

Chingalire Women's Travelling Theatre: Touring with Trousers

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This paper is an initial investigation into the establishment of the Chingalire Women's Travelling Theatre (CWTT) in Malawi, and its impact on the group and their local community. The paper touches on issues of gender inequality in Malawi by showing how the theatre company challenges the commonly accepted cultural and gender hegemonies through theatre performance. Malawi has an ancient drumming, ritual and dance culture. Since colonial times drama has joined the ranks of performative expression of both the urban and rural populations. Historically the expatriate community or, post-independence, the male population and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have largely dominated drama. Inspired by hearing the voices of women in drama on the radio, ten mothers formed the Chingalire Women's Travelling Theatre in July 2016. The purpose of the company is to travel through rural areas of Malawi using theatre to explore issues such as gender-based violence, the environment and the importance of education to the rural community; discussions with those communities form part of the enterprise. The rehearsals and performances give voice to the experiences and opinions of women who might otherwise remain silent. The group decided to play male characters themselves, wearing trousers as a signifier. Women were prevented from wearing trousers by law until 1994, and in 2012 there were BBC reports from Blantyre that women were still being beaten for dressing in trousers. There is therefore personal risk inherent in this undertaking. Using interviews with the founding members of the company and with the chief of Chingalire village, Ben Mankhamba, this article seeks to contextualize the achievement of this female-led project, to analyze some of the work they have already undertaken and to offer insights as to what the theatre company might achieve in the future and what impact their work might have.

Keywords: theatre, Malawi, women, arts activism, performance

Introduction

Since the wearing of trousers was adopted by women during the 1850 feminist protest of Mrs Amelia Bloomer (Holt Sawyer 1987, p.6), women in trousers have remained a symbol of feminist uprising.¹ In 1965 Hastings Banda, the Life President of Malawi, enshrined in law a dress code banning Malawian women from wearing trousers. While this ban was lifted in 1994, the image of a Malawian woman wearing trousers arguably reflects the rise of women's rights within the country. The development of women's rights in Malawi is characterized by incremental changes and occasional surges of progress or regression, with the exception of one apparent great advancement: in 1995, after the end of Banda's one party state, rights for women were enshrined within a new Malawian Constitution. Nevertheless, in practice even this had a

¹ My grateful thanks to Ben Mankhamba, Chief of Chingalire village, who provided much of the source material for this paper. To all of the members of the CWTT who kindly agreed to be interviewed for the purposes of this paper, their spokeswoman, Jane Mphatso, and finally to Ms Flossy Ephraim, an undergraduate and member of the village community who kindly conducted the interview on my behalf.

limited impact on the daily lives of many Malawian women due to the continued negative attitude towards women's rights and freedoms, both in traditional laws and the male-dominated culture. As recently as 2012 Malawian women wearing trousers were the focus of violent attacks by male members of the public opposing the rights and freedoms of women. This reflects that while Malawian women are protected by law, they are often still vulnerable in practice.

The disparity between the legislated rights and the lived reality of many Malawian women and girls lit the touchpaper that led ten women from the rural Chingalire Village to establish the Chingalire Women's Travelling Theatre (CWTT) in the summer of 2016. The donning of trousers as costume is a central part of the visual aesthetic and performance strategy of the theatre company. Through an analysis of one of their scripted narratives I argue that, by being involved in the management of a theatre company and through the creative enterprise that theatre-making involves, the women of the group have found a collective freedom through which they can challenge the accepted hegemony. A contextual background will explore the rise of women's rights, set against the continued struggle for these rights to be realized countrywide. A brief summary of the travelling theatre tradition in Malawi and the rationale as to why the group of women from Chingalire Village decided to engage with this form of theatre will contextualize the enterprise. Exploration of the aims of the project and the possible impacts of the work will show how theatre can offer a non-combative mechanism for community dialogue which gives agency to the actors, in this case exclusively women, that is safe and controlled. Trousers play a significant role within the story of the women and the theatre company. I argue that, whilst clothing choice has long been used as a mechanism for the oppression of women in Malawi, the donning of trousers as costume has been a liberating experience for the group and one that has, ironically, given them a public platform for interrogating and publicizing their ideas through the communal spectatorship of their stories, or theatre.

Malawi's Women

Modern Malawi, famous for Lake Malawi and its soaring plateaus, borders Mozambique, Zambia and Tanzania in southern Africa. As John McCracken (2012, p.4) states, these borders are 'an artificial construct' imposed during British imperialism. Inspired by Dr David Livingstone, from 1850 onwards missionaries flocked to the country. Colonized by the British in 1891, it would not become an independent country until 1964 under the Presidency and subsequent dictatorship of Hastings Kamuzu Banda (Crosby 1980, p.15; Kamlongera 1984, p.2). During the time of Banda, Malawi's people, but particularly its women, were highly oppressed. The one party state forced everyone to belong to the Malawian Congress Party; membership for girls and women required them to take part in regular traditional dance rehearsals and performances throughout the year, at the state's pleasure (Gilman 2004, p.38). For the performances they wore compulsory head wraps and blouses with full-length skirts depicting large images of Banda (Gilman 2004, p.39). He policed 'the moral integrity of woman': indeed, he tellingly described the female population of Malawi as 'my women' (Gilman 2004, p.39–40). He introduced a strict dress code that was even incorporated within the Constitution, banning women from wearing trousers because they highlighted the erogenous areas of the female body – 'the shape of their thighs and buttocks'. Lower than knee

length skirts were acceptable but as Gilman observes, ‘the uniform worn by party women exemplified this dress code: women were covered from head to ankle’ (2004, p.39–40).

Banda lost power in 1994 when Malawi held her first democratic elections. It seemed as though women’s rights would continue to rise when the newly drafted constitution of 1995 asserted that men and women would have equal rights (White 2009). Yet, even though the election of Joyce Banda in 2012 (incumbent until 2014) made Malawi the second country in Africa to have a female president, Malawian women still battle against gender inequality. Ingrained issues such as widespread poverty, poor infrastructure and long-established patriarchal cultural practices have meant that in reality the rise of women’s rights has been at best patchy, slow and focused largely within the urban educated parts of the country (*Malawi - Worldbank page*, n.d.). Seodi White (2009), a leading human rights lawyer in Malawi, isolated the continued struggle of women in Malawi into four detailed key areas, which I summarize:

1. The ‘Feminization of Poverty’, which she asserted is a gendered problem as households led by women constitute the most poor; their access to education, resources, health care and opportunities for work are limited while at the same time they have more dependents than male-led households. White states that ‘women remain poor and observers of development rather than change agents’ (2009).
2. ‘Violence Against Women’, according to White, is a significant and a common problem. In the home this includes wife beating, sexual assault and defilement of girls. The law in Malawi does not currently recognize rape within marriage. In the community, rural women can face blame if their daughters are unmarried and pregnant. Poverty forces women into prostitution and places them at great risk of sexual assault and rape. From a young age girls are at risk of sexual harassment at school.
3. White suggests the prevalence of ‘HIV/AIDS’ heightens the factors previously mentioned because of general poor consideration of women’s reproductive health needs and continued poor education. In general, women lack the agency necessary to assert their needs.
4. The final area identified is concerned with ‘The Law and Women’s Rights’. White describes the symbiotic relationship between constitutional rights and statutory and customary laws: customary laws can leave women at the mercy of discrimination in areas relating to divorce, property and inheritance which in turn leaves them vulnerable to poverty. She maintains that these customary practices must be amended to align them with the legal protection purportedly offered to women under Malawian constitutional law.

This disparity between national protection and local vulnerability was acutely highlighted in January 2012 when President Bingu wa Mutharika made a statement supporting the nation’s women: ‘You are free to wear what you want. Women who want to wear trousers should do so, as you will be protected from thugs, vendors and terrorists’ (*Malawian Women Protest Over 'Trousers Attacks'*, 2012). This statement was made in response to vicious, violent attacks against Malawian women in Blantyre. Women wearing trousers were attacked by street vendors, stripped of their clothes and beaten. At the subsequent protests against the attacks one

woman stated: ‘Trousers and mini-skirts for most women in Malawi are a symbol for our hard-won freedom from the one-party dictatorship to the multiparty era’ (Unnamed woman, cited in *Malawian Women Protest Over 'Trousers Attacks'*, 2012). In theory, law protects the women of Malawi, but in practice, they remain extremely vulnerable. So how might women from a rural village near Lilongwe hope to improve the rights of women against these seemingly insurmountable issues? They turned to theatre.

Theatre in Malawi: impact, legacy and inspiration

Performance and ritual have long been a feature of Malawian cultural expression, as Patience Gibbs explains:

In the Malawian context, traditional festivals and religious ceremonies are held in celebration of natural phenomena such as the life cycle and seasonal changes or of historical and legendary events. Social activities for entertainment or community control may also call for festivals and religious or ritual ceremony. Particular ceremonies and rites are performed at childbirth, child naming, marriage, initiation at physical and social maturity and death (1980, p.5).

These performances and rituals retained their significance throughout the missionary and colonial periods and were transferred down through the generations. Performance in Malawi serves a societal purpose as well as being a living record of Malawian performance history (Gibbs 1980, p.6). Theatre, in the Western understanding of the term, was brought to the country by the early missionaries and later by the colonial administration. It served a variety of functions: it was entertainment in the form of expatriate drama clubs and school productions, education in the form of didactic performances and later Theatre for Development² as examined by Christopher Kamlongera (1984). As a way to popularize literary theatre in Africa, some universities established travelling theatre companies (Kerr 1995, p.133–5). In Malawi, from 1970, the University of Malawi’s Chancellor College was the home of the English department where the University Travelling Theatre (UTT) was based. The company toured plays throughout Malawi largely to educated and elite audiences, initially performing in English before recognizing that they might have a greater impact rurally if they were to perform in the vernacular (Kerr 1982, p.34). From 1971 the UTT was led by James Gibbs. Mufunanji Magalasi describes how Gibbs encouraged his students to ‘tap material from Malawian folk tales, legends and myths’ after the students were unable to find texts that they found relevant. As a result of this he began to write his own plays for the students to perform (Magalasi 2012, p.25). An indigenous and foreign ‘fusion’ style of drama developed as a result of the work of Gibbs and his university colleagues (Gibbs 1980, p.vii). The tradition of touring and travelling productions became firmly established within the Malawian theatre landscape. It is therefore

² According to Kamlongera: ‘Theatre for Development is being developed as one way of helping the masses in the developing world to come to terms with their environment and the onus of improving their lot culturally, educationally, politically, economically and socially’ (Kamlongera 2005, p. 435).

unsurprising that the women of Chingalire Village opted to use this type of performance as a model for devising and disseminating their own plays. Radio plays too have long played a pivotal role in the development and communication of drama in Malawi. ‘Theatre for the Air’, for example, broadcast plays in English during the late 1970s and early 1980s (Kamlongera 1984, p.341; Magalasi 2012, p.52, 136) and the importance of radio drama to the women will become clear.

Chingalire Women’s Travelling Theatre

The rural Chingalire village lies to the west of the capital of Malawi, Lilongwe, within the Nsaru area. As part of his vision for developing the village and looking forward to securing its sustainability, village chief Ben Mankhamba has encouraged educational enterprise among his community. He has established the Chingalire Rural Growth Centre as a non-governmental organization (NGO) with a view to ‘developing my village into a model and resource centre’ for the benefit of not only his own village, but those that surround it as well (*Chingalire Rural Growth Centre*, n.d.). Mankhamba’s enterprise has gained considerable support from the women of the village. The CWTT was formed by village women ranging in age from their mid-20s to early 50s. Additionally, all were mothers with considerable caring and domestic responsibilities and all were members of the village’s Women’s Club (Ben Mankhamba, personal communication, 10 February 2017). The founders of the group had great admiration for the women who performed in the dramas that they listened to on the radio. These dramas were didactic and message-based, which inspired the group to form a similar theatre company of their own (Mankhamba, personal communication, 10 February 2017). Having heard about the group’s incorporation and being impressed by both their initiative and their creativity, Mankhamba arranged for theatre director Mr Frank Mbewe, of Bantu Theatre Arts, to visit the village to work with the group, equipping them with the performance skills needed to develop the company and supporting them in realizing their ambition.

The objectives of the company state that the plays should travel to rural Malawi so that theatre performances created and performed by women can inform these communities about health, culture, education, agriculture, religion, human rights and especially gender based violence. In our correspondence the group emphasized the need for greater agency for women, stating that when CWTT performs plays about issues relating to women they inspire a positive response from their audiences: ‘many women will learn to stand up on their own and not just depend on the men’. Significantly, addressing and reducing incidences of violence perpetrated by men against women is a recurring theme within the stated aims and outcomes of CWTT (Mankhamba, personal communication, 10 February 2017). This correlates with the second key area of struggle for Malawian women as identified by White (2009) and it highlights how normalized domestic violence against women is in contemporary Malawi. Crucially, as well as creating plays, the group includes non-combative, post-performance, communal discussions about the issues explored within the dramas. In so doing they hope to teach other women about the issues raised so that they will in turn teach others. CWTT hope that, eventually, whole communities will benefit from this enterprise and be better informed about the issues that directly affect them. If the community is informed, then they can evoke effective change at a local level. If women are driving this change collectively using a public performance as a touchstone, then perhaps positive change stands a better chance of successful adoption by their

audiences. Perhaps the public-facing, community-based nature of theatre can place the audience in the position of becoming change makers (Mankhamba, personal communication, 10 February 2017).

Performance

To date the group has created two productions; both are based around the concerns that are significant to the women of the theatre group. The first production, *Chitetezo Mbaula* (Prevention Cooking Stove), promotes the use of stoves that are safer and more environmentally friendly than the traditional rural cooking methods. The drama plays out over five scenes and I will explore the scene synopsis in more detail below. The second production, *Payere Payere* (Enough is Enough), contextualizes and examines the courage of a village woman who, having endured a long and abusive marriage, decides to leave her husband (Mankhamba, personal communication, 11 February 2017). In Malawi it is common for the narrative of a play to be written down, but for the dialogue to be improvised or devised through rehearsal and in performance. This style of performance offers distinct advantages for groups such as the CWTT. Not all members need be literate to contribute to the performance and performers can articulate the drama using their own words, meaning each performance might be similar but not identical. It is a flexible method of creating plays; the cost of rehearsal is reduced because few resources are needed. Having a simple breakdown of the narrative in written form provides records of the performance and opens up the possibility of dialogue with other agencies that might be interested in the performances. These plays are rehearsed and performed in Chichewa (the dominant Malawian language) because the women do not speak English. This is significant when one considers that English is the language of administration in Malawi and most larger theatre companies perform in English, or a Chichewa-English and other vernacular language mix.

Chitetezo Mbaula

Scene 1: Mr Mphatso's house

Mr Mphatso is arguing with his wife about the time she spends making the Chitetezo Mbaula (from clay) at the Women's Club rather than attending to his daily sexual needs, which he claims is the only reason he married her. A neighbour intervenes and tries to convince Mr Mphatso of the importance of her attending the Women's Club because of the education she receives there, which allows her to take better care of her family.

Scene 2: Chief Chinkukyu's house

The whole village is gathered together to hear an environmental expert inform them about issues such as the importance of nature, tree planting and why using the Chitetezo Mbaula rather than traditional charcoal open fires is important to improve safety. Traditional Chewa songs and dances are performed.

Scene 3: The Women's Club

Chief Chinkukyu has instructed all of the men in the village to encourage their wives to attend the Women's Club. However, Mr Mphatso finds the women while they are at work making the stoves and he shouts at them for corrupting his wife.

Scene 4: Mphatso's place of work

Thugs attack Mr Mphatso while he is at work as a guard; friends take him home.

Scene 5: A private hospital

The Government hospitals have no medicine at night and so he is admitted to a Private Hospital. His wife is able to pay for his transport and medicine because of money she has saved making the Chitetezo Mbaula (plot synopsis from Mankhamba, personal communication, 22 February 2017).

Within *Chitetezo Mbaula* three of White's four key areas are clearly evident. Daily sexual relations as an expectation within marriage implies the lack of autonomy the wife has over her own body. Similarly, the necessity of the community member's intervention highlights that her personal protestations are not enough for her to be 'allowed' to attend to her own interests. The impact of poverty and poor basic infrastructure is also highlighted by the lack of medical provision for those who have scant economic resources. The structure of the drama is as significant as the content. The husband's dominance over his wife is established immediately, as is the communal nature of Malawian rural life, in the form of the neighbour's intervention. In the second scene the village chief is seen endorsing the women's right to engage in social enterprise through the manufacture of their Chitetezo Mbaula. The inclusion of the chief serves a dual purpose: CWTT uses established cultural conventions to assure the audience that the play's message is endorsed by a chief but, additionally, that they as performers are also endorsed by their chief in their enterprise. This may act as a cultural safety feature: as the performers are wearing trousers as costumes, they could be vulnerable to assault both physical and verbal. Scene four illustrates the reversal of power within the marriage as, once physically injured, the husband is dependent upon his home and his wife – she finds herself in the position where she could become an oppressor. The reveal at the end of the play is significant for two reasons. Firstly, the denouement highlights how unusual and unexpected it is for rural women to have independent access to their own finances. Secondly the wife's decision and ability to pay for her husband's medical treatment highlights how women can use their resources to improve the family's wellbeing. Further, she rejects the role of oppressor, unlike her husband at the start of the play.

The production also serves an economic function. The women do not charge the audience for their performances as this might prohibit many from attending. The women of Chingalire village do in fact make the stoves that are a central part of the narrative; the touring element of the production therefore offers the women an opportunity to expand their business and promote safer cooking practices (Mankhamba, personal communication, 11 February 2017). Cooking can be a significant hazard in a Malawian domestic setting, especially for children below the age of eight years; the majority of paediatric injuries in the country are burns and scalds related to open charcoal cooking fires (Bane, 2016, p. 58). By encouraging local enterprise, the women are acting as agents of change to improve their own health and that of their children.

Impact

When asked about their work in July 2016 the group stressed the importance of the freedom that the illusion of theatre offered them: theatre is non-combative, the plot and the narrative are fictitious. However, this theatrical freedom can create its own reality. Jane Plastow (2015) describes embodied performance as being the way actors take space. This is highly relevant to this paper, specifically in relation to how the women perform when playing male characters. The women take the roles of male characters themselves and ‘do it exactly as the men do in real life. We cannot show a man’s part while in a [...] dress’ (Mankhamba, personal communication, 10 February 2017). The spectacle of performance allows these women to behave in ways they feel unable to under usual circumstances; they stated that being free to behave as men, protected by the veil of theatrical characterization, made them very happy. Entering and inhabiting the performance space wearing trousers gives them the ability to embody their character’s physicalization, particularly male characters. Mankhamba explains that the women can ‘stretch or spread their legs on stage without worrying about showing their private parts’. He further highlights that ‘normally women don’t spread their legs when seated but if they are on stage they can do it and if someone asks them why they were doing that they just say they were acting’ (Mankhamba, personal communication, 10 February 2017). Through the development of their own practice and performance aesthetic, the women of CWTT are able to interrogate situations similar to those in real life in which they have been the oppressed party; this is an important example of their increased empowerment and agency. The group itself, not an external organization, led and set down the aims and scope of the work. While they may be vulnerable members of society in their daily lives, the protection that the recognized encounter of public theatrical performance brings them evidently allows them to not only ‘take’ the space but to own it, using it to undermine the traditional gender codes of rural Malawian communities. It is particularly significant that this is an exclusively female group as there are cultural ‘rules’ as to how men and women may engage with each other on stage, particularly in relation to the performance of intimacy. Erogenous zones such as the breasts and buttocks should not be touched in public, and that includes within theatre production. Actresses risk damaging their personal reputation if they do not act within these parameters.

The theatre industry in Malawi is largely (but not exclusively) male dominated and engaging women in leadership roles in theatre production and the development of theatre practice is essential in expanding work that will engage female audiences. Mankhamba states that, in his experiences of rural theatre audiences, ‘[the] female audience is shy to attend such performances because the actors make fun of women’ (personal communication, 10 February 2017). CWTT’s work may have important implications for their audiences as the communities will see women who are in control of the drama, as far as is possible in a country where the censorship of drama is still controlled by government. Consequently, even in rural areas these women are becoming agents of change. Strikingly, the audiences do not always realize that CWTT hails from the same area of Malawi as them. This provokes questions, often relating to the cast’s personal lives, such as whether they are married and whether their husbands approve of what they are undertaking. (Mankhamba, personal communication, 11 February 2017). These questions highlight how unusual the theatre company is and how the communities can

struggle to accept women as autonomous individuals in their own right. Others question costume choice: ‘Whose trousers are those you were wearing on stage?’ They assume that the women cannot be wearing their own trousers. The wider Chingalire village community has been positive about the work of the theatre group. Indeed, increasing numbers of women have expressed an interest in becoming members of the company.

Conclusions

Despite increased legislative rights for women in Malawi in 1995, the lived experience of Malawian women highlights that such rights have diminished through a lack of implementation and ingrained cultural norms. The process of managing and running a theatre group has given the women a newly-found improved socio-economic status within the village and thereby reignited the local debate about women’s rights. Creating and performing their own plays and utilizing the established performance methods used in Malawian theatre practice has given the women of the group, all but two of whom have only a primary level education, an opportunity to explore a creative and productive outlet; this has improved their confidence personally and their professional standing within the community. It has provided them with a chance to develop their expertise and, perhaps more importantly, to be *seen* to develop an expertise by the community. The freedom that performance offers the members of CWTT is vital for giving them agency as women. Through the act of donning trousers as costume within performance and by embodying the roles of male and female characters, the group’s women have discovered a renewed zeal to challenge their status within their local community. The women wear trousers to play men and in so doing interrogate the role of the male, the oppressor, for an audience that contains men. CWTT thereby put themselves at the interface of cultural development. The bravery of this act cannot be overstated: CWTT’s work is an act of grassroots resistance challenging the subjugation of rural women in Malawi through costume choice, performance and economic independence.

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