VOICES OF DISQUIET ON THE MALAWIAN AIRWAVES

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COUNTERPOINTS

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Human Rights NGOs are considered vanguards in the struggle against injustice and authoritarianism in Africa. But their narrow focus on civil and political rights neglects widely held economic grievances. In Malawi, an audience-driven radio programme – *Nkhani Zam'maboma* or "News from Districts" – has captivated the nation by exposing everyday injustices experienced by Malawians. Grievances are articulated through local idioms and proverbs that have little in common with the individual freedoms espoused by human rights activists. Never before has it been possible for Malawians to share experiences of injustice so publically.

By Harri Englund

When a wave of democratisation swept across Africa in the early 1990s, human rights NGOs became a permanent feature of the continent's social and political landscape. Idolised by the international media and the donor agencies that fund them, human rights activists have confronted lingering authoritarian tendencies – often at considerable personal risk. But theirs are not the only voices exposing injustice in Africa's new democracies.

In Malawi, the radio programme *Nkhani Zam'maboma* – "News from Districts" – airs the grievances of its listening public twice in the evening, seven days a week. It is the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation's (MBC) most popular programme, attracting several million listeners. Since 1998, *Nkhani Zam'maboma* has taken authorities to task through idioms that have little in common with the rhetoric of individual freedoms espoused by human rights activists. The stories sent in by listeners are easily overlooked by foreign donors and activists because they are related in Chichewa. Few foreigners speak Malawi's national language.

Human rights activists have scored successes in Malawi's fledgling democracy, often in collaboration with faith-based organisations. In 2003, a campaign to prevent President Bakili Muluzi from securing an unconstitutional third term in office created public outcry. The government was forced to shelve its plans. But a certain elitism and urban bias has characterised human rights activism. The principal focus has been the defence of political and civil liberties. The economic rights of Malawians have been largely overlooked, in spite of the endemic poverty and inequality that continue to beset the country.[1] Activists have been slow to recognise that the provision of adequate economic resources and opportunity might be a human rights issue.

Public radio seems an unlikely medium for the candid discussion of injustices experienced by impoverished Malawians. As in many other African democracies, state radio in Malawi has retained an incilination towards the incumbent government. Human rights campaigners and international donors have frequently condemned the MBC's news and current affairs programming as a tool of state-sponsored misinformation redolent of the autocratic era. But to dismiss the MBC as nothing but a government mouthpiece ignores alternative insights into injustice provided by the stories on *Nkhani Zam'maboma.*

A new kind of news

Malawi's media landscape changed considerably in the 1990s. When the first multi-party elections for over three decades were held in 1994, only two radio stations operated in the country – the MBC and an evangelical Christian FM station that largely relied on programme materials from the United States. By 2006, 16 radio stations were operational, excluding community radio. The MBC launched *Nkhani Zam'maboma* in 1998, anticipating increased competition on the airwaves. The status of radio as the principal medium for the dissemination of news and information remains unrivalled in Malawi.

[1] Harri Englund, *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor* (University of California Press, 2006).

Nkhani Zam'maboma was introduced to broadcast stories about local development success stories that would illustrate the efficacy of a national development process given prominence in official news bulletins. Soon after its launch, the programme changed. It became apparent to the editors that most stories sent in by the public were complaints – overt or implied – about misconduct on the part of various figures in positions of authority.

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Religious leaders are among those often implicated by listeners in stories of transgressions that reveal disparities in wealth, status or opportunity. A story broadcast in 2003 reported that Christians in a particular church "were very disappointed about what their new pastor was doing". The pastor had warned his congregation that "he would remove from the church everyone who did not give tithe and that they should not give silver money [coins] but paper money [banknotes]". The pastor had also ordered that "Christians must collect money every week to buy fuel for his motorbike". Such stories prompt listeners to reflect on the conduct of their own leaders.

Nkhani Zam'maboma became a veritable household name with its tales of commonplace abuse and injustice, despite the widening range of entertainment offered by private and religious radio stations. A steady supply of stories – mostly submitted as hand-written letters but also by phone and e-mail – has given the programme more than enough material. Fieldwork undertaken in 2003-08 recorded that the editors received as many as 20 stories per day. Only about eight of these could be aired in the twice daily broadcast.

From freedom to disappointment

In the sample of more than 500 stories collected during fieldwork, not one mentioned *ufulu wachibadwidwe* – the "birth freedom" that has become the standard Chichewa translation for "human rights". When I queried the absence of the customary language of human rights and individual freedoms on the programme, editors retorted that "they are NGOs' things" (*za maNGO zimenezo*). *Nkhani Zam'maboma* has introduced a genre for expressing claims and grievances that is strikingly different from the one utilised by human rights NGOs.

The rejection by *Nkhani Zam'maboma* of stories that mentioned politicians or political parties rendered the contrast with the approach of human rights activists especially striking. Non-partisanship was the justification put forward by the editors. This sounded improbable, coming from journalists whose official news bulletins were little more than eulogies to the state president and rebukes of opposition politicians. But the editors insisted that Malawians of different political persuasions listened to the programme and they did not want to alienate any of them. Avowed non-partisanship also allowed the editors to safeguard a precious space of independence amid the MBC's often stifling governance.

The rejection of stories deemed "political" by editors is compatible with the broadcast of critical perspectives on authority and power. Without mentioning politicians, *Nkhani Zam'maboma* can address social and political problems by highlighting misdemeanours among village headmen, teachers, healers, employers, and religious leaders. Listeners are perfectly able to make inferences, and reflect on the conduct of politicians and institutions even if they are not mentioned explicitly on the programme.

A common idiom heard on *Nkhani Zam'maboma* is "disappointment" (*kukhumudwa*) – people are disappointed with the decisions or actions of specific authorities. Such idioms convey obligations between leaders and citizens, rather than discontent with

hierarchies. The stories never suggest that Malawians should do away with hierarchies. On the contrary, hierarchy is crucial to the condition of mutual dependence between leaders and citizens. But dependence does not connote docile submission, and *Nkhani Zam'maboma* offers an exceptionally accessible medium for voicing disappointment.

An outlet for grievances

Employers frequently feature in stories sent in to *Nkani Zam'maboma*. All too often, employers are accused of paying meagre salaries and subjecting their employees to arbitrary mistreatment. The introduction of new laws since the 1990s has paved the way for reforms in conditions of employment and collective bargaining. But progress in improving labour relations in Malawi has been slow, and the enforcement of reforms has been hampered by the weakness of trade unions. In this context, *Nkhani Zam'maboma* offers an important outlet for workers' complaints, expressed in idioms that have a broad resonance among its public.

One headline stated that "the manager of a firm in Blantyre city is said to maltreat his workers by denying them rest even on big holidays such as 6 July", Malawi's independence day. The story reported how the manager deducted money from the salaries of workers if they did not turn up to work on public holidays. It ended by noting that "people are said to just persevere in this firm". It should not be assumed that the semblance of resigned obedience is evidence of a lack of critical reflection among the workers. Malawian employees can seek to influence their superiors by subtle means on *Nkhani Zam'maboma*. The mere possibility of being identified as the wrongdoer in a story broadcast on national radio acts as a deterrent for employers.

Another story exposing "unloving behaviour" (*khalidwe losowa chikondi*) on the part of employers concerned a funeral. The headline asserted that "workers in a well-known firm in Blantyre

city were disappointed by the refusal of the firm's superiors to give money to help with the funeral of a worker's mother". Participation in funerals in their village of origin is usually obligatory for urban dwellers, and they are often pressed for material contributions by rural relatives. The bereaved worker in this story had explained to his bosses that "people in the village rely on him for everything". The bosses refused to give him anything other than transport to the village. His colleagues, who had "sacrificed themselves" by giving him money, resolved to take the issue to the firm's director in the hope that "the unloving behaviour would not continue".

The bosses of the bereaved worker revealed themselves as being unmindful of the fundamental relationship that exists between the living and the dead, and between urban and rural relatives. The inability of the worker to pay funeral expenses from his own pocket was consistent with the experience of listeners, employed and unemployed. Among the listeners in townships and villages I knew well, the story inspired further reflections on the inequality of pay within companies, the spiralling personal debt often caused by inadequate salaries, and the lack of opportunity to escape exploitative labour relations.

Fellow workers in this story showed their solidarity not through strike action but by contributing money from their own meagre resources. The overthrow of the existing hierarchy seemed far from their minds, because they had faith in the prudence of the company director. Crucial to convincing the director of the merits of their case was the mention of "unloving behaviour", an idiom for the conduct the workers wanted to change.

In a country where strikes are rare and trade unions weak, stories such as this assert an obligation between persons in strikingly different positions. As *Nkhani Zam'maboma* is not explicit about the institutions and laws that support the democratisation of labour relations, its identification of obligation amid the instances of abuse

and exploitation tends to be couched in moral terms. Doubt about the efficacy of moral argument could well be raised were it not for the fact that it is presented in public, to an audience of several million Malawians, rather than within the confines of an individual company.

A story that did mention an institution – the Office of the Ombudsman, established by the new constitution to improve accountability in public offices – only did so at the very end, as if in a footnote. The headline announced that "a man who works at a hospital in Karonga district is said to have disappointed people by beating up a patient". The patient had been discharged and was standing in a queue to receive medicine to take home. But the hospital official decided to send him to the back of the queue.

The patient did not accept his fate without a protest, resulting in verbal and physical abuse from the official. Such arbitrary displays of power are commonplace for Malawians in a variety of settings – from hospitals to post offices, from shops to government departments – where they are expected to wait patiently for attention from members of staff.

> **_Nkhani Zam'maboma_ offers an exceptionally accessible medium for voicing disappointment**

Onlookers were reported to have been disturbed by the incident, and "the patient was said to take the story to the chief of the office for hearing people's complaints, the Ombudsman". Irrespective of the effect of mentioning an institution like the Office of the Ombudsman, *Nkhani Zam'maboma* is an institution in its own right. Its vast audience of listeners is one that Malawian human rights activists can only dream of, restricted as they are by the narrower appeal of the message they tend to disseminate —and by their self-appointed status as the vanguard in the struggle for human rights.

Alternative intellectuals

The criticism levelled at Malawi's public radio by human rights activists is often too indiscriminate. It fails to distinguish the variation in programme formats broadcast by the MBC, and there is a common assumption that all journalists working at the MBC are the same. An understanding of how Malawians listen to the radio is also absent from such criticism. Far from being brainwashed to believe all the state-sponsored propaganda they hear on the MBC, Malawians have developed critical listening skills precisely because so much that is broadcast is implausible. There is always more than meets the eye (or the ear) even in the official news stories broadcast on the MBC. Malawians have long lived with the need to analyse and interpret what they hear on the radio.

Jack Mapanje, the Malawian poet and academic, has observed that during the autocratic era, "your faculty of speculation and quick perception of events had to be highly developed".[2] This faculty of speculation has not been the exclusive reserve of the intelligentsia, nor did it become any less necessary with the transition to multi-party democracy. What is true of the listening public is equally true of beleaguered editors at the MBC.

The work of journalists at the MBC, particularly those compiling vernacular programmes, is of no lesser importance in envisaging alternatives in Malawi's public culture than the work of human rights activists. This is a difficult – and paradoxical – proposition. It is far easier to write off all MBC journalists as biased and mired in self-censorship, as I used to do myself before my fieldwork in the newsroom. But many of the editors responsible for *Nkhani Zam'maboma*, employed at the MBC for decades, belong to a journalistic rank-and-file with few prospects of, or little interest in, pursuing political appointments and favours.

[2]Jack Mapanje, "The Orality of Dictatorship", in H. Englund (ed.) *A Democracy of Chameleons* (Nordic Africa Institute, 2002).

Income inequality at the MBC, the allocation of assignments, procedures for promotion, and pressure from politicians are long-standing grievances. The strike action that swept across Malawi's civil service in the 1990s also reached the MBC, but the resulting dismissals – and the subsequent demotion and sacking of journalists who sought to report opposition viewpoints – have served to warn against undue ambition. More recently, the delay or non-payment of salaries has added a new layer of insecurity. MBC editors share many of the same grievances over pay and working conditions as their listeners. Their relatively modest standard of living in townships engenders a certain commitment to the rural and urban poor as the "public" of their public service.

As a workplace, the MBC's newsroom differs markedly from the offices of aid agencies and human rights NGOs. Lifestyles and language are at variance. In contrast to the use of English in aid agencies and NGOs, the preference for Chichewa and other Malawian languages in both professional and everyday communication at the MBC testifies to – and asserts – the affinity of editors to the public they aspire to serve. Many feel that their professionalism calls for close contact with the public, whether in beer halls or township churches, in order to hear the news and rumours that are in circulation. It is because the everyday lives of editors are so similar to the everyday lives of their public that critical perspectives are broadcast in *Nkhani Zam'maboma*, expressed in idioms that seemingly bypass political themes but are commonly used and understood by fellow Malawians.

The much-maligned public broadcasting service in Malawi contains more than a single journalistic orientation. The rank-and-file journalists at the MBC are discontent with the material and ideological conditions of their work, but constraint makes them innovative in ways that many critics are unable to recognise. Nothing suggested by this *Counterpoint* should be interpreted as seeking to excuse or justify the bias and misinformation the MBC perpetuates in

some of its programmes. By the same token, we should pay close attention to these journalists not just as state functionaries but also as intellectuals.

> **Never before has it been possible for Malawians — irrespective of wealth, age, gender, or ethnic origin — to articulate experiences of abuse, injustice and violation on the radio.**

The end of vanguardism

What are the expectations that we as academics, activists or policy-makers have about the kinds of claims and demands people in Africa ought to be voicing? What counts as a progressive or democratic claim? The example of *Nkhani Zam'maboma* suggests caution with taking anything for granted. The programme's significance lies not so much in the kinds of entreaties made by listeners, as in the platform it provides and the nationwide resonance of the idioms and proverbs they use. Never before has it been possible for Malawians – irrespective of wealth, age, gender, or ethnic origin – to articulate experiences of abuse, injustice and violation on the radio.

Nkhani Zam'maboma might be criticised for not going far enough in attacking, or seeking to dismantle, existing hierarchies. But from the point of view of its public, it is only within a hierarchy that listeners can invoke the obligation between them and their "superiors". Petitions against injustice voiced in the stories in *Nkhani Zam'maboma* take a very different form to the vanguardism of human rights activism with its emphasis on individual freedoms. In the work of human rights NGOs, activists are required to lead Malawians towards the utopian goal of equality between all men (and women). The French philosopher Jacques Rancière has pointed out the paradox of this sort of egalitarianism: "to pose equality as a

goal is to hand it over to the pedagogues of progress, who widen endlessly the distance they promise that they will abolish". [3]

If equality is always the paramount goal, it tends to create a vanguard whose members actually assert a fundamental inequality between the vanguard and the so-called grassroots. Human rights activists, donors and some politicians became Rancière's "pedagogues of progress" in Malawi during the democratic transition. It is the absence of vanguardism that is so refreshing about *Nkhani Zam'maboma*.

[3] Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Duke University Press, 2003).

The Author

Harri Englund is Reader in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. He is the author of “Human Rights and African Airwaves: Mediating Equality on the Chichewa Radio”, (Indiana University Press, 2011).

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