

## **The Donor dependency syndrome: The politics of theatre funding structures in Malawi**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the impact of funding models on contemporary Malawian theatre. It attempts to examine how, since its emergence, the form has been hampered by the lack of a national arts council or funding strategy. We discuss theatre in the 1970s and '80s before examining NGO funded theatre since the 1990s, moving to a case study of an international donor aided theatre company, Nanzikambe Arts.

In this article, we argue that under President Kamuzu Banda's dictatorship (1964-1994) theatre was not supported by the state, in part, because it was perceived as a threat to the regime and artistic voices were, some times violently, silenced. After 1994, the arts funding situation did not change and into the gap came NGOs, who used performers to make message-based theatre. We also assert that in the 2000s theatre practice became further complicated by the influx of international donors and their promotion of the European canon, at the expense of theatre that was truly made by, for and about Malawians in their own languages, and using their local performance forms. Ultimately, our argument is that politics and economics has affected theatre progression and professionalism in the country, for change to happen there must be an overhaul of current funding structures.

### **Theatre funding in Kamuzu Banda's Malawi**

Postcolonial Malawian theatre<sup>1</sup> was initiated at the University of Malawi's Chancellor College campus by academics in the

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<sup>1</sup> This is a practical term, but others have referred to it as popular theatre and recently as commercial drama.

Department of English, with a production of Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* in 1967 (Magalasi 24).<sup>2</sup> In 1970, the Chancellor College Travelling Theatre (CCTT) was founded with the aim of taking theatre to the people (Chimwenje 11).<sup>3</sup> The group came to prominence from 1972 with the arrival of James Gibbs (British), who had organised such a group at the University of Ghana (Roscoe 270-273). In addition to university drama there was also the Schools Drama Festival, established during the 1960s by the Association of Teaching of English in Malawi. Its purpose was to support in the teaching of English in secondary schools through a co-ordinated annual drama festival (Kamlongera, "Problems" 128) Initially, the festival was organised as an oral and prose competition; however, by 1969 a drama festival was adopted, supported by funding from the British Council (Kamlongera, "Problems" 128).

By the 1980s, the CCTT had helped spread literary drama in nearly every district in Malawi, through tours to secondary school and town halls, and shaped the practice by conducting theatre workshops at the School Drama Festivals (Kamlongera, "Problems" 137-145). Joel Chimwenje explains that the group was successful because it was financially assisted by the English Department, which covered its operational costs (20).

In many places in Africa, during the early post-independence years, there were efforts to uplift local culture, which had been oppressed under colonialism, through the formation of national theatre councils and national dance troupes (Kerr, "Popular Theatre" 196-208). However, in Malawi local culture was co-opted to promote and reinforce dictatorial rule (Kerr,

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<sup>2</sup> University of Malawi theatre developed separately in the different constituent colleges; however, it was the activities at Chancellor that shaped the practice in Malawi.

<sup>3</sup> The CCTT was formed in 1970 by Mupa Shumba (Malawian), who had been exposed to the concept in the early 1960s at Makerere University (Uganda) and expatriate John Linstrum.

“Unmasking” 118). In 1964, Malawi gained its independence from the British, but by the end of the decade, the political atmosphere became repressive. The new president, Kamuzu Banda, began imposing censorship and enacting sedition laws to deal with critics (Kerr and Mapanje 17). Literature and culture that promoted critical thinking were censored or banned (Magalasi 51).<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, the only local culture Banda financially supported was that which reinforced his rule. For example, the Malawi Congress Party Women’s League — also known as the *Mbumba* — used folk songs to mobilise mass support for Banda and in return they were given gift incentives (Kerr, “Unmasking” 118). In 1981, the International Monetary Fund began to impose Structural Adjustment Programmes to cut African debt (Therein 456). Jane Plastow explains that the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programmes SAPs led to cuts in educational and cultural programmes in many African countries (111). Consequently, support for university theatre programmes and commercial theatre companies stopped. In that year, the Department of Fine and Performing Arts was established at Chancellor College, and following that decision the CCTT came under the new department. It is important to note that the CCTT received assistance from the department of English because it formed under the patronage of the practical drama course in the department. Some people we interviewed for this article, such as James Gibbs, confirmed that the group also relied on external support from groups like Schimmelpennick-Campbell Fund. From 1981 onwards, the group had to do without the financial support it had received from the department and this impacted on its ability to make frequent tours (Chimwenje 20). The group continued to tour, but

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion on censorship see *Where Silence Rules: The Suppression of Dissent in Malawi* (Human Right Watch 1990).

this was sporadic and became dormant in the late 1990s.

It is generally accepted that the CCTT inspired the birth of commercial drama in Malawi. In 1981, there emerged vernacular drama groups like Kwathu Drama Group in the urban towns of Blantyre, Lilongwe and Zomba, which came after the university tour of a Chichewa adaptation of Timpunza Mvula's *The Lizard's Tail* (Kerr, "Unmasking" 123-125). In 1987, a commercial English language group, Wakhumbata Ensemble Theatre, was formed by Dunduzu Chisiza Jr, who had first been exposed to theatre through the Schools Drama Festival between 1979-1983. He later engaged with theatre in the US. These were steps forward for Malawian theatre; however, they did not lead to the formation of any kind of national arts council to support its growth.

In 1987, the national dance troupe, the Kwacha Cultural Troupe, was formed. Waliko Makhala, former troupe leader, told us that it was formed by a Presidential decree and operated under the Department of Culture in the Ministry of Education and Culture. He further explained that the group received state subvention, which paid for the performers. Between 1987-1994, they toured Australia, Germany, Scotland and Zimbabwe. When asked why the group was formed Makhala said: "it was formed with the aim of bringing about national unity through local dances and culture hence the group recruited dancers from different districts in Malawi." This confirms David Kerr's argument that during the early post-independence years, national dance troupes were formed by African leaders to push across narratives of national unity to foreign dignitaries and visitors, and to promote cultural homogeneity among the locals (*Popular theatre* 204). From the late 1960s the political atmosphere in Malawi became repressive. Mufunanji Magalasi asserts that

conditions in the 1970s and '80s encouraged political theatre at the university, which was critical of Banda — though this was done covertly for fear of reprisals (20-81).<sup>5</sup> The censorship of literature went further than content alone, Banda prescribed his own version of Chichewa (Banda's ethnic dialect) and Magalasi explains that this forced writers away from writing in their own language, instead they worked in English to sidestep reprisals for not using the politically approved Chichewa (Magalasi 163). During this period, several university writers like lecturers Felix Mthanli and Jack Mapanje, and students Edge Kanyongolo and Zangaphe Chizeze were detained without charge on the basis that they had spoken or written something deemed subversive to the Banda regime (Africa Watch 71-97). It appears here that Banda was not interested in promoting socially relevant literature, particularly university theatre, because he saw it as a threat to his authority, and only wanted to use art forms if they could advance his political agenda. The formation of a National Arts Council could have removed national cultural policy from Banda's direct control.

### **NGO funded theatre-based work from the 1990s to the present day**

NGO's in Malawi filled the gaps left by economic or governmental failure. When the first cases of HIV were reported in the late 1980s the Malawian government responded poorly by not allocating adequate funds to combat the disease (Lwanda 161). Malawi became a multiparty state in 1994 and the establishment of democracy saw the removal of constraints placed upon NGOs (Lwanda 151-161). At that time, NGO-funded theatre work came to Malawi, and NGOs began using performers

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion on university political theatre in the 1970s and 1980s see Mufunaji Magalasi (2012).

to make message-based theatre, promoting donor messages. In other African countries, NGO funded arts work or Theatre for Development (TfD) also expanded rapidly because state support for theatre stopped after the imposition of SAPs (Plastow 110).

One of the first examples of NGO TfD came in 1994 when the Chancellor TfD team led by Chris Kamlongera, a drama lecturer, collaborated with the Girls Alliance of Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) to make message-based plays about the benefits of sending girls to school in southern Malawi (Kamlongera, "Theatre" 449-451).<sup>6</sup> Another example of this work came in the form of HIV plays in the early 1990s. After 1994, the situation was little changed and the fight against HIV became the responsibility of international and local NGOs, who turned to theatre to sensitise people to the dangers of infection and failure to seek testing or treatment (Kerr quoted in Magalasi xvi). Frank Mwase, former member of Wakhumbata, said that after 1994 many artists began to abandon commercial theatre for NGO-funded TFD work (Personal Communication, 2016).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, NGO-funded development and health radio, television drama soap operas emerged. In 1997, the development NGO, Story Workshop Education Trust (SWET) was formed and, in that same year, created the still on-going radio drama, *Zimachitika* (It Happens).<sup>7</sup> Blessing Nkhata, Head of Programmes at SWET, stated that since it started the soap had employed over 300 actors.<sup>8</sup> In 2002, the Adventists Relief Agency (ADRA) Malawi funded TV drama, *Tikuferanji* (Why are we dying?), was created.<sup>9</sup> Since its inception, it attracted a range of stage and radio actors including

<sup>6</sup> Chris Kamlongera, was the first Professor of Drama in Malawi and together with David Kerr pioneered the TfD movement in Malawi in 1981 at Mbalachanda in northern Malawi. Subsequent practice came in 1985-1987.

<sup>7</sup> For more details see [www.storyworkshopmw.org](http://www.storyworkshopmw.org).

<sup>8</sup> Head of Programmes, SWET, Personal Communication, 20 May, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Deputy Country Director, ADRA Malawi, Personal Communication, 2015.

Magret Chikwembeya and Smart Likhaya Mbewe from the popular radio drama *Kapalepale* (Removing the weeds); Jeremiah Mwaungulu, former Wakhumba actor, and Kwathu actors, Bon Kalindo and Jacobs Mwase. NGO-funded radio and TV dramas offer actors a higher pay. This is a significant consideration for professionals working in an industry that does not have access to continuous funding streams. In 2008, one of the authors of this article, worked as an actor on *Tikuferanji* where, at the time, artists were paid \$90.00 for a 30 minute improvised episode. For context, by 2012 the Malawi national GNI per capita was \$320 (UNICEF *Malawi Statistics*). So, these wages, by any Malawian standard, was a lot of money. In 2000, the Malawi Government set out minimum wage terms in section 54 and 55 of the Malawi employment act 2000 (GOM, *Employment Act 2000*). As the provision for setting wages is done in consultation with professional organisations of workers, that Malawi lacked a cultural policy and arts council was clearly a significant hindrance to the professions growth, there is no defined minimum wage for artists in Malawi.

NGO arts work has negatively affected Malawian commercial theatre since it first emerged. Artists have needed to take NGO money for economic survival, rather than developing best practice. Moreover, NGO work often has no direct impact on artistic development or theatrical creativity — though this is not to underestimate the importance of Tfd. In 2015, one of the authors of this paper conducted research on the uses of Tfd by two arts based local NGOs; namely, Pakachere Health and Development Communication and Story Workshop Educational Trust (SWET). Their Tfd actor training manuals revealed that emphasis was on participants learning set guidelines for making message based Tfd, rather than promoting imaginative or theat-

rical creativity. For example, Pakachere's 2013 manual, which is currently in use, predominantly focuses on participants gaining knowledge on Tfd, understanding the characteristics of a successful performance and how to prepare a Tfd play, but nothing on actor creativity — though indigenous songs and dances, in the case of SWET, were incorporated in the plays. This is not unique to SWET, but common in many NGO Tfd work in Malawi. It is understandable that, in the absence of an arts council to support theatre, practitioners have to find alternative models of funding. However, NGO funding does nothing to raise the quality of Tfd because funders know nothing about the discipline and never demand rigorous evaluation of provable impact. In over fifteen project reports that we accessed by Pakachere and SWET it shows that the quality of Tfd practice is surely compromised because training of drama groups is often only two to five days, which we argue is not adequate for critical Tfd practice. Consequently, the practice largely lacks innovation, imagination and impact, and this is affecting commercial theatre in the country since many actors working in NGO-funded Tfd are also involved in mainstream theatre.

The situation is worsened by the fact that actors who train at Chancellor College — and this is only place that offers formal training — are reluctant to go into the theatre industry because of the lack of money, as a result, they are forced to undertake NGO theatre-based work. A group of drama graduates we interviewed said that they did not go into commercial theatre because there were no companies offering employment — and Malawi only has one professional company now, Nanzikambe Arts, indeed, one respondent, Charles Nkhalamba said: 'joining an NGO was merely for the job itself not necessarily because it was theatre based'. Thokozani Mapemba, another graduate,



offered a different perspective: “theatre at Chancellor lacks both technical expertise and equipment to support the skills that we were trained in. For example, Chancellor does not produce experts on stage sound and lighting or costume and prompts. In several instances, students had to do these things without any training, which means that quality was compromised.” Another respondent said: “I did not go into commercial theatre because there aren’t enough theatre companies and graduates are not motivated to start their own companies because they want to find non-theatre based jobs.” This means that the quality of theatre practice remains stagnant and its scope extremely limited. Almost all of the artists working in the industry have only been exposed to theatre through the Schools Drama Festival or in acting workshops organised by Nanzikambe or the Department of Culture — and these have been only sporadic.<sup>10</sup>

### **The international donor dependency syndrome in the 2000s**

Donor-aided European-centred theatre became a dominant theatrical form throughout the 2000s in Malawi. However, donor aid as a theatre funding model came with both ideological and artistic problems. To illustrate our point we take a look at one of the companies currently working in Malawi; Nanzikambe Arts.

The company was founded in 2003 by British director Kate Stafford, who at the time was resident in Malawi. Its inaugural production was *African Hamlet* (2003) co-funded by the British Council and St Andrew’s International High School. Following this, international donor-aided theatre project financing became the accepted model for future productions. In 2005, the company changed status to a local NGO (Kapiri 963), however, the funding model little changed. The current Managing Director In 2004, the Norwegian Embassy, through the Copyright Society of Malawi, implemented the Cultural Scheme Project to support arts in Malawi. Under the programme various workshop have been conducted. As of 2014, funding has stopped

tor, Chris Nditani, told us that since its inception Nanzikambe has received support from the British, Norwegian and South African embassies and international donors that include UNESCO, Concern Universal and Save the Children, among others. Stafford left in 2005 and management passed to Melissa Eveleigh and Thokozani Kapiri. However, Eveleigh took charge of all productions and then appointed South African, Willian le Cordeur to deputise her.

Through an analysis of Nanzikambe's repertoire between 2003-2009, one can see that a pattern emerges; European 'classical' texts funded by European donors formed the company's mainstream theatre projects. By contrast, Malawian-centred theatre largely formed the company's TfD work (developmental and educational projects), with funding coming from local and international NGOs. The Artistic Manager, Thokozani Kapiri, argues that the funders of commercial theatre "had a lot of influence on what should constitute the agenda of Nanzikambe Art's theatre projects" (963). He further explains: "the funding agency directly or indirectly influenced the choices of the issues [...] even the texts to be developed." It is then not surprising that the Shakespeare adaptations *African Hamlet* (2003) and *African Macbeth* (2005) were funded by St Andrews High School, which is historically elitist and largely taught by British expatriates, and the British Council, respectively. The French Cultural Centre and Bata Shoes Company funded French classics *A Flea in Her Ear* (2005) by George Feydeau and *The Little Prince* (2005) by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, while *Breaking the Pot* (2007) — an adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* — and Aristophanes' *Frogs* (2009) were supported by the Norwegian Embassy.

According to Kapiri, the influence of donors was not

limited to Nanzikambe's repertoire, but extended to its aesthetic decisions. For example, the funding agency of *The Little Prince* instructed them not to incorporate local art forms "arguing, it will dilute the essence of the story as recognised in Europe" (992). Despite these demands, there were efforts to Malawianise the plays. For example, Nanzikambe employed the use of the narrator — common in Malawian folklore — and incorporated local songs and dances in some productions. The language used in the plays, however, was English, targeting English speakers. The plays toured locally (secondary schools, university campuses and entertainment halls), regionally (Zimbabwe and South Africa) and in Europe.

While it is clear that the funding agencies had a Eurocentric agenda, Nanzikambe also has to take responsibility for what happened. The company took the money in order to establish its brand and audience base; however, the funding model allowed Eurocentric texts to be produced at the expense of prioritising the development of Malawi dominated intercultural performance. Responding to the choice of plays, Smith Likongwe, a board member who was involved with Nanzikambe since its formation, in an interview said: "this was mainly due to the win-win situation that is always there in partnerships like these. For example, funding came from the British Council for the production of *Hamlet* because Shakespeare's plays are studied not only in Malawian schools, but also in the international schools, which the British Council saw as a good cause."<sup>11</sup> A former manager, who was also interviewed told us: "European classics were Nanzikambe's niche that is how the company had positioned itself." A board member, who opted for anonymity and who had joined in 2007, offered a different perspective: "we met once a year and had to approve activities [productions and projects] for

<sup>11</sup> Personal Communication, 2016.

the entire year.<sup>12</sup> If an offer came after the board had met it was unlikely for us to come back to discuss it hence management made the call.” We recognise that Nanzikambe’s funding model made sense in the absence of an arts council; however, there is evidence of companies thriving without donor aid. For example, between 1987-1999 Wakhumbata successfully operated as a predominantly touring theatre without donor support.

Stafford and Nditani stated that Nanzikambe was originally set up as an intercultural company. In the beginning, there were attempts at a mode of working to produce intercultural work, through the cross-pollination of ideas — taking a European text, workshopping it with a Malawian cast, setting it in Malawi, performing it in Malawi and, finally, with some productions, touring in Europe. This set the pace for its intercultural practice, which was to be fully realised later. In 2011, company became fully Malawian-led under the leadership of Chris Nditani and Thokozani Kapiri. In that year, the establishment of a three-year exchange programme with the German company, Theatre Konstanz, aimed to foster intercultural theatre and collaboration (Kapiri 1028-1114). Under the programme, Nanzikambe artists and their German counterparts collaborated creating original works such as the Dario Fo-inspired *Story of A Tiger* (2011) and *The Aid Machinery* (2012). Writing in “Theatre in Malawi, directing in Europe” and reflecting on the partnership, Thokozani Kapiri writes:

The project’s lesser emphasis towards championing some super objective of its funder allowed my directing work in Europe to focus more on the aesthetics I would use, rather than on how to present work that will secure us more funds. I instantly felt artistically attracted to the work, since it proposed in its conception not to serve as a means towards an alien change agenda, like

<sup>12</sup> Personal Communication, 2016.

other funding providers or any previous cooperation had directly or indirectly perpetuated (1018)

The donor dependency syndrome that defined Nanzikambe's early funding success stopped in 2011. Why did this happen? Writing on the impact of austerity on donor aided arts programmes in Tanzania, Vicensia Shule argues that after the 9/11 attacks on the USA, funding for African arts NGOs began to decline because western donors began giving the money to African countries to combat terrorism (81). Coupled with the 2008 economic crisis it is then not surprising that donor funding for Nanzikambe has waned. Currently, the company is still ongoing and planning future productions; however, the recent output of plays and tours has decreased.

Nanzikambe has existed for thirteen years while other companies have been unable to survive as ongoing entities and the question must be raised as to why this is. Was the company able to access funds because of its use of Eurocentric works over companies that focused solely on Malawian theatre? Importantly, did its donors think about how the funding would impact theatre more widely in Malawi? We are not arguing that international artists coming in is the problem — David Kerr and James Gibbs were positive and Stafford built something new. In our opinion, donor theatre funding would have had a much wider impact if money had been available to put towards long-term structural investment, technical and management skills training and exchange programmes as well as supporting individual production projects.

### **Towards a sustainable theatre funding model**

In recognising that the growth and development of arts in Malawi has been hampered by the lack of a national arts council

the Malawian Government enacted the Natural Cultural Policy in 2015 (GOM, National Cultural Policy 1-18). A crucial part of the policy is the formation of the National Arts and Heritage Council (NAHEC) ‘to develop and promote Malawi’s cultural and creative industries’ (GOM, National Cultural Policy 16). In April 2016, we accessed a draft of the NAHEC ACT, which once passed by parliament will enable the institution of the council. Under the council, creators and producers of literary, dramatic, musical audio-visual, published and sculptural works will be supported, after applying and having their proposals vetted by the Board, through provision of loans for financing projects, provision of grants-in aid; rendering of financial support, advice and information and making bursaries available to students for local and overseas studies in the arts and culture (GOM, NAHEC ACT 12-13).

It is encouraging that the Government of Malawi, and other stakeholders are beginning a dialogue that focuses on the possible structures that need to be implemented to support the development of the theatre industry in Malawi. However, we observed that the arts council is looking at art too broadly, without considering the differences that might be between theatre, music or dance and how these impact, for example, on their development and profitability. For theatre to successfully develop and grow, we argue NAHEC needs to implement novel strategies to address the current challenges. Theatre in Malawi offers great potential for developing new types of performance, new methods of creating and delivering theatre to both its rural and urban audiences. With the promise of financial support from government it will be interesting to see if and how this money impacts upon the current theatre aesthetic.

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