



Figure 6.1: Mr. Kachazu's Support Diagram

in case of sickness, or contribute to the funeral costs if one of his 'employees' dies. Mr. Kachazu perceives this support as an act of benevolence or duty in his role as an employer, and equally significantly, as an important investment in his

social status as a good employer and trustworthy businessman, which in turn may result in new assignments – which are of course especially important for the self-employed.

“I provide them with money and help them in sickness and funerals and with work, *Ganyu* or employment. The help is very close, because it is easy for workers to come here. If you help each other, you can also get help in the future. As an employer it is expected to support them. (...) I like to give because already the bible says the more you give the more comes back. I also experience this. When I give I can also easily get work. When I hold my money back it is more difficult. When I help my workers, they work whole-hearted and do a good job, and then it is also easier to get a new assignment.” (Interview No. 69, Mr. Kachazu, Self-employed Builder)

The ‘informal’ and highly personalised character of these working relations, which also provides the basis for their functioning, invites the label of modern type patron-client relations.<sup>2</sup> However, I believe that one should be careful with this typology. Many of these support relations bear a certain degree of institutionalisation that in my opinion goes beyond notions of patron-client relations, which always seem to be characterised by a certain degree of arbitrariness and benevolence (Rothstein 1986; Fatton 1986). Although employers in the ‘informal’ economy often were not able to live up to their social security role due to resource constraints, it seems to me that the social support provided is understood as more than favours being granted. On the contrary, it seems that the investment in these relations is a very rational one, as the above statement suggests; an investment that not only renders workers happy, but also improves the situation of the investor with regard to future building assignments.

Building assignments may also lead to relations of dependency between the contractor and the people whom he is building for. These relations may also obtain a social security character. It is very common for contractors to receive cash advances on work still to be finished. Some builders or *Ganyu* workers are actually living in houses they built for ‘absent landlords or landladies’ currently living in other towns or abroad and planning to retire to Sector 7. In exchange,

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<sup>2</sup> The so-called ‘patron-client’ relations that denote favours that are granted by a patron “*in return for political support, material goods and/or other services*” (Rothstein 1986: 228; see also Fatton 1986), have for a long time been discussed as being exclusively related to the traditional affective and moral kinship system. However, the importance of clientilism, patronage and corruption in order to gain access to support, care and infrastructure that we have also seen throughout this book shows that patron-client relations are also a mode of behaviour that characterises modernising and thus also urbanising societies.

they do not pay rent but just some token money. Many of these relations continue to exist beyond the building period, and may even evolve into close relations. The maintenance of these relationships beyond the working period is not always voluntary, however: many people who undertake the project of building a house are not able to pay the builders the total cost at once. In this respect, all builders complained about outstanding debts, which in some cases were really high, reaching a few thousand Kwacha. While some builders regarded being forced to run after defaulters as a negative side of their profession, for others these outstanding debts also provided security to which they might resort in difficult times. When money was short, they could ask these people to balance still outstanding debts.

### 6.2.3 Worker's Networks

While vertical relations are important too, it is especially the relations among workmates that render the working environment such an important site in terms of social support. Workmates provide a source of multiple network relations that are partly very intense and may grow into friendship and kinship relations and at the same time, also encompass highly institutionalised forms of support, as Mai Swalo's support diagram shows (Fig. 6.2). She is a teacher at the Kagawa Primary School, situated in Area 25A. Her colleagues are not only a source of personal support relations; in addition to the school-run Rotating Saving and Credit Association (ROSCA), the Teachers' Bank, she participates in a small saving group consisting of working colleagues, and in the Teachers' Funeral Association *Condolence* as well.

Like in Mai Swalo's case, working relations are usually relations for borrowing money; small amounts needed for daily contingencies, such as food or relish, medical treatment or the purchase of medicine. The amount of money borrowed ranges from MK 20 to MK 200, depending on how rich the working environment and the individuals are. In any case, the working environment is considered an important and easily accessible support structure, because – being the workplace – people usually have some extra money available. At the same time, close daily interaction guarantees strong social control of network relations and repayment modes. Otherwise, one would lose his/her credibility as a reliable network partner. Finding one's way into this dense network of borrowing and debt relations and learning not to overstretch them is not that easy and usually involves a learning period, which is especially important for network newcomers.

“It took me one month to be able to borrow money. I observed how it works and saw that they were assisting each other. And I saw that it is easy. And I also heard it from my “relatives” who are

working there that this is common. At first it was easy to get money, but now I see that it is difficult to pay it back at the end of the month and I ask less. When I compared my budget at the end of the month, and when I had to give back money, I saw that my budget would not work out." (Interview No. 68, Mr. Chicumbudzo, Seasonal Labourer)

While this borrowing of money is a crucial aspect of working relationships, working colleagues are also a source of other, non-material support. This was of special importance for young people who had just started a job. Informal on-the-job training and information regarding future working opportunities within the company are especially relevant for seasonal labourers. Although in most Malawian companies few people are organised in trade unions, workmates also provide an important source of support in labour conflicts.

The characteristics of workmates' network relations hold for both formal and informal labour relations, although the latter are usually less resilient and more volatile. This is related to the nature of an income that itself is volatile and does not allow for regular social investment in order to create stable reciprocal borrowing relations. As well, it is the social environment in which this work is located that makes it difficult to establish permanent and resilient networks. People engaged in *Ganyu* or the self-employed, such as builders, market people, or those having their own workshops, are usually working for very different people in different sites and within limited – usually short-term – assignments. Notwithstanding, network relations among the self-employed may also be very tight, going far beyond a single assignment. Many workers have access to a tight network of information flows on new assignments, employers or paying conditions, which also guarantees a certain wage control mechanism within the area. If they work in a group, they usually also assist each other in case of labour disputes, which are often discussed in front of the Chief. Complaints from *Ganyu* workers who did not get paid are, in fact, numerous. Finally, workmates also provide each other with support in 'private' matters, such as borrowing of money or the provision of food. Especially among female workers, their working relationship is actually just one amongst various others, usually including close neighbours, friends or kin who live in close spatial proximity and who also provide each other with labour.

Relations among the self-employed engaged in small-scale business usually follow a similar pattern. The fact that they usually have their fixed sales point at the market where they meet daily, weekly, or monthly allows for relatively stable relations. 'Market people' support each other a great deal on the basis of their daily interaction, both for 'private' and business matters. It is common practice among restaurant owners to borrow money from other businessmen in order to be able to buy the ingredients needed for the preparation of the daily