyalty, as it located near Kasungu where Banda was born, and it is also near the core area of ethnic group, the Chewa" (Potts, 1985: 188)."

Therefore, it is possible to argue that this methodological error by Kayira and Banda was deliberately overlooked since it suitably served in spinning the narrative regarding Banda's ethnic favouritism towards his ethnic kin in central Malawi.

However, it is important to emphasise that the determination of a capital city's location is a multifaceted decision that is influenced by a combination of historical, geographical benefits, political tactics, economic goals, and strategic factors. The positioning of each capital city mirrors the distinctive context and priorities of its respective nation when the decision was made (Mayer et al., 2016). The relocation of capital forms a part of a complex political decision-making process. This involves a wide range of strategic, economic, logistical, and administrative considerations. Diverse stakeholders, such as economic planners, urban developers, and international advisors, also need to converge to share their technical expertise (Former Cabinet Minister, personal communication, in-depth interviews, Lilongwe, July 2, 2024). Accordingly, a comprehensive understanding of such decisions requires a critical evaluation of historical records, planning documents, and government archives from the relevant period. These valuable sources become useful in unveiling the motivations and actors involved. Banda's own explanations for relocating the seat of government from Zomba to Lilongwe, including other pieces of evidence are not far from this reality.

Banda's pursuit of ethnic and regional parity in the public spaces

The three issues discussed above have been less incentivised by Banda's ethnic favouritism practices at the expense of the people of Northern Malawi. Thus, the regard that Banda made these policy choices for the sake of national unity by eradicating ethnic and regional disparities. To a considerable extent, Banda pursued these policy choices to ward off the tribalistic and nepotistic tendencies prevalent among the people of Northern Malawi. Empirical evidence supports Banda's move in this regard. For instance, once research participants in Southern Malawi's Machinga district considered the people of Northern Malawi as "self-centered and they tend to numerically dominate in work places" (Josephine, personal communication, FGD, Machinga, June 11, 2023). This was corroborated by a research participant in Lilongwe, who stated that "even when we meet with these people at Kamuzu Central (Referral) Hospital as guardians, they cannot mingle with us. They congregate with each other. They look down upon us" (Elizabeth Thawe, personal communication, FDG, Lilongwe, June 26, 2023). Interestingly, some people in Northern Malawi also acknowledge the prevalence of tribalistic and nepotistic tendencies among themselves. This was apparent when one of them accused his co-ethnicity:

> Putting a more tribal approach to issues than development. The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest. I am a northerner, a pure northerner. However, I am able to see some things that this is not right. I have publicly accused my tribe. Some of the people from the Central Region and Southern Region [ask me:] are you from the North? I say yes, [I am] a pure northerner. Our attitude [as northerners] was bad. This destroys the country. Because we feel that we are the only favoured ones, no no no! (Nyirenda, in-depth interview, 1 June 2023).

These sentiments underscore the prevalence of tribalistic and nepotistic tendencies among people in Northern Malawi. Of course, it is possible to argue that the sentiments originating from the people of Central and Southern Malawi may have been influenced by the glaring north-south cultural divide of Malawi. Posner (2004) offers a useful hint regarding this cultural divide when he unravels the basis of cultural and political incongruity between the Tumbuka of Northern Malawi and the Chewa of Central Malawi. Importantly, the acknowledgement of tribalistic and nepotistic attitudes among fellow northern regional group members validates the basis upon which Banda sought to enhance national unity by removing ethnic and regional disparities in public spaces, and enhancing ethnic and regional parity in public spaces. Indeed, the acknowledgement of

tribalistic and nepotistic tendencies from the horse's mouth is more valuable and binding than hearsay. Payne (2008:13-15) considers such type of acknowledgement as self-confessions, which sustain their value by the fact that they "are more than mere political talk: they not only say something, they do something. They interpret [and shape] the meaning of an event.

Therefore, while the aspect of meritocracy, owing to the people of Northern Malawi's better educational achievements, played a crucial role in their acquisition of employment opportunities in large numbers, their dominance in public spaces was arguably increased by their tribalistic and nepotistic tendencies. In other words, their strong cultural and regional identity, coupled with the reality that labour migration was their only reasonable economic activity (McCracken, 2010), served to fence out people of other ethnic identities from labour opportunities. This tendency thus resulted in an ethnic imbalance in the labour market, which only colonial authorities at the time could have corrected. However, as Leys (1975:199) demonstrates, the failure of the colonial regime to do so was not necessarily due to its regard for meritocracy. Rather, it was their tendency to foster "tribalism … by discriminating in favour of some tribes and against others, especially in their own recruitment policies." This strategic reluctance by the missionaries and colonial authorities to alter the status quo privileged the people of Northern Malawi and, arguably, encouraged tribalistic and nepotistic tendencies among them. This was acknowledged by one of the people of Northern Malawi that:

All positions in Malawi belonged to people from northern Malawi. And when recruiting, they went for the qualified, who turned out to be people from the north. This is why [and how] we practice nepotism: I am in Blantyre [in southern Malawi]. I am educated. A coethnic from the north is seeking employment. And he or she is qualified too. I am the employer. I cannot employ anyone else more than my fellow northerner. Mind you, it is *ku mmwera* (in southern Malawi) where people get employed. So a lady like this one, goes to look for employment in southern Malawi, you see, we northerners are united. I will say, oh, you have come here for work. I work at a such and such company; we will be recruiting on a such and such date. I will automatically recruit her. I cannot sideline her because she has come from very far. It is better I sideline you a southerner because you live within the same region, you can even foot to your home place. Yet the northerner cannot foot from his or her home to southern Malawi).[2]

This sentiment reveals a complex interplay of critical elements, such as regional favouritism, ethnic loyalty, and the practicalities of job-seeking and acquisition. Clearly, this underscores the regional dominance

[2] Baxter Mwangonde, FGD, Karonga, July 27, 2023.

in employment spaces by the people of Northern Malawi, who were more educated at the time than their counterparts in other regions. Importantly, it reveals the reality regarding the prevalence of clear bias among the people of Northern Malawi with regard to recruitment, which was bent towards assisting fellow members of the Northern Malawian region. This underlines the aspect of favouritism and nepotism in job recruitment, a phenomenon that was enhanced by the realities of geographical and cultural unity. In the construal of the people of Northern Malawi, this regional bias was justified as a form of solidarity and support for each other owing to rich historical background of constructed unity (Vail and White, 1989).

It is important to emphasise that, contrary to Banda's portrayal as being discriminatory against the people of Northern Malawi, not everyone from this region toed that line of thinking. This article reveals that others from this region hailed Banda's distributive politics. This became apparent in the following acknowledgement: "President Kamuzu Banda was like our biological father. If we told him we experienced famine, he would give us white maize flour. He fed us without regard for regional or district identity" (Catherine Mwandenga, personal communication, FGD, Karonga, July 27, 2023). This demonstrates the contrasting portrayal of Banda between ordinary masses and prevailing scholarship. This realisation is helpful in exposing the absence of merit, particularly by the academic literature on Banda's perceived discriminatory practices against the people of Northern Malawi.

Conclusion

This study challenged the portrayal of Banda as having practiced discrimination against the people of northern Malawi. It concludes that Banda's policies, often perceived as discriminatory, were aimed at balancing representation and opportunities in public spaces, which were dominated by the people of Northern Malawi. This suggests that Banda's actions were driven by the desire for equity rather than bias. Hence, this article underscores the need to adequately understand the historical and socio-political context in which Banda's policies were formulated and implemented. Doing so could be helpful in highlighting the complexities and nuances of his leadership and decision-making process. Indeed, while Banda's policies aimed at enhancing parity, the prevailing academic literature has clearly highlighted how they have been adversely interpreted. Therefore, this article has been valuable in contributing to the ongoing debate on what constitutes state discrimination and how to distinguish it from efforts to achieve equity.

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