Chapter V:
"Distance Saves Me" – Civil Servants and Their Kin

> I want to avoid unnecessary family problems, it must be avoided. You know I have stayed in town for quite a long time, I don't want to get entangled in the way people live, I have been away from the village for so long I doubt I can manage. They know their policies and I doubt I can cope. I guess distance saves me.
>
> Mr. Mkandawire

Introduction

Mr. Mkandawire was preparing for his retirement when he shared his anxieties about the "policies" of his relatives at home with me. For 30 years he had been posted far away from his home region and he did not intend to return after his retirement. Mr. Mkandawire opted against a return to the home village or *kubwera kumudzi* because he had been "away from the village for so long" and chose a "neutral place" at a safe distance from his relatives and his in-laws.

This chapter expands the horizontal slice and addresses the predicament of Mr. Mkandawire and his peers. There seemed to be no easy or straightforward decisions with regard to the relationship with a wider circle of kinsfolk and the desire to maintain distance. All of my informants were confronted with demands from rural kin for support and for all of them the pertinent question was how to deal with these demands. Civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba provided accommodation for the children of relatives, many of them orphans, and paid school-fees for these children and their own. It was common practice to send remittances to their parents and other relatives in the home village. Many provided inputs such as fertilizer and seeds for their kin in the home village and brought gifts in cash and kind when they visited the home district. The motives for supporting relatives varied considerably.

My informants experienced a tension between their dream of material wealth for their own nuclear family and the numerous demands on their resources by kinsfolk often only vaguely related to them. This tension, however, must not be misunderstood as the dualism between individualism and communitarianism that is the product of an old

tradition in Western sociology. Individual aspirations and kinship obligations do not necessarily have to be at odds. In Malawi personal growth or *kukula* and the support of dependants are two sides of the same coin as Englund shows (1996, 2001). Englund describes *kukula* as "a continuous process by which a person ideally consolidate their moral standing in the course of their life cycles. Crucially, the process is less a matter of individual virtues than of being able to 'care for' (*kusamala*) many dependants" (2001:99). Thus one's growth as an individual and the care for kin are not juxtaposed and personal ambition to grow as a moral person may entail responsibilities towards others. The dependant relatives, in turn, see a successful relative not as individual example but as collective achievement. Consequently successful nephews and nieces, sons and daughters, are expected to share their alleged wealth with kin. The practice of sharing is referred to as *kugawira* in case of social equals or as *kugawa*, to allocate to people with an inferior social status. When the emphasis was on the motive rather than the activity people would usually use the word *kusamala* or the word "to help", *kuthandiza*.

The civil servants in the townships of Lilongwe and Zomba expressed their predicament in terms of a dualism between their "modern" or "civilised" way of life in town and the "traditional" way of life led by their kinsfolk in the home village. A "modern" way of life was associated with education, a formal job, the nuclear family, the neighbourhood, and the church whereas the latter was associated with a wide circle of relatives, *abale*, in the home village who had no education and tended to expect support from their wealthier relatives in town. Although the village was usually described in terms of backwardness and underdevelopment, the feelings of the privileged urbanites were ambivalent: on the one hand, they complained about uncivilised and backward life in the village, consisting of jealous and ungrateful relatives who were better avoided while, on the other hand, they imagined idyllic life in the village where one still could find simple solidarity, a place not yet corrupted by the modern world.

In order to avoid misunderstandings it should be noted that this dualism between "modern" and "traditional" was not my analytical category but used by civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba themselves when they talked about their relatives in the home village. Ferguson noted the same when he mentioned that he often had the impression he was "listening to an out-of-date sociology textbook when listening to people discussing

the contrast between 'town'/'village' and between 'African tradition'/'European modernity'" during his fieldwork in the Zambian Copperbelt (Ferguson 1999:84).

The chapter is divided into four parts. The first part discusses the importance of formal education for civil servants and the way it affects their relationship with their relatives. The second part presents two case studies of two civil servants who had to decide where to settle after their retirement from the civil service. Their decisions perfectly illustrates their ambivalent relationship with the home village. Most of my informants also experienced anxiety about social pressures to share their wealth and tried to negotiate a course between the conflicting claims, expectations and loyalties in such a way as not to isolate them socially and make them vulnerable to contingencies. The third part places the growing reliance of class based social networks in the context of the ambivalent relationship with the rural kin, and the fourth part discusses the moral dilemma that arises from the desire to maintain social and spatial distance to the relatives in the home district.

1. Education and Social Stratification

In March 2002 I travelled by bus from Zomba to Blantyre. A boy of about sixteen sat next to me and we struck up a conversation. He told me he travelled to Chikwawa, a town about 50 km south of Blantyre. He had just visited his older brother who served as a sergeant at Cobb Barracks, the big army base in Zomba. He told me that he visited him to ask for school fees but all he had received was the money for the fare back home and a promise that the brother would send him the money soon. The boy I met in the bus was no exception. Each school term thousands of boys and girls have to "hunt" for their school-fees and ask their relatives to pay the school fees for them. Formal education, especially at secondary and tertiary level, constituted a considerable drain on the resources of all civil servants who paid school fees for their own children and often the children of relatives. Yet, most of them went to great lengths to provide their children with a formal education, considered to be a necessary prerequisite for status and wealth. It was not unusual for 50 percent of the annual salary to be spent on school and boarding fees for private schools or missionary schools that were thought to provide better education than the government schools that charged much lower fees.

Education has always constituted one of the prime avenues to material security and social status. In the 1990s university education had become a prerequisite for a career in the civil service and secondary education was the norm even for relatively subordinate positions. Access to formal education had always been extremely limited in Malawi and was a guarantee for life-long employment in the civil service or one of the state-owned enterprises. Until the 1930s there were almost no government schools; education of Africans was mainly provided by Christian missions, most notably the Presbyterian mission stations in Livingstonia in the North and Blantyre (McCracken 2000[1977], Ross 1996). The missions operated an impressive network of schools and trained Africans who were employed by missions, the administration and European businesses not only in Nyasaland but in whole British Central and South Africa. Clerks from Nysaland dominated the top positions for Africans in the copper mines of Northern Rhodesia and the mines of Witwatersrand. Nevertheless coverage was limited to a few places and the total output of education institutions was so low that the report of the Localisation Committee, an advisory body on the Africanisation of the civil service, concluded: "The estimated output of the secondary schools …. is totally inadequate to meet the requirements of the Civil Service…" (1960:27).

The lack of qualified people should not have come as surprise since there were only a handful of secondary schools in the country: the first secondary school had been opened as late as 1942. Institutions of tertiary education were non-existent during the colonial era and only a lucky few were able to follow courses at Makerere College in Uganda, Fort Hare in Rhodesia, and other colleges in South Africa or abroad. The Localisation Committee estimated that only 33 Nyasalanders held a degree in 1960 while about 40 followed "various degree courses and professional courses" – indeed an alarmingly low output rate considering that there were 480 posts requiring a degree (1960: 22).

After independence output of secondary schools remained low, there were only few secondary schools and for both primary and secondary schools school-fees had to be paid. Those who were lucky enough to enjoy secondary education found guaranteed employment in the civil service and the state-owned companies. Kamuzu Banda did not show much interest in extending secondary and tertiary education to the masses and even

primary education was restricted through the obligatory school fees, a considerable hurdle for poor households. Instead he focused on providing high-quality secondary and tertiary education for a very limited number of students. Under Kamuzu Banda the few hundred graduates of the University of Malawi had guaranteed employment in the professional grades of the civil service, which enjoyed considerable prestige during that time. In recent years the number of graduates has been increasing and lucrative and prestigious employment is no longer guaranteed. Since democratisation a diploma is no longer a guarantee for life-long employment in the civil service. The number of graduates at the University of Malawi has risen sharply while employment opportunities in the civil service and the state-owned enterprises, which were forced to cut down personnel costs, have decreased. Only those with training in accountancy or information technology have no difficulty finding a job since these skills are central to the quickly transforming economy.

As a result of the introduction of the dual economy and the colonial administration a small indigenous elite that was employed in these sectors formed during the colonial period. Due to the expansion of the state and the Africanisation of the civil service after independence this class expanded considerably until the 1970s. This process of class formation slowed down and turned into the reproduction of the political and bureaucratic elites when the effects of the debt crisis began to affect African countries. Bayart notes that in the 1980s "hierarchies close up, and tend to the reproduction of the governing classes, particularly in schooling" (Bayart 1993:69). White (1987) observes the same trend in his study of Magomero village:

> Education has for decades been a popular means in Malawi of investing the profits of labour migration. The rewards were jobs outside the village as schoolteachers, clerks and pastors, or further afield with the plantation companies of Mozambique or the mines of Southern Rhodesia and South Africa. By the late 1950s, however, when the first labour migrants from the former Magomero estate returned home with cash in hand, the benefits of education were already receding. This may seem paradoxical with independence approaching, but the days when primary education alone guaranteed a job had gone and the competition for secondary-school places was, and remains, intense. …. Since the 1960s, then, only a handful of people have used education as a route from poverty and, … most now [in the 1980s] regard that route as effectively closed.
> (White 1987:230-231)

Class formation by means of formal education and employment in the civil service was evident from the family histories of my informants. Employment in the civil service was rarely limited to one family member. It was very common for the parents, uncles, aunts and siblings of my informants also to be employed in the civil service or state-owned enterprises. It was especially common among the middle- and high-ranking civil servants for one or both parents to have been employed in the civil service. Often uncles and aunts were also employed in the civil service or the formal economy. It was the moral and financial support of this older generation that had enabled many of my informants to pursue secondary and tertiary education and gratitude for this support characterized the attitude of my informants to their benefactors. Other informants had received support from older brothers or sisters who had paid school fees and provided accommodation for their younger siblings. One important aspect of this process of class formation was the social distance between the "modern" family members employed in the formal sector and their rural kinsfolk in the villages. The following paragraphs elucidate this complicated relationship and the social distance between civil servants and their rural kin.

2. *"Kubwera Kumudzi"*

My informants' attitude towards their home villages and rural kin was ambivalent. No one complained in public about the expectations of rural kin but often people hinted at a much more complex and ambiguous relationship. When I asked people whom I knew better about their relationship with the home village and relatives there they would usually reply with a sigh *"abale!"* (relatives) conveying all the social pressure and their exasperation in this single word. Others replied with the proverb *chibale chringati chipsera*, relatives are like a scar, and one informant explained the proverb in the following words: "Relatives are like scar, you never get rid of them, they are a pain in the ass". Others mentioned fear of witchcraft, *ufiti*, used by jealous villagers against them.[1] However, these negative feelings were often juxtaposed with images of idyllic village life without the anonymity, stress and crime of urban life. On the one hand, the village was the site of relatives perceived to be jealous by my informants and, on the other hand, the

[1] See also Englund (1996).

village was seen as insurance one could fall back on in times of distress and a place idyllic harmony where life was still predictable and safe.

People did not openly admit their equivocal feelings towards kin in the home village and I found it very difficult to come to terms with their attitudes, a lot was left unspoken and what was said often seemed to represent the ideal rather than the reality. A closer look at residence patters after retirement eventually helped to elucidate the attitudes towards the home village and the choices people made to give shape to this relationship. Residence patterns have the advantage that they are a spatial expression of decisions people take with regard to their relationship with kin in the home village. Hence, I was able to observe actual practices with regard to the home village and not idealised normative statements.

To be eligible for pension payments, a main motivation for many to join the civil service in the first place, a civil servant could either retire upon reaching the age of 55 or after twenty years of service. According to the Malawi Public Service Regulations (MPSR) the retiring civil servant could choose between two options: the first option was a lump-sum payment and a small monthly pension and the second option no lump-sum payment with a higher monthly pension. Most retiring officers chose the lump-sum payment in order to have sufficient funds for life after retirement. With regard to retirement the single most important issue was the place of residence. During their careers my informants had only limited input on their place of residence. Many had lived in houses provided by the government at the service station and it was not uncommon to be transferred to another town every few years. After their retirement for the first time in their life they were in a position to choose where to settle and had to take a whole set of factors into account, such as availability of land and property prices. However, the central issue for them was whether they should move to "neutral ground" at a "safe distance" from relatives and in-laws or return to the home village or *kubwera kumudzi*.

In his study of migrants in a poor squatter settlement in Lilongwe, Englund conducted a survey on migrants' emotional and economic attachment to the home village. According to his findings 89 percent of the migrants he interviewed expected to return to their village of origin eventually (*kubwera kumudzi*) (Englund 2002, Table 4). However, he does not present any data on actual returnees to the village and it is a fair guess that

not all of those who talked of their return to the village actually returned. The dream *kubwera kumudzi*, among civil servants at least, ought to be interpreted in terms of a projection of an idyllic “home” or imaginary village far removed from the hectic, dangerous and insecure life in town that was often invoked when people complained about life in town, but also as a place where they had no intention to live actually.

My research on civil servants, a group with higher social status than Englund’s respondents, indicated a more ambiguous attitude towards *kubwera kumudzi*. Unlike the poor migrants in the squatter settlement, civil servants, especially in the middle and higher ranks, stated that they did not expect to return to their home village after retirement. Instead they wanted to settle “on neutral ground”. My informants had a clear idea of the nature of this “neutral ground”: it should offer opportunities for business such as a trading centre or market, have access to urban infrastructure such as public transport, electricity, schools and hospitals, and be situated at a distance that would prevent relatives from visiting too often, on the one hand, and allow the civil servant to visit them if necessary, on the other hand. In practice “neutral ground” was usually a trading centre where land was still available and cheaper than in town. These trading centres were large villages or small towns situated at main roads and were connected to electricity and telecommunication. The civil servants were worried about relatives who might be inclined to take advantage of them if they were easy to reach. Therefore, they hoped to accumulate enough material wealth to be able to settle on “neutral ground” after retirement.

Two case studies illustrate the economic and spatial decisions civil servants took after their retirement. Both case studies present men who decided to settle on “neutral ground” at a “safe distance” from relatives and in-laws in the home district. The first one describes a civil servant who had been retired for more than twenty years when I met him, a man who was deeply involved in community affairs both in his chosen home and his home village. The second case study presents a man at a different stage of his lifecycle who has not yet moved to “neutral ground” and is more anxious about distance than his peer who had established a certain *modus operandi* in relation to his home village.

a) Mr. Kachopoka

Mr. Kachopoka had retired from the civil service in 1981. He was in his late 60s and had held a senior position in the Office of the President and Cabinet. He was also village headman, a position he had inherited from his father, the founder of a district commission and a respected member of the community in Lunzu, a trading centre about twenty kilometres north of Blantyre where he had settled after his retirement. He was also the founder of a district association and a dedicated member of a HIV/AIDS initiative sponsored by the Catholic Church. Mr. Kachopoka comes from a village with the same name as his in the lower Shire valley near Chickwawa, about 50 kilometres south of Blantyre. He received his primary education from White Fathers missionaries who had come to the area in the early 20th century. Later he attended the Catholic seminary in Zomba.

Mr. Kachopoka was a typical representative of the first generation of African civil servants after independence who profited from the new career possibilities that became available at that time for officers who had served in the colonial civil service. He had served in the colonial government since 1956. In the course of the Africanization programme he received six months training in the newly established Staff Training Centre in Mpemba in 1968. Then he was posted to Blantyre. In 1976 he was transferred to Lilongwe where he worked until his retirement. After his retirement he settled in Lunzu. Already in 1971 he had built a house in Lunzu, a very small market place at that time. It turned out that this was a wise decision, in the 1970s a new road was built to connect Blantyre in the South directly with Lilongwe in the Central Region and Lunzu soon developed into a bustling and quickly growing trading centre and market place. The small house that he had built "to occupy the place" was later replaced with a larger house.

He explained his motives for moving to Lunzu after his retirement in the following words: "If you would go to your home village people would demand a lot from you, to safeguard your children's future you have to be at a neutral place. If you retire and go to the village your children would not have a place when you die, it is a security for them". In order to protect his property that he intended to pass on to his children he had decided to move to "neutral ground". But the care for his children was not the only motivation for moving to "neutral ground". He had been away for so long and got used to

life in town with all its amenities. Because of long absence and different lifestyle “you might feel as a stranger after having been away for such a long time and you would not feel comfortable in the village without electricity and running water”.

It was paramount for Mr. Kachopoka to ensure that his children received a good education, and all of his children, three daughters and three sons, had received tertiary education except for the youngest daughter who had just finished secondary school. The eldest son had even acquired a Ph.D. in the United Kingdom and worked as lecturer at the University of Malawi. One daughter and one son worked as secondary school teachers. The youngest son attended college in Blantyre. His second daughter worked as a senior nurse at a health post in Lunzu and the youngest had a temporary job in a family planning clinic in Lunzu. All his children earn enough and do not have to rely on their father’s support as he proudly told me.

He lived in a comfortable house with corrugated iron roof and four rooms a few hundred meters from the main road. The house had electricity and running water. The house was also connected to the telephone network, a gift from his children who had paid for the connection. Mr. Kachopoka owned several houses and gardens in Lunzu. He owned three shop-buildings. With the gratuity (the lump sum payment after retirement) he had built the first shop in 1981 and started a tailor shop. He had bought four sewing machines and employed four tailors. However, in the early 1990s business deteriorated due to cheap imports of second hand clothes from Europe, so he closed the tailor shop. He began to let the shop along with two other that he had built later. The income from the rents was relatively high according to Malawian standards. In 2000 he earned Mk 3000 (ca. US$ 30) for the three shops he let. Lunzu had grown dramatically since the construction of the new road between Blantyre and Lilongwe and had transformed from a sleepy village into a bustling little township and marketplace where property prices soared. He also owned two gardens totalling six hectares where he cultivated maize for subsistence and sale. This was a large garden in the Southern Region where the average size of a person’s property was less than one hectare.

He told me that he did not have any other sources of income while he was in the civil service, “everything was paid from the salary, civil servants lacked capital and they were not encouraged by government to engage in other businesses, the average civil

servant was not interested in business in these days". Usually a retired civil servant would invest the money from the gratuity in a business such as a maize mill or a grocer shop to be supplemented by subsistence farming. During Banda's rule the economy was strictly regulated and left little room for individual commercial endeavours. Especially civil servants were considerably restricted in their out-of-office activities due to the oppressive regime and official regulations that prohibited other income-generating activities.

In Lunzu he was deeply involved in the affairs of the local community and was a member of several committees: the School Committee, the Development Committee, the Committee for Justice and Peace of the Catholic diocese[2] and an HIV/AIDS project sponsored by the Catholic Church. When I interviewed him he had been working a lot on the HIV/AIDS project to raise awareness and influence people's behaviour. He visited surrounding villages to raise awareness and distribute drugs. He visited the sick, gave medication, and advised relatives on proper care. He promoted abstinence to check the spread of the epidemic and he was very sceptical about the use of condoms, an attitude quite in line with the official position of the Catholic Church that advocated abstinence rather than safe sex practices. From the Church he received a monthly allowance of MK 1800 (US $ 17).

His involvement in local politics and community affairs was not limited to Lunzu. He was the chairman of the "Friends of the Lower Shire".[3] The "Friends of the Lower Shire" was a district association founded by him and a few other civil servants from the same area in Lilongwe in 1977. The association started as a burial association and has slowly developed into a revolving fund for funerals, illness and weddings. There are branches in Lilongwe and Blantyre and the association has about 500 members who contribute to the fund. Sometimes the members of the association helped migrants from the Lower Shire to find housing and employment in town. Like his father before him he was also the village headman of the village bearing his name.[4] The village was a large

[2] Initiative of the Catholic Church to raise awareness of political and civil rights in Malawi established during the transition to democracy.
[3] Lower Shire is the name of the low-lying southern tip of Malawi between Chikwawa and Nsanje.
[4] Descent in Mr. Kachopoka's village was organised along matrilineal lines. However, headmanship was passed on patrilineally. This is not uncommon for many matrilineal areas in Malawi that in fact have complex hybrid forms of descent merging elements of patrilineal and matrilineal kinship ideologies due to extensive migration in the 19th century when patrilineally organized groups, most notably the Ngoni, mixed with indigenous matrilineally organized groups (Brantley 1997, Peters 1997).

and thriving settlement and "many people come to live there" as he told me. Since Mr. Kachopoka lived in Lunzu his sister handled the daily affairs of the village together with the advisers, *induna*, and his nephews. He visited the village only in the case of more serious disputes, usually related to land demarcations.

In a sense Mr. Kachopoka epitomized the ideal retired civil servant. Financially independent, in good health, living in his own house, loved by his wife and children, highly respected in the community and an authority figure in the clan, acting as mediator and arbitrator in family affairs. For many retired civil servants such a life remained a dream. Plagued by financial difficulties many of them embarked on ill-fated business ventures that left them destitute and dependant on the support of their children. Not everybody was in the position to move to "neutral ground" that had all the amenities of urban life. For those who were in a better position such as Mr. Kachopoka it was very common to participate in the affairs of the congregation and the community, though not everybody was as prolific as Mr. Kachopoka.

At the same time, he had not severed his ties with his home district. He was the chairman of the "Friends of the Lower Shire" and he was the village headman of his home village. The latter is especially interesting. Although he does not live in the village he remains the village headman and delegates minor tasks to his sister. As the guardian or *mwini mbumba*, of his sorority group and the village headman he was eventually responsible for the harmony in the village. This exposed position of authority can be a burden. As arbitrator in the affairs of his sorority group and the village he was an easy target for backbiting and witchcraft attacks from disgruntled and jealous relatives[5] and he conceded that it was vital for him to maintain the "safe distance" from the kinsfolk in the village towards whom he felt a great deal of responsibility. Therefore, it would be apt to conclude that Mr. Kachopoka was able to maintain the ties with the home village not in spite of his spatial distance but because of it.

[5] See also Marwick (1965:95-97) and Mitchell (1956:137-138) on conflicts and witchcraft within the matrilineage.

b) Mr. Mkandawire

Mr. Mkandawire was a senior officer in Zomba who was preparing for his imminent retirement when I met him in February 2002. He had reached the retirement age of 55 after having served in the civil service since 1969, slowly advancing through the ranks to his present position in the Superscale (highest salary grades in the civil service). Originally he was from Mzimba District in the Northern Region of Malawi. He was married and his wife was from another village in the same district. Since his early youth he had been away from the village. He grew up with his father who worked for the Kandodo supermarket chain in Mzuzu. When he entered the civil service he was posted to Zomba. During the 1970s he was posted in Lilongwe and in the 1980s he was transferred again to Zomba.

After his retirement he would be required to leave his government house and was pondering where to settle. He had not built his own house yet and his first attempt to get a house of his own had failed. In 1995 several hundred houses for civil servants were built in Zomba with funding from the World Bank and loans were made available to civil servants to buy these houses. To his dismay his application was rejected due to "budgetary constraints". The rejection constituted a serious set-back to his life-planning since he had wanted to stay in Zomba where he had lived most of his life and where he and his wife were happy. Without the government loan he would not have the financial resources to settle in Zomba and would have to find a place to settle elsewhere.

After long deliberations he decided to move to Mzimba *boma*[6] after his retirement, a small town and the administrative centre for Mzimba district. In 1998 he had acquired a plot there and since 1999 he had been assembling building materials such as iron sheets, nails, doorframes, window-frames and a toilet at a storage place in Zomba. All of these goods would be transported to the site in Mzimba by the government. The government takes care of the transport of the belongings of a retired civil servant to the new place of residence according to the Malawi Public Service Regulations (MPSR). In total he had already spent MK 70.000 (US$ 900) for the plot and the construction material over the years. The preparations to settle in Mzimba town had been progressing

[6]*Boma* is the acronym for British Overseas Military Administration, used as synonym for government and town, in this case it refers to Mzimba town.

slowly or *pang'ono pang'ono* (little by little) as Mr. Mkandawire said. Whenever he had some extra money he would buy more construction material but often he had to wait several months before he could acquire the next items. He planned to spend part of his gratuity to purchase all material still needed and to construct a four bedroom house on his plot in Mzimba town where he and his wife could live "comfortably".

Mr. Mkandawire chose his place of retirement very carefully and only after a long weighing of the pros and cons of the available options. Eventually he and his wife decided to move to "neutral ground". At first he had wanted to move to Enkwendeni, a trading centre and CCAP (Church of Central African Presbyterian) mission station at the main road between the Central region and Karonga in the north, about 40 km northwest of Mzuzu. However, his wife objected: she was worried that Enkwendeni would be too close to his family. His father lived in a trading centre a few kilometres south of Enkwendeni at about twenty kilometres distance from his father's family's village. To complicate matters his mother's clan lived in a village just a few kilometres from Enkwendeni. Mr. Mkandawire agreed with her that such a concentration of relatives would constitute a burden he and his wife wanted to avoid, "to avoid crowding is much better, we do not want to open a wing of the Enkwendeni mission hospital".

Due to his long absence and the spatial distance to the home district Mr. Mkandawire was afraid of returning to his home village as a stranger, unable to adjust to a village life he had barely experienced: "I want to avoid unnecessary family problems, it must be avoided. You know I have stayed in town for quite a long time, I don't want to get entangled in the way people live, I have been away from the village for so long I doubt I can manage. They know their policies (sic) and I doubt I can cope".[7] The long distance between the north and Zomba prevented his and his wife's relatives from paying regular visits. Mr. Mkandawire used the phrase "distance saves me" to express his desire to stay outside of family affairs in the home village. He was wary of jealous relatives who could entertain exaggerated expectations and who could accuse him of selfishness and

[7] It is important to note that the "cosmopolitan" urban lifestyle that has been identified by Ferguson in his research on the Zambian Copperbelt (1999) is much less distinct and pronounced among urbanites in Malawi. Informants stressed again and again their respect for village customs, *miyambi yakumudzi,* and tended to express their anxiety about adjustment to village life in terms of their own inadequacy rather than their superiority. See also Englund (2002a).

greed, *umbombo*. Therefore he was keen on maintaining what he and his wife perceived as a safe distance to the kinsfolk in the home district.

As a result he chose to move to Mzimba town, about 150 kilometres from his and his wife’s home villages. Mzimba town had all the amenities of urban life and several of Mr. Mkandawire’s acquaintances from Enkwendeni and Mzuzu worked there for the district administration and planned to settle there, too. Obviously he preferred the social contacts with these people who had the same *habitus* toward villagers whose “policies” were alien and potentially threatening to him.

It is important to note that the house “on neutral ground” was usually not the only house a civil servant built in his life. It was quite common to build a house in the home village as a place to stay while visiting and to demonstrate the commitment of the civil servant to his or her home village. However, people rarely intended to live there permanently. For informants with a matrilineal background such as Mr. Kachopoka, the home village was the village of the mother’s clan, whereas for people with patrilineal background such as Mr. Mkandawire, the home village was the village of the father’s clan. Several of my male informants with matrilineal background who were married to women with a matrilineal background had built houses in the village of their wife. The motivation to do so was the institution of uxorilocal marriage custom among groups such as the Chewa and the Yao in the Central and Southern Region of Malawi known as *chikamwini*. According to matrilineal kinship ideology the husband is supposed to build a house when he moves into the village of his wife’s matrikin.

However, none of my informants intended to live for long periods in such houses, which were merely meant to express one’s adherence to custom. In fact, the men were strongly opposed to the idea of moving to the wife’s village after retirement because of fear of the influence of the wife’s matrikin and because of their precarious position in the village, especially in the case of the death of the wife. Hence, it was not unusual for a retired civil servant with the necessary means to build a simple house in the wife’s village after their marriage, a house for visits in his own home village, and the house “on neutral ground” where he intended to settle after his retirement.

c) "Neutral Ground"

The desire to move to "neutral ground" contrasted with the custom of being buried in the home village. The strong sense of attachment of African townspeople to their home village is expressed in the burial at home (Geschiere/Gugler 1998, Gugler 2002). Indeed in Malawi most townspeople were taken to their home villages and buried there, often with considerable effort and cost. The payment of the costs for the transport of the corpse to the home village was, therefore, considered by many civil servants as one of the main perks of government employment (see Chapter Four). According to my informants it was very important for the relatives in the village to claim the deceased as one of theirs and to bury him or her in the home village. Most of my informants also wished to be buried in the home village but in practice the issue of the place of burial proved to be very controversial. It was common that the village of the deceased and the village of the wife competed to host the burial, especially if it concerned an influential and wealthy senior civil servant. Others preferred to be buried in town but expected that their corpse would, as one of my informants remarked wryly, be "hijacked by relatives" after their death.

Among civil servants there was a strong preference to settle on "neutral ground" at a "safe distance" from relatives in the home village, their squabbles, policies, jealousy and expectations. In order to establish a place at a safe distance civil servants acquired property and built a house. They might do this during their career as in Mr. Kachopoka's case who bought land in Lunzu already in the early 1970s and built a house there before he retired, or it can be done in phases as in Mr. Mkandawire's case depending on the financial resources available. The motive for this decision inlcuded the desire to avoid problems with rural kin, the protection of their accumulated wealth for themselves and their children, and the wish to continue an urban "modern" lifestyle.

An important motive to move to "neutral ground" was the protection of status and wealth. Many civil servants with a matrilineal background expressed concern about moving to the wife's village after retirement because they feared they might be thrown out of the village in the event of the wife's death. Part of the explanation for this anxiety is the uxorilocal marriage pattern among parts of the matrilineal ethnic groups. All rights that a husband possesses in his wife's village are derived from his union with his wife. If

the marriage is dissolved or the wife dies the husband is forced to leave the village in which he is literally only a guest or *nkamwini*. A senior female civil servant commented on her male colleagues desire to settle on "neutral ground": "Now they are becoming more sophisticated, they don't want to go back to the village. The reason is once they go back to the village and their wife would die some of the people would chase them out, they cannot build a house elsewhere, that's why they want to go to a place that is neutral, should the wife die the man could stay, so they do that now."

Women who followed the husband to his home village had the same fear of isolation or exclusion in case of the death of the husband. Generally people were very afraid of the greed of relatives in the home village. Stories of "property-grabbing" by the relatives of the deceased were ubiquitous and dominated newspaper reports on "gender issues". Property-grabbing denotes a widespread practice when relatives of the deceased spouse literally "grab" everything from the widow/widower. Generally, both men and women can become the victim of property-grabbing, though all informants agreed that widows whose husbands were wealthy were the prime targets of the man's customary heirs, i.e. uncles and cousins from his "mother's side". They all were afraid to be put in a very vulnerable position in the village of the deceased where his or her relatives have relatively easy access to the estate of the deceased partner.[8]

The position of the children was the other central concern for people who moved to "neutral ground"; Mr. Kachopoka stated that "to safeguard your children's future you have to be at a neutral place". The protection of the acquired social status for themselves and the following generations was the central motive for civil servants to move to "neutral ground". The fear was that the accumulated wealth could not be protected from claims of kinsfolk if one would settle in the home village. As we have seen in Chapter Four business was crucial to ensure the social distance the civil servant had built up during his or her career because of the regular salary and the various benefits that came with the job. The income was further supplemented by subsistence farming. These activities enabled the retired civil servant to keep "safe distance". Business and

[8] Property-grabbing is illegal and violates the Wills and Inheritance Act (Amendment 1998); enforcement, however, is often lacking. Unfortunately there is no empirical quantitative data available on the phenomenon, in 1999 an unpublished survey sponsored by DANIDA merely recorded people's perception of property-grabbing but failed to collect empirical data on the phenomenon itself.

agricultural production "on neutral ground" were situated outside the sphere of the home village and were at least partly removed from the reach of the kinsfolk there. In order to protect their wealth from what they perceived as "jealous" rural kin and to pass it on to their children they had to move to "neutral ground" out of reach of their rural kin.

And last but not least the desire to maintain an urban lifestyle should not be underestimated. Due to their socialisation and the life in town both men had developed a distinct lifestyle they could not maintain in the village. In the trading centre there were shops, health facilities, electricity, running water, telecommunications and easy access to the road network. Furthermore, they could expect to find more people who had the same socialisation and lifestyle in the trading centre, people with whom they felt they had more in common with than with their rural kin.

3. The Importance of Associations

One of the effects of an urban "civilized" lifestyle at a "safe distance" was the growing reliance on social networks other than those based on kinship. Traditionally the village had been perceived as the last refuge on which one could fall back in times of crisis. This perception seems to have changed. Civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba had a clear preference for relatives with a similar social status and for voluntary associations such as district associations, church groups and welfare committees to serve as social security in case of unanticipated contingencies. This preference for people with similar social status and lifestyle, whether related or not, did not result in an open break with kinsfolk in the home village. People like Mr. Kachopoka and Mr. Mkandawire carefully strove to negotiate a safe distance from rural kin that allowed them to check demands on their resources, on the one hand, and to maintain cordial ties with the home village, on the other hand.

The church congregation and the colleagues from the workplace and various other organisations such as district and burial associations played a central role in civil servants' life in Lilongwe and Zomba. District and burial associations are not a manifestation of traditional or primordial ties with the home region. These associations should rather be understood as urban phenomena (Englund 2001, Gluckman 1960, Mitchell 1956a). The ethnic or regional identity expressed through membership is

primarily a way for townspeople to organise themselves and address issues that arise from life in town.

Religious belief and the participation in church affairs were matters of extreme importance among civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba and pervaded all aspects of daily life. In Zomba many employees of the government offices assembled in their lunch break in groups of ten to twenty people in the adjacent Botanical Gardens to pray and sing together. The same could be observed on Capital Hill, Lilongwe's modern government quarter, where groups of civil servants gathered in their lunch break in the shade of the trees between the office buildings to sing and pray together. Sunday morning was the time that most of my informants would crowd the benches of one of the various churches.[9] Many took also a more active interest in the affairs of the congregation and participated in neighbourhood prayer groups, referred to as *mphaka* in the Catholic Church and Jesus' Way by the Seventh Day Adventists, for instance.[10]

The neighbourhood groups were important hubs of support and solidarity between neighbours and a manifestation of both people's engagement in the church and neighbourly hospitality, *chinsani*, outside the sphere of kin and the home village. Neighbourhoods in Lilongwe and Zomba were socially stratified to a high degree. Hence, the members of a *mphaka* usually shared a similar social status and *habitus* due to high degree of social stratification in neighbourhoods and townships. The women took more interest in this form of sociability and played a more active role than the men.

In most government offices, schools, hospitals, offices, and barracks employees were organized in so-called Welfare Committees or Social Welfare Funds. Typically all employees of a department or school would be organized in the Committee, a revolving fund to which they paid monthly contributions with a secretary, a chairperson and a treasurer. Two types of funds would be distinguished: those that gave emergency loans and those that paid condolence money in the case of death of the member or one of his or

[9] The largest churches in Malawi are the Catholic Church, C.C.A.P. (Church of Central African Presbyterian), and Seventh Day Adventists, though the new charismatic or born-again churches have quickly gained ground.

[10] I was not able to check whether all churches had these neighbourhood prayer and support groups although I suppose that the established churches (Catholic, Seventh Day Adventists, CCAP) and some of the smaller more institutionalised churches (Lutheran, Assemblies of God and other born-again churches) had this form of organization - at least in the urban and peri-urban areas. My empirical material is limited to the Seventh Day Adventists and the Catholic Church in Blantyre, Lilongwe and Zomba.

her relatives. For example, the preamble of the statute of the Welfare Fund at a department at NSO stated that the fund had the objective "to provide financial assistance to members of the fund in case of need: like funeral, sickness and other genuine personal problems and to reduce the heavy burden experienced through borrowing from other sources".

All welfare committees had these and similar objectives, the Welfare Committee at a primary school in one of Lilongwe's townships, for example, offered condolence money and emergency grants to its members. It consisted of a chairperson, vice-chairperson, secretary, vice-secretary, treasurer, executive committee and all 75 teachers of the school.[11] The members had to pay a monthly contribution of MK 20 and received money in the case of illness, death and other emergencies. In case of illness a member received MK 10, a member who was admitted to the hospital received MK 20 and other members who paid him or her a visit received the bus fare. The fund paid MK 100 condolence money if one of the parents, the spouse or a child died, MK 50 if the grandparents, an *amalume* (MB), the maternal aunts or the parents-in-law died and MK 20 if the paternal uncle, aunts, cousins or other in-laws died. The executive committee decided on applications for an emergency grant. In 1999 the Committee granted three loans of MK 500, MK 250 and MK 700 to staff members in difficulties. The Committee paid also condolence money of MK 50 to the parents of pupils who died. In 1999 the Committee ran out of funds several times because "there are too many funerals these days" as the chairwoman put it. In these situations the Committee borrowed money from the wealthier staff members who did business and had more cash at their disposal than the others.

Funerals were events where several support networks converged and complemented each other. For example, one of my female informants, a primary school teacher at Biwi Primary School, was the secretary of a *mphaka*, which counted about a dozen families. One day in February 2002 one of the members died unexpectedly. While we were having dinner we heard whistles being blown by boys to announce the funeral. They walked the streets to inform the neighbourhood. This was the sign for people to put

[11] The headmaster selected the chairperson of the Committee, the other executive members were elected by the staff members. The Committee had a written constitution.

firewood in front of their houses to be collected later by the same boys and delivered to the house of the deceased. These boys had received orders from the traditional chief[12] of the neighbourhood who had been immediately informed of the death by the widow of the deceased. After dinner my informant went to the house of the deceased to see what had to be done and to discuss matters with the other members of the *mphaka*. Then they organized the night vigil, prepared food for the guests and co-ordinated the collection of condolence money and food. The next morning, the day of the burial, the members of the Welfare Committee of the school of the deceased, some of whom had already attended the night vigil, organised a government vehicle from the city council, the authority responsible for primary schools, to transport the corpse to the home village in Kasungu district, about 30 kilometres north of Lilongwe. There the village headman had already lit a fire at the village graveyard to announce the funeral. The members of the *mphaka* played an important role in organizing and co-ordinating the display of the body in Biwi in the morning and the transport of the body along with the priest and the bereaved family to the home village where the burial took place.

District Associations were another important form of organization in the urban areas. The district associations were organisations with a written statute, secretary, treasurer and executive committee. District associations as a form of organization are not a recent phenomenon and their antecedents can be traced back to colonial times. In fact, Malawi has one of the strongest and longest traditions of this form or organization in Central Africa (Rotberg 1972). District associations or Native Associations as they were called during colonial times were an attempt by the small African elite consisting of people who had enjoyed missionary education and worked for the missions, the government, or as traders and commercial farmers to influence colonial politics. The colonial government was very sceptical about these modern articulations of "natives" and ignored the demands and complaints voiced through these associations. Instead the colonial administration promoted and strengthened the "traditional" chiefs as representatives of the African population. It is interesting to note that the label native was adopted by many of these associations only following pressure by the colonial

[12] The urban areas, especially Traditional Housing Areas (THCs), the squatter townships and older townships within the municipal boundaries also have so-called *chiefs*, though formally only *chiefs* outside the urban boundaries (in the district) are recognized.

government, which was keen on tribalising African society (Chanock 1975, Mamdani 1996, McCracken 1983, Rotberg 1972). Most district associations were revolving funds that provided assistance for funerals and weddings; some of the wealthier associations in Blantyre also supported charitable projects in their respective home districts.

4. The Nature of Kinship Obligations

At the outset of this chapter I argued that personal ambition and the care for dependants demanded by traditional kinship ideology do not have to be at odds with the ambition "to grow" as an individual, to dispel the notion of a absolute divide between individual ambition and communal responsibility that used to dominate the foreign understanding of "civilised" Africans. B.S. Platt, for example, conducted an extensive survey for the colonial administration between 1938 and 1940 on nutrition, health and agriculture. His report, with the title "Nyasaland Survey Papers", comprised a study of the urban township Ndirande in Blantyre. Parts of the report were published in 1992 (Berry/Petty 1992) but the urban study was not included. Luckily I found a typescript of the report in the National Archives in Zomba.[13] Platt observed a tension between individual aspirations and kinship solidarity:

> Most men have to choose between this individualistic attitude towards their earning and an acceptance of extensive kinship obligations as would probably bring them heavily into debt and make the attainment of a higher standard of living virtually impossible. The solution of these problems will doubtless be in a compromise between what can be recognized at the present time as two opposing tendencies. On the one hand there is the striving for the attainment of a higher standard of living which the native interprets as being the possession of furniture, western clothes, bicycles and books, and, on the other hand, there is the conservative tribal attitude involving hospitality and the provision of food which expresses itself in the tenacity with which they cling to land to supply at least part of the food consumed. (Platt 1940: II (6), (7))

In line with the thinking of the time that juxtaposed "modern individualism" with "conservative tribal attitude" Platt presupposed a dualism between individual self-interest and the demands of "extensive kinship obligations". While I think it is wrong to

[13] Thanks are due to Prof. John McCracken who made me aware of the existence of the urban survey when he mentioned a colonial survey with "nutritional data on civil servants" in a conversation.

conceptualise the conflicting tendencies observed by Platt in terms of a dichotomy between modern *Gesellschaft* and traditional *Gemeinschaft* it is impossible to ignore the predicament of more privileged Malawians who are torn between striving for material security for their nuclear family and the expectations their rural kin have of benefiting from the – often exaggerated – wealth of their urban cousins.[14] To finance the education of the children of rural kin and to send remittances literally means that the purchase of a refrigerator or a television must be postponed. Many civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba were deeply in debt because they had to pay for medical treatment or the funeral of a relative.

This part of the chapter addresses the nature of these "extensive kinship obligations". Are they binding obligations that precisely circumscribe the scope of solidarity or are they very general principles that are open to interpretation? The following two sections are aimed at contributing to an answer to this conundrum. The first presents the interpretation of a popular song of the promise given by an *amalume* (MB), a traditional authority figure in the village to look after his nephew. The second section discusses the nature of the obligation felt by my informants towards their rural kin.

a) *Amalume* – The Promise of the Uncle

The study of morality in Africa often draws on proverbs and popular culture. With the help of Jean Chaponda I made a survey of popular songs, cartoons in newspapers, theatre plays and the sketches of Isaac and Jacob, two immensely popular comedians, searching for clues with regard to the nature of moral obligations to share or allocate. I hoped that in the derision and joking about these relationships I could find a key to the ambivalent attitude towards relatives in the village. Although many sketches, plays and cartoons used the theme of the townsman and the villager[15] we found only a few references to the relationship between townspeople and villagers and the entailing moral obligations. Most manifestations of popular culture that referred to cultural dualism and kinship morality

[14] See already Gluckman (1958) and Mitchell (1956a). Recently Ferguson has sharpened the critique of cultural dualism in his critical review of the RLI-research on the Copperbelt (1999).

did not problematise the relationship between townspeople and villagers and the influence of kinship ideology. Cultural dualism served rather as given, a mundane fact of the social fabric that did not provoke much response. Of course, people privately admitted to their mixed feelings about relationships with kinsfolk but apparently the ideology of kinship harmony and solidarity could not be criticised in public.

Most sketches by Issac and Jacob centred on the themes of adultery, marital fidelity and the institution of marriage. Many pop-songs addressed HIV/AIDS, politics, corruption and the economic crisis in the "New Malawi". We found only a few songs that explicitly dealt with kinship obligations and the cultural dualism between town and village. One of the best songs in this respect is *amalume,* Uncle, by Albert Khoza, a *Kwaito*-artist based in Blantyre. The song *amalume* is sung by a boy, an orphan, addressing his *amalume,* the mother's brother. In a matrilineal context the *amalume* (MB) is a person with great authority and responsibility acting as guardian for his sisters and their children. The boy addresses the *amalume* in the first person, "*amalume,* on the *bwalo* you promised to look after me but here in town you spend all your money on women and drinking. *Amalume* what should become of me if you do not help me." To address a song in the first person to the listener or a fictive character is a very common form for songs in Malawi and is a manner of expressing grievances that can not be raised through direct appeal. The *bwalo* is the centre of the village, it is the place where the *gule wamkulu*[16] dances are performed and the court where the chief and his advisors (*induna*) discuss and settle quarrels, *mlandi* (pl.). The *bwalo* is located within the realm of the village governed by the "traditional" customs, *miyambi yakumudzi,* of kinship ideology. A promise or oath made on the *bwalo* is public and witnessed by the village headman, the *induna* and the other villagers.

The boy complains that the *amalume* broke this promise and neglects him in town. Instead of taking an interest in him and supporting him the *amalume* spends his

[15] For example, the weekend-edition of the newspaper *The Nation* featured a cartoon with country rat and town rat commenting on politics. The opposition of two different characters is a common feature of al comic duos, the thick and the thin, the smart and the dumb, etc.

[16] *Gule Wamkulu* is the performace of the masked dancers of the *nyau,* male secret societies of the Achewa and Amanganja. They perform funeral and initiation rites wearing masks representing wild animals, *zirombo*, and ancestral spirits, *nyau*, that are associated with the world of the ancestors and are based on the graveyard, *manda*.

money on women and alcohol. The song juxtaposes the village as a place of "traditional" kinship solidarity with the town as a place of moral corruption, selfish indulgence in worldly pleasures, and individualism. With regard to the opposition between the individualized corrupt town and the collective "traditional" village it is important to note that the artist is a member of the urban elite and that his audience is primarily the younger generation growing up in town. By invoking the image of the promise on the *bwalo* the artist tries to remind both his generation and the older generation of the "traditional" obligations of the *amalume*. In this sense the song has a very explicit moral message. The song criticises the hypocritical use of "traditional" moral values to maintain social status among kin: on the *bwalo* the *amalume* made a promise but as soon as the *amalume* and his nephew leave the sphere of the village and enter town he drops the mask of responsible *amalume* and shows his true face. The boy reminds his *amalume* of the promise he made on the *bwalo.*

The medium of a pop song is chosen by the artist to draw the attention of his audience to a general problem. The Chichewa-proverb *Apawo ndi mizu ya kachere,* "the clan is like the roots of the Kachere-tree (fig-tree)" encapsulates this strong rejection of open conflict among relatives: a multitude of roots is invisible to the eye of the observer who only sees a strong and unified tree. The *amalume* is the guardian of his *mbumba* and responsible for quarrels within the *mbumba.* Hence, the boy cannot complain to anyone other than the *amalume* and he cannot even threaten him with sanctions since he depends on the support of the *amalume*. The only thing he can do is to remind the *amalume* of his duties in the hope that he will eventually do what he promised on the *bwalo.*

We do not hear the voice of the *amalume* in the song. What would he respond to his nephew when confronted with the charge of neglect and selfish behaviour? Most of my informants belonged to the category of *amalume,* i.e. they were supporting a relative's child staying in their household - paying school-fees, providing food and clothes, etc. Often they complained about wildly exaggerated expectations of these children who often failed in school and used the money they received to buy schoolbooks and stationery for consumer goods instead. Some even accused the children of acting as "spies" for relatives who wanted get information on the material wealth of their relatives in town.

During my fieldwork I did witness several cases of adolescents taking advantage of the relative they were staying with in town. For example, I spent several months in the household of a senior civil servant in Zomba. The son of his sister who had passed away was staying with him. The young man was nineteen and had just finished secondary school. He was staying at his uncle's house while looking for a job in Zomba. Unfortunately he had failed the MSCE-exam and without a degree his chances of finding a good job were slim. However, he told me he was confident that his uncle would find a job for him. During the three months I was staying in the household the nephew mainly loafed around, watched television, hung out in town, picking up girls, and spent the evenings in bottle-stores with his friends. As far as I could see he did not do anything to find a job, relying completely on his uncle and his uncle's efforts to find him a job. Of course, these are problems to be expected with adolescents, but the vignette nevertheless highlights that there are two sides to the story of the neglected child and the selfish *amalume*.

b) The Interpretation of Kinship Solidarity:

Exaggerated expectations of kin and the strong emphasis on intra-kin harmony soured many relationships and resulted in backbiting and witchcraft. The discrepancy between expectations and actual support provided by civil servants was a source of insecurity and anxiety among my informants. The following account from a senior civil servant illustrates this ambiguity:

> In all the situations I have failed to assist, I have discerned the feeling that the people couldn't understand how I was unable to assist them. As for my wife's relative, who first came to the husband of my sister-in-law and he couldn't help because his truck has been down for a month, they were complaining that my wife and her relatives are not like their father who was assisting them. They were being accused of being stingy and selfish and inconsiderate to their plight. This, I think, is a source of conflict and disputes. The only reason it doesn't become a dispute is that the villagers are unable to speak off their minds to the concerned persons, for example, they tell me about the husband of my sister-in-law, yet they can't tell him to his face. I also suspect that they talk about me to the others behind my back. I also perceive that lack of appreciation and understanding as to how much one can help. This is true with my family, no one appreciates the burden I shoulder and the extent to which I can assist. I have to control myself nearly always for

> fear of making myself stupid while trying to be reasonable with the concerned peoples. I believe strongly that many others who don't have that patience can end up flaring up and heightening the existing tensions. In all this, I wouldn't be surprised that issues of witchcraft can easily crop in.

Within kinship groups, jealousy, witchcraft and gossiping were constant undercurrents, and those who were perceived to be wealthy were constantly confronted with demands for support. Often they were either accused of being a witch or the subject of witchcraft attacks by other relatives. He continued his reflection on moral principles and their interpretation:

> The problem here is who sets the value range of importance for the obligation to help? How does one understand the categories and differentiate at which level one is operating on? The obligation to help relatives in need, *kuthandiza*, is our custom cast in iron, *miyambo*. I am expected as part of *miyambi* [pl.] to do anything possible, even put myself in critical debt, to pay for my mother's hospital expenses or the death of my brother and I can't abscond from such responsibility without being considered morally bankrupt. Yet, I can be exempted or people will understand my failure to contribute towards my brother's wedding or education or my mother's house, but not her food. Since there is no rule governing the importance of one custom in relation to the other, there are ultimately differences in understanding or application in certain circumstances. It is as if the ideal vision has now become blurred and using the same principle(s), yet people act differently and this tends to loosen the binding character of certain *miyambi* on rural and urban people. This difference in applicability depends also on ability: how much does one have to provide so as to be able to fulfil certain expectations depends on one's resources: where a small-scale vendor is expected to help with a lot of cash, even over issues of life and death, the *miyambo* loses its binding character since the person can't fulfil his obligations.

The informant complained that there was no authority or meta-rule that interpreted the moral obligation to help and determined the scope of the obligation; instead different people interpreted the moral principle of kinship solidarity differently. The moral principles of kinship ideology proved to be very flexible and their interpretation was subject to constant negotiation. Interpretations varied since there was not third party accessible that might have provided an authoritative interpretation of the moral obligations.

Yet the interpretation of the moral principle to help was not arbitrary. Kinship obligations were differentiated by grade of relatedness, availability of resources and the

perceived need. The request of a distant kin who needs money to start a business could be refused, usually by reference to one's own limited resources, without offending anyone, including the requester. However, if a first grade relative was in need of urgent medical treatment or had died, one "can't abscond from such responsibility without being considered morally bankrupt". Thus, in case of illness and death of first grade relatives such as the spouse, parents, children, siblings and other close relatives there was little room for interpretation.

Indeterminacy crept mainly in through the assessment of the need and the extent of support in less vital situations. In this respect the crucial issue was who ought to decide what kind of support was appropriate and which situations warranted a request for support. All civil servants emphasised their freedom to decide whom to help, in what form and under which circumstances. Civil servants in Lilongwe and Zomba always emphasised that they supported relatives because they had decided to do so. It was important for them to assert their agency and to stress that they were by no means obliged or forced to help. They portrayed themselves as acting out of pity and a sense of moral obligation to help. Despite the reality that they often responded to considerable social pressure to provide support it was important for them to present themselves as in charge, as controlling access to their resources.

As might be expected they did not honour every request. They made a clear distinction between sensible demands such as school-fees and demands they considered foolish. Relatives who would just ask for money without a specific and "useful" purpose could not count on their support. Being in a position to act upon such distinction was extremely important for my informants: after all, it would be inconsistent for "civilised" urbanites to appear to be under the control of "uncivilised" uneducated kin from the home village. Reality was often different: stories about jealous relatives in the home village were ubiquitous, many of my informants admitted that they feared witchcraft attacks and lived in fear of being accused of being a witch because of their alleged selfishness and greed.[17]

[17] It should be noted that the fear of relatives did not only have a supernatural aspect: stories of poisoning and attacks or burglaries were common.

Witchcraft came into these matters in two ways: on the one hand, people who were perceived to be rich could be accused of being a witch, *afiti*, and, on the other hand, many of my informants were afraid of becoming the target of witchcraft attacks made by jealous relatives.[18] With regard to the former, a selfish and greedy person, *munthu wa umbombo*, was accused of being a witch because of the assumption that material wealth is acquired through the use of medicine, *mankhwala*, made from human organs. Rumours about sorcery undertaken by rich people to accumulate more wealth were ubiquitous, though no one would ever have dared to utter these accusations in the presence of the accused for fear of reprisals. In the second case, witchcraft might be used against a relative in town who adopts an air of aloofness. To be "proud", *onyada*, or to "boast", *kusitu kumula*, was strongly disapproved of and could be sanctioned through backbiting, social isolation and witchcraft. Therefore it was important to most of my informants, especially those with higher social status like Mr. Kachopoka and Mr. Mkandawire, to create and maintain "safe distance", both spatially and socially. Witchcraft is thus a way to express the deep emotions related to the tensions of different lifestyles and the disjuncture between expectations and feasible support in the context of processes of urbanisation and modernization (Fisiy/Geschiere 1991, 1996, Geschiere 1997).

Many studies of the state in sub-Saharan Africa seem to assume a shared moral ideology among Africans who are enmeshed in a patrimonial or neo-patrimonial system largely regulated by primordial kinship and ethnic categories regardless of social status, class and occupation (Bayart 1993, Chabal/Daloz 1999, Dia 1993, Ekeh 1975, Médard 1982). This conceptualisation of morality is seriously flawed: empirical research reveals significant differences in the interpretation of moral values between different social classes. Rohregger, for example, conducted research in a poor squatter area in Lilongwe (Area 25, Sector 7) and her informants stressed their claim on the resources of their wealthier relatives. According to her informants, the moral principle for sharing one's wealth and displaying the spirit of kinship solidarity, *chibale*, and neighbourliness, *chinsani*, constituted a claim they were entitled to (personal communication, Rohregger 2003). This interpretation was at odds with the statements I had collected among civil

[18] For a comprehensive discussion of this differentiation and the nexus between new forms of accumulation and witchcraft in Cameroon, see Fisiy/Geschiere (1991, 1996) and Geschiere (1997).

servants who were a few notches up the social ladder. These people stressed their autonomy from the social pressures of relatives, it was they who decided whom to help and in what form since there were no general unequivocal rules defining the scope of kinship solidarity.

Although the interpretation of what was considered appropriate varied according to social status, neither the response nor the request were even posed directly, thus allowing both parties to save their face. Some of my informants devised the most elaborate strategies of evasion to control access to their resources. One senior civil servant in Zomba, for example, lived in a very spacious house leased by the government. However, this blessing was a curse in disguise since an ever-growing number of relatives, *abale*, enjoyed his hospitality and took up quarters in his compound. Since the space was available there was no apparent reason to refuse them and soon he started to feel encroached upon in his own house. After a couple of months he decided to take certain steps since the bills for all the water and electricity used by his fast growing household posed a serious threat to his budget. He started to spread a rumour that his transfer to Lilongwe was imminent. Soon his relatives became worried and wondered what would happen to them if their patron moved to Lilongwe. Soon I heard that one family had moved out and honoured another relative in town with a visit. He was never actually transferred, but that could be easily explained away by the unreliability of the bureaucracy. In the meantime he had found another house that, which, not by chance, was much smaller and did not have enough space for all the relatives who wanted to visit him.

Conclusions

The adherence to kinship solidarity proved to be highly situational. Those civil servants who had the means preferred to move to "neutral ground" at a "safe distance" after their retirement. It was revealing to observe how social distance was translated into spatial distance. The civil servants were keen on maintaining the social and spatial distance they had established during their careers after retirement from the civil service. However, the decision to create spatial distance in order to maintain the accumulated wealth and to avoid squabbles with the rural kin did not imply that civil servants wanted to sever their ties with the village. On the contrary, both men, Mr. Kachopoka to a greater extent than

Mr. Mkandawire, had maintained ties with and had a sense of attachment to their home village. Mr. Kachopoka's case is especially revealing in this respect since he maintained ties on different levels with his home.

The attachment to the home village was expressed in terms of a cultural dualism between "modern" and "traditional" discourse. Yet, despite this sense of attachment they preferred to keep the distance they had established during their career in the civil service. It was striking that the "neutral place" was at a distance prohibitive to the poorer relatives in the village but not insurmountable for the retired officer. "Distance saved them" since their relatives did not have the financial means to visit them too often while the home village was not too far away for them due as their financial resources enabled them to pay the bus fare. The maintenance of social and spatial distance was vital to civil servants: the fear of jealousy, witchcraft, backbiting, theft and property-grabbing were a source of great anxiety among civil servants when they were thinking about retirement. A "neutral" place promised more security than the village where their status of being "civilised" and "modern" would set them apart and their material wealth would be threatened by the claims of relatives.

Kinship groups have become increasingly socially stratified as a result of the process of class formation with formal education and a "modern" lifestyle serving as the primary markers of distinction. It is a common practice of employed and educated family members in town to form a sub-group to discuss support for relatives from the wider kinship group. People in town rely more on other relatives in town and forms of association such as district associations and welfare committees for their own social security than on relatives in the village. To avoid some of the tensions arising out of personalized support the ties with the home district are transformed into a more abstract form of attachment through membership in district associations, which serve as an urban form of solidarity rather than as a manifestation of kinship and ethnic identity.

One of the main motives for the desire to move to "neutral ground" seemed to be the ambiguous and total character of kinship obligations. My informants were willing to share part of their wealth with relatives but they wanted to control access to their resources. Otherwise they feared they could not maintain their "civilised" way of live and the standard of living they had become accustomed to. Civil servants in Lilongwe and

Zomba asserted their autonomy and agency with regard to support to relatives by invoking their status as being “modern” and “civilised”, though in fact they often felt compelled to provide support out of fear of social isolation, backbiting and witchcraft. Hence, they manoeuvred carefully not to alienate their relatives in the village on whom they wanted to count in times of distress.