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DISSONANCE IN DEVELOPMENT
FOREIGN AID AND STATE FORMATION IN MALAWI

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Philosophiae Doctor (PhD) Thesis

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Abstract

The thesis focuses on certain characteristics of the state and of state formation in Malawi, with particular emphasis on the effects of development aid. The methodological and theoretical approach draws primarily on social anthropology. Empirical research included multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Malawi during 2009. The thesis consists of three papers for publication in journals, each focusing on different aspects of the state and state formation, and an introductory discussion.

The first paper – *Chiefs and everyday governance: Parallel state organisations in Malawi* – looks at the institutional set-up of the state. In Malawi, this includes not only the formal institutions, but also the chiefs: the paper sees the chiefs as not primarily ‘traditional’ leaders, but as an integral part of the state. The paper discusses some implications of the fact that two seemingly incompatible state institutions, often filling the same or similar functions, exist in parallel and are available both for subjects/citizens and for public offices. People are thus subject to *parallel rule*: they are simultaneously subjects under a state-enforced chieftaincy, and citizens of a modern state. The position of the chiefs in Malawi has been strengthened and expanded during the last two decades. Ironically, this has been possible due partly to policy choices that have been promoted or introduced by donors, but that have paved the way for the strengthening of an institution incompatible with the liberal democratic values emphasised by the same donors.

The second paper – *Performing good governance: the aesthetics of bureaucratic practice in Malawi* – focuses on bureaucratic practice. In the case observed – agricultural subsidy distribution – the policy of the government (and its donors), of targeting only the poorest farmers, contrasts with local norms for more equal sharing. The public office does not have the authority to overrule local norms, and the targeting procedures therefore fail completely to achieve what they were designed for. Nonetheless, they are carried out with enthusiasm. This may be because of the ‘aesthetic’ qualities of those procedures: they create an image, albeit temporary, of a well-functioning state and a well-organised population. The case is used as basis for a discussion of the role of aesthetics in bureaucratic practice and in state formation, and the role of bureaucrats as mediators between incompatible norms and worldviews: by carrying out the stipulated procedures even when they ‘fail’ – but with

primacy to the aesthetic aspects rather than the instrumental effects – the bureaucrats make possible the continuation of the subsidy programme, in the interests of all those involved.

The third paper – *Making and shaping poor Malawians: Citizenship below the poverty line* – explores some observed and some potential consequences of the poverty line. The idea of distinguishing between individuals and households according to a ‘poverty line’ has been introduced in Malawi only recently, partly in connection with the UN Millennium Development Goals. The poverty line as it is applied in Malawi – the national response to the global poverty line known as *one dollar a day* – in most cases has no local equivalent. But when it is used to identify the intended beneficiaries of development interventions, it becomes of increasing economic, social and political relevance. Those classified as ‘below’ the poverty line have exclusive access to certain state resources. But in practice, by the way poverty interventions are organised, these beneficiaries are also subjected to particular forms of governance, including more intense attempts to reform their rationality and behaviour than what is the case for those ‘above’ the line. By the tendency to organise beneficiaries in groups they also tend to interact with government less as autonomous individuals than those who are classified as above the line. In effect, the poverty line serves to distinguish between two types of citizens – perhaps in contrast to policy objectives of including the poorest as equal citizens.

The three papers refer to different academic debates, but they all point to aspects of state formation associated with aid and development. This is discussed in the introductory chapters. The main argument here is that all papers demonstrate some forms of *dissonance*: here used as a metaphor for the difference between how social phenomena appear when seen through the logic of the state, and how social life is experienced in actual, local, daily interactions. Such dissonance is well known in all states, but seems particularly evident in states receiving development aid. The introductory paper discusses aspects of aid and development that can explain this, building on recent critical studies of aid and development in social anthropology. It points to features that are inherent in all aid, but have become increasingly relevant with the recent changes in development discourse that seem to produce dissonance. Aid can therefore increase the dissonance inherent in all states between reality as it is seen in a state logic, and reality as it is experienced locally.

Sammendrag (summary in Norwegian)

Den norske tittelen er *Bistand, utvikling og statsdannelse i Malawi*. Avhandlingen er basert på antropologisk feltarbeid i Malawi og omhandler ulike sider ved stat og styring, med vekt på hvordan staten påvirkes av bistand og utvikling. Avhandlingen består av tre artikler.

Den første artikkelen omhandler høvdingenes rolle. I Malawi er høvdingene en integrert del av statsapparatet. Folk på bygda forholder seg oftest til sin høvding som mellomledd til staten, men kan også ha direkte kontakt med offentlige institusjoner. Det fører til at staten består av to parallelle strukturer som i noen grad overlapper, og artikkelen diskuterer enkelte konsekvenser av dette. Videre viser artikkelen til at høvdingene har fått mer makt de siste to tiår. Det har i stor grad skjedd som følge av politikk som er fremmet gjennom vestlig bistand: For det første har høvdingene fått en relativt sett mye sterkere posisjon fordi andre statlige makthavere er blitt svekket. Det skyldes både introduksjon av flerpartidemokratiet (som reduserte partiapparatets makt) og reduksjon i offentlig sektor samt nye former for samhandling mellom offentlige kontorer og enkeltmennesker (mer mindre tvang og mer rettighetsbasert samhandling). For det andre insisterer donorene ofte på at utviklingstiltak skal være lokalsamfunnsbasert og organiseres lokalt på måter som gjør at man blir helt avhengig av høvdingen for å kunne gjennomføre tiltakene. Paradoksalt nok har altså slike donor-interesser ført til en styrking av høvdingene, som er en instisjon helt inkompatibel med de liberale, demokratiske verdiene som bistanden ellers forsøker å fremme.

Den andre artikkelen ser på byråkratisk praksis. Den er basert på et case-studie av et statlig, donorstøttet program for distribusjon av landbrukssubsidier, og ser særlig på prosedyrene som skal sørge for at subsidierte såfrø og kunstgjødsel bare gis til de fattigste bøndene. Artikkelen viser hvordan prosedyrene ikke lykkes i dette fordi landsbyene, under høvdingens ledelse, re-distribuerer de subsidierte varene etter kriterier for mer lik fordeling. Men prosedyrene er meningsfulle selv om de "mislykkes". Det kan forstås ved å se dem som estetiske uttrykk framfor som instrumentelle handlinger. De skaper et slags bilde av et velorganisert samfunn og en velfungerende stat, som gir mening selv om det ikke gjenspeiler virkeligheten. Men prosedyrene har også noen praktiske konsekvenser: Det er i

praksis ikke mulig å gjennomføre regjeringens (og donorenes) krav til fordeling av subsidier så lenge disse er inkompatible med lokale normer, fordi regjeringen har ikke kapasitet og autoritet nok til å tvinge gjennom sin egen politikk. Ved å gjennomføre prosedyrene likevel, tilfredsstiller man regjeringens og donorenes krav til målretting av landbrukssubsidier. Byråkratene kan (uten å lyve) dokumentere til regjeringen og donorer at subsidiene er blitt distribuert til utvalgte mottakere, og landsbyene kan omfordele i forhold til lokale normer like etterpå. Paradoksalt nok er det nettopp ved å “mislykkes” – og ved at prosedyrene derfor blir mer estetisk enn praktisk relevante – at prosedyrene gjør det mulig å gjennomføre subsidieprogrammet til fordel for alle involverte.

Den tredje artikkelen ser på hvordan staten kategoriserer og klassifiserer enkeltmennesker og organiserer statlige tjenester etter dette. Fokuset er på den såkalte fattigdomslinjen, en malawisk tilpasning til den globale fattigdomsdefinisjonen kjent som ‘en dollar per dag’. En slik definisjon samsvarer ikke med noen lokale skillelinjer i Malawi, men når den brukes til å peke ut mottakere av statlige tjenester, blir den både politisk, økonomisk og sosialt relevant. De som ligger “under” fattigdomslinjen får eksklusiv tilgang til noen statlige ressurser, men samtidig utsettes de for andre typer styring. Det er fordi de statlige tjenestene vanligvis kombineres med spesielle måter å organisere folk på, sammen med forsøk på å endre mottakernes måte å tenke og handle på. Det er en naturlig strategi dersom man antar at årsaken til fattigdom ikke er materielle eller eksterne sosiale og politiske forhold, men skyldes noe ved de fattiges egen oppførsel. I sin konsekvens kan man si at fattigdomslinjen etablerer et skille mellom to typer borgere: De som er “fattige nok” til å få hjelp av staten, og de andre som forventes å klare seg selv i markedet. Målet med fattigdomstiltak blir da å omskape de fattigste til gode, markedsvennlige borgere som klarer seg selv uten videre statlig inngripen. I praksis er det ofte liten økonomisk forskjell på de som er “under” og “over” fattigdomslinjen, men de blir gjenstand for forskjellige former for statlig styring.

De tre artiklene representerer dermed ganske forskjellige perspektiver på stat og styring, både praktisk og teoretisk. Men de har til felles at de viser til noen endringer når det gjelder stat og styring, som synes å være påvirket av bistand og utviklingspolitikk. Dette diskuteres i avhandlingens innledende del. Denne diskusjonen tar utgangspunkt i at alle artiklene viser til noe som kan kalles “dissonans”. Dissonans brukes som metafor på forskjellen mellom statlige måter å forstå og organisere virkeligheten på, og hvordan virkelighet erfares for

folk lokalt. Det gjelder på ulike måter i de tre artiklene: I forholdet mellom høvdingstyre og den formelle statsapparatet, i byråkratiske prosedyrer som synes å mislykkes, men likevel har en funksjon, og i et statlig forsøk på å organisere en befolkning etter kriterier som ikke samsvarer med noen lokale måter å se lokalsamfunnet på. Slik dissonans synes å øke som følge av bistand og utvikling, og diskusjonen tar opp noen sider ved bistand som kan forklare dette. Et hovedargument er at de som jobber med bistand – særlig statsansatte i mottakerlandene – må forholde seg til abstrakte ideer i internasjonal utviklingstenking, som ikke passer sammen med lokale forhold. De kan velge ulike strategier for å løse dette problemet, men alle de mest relevante strategiene synes å føre til en økning i forskjellen mellom en “statlig” virkelighet og lokale erfaringer. Disse sidene ved bistand er blitt større med tiden som følge av to forhold. For det første legger de fleste bistandsaktørene stadig mer vekt på å reformere mottakeren, som representerer bredere og mer kompliserte utviklingsmål enn om hovedvekten er å overføre ressurser. For det andre har man nå mer fokus på spesifikke kategorier av enkeltmennesker framfor å se på fattige land og samfunn under ett. Begge disse utviklingstrekk fører til økt behov for å jobbe med aggregert, abstrakt informasjon, framfor spesifikk kunnskap om mottakerne og deres omgivelser. Det gjør at avstanden mellom abstrakte ideer og opplevd virkelighet blir større.

Thesis overview

Part two consists of three papers, which constitute the main product of the academic research presented in this thesis. These are:

1. Chiefs and everyday governance: Parallel state organisations in Malawi (p. 85)
2. Performing good governance: the aesthetics of bureaucratic practice in Malawi (p. 117)
3. Making and shaping poor Malawians: Citizenship below the poverty line (p. 145)

The papers present, analyse and discuss some of the empirical data produced during the research, each focusing on different aspects of the state and state formation in Malawi. They have been produced in response to research objectives presented in chapter one (page 1) and the methodology presented in chapter two (page 9). Written for specific academic journals, the papers are stand-alone research products, associated with different academic debates rather than with each other. Their internal interrelatedness is not made explicit in the papers themselves. That is, however, the focus of the two last chapters of this Part One. **Brief summaries of the papers are given in chapter three (page 30)**, followed by a discussion on how the papers correspond to each other and how they shed light on selected theoretical and methodological issues. Chapter four (page 48) discusses the papers with a particular view to how they shed light on the effects of aid and development on the state.

An important component of the methodology is the theoretical foundation on which the empirical and analytical work builds. Since the initial, empirical research focused on the state, much of the methodology chapter discusses state theory. It does not aim to present state theory in general – that would be beyond the scope of this thesis – but only the theory foundations on which the study is built. Likewise, the theory frameworks for this study's approach to aid and development are presented in connection with the discussion on the papers in chapter four. Thus, theory-oriented discussions on the key dimensions of research – state, state formation, aid and development – are integrated into other discussions rather than presented in separate 'theory chapters'.

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It became manageable thanks to excellent support from my supervisor Knut Nustad and co-supervisor Stein Sundstøl Eriksen. They provided guidance during the early phases, and timely and very useful responses to my draft texts later on. Although not a formal co-supervisor, Kristen Nordhaug generously read and offered valuable inputs. I am also grateful for comments from Iver B. Neumann, Jon Harald Sande Lie, Heidi Kjærnet and other colleagues at NUPI. Stephen Hopgood's critical reading and challenging but pertinent questions during the 'mock viva' were encouraging and very helpful. The individual papers included here have also benefited greatly from inputs from Nadarajah Shanmugaratnam and other colleagues at Noragric, and participants in the Research School at Centre for Development and the Environment at University of Oslo. Maren Aase in particular is to be thanked not only for her own intellectual contributions but also for her role in motivating and mobilizing other students to contribute, making the Research School a very stimulating forum.

Another group of persons who made research manageable are those whose services are indispensable to research, but who rarely receive the recognition they deserve. Hazel Henriksen and Tore Gustavsson in the NUPI library have provided excellent service well beyond the expected. Sølvi Røen and Elin Demiraslan have worked hard in their respective functions to create a good working environment even when researchers do not always do their part. Jack Skarsjø and Kristoffer Tjærnås have ensured that the computers and networks have functioned well, and Mathana Kanesharadnam has kept the office clean while also providing welcome opportunities for small talk. Susan Høivik has improved the language of all the texts, carefully and patiently correcting mistakes and poor formulations, while also using the opportunity to teach me better English for future use.

That research also feels meaningful is not to be taken for granted. When digging deep into stuff that nobody else seems to care about, it is difficult to see it in context and perspective. A visit to Noragric always helped the motivation. The department does much more than offering high-quality courses and assigning the best possible supervisors. It generously welcomes its PhD students as peers, seeing all as equally important resources to the joint efforts towards academic

progress, while also showing interest in the individual students' work. Most importantly, Noragric never lets you forget that your research is important and may make a difference also outside the confines of academe. It also helped the motivation that my mother, father, mother-in-law and father-in-law seemed confident that I was doing something important even when I was in doubt myself. My father-in-law has been one of my most critical readers, giving useful inputs but always confirming that what I write is important. The struggles of my mother, a highly intelligent person not familiar with the social sciences, to understand have reminded me that academic texts should never be the sole product of research. My later work will involve dissemination, in other formats, to a wider audience.

Finally, the research has been enjoyable. This is first and foremost because my wife Marianne decided to join me to fieldwork in Malawi. What might have been lonesome fieldwork far from home became instead a new home for the two of us, and one of the best years of my life. Not only was fieldwork more enjoyable when I could share experiences with the person who makes every day of my life better. It has also made all the difference after fieldwork: The new knowledge and perspectives, friends for life, and so many memories are much more valuable when I know that we will share this for the rest of our lives, instead of this being my own personal experience. In addition, Marianne improved my research, partly by expanding and improving our social network and interactions, partly due to her expertise in economics and demography, which enabled continuous comparison between my local ethnographic observations and her nation-wide statistical data. I am forever grateful for her decision to join me.

She shares with Malawi – the warm heart of Africa – the credit for making the fieldwork so enjoyable. Nowhere else in Africa will you meet such warmth, friendliness and humour almost anywhere, whether you interact with strangers or friends. In particular, I am grateful to Michael Madalitso, his wife Jessie and her sisters, brothers and in-laws. Their hospitality, humour, and practical support to practical and informational needs made rural fieldwork a pleasure. The same is true for Nixon Ndanga, Berna Namiwa, and other neighbours. The many other people who made Malawi enjoyable and in various ways helped during fieldwork include Samson Manda, Louis Mjumira, Godfrey Chimenya, Chicco Nambesa, Billy Jali, Martha White, Josephy Kombo, Steve Namaonde, Monica Machumo, Alistair Munthali, Blessings Chinsinga, to mention only a few. To everyone mentioned above and to many others not mentioned,

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PART ONE

Introduction

1. Research objectives

The research that resulted in this thesis aimed, in general terms, at shedding light on the effects of development aid on state formation in Malawi. It started with quite specific research questions and hypotheses on effects of development aid in general. I had some ideas and hypothesis in mind which I wanted to explore further, using Malawi as a case but aiming at generating some more general statements about effects of development aid.

I soon found that a more open, explorative approach had greater potential, for several reasons. For one thing, I have most of my academic background in Social Anthropology, which is characterised by localised, explorative studies. But since the PhD project was located in the cross-disciplinary field of Development Studies, with its wide range of approaches and methodological tools, I was not restricted by disciplinary background, and could consider other methodological approaches. A more important reason why I found an exploratory approach more appropriate was that research on the interrelatedness between aid and state formation represents a fairly new field of research, and relatively little consensus has been developed on theory foundations, key problems and hypotheses.

1.1.1. Previous research

Related research questions – on the effects of aid on the state – have been approached through several relatively distinct streams in research. Some attempts have been made to study the effects at the macro-level, typically applying econometric studies of the correlation between aid and selected indicators of governance (see Bräutigam & Knack 2004; Moss et al. 2006; Doucouliagos & Paldam 2005). Other studies have used models and theories developed in other research fields, for instance in institutional or economic theory, or policy studies, for application to the case of aid (for a review, see Booth 2011). In addition, many evaluations and studies have assessed the success of aid interventions in producing the results intended (Riddell 2007); when those intentions relate to the state, the studies focus on the effects of aid on the state. Finally, there is a stream of research, primarily within social anthropology, which takes on a more critical approach to whether aid ‘works’ or not. Such studies explore various problems seen as inherent in aid, in order to explain its alleged failure to achieve the intended effects, or the unintentional effects often seen as harmful. Much of this work originates in ‘post-development’ theory (Sachs

1992; Escobar 1995; Rahnema & Bawtree 1997). Although the term is seldom used (and not precisely applicable) in more recent contributions, most of them would acknowledge their inspiration from post-development studies. This stream has served to open the way for a broader research agenda, by focusing more explicitly on the underlying (political) ideas and rationalities that are reflected (but hidden), transferred and enforced on other societies through development discourse and aid practice; and with a critical view to the unintentional, often negative, consequences of aid.

These various streams do not relate very closely to each other, and although the research questions may seem related, in practice their potential for drawing on each other is rather limited. The studies and evaluations of effects of aid interventions may provide good evidence as to their level of success, but they serve further understanding of the processes involved to a limited extent only, since the scope of those studies is normally limited to what development agencies find worthwhile to fund – and in most cases that rules out in-depth empirical research. The same can be said of the large-scale statistical studies which at best produce evidence of the success of aid, but are less useful for explaining the underlying mechanisms. Institutional and policy theories can produce further understanding of the dynamics involved. But, as with the other streams mentioned, most of the research is limited to particular aspects of ‘governance’ as defined by the policy objectives of aid, like bureaucratic capacity, democracy, accountability and so on. Hence, they seem to limit themselves to the dimensions of governance already defined by aid. Such studies, even if critical of aid, do not aim to examine the wider range of effects of aid beyond the parameters of policy intentions.

Post-development studies and the later research they have inspired appear to be the only major stream of research that has explicitly disengaged itself from the intentions of aid by broadening the focus to look at the potential effects of aid on social changes along parameters not reflected in the original policy objectives. But, partly by implication, these studies do not communicate very well with the other streams. Some of that research also carries implicit objectives that contradict many of the other studies mentioned above. Most studies of aid tend to consider aid as a benign project, with the researcher’s task being to support aid by assessing the degree of its success. In contrast, post-development studies seem to regard aid and development as a well-intended but potentially harmful project regardless of failure or success. It is seen as a politically motivated attempt to

impose Western ideas and forms of social organisation on other societies, thereby undermining local diversity and alternative pathways; and is likely to change power relations, economy and modes of production or in other ways change societies, perhaps in unfortunate ways. In that perspective, researchers may find themselves comfortable with de-legitimising aid rather than contributing to its success, which does not help its integration with other research. My distinction here refers to what may be seen as an underlying political agenda of some of the most seminal literature in the respective streams of research, and should not be taken as a general statement about the motivations of the scholars involved in any of the streams of research. Indeed, many of those who are here categorised in or inspired by ‘post-development’ research appear to be supportive of aid, whereas researchers in other fields may of course be critical to aid as well.

1.1.2. Implications of an explorative approach

Thus, studies of the effects of aid on the state do not constitute a well-defined research field. Moreover, most work here is relatively recent. In such a phase of research, an explorative approach is often the most appropriate, serving more to ‘open up’ the field for further research than to develop broad, general statements.

Another argument for choosing an exploratory approach is that, as will be shown in this chapter, some of the key phenomena under study – ‘state’ and ‘state formation’ – are not easy to define and therefore represent a more challenging study object than is immediately apparent. This holds both for theoretical conceptualising and empirical focus. A similar point can be made regarding ‘development’. While such challenges can be managed in research simply by restricting the concepts by definition, I was fascinated by the multi-dimensional nature of both those sets of concepts.

Recognition of the above led me to re-formulate my research from specific research questions and hypotheses to a more open-ended research objective and to choose a more exploratory approach. In exploratory research, concepts, hypotheses, specific research questions and empirical findings continuously interact and influence each other rather than building on each other, step by step, in a linear sequence. This is made possible by deliberate attempts to continuously revisiting and revising them in the light of empirical findings in a process where the researcher tries to avoid being too much guided, and

therefore limited, by pre-conceived ideas. The theoretical framework is often not concluded until after the empirical research is finished. That approach, I believe, broadens both the theoretical and empirical potentials of research compared to a more rigidly structured, typically hypothesis-testing research framework. It allowed me to explore both ‘the state’ and ‘development’ further as empirical phenomena and as concepts, before and while studying the interrelationship between them.

But the explorative approach implies some limitations. One is that while (and because) this approach is wider in conceptual and theoretical scope, it becomes all the more important to restrict the empirical focus, so as to make empirical research manageable. Moreover, the potentials for generalisation and comparison across cases are more limited and cannot be planned or predicted prior to empirical study. This is partly because the analytical tools necessary for comparison and generalisation – the concepts – are not yet concluded. Generalisation is still possible, and in my research I make some attempts to generalise beyond the case of Malawi. One reason why that was possible was because some of the phenomena under study, namely aid and development, are shared and I can assume – from other research and own observations – that they assume relatively similar forms across many states. But in the early phases of research I could not predict the potentials for generalisation. I therefore had to be more modest about seeing Malawi as a case (of something general) – not knowing specifically *what* it could be a case of. Hence, I re-defined Malawi from being a ‘case’ to being the *key object* of research. The research objectives that guided my research were simply to **generate knowledge of aid, development and state formation in Malawi.**

Of course, ‘open-ended’ exploratory research does not imply the assumption or claim that it is possible to conduct truly ‘open-minded’ research where the researcher starts with some sort of *tabula rasa* and ends up with conclusions independent from prior academic and personal biases and prejudices. As an academic, the researcher is guided and limited by previous academic work and current trends in scholarship, including quite specific theoretical positions. As a socialised human being, the researcher also carries a range of other ideas that shape all phases of research. The deliberate attempts at continuously revising concepts and hypotheses that characterise explorative research do not mean that the ‘old’ ideas are necessarily discarded. Some explicit reflection on those limitations is therefore useful. In my case, I first had in mind some specific hypotheses with regard to

the actual effects of foreign aid and the mechanisms involved. Those hypotheses were influenced by my previous work as a practitioner in development aid and as a participant in debates on development policies.¹ Briefly put: I assumed that some specific aspects of the donor relation have a negative influence on how state bureaucrats relate to their own government and their constituency. In the jargon of development aid (where such concerns are well known), this would typically be expressed through terms like *accountability* and *ownership*. Inherent in my hypotheses were also more general ideas of some form of tripartite relations involving donors, aid-receiving government bureaucracies and their constituencies, and an assumption that there is some form of competition between those relations. I removed the specific hypotheses and most specific research questions already when formulating the research proposal, although that exercise of course did not remove them from my mind.

But even omitting the specific research questions, at a more basic, general level, my research is founded on some important assumptions, which remain even in the quite openly formulated research objectives. First, the objectives assume certain ideas about ‘aid’, ‘development’, ‘state’ and ‘state formation’. Those are discussed in greater detail later in this introduction: suffice it here to give some brief indications. ‘Aid’ in this thesis refers to what is normally termed *development aid* (or *development assistance*) and the corresponding institutions, relations, resource flows, interventions and management practices. ‘Development’ here does not refer primarily to the common understanding of the term, as denoting some form of preferred social change, for instance as reflected in aid policies. It is inspired by the streams in critical anthropological research mentioned above, where ‘development’ refers to a certain class of ideas, discourse, relations and social practice – a ‘domain of thought and action’ (Escobar 1995, p.10) – reflecting Western, hegemonic ideals of how other societies should improve. ‘State’ and ‘state formation’ refer to a broad understanding beyond what is normally seen as ‘the state’ in everyday language, for instance when talking about the government or bureaucrats. It is inspired by various studies in social anthropology on state formation, which seek to expand our understanding of the state as something broader and less tangible than any particular social entity. Those studies do not offer any general definition of the state, or

¹ I have been involved in development aid for about eight years through management and evaluation of aid programmes. Through various positions I have also been involved in influencing policy-making on development aid.

even aim to do so. For the purpose of this thesis, no general definition of the state is needed.

Second, the research objectives assume that there are some more or less direct, identifiable relations between the phenomena under investigation. The objectives may even be read as implicitly proposing a causal relation between ‘aid’ and ‘the state’. Later in the thesis I offer some reservations with regard to that proposition; nonetheless, the thesis reflects and to some extent depends on that assumption, without making empirical claims about causal relations with this regard. When I still find it natural and justifiable to base research on the idea of a relation between these phenomena, one reason is that it is inherent in the idea of modern aid, to such an extent that imagining aid today without it is difficult. To a large degree, modern aid is about state formation. Thus, in a study of aid it is natural to put that postulate specifically under investigation.

Finally, it is worth noting the difference between studies of state *formation* and state *building*, which are often confused. The latter term normally refers to deliberate attempts in ‘new’ or ‘weak’ states to ‘build’ more ‘modern’, ‘strong’, democratic (or whatever) ‘good’ states, often supported by interventions from external state or non-state actors. This represents a view that sees state building as an intentional process towards a certain end-product: a better state. By implication, it assumes that ‘stateness’ can be clearly defined and measured along a pre-defined scale. By contrast, state *formation* refers to the continuous processes of change in all states, not primarily in ‘new’ or ‘weak’ ones. Most of those changes are not the result of deliberate political attempts to change the state: they are neither planned nor foreseen, and not necessarily towards ‘better’ or ‘worse’ states according to policy intentions. They cannot readily be seen as linear processes towards ‘stronger’ or more ‘effective’ or ‘democratic’ or any other pre-defined scale of stateness, and they tend to proceed so slowly as to be not even observable to the actors involved.

1.1.3. The need to disengage from the development jargon

Not surprisingly, professionals involved in development assistance have shown interest in my research objectives, presumably expecting to be able to harvest some insights or knowledge for use in guiding their work towards better impacts of aid in the future. Several times I noticed that, moments after presenting my research objectives to

development professionals, they were referring to them in terms like ‘the impact of development assistance on governance’, or ‘...good governance’, ‘...capacity building’, ‘...state building’, ‘...democratisation’, ‘...decentralisation’ or ‘...[public sector] effectiveness and [or] efficiency’ or other catchword imported from common policy objectives in aid. All of the above terms are relevant and reasonably precise interpretations of my research objectives. But the fact that my conversation partners saw my objectives in such terms also points up some dilemmas involved in relating to development jargon when doing research on development.

Development discourse and jargon² is of course a key dimension when studying aid and development. It provides the framework to which key actors relate, and many of the concepts are indeed useful in denoting and analysing some of the phenomena under study. Nonetheless, I have tried to limit the use of the same terms and concepts in my research objectives and in much of the later writing, for several reasons. Development jargon is comparable to the ‘local language’ in most ethnographic studies: it should be seen as an object under study rather than as the framework for analysis. Anthropological research needs to relate to both the local language, and to the terms and concepts used as analytical tools.³ In the case of most ‘local’ languages, it is easy to distinguish between the two, since the local language is less familiar to the researcher and normally does not provide concepts readily suitable for capturing what the researcher is trying to understand within the discursive framework of academic research. But development jargon reflects ambitions to capture similar phenomena, in an analytical approach often on the same aggregate level as the social scientist, and in a familiar language. And development agencies produce masses of studies, often of high quality, seeking to respond to comparable research objectives as the researchers. It is therefore tempting for the researcher to use the same concepts developed for those purposes, when identifying and analysing phenomena.

² In a later section ‘development discourse’ refers to perspectives inspired by early Foucauldian writing and post-development studies, which sees discourse as much more than merely text and speech. To avoid confusion with that meaning of ‘discourse’ I here use ‘jargon’ instead, but in a relatively broad meaning of the term that could also be referred to as ‘discourse’: ‘jargon’ as I use the term is more than merely a set of terms: it refers to a set of quite specific ideas and concepts, but also assumptions about social change reflected in how key actors talk about ‘development’.

³ This would correspond to a distinction sometimes used in earlier anthropology between *emic* (local) and *etic* (the researchers’) presentations of data and analysis.

Caution is in order here. Borrowing terms and concepts from a local language may involve the risk of positioning oneself within the same discursive framework and thereby limiting the exploratory potentials in opening up a field of knowledge. It has also been claimed that development discourse is a field of knowledge that is incompatible with the ambitions of anthropological research, and that one should avoid it for normative or political reasons (cf. Ferguson 1997). On the more practical, communicative level, terms borrowed from development jargon are often loaded with quite specific but implicit meanings, and thus involve considerable potential for misunderstanding. The meanings often seem to reflect development policies rather than empirical realities, and are thus not necessarily useful for empirically oriented academic studies. Take ‘governance’, for example: it may for some purposes replace ‘state’ to the extent that in a very broad meaning of the term, my research objectives could be translated to ‘impact of aid on governance’ with a reasonable degree of precision. Some dominant development agencies define governance along hundreds of quite specific, often quantitative, indicators (Grindle 2004; OECD 2009; Kaufmann et al. 2010), which seem to reflect donors’ ideals concerning statehood rather than being developed to capture local phenomena.

Another possible problem in relating to the jargon of development practice is the expectations among development agencies of what is possible to study empirically. Terms like ‘the impact of aid on governance’ reflect ambitions that can be condensed into verifying or falsifying whether selected aid interventions manage to achieve certain intended outcomes, reflecting an idea of causal interaction between aid and a certain social change. While such causality is obviously politically relevant (and may well be true), it is problematic in research. First, in many cases it is difficult or impossible to verify causal relations on that level by using the methodologies available to social science, at least within the scope of the practically feasible. Second, it may distract attention from other aspects of aid that do not fit into the question of whether aid ‘works’ or not according to policy intentions and the objectives of the respective aid interventions. Any development intervention is likely to have unintended and unforeseen effects, but those that are not reflected in the concepts and policy intentions will easily fall outside the radar of development agencies if the main focus is on verifying whether aid ‘works’ according to policy intentions. Disengaging from development jargon is therefore a methodologically important choice to avoid discrimination in focus between effects along dimensions reflected in policy intentions, and other effects.

2. Methodology

2.1. Methodological challenges in studying the state

The research objectives involve two categories of social phenomena: aid and development; and state and state formation. When planning the empirical research, I chose to focus primarily on the state and state formation, with little specific emphasis on aid and development. One reason is that I was already quite familiar with aid from several years of experience as practitioner: hence, I was less curious about the empirical manifestations of aid. But the priority of ‘the state’ over ‘aid and development’ in empirical research is also useful in helping to avoid a risk inherent in much research on aid and development. If empirical research had been guided by a focus on aid, for instance by selecting certain aid interventions or aid relations for observation, it would naturally have drawn the focus into those locations, relations, or institutions that are most directly affected by aid. As regards the state, it might well have led to a form of bias in empirical observation towards those aspects or locations of the state that were most directly focused on in aid. Instead, when planning the empirical research, I did not select any particular development interventions to study, and did not focus much on identifying the institutions, resource flows and relations that might be directly attributed to aid. And with Malawi I could remain confident that aid and development intersect with so many aspects of social life, and perhaps most aspects of the state, that the effects would be manifest even if I did not concentrate on specific aid interventions.

Instead, I aimed at identifying characteristics of the state with a special focus on what might seem like processes of change in those characteristics – state formation – regardless of any preliminary hypotheses about their relation to aid and development. Only later, in the last phases of empirical research and in analysis, did I focus more explicitly on aid and development. Such phasing of research should allow a wider scope in the empirical study of the state and state formation than if I had followed a few selected aid interventions.

The choice of ethnographic fieldwork as the method was natural, given my interest in an explorative approach to the state. Ethnographic fieldwork, using participant observation

as the main tool, is localised in terms of geography but wide in terms of which phenomena to observe. It therefore offers the opportunity for a broad empirical focus, within a manageable social universe. By implication of my preference to ‘the state’ over aid and development, my empirical research should be seen as research on the state and stateness, and not on aid and development. It draws more inspiration from anthropological studies of state formation than from studies of aid and development – it is not an ‘aidnography’ (Gould 2004).

But the choice of the state over aid as the key empirical focus of research poses some challenges when it comes to knowing exactly what to observe. Aid is relatively easy to identify. The state, however, is not that evident. Despite the frequent use of the term, it is not clear what ‘the state’ really means. To be sure, ‘the state’ is often referred to as something quite specific and very important in almost any society, whether as the cause of or the solution to almost any societal problem. But it is difficult to see exactly what ‘the state’ means in terms of a readily identifiable set of social phenomena that can fit most uses of the term. ‘The state’ could mean the government or the regime, the nation or the people, a government or municipal office, or any individual policeman, judge, or bureaucrat – but also something more abstract, like ‘public’ or ‘communal’. As indicated later, anthropological research has broadened the understanding of ‘the state’ even further, but without approaching any simple definition of the term.

However, the elusiveness of the concept does not mean that it is open to personal preference and interpretation, or mainly a philosophical exercise: my study of the state was indeed a search for the state as an empirical phenomenon that certainly shapes societies and influences individuals. The challenge was how to carry out empirical research on something that is seen as socially important, without knowing exactly what that ‘something’ is. Empirical study requires some prior idea of ‘what’ and ‘where’ the state is, but any pre-empirical definition also limits the scope of empirical research. This is a dilemma familiar in social science (not only in the study of the state), and it has been solved in very different ways in different disciplines. As a reference for the methodology of an anthropological approach to the state, I will start with a discussion of the most common methodological approach to the elusiveness and multi-dimensionality of the state in other disciplines of social science: the ideal type. This is because the ideal type has been so influential for the study of the state that it is difficult to study and theorise the

state without reference to it. The anthropological approach, which is radically different, should also be understood with reference to the ideal type, as it can be seen as a form of opposition to it. Moreover, it may even be that the ideal type has been so influential that some aspects of most modern states – as they appear in real life and not only in the academic literature – can be seen as an effect of the ideal type originally designed in order to understand and not to change states.

2.1.1. The ideal-type approach

The ambiguities of the state are well known in social science. But although scholars are occasionally reminded of the methodological challenges that result from that ambiguity (see e.g. Abrams 1988; Mitchell 1991), in much sociology and political science this seems treated more often as a theoretical and philosophical concern, rather than a methodological one. Methodologically, the problem of ambiguity has been solved by applying an ideal-type approach borrowed from Weber – a definition made primarily for methodological purposes. The most widely used definition of the state is ‘the entity that successfully claims monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a territory’ (Weber 1971), with further elaboration in other texts (e.g. Weber 1978).

The ideal type is a tool designed to serve methodological and analytical purposes rather than descriptive ones, based on the acknowledgement that the complexity of social phenomena has forced social science to be selective in its use of aggregate social data (Weber 1949). The ideal type is therefore mainly a conceptual tool, but is to some degree also a normative statement; Weber was explicit that an ideal type is based on certain norms and should not be seen as value-neutral or objective. In Weber’s writings there seems to be some ambiguity about the extent to which the ideal type is also descriptive, understood as a form of high-level generalisation of social reality at aggregate level. The key point here is that an ideal type can be used without necessarily claiming that it is an accurate description of any empirical phenomenon. In the case of the ideal-type definition of the state above, it seems clear that when it was proposed it could at best be seen as an exceptional form of the state and not a general description – since different forms of colonial rule, undrawn boundaries, and more or less stateless societies with competing claims to the legitimate use of physical force made the definition unsuited to many areas of the world. In his more elaborate writings Weber left little doubt that his work on the

state was done for analytical purposes specific to a specific time (the modern era) and place (the West), and even though the general ideal type definition referred to above may seem developed for universal application (but not as a precise empirical description of actually existing states) even basic aspects of his other writings on the state should not be taken as a universal given (see e.g. Weber 1978, p.902).

Any reading of an ideal type as a description of an empirical phenomenon is therefore premature unless it has already been tested against empirical findings, and to interpret the ideal type as a universally applicable definition is to misunderstand Weber. Moreover, even if tested and confirmed against realities, it must involve the recognition that the representation of those realities – precisely because they are observed and analysed upon an ideal type – is a value-based selection from a complex set of empirical data and therefore merely one of many possible representations of the same realities. Weber frequently warned against interpreting the ideal type as a ‘scientific’, objective, universally valid representation of a social reality: for instance, *‘Nothing, however, is more dangerous than the confusion of theory and history [...] the belief that the “true” content and the essence of historical reality is portrayed in such theoretical constructs’* (Weber 1949, p. 94).

In other words, the Weberian ideal types, albeit (in my view) a good candidate for a normative approach to the state and state building, is only one of several possible starting points for an empirical study of the state. With regard to states outside of the early modern West, it should be applied with particular caution. The use of a Western ideal type in other contexts carries the risk of ending up by analysing non-Western states mainly with regard to what such states ‘lack’ as compared to the Western, Weberian normative ideas of the state. Indeed, this is a weakness of most academic studies of non-Western states: the analysis easily becomes limited to the question of how much they deviate from the Weberian ideals.

In justification of that approach one could say that, unlike the situation when Weber introduced his ideal-type description of non-Western, non-modern states, most of today’s state bureaucracies are staffed largely by people who have been schooled in Weber’s ideal types and who share those ideals as one (out of several) set of norms for the state. If they act with reference to those norms, the Weberian ideal type may have served to create some of the state form that it describes, and the initially analytical concept has become

more of empirical reality. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily make such concepts the most appropriate for analysing non-Western states. They do not necessarily reveal the most pertinent characteristics of those states, and they do not even necessarily reflect the norms for statehood precisely: Weberian norms are but one of several sets of norms for state practice in most states, non-Western ones in particular.

2.1.2. An ideal type of African states?

Several studies have tried to identify some general characteristics of African states that also distinguish them from non-African ones. Many of them focus on the difference between African and European states. Some studies point to the relatively less important role of a bourgeoisie and/or a working class in state formation (Sandbrook 1985; but see also Fatton 1988) as compared to Europe (e.g. Gramsci 1971; Corrigan & Sayer 1985). Similarly, there is sometimes a focus on the lack of a Western-type, independent civil society, at least in the form of formal organisations with voluntary membership (Harbeson et al. 1994; Bratton 1989; Chazan 1994). Conceptually, the most widespread description of African states is ‘neo-patrimonialism’, which denotes a hybrid between two Weberian ideal types and a difference from ‘modern’ Western states (Eisenstadt 1973; Médard 1982; Sandbrook 1985). Other studies seem concerned about the lack of distinction between state and non-state domains, for instance in terms of a distinction between a ‘public’ and ‘private’ sphere (Ekeh 1975) or between formal and informal institutions (Lund 2006): distinctions that are known (at least as the norm) in Western states but that seem lacking in Africa. Many of the studies attempt to describe, analyse or justify certain problems with African states – like elite accumulation, clientelism, centralisation, corruption, lack of democracy and accountability. While it is easy to agree that such problems are ‘real’, they tend to involve a bias towards what African states ‘lack’ rather than how they function (cf. Chabal & Daloz 1999).

There are also studies that make less explicit comparison to Western states, seeking rather to explain African stateness more on its own terms. Some seminal studies have noted particular patterns of economy and production, resulting predominantly from a colonial mode of production (Boone 1994) or particular forms of linkage between the economic, social and political domains (Hyden 1983). Several studies focusing on production patterns have claimed that the role (not the power) of the peasantry has had a relatively

strong influence on state formation (Hyden 1980; Bratton et al. 1994; Boone 2003; Hyden 2006). Other studies have focused on historical and/or cultural particularities (Bayart 1993; Geschiere 1996; Mamdani 1996; Berman 1998; Chabal & Daloz 1999; Herbst 2000; Mbembe 2001; Schatzberg 2002), or specific forms of external relations (Reno 1998; Bayart et al. 1999; Herbst 2000; Bayart 2000). While many of the above still represent a bias towards the problems of African states, they demonstrate a diversity in possible approaches to understanding African states that goes beyond what African states 'lack' as compared to Western ideals of statehood.

Even though most of the above studies present quite bold, general statements on African states in general, they do not approach a consensus on African stateness. Still, some may serve as an ideal type for particular purposes. In my research, I found Mamdani's typologies of direct versus indirect rule (Mamdani 1996) useful as a reference in some of my analytical work; but not to guide the empirical research. Otherwise, I made little reference to the literature on 'African states' in empirical research or analysis. It was not necessary to base my study on any particular prior reference to what makes the 'African' states a particular case. Indeed, I tend to believe that the particularities of 'African' states have been exaggerated in some of the literature mentioned above. Except, perhaps, for the colonial history (which is also shared with other regions) it is difficult to see that today's African states, with their wide variety, share common characteristics that distinguish them from states elsewhere to the extent that it is useful to consider them as a particular case except for specific analytical purposes. Since I had no ambitions of developing general statements on African states, the literature on African states was relevant only to the extent it could help to explain some of my observations in Malawi.

2.1.3. Anthropological approaches to the state

In social anthropology, with its preference for explorative research, an ideal-type approach is not natural. One might expect other methodological approaches to the study of the state followed by alternative attempts at theorisation. But social anthropology provides a relatively weak foundation for studying the state. To be sure, there are many studies that approach the state from various different angles, in terms of both methodology and theory (e.g. Geertz 1981; Kapferer 1998; Handelman 1990; Herzfeld 1992; Coronil 1997; Scott 1998; Taussig 2002). But the overall number of studies that

explicitly explore the state is still relatively low, and no consensus has been developed on the state as a concept or on methodological approaches to the state, at least in the form of a unified theory or approach that can provide a common framework for an anthropological study of the state.

This lack of interest in the state in the history of social anthropology is perhaps understandable since the discipline has traditionally concentrated on societies organised in other, more ‘traditional’ polities, and has focused on politics in assumed ‘stateless societies’ – often with an apparent sense of urgency to study those political systems before they disappeared, since they were seen as under threat from the (colonial) state. The research agenda was indeed justified, as almost all ‘traditional’ societies studied by anthropologists have now been heavily changed under influence by the state. This is not to say that ‘traditional’ societies were necessarily ‘stateless’; many were interacting with states and responding to those. The pity is that when anthropologists were focusing on the traditional political systems, many of the same societies were also excellent cases – and now lost opportunities – for studying states ‘in the making’, so to say. The processes of change could have provided invaluable insights on state formation, but many of those processes are already lost as an opportunity for research. Not that state formation is ‘over’ – but we can expect that changes in power relations and societal organisation associated with state formation to be easiest to observe when they are relatively new, as the new features are more readily apparent to the actors involved and are therefore probably accompanied by explicit negotiation and contest. Today the state is already seen as so self-evident in most contexts that people generally do not question its naturalness – political contest is more often about state resources than state form. Having reached the point where they are seen as natural, the key features of the state are less likely to be subjected to explicit negotiation.

In addition to a general lack of interest, there has even been in some social anthropology an almost programmatic agenda *against* studying the state. This is based on philosophical and methodological considerations that originate partly from the acknowledgement of the ambiguity and conceptual and empirical elusiveness of the state. In the words of Radcliffe-Brown:

In writing about political institutions there is a good deal of discussion of the origin and nature of the State, which is usually represented as being an entity over and above the human individuals who make up society, having as one of its attributes something called ‘sovereignty’ and sometimes

spoken of as having a will (law being often defined as the will of the State) or as issuing commands. The State, in this sense, does not exist in the phenomenal world; it is a fiction of philosophers. What does exist is an organisation, i.e. a collection of individual human beings connected by a complex system of relations. [...] There is no such thing as the power of the State; there are only, in reality, powers of individuals – kings, prime ministers, magistrates, policemen, party bosses, and voters (Radcliffe-Brown 1940, p.viii).

Later historical developments make it difficult to accept Radcliffe-Brown's claim that the state is little more than a 'fiction'. On the contrary, it is one of the most influential human constructs ever in history, which, unlike the time of Radcliffe-Brown's statement, now permeates societies and the daily life of most individuals almost all over the globe.

Nonetheless, I take his negation of the state as a useful starting point – not as an empirical or epistemological statement, but as a methodological tool. Perhaps 'there is no such *thing* as the state', as he claims, and it is useful to dismiss the idea of any particular social entity as being or representing 'the state'. But there must be *something*, without which the 'kings, prime ministers, magistrates, policemen, party bosses and voters' who, he claims, having 'powers of individuals', would have been more or less powerless. Hence, rather than dismissing the state due to its elusiveness, a more pertinent approach is to ask more specifically what it is about the state that makes those actors, or any other actor that successfully claims to represent the state, powerful; and what it is about the state that shapes societies all over the world so that a 'state' society appears radically different from a possible 'non-state' society. And, if we accept that in some sense the state is a 'fiction', we should ask how an ideational construct can come to appear as a 'real' entity, an agent, or a social order – and what sort of social processes are concealed by such appearance of the state.

Those are questions asked by recent anthropological research on state formation, attempting to investigate the state from many different perspectives (see for instance, Blom Hansen & Stepputat 2001b; Trouillot 2001; Ferguson & Gupta 2002; Krohn-Hansen & Nustad 2005b; Sharma & Gupta 2006). That research can be seen both as attempts to compensate for the earlier dismissal of the state in anthropology, and as providing an alternative to the mainstream Weberian approaches of other disciplines (Krohn-Hansen & Nustad 2005a). We should note, however, that much of this research in social anthropology builds on research agendas and theoretical perspectives that are also familiar – but not mainstream – in other disciplines, and has certainly drawn inspiration from such studies (for instance, Gramsci 1971; Foucault 1980; Abrams 1988; Foucault 1991; Migdal et al. 1994).

This stream of research seems very promising in opening up and expanding our understanding of the state, stateness and state formation. Perhaps this is precisely because of the negative approach to the state as a concept, made possible by abandoning an ideal-type approach, and perhaps by the legacy of anthropological disinterest in studying the state, as expressed by Radcliffe-Brown. Dismissing the state as a ‘thing’ opens up a wide range of potential new understandings of what the state ‘is’. This is particularly important in a field of research that is so heavily influenced by an ideal-type approach that it is difficult to think academically about the state without it: explicit rejection of the state as we know it is perhaps necessary in order to de-link it from the ideal types on which most academic thinking is based. Acknowledging that the state is ‘real’, effective and powerful, while not concluding prior to research on the ‘substance’ of the state, opens a whole new field of research, enabling an understanding beyond fixed, pre-empirical ideas of the state. Some studies have provided new insights into the ‘substance’ of the state, ‘discovering’ the state and stateness in practically all aspects of human life – including the historical and cultural sources, the state as a discursive and ideational phenomenon, and the very specific techniques of governing that may be ‘state’ governing even if carried out by non-state actors. Other studies focus more on the effects of the state, without much concern for ‘what’ the state is at all.

2.1.4. *Localising the state*

Following the reflections above, as a point of departure for my empirical investigation of the state I decided against taking any *a priori* understanding of the state for granted. But while I was comfortable, in principle, with not having a clear definition of *what* the state is, another question was of practical relevance to fieldwork: *Where* is the state? I needed to start with some ideas of where to observe, not primarily in spatial terms but in social ones: In which social practices is the state observable? By ‘location’ I here mean almost any social context where the state may be observable – be they institutions, spaces, discourses, domains, practices, relations or interactions (cf. Gupta & Ferguson 1997). By focusing my empirical research on the location of the state, I believed it would be possible to maintain the empirical focus while reducing the risk of being limited by pre-determined ideas as to its substance. I found the question of where to ‘locate’ the state useful not only in guiding fieldwork, but also as a relevant approach to further de-linking

the study of the state from pre-conceived ideas: applying a negative approach to the location of the state, comparable to dismissing the state as a ‘thing’, might enable greater awareness of the need for an open approach to the state, and to de-link my empirical research from the Weberian ideal types. I therefore start with the Weberian definition in the overview below, to illustrate the potentials in opening the scope of research by rejecting what the ideal type says, implicitly, about ‘where’ the state is.

‘The entity that successfully claims monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a territory’ (Weber 1971): this means, in modern times, a sovereign government within a territory. It serves quite well, in most cases, for distinguishing states from each other: indeed, much better now than when it was introduced. But a territorial distinction between states provides very little insight into exactly what it is that makes states powerful and how they work within each territory. Moreover, some recent developments and research on the state suggest that even the location of a state within a certain territory should not be taken for granted, whether historically or in the post-colonial era, and the territorial boundaries are increasingly blurred (Blom Hansen & Stepputat 2005). Even international relations – the social field where the idea of states as territorially distinct entities represented by their government seems most relevant – can fruitfully be seen in other perspectives than as interaction between sovereign states, each located within a territory (Neumann & Sending 2007; Sending & Neumann 2006). Foreign aid, a key dimension in my research, is a good example of states and state powers crossing territorial boundaries, where allocating government institutions to particular territories makes little sense and some of the modalities involved may be seen as challenging sovereignty (Lie 2011).

Neither is it necessarily fruitful to localise the state within certain (state) institutions, like the government and the bureaucracy. That involves the risk of viewing the state as a more or less autonomous institution that is ‘outside’ society (Mitchell 1991; Migdal 1994) and ‘above’ it (Ferguson & Gupta 2002). That idea is at best empirically imprecise, as it is difficult to imagine a state institution independent of the society it is merged in; and it risks taking the focus away from state processes and manifestations in society. It also seems to have limited potential for explaining diversity and historic changes. Given all the evidence of actual diversity in state practice, it is a paradox that governments and bureaucracies seem to be so similar almost all over the world, at least in their formal

appearance. This would suggest that variations between states are more likely to be explained by studying aspects of society or a state–society relation, than by focusing solely on state institutions.

Localising the state in state institutions also hides the political and ideological struggles, power struggles and (class) interests that are embedded in the state and seem to disappear as soon as the state is presented as a separate entity outside society. Engels warned against this as early as 1845,⁴ but still the state is often associated with ideas of being an institution free from particular (class) interests and ideologies, representing the common good. A distinction between the government and the regime (e.g. Eriksen 2005) may serve as a reminder that what is called ‘the state’ is controlled by someone – the regime – but still it allows the impression that some parts of the state are a natural, extra-societal given, independent of social struggles. A relational perspective, in which the most important object of study is the mutual interaction between ‘state’ and ‘society’, may serve to shift the focus from the ‘poles’ of the relation to the relation itself. It would imply seeing neither ‘state’ nor ‘society’ as independent social entities, but as constituted in and by that relation (Emirbayer 1997). It avoids reifying the state as an outside social entity, but still tends to assume that we can identify the state as one pole in a seemingly one-dimensional (but two-way) state relation.

Having dislocating the state from the formal state institutions, we also see that the state cannot be seen as identical with any specific actor (cf. Gupta 1995). Much recent work on the state sees state power as inherent in discourse and practices⁵ that normally originate in state institutions, but may exist quite independently of those. Most of those studies also challenge another component of the Weberian ideal type – its emphasis on coercion or the threat of coercion (‘use of physical force’) as the constitutive basis of state power. Works inspired by Foucault (Foucault 1977; Foucault 1979; Burchell et al. 1991; Rose 1999) have shifted the focus from the ‘repressive’ (sovereign) forms of power based on coercion, to ‘productive’ powers that ‘produce’ subjects/citizens whose rationalities and conduct fit into a state logic. If effective, coercion will be relatively less important to state

⁴ F. Engels in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, according to Abrams (1988).

⁵ When ‘discourse and practice’ are used in this thesis they should not be seen as referring to two distinct categories of phenomena, but as a reminder of a broader understanding of ‘discourse’ that includes practice, as in Foucault-inspired research. The term ‘discourse’ used alone indicates the everyday use of the term as referring predominantly to text and speech.

power, as individuals are made to govern themselves according to state preferences, but in the name of individual freedom. ‘Productive’ power includes such aspects of discourse as analysed in research inspired by Foucault (1980) as well as the political rationalities, practices and techniques referred to as *governmentality* (Foucault 1991). Even though many of the techniques and practices involved are not exclusive to state institutions, they are closely associated with the historical development of the states and it is difficult to analyse these phenomena without reference to the state.

Some studies of the state and state formation localise dominant aspects of statehood not in particular institutions or specific practices, but as aspects of society and culture (e.g. Corrigan & Sayer 1985; Joseph & Nugent 1994). In such studies, state formation is localised in the general population rather than in state institutions, and the society is seen as both a function of state practice and a key component of state power. Changes in how state power works are reflected in a changing society, including new classifications established for state purposes (Scott 1998; Bourdieu 1999; Baitenmann 2005; Poulantzas 1975; Jessop 1990) that produce different types of subjects (e.g. citizens, Mamdani 1996) and collective identities (e.g. nations, Anderson 1991). When state formation is viewed primarily in society, the state is de-localised from any institution and any particular relation, but is more perhaps best seen as the aggregate of ‘millions of encounters’ (Trouillot 2001). As shown by Das and Poole (2004), fruitful studies of the state can also be undertaken by ethnographic explorations that focus on the margins of the state. This is not primarily in geographical terms, but as denoting what is regarded as ‘outside’ of and therefore also the ‘opposite’ of the state – for instance disorder, lawlessness, illegibility, ‘the wild’, etc. In a quite different but comparable approach to investigating what is ‘outside’ but still constitutes the state, Agamben investigates (state) sovereignty by exploring its ‘state of exception’. In his perspective, both the extreme ‘poles’ of the state – the sovereign, and those who are excluded from being state subjects or citizens – are in a state of exception from state law, whereby they constitute each other and the state (Agamben 1998; 2005).

Several studies have focused primarily on the ideational aspects, whether as imaginary aspects of the state (Gupta 1995; Mitchell 1999), as having a position in discourse representing some form of higher rationality and unified entity beyond everyday social struggles (Kantorowicz 1957; Abrams 1988; Blom Hansen 2001) or as the dominant

provider of ideological and normative prescriptions for social life. Through a wide range of interactions, governing techniques, and interventions to organise territories and societies – and the negotiation and contest against those – images are created of states and stateness (Blom Hansen & Stepputat 2001b). In such perspectives, the ‘location’ of the state is mainly in people’s minds; but for the purpose of empirical research we may assume it can be seen in discourse/practices that both reflect and create certain images of the state, in a ‘language of stateness’ (Blom Hansen & Stepputat 2001a) or practices that make the state appear, for example, as unified and sovereign (see e.g. Neumann 2005; Weber 1998; Dunn 2010;) and ‘above’ society (Ferguson & Gupta 2002). Locating the state in the ideational domain should not be read as reducing the state to merely an idea, as the ideas are both produced by and certain to have effects on actual social practice. It seems useful to investigate how ideas and practices interact, mutually, to create what is seen as the state, and its social effects.

Some studies of the state are deliberately not concerned with the state as such, but focus mainly on its effects. Several studies of various forms of ‘state effects’ have proven promising (e.g. Mitchell 1999; Trouillot 2001; Ferguson & Gupta 2002; Nustad 2005). Another potentially analytically useful approach may be to locate the state in terms of governable spaces or times (Rose 1999) rather than of institutions and territories.

2.2. Empirical research – the fieldwork

In the perspective of the state and state perspective above, I could have chosen almost any country for fieldwork. Indeed, the choice of site and location is just as important a methodological choice as the choice of which country (state) to study. Malawi was selected partly because I was already familiar with the country, but it also seemed a good place to observe the possible effects of aid and development. It is a relatively stable country, with few features that might be expected to have a major influence on state formation, such as violent political struggles, security or territorial threats, or radical changes in the government and political system. The government is heavily dependent upon foreign aid, and I knew from previous experience that aid influences much of public sector and political discourse.

Malawi is relatively small in territory, but densely populated, with about 14 million inhabitants, mostly rural peasants. Its economy is based on agricultural production, most of it among smallholder farmers, but with an estate sector that dominates in some parts of the country. Despite land scarcity and considerable internal migration, with corresponding potentials for land and resource conflicts, the country has had a generally peaceful history. And despite the high ethnic and religious diversity,⁶ most of the population seem to share a relatively strong understanding of a Malawi nation and a shared 'Malawian' culture. This is partly attributable to the rule of Kamuzu Banda during the one-party era from independence in 1964 to the introduction of multi-party system in 1994. More than the case in most other African countries, his rule was based on the celebration of national 'tradition' and 'culture', conveniently interpreted as loyalty, obedience and respect for authorities. It was enforced by brutal retaliation against almost any signs of disloyalty. After a peaceful transformation to multi-party rule, the country has undergone reforms aimed at liberal, electoral democracy. The public sector has experienced quite radical reforms towards new public management and neoliberal forms of governance since the 1980s, followed by reforms aimed at decentralisation and 'good governance' (Anders 2005a). These were in line with Western donor preferences, but have not been particularly successful according to donor assessments. During approximately the same period, the country has had poor economic performance and could be classified among the economically poorest non-violent countries in the world. In recent years, Malawi has experienced impressive growth, due not least to heavy investments in agricultural subsidies. That growth seems, in the opinion of most voters, an achievement that outweighs the country's poor 'performance' in key aspects of good governance and democratisation, generally seen as worsening.

I knew that I could observe the state almost anywhere in Malawi, but preferably without seeing the state as exclusively located in any specific institution, actor, or social practice. The state is in fact almost everywhere, but is not precisely localisable anywhere. The solution is not necessarily to attempt to observe all aspects of the state in all possible locations. The most important methodological response to the multi-dimensionality of the state is simply to acknowledge it and its implications: any empirical study of the state

⁶ In the 2008 population and housing census (www.nso.malawi.net) 12 ethnic categories are applied; this is partly a matter of definition. About 15 per cent are Muslims, the rest are Christians, with a negligible number of 'other'.

cannot avoid being limited in scope and cannot even hypothetically produce a general understanding of the state. Moreover, the choice of a certain point of observation is likely to produce exclusive knowledge that corresponds to that point of observation and is not necessarily readily compatible with other forms of knowledge (cf. Haraway 1988). In this perspective, any choice of location is methodologically acceptable, but a single empirical study should not be expected to provide sufficient general knowledge on the state and stateness:

This is not a matter of balancing different approaches to the study of the state as much as it is a call to recognize the integral connections between political economy, social structure, institutional design, everyday practice, and representation. We are not thereby advocating that every study of the state has to do all these things in equal measure – a requirement that would be impossible to satisfy. Rather, what we propose is that a study deeply informed by the co-imbriation of these phenomena will, even if it focuses on a single task, yield insights that are qualitatively different from those of approaches that do not acknowledge such intertwining, such as those that begin with the premise that culture is epiphenomenal or, conversely, those that assume that the organisational structure of bureaucracies is irrelevant. (Gupta & Sharma 2006, p.279)

My response was multi-sited fieldwork, with a deliberate approach to selecting social and political locations that could cut across geographic or institutional settings/sites. The idea was to narrow the study down to one or few locations where the state might be observable, to allow the investigation of the state in comparable locations but across sites, enabling comparison. Such multi-sited fieldwork would not necessarily yield a more ‘complete’ understanding, than, say, an in-depth study in only one particular site, but it would permit some flexibility during fieldwork – for example, being able to switch between sites, while also maintaining some continuity. It would allow for ‘a flexible and opportunistic strategy for diversifying and making more complex our understanding of various places, people, and predicaments through and attentiveness to the different forms of knowledge available from different social and political locations’ (Gupta & Ferguson 1997, p.37).

I chose Zomba district, partly because of personal preferences, partly because the University of Malawi’s Chancellor College is located here and I was hoping to benefit from interaction with the researchers. I aimed at studying the state in both rural and urban sites, as well as at least one public office. That is of course very broad and perhaps overly ambitious for an ethnographic study, and would be meaningful only if I could find a unified, empirical focus across sites, perhaps by concentrating on one or a few possible locations. Initially, I aimed to find a specific, identifiable focus that I could ‘follow’ across all the locations – some persons or relations, a thing, a metaphor, a story, a

biography or a conflict (cf. Marcus 1998, pp.90–95). In practice, it did not work out that way. For one thing, there are relatively few social relations or interactions that directly link two main sites in a study of the state, namely a rural village and the bureaucracy. In my case, some rural informants in the village had relatives working in a public office elsewhere; otherwise I could not identify any personal relations that might serve as a cross-site for observation.

Instead, I sought a less, specific, general idea of the social and political location of the state and state formation. I decided to look for the interactions between the ‘state’ and its citizens (or subjects⁷), in particular interactions involving some forms of negotiation, whether around power, authority, resources or other issues of relevance to the state. I assumed that those relations and interactions where negotiations took place most intensely could rightfully serve as a focus in the study of state formation. This does not mean that the most intensely negotiated interactions or issues are the key sites of state power. Indeed, many perspectives on state power would indicate that, at its ‘strongest’, state power is not negotiated or contested – whether because power is seen as legitimate as in a Weberian understanding, or because it is invisible to the actors involved, for instance through techniques of *governmentality*. But I believed that negotiation around power or resources could be seen as an indication of *changes* in power relations or practices of relevance. New power formations could be expected to provoke some form of opposition and corresponding negotiation, perhaps reflecting or leading to changes in the characteristics of the state (cf. Joseph & Nugent 1994). The negotiation of power in such interactions can therefore be seen as where state formation takes place. In this perspective, opposition/confrontation against the state is just as much a contribution to state formation as is acceptance of state power, since both influence how future interactions take place. Some aspects of state formation can be seen as the aggregate effect of those negotiations.

State–citizen relations cannot be identified mainly by which individuals are involved; it is a question of which statuses are activated in the interaction. All individuals have various statuses available that become activated in different relations and interactions. I was

⁷ I use ‘citizen’ to denote the status of the individual in relation to the state; although ‘subject’ may in many cases be a more precise term, there is no doubt that the norms for state-individual interaction in today’s Malawi is that of a citizen.

interested in those interactions in which the corresponding statuses of ‘state representative’ and citizen were activated – as when a person working in a public office assumes the status of ‘bureaucrat’ and can hence claim to represent the state, whereas another person correspondingly assumes the status of citizen or as the representative of a group of citizens. The same person who has status as bureaucrat in one relation is a citizen in other relations. People may shift statuses between ‘state’ and ‘citizen’ frequently, and can even represent both, as in the cases of politician, village leader, or an NGO if it takes on the role of representing ‘the people’ and delivering public services simultaneously. In such cases, and especially if there is some confusion around statuses, more intense negotiation on statuses in each pole in the relation may perhaps be expected, for instance by protest against claims to authority by the representative of the state or claims by the representatives of the people concerning citizenship and corresponding rights.

My fieldwork soon revealed that, in rural areas, almost all the interactions that could be seen as state interactions involved the chief. He or she⁸ functions as a state representative in village for most purposes, for instance in granting access to the village for state officials and, if requested, organising village meetings. The chief also writes or receives correspondence with public offices on behalf of the subjects, whose cases will often not be accepted unless they bring a letter from the chief; or when communicating with the police or court, who will often deal with cases only upon a letter from the chief, after an attempt has first been made to settle the case in the local court. This led to a dilemma as to which forms of chief interactions to regard as a ‘state’ interaction. Villages are small and the chief may be in almost daily contact with many of the subjects, but most of those interactions are purely personal or about home or village affairs. After all, the chieftaincy was established long before the state in Malawi, and many of the functions of the chief today can be seen as continuation of the ‘traditional’ chieftaincy. The status of the chief as a representative of the state – locally translated to the District Commissioner– is made explicitly relevant only occasionally. That does not mean that other interactions in which the status as ‘state representative’ is not made relevant are not also state–citizen interactions. But it would be wrong to assign to the chief an exclusive status as ‘the state’ in all interactions. In practice, I tried to identify all the different forms of interaction

⁸ Female chiefs are in the minority, but are not uncommon in Malawi.

between the chief and the villagers, while focusing on those where the chief's status as 'state representative' was most explicit.

After a few weeks in a village, meeting with all households and establishing contact with a few informants, I moved to the town. This was partly because the interactions I was looking for were so infrequent that I found the full-time stay in a village less efficient. On the other hand, the village was close to town, so I could maintain almost daily contact by visits and calls throughout the entire fieldwork, scheduling visits whenever I heard of upcoming events of interest. Not surprisingly, with my focus on observing the interactions between 'state' and 'citizen', the urban fieldwork provided far more frequent opportunities for observation, due to a spatial organisation in which state institutions are more visible and interact more frequently with urban than with rural populations. My fieldwork also benefitted from the fact that most informants in town had families in rural areas, and were glad to keep me informed of village affairs, or to invite me home. The urban fieldwork therefore provided valuable information also on many rural contexts as well. It provided the opportunity to observe state-citizen interactions almost continuously, while also giving access to data from various rural contexts.

In urban areas, there are 'town chiefs' with functions comparable with the rural chiefs (Cammack et al. 2009), but also many other forms of interactions with the state. In the relatively small town where I stayed, most interaction with the state (except for health and education services) was with the *boma* or DC— the focal point of the decentralised government.⁹ The first two weeks of urban fieldwork, I spent around the *boma*, trying to map out how and why people interacted with its offices, such as queuing up at the labour office hoping for a job, requesting a proof of identity or applying for a drivers' licence, business permit, etc. The observation of those interactions was done in parallel with my own attempts to obtain the necessary permits for research. Even though my experiences with those frustratingly slow procedures with officials I found arrogant were smoother than for most ordinary citizens (and in spite of the fact that I was not even a citizen), they provided a good opportunity to learn about some modalities in state–citizen interactions. In parallel with observation of people approaching the *boma*, I tried to map the various

⁹ 'DC' or *boma* locally refers both to the District Council and the District Commissioner or its urban equivalent, the Chief Executive Officer (and their offices). The District Council should in principle be an elected body, the others represent the local branch of government. At the time of my fieldwork, there was no functioning local electorate because local elections had been cancelled a few years earlier.

types of initiatives made by public offices to approach people actively. This generally involved some form of ‘participatory’ consultations on selected issues or ‘civic education’ for various purposes. In addition to interactions like the above, there were many everyday interactions within the sectors, such as health, education, police and the judiciary. The 2009 presidential elections were held during my fieldwork, constituting a very special but interesting form of interaction. The election campaign was intense, filled with activity that provided valuable data on discourse about the state and stateness.

During the final parts of fieldwork, I served as a part-time ‘volunteer’ – with full openness and formal acceptance of my role as researcher – in two public offices: Zomba District Agricultural Development Office and Liwonde Town Assembly (*boma*). The first was chosen because I had learnt during village fieldwork that agricultural extension services, agricultural subsidies in particular, were seen as the most important state intervention. Subsidies are also a key component of a state contract – people expected subsidies in return for voting for the president. The second case was justified by my general interest in learning more about the operations of the *boma*. The reason for choosing Liwonde, approximately an hour’s journey from the town where I was staying, was made because the office was in the process of producing an urban development plan involving many consultations of potential interest. In fact, the process was delayed, and did not materialise until after my fieldwork was over.

In each office, I was present only part-time, usually one to three days a week, depending on whether the activities planned in the office seemed to offer good opportunities for observation. My largely self-assigned office task was to help junior officials with duties such as report writing: this was a very popular form of assistance and a valuable source of data. I also joined in whenever there was an opportunity to go with the officials on *community visits* or other activities of interest. The observation of those interactions followed by discussions with my new co-workers gave insight into the bureaucracy and the officials’ view on their work. It also served as a form of triangulation, as I could observe similar interactions from the perspective of village or town dwellers. In a few cases, when together with the agricultural team, I even joined officials in interactions with the village where I had conducted fieldwork earlier, so I could discuss the same observations with both poles of the relation afterwards.

In total, I spent ten months in the country, of which almost eight months actively doing fieldwork. During the remaining period, I worked on consultancy assignments, including an evaluation of a government development programme, which also provided insights. The actual methods for empirical research were taken from the anthropologist's toolbox. Participant observation dominated my research, supported by document reviews and semi-structured interviews with individual informants, chiefs and civil servants, and informal discussions with groups of informants. A dominant proportion of my main informants were male and English-speaking, normally reflecting education at least at 'senior primary' level – as is the case for some 29 per cent of the population (NSO 2009). In many cases, informants approached me on their own initiative, rather than me selecting them. Hence, there is a clear bias in my informants towards the more privileged, and those who would take the initiative to approach a White researcher. Around 20 informants constituted the core of my fieldwork; these are people with which I spent considerable time and explicitly discussed various aspects of my research interests. In addition, I interacted sporadically with many others. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, most often in groups, with representatives of most of the 60-odd households in my main fieldwork village, about 15 chiefs and a similar number of civil servants;¹⁰ in addition came hundreds of less formal interactions with other individuals, groups, chiefs and civil servants.

Fieldwork was guided by considerations of what I felt was possible and feasible from day to day rather than a pre-set schedule. In retrospect, it is tempting to conclude that much of the empirical research was unsystematic, time-consuming and thus not very effective. This is probably unavoidable in fieldwork of this nature and with the methodological approach I had chosen. But effectiveness was greatly enhanced by the choice of a multi-sited approach. I got to know many people from various different socio-economic strata, such as farmers, petty traders, bureaucrats and academics. I maintained frequent contact with core informants from different sites or strata, most of whom knew of some of my research interests and could inform me of events of interest – for example, when government representatives or politicians were expected to visit a village, when an interesting hearing was planned in a local court, or other events of relevance to my work. Informants also reported about past events, so I could enquire about details, as a

¹⁰ The figures are given as approximates due not to lack of detailed recording but to some uncertainty as to what to categorize as 'semi-structured interview' as opposed to more informal talks.

substitute for observing them directly. This made it possible to do a kind of low intensity ‘fieldwork’ even when not on the actual site, and would not have been possible if I had spent time in only one location waiting for relevant interactions to occur.

Moreover, two daily newspapers were invaluable sources of data not only concerning the political discourse, but also as regards events of interest to state–citizen interactions elsewhere in the country. The Malawian style of journalistic writing is characterised by a relatively high degree of detail in the reporting of actual events, which I found generally trustworthy in the details, albeit very selective and incomplete. The media bias towards anything connected with the government and a state-dominated view on ‘society’ made the media selective towards events of interest to my research. Throughout my fieldwork I collected hundreds of small items from the media, all providing data on interactions between state and citizens.

3. Synthesis of papers

The three papers that follow are all based on data produced during the same fieldwork, and to some degree they build on the same observations. Nonetheless, they present quite different perspectives on the state, to the extent that they even appear not to be discussing the same phenomenon. They are associated with three distinct academic debates, and have been submitted to journals in various disciplines: regional studies, social anthropology and development studies, respectively. Thus, as studies of the state, they should be seen as stand-alone research products. They nevertheless mutually support each other, not towards an integrated, coherent understanding of the state, but rather as an illustration of diversity in possible approaches. They also illustrate the importance of the methodological choice of location, as each different perspective corresponds to certain social and political locations.

This section presents a summary of each paper, followed by brief discussions on selected aspects of how the papers can be seen as responding to, and illuminating, different parts of the discussion on theory and methodology in the previous section. The last part of the section discusses how the papers shed light on aid and development, as a preparation for the next section.

3.1. Summary of papers

The first paper – *Parallel state organisations in Malawi*¹¹ – focuses on the state hierarchy, which in the case of Malawi and some other African states consists of both the formal bureaucracy and the semi-formal hierarchy of chiefs.¹² The chiefs, often seen as remnants of the ‘traditional’, are also an integral component of state rule, and the chieftaincy should therefore be seen as a state institution. The paper discusses Mamdani’s typology of direct versus indirect rule (1996) and claims that more recent developments have led to what in Malawi can better be termed *parallel rule*: indirect rule via chiefs and direct (‘modern’) rule co-exist in most areas, so people are exposed to both. They are at

¹¹ Short titles are used to denote each paper throughout the introduction.

¹² There are various hierarchies, including the legislature and the judicial: my discussion relates mostly to executive functions, although the chieftaincy overlaps with the other functions as well.

the same time citizens of the modern state *and* subjects under a state-enforced chieftaincy system.

For those able to straddle between the two forms of rule, this means a wider scope of opportunities for interacting with the state. For others, it means a dissonance between the rhetoric of civil, rights-based governance and the practice of chiefly rule. Mamdani's characteristics of chiefly rule as *decentralised despotism* are applicable in Malawi as principles of rule, but not necessarily as practice: chiefly rule there does not normally equate with brutal rule, and many chiefs seem to adhere to democratic norms.

Conversely, bureaucratic practice does not necessarily reflect the civil, liberal, democratic norms that have been adopted by the government of Malawi. Nonetheless, the choice between the two state hierarchies does make a difference, as they represent very different norms and institutional mechanisms for the relation between the state and its subject/citizens. For instance, there are differences in social organisation as seen from a state logic in terms of voluntary membership in civil society, versus compulsory membership in a village *community*. Moreover, the mechanisms for 'vertical' and 'horizontal' balance of power are very different. In the case of the chiefs, downward accountability is not institutionalised through, for instance, elections or certain notions of rights, and the chiefs represent fused powers – as opposed to a division between branches, for instance the executive, legislative and the judiciary.

The paper also notes a more recent 'vertical' expansion of chiefly rule: The chief hierarchy, which previously reached only to district level, now extends all the way to the president. Mandated by a law from 1967, the president has appointed a number of 'paramount chiefs', who are directly subordinated to himself and rule over all other chiefs within their ethnic group. This means that more options are available for the government, and the president in particular, who can choose between two separate institutional hierarchies in the execution of state power.

The paper demonstrates that research on state building and governance should be cautious about using bureaucratic capacity as a proxy for state capacity. The chieftaincy, standing outside the bureaucracy, constitutes a key component of state power and everyday governance, and it is difficult to imagine this institution being replaced by any part of the formal government in the foreseeable future.

The second paper – *The aesthetics of bureaucratic practice* – concentrates on bureaucratic practice. Its empirical focus lies close to many mainstream approaches to studies of the state, which more or less equate states with government institutions. It discusses some observations on a nation-wide programme for distribution of subsidised agricultural inputs. The programme aims at targeting only the poorest farmers through the application of some time and resource demanding procedures for selection of beneficiaries. However, the local chiefs step in and arrange for the subsidies to be re-distributed in a matter of hours after the targeting procedures have been completed. In effect, the government policies of targeting the poorest fail. This also makes the bureaucrats appear powerless vis-à-vis the chiefs, as it is clear to all that it is the chiefs who have the final say on principles for distribution. Hence, the procedures seem not to serve any instrumental purpose – neither ‘state’ interests nor the bureaucrats’ personal interests.

Why then do the bureaucrats not only implement the state procedures, knowing that they are going to ‘fail’, but seem to do it eagerly and even with some pride? The paper suggests that the procedures can be understood with reference to their ‘aesthetic’ qualities. They create an image, albeit temporary, of a legible, well-organised society and a knowledgeable, caring state. Those qualities make the procedures meaningful, whether or not they serve any instrumental purpose. By focusing on the aesthetic qualities of bureaucratic procedures, the paper balances a dichotomy in many studies and common assumptions of state practice: everyday bureaucratic practice is often seen as subject to instrumental considerations, whereas the more expressive, aesthetic practices are located elsewhere in the state, for instance in ceremonies.

The paper also notes some utilitarian effects of the bureaucratic procedures under discussion. They enable the mediation between incompatible norms and worldviews between the local population and the government. By establishing a preferred image of the state and its population, the procedures appear meaningful according to a state logic while still allowing for local practices according to other standards. This enables continuation of the subsidy programme: the government and donors can continue to support it, and one avoids the conflicts in local communities that would probably have resulted if the donor preferences for targeting only the poorest had been enforced in practice.

Those utilitarian aspects of the procedures do not reduce the validity of the argument that the practices are primarily aesthetic; a comparable logic may be valid for many expressive state practices, for instance public ceremonies. The key point is that it is the primacy of the aesthetic qualities that also makes the utilitarian effects possible. Paradoxically, those effects are possible not only in spite of, but indeed because of the fact that the procedures ‘fail’. It is only by ‘failing’ to achieve what they are designed for, that they make it possible to continue support for the government interventions, in the interests of all involved.

The third paper – *Making and shaping poor Malawians* – looks beyond the state institutions to some possible effects of the state as occurring in ‘society’, by new ways of classifying and organising individuals according to categories of relevance to the state. The article focuses on the ‘poverty line’, which reflects the idea in development discourse of a universal poverty line, although translated to a national poverty definition in Malawi. Here, the poverty line becomes a new form of classification of individuals (or households), and by implication it constructs a new category of state subjects or citizens. It reflects a state logic that has no local equivalent, but becomes of increasing economic, social and political significance at the local level. Negotiation of who are to be the beneficiaries of poverty alleviation programmes is also a negotiation about who falls ‘above’ or ‘below’ the poverty line. Due to the way most development interventions are designed, those who fall ‘below’ the line are typically categorised into groups, which are then used in applying a range of techniques that aim not only at improving the material conditions of those concerned, but also at changing their rationality and conduct.

The poverty line lays the foundation for two different forms of citizenship. Those classified as below the poverty line are granted a particular, exclusive type of citizenship under which they have exclusive access to certain state resources, but are also subjected to more intense attempts of particular forms of governing aimed at reforming them. Moreover, due to the group organisation they interact with government less as autonomous individuals than do those who are classified as being above the poverty line. The distinction in Malawi reflects a distinction in global development discourse between two types of citizens in different positions as regards the state and the market. Those ‘above’ the line are expected to be economically self-sufficient in a globalised market – and therefore productive; those ‘below’ are dependent on state interventions and are

otherwise economically irrelevant. Indeed, the sole relevant political purpose of constructing the category of *the poorest* is to empty that category by ‘lifting’ the poor above the poverty line so that they can develop further on their own without further state interventions. This project is made into a joint global effort through the UN Millennium Development Goals.

3.2. Theory and methodology issues emerging from the papers

3.2.1. *Different perspectives on the state from the same localised fieldwork*

Combined, the three papers represent a sequential empirical focus: starting with an overall, birds’-eye-view look at the institutional organogram of the state; via the everyday practices of the bureaucrats involved; to the potential effects of bureaucratic practices in society. That sequence does not reflect a similar process of fieldwork: all three papers are based on data acquired during one continuous, multi-sited fieldwork, which gradually shed light on each of the aspects of the state. All papers benefit from parallel, simultaneous observation and analysis in different sites and make reference to characteristics of the state as observed in other locations. All papers also benefit from my methodological choices regarding social and political locations of the state, even though the state perspectives emerging in each paper do not refer to the same locations. For instance, *Parallel state organisations*, whose main arguments concern the state from a bird’s-eye view, is based primarily on strictly localised ethnographic fieldwork focused on the interactions between chiefs and their subjects in a small number of villages. From those observations, I was able to generalise, using historical sources, official documents, media reports and other data.

In *Making and shaping poor Malawians*, however, I make some claims about possible changes in society that are less apparent to empirical observation. Compared with most other studies that focus on state classification and organisation of population, the paper is more explicit on agency, but less so on the actual (state) effects in society. This is a consequence of the data available, as I had little data on actual effects in society. What I observed were certain changes in state practice – in the interaction between ‘state’ and ‘citizen’, with the potential for creating effects in society. Any actual effects are likely to

take very long time – after all, one of the seminal studies (Corrigan & Sayer 1985) of comparable state effects operated with a perspective of several centuries.

In all three papers, the ideational and discursive domain is also important. This is referred to as a ‘language of stateness’ associated with each of the two parallel hierarchies in the first paper, an image of the state and its population in the second, and the close interrelationship between development discourse and social practice elaborated in the third. All papers demonstrate the potentials in comparing the state as a social practice with the manifestation of the state in the ideational and discursive domain. In empirical research, this was a relatively simple task. While simultaneously observing two different sites may be difficult in practice, double observation in the two different domains – the practical and the discursive – is relatively easy, since one talks with the informants while observing them, and idle time can be used to read newspapers, websites and other sources of data on discourse.

3.2.2. *Correspondence between the papers on state perspectives*

Even though I prefer to view the three papers as stand-alone rather than an attempt to produce one coherent study of the state, they do communicate with each other. *Parallel state organisations* and *The aesthetics of bureaucratic practice* support each other in the perspectives on the chiefs as key agencies in a state intervention, and they draw partly on the same observations. They also indicate a key aspect of state ‘power’ as both reflected in and shaped by the fact that some people are seen as gatekeepers who hold the key to distribution of state resources. While it is clear that the chiefs are the main agents with this regard, the bureaucrats become gatekeepers in the case of subsidy distribution. Chiefs and bureaucrats, then, share the privilege of being the necessary intermediary between the state and the population. Since some of the resources they control are financed by foreign aid, this is obviously relevant to the discussion on aid and state formation. There is an interesting contrast, though. In the case of the bureaucrats, their key role in distributing aid resources is strengthened by the donors’ recognition (at least formally) of state sovereignty, translated into *ownership* in aid. This has made the donors dependent on the bureaucracy even when alternative institutional set-ups (like multilateral or non-governmental organisations) may be available. In the case of the chiefs, the paper *Parallel state organisations* attributes their status partly to a ‘community fetishism’ in aid

and development that insists on direct interaction with villages. This can be done by bypassing formal government structures or by insisting that aid-financed government interventions are ‘community-based’ even if this is not the preferred way of organising local government services. In any case, by implication, it means assigning key roles to the chief. Hence, while the one category of ‘gatekeeper’ (the bureaucrats) is accorded that role due to donor respect for state sovereignty, the other category (the chiefs) benefits from other donor policies, which can also be seen as dismissing some aspects of state sovereignty at the local level.

The two papers *Parallel state organisations* and *Shaping and Making Poor Malawians* communicate in their view on the status of state subjects. The first discusses the distinction between, typologically, subjects and citizens, and the other a possible distinction between two forms of citizens. These are not overlapping distinctions, but subject to different logics. In the first case, the same individual may take on two alternative statuses simultaneously, while the other describes explicit attempts to distinguish between individuals and assign to them different statuses. The historical overview in the first paper is of some relevance to the other, in making more explicit an important shift over time: previous state practice in Malawi applied a view on the population as organised in groups, with little concern for the individuals within these groups. With the growing (liberal) focus on the individuals, this has changed: today, the main organising principle in society is categories of individuals. Several of the actual practices involved – including the organisation of a population into groups for the purpose of a government intervention – are nevertheless common observations and of theoretical relevance in both papers.

Finally, *The aesthetics of bureaucratic practice* communicates with *Shaping and Making Poor Malawians* in that both refer to aspects of classifying individuals according to state interests. Critical reading of those two papers, however, reveals some interesting contrasts or even contradictions. This is worth noting, not as an indication of incompatibility, but rather as a pertinent example of how different methodological approaches may yield seemingly incompatible results while still communicating and informing each other. Both papers discuss aspects of bureaucratic practice that have the potential of creating certain ‘state effects’ in society, with a focus on the classification of individuals along a new category: the poorest. However, while a main argument in *The aesthetics of bureaucratic*

practice is that the bureaucratic procedures under study do not have those effects in society that they are designed for, *Making and shaping poor Malawians* discusses the potential for ‘state effects’ with possibly dramatic implications. When compared, these may seem contradictory. A simple explanation for the difference is that the two refer to different case studies in different public offices and geographical locations, and may reflect actual diversity in the effectiveness of state bureaucracies within the same state. In any case, *Making and shaping poor Malawians* does not claim empirical evidence for the generalised effects in question: it merely discusses the potential for such effects in future, so there is no conflict in terms of empirical claims.

Any apparent contradiction between the two papers can be solved to some extent by reading them in the context of what is discussed in *Parallel state organisations*. In a parallel state hierarchy, where the functions and relative powers of chiefs and bureaucrats are not permanently settled, different outcomes can be expected in different interactions. What makes the bureaucracy ‘fail’ in the case of targeted agricultural subsidies is largely that the efforts of the bureaucrats are nullified by the chiefs. This is possible because the state resources in question, targeted agricultural subsidies, can easily be shared. *Making and shaping poor Malawians* discusses another resource – short-term public works, which are not so readily ‘shared’; and a form of state intervention – the creation of a ‘community’ organisation, which is more difficult for the chief to bypass. Thus, it is perhaps not the differences in the ‘effectiveness’ of the various state bureaucracies, but the different nature of the state intervention in question, that is relevant: One intervention can easily be nullified by chiefs, the other not.

My point here is not to justify the seemingly contrasting findings in the different papers. The above discussion is simply meant to indicate how the three different approaches to the state can shed light on each other even when they may seem contradictory. Rather than seeing this as a weakness, it should be expected in – and is, perhaps, the beauty of – ethnographic, localised research: the empirical data and the analysis depend so much on the actual locations, the interactions observed and the research process, that the outcome from empirical research on the same or similar social contexts may appear very different.

3.2.3. *The importance of multi-sited, long-term field work*

The data produced for the second paper, *The aesthetics of bureaucratic practice*, can illustrate in greater detail the advantages of multi-sited fieldwork. Observation of the case on which the paper is based constituted only a small part of my fieldwork in terms of time: part-time observation constituting about fifteen working days over a period of eight weeks. It is not uncommon for anthropologists to base much of their writings on short-term cases: indeed, one may ask whether it is necessary to spend months or even years on fieldwork, when in the end what is used are cases of quite short duration. Still, as I will show, I could not have used that case the way I did, had it not been part of longer-term fieldwork.

The case in question is a nation-wide agricultural subsidy programme, established in 2005/2006. It is probably the most resource-demanding single event (at least between elections) in terms of interaction between government and population, and its design and implementation is a key issue in political discourse. It also represents a new, innovative approach to resource allocation in Malawi by its use of 'smart subsidies'. Such subsidies target only those who need it most, and make use of coupons as opposed to a government monopoly in distribution, hence avoiding market disturbances. The programme is therefore a good candidate for observing the interaction between the state and its citizens in Malawi.

The programme can be studied or and observed at many different levels. For instance, one could investigate the background, including political negotiations, its financing arrangements or other aspects, the overall design, the procedures of implementation, or its effects. In terms of actual implementation, there were several phases, including the selection of beneficiaries and the distribution of the coupons a few weeks later. These phases can be observed from the point of view of the agricultural officers, or of the villagers. I will here briefly list possible conclusions that might have emerged from studying the programme at different levels and phases of implementation. The aim is to illustrate not the strength or weakness of each, but the potentials in combining them.

I could have studied the design of the subsidy scheme based on a general document review. Considerable documentation, with reviews, evaluations and some academic research (e.g. SOAS et al. 2008; Holden & Lunduka 2010; Dorward & Chirwa 2011), on its impact is already available. The document review could have been supplemented by

interviews with key actors involved, such as government and donor representatives. Most likely, that study would have indicated an impressive programme design that made possible the provision of life-saving resources at minimal cost, distributed only to those most in need; moreover, that the use of ‘smart subsidies’ made it possible to avoid many common side-effects of agricultural subsidies. This view of the programme is what has gained international attention and prestige, and acknowledgment from donors and other African countries now trying to copy it. The president, Bingu wa Mutharika, was reportedly even nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for the programme’s contribution to food security.¹³

A closer look at actual implementation might yield similar conclusions, also if this involved local observations during shorter ‘field’ visits – like the first days of my own observation of the first phase of implementation, the selection of beneficiaries. I had been quite well prepared. Before observing I had asked officials to explain the procedures to me in detail and I attended meetings where all extension workers were instructed, in detail, how to proceed. All observations indicated that this was a programme, which was not only well designed, but also well implemented.

The same would apply if I had observed the actual selection of beneficiaries from a distance, say, by joining one of the agricultural team to their village meetings but spending the time with the senior officials from the Ministry of Agriculture who supervised the procedures rather than observing the junior officials actually interacting with the villagers. The procedures appeared very impressive: Well organised, targeting the neediest, in an atmosphere of good collaboration between the government officials and the local population. The neediest had been selected according to some general criteria, but in plenary consultations with representatives from each household in each village, ensuring transparency and local adaptation. Good record-keeping, measures against corruption, and procedures to handle complaints all served to ensure the right selection. Some months later, I could have consulted loads of documents and records that confirmed the success. Had I wished to verify, I would probably have been allowed to check the thousands of forms with signatures or fingerprints from every single recipient.

¹³ This according to media reports: actual nominations for the Nobel Prize are not made public.

Thus, if I had stopped observation at this point, the programme would still have appeared to be well functioning. But instead of staying close to the senior officials, I joined the junior agricultural extension workers in actual interaction with villagers to identify beneficiaries. And now things started looking different. In most cases, the extension workers selected beneficiaries not based on any assessment of their poverty, but simply by copying a list provided by the chiefs, who are generally expected to care most for their own relatives. If the chief did not supply a list, beneficiaries were arbitrary selected, either by picking in alphabetical order from a list, or by random selection. Indeed, the programme seemed to have no specific priority towards the neediest at all. In other words, what had seemed excellent from a distance and from the first levels of observation emerged as very different on closer inspection. A natural conclusion would be that the programme was well designed, but has failed completely during implementation due to gross mismanagement by junior agricultural officials. The fact that the villagers did not seem to protest would appear shocking to an outside observer. That might have led me to conclude that ‘the state’ is so powerful that people do not even protest against such an obvious abuse of power – that would seem the only possible explanation for the lack of reaction to the arbitrary selection and unfair distribution. Thus, at this level of observation the case study tells not only about agricultural officials’ misbehaviour, but also indicates some hypotheses of the state more generally.

The same impression would have been the case even if I had come back to observe the next phase of implementation, where coupons were distributed to the selected beneficiaries. For an outside observer, it would have been natural to travel back into town with the agricultural team afterward, since the sites for distribution were often far away, on slippery dirt roads, and the agricultural office had heavy-duty vehicles. I would still have been able to follow the formal procedures all the way to the final point where the coupons were handed out to the villagers. Those observations would have confirmed that subsidies were distributed to beneficiaries selected at random or by the chief. ‘Smart subsidies’ would have proven to be a naïve donor dream, the Malawian bureaucracy would appear useless, and the lack of protest might indicate some terrifying aspects of the ‘strength’ of the state. Elaborating that last point further, it would be natural to go back in history: less than twenty years ago Malawi was known as a brutal dictatorship where people had little choice than to do as they were told.

However, in the course of my long term, multi-sited fieldwork I had come to know people from many villages. When I was together with the team of agricultural officials, I sometimes met people I knew. In those cases it felt natural to go up to the village groups that I saw re-grouping at some distance after receiving the coupons, while the agricultural officials continued distributing coupons to other villages. Where the roads were passable, I took my own car, so I could stay behind even after the agricultural officers had left. That was when I observed how the coupons were re-distributed in the village, according to other principles closer to equal distribution – but now under the chief’s control.

From talks with informants in those villages, and rural informants elsewhere, a new picture emerged. There appeared to be strong local resistance to the government’s principle of giving coupons only to the poorest. Local norms prescribed more or less equal sharing, albeit with some extra benefits for the chief and, in some cases, the biggest farms.¹⁴ This may not be in line with current donor priorities, but is a common and fully acceptable general principle for distribution of state resources: More subsidies to those having the biggest farms is indeed the principle for agricultural subsidies in most donor countries (normally based on production volumes). Some extra benefits for those administering state resources locally, in this case the chief, is common also elsewhere. But these norms are not compatible with policies of the Malawian government or donor norms. Instead of protesting against those principles, the local chiefs simply ignored the government instructions, and then re-distributed later, according to their own norms. The villagers had never expected the targeting by the Ministry of Agriculture to be the final result anyway. That explains the lack of protest against the arbitrary selection: rather than indicating obedient acceptance by the farmers, it shows the converse: disrespect for a government not able to enforce its own policies, which are ignored rather than contested.

From this viewpoint, then, the appearance of the programme turns from bad to fairly good: It provides valuable resources to poor villagers, and in the end, it enables sharing of resources according to local norms rather than enforcing donor-imposed Western norms for distribution.

¹⁴ ‘Local norms’ here do not necessarily mean shared norms – I would guess they reflect the power of the chief and the richer farmers, whereas the very poorest farmers would prefer the government’s distributional norm. The point here is not which set of principles is better, but that they are incompatible.

There are further possible alternatives. I could have observed implementation of the subsidy programme only from the local viewpoint, without joining the team from the Ministry of Agriculture. That might have produced almost the opposite view on the subsidy programme. As indicated, from a 'state' perspective the programme looks well-designed, but sabotaged by poorly performing agricultural officers. That perspective would still give credit to the central government, while putting the blame on local agricultural officials. From the village perspective, however, the programme appears poorly designed since it is not compatible with local norms for distribution. It was 'rescued' not only by the chiefs, who re-distribute according to other norms, but also by the agricultural officers who are aware of the re-distribution and allow it to happen. Hence, a new image emerges of the agricultural officers. Those who would have been to blame for their poor performance as seen from 'the state' can be seen as relatively well performing as seen from the village point of view. They made it possible for all parties to be satisfied, by providing government and donors with all the documentation needed to show that distribution had been done according to procedure, while also allowing local re-distribution in practice.

Note that they accomplished this without lying to their government. After all, the subsidy coupons were distributed to selected individuals, according to procedure. To be sure, the agricultural officers did ignore some instructions as regards the actual criteria for selection. But they were not required to report how selection was done in each village. Hence, without producing any false documentation they enabled the interaction between two seemingly incompatible set of norms, making everybody happy: The government and donors could rest assured that targeting had been done, and the villagers could distribute according to their own local norms. In this perspective, the programme emerges as a rather brilliant way of utilising donor resources to benefit poor farmers in the face of incompatibilities that would otherwise make it impossible.

Only multi-sited fieldwork over some period of time could make possible observations that would lead to such conclusions. Any observation from only one or few of the viewpoints mentioned above might have produced other, probably contradictory, conclusions. This also illustrates how widely different results can emerge from social science research even from study of the same phenomena.

3.3. State formation and attributes to aid

In the discussion above of the three papers' different conceptual and empirical approaches to the state, I focused on characteristics of the state as relatively static features. As a preparation for next chapter's discussion of the possible effects of aid and development, I will extract what the papers tell about *changes* in the state – state formation – and offer some indications of how those changes may relate to aid and development.

Parallel state organisations demonstrates how the 'traditional' chieftaincy, which in Malawi is fully integrated in the state, has been strengthened both in terms of local authority and in institutional and geographical scope after the introduction of multi-party democracy during 1990s. The paper briefly discusses some factors believed to explain those changes. First, the state administration had been reduced in terms of capacity and authority. Under the World Bank/IMF-led structural adjustment and general neoliberal norms regarding the public sector, the number of staff has been reduced, and multi-party democracy with the introduction of norms for rights-based rather than coercive approaches in civil service has reduced the fear and obedience previously associated with the bureaucracy (Tambulasi 2006). In combination with a removal of the one-party system, this means that the relative authority of the two alternative sites of state power – party officials and civil servants – was drastically reduced, leaving chiefs with relatively more power. Second, donor preferences for a *community approach* and *participation*, in combination with norms for targeting resources only to selected categories of beneficiaries, served to give the chiefs a more dominant position in development interventions, whether implemented by the government or by other agencies. Only the chiefs can serve as gatekeepers to a village, and only the chiefs can produce the information needed to target selected classes of individuals.

Ironically, this means that some of the most prominent priorities in Western aid in recent decades have paved the way for the strengthening of an institution that is fully incompatible with liberal democracy of the kind that Western donors try to impose on African countries. Aid and development seem to have made possible changes in the state that may undermine one of the main objectives behind aid. However, those changes seem to have passed unnoticed in much political and development discourse, even though almost everyone in Malawi knows and experiences the changes. This may be because

development discourse on governance and democracy focuses only on the formal institutions, and to some extent the chiefs are seen not as a part of the state, but as the remnants of something traditional.

The aesthetics of bureaucratic practice investigates some aspects of bureaucratic (state) procedures, the implementation of which seems to create a certain image of the state and its people. The case is directly related to aid, as the formal procedures under study have been designed in response to donor requirements. It refers to time and change in two ways. First, the image created may not reflect current realities in Malawi, but it corresponds well to modern ideals of stateness reflected in international discourse. Unlike many forms of expressive and often ceremonial state practices that predominantly celebrate the past, the bureaucratic practice here may be seen as creating the image of a possible future, modern statehood. Second, the actual procedures under implementation involve classifying individuals according to an imaginary poverty line, which is new to Malawi; it reflects a form of state rationality, with a focus on individuals rather than groups, which is also relatively recent. Both these time dimensions have correspondences with development and aid, building on norms apparently imported from the international development discourse via aid.

The paper also discusses aspects of the relation between aid and bureaucratic practice, and the role of the bureaucracy in mediating between different norms by managing contradictions in the aesthetic domains. Although I suggest in the article that those mechanisms could be expected as part of bureaucratic rationality in any country, and I do not believe that this aesthetic aspect of bureaucratic practice is new, in this particular case it is also presented as a pragmatic adaptation to the incompatibility between donor requirements and local contexts, and is hence directly related to aid.

Making and shaping poor Malawians links state formation more directly with aid and development. The article presents a practice of classifying individuals. This is a well-known state practice elsewhere, but was historically less dominant in Malawi: both colonial and later independent rule showed scant concern for classes of individuals. The ‘poverty line’ is arguably a new form of classification and hence a new aspect of statehood, and therefore certainly a process of state formation. The paper explores the historical emergence of the poverty line through a series of events in the global development discourse: the invention of *the poor*, increasingly understood as a class of

identifiable individuals rather than an abstract category; increased use of targeted development interventions; the trend towards community as a territory for application of *governmentality*; and the UN Millennium Development Goals. It seems clear that *the poor* and the poverty line are fairly direct imports from aid and development, now gaining increasing local relevance due to expectations that development interventions should be targeted only at selected classes of individuals.

The Millennium Development Goals are particularly important as they have changed the way development interventions are managed, necessitating the construction of national and local poverty lines that can correspond to the global poverty line. Once again, it is ironic that some of the local implications of the poverty line seem to contradict important ideals in development policies. Instead of being included as (fellow) citizens, those below the poverty line are made a particular type of citizen that differs from the less poor as regards interaction with the government. They do not interact with the government as the autonomous individuals that liberal democracy presupposes, and they seem to be assigned a different position as regards the world market than what is assigned to the less poor.

3.3.1. African states a product of Western aid?

Thus, all three papers have direct reference to processes of change in the characteristics of the state, which can be associated with aid and development. That is not to say that my research supports any direct, causal relations between aid and state formation meaning that aid has ‘produced’ certain characteristics of the state in Malawi. The methods applied do not allow such conclusions (and nor do most other methodologies in social science, at least not within the scope what is practically possible). But the papers clearly indicate the possibility of some effects or at least some form of correspondence between aid and the state. Because most of the discussion in the next chapter is based on those associations, some reservations should be noted against the idea that the state in Malawi is a product of Western aid. This is to avoid a bias towards one historical explanation of stateness over other possible factors, comparable to what has been seen in many attempts to explain Africa as a product of colonialism. It is of course relevant to study possible effects of aid on the state – not least because this is, implicitly or explicitly, an inherent objective and assumption in much aid policy and practice. But the brief notes below are meant to indicate that when the papers next chapter discusses some correspondence between aid

and stateness, it should not be used to draw simplistic conclusions about aid as a dominant, determining force that shapes and makes states. Aid is only one of several possible historical and other factors behind the characteristics of the state under discussion.

Even though the actual case discussed refers to aid, the aesthetic aspects of bureaucratic practice described in *The aesthetics of bureaucratic practice* also have some resemblance to various aspects of statehood elsewhere in Africa (Mbembe 2001; Apter 2002). The ‘project of legibility’, which I claim is one of the underlying rationalities, has been described by Scott (1998) as inherent in modern statehood independent from aid; and several studies have described aspects of bureaucracies that can be interpreted as a preference for aesthetics over instrumental functions (e.g. Weber 1998; Laffey 2000; Neumann 2005; Riles 2006; Dunn 2010). *Making and shaping poor Malawians* refers to aspects of state practices that may seem to be part of a certain historical development of most states regardless of aid and development (Pasquino 1991), but also as a rationality introduced by colonialism, albeit to a limited degree in most African countries (Mitchell 1988; Scott 1999). In any case, they should not be seen as exclusively the products of aid. Moreover, the focus on community, which obviously resonates with the development discourse, also corresponds to earlier forms of rule in Malawi, colonial as well as post-colonial.

Parallel State Organisation in Malawi indicates that some aspects of Western aid policies have paved the way for a strengthening of the chieftaincy. But structural adjustment and much of the neoliberalist thinking in public sector, often presented as designed by Western donors and creditors, can also be seen as national adaptation to macro-economic conditions including loans. The new modalities of service provision are called *demand-based* or *rights-based*: the terms are clearly donor imports, but the practical implications are not very different from the general disrespect for state officials that emerged as a result of the dismantling of the one-party system. Indeed, democratisation is not a donor import, but a result of social processes that relate directly to domestic aspirations, mainly towards freedom from oppression, but with a clear preference for a multi-party electoral system. To the extent that democratisation also relates to the international context, an important factor is the changes within South Africa, a previous supporter of Malawi: Western influence does not seem an important factor in explaining Malawi’s first steps.

But when the one-party system was dismantled, donors were surely influential in promoting certain components of democracy, including the heavy emphasis on formal, electoral institutions on the national and not least the local level. In Malawi, democratisation seems to reflect aspirations for freedom from a brutal and repressive party apparatus – which corresponds well with the donor interests in rights-based approach – rather than the possibility of electing the president. The local electorate has been given very little attention. Hence, the *form* of democracy – liberal, electoral democracy focused on the electorate and on civil and political rights – may be a donor import, but aid and donors should not be given so much credit for democratisation as such.

4. Dissonance in development

The synthesis of papers in the previous chapter demonstrates aspects of statehood, which, despite the differing perspectives, have some features in common. They all point to something that can be described as *dissonance* between how social phenomena appear when seen through the logic of the state, and how social life is experienced in actual, local, daily interactions.

Parallel state organisations describes dissonance between actually existing state hierarchies, in which the chiefs have a key position, and the formal government structure with legislation and policies assigning a limited role to the chiefs. The two hierarchies are again associated with different forms of and norms for power. People are exposed to dissonance between the rhetoric of liberal, democratic, rule-based and differentiated state power with checks and balances; and the chiefs, who represent state-enforced, fused, absolute power locally. *The aesthetics of bureaucratic practice* presents dissonance in what may appear to be instrumental bureaucratic procedures, but they fail to achieve what they were designed for. The procedures create an image of a form of statehood quite unlike the actual experience of state practice and society. *Making and shaping poor Malawians* presents a dissonance between the existing local organisation, characterised by diversity and complexity in relations and networks; and state attempts to classify and organise individuals according to categories drawn from a simpler state logic.

Such tensions between different modes of power are well known in many studies (and, I believe, most experiences) of the state, and appear to be an inherent aspect of statehood (see e.g. Scott 1998). Much research (and again, I believe, experience) indicates that this is even more striking in most African states. The range of approaches to dissonance in African states can be illustrated by studies as dissimilar as those of Ekeh (1975), Jackson and Rosberg (1982), Bayart (1993), Mamdani (1996), Chabal and Daloz (1999) or Lund (2006), and the many references to neo-patrimonialism (Eisenstadt 1973; Médard 1982; Sandbrook 1985). To the extent that the literature attempts to explain dissonance, some of it refers to colonialism. In my papers, I indicate how dissonances can be attributed to aid and development.

I assume that there is something about aid and development that serves to increase the already existing dissonance between state formalities and local realities. Indeed, I do not think it coincidental that many studies of stateness which focus on such tensions are based on empirical research in the context of development, with more or less explicit reference to aid (e.g. Ferguson 1990; Apthorpe 1996; Riles 2006; Stirrat 2000; Mosse 2005).

At this point I can mention that certain features of aid make dissonance likely. Development interventions relate to a shared international development discourse – policies – where concepts and representations exist on a highly abstract level, but are implemented in diverse local contexts, leaving practitioners with the mandate to relate empirical realities to development discourse. The abstract concepts can be expected to fit poorly with the realities experienced by those subject to development (Sachs 1992). Thus, discourse and practice are necessarily characterised by some form of disjuncture¹⁵ between apparently incompatible social universes or rationalities. It has even been claimed that disjuncture is not only an effect of the differences between the two different worlds, but is inherent in aid as it is continuously produced and maintained in the aid relation (Lewis & Mosse 2006b). The strategies and practices that practitioners may choose when faced with disjuncture have been the focus of various studies, among them Long 2001; Gould & Secher Marcussen 2004; Mosse 2005; Lewis & Mosse 2006a; Lewis & Mosse 2006b; and Lie 2011.

In the following, I seek to understand how aid and development may affect state practice and consequently state formation, by focusing on how practitioners can manage disjuncture in the *interface* between aid and development (Long 2001). Norman Long's call for an actor-oriented approach to the interface is presented as opposed to the structural, institutional or political economy analyses more common in sociology (2001, p.1). But it can also serve as a reminder to anthropological research, which has perhaps focused too much on discourse or on the specific practices and techniques involved, at times with less explicit interest in the social context – the aid relation.

¹⁵ Note that 'disjuncture' in this thesis refers to the aid relation, as the term has been used in several studies (Lewis & Mosse 2006b; Lie 2011). By contrast, the metaphor 'dissonance' introduced in this thesis describes comparable experiences, but in relation to aspects of stateness, not aid.

As my empirical fieldwork did not focus exclusively on aid and development, I cannot present a coherent, systematic empirical study of the mechanisms involved. Instead, I note some possible strategies available to practitioners in managing disjuncture, more as indications of possible mechanisms of relevance than as empirical claims. My suggestions are nonetheless supported by a large number of observations of aid in different locations, based largely on my own experience as an aid practitioner, as well as during anthropological fieldwork. More in-depth, systematic empirical research would reveal more of the actual practice involved, and might perhaps make possible more elaborated theoretical perspectives than the relatively simple set of arguments I propose here.

As a start, I will explore some of the contexts and parameters under which the practitioners choose actions. I begin by discussing ‘development’ as it has been understood in critical anthropological research on aid. I then discuss some dimensions of aid and development that seem relevant to understanding strategies in the interface. The first dimension concerns discourse, with the emphasis on trends that lead to increasing challenges for practitioners in relating abstract discourse to actual practice. The other is the aid relation and its implications for the practitioners involved – in this discussion, the bureaucrats.

4.1. Critical studies of aid and development

I use ‘aid’ here as a term for the actual institutions, financial flows and corresponding activities that relate to the specific political programme initiated in the USA and Europe after the Second World War (Truman 1947; Rostow 1960), now termed ‘development aid’, or Overseas Development Assistance.¹⁶ ‘Development’ as used here – sometimes referred to as ‘big D’ Development (Hart 2001) to distinguish it from other uses of the term – refers to ideas that originated in Western industrialisation (Cowen & Shenton 1996) but have been introduced as a global project through aid. This now extends well beyond the institutional boundaries of aid, permeating political discourse and rationalities, power relations and government practices to the extent that it is inseparable

¹⁶ See, <http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/>. That definition also covers much of the resource flow from non-OECD donors such as China; but in the perspective of this thesis those resource flows do not necessarily fit well, as much of these are not necessarily subject to the same rationalities described here.

from national discourse and practice, regardless of whether activities are financed by donors or termed ‘development’. Development policies may shift over time, but they always reflect hegemonic ideas, predominantly of Western origin, of how societies should ‘improve’.

The above-sketched perspective on development emerged most explicitly in post-development studies, especially during the 1990s. Those studies explored development as discourse and practice influenced by the early works of Foucault (1980). Some aimed at exploring and deconstructing key concepts and ideas (Sachs 1992; Escobar 1995; Rahnama & Bawtree 1997); others focused more on empirical studies of actual effects that could well be contrary to the developers’ stated intentions (Ferguson 1990). In any case, these studies demonstrated how ‘development’ might have appeared to be apolitical and universal, but actually reflected specifically Western ideas of high political significance: ‘Development’ limited the opportunities for alternative pathways to improvement, implicitly reflecting and enforcing power relations, by entitling certain agencies to take responsibility for ‘improving’ others (cf. Cowen & Shenton 1996).

Post-development theory has been criticised by later scholars for its analytical or even ideological bias towards the ‘power’ of discourse and the idea of a homogeneous, powerful discourse, which seems to hide the enormous diversity within ‘development’ as discourse and as practice (e.g. Kiely 1999; Pieterse 2000; Ziai 2007b). It has also been noted that post-development has limited applicability, in terms of both empirical research and analytical approach, for grasping the actual social processes involved, for instance in understanding agency (Lie 2007). Post-development has been further criticised for not providing alternatives to the problems it seeks to reveal (but see Nustad 2001).

Those limitations explain, perhaps, why later critical research on development seems to regard post-development more as a source for inspiration than as a research agenda. While not dismissing the general arguments (Ziai 2007a, pp.8–9), most researchers drawing inspiration from post-development have shifted their attention away from the ‘power’ of development discourse towards investigating practice. They typically apply a critical alternative to more instrumental approaches to aid, often seeking to determine whether aid ‘works’ or ‘fails’. Some investigate development practice or the specific techniques involved (Ferguson & Gupta 2002; Green 2003; Li 2007); others focus more explicitly on the aid relation (Gould 2005a; Gould & Secher Marcussen 2004; Mosse

2005; Mosse & Lewis 2005). Many of these studies (e.g. Gould 2005b; Anders 2005b; Lie 2011) are explicitly influenced by the later work of Foucault on *governmentality* (Foucault 1991). This seems a useful approach: after all, aid can be seen as the archetypical case of ‘governing at a distance’ (Rose & Miller 1992); moreover, by insisting on ‘ownership’, aid has been made dependent on governing through techniques that resemble modern liberal government in the name of freedom (Lie 2011).

The studies share much common inspiration, but they do not seem to merge towards a common theory about aid and development, which can be seen as a successor to post-development. Some of the more recent works involve interesting proposals for a general theoretical approach to aid and development, including Jon Harald Sande Lie’s exploration of *developmentality* (2011), and Maia Green’s understanding of development as a knowledge practice which, by working ‘creatively with scalable concepts for the purpose of government’ is also a ‘project of government’ (2009, p.400). Some attempts have been also made to apply other theoretical frameworks, such as actor network theory (Lewis & Mosse 2006a); these I find promising, but not yet well developed in the context of aid.

The studies mentioned above have informed my attempts to understand aid and development. In the case of Malawi it is easy to understand the post-development view of development discourse as ‘powerful’ in influencing many aspects of state practice. But it is also clear that the idea of ‘development’ as an all-embracing, formative discourse that leaves individual actors – policy makers, practitioners, recipients – almost without choice, was misleading. ‘Development’ is indeed dominant in political discourse, but it certainly does not determine politics and state administration in Malawi. It is only one of several frameworks that constitute the framework for action, and it exists in parallel with other rationalities and modalities of state practice – often to the bitter frustration of donors. But rather than framing governance as an overarching rationality, development seems to permeate some aspects of governance by introducing new techniques in the bureaucracy and other key agencies (like NGOs) in ways that seem to correspond to several of the studies above.

4.2. Changes in development discourse over time

Post-development criticism of development discourse typically presents a hegemonic project appearing as one dominant, hegemonic stream of thought, insisting on historic continuity. This is an important contribution and a correction to much other development research, which seems to emphasise shifts in development policy and paradigms over time. Policy shifts may give the impression of the emergence of ‘new’ ideas, often in opposition to previous paradigms – for instance, dependency theory as opposed to modernisation. The message from post-development is that there is continuity across policy changes, which makes all development, regardless of more specific policies, a part of the same Western hegemonic project. Policy change does not necessarily make much difference. But by insisting on continuity, the criticism of development discourse may have shown too little interest in historical change. Perhaps the criticism of post-development studies for not acknowledging synchronous diversity (Kiely 1999) can also be said of their approach to historical discontinuities.

There have been quite notable shifts in development discourse over time. I here do not refer to policy shifts; I agree that policy shifts are often exaggerated as important ‘new’ ways of thinking in development, whereas they can more fruitfully be seen as changes within a dominant discourse that is also characterised by continuity. But in parallel with policy shifts, and interacting with them, there are important changes in some aspects of the underlying rationality.

Two sets of historical developments in development are explored below. They both point to aspects which, albeit not new, have become increasingly important in development and of relevance to the later arguments in this chapter. Both these changes introduce new dimensions to the disjuncture inherent in aid and development and may be factors behind the trend towards the recent *increased* disjuncture in aid noted by some scholars (Rossi 2004; Lewis & Mosse 2006b).

4.2.1. Reform as the first step to development

The history of modern development aid is a history of ambitions to reform poor societies (Truman 1947). Originally, aid was to a large extent seen as financial and technical

transfers, with support to technology innovation as the first step. The idea was that economic growth would lead almost automatically to other changes in society, including modernisation, a capitalist economy, freedom and democracy (Rostow 1960). At local level, the development interventions might assign more primacy to reform – for instance, in changing economic rationalities or organisational principles in local economic production units (e.g. Pharo 1986) – but the general reform of societies was expected more as an effect of economic improvement than as an important instrumental objective of development.

From the 1980s, donors (then also acting as creditors) increasingly engaged in domestic affairs of recipient countries, aiming more explicitly at political reforms. In addition to budgetary control and reductions in public spending, those programmes also involved reforms in state administration. But the reforms were mainly limited to those that could be justified in macro-economic terms or by effectiveness and efficiency in the state administration. They were criticised partly due to their content, but also because such forms of conditionality were not seen as appropriate in the aid relation.

During the 1990s, structural adjustment programmes were gradually replaced by much broader political ambitions of political change, now including almost all possible policy areas and state administration. They were more social than economic in focus – with an insistence on liberal democratisation, human rights, pro-poor policies, gender equality, environmentally sustainable development, rights-based service delivery, and so on. This was a cross-cutting reform agenda involving most sectors and most ministries. Even non-state actors, as in civil society, were included as key agencies in the reform of states. In most aid-receiving countries those reforms would, if successful, involve fairly radical changes in states and societies, well beyond the previous economically justified reforms. Helped by the Heavily Indebted Poor Country initiative since 1996, policy reforms were integrated in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers at the end of the decade, while governance and administrative reform were joined under the label of *good governance*. Good governance encompasses most of the other reform objectives into one concept, compromising a whole range of areas in which state administration is expected to reform. Although the reform agenda is framed under the term *ownership* it can readily be seen as a new form of conditionality (Gould 2005a).

Despite the much wider scope of this new reform agenda as opposed to structural adjustment, it has attracted less attention and criticism – perhaps because the preferred changes were viewed positively across the Western political spectrum. Even much of the political left, so critical to aid conditionality when oriented towards market liberalisation, seems to have embraced this new form of conditionality. It probably helped that reform attempts were formulated in terms of national poverty reduction strategies, which seemed to ensure *ownership*, but also that the intended reforms sound apolitical– who could disagree with *good governance*?

This reform agenda represents a quite new rationality in development discourse and practice as compared to the original idea of ‘development’. The sequencing seems to have changed. Instead of seeing economic growth as the main tool and first step to development, reform of states and societies is now seen as the key first step in paving the way for improvements in economy and other development objectives (see e.g. World Bank 1997). Financial and technical transfers are still important, but these are normally integrated with attempts to reform the recipient, and therefore seem to be regarded as tools to serve reform just as well as pure resource transfers. Economic growth is seen as the result of reform, not the start of it.

4.2.2. *Introduction of the individual poor*

During the first decades of aid and development, poor (or ‘under-developed’) countries and societies were in focus. Today, development is more about improving the lives of individuals. In the aggregated representations in development discourse, individuals are approached as selected classes of identifiable individuals to be categorised, measured and analysed, and made key targets of development. Development interventions are specifically designed to target only selected classes of individuals, solve their particular problems, report the degree of success in aggregation into higher (statistical) levels to feed into development discourse. This is the case for various categories of individuals like women, children, orphans, the disabled, or the HIV-infected. In the following, I use the generic class of ‘the poorest’ as a case.

In the age of the millennium development goals (MDGs) *the poor* are the reference point against which politicians and bureaucrats make policies, managers plan, practitioners

carry out and researchers evaluate development interventions. They take the form of a number of beneficiaries from a development intervention, the percentage of a country's population who are poor, or global aggregates of the number of poor individuals in the world. For young practitioners it may be difficult even to imagine that development has been possible without much reference to *the poor*, meaning a particular class of individuals. To be sure, poverty alleviation has always been a motivation and justification for aid. But the focus was on poor countries to be developed, rather than on poor people. Through *trickle-down* effects, economic growth was expected, almost automatically, to benefit the poor; in principle, little specific attention to them was necessary, as long as growth could be achieved. When poor people were mentioned, this was more often in order to justify and motivate aid, than as reference points to guide policies or interventions. Knowledge about the poor was not needed at the general, aggregated level; it was seen part of the more specific, localised knowledge needed in each intervention, to be ensured by having people 'in the field'.

But from the 1970s, poor individuals gradually entered development discourse as a more specific concern, following rising concerns that growth was *not* trickling down as expected (see Chenery et al. 1974) and calls for development interventions that would target the basic needs of the poor more directly. The issue of economic growth was perhaps delegated to a proposed *New International Economic Order*, whereas aid was given more direct responsibility for the poor. Gradually, the concern for poor individuals replaced the concern for poor countries and societies.

The shift is illustrated by the high-level commissions on development, which both reflected and influenced development discourse. The Pearson Report (1969) referred to poor countries and nations, and made almost no mention whatsoever of poor people. When it did, the concern was mainly with their growth in number rather than their poverty. Its successor, the Brandt Report (1980) paid greater attention to poor people, even estimating their numbers (800 million) and attempting to describe their situation.

The World Bank serves as another illustration. It was originally mandated to work mainly with governments (member states) directly, not with individuals. All its main instruments are designed for interaction with governments¹⁷. It is historically associated with macro-

¹⁷ This refers to the World Bank institutions IDA and IBRD. The wider *World Bank Group* includes more

economic concerns, even if at the expense of the welfare of individuals. But also the Bank has shifted towards a greater interest in poor individuals. Its current rhetoric is more oriented to poverty alleviation than growth, and much of its analytical work, policies and instruments for implementation seem concerned about individuals. When the president James D. Wolfensohn, in 1999 presented the process of change to his board's Annual Meeting, he said: 'My colleagues and I decided that in order to map our own course for the future, we needed to know about *our clients as individuals*' (Naranyan 2000a, p. ii, my emphasis). That statement is notable, as a decade earlier it might have been quite controversial or at least embarrassing, indicating complete misunderstanding of the Bank's formal mandate – of interacting with governments – or lack of respect for the sovereignty of its member states. But around the millennium shift, that possible interpretation of the statement seemed to go unnoticed, while World Bank staff proudly quoted the statement in their introduction to the study 'Voices of the Poor' (Narayan 2000a).

A parallel shift has been seen in the UN system. Even though the UN had more focus on individuals even in early documents (see e.g. United Nations 1970), the measures for their improvement were specified mainly at the macro-level. Then came an increasingly broader focus on *human development* (UNDP 1990). The sequence of UN summits during the 1990s called for greater attention to different classes of vulnerable groups, with particular political focus and special interventions aimed at improvement. The UN seems to differ from the World Bank in being concerned about a wider set of categories than only the poor, but the increasing concern for particular classes of identifiable individuals rather than societies more generally is a parallel development.

The changes over time have led to a different view of the organisation of the world's population as reflected in global discourse. Early development discourse – and the discourse criticised by post-development studies – organised the world primarily into 'developed' (rich) and 'underdeveloped' (poor) countries or societies. Today's development discourse organises the world into categories of individuals: There are those in need of development, and those able to manage on their own, primarily by becoming economically self-sufficient in a globalised market economy. The Millennium

institutions (MIGA, IFC and ICSID) that also work directly with companies; none are mandated to see individuals as their clients.

Development Goals illustrate this very well: they are not designed primarily to help countries or societies; indeed, they scarcely relate to individual states at all (cf. Vandemoortele 2009). As the final object of development, they identify certain classes of individuals. Those individuals are seen almost as detached from the respective states of which they are citizens, as they are made the subject of a massive joint development project of all states.

As one consequence, this has led to a new approach to the need for knowledge, reflected in the enormous amounts of studies on different classes of vulnerable individuals. The World Bank study *Voices of the poor* (Narayan 2000a; 2000b; 2002), for instance, represents ambitions for knowledge production that are both empirical and localised – with data or views from 60,000 poor people – but aggregated to global level and thereby detached from the contexts. In addition, in line with the preference for targeting government interventions in both North and South (Mkandawire 2005), it also necessitated changes in the design of development interventions. These have increasingly sought to identify, as precisely as possible, individual *beneficiaries* according to selected categories according to abstract classifications in development discourse, so as to target only those individuals.

Having introduced classes of individuals as the targets of development, development interventions took an approach corresponding to the ambitions to reform states. In a logic similar to that of reforming states, the strategies for improving the lives of poor individuals focused on reforming them as the necessary first steps towards economic improvement, rather than an effect of it. Individuals should be reformed into more rational and market-friendly citizens in line with liberal ideas of society and economy. The end product is autonomous, economically productive individuals capable of managing their own economic and social affairs without the need for more than a minimum of further state interventions, and also acting responsibly towards the state and society, and in particular one's own community, according to a state logic. The rationality and some corresponding techniques reflect *governmentality* – historically a component in the development of modern states (Foucault 1991), but now made a global project (Li 2007).

The reform agenda is often not explicitly stated, but a closer look reveals that change in the individual's rationality and conduct is seen as necessary for the development

intervention to succeed. Reform is sought in most aspects of life. In terms of individual conduct, greater self-discipline is expected, for instance in sexuality or work ethics. In immediate social relations, a new combination of collective responsibility and individual autonomy is the aim. Individuals should interact responsibly with reference a new type of collective: the *community* (Rose 1996; 1999), even if this comes in conflict with the more familiar kin and other reciprocal networks. But in parallel with the re-orientation of their collective behaviour, individuals are also expected to strive towards autonomy and economic independence. Gender, local hierarchies and other organising principles are to be made less relevant. In the economy, a new rationality is expected, with more focus on savings and investments. In terms of political rationality, individuals change is sought towards liberal democratic values, where all see themselves as autonomous individuals vis-à-vis the political system, and respect a private–public distinction (including refraining from corruption) and so on. Common to all the reform agendas is that they reflect ideas imported from development discourse (and perhaps a Western hegemony). This is not to say that they do not also represent local aspirations, but it is evident that the main reference is elsewhere. Reform strategies are integrated in a wide range of development interventions, often under labels like ‘civic education’, ‘sensitisation’ or ‘mobilisation’.

At the local level, we can expect such changes to be radical and often controversial. But in development discourse, the reform agenda is normally seen as relatively unproblematic, except for the frequently heard calls for local adaptation. Those calls may be seen as a protest against standardised approaches to reform, but not necessarily as opposition against a reform agenda as such. There are some recent trends that can be read as a counter-movement to the reform agenda, including the popularity of cash transfers with only a narrow set of conditions attached (Fiszbein et al. 2009; Hanlon et al. 2010). However, except for a few countries, reform-neutral cash transfers or other resource transfers targeting individuals are today marginal as a development strategy¹⁸.

¹⁸ Under the discussion on ambitions to reform governments, I did not mention the equivalent of cash transfers, namely budget support. This is because budget support is only given to those countries that have already accepted the reform agenda: thus it does not necessarily represent an alternative form of development rationality, just another modality of aid.

4.2.3. *Implications of new rationalities in development*

Thus, in recent decades, two dimensions of development have become dominant in policy and practice. First, the sequence in development has changed, with primacy given to reform rather than resource transfer as the necessary step towards, rather than a result of development. This is the case both for states, which are to be reformed into liberal democratic and market-oriented entities that practise good governance and respect civil and political rights; and for individuals, who are to be reformed into liberal and market-friendly citizens who have adopted a new rationality and conduct seen as necessary for their improvement.

Second, the target of development is no longer the world's poorest countries and societies, but classes of individuals, including the *global poor*. Countries and societies used to constitute a relatively manageable universe to be dealt with, for instance, by developing specific knowledge on each country and designing appropriate strategies. With individuals, this is not possible. Depending on the policy interventions in question, the universe is enormous: for the poorest, the number is about 1.4 billion (Chen & Ravallion 2008). Naturally, that universe cannot be approached by specific knowledge on each unit: large-scale aggregation is required. If poverty alleviation had been about easing the material conditions of their poverty, for instance by cash transfers or job creation, this would still have been manageable, at least if one managed to identifying the the individual poor precisely enough (or, even easier, to accept a considerable degree of imprecision). But when the ambition is to reform them as individuals, more knowledge is needed to analyse them and their poverty, identifying ways for their reform towards improvement. Similar challenges are relevant for other categories of vulnerable, such as the orphans (who should be taught to manage their lives as economically autonomous actors in a market), the HIV-infected or those at risk of infection (where the task is to instil sexual discipline), or marginalised women (who need to be empowered) – and so on. Among the several possible strategies for improving the lives of these people there is no doubt that, with the primacy to individual reform as opposed to focusing primarily on the material or external conditions for their problems, development has opted for the most difficult strategy.

Implementing the reform agendas is still possible at the local level, where this is not a new task. Many development agencies, non-governmental ones in particular, have

worked with comparable objectives for some time already; Christian missions were doing this long before modern aid appeared on the scene. But this was probably based on at least some basic knowledge about individuals and their contexts. Similar reform agendas cannot easily be extended to an aggregated level, where specific knowledge is not easily applicable. If the classifications, the strategies and the knowledge are expected to fit with global development discourse, it becomes almost unmanageable.

It is the combination of the new units in development – not anymore countries and societies, but individuals, the broad ambitions for reform according to standardised ideas in development discourse, and the expectations for enormous scale level of aggregation that makes development a huge challenge as compared to previous economy- and growth-oriented development with resource transfers as the main tool, perhaps in combination with more localised interventions that did not need to relate that directly to standardised classifications in development discourse. Even though not new, the emphasis and the combination of all the above features of development have introduced new dimensions that are bound to produce disjuncture between reality as reflected in development discourse and practice, and as experienced locally. That is a challenge to be solved within the social context of the aid relation, discussed below.

4.3. The aid relation

The inspiration from post-development may be one factor explaining why much critical anthropological research on development has shown relatively limited interest in the agency of those involved in aid. Some readings of post-development theory would suggest that development discourse is so powerful that individual agency simply does not make a difference (Lie 2007; 2011). More recent critical research is more actor-oriented, but even some of that literature appears more interested in generalised or even idealised practices or techniques. Even when based on localised fieldwork, some studies seem to be based on – or at least read as – implicit assumptions that the observations are cases of some broader, more general aspects of aid and development. Perhaps there still exist the remnants of an idea that development provides a framework so dominant that the agency of aid practitioners is not important. Other studies are more explicitly interested in the choices that actors make in the interface of aid, assuming that those choices make a

difference, and some of the studies attempt to a general approach to understanding the strategies (Long 2001; Mosse 2005; Lewis & Mosse 2006a).

I find it worthwhile to reflect on the social context of the aid practitioners: the aid relation. While ‘development’ should rightfully be seen as something that goes beyond the institutional apparatus of aid, much of it is still situated in aid. Aid is a relation that constitutes a particular social context and a framework for action for those involved as intermediaries, but it should not be seen as a framework so ‘powerful’ that individual choice is of no relevance.

Seeing aid as a relation, we may imagine the donors as the one pole and the beneficiaries as the other pole. In more abstract terms we may imagine international development discourse as one reference point, and a recipient population (under reform) as the other. Those two axes should not be seen as parallel– with the donors located exclusively in international development discourse, while the beneficiaries are in another ‘local’ discourse, thereby constituting different ‘Worlds of Knowledge’ (Rossi 2006). Rather, it is a matter of two different dimensions, and tensions, involved in the aid relation: a social, relational dimension between actors; and a discursive dimension between abstract development discourse and realities as experienced in a local context. The intermediaries in that relation have to manage within those tensions, both of which both could be expected to produce some form of disjuncture, assigning them the role as brokers or translators (Lewis & Mosse 2006a).

Here, I will focus on only one category of intermediaries: civil servants in the aid receiving country. In countries whose state apparatuses are heavily dominated by aid, like Malawi, this would include most civil servants and probably all extension workers. By implication, when people interact with civil servants, they are often also interacting with someone who is not only part of a government hierarchy, but is, to varying degrees, positioned in an aid relation. Their status as intermediaries in aid is increasingly relevant, following the ‘new aid architecture’ with increasing alignment and harmonisation of donor agencies and recipient bureaucracies – but only after if the recipient government has adopted governance and management practices that are in line with donor preferences (Lie 2011). By comparison, bilateral, multilateral, or non-governmental aid agencies combined represent relatively smaller numbers of practitioners, who are increasingly taking a more hands-off role and are in less direct interaction with most of the population

in the recipient country. In terms of number and intensity of social interactions, they are marginal in comparison with the hundreds of thousands of civil servants in developing countries who are involved in implementing development interventions. Since the management of aid and domestic resources is so closely integrated, normally integrated in the same co-financed interventions, the choices the civil servants make in dealing with disjuncture in the aid relation have an influence on their practice beyond those interventions that are financed by aid.

I will argue that some features of the aid relations introduce new demands as compared to the 'state–society' or government–citizen relation in which civil servants are normally situated. In one simplified, idealised version of that relation, most civil servants are involved in implementing their government's ambitions to govern its population. Most also take part in producing information about the population. This may be because knowledge about the population is seen as necessary to design appropriate state services and interventions, or to enable feedback to the government regarding their degree of success. However, that latter role is shared with other forms of feedback, like those put forward through the public discourse, political debate, civil organisations and of course elections. The role of the civil servants in producing feedback is not exclusive and it is not seen as crucial to the success of its government, since the bureaucracy is only one of several structures with that function.

In the aid relation, however, the feedback functions are more important, and more of an exclusive task of the civil servants. There are few other natural channels for information from 'recipient' populations to donors. Information on the success of development interventions is important in order to maintain legitimacy and funding, and the task of producing that information is to large degree assigned to the same bureaucratic institutions that implement the aid interventions. This makes aid qualitatively different from the government–citizen relation, where the government does not depend exclusively on information produced by the bureaucracy to maintain legitimacy or funding. Although important to management, quality assurance and other purposes internal to the bureaucracy, most of the information produced by civil servants is marginal or irrelevant to most tax-payers and voters. Compared to the government relation where civil servants are normally situated, the aid relation therefore means an expansion of their role. In

addition to implementing the executive functions of their government, they are assigned the key role in producing information to donors.

Thus, civil servants involved in aid are to a larger degree key intermediaries in both directions: in the ambitions to govern a population, and in producing information feedback from the same population. In the context of the changes in development discourse discussed above, the civil servants are made two-way intermediaries of the aid relation a global-scale governance project aimed at creating reform at the state and the individual levels, followed by reporting of changes at the micro- and macro-levels. This is reflected in the management systems: in almost every development intervention there is a *monitoring and evaluation* (M&E) component, with strict reporting procedures. While not specific to aid, the components that are designed to provide feedback are given higher priority in aid than in ordinary bureaucratic work. The same techniques are simultaneously used to execute and to produce information that will eventually be fed back into the development discourse at an enormous level of aggregation.

Maia Green calls development a ‘project of governance’ which involves ‘the capacity to work creatively with scalable concepts for the purpose of government’, where considerable effort goes into ‘categorical organising’, including ‘practices of legibility and homogenisation’ (Green 2009). I find this a useful approach to the practice of development, in reflecting key aspects of the ambitions involved in development. Green seems to see development primarily as a governance project: the attempt to improve by reforming others. But the same techniques used in a ‘project of governance’ also describe a good response to the additional demand in the aid relation to produce feedback. Since the techniques used for governing are also useful to meet the demand for a return flow of information to feed into a development discourse, there is not much conflict between these two objectives. But the more exclusive role of bureaucracies involved in aid in producing information for feedback, as compared to a state bureaucracy, explains why those tasks tend to be given more emphasis in aid.

This involves huge challenges, as we can expect incompatibility between the ideas, concepts, and intentions of development expressed in international discourse on the one hand, and the local populations on which development is supposed to work, on the other. The challenges are comparable to those of a state bureaucracy, and can be solved by what Green terms ‘legibility and homogenisation’, to be achieved by standardisation and

classification. Legibility is a key dimension here (see Scott 1998).¹⁹ Managing development interventions typically involves constructing a standardised, legible imagination of local reality that corresponds more to the ideas and concepts – policies – in international discourse, than to locally existing reality on the ground. The same aggregate representations can be used in the attempts to reform states and individuals, and in aggregating information for feedback. But while a state bureaucracy relates mainly to national discourse, in aid, the aggregation must be made to fit into international development discourse, representing an extra level of aggregation. Information must be produced so that it is meaningful for people (for instance, in donor agencies) who have no specific knowledge about the national context, and preferably using indicators that make possible comparison across states.

There is also a time dimension in aid that makes the need for information different from the needs in a government relation. We can assume that in a state–society relation, as in the logic of Scott (1998), the success of the state project is measured at the end situation: the rulers (a president, politicians, voters) are assumed to be familiar with the situation before the intervention, and success is measured in terms of their satisfaction afterwards. In the aid relation, however, this is not sufficient. Donors cannot be assumed to know the situation prior to an intervention. To legitimise aid, it is important to be able to confirm that aid has indeed made a difference, and here success can be meaningfully measured only by knowing both the start (*baseline*) and the end situation. The aid relation, therefore, demands not only legibility in the form of still image, but also legibility in changes across time. The population subject to development must be made legible and classifiable before, during and after a development intervention – all according to categories that correspond to development discourse, since only changes that are measurable according to development policies can serve to release more funding. The expectation is now that almost any development intervention should result in reporting of changes according to a policy – in contrast to much previous development discourse, which in Western countries often focused on reporting resource transfers only.

¹⁹ Here I refer to the logic or rationality of state governance that Scott explores and criticises. Scott has been criticised by others, but that is in reaction to his description of the actual effects of that rationality (Ferguson 2005; Coronil 2001) and not the claim that bureaucracies are characterized by such rationalities.

In terms of management, the response to the demands in the aid relation is by large-scale classification at all levels and time periods: The prescriptions for most aid programmes (at least the larger ones) are that one should start with a *baseline study*, which is used as a basis to design the programme document, and a *monitoring and evaluation* plan with specific indicators for success – *results* – at various levels in time: immediate *outputs*, medium-term *outcomes*, and long-term *impact*. All levels must correspond with development policies and therefore with categories in international development discourse. Each intervention involves a pre-set list of indicators designed for registration at micro-level and being fed directly into higher, aggregate levels.

4.3.1. *Increasing demand for legibility in development*

The two trends in development discourse discussed above – the focus on reform as the first step to development, and the introduction of individuals – seem two relatively distinct trends. The reform agenda emerged from macro-economic concerns with little direct linkage individuals, while it may be argued that the concern for individuals partly grew out as a response to the narrow macro-economic focus. The agenda to reform individuals, however, seems to reflect trends that are not exclusive to aid and development, but are inherent in modern forms of governing.

In their implications, however, they mutually enforce each other. In the aid relation, where social change must be made legible according to classifications in development discourse, they make development more demanding. Whereas the transfer of resources is easy to report, reporting on reform is complex, especially when it must be in a form that enables measurement, comparison and reporting across states. This is done by establishing strict classifications. Take *good governance*, for instance. A wide range of indicators have been developed by different donors (see Grindle 2004; UNDP 2007; OECD 2009), and many measurement tools are available (see, for instance, UNDP's www.gaportal.org). The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators project uses hundreds of indicators in assessing governance for most of the world's countries (Kaufmann et al. 2010). The information on each country is often presented in charts rather than narrative reports. This illustrates the radical difference involved in when state reform is made an international rather than a national project: After all, state reform is the core of political discourse, but it is difficult to imagine leading or opposition parties using

charts as the major tool for measuring what they think about achievements in the performance of their government in general. Comparable approaches are made to other aspects of governance, such as corruption, democracy, civil and political rights, and so on, all with corresponding attempts at international comparison. Even though the same strict classifications are not used as in *good governance*, there is a clear bias towards focusing on the formal and therefore measurable – legible – aspects of democracy, such as constitutional, legal and electoral systems. Those components are measurable and comparable across countries, but the specific social and political processes involved are not.

Similarly, the focus on the individual rather than states and societies requires higher levels of aggregation. When individuals (as opposed to countries or societies) are made the target units of development, it becomes meaningless to speak about specific knowledge about each unit. All information must be translated into aggregated, abstract categories. Specific knowledge about each unit (the individual) is useful solely for anecdotal purposes and is used mainly in fund-raising. In management, only aggregate information is applicable. With the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) this has been brought to a new level, since even non-state actors are often required to report in line with the same criteria. It confirms that all are part of the same state project of classifying and identifying individuals, targeting interventions to reform them, and measuring changes – first at individual level, then at aggregate levels to feed into international discourse when reporting success in the MDGs.

4.4. Development and dissonance

Large-scale classification that corresponds to techniques for governing individuals is nothing new to aid, but is inherent in modern states. To a large extent the needs introduced in the aid relation are qualitatively comparable, and similar techniques are at work. The difference lies in the degree and the extent of their use, and the greater emphasis on integrating techniques aimed at reform with attempts to produce information. Moreover, in aid there is an extra level of aggregation in the expectation that development should fit with categorisations in international development discourse. This may serve to explain why the dissonance between the information produced and actually experienced realities – known in all states – is more evident in states subject to aid and

development, than in other states. Here I will mention three possible strategies available in the interface between abstract discourse and local realities, when facing disjuncture inherent in aid.

First, the challenge can be managed by **giving preference only to the legible changes**, ignoring any other social changes that do not fit into a pre-determined set of parameters for measurable development. This seems the strategy in many aspects of democratisation and governance, where only changes according to prior selected indicators are measured. These are most often formal changes in the formal institutions as opposed to informal relations and processes.

Second, disjuncture can be **solved in the aesthetic domain**. It is possible to create the appearance of harmony between incompatible worlds (of knowledge, norms or interests), by creating some sort of imagined reality. In that case, both worlds are allowed to exist more or less undisturbed while also satisfying (at least to some degree) expectations in the aid relation. This can be done by creating a layer of abstractions, ideals, formalities, on top of actually experienced realities – and that layer is made to fit with policies. This may explain how the art of development sometimes seems an art of aesthetics (cf. Stirrat 2000).

Both the above strategies can be seen as attempts at translation, primarily in translating local realities into some form of representation that is legible in international discourse. A third type of strategy would be to **attempt to transform social reality so that it actually corresponds to discourse** – in other words, try to make the two worlds merge in ‘real’ terms. Indeed, all development interventions are attempts to transform social realities, and most practitioners involved know that it is a difficult task, but they keep trying nevertheless. Here I focus not on the general objective of transforming individuals and societies inherent in practically all aid interventions, but the attempts to transform specifically according to ideas and concepts of development discourse, regardless of whether those seem appropriate to understand local realities.

4.4.1. When dissonance is default

Any of the above strategies are likely to lead to *dissonance*, as introduced in the beginning of this chapter: a difference between how social phenomena appear when seen

through the logic of the state, and how social life is experienced in actual, local, daily interactions. Such dissonance constitutes a political and managerial problem that is familiar to all bureaucracies, since the classifications, indicators and figures used in modern bureaucracies cannot reflect social realities in any precise ways. When dissonance is nonetheless accepted in all bureaucracies, it is probably on the assumption that the bureaucrats are committed to empirical precision and will correct or report any deviance, resulting in greater precision with better governance. But what if that assumption is not true?

In Malawi, the civil servants are indeed familiar with dissonance. In the one-party system, the bureaucratic focus on pleasing superiors and the president was the norm regardless of how reality looked like on the ground. For instance, prior to presidential visits to communities, the state administration put much effort into transforming those into model villages, often by investing heavily in agricultural production along the routes that the president was expected to follow – in a logic not unlike the ‘Potemkin’ villages of Imperial Russia. Comparable arrangements have been noted in other African contexts as well, for instance what has been described as the *imperial spectacle* in the colonial context (Apter 2002), or *pretence* as described by Mbembe (2001). In more general terms, the description by Chabal and Daloz (1999) of African states must obviously appear as dissonance for those involved. But rather than seen as a problem to be solved, as one would see the same features of African states from a development perspective, the dissonance described by Chabal and Daloz seems to be naturalised and even desired by key actors.

The above forms of dissonance are not related to aid and development: I mention them here to indicate that dissonance is perhaps a norm for the bureaucracy to a greater degree than in donor countries. Neoliberal modes of governance, partly introduced via aid, together with the *normativity of numbers* in the case of the Malawian bureaucracy (Anders 2005a), might have introduced new dimensions of dissonance, seemingly with donor approval.

It may be that donors expected the bureaucracy to try to minimise dissonance by correcting misrepresentations and perhaps suggest changes in the formal parameters if they did not fit with experience. But if dissonance fitted into a tradition and norms in the bureaucracy for focusing more on how things appear than how they are experienced,

those expectations were perhaps not justified. The natural response by bureaucrats might have been to adapt to expectations in development discourse by pretending success, as this was already the accepted way of dealing with demands that were incompatible with local realities. This may be a factor behind the relatively less critical attention to dissonance, and the apparently limited efforts made by bureaucrats to attempt to ‘correct’ when dissonance is experienced. It may explain why, when it is occasionally revealed that aid and development do not work according to intentions, the greatest shocks are seen in the donor communities. Donors are situated so far removed from local realities that perhaps it has been possible for them to imagine that development discourse actually reflects local realities. If dissonance is already seen as the default among state bureaucrats, it is not questioned to the same degree. Bureaucrats and beneficiaries may judge development and aid as better or worse – and in Malawi, it is almost unanimously celebrated as positive – but those judgments are based on assessments of the actual consequences, not how aid fits with policies. The fact that development does not seem to fit with intentions as reflected in aid policies becomes a problem for the donors – not for Malawians.

4.4.2. Dissonance in development

My three papers demonstrate, in different ways, various forms of dissonance that can be explained by reference to what is discussed above.

Parallel state organisations shows how the chiefs, an institution totally incompatible with liberal democracy, gained strength during the same period as Malawi adopted liberal democracy according to donor preferences. I have indicated how certain aspects of aid and development policies may have made this possible. The obvious dissonance seems rarely focused upon in Malawi even though it is well known to scholars, politicians and practically all citizens. This may be because the strengthening of the chieftaincy was not ‘legible’ through the lens of development. Democratisation and governance have been defined along very specific indicators, focusing on formal modes of governance, well-managed elections, freedom of the press, and so on. These indicators make governance in Malawi legible in international discourse, but leave little space for taking the chiefs into account. The chiefs are dismissed as a residue of ‘traditional’ authority rather than being recognised as an integral part of the state hierarchy. Perhaps this is imaginable in some

urban, middle class populations in Malawi, but to the large majority of the local population who depend on the chief for access to government, it is not true. Despite all that is known about the roles of the chiefs, changes in this component of the state have passed relatively unnoticed in development discourse even at the national level. The development apparatus has been tuned solely to the formal aspects of democracy with a focus on the electorate, and the reform of the bureaucracy into good governance. Even the strong donor focus on decentralisation and the local electorate seems to have ignored the major state agents at local level, the chiefs.

This is not by any means because of lack of knowledge. Indeed, not only did almost all Malawians know about the changes in the chieftaincy, but even many donor representatives I have met are concerned. But such knowledge does not fit into the aggregation of information into public discourse, administration, aid policies and strategies, and even research, which are all influenced by international (and partly Weberian) ideas of governance. The power of the chiefs has remained a local fact, but has failed to reach development discourse. I believe that may be seen as the result of a strategy to manage disjuncture by focusing on legible changes. The obvious mismatch between formal changes and ‘real’ changes in state power can be possible only if dissonance is recognised as inherent in the state in Malawi.

The aesthetics of bureaucratic practice focuses particularly on the state bureaucrats, who in this case are the key intermediaries in the aid relation. The paper describes how the bureaucrats actively create what seems quite striking forms of dissonance by implementing procedures that obviously ‘fail’. This may be potentially shocking to outside observers, but the bureaucrats do it with enthusiasm and even some pride. This practice may be explained as an attempt to solve disjuncture between incompatible worlds in the domain of aesthetics rather than in practice. Also in this case it seems obvious that ignorance is not a main factor: most of the actors involved know well that the procedures ‘fail’, but they do not appear particularly disturbed at the resultant dissonance. On the contrary, dissonance is probably a rather low price to pay for a strategy that enables them to continue disbursing life-saving resources to Malawi’s smallholder farmers, practically all of whom – and not only those originally targeted – are poor.

Making and shaping poor Malawians presents some attempts to transform local realities in ways that correspond with development discourse, in this case a new social distinction according to a 'poverty line', and the specific understanding of *community* that has emerged in development discourse. This is part of an enormous project on the global level, expected to be implemented at the local level in most countries, not only Malawi. The UN Millennium Development Goals are based on the assumption that it is possible to classify each individual according to given, abstract, categories that generally lack local parallels, and to target state resources according to those new classifications. Incentives are created for applying those parameters in local realities to a greater degree than in previous modalities of aid and development. Solving disjuncture by translation, as in the two examples above, is not easy, so it is perhaps tempting at least to try to transform local realities in line with the development discourse. I believe, however, that in most cases the project is doomed to fail, at least in the short and medium term. If so, it may serve to create new forms of dissonance between local realities and state formalities. And even if the project should succeed, we may expect a side effect – differentiated citizenship – that obviously does not harmonise with development policies aimed at including the poor as fellow citizens. Hence, whether the project fails or succeeds, dissonance between reality as locally experienced, and the reality constructed by the state under development, will be the result.

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PART TWO

The papers

PAPER 1

Chiefs and everyday governance: Parallel state organisations in Malawi

Chiefs and everyday governance: Parallel state organisations in Malawi¹

The combination of direct and indirect rule in Africa during late colonialism created a dual state where, broadly speaking, rural areas were under indirect rule through chiefs while urban areas were subject to direct rule. This article explores the developments that in Malawi have led to a state in which most individuals are exposed to both forms of rule simultaneously. Nowadays, people in most areas experience two parallel state organisations, and individuals are simultaneously citizens of the state and subjects under a state-enforced chieftaincy system. Recently indirect rule has also experienced institutional expansion: The chiefly hierarchy, which previously reached only to district level, now extends all the way to the president, making the choice between the two parallel organisations relevant at higher levels of the state hierarchy.

For those able to straddle the two forms of rule, this means a wider scope of opportunities for interacting with the state. Yet for others, it means a dissonance between the rhetoric of civil, rights-based governance and the practice of chiefly rule. For state agencies, it makes available more options for effective governance, and the president in particular can choose between two separate institutional hierarchies in the execution of state power. For academic studies, the case of Malawi demonstrates that research on state building and governance should not equate bureaucratic capacity with state capacity. The chieftaincy, standing outside the bureaucracy, constitutes a key component of state power and everyday governance, and it is difficult to imagine it being replaced by any part of the formal government in the foreseeable future.

¹ Published (with minor changes) as Eggen, Øyvind (2011): 'Chiefs and everyday governance: Parallel state organisations in Malawi', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 37(2), pp. 313-331.

Introduction

In Mamdani's typology,² the combination of direct and indirect rule during late colonialism created Janus-faced states whose appearance and language of power differed radically depending on the status of those interacting with the state. For those subject to indirect rule, the state spoke the language of custom, culture, community. All modes of state power were fused in a hierarchy of chiefs³ under a *Native Authority* placed between the individual and the government. Under direct rule, the state was represented by state officials and spoke the language of modern civil rule, civil society and civil rights – whether one was a citizen enjoying those rights, or a subject without access.

Later independent governments reformed their states in various ways, but, according to Mamdani, they never successfully addressed the key characteristics of the dual state, which therefore continued despite otherwise radical reforms. Under indirect rule, individuals relate to the state as members of a certain community (village, tribe) and interact with the state through the chief. Neither the community to which a person belongs nor the chief who rules that community is a matter of choice, not even under electoral systems on higher level. The chief represents state-endorsed fused power in combining executive, legislative and judicial state functions at the local level. Being located in the domain of the 'customary', the chief enjoys wide local autonomy and can deviate from the modern principles of governance applicable to the state elsewhere. There are few checks on the chief's powers from below, and few if any rights are granted to the subjects. Fortunately, chiefly rule is seldom as brutal as Mamdani seems to claim, but as principles of rule these features nevertheless still constitute enclaves of 'decentralised despotism' within otherwise more modern states.

In contrast, direct rule applies, in principle, a modern model of differentiated state power in which individuals are seen as autonomous rights-bearing citizens within civil society. They may interact directly with the government, either as individuals or as part of voluntary organisations and alliances. For those who enjoy those rights this means citizenship. Those who live under direct rule, but do not qualify as rights-bearing citizens,

² M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1996).

³ 'Chiefs' in this article refers to all levels of the hierarchy, including local levels, for example, headmen/women, often termed differently in official as well as local languages.

do not enjoy those privileges, but still experience the state quite differently from the situation under indirect rule.

The two forms of rule and corresponding forms of subject/citizenship have existed simultaneously, side by side, but the boundaries have changed over time. The colonial distinction followed a racial logic,⁴ sometimes with exceptions for the most ‘civilised’ Africans.⁵ Later independent governments replaced race with ethnic, class-based or other criteria for access to citizenship under direct rule. Some removed the chieftaincy, but most states retained a combination of direct and indirect rule, using the rural/urban distinction as the most stable axis along which to organise the bifurcated state.⁶

Such dual states rarely gave people a choice. The specific criteria shifted over time, but the form of rule available to the individual was normally pre-determined by race, residence, ethnicity or class. For rural Africans in particular, indirect rule created a ‘world of the customary from which there was no escape’.⁷ In cities, urban–rural migration could involve alternating (but not simultaneous) forms of rule. Because, however, the whole idea was to allocate different forms of rule to different categories of people, indirect rule was explicitly designed to avoid ‘dualism’,⁸ and Mamdani notes some of the violent consequences of failure.⁹

In addition to the rural/urban axis, another axis can characterise the institutional hierarchy. Under colonial governments, the chiefs’ authority was granted and controlled by the District Commissioner (DC).¹⁰ No institutional dualism existed above that level – except where chiefs were represented in national assemblies or a house of chiefs of less relevance to everyday rule, or in basically ceremonial interactions between higher chiefs and colonial government.¹¹ The vertical separation between chiefs and central government was well suited to the policy of enabling wide scope for local adaptation.¹² This pattern persisted in most post-independence states, and even where higher

⁴ F. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh, Blackwood, 1922).

⁵ Lord Hailey, *Native Administration in the British African Territories*, Vol. IV (London, HM Stationery Office, 1951).

⁶ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, pp. 289–90.

⁷ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, p. 21.

⁸ See, for example, Lugard, *Dual Mandate*, p. 207.

⁹ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, Chapter 7.

¹⁰ Or its equivalents, like District Officer or *Cercle Commander*.

¹¹ See, for instance, Hailey, *Native Administration*, pp. 58–60.

¹² Lugard, *The Dual Mandate*, in particular Chapter X.

chieftaincies and kingdoms were recognised or established, the lower-level chiefs normally interacted with the DC in the execution of power on the local level.

In sum, the dual character of the state was organised around at least two relatively stable axes: geographically, along the rural-urban axis, and institutionally, at the district level. Just as individuals were subject to a predetermined form of rule, the institutional axis meant that most people in the state hierarchy knew whether chiefly or direct rule was applicable in each location as well as for each state intervention. To the extent that the state could be termed ‘dual’ or ‘bifurcated’, this was as an abstract term mostly relevant to outside observers, not as a dimension of everyday rule – whether for the individual or for most government officials – since the alternative was simply not an option.

The following sections will show how, in Malawi, the dual character of the state persisted during independence and under multi-party democracy despite radical reforms. One significant feature changed, however. The boundaries have become porous. Both the two state hierarchies and the corresponding principles of rule apply to most individuals, and the choice between them is relevant to many levels in government. In effect, the bifurcated state is now relevant to most people – sometimes as a matter of choice, sometimes not, but generally as a cause of ambiguity. Individuals are simultaneously citizens and subjects.

This has come about by penetration of direct, ‘modern’ civil rule in rural areas without removal of the chiefs’ powers. Moreover, ‘town chiefs’ now make the chieftaincy relevant, albeit to a lower degree, in urban areas. In effect, most individuals relate to two different state organisations. In addition, the state hierarchy above the district level is also acquiring a parallel structure. A parallel state has been created all the way up to the president, who now has two state hierarchies available for the execution of power. The indirect rule inherited from colonial times has developed into a practice that today is better termed ‘parallel rule’.

This article is based on ethnographic research involving multi-sited fieldwork in one rural and one urban area, and two public offices in Southern Malawi over a period of ten months during 2009. The main method applied was participant observation supported by group or individual discussions with informants in all areas of fieldwork. After an initial period of staying in a rural village, fieldwork was carried out in Zomba town and the

surrounding villages by following a number of informants (most of them male and English speaking) in their daily activities and journeys. Most informants in town had families in rural areas and happily informed me about village affairs or invited me home; hence the urban fieldwork also provided valuable information about rural contexts. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with about 15 chiefs at different levels in the chief hierarchy, as well as a similar number of civil servants from different parts of the civil service, in addition to less structured interaction with chiefs in all sites of fieldwork. In the latter part of fieldwork I was working as a part time ‘volunteer’ in Zomba District Agricultural Development Office and Liwonde Town Assembly, respectively, to observe how their staff interact with communities.

Most of the fieldwork was conducted in traditional Yao areas, although most of the villages I visited were of mixed ethnicity. The main arguments in this article, however, relate to developments in Malawi in general. My claims to generalisation are based on historical sources, official documents, media monitoring and observations elsewhere in Malawi.¹³ The article does not aim to reflect the actual local manifestations of parallel rule in locations other than those of my fieldwork. There is considerable variation and complexity in local power relations and practices across the country, to some degree depending on ethnicity. However that variation falls outside the scope of this article, which only points to some general features of the parallel state exemplified by fieldwork observations from the Southern region.

‘Parallel state’ here refers to two interrelated distinctions. One is between two organisational hierarchies – the chieftaincy and the formal government (including the electorate, judiciary and, when relevant, the political party). The other is between two different modes of state power seen as norms, rhetoric and practices, which following Mamdani are sometimes termed *languages* of power. The latter is necessarily an abstraction of complex local realities and does not necessarily correspond with dichotomies in actual practice. The practices of government officials may be far from the ‘modern’ ideals stated by the government they are working for, instead constituting a hybrid reflecting several sets of norms.¹⁴ Moreover, chiefs often apply some forms of

¹³ These include observations during several work assignments since 2003 involving close interaction with municipal and district assemblies and a substantial number of chiefs and village groups in about half of the districts in Malawi.

¹⁴ See, for instance, F. Bayart, *The State in Africa* (London, Longman, 1993).

modern democratic standards. The distinction is therefore less clear-cut in practice than in principle. Nevertheless, it is relevant not only as an analytical distinction but also in practice, since it refers to a dichotomy between different sets of norms and institutional arrangements of practical relevance to execution of power, to which each of the two hierarchies is associated.

Indirect Rule and the Creation of ‘Traditional’ Authority in Malawi

The first years of British rule over the British Central Africa Protectorate of Nyasaland involved attempts at direct rule. The higher chiefs were subjugated, sometimes defeated and dethroned,¹⁵ and those who kept their positions were weakened.¹⁶ Local chiefs (headmen/women) normally kept their positions, performing duties for the colonial administration such as tax collection.¹⁷ As early as 1912, however, the government established a new hierarchy of chiefs to ‘replace the old system of tribal rule of Chiefs which has fallen into decay’.¹⁸ And to some extent they did indeed replace the system, rather than restore it. The new administrative sections did not necessarily coincide with existing tribal or territorial boundaries, although the government generally respected existing boundaries.¹⁹ The District Commissioner appointed a Principal Head for each section. Existing heads were the most likely candidates, but others ‘who had assisted the Resident in native administrative matters in the past’,²⁰ or (in estate areas) labour foremen, could be appointed, sometimes after local elections, seemingly with no general criteria or procedure.²¹ Succession was normally hereditary, even for appointed chiefs.²²

The next decades saw a gradual expansion of the scope and powers of the chiefs on behalf of the state, including judicial powers, until the *Native Authority and Native Courts Ordinance* in 1933 established the general principle of indirect rule. Its highest level, the Native Authority, held widespread powers as the arm of local government for almost

¹⁵ H. Duff, *Nyasaland under the Foreign Office* (London, George Bell and Sons, 2001), Chapter X.

¹⁶ J. Mitchell, ‘The Political Organization of the Yao of Southern Nyasaland’, *African Studies*, 8, 3 (1949), pp. 141–59.

¹⁷ C. Baker, ‘Tax Collection in Malawi: An Administrative History, 1891–1972’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 8, 1 (1975), pp. 40–62.

¹⁸ Annual Report for 1912–13, quoted in Hailey, *Native Administration*, Vol. II, p. 25.

¹⁹ J. Mitchell, *The Yao Village* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1956), p. 47.

²⁰ Hailey, *Native Administration*, Volume II, pp. 26–7.

²¹ T. Woods, ‘Capitaos and Chiefs: Oral Tradition and Colonial Society in Malawi’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 23, 2 (1990), pp. 259–68.

²² Hailey, *Native Administration*, Volume II, pp. 27, 51, 67.

every purpose, including the power to make rules,²³ but under direct command of the DC. The DC normally appointed existing senior chiefs as native authorities, but also interfered with the chiefly hierarchies.²⁴

For the chiefs, their role as executives of state power paid well in the form of greater local powers. Territorial re-organisation had already increased their authority over more people, including members of other tribes not previously under their jurisdiction.²⁵ The ‘customary’ became a state-enforced legal domain to be defined and managed by chiefs. New administrative tasks made chiefly power more all-embracing, as previously autonomous social domains including domestic affairs increasingly fell within the purview of the chiefs.²⁶ The powers of the colonial government to influence local affairs through chiefs were limited and chiefs had a large degree of autonomy²⁷. Prior to independence some chiefs even engaged in political opposition to the government²⁸.

Historic sources do not characterise Malawian chiefs as particularly brutal. In this regard, Mamdani’s presentation of the ‘decentralised despotism’ practised elsewhere does not correspond well to Malawi. ‘Despotism’ fits as a principle of rule (unlimited, absolute, fused state power) rather than as a description of actual practice in Malawi. Most opposition against the chiefs came not from peasants, but from groups of educated and economically stronger Africans who challenged the position of the chiefs rather than their way of ruling. In particular, their establishment of ‘native associations’ can be seen as an attempt to establish a parallel (civil society) structure for negotiating with the colonial administration by direct rule as an alternative to indirect rule through chiefs.²⁹ The administration welcomed these associations in the economic domain,³⁰ but allowed them

²³ *Ibid.*, Volume II, p. 27.

²⁴ Mitchell, *The Yao Village*, pp. 48–9.

²⁵ M. Chanock, ‘Ambiguities in the Malawian Political Tradition’, *African Affairs*, 74, 296 (1975), pp. 326–46.

²⁶ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, p. 110.

²⁷ K. Fields, *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985) demonstrates the limited power of the colonial government vis-à-vis local leaders in the context of religious revivals as vehicles of political opposition.

²⁸ J. Power, *Political Culture and Nationalism in Malawi: Building Kwacha* (Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2010), pp. 62–4.

²⁹ R. Rotberg, *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa: the Making of Malawi and Zambia 1873–1964* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 116–24.

³⁰ J. Power, “‘Individualism is the Antithesis of Indirect Rule’”, *Cooperative Development and Indirect Rule in Colonial Malawi*, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 2 (1992), pp. 317–47.

no place in governance, insisting that they remain subordinate to chiefs.³¹ Only one state form – indirect rule – was allowed for Africans.

Towards the end of colonial rule the Native Authorities lost some powers, due partly to establishment of district councils and the removal of chiefs' judicial functions. Officially, Native Authorities were left with 'traditional roles' including the maintenance of law and order and the allocation of customary lands. In practice the chiefs remained central agents for the DC's executive powers.³²

Subordination of Chiefs to Party after Independence

After independence in 1964, the new rulers, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), initiated some reduction in chiefly powers,³³ but compared to most other African countries these efforts were not far-reaching. The new president Kamuzu Banda drew legitimacy from the domain of tradition and emphasised 'traditional' values of respect and obedience.³⁴ In the rhetoric of tradition, the chiefs, soon renamed 'traditional authorities', had a natural position. Banda left no doubt that chiefs formed an element of government – fully subordinated to him and his party.³⁵ He removed several senior chiefs from office after relatively minor hints of disloyalty.

The 1967 Chiefs Act, still in force, assigned roles to chiefs in keeping the peace, 'traditional functions' under customary law, tax collection and 'general administration and such functions as the District Commissioner may require'.³⁶ It also introduced a new level to the hierarchy. A Paramount Chief could be appointed by the president to rule over the Traditional Authority (T/A)³⁷ with functions 'such as the President may specify in the appointment of the holder of such office'. At that time, only the two Ngoni tribes

³¹ Rotberg, *Rise of Nationalism*, p. 122.

³² A. Chiweza, 'Participation: Reality or Rhetoric in Rural Communities of Malawi?', *Tanzanet Journal*, 5,1 (2005), pp. 1-8.

³³ A. Chiweza, 'The Ambivalent Role of Chiefs: Rural Decentralization Initiatives in Malawi', in L. Buur and H. Kyed (eds), *State Recognition and Democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa. A New Dawn for Traditional Authorities?* (New York, Macmillan, 2007), p. 59.

³⁴ O. Kalinga, 'The Production of History in Malawi in the 1960s: The Legacy of Sir Harry Johnston, the Influence of the Society of Malawi and the Role of Dr Kamuzu Banda and His Malawi Congress Party', *African Affairs*, 97 (1998), pp. 523-49; P.G. Forster, 'Culture, Nationalism and the Invention of Tradition in Malawi', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32, 3 (1994), pp. 477-97.

³⁵ See, for example, J. Kaunda, 'State Centralization and the Decline of Local Government in Malawi', *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 65 (1999), pp. 579-95.

³⁶ Malawi Government, Chiefs Act, 1967.

³⁷ I employ the titles most commonly used, rather than the terms used by the Act.

had a Paramount Chief. Soon after this, President Banda elevated the Mang'anja chief Lundu (the descendant of the rulers of one of the three main Maravi kingdoms that flourished in the eighteenth century) to Paramount Chief in the Lower Shire Valley. The paramount chiefs had mainly ceremonial functions.

In 1969 and 1970 local courts powers were increased so that they could pass judgement on criminal cases. Thus the judicial powers of the chief were thereby restored to some extent. However, unlike during late colonialism, the local courts did not occupy a separate legal domain – they were closely supervised by the formal court and fully under party control.³⁸

Following further centralisation of power,³⁹ the District Development Committees (DDC), under the DC, were strengthened at the expense of district councils. This meant a strengthening of the chiefs, who were full members of the DDCs and had key roles in the execution of power through their position as head of the subordinate area and village Action groups. The parallel structure between district council and local government was probably not particularly evident to rural people, as the chiefs were also central to the council's interaction with the local communities.⁴⁰

Overall, the one-party era in Malawi did not bring radical changes to the actual functions of the chiefs, although their autonomy was more restricted than under colonialism. On a higher level, those chiefs who remained loyal enjoyed more positive attention from the government, mainly in connection with their ritual and ceremonial roles.

For lower-level chiefs, however, the one-party system brought radical changes, not in terms of their functions but in their power and status in relation to the party structure. The one-party structure constituted a highly effective chain of communication and control all the way to village level. There were party representatives in almost every village, with the Malawi Young Pioneers particularly effective, implementing high-profile development projects and at the same time serving as agencies of coercion. They controlled the party cards required for Malawians to trade at markets and could intimidate anybody who was

³⁸ P. Short, *Banda* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 272.

³⁹ Kaunda, 'State Centralization'.

⁴⁰ Chiweza, 'Participation: Reality or Rhetoric?'

regarded as disobedient.⁴¹ Those (few) chiefs who were ‘disobedient’ to the party – often by opposing state projects that could harm their village constituencies – risked being disciplined in brutal and humiliating ways, typically by beating or forced labour.⁴² Although the chiefs remained in control of customary lands, they were unable to stand up against the transformation of land to commercial use, normally into the ownership of party members.⁴³

In other words, while retaining functions on behalf of the government, the chiefs’ local authority was weakened in relative terms. The party became a more important locus of state power than chiefs. Hence, what in Mamdani’s arguments seems to be a characteristic of the ‘radical’ states that removed the chiefs also happened, to some extent, in a ‘conservative’ state like Malawi; the absolute, fused powers of the state were represented by the party rather than the chief at local level. These two sites of state power were probably not seen as in conflict: Few chiefs would even try to engage in rhetoric or practices that could be seen as interfering with the party monopoly on state power. We may, perhaps, assume that the chiefs adapted by using a ‘language of power’ drawn from the non-political, social and cultural (‘traditional’) domains, and focusing on ceremonial functions.

The Resurgence of Chiefs in Multi-party Malawi

Multi-party democracy since 1994 brought a resurgence of chieftaincies in Malawi as in many other African countries,⁴⁴ although the contrast is not as striking as elsewhere since the chiefs had enjoyed positive recognition under Banda’s rule. The formal functions of chiefs were in fact quite significantly reduced under the new system. Traditional courts were suspended, and even though the new constitution provides for traditional courts with limited mandate (headed by chiefs *or* lay persons) no legislation on their operation has yet been approved by Parliament. Moreover, the decentralisation process of the 1990s

⁴¹ D. Kaspin, ‘The Politics of Ethnicity in Malawi’s Democratic Transition’, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 33, 4 (1995), pp. 595–620.

⁴² Reported by informants to my fieldwork old enough to remember, supported by anecdotes still flourishing.

⁴³ S. Cross and M. Kutengule, ‘Decentralisation and Rural Livelihoods in Malawi’, in F. Allis and H. Freeman (eds), *Rural Livelihoods and Poverty Reduction Policies* (London, Routledge, 2005).

⁴⁴ P. Englebert, ‘Patterns and Theories of Traditional Resurgence in Tropical Africa’, *Mondes en Développement*, 30, 118 (2002), pp. 51-64; L. Buur and H. Kyed (eds), *State Recognition and Democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa. A New Dawn for Traditional Authorities?* (New York, Macmillan, 2007).

explicitly removed chiefs as chairs of the Area and Village Development Committees⁴⁵ and chiefs are rarely mentioned in legislation, policy and corresponding guidance documents on decentralisation. In the political and academic discourse on the new Malawi, the role of the chiefs has been marginal.

But the *de facto* operation of chiefs has continued, despite the *de jure* reduction of their role. More than 24,000 ‘traditional justice forums’⁴⁶ currently act as traditional courts for all practical purposes. Chiefs not only settle civil disputes but also act as judges in cases of petty crime or breach of local rules, and even more serious crimes if all parties agree or the chief insists. Chiefs also take charge of local security both in the local context where they exercise their own authority as well as in their capacity as intermediaries to the police. For instance, in some of the cases I observed, local activities under *community policing* organised by Malawi Police were considered by locals as falling under the chief’s responsibility and control.

In addition, the Area and Village Development Committees are often headed by chiefs⁴⁷ despite policies discouraging this. Even if this is not the case, these committees are considered as subordinate to chiefs. In those areas in which I carried out my fieldwork, as in most parts of the country, functioning VDCs are uncommon anyway. The role of gatekeeper between the government and the village is therefore occupied by the chief alone. He or she⁴⁸ approves and calls meetings, organises groups for all kinds of government interventions and mobilises labour or other resources when necessary. The government depends on the chief’s register of residents as the only way of finding out about village population or identifying individuals, for example, those eligible for a government intervention or wanted by the police. Chiefs are gatekeepers for foreign aid, as well – not only approving interventions and organising meetings, but also mobilising ‘local contributions’ of labour or bricks for infrastructure projects.⁴⁹

Villagers, for their part, normally depend on the chief for access to government, except for health, education and certain other services where individuals have direct access. A

⁴⁵ Chiweza, ‘Ambivalent Role of Chiefs’.

⁴⁶ E. Kanyongolo, *Malawi Justice Sector and Rule of Law: A Review by AfriMAP and Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa* (Johannesburg, Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa, 2006).

⁴⁷ Chiweza, ‘Ambivalent Role of Chiefs’; this is supported by my observations during fieldwork.

⁴⁸ Female chiefs are common. According to the National Statistics Office (Zomba), *Welfare Monitoring Survey 2008*, 12 per cent of households are located in villages that have female chiefs.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

letter from the chief is needed for formal registration of a business or a land transaction or for confirmation of identity, which is necessary to open a bank account or obtain a driving licence or passport. Police officers will normally not engage with thefts, domestic violence and other ‘small’ crimes, and the court will usually only handle cases if brought forward by the police or if the complaint is accompanied by a letter from the chief.

The two-way gatekeeper roles enable chiefs to tap into some of the resource flow between a village and the state or development agencies. This may involve cash-in-hand as a ‘fee’ for services, access to a larger share of resource inflows or keeping spare parts or surplus cement after a borehole has been installed or a bridge constructed. Effective norms against inequality and against corruption for individual gain (as opposed to tapping resources from the government to share with others),⁵⁰ however, set strict limits as to how much a chief can keep. Cash amounts seldom exceed the equivalent of about two US dollars, and local chiefs are generally not much wealthier than their subjects.

In village affairs the chief is also in charge of practically all local matters, including ‘traditional’ functions such as the allocation of customary lands (although their importance is diminishing due to the scarcity of land and changing land policy); weddings, funerals, some cultural and religious ceremonies, mobilising labour for communal work, such as maintaining footpaths or the village graveyard, collecting funds for communal purposes, settling local conflicts and mediating domestic disputes.

Even in urban areas, chiefs have become important sites of power. Cities were in principle under direct rule both under colonialism⁵¹ and after independence, and the Chiefs Act still excludes chiefs from exercising jurisdiction in towns. Nevertheless, *town chiefs* rule in almost all urban areas,⁵² albeit with relatively less power than rurally, partly due to stronger presence of local government.

The popular legitimacy of chiefs seems as strong under liberal democracy as under previous political systems, in striking contrast to both political leaders and public officials who have lost credibility and respect following democratisation. One possible explanation

⁵⁰ G. Anders, ‘Like Chameleons: Civil Servants and Corruption in Malawi’, in G. Blundo and P. Le Meur (eds), *The Governance of Daily Life in Africa. Ethnographic Explorations of Public and Collective Services* (Leiden, Brill, 2009), pp. 119–41.

⁵¹ Lord Hailey, *Native Administration*, Vol II, p. 61.

⁵² D. Cammack, E. Kanyongolo and T. O’Neil, ‘Town Chiefs in Malawi’, *Africa Power and Politics Programme*, Working Paper no. 3 (2009), available at www.institutions-africa.org/page/publications.

is that chiefs' association with tradition means that they are located in a non-state domain and therefore not subject to the same critical scrutiny as state representatives. This is, however, subject to local variation. In some areas and within some ethnic groups the chiefs are closely associated to tradition, expressed in widely celebrated traditional ceremonies. In the locations of my fieldwork, however, they draw legitimacy more from the state. Most chiefs, when interviewed, legitimised their role as representing the government (or the president) over their role in tradition. Some proudly presented themselves as 'civil servants'. Senior chiefs are subject to similar associations. Informant interviews revealed two major sources of legitimacy for chiefs: as having the mandate to exercise power on behalf of the DC, and as the 'owner of the village' (*mwini mudzi*). The latter is a direct continuation of pre-colonial sources of legitimacy,⁵³ and while it certainly relates to historic claims, the fact that a similar term is commonly used for the president as 'owner of the country' (*mwini dziko*) indicates that not all its associations are necessarily with 'traditional' legitimacy. During fieldwork I could not identify clear divisions between 'state' and 'tradition' with regard to specific ways of exercising power. It seems likely the chief has authority over most local affairs both as the 'owner' and as the DC's representative.

Still, even when drawing legitimacy as 'civil servants', chiefs apparently avoid much of the criticism attracted by holders of public offices, for example, for misuse of power or petty corruption. This may be because having chiefs is not seen as a matter of choice: They are less easy to remove than civil servants. Similarly, in contrast to politicians they also avoid being linked to the highly competitive electoral games (*ndale*) that characterise democratic processes with their negative associations.

Nevertheless, chiefly power is still supported by traditional sanctions: They can impose fines or, as a final resort, as the 'owners' they can expel people from the village. Although often used as a threat, my fieldwork did not reveal evidence of actual expulsion. As a milder alternative, chiefs can threaten to deny people burial in the graveyard when they die. Another effective source of power comes from association of chiefs with witchcraft, which surrounds them with an aura of fear.

⁵³ See, for instance, Duff, 'Nyasaland under Foreign Office', p. 193.

While none of the practical functions of chiefs have been significantly altered since the transition to multi-party democracy, their relative status and authority have significantly increased. Chiefs, previously weak in relation to party structures, now constitute the unchallenged seat of local power because the main alternative, the one-party structure, has disappeared. No other sites of state power compare to the chief except, perhaps, in some areas where local branches of government party have gained power in ways that may resemble practices of the one-party era. The same applies for other likely candidates for local power. The local electorate is generally non-functional.⁵⁴ Local administration is not only understaffed, but respect for state officials is very low relative to the one-party era, when there was an element of fear surrounding government representatives. Their powers now do not compare to the powers of the chiefs, whom they normally treat with considerable respect. The only exception is the DC, to whom chiefs are directly subordinated.

The following case illustrates this balance of power. When distributing subsidised agricultural inputs during 2009, the Ministry of Agriculture arranged a series of mass meetings with all benefitting households under each Group Village Head. These meetings gathered hundreds of people and all chiefs in each area, the latter sitting just in front of the government representatives, with the other people observing and listening from a distance. At one meeting the team leader – a senior agricultural official and a charismatic public speaker – delivered the instruction from government that beneficiaries must not share or sell agricultural inputs after receiving them. He added, glancing at one of the armed police officers guarding the box of subsidy coupons: ‘If anybody makes trouble, please shoot him’, followed by spontaneous laughter and applause by the audience. After his speech, the Group Village Head stood up and said: ‘We know well that the government wants to give subsidies only to those who are most needy. But we are going to share the coupons in our own ways’. He added, raising his voice: ‘If anybody protests against sharing [coupons the way the chief instructs], I will personally throw him out of his village’. Nobody laughed – and, notably, none of the government officials replied.

⁵⁴ During the period between 1994 and 2010 only one local election has been held. This took place in 2000, with little local relevance. Another local election is planned for 2011, though there is some uncertainty about its implementation.

Ejecting a person from the village is the chief's ultimate sanction against anyone who disobeys him or her. Executing a person is the ultimate sanction of the state, and not only according to general state theory: For Malawians this has recent historic resonance for it was commonly practised by the Banda regime. Hence both parties in the discussion were invoking their most powerful sanction as a threat against disobedience. While the people interpreted the threat from the senior state official as a joke, they saw the Group Village Head's threat as real.

Thus, the powers of the chiefs in Malawi have been strengthened significantly since the introduction of multi-party democracy – not only because of changing functions but because of the lack of alternative sites of state power. This development can be attributed to several factors which are outlined below.

First, the one-party system, the only alternative power structure at local level, was removed.

Second, decentralised state capacity has been greatly reduced. World Bank/IMF-led structural adjustment during the 1980s and 1990s reduced the public sector significantly, leading to a dramatic reduction in the number of staff in the civil service, especially at lower levels. Decentralisation and neoliberal reforms with *new public management* did not result in better performance that compensated for the nominal reductions.⁵⁵ Weak administrative capacity makes it very difficult for officials to interact with villages except through chiefs, hence strengthening chiefs' role as gatekeepers. The non-functioning of Area and Village Development Committees illustrates one effect of low capacity. Close supervision is needed for the committees to function and for the chief to keep hands off the committees, and a general flow of government resources through committees may also be necessary for the committees to be meaningful. Government extension workers today must cover vast areas, normally coming to each village only once every several months. They lack sufficient knowledge of the local context to facilitate the establishment, functioning and monitoring of the committees.

Third, respect for civil servants, previously supported by what informants sometimes refer to as a 'culture of fear' under Banda's rule, disappeared and was replaced by

⁵⁵ G. Anders, 'Civil Servants in Malawi. Cultural Dualism, Moonlighting and Corruption in the Shadow of Good Governance' (PhD thesis, Erasmus University of Rotterdam, 2005).

‘freedom’ (*ufulu*), which is understood in very general terms, including disrespect for officials. This is combined with reforms towards *rights-based* and *demand-based* forms of service delivery that contrast with previous coercive approaches. As a result, civil servants have less authority and fewer opportunities for challenging or bypassing chiefs.

Fourth, donor policies favour chiefs. Development discourse since the early 1990s has emphasised *ownership*, *community participation* and *demand-driven* service provision, making aid dependent on community consent before any intervention. In the absence of other local structures, the village is interpreted as the relevant community, and the only available representative of that community is the chief – who consequently gets a key position in many aid interventions. Furthermore, much of today’s development aid is specifically targeted rather than universal – aimed at certain categories of recipient: the poorest, women, orphans or others regarded as particularly needy.⁵⁶ In addition, donors increasingly demand documented results, preferably on the individual level. Only the chief can provide the local information necessary for identifying and mapping beneficiaries, as well as monitoring and documentation during and after an intervention. Hence, development assistance has made itself dependent on the chief for its success.

There is a striking irony in this. Chieftaincy is incompatible with much of what Western donors try to impose on African countries. As an institution of non-elected leadership with all-embracing powers and no institutionalised downward accountability, it represents almost the exact opposite of liberal democracy and the rights-based approach promoted by donors. Moreover, chiefly rule discourages the professional, non-clientelistic form of service delivery expected within *good governance*. Yet, the most prominent priorities of Western donors in recent decades – structural adjustment fused with neoliberalism, multi-party democracy, rights-based service delivery rather than coercive approaches and the community/participation/ownership nexus in donor policies – are four main factors that have strengthened the chiefs, making them an unchallenged locus of state power in practically every village of Malawi.

⁵⁶ T. Mkandawire, *Targeting and Universalism in Poverty Reduction* (Programme Paper no. 23, *Social Policy and Development*, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2005).

On the other hand, it is difficult to describe the Malawian experience as the kind of *re-traditionalisation* experienced in other African countries.⁵⁷ Although the chieftaincy possesses pre-colonial elements, it also reflects its reconstruction under colonial rule.⁵⁸ Moreover, chiefs were more exclusively positioned in the domain of tradition during the one-party era than today. The more recent changes, therefore, are a form of ‘de-traditionalisation’, as the relative balance of ‘traditional’ functions versus the chiefs’ role in modern governance has shifted towards the latter. To be sure, Malawi has seen an upsurge in interest in ‘traditional’ cultural expressions with political undertones. The current president Bingu wa Mutharika has been accused of promoting his own (Lomwe) tribe, and his administration is imitating some of Banda’s uses of the domain of tradition.⁵⁹ This is a relatively recent phenomenon, however (since around 2005) and was unimportant during the 1990s, when most of the local strengthening of chiefs took place.

Rural Penetration by Liberal Democratic Modes of Governance

Following the introduction of multi-party democracy in 1994, liberal democratic ideas were widely celebrated. These new ideas penetrated public discourse and provide the normative framework for new modes of everyday governance between elections. Government officials now receive training in new *demand-based* or *rights-based* forms of service delivery, often involving various forms of participatory process. The government does indeed speak a new language of power. People now expect to interact with government under *freedom*, as opposed to the *fear* that previously dominated.

In practice, however, the ideals of democracy and human rights have not generally materialised in substantial terms for the (rural) poor.⁶⁰ The electorate is relevant mainly on the national, not the local, level. People still experience bureaucratic practices that are far from the stated ideals of the government, and even though the bureaucracy may have changed slightly, people rarely have direct interactions with it, leaving the chiefs as the main point of interaction. Although many chiefs have now been trained in the new

⁵⁷ See, for instance, B. Oomen, “‘We Must Now Go Back to Our History’: Retraditionalisation in a Northern Province Chieftaincy”, *African Studies*, 59, 1 (2000); Englebert, ‘Patterns and Theories’.

⁵⁸ This is, for example, implicit already in Lord Hailey’s *Native Administration* from 1951.

⁵⁹ R. Chirambo, ‘Democracy as a Limiting Factor for Politicised Cultural Populism in Malawi’, *Africa Spectrum*, 44, 2 (2009), pp. 77–94.

⁶⁰ H. Englund, *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006).

principles, changes come slowly and do not alter the general characteristics of the state-enforced, fused powers of the chief as a non-elected leader established by indirect rule.

Nevertheless, the new discourse has opened new forms of interaction with government. Most people know that they, at least in principle, have the right to access the government, based on their rights as citizens, and that coercion is no longer legitimate. ‘Civil society’ has emerged as the relevant forum through which to gain access to governance, opposed to the community under a chief as in the old system. Active and powerful in the national political discourse, NGOs often dominate in the media. Various broad, far-reaching public and private schemes, typically aid-financed, have been implemented throughout most of the country, using civil society rather than the village as the basis for interaction with government. Grants and other resources go primarily to community-based organisations (CBOs), often established for the purpose of a particular intervention; they frequently include components of civic education and are used as platforms for ‘participatory’ consultations – which, in the absence of a functioning local electorate, may be seen as *ad hoc* democratic forums. Most CBOs become inactive when funding ends and are not used for general interaction with the government,⁶¹ but they have at least demonstrated the potential of civil society to be a forum for involvement in societal issues and access to resources, perhaps with some influence on government.

The new principles function not only as abstract phenomena, but constitute a real experience and occasionally an alternative option. Today, two forms of rule are available: indirect, chiefly rule and direct, modern, liberal democratic governance. My fieldwork has shown that people see the choice between the two forms as real, making this choice a key issue in local discourse.

In the judiciary, local conflicts frequently involve a choice between using the local or the formal courts. During fieldwork I observed a case in which one of the wealthier farmers in the village lost a pig, only to find the remnants a few hundred metres away. The village was near a peri-urban settlement, and the thief could have been almost any outsider, but the owner suspected a woman in the same village, with whose family he was already in conflict. He reported his suspicions directly to the police, which resulted in the arrest of

⁶¹ A. Swidler and S. Watkins, “‘Teach a Man to Fish’: The Sustainability Doctrine and Its Social Consequences”, *World Development*, 37, 7 (July 2009), pp. 1,182–196.

the accused and her brothers. They were furious, not so much because of the accusations but because the case had not been brought to the chief first. They argued that, if the chief had handled the case, they would not have had to spend two uncomfortable days in custody and paying expensive bribes to get out. If the chief had found them guilty, they would simply have had to provide compensation for the pig. The money would have gone to the owner with perhaps a small amount to the chief – and would have remained in the village – instead of going to corrupt police officers. In this case, the local chief was known as very weak and the arguments of both parties in the conflict may also have reflected the assumption that the chief was unlikely to have been able to handle the case properly. Thus this case illustrates that the choice of judiciary is often pragmatic rather than based on general principles.

Another case involved a woman – the relative of the Traditional Authority of the area – who was accused of teaching witchcraft to children of other households, leading to much local anger.⁶² The Traditional Authority did not allow the local chief to hold court on the issue and dismissed the case himself. When one of the accusers threatened to go to the formal court, the Traditional Authority threatened to expel from the village anybody who tried to take the matter to the police or to formal court, which is otherwise standard procedure for people unhappy with the chief's judgement. This incident indicated that the choice of which judiciary to use was made a key issue, even in a case of witchcraft.⁶³ I observed similar dilemmas in a discussion around rumours of domestic violence. Some villagers argued that the victim should go to the police Victim Support Unit, rather than the more traditional choice of reporting to the chief.

In terms of local organisation, despite the fact that the Village Development Committee (VDC) is recognised as the government's preferred point of interaction with the village, the chief occupies that position for all practical purposes. Occasionally, as response to dissatisfaction with the local chief, critics will call for establishment of a VDC.

Nevertheless, I did not observe any initiatives to actually establish one as a *de facto* alternative point of interaction with government – opposition by the chief may not have made it a practical option. That it was discussed, however, indicates that the two parallel

⁶² My knowledge of the case builds on the reports of the parents of some of those children. The accused woman was living in a nearby village.

⁶³ The Witchcraft Act of 1911 does not recognise witchcraft as 'real', so the formal courts are not seen as suitable forums for such cases.

structures for interaction with the government are recognised and reflected in local discourse. Yet, many examples exist of *pro forma* VDCs under the control of the chief, having little purpose other than being available for a government or development intervention that requires one. Some are remnants of committees established for earlier interventions, others established on local initiative. In the areas of my fieldwork several were established in response to a rumour three years earlier that a VDC would be needed to access agricultural subsidies. Most were now inactive, but in one village adjacent to the site of my fieldwork, the VDC were still functioning and acted as a consultative forum under the chief. That village was known as having a particularly good (female) chief. The existence of the VDC was brought up several times in the neighbouring village, for example, after dissatisfaction with the chiefs' decision (with no official mandate) on local redistribution of subsidised agricultural inputs. Here a main point in the discussion was that the village should have a VDC to make such decisions instead of the chief and his assistants. While this was not proposed as an alternative channel for (external) interaction with the government, it was seen as a way to democratise the rule of the chief in internal affairs.

Civil society organisations are also recognised as an alternative channel for access to resources. The numerous orphan support groups, HIV/AIDS groups, youth groups, self-designated VDCs or other types of organisation in most villages demonstrate expectations and strategic positioning for access to government resources. Such groups often do little other than produce a constitution and hold some meetings, simply waiting for funding. At infrequent intervals, their efforts pay off in the form of a project grant.

This choice between different strategies to access government resources reflects the duality of the state. For instance, defunct boreholes frequently cause trouble and frustration because the government and donors are generous in constructing them but leave maintenance to a borehole committee. Water pipes make very good window bars to protect against burglary and are often stolen. Replacement is expensive, and borehole committees find it difficult to raise funds locally. A small survey revealed that committees within the same area made different choices.⁶⁴ Some sent a letter directly to

⁶⁴ The survey was carried out by group interviews with representatives of the borehole committees (in most cases with the chief present) for all boreholes – in total six – found along a more or less randomly selected stretch of a rural road near Zomba. In all cases the boreholes had been defunct for periods, sometimes over months, during recent years. Other cases brought up by informants indicate a similar diversity in strategies

the DC (after first seeking approval from the chief), some asked their chief to make a request to the DC. Others asked their chief to submit a request, via the Group Village Head, to the Traditional Authority, who was then expected to ask the government for support. Some went as individuals to the constituency's Member of Parliament for support. All strategies reflected similar expectations of financial support from the government but little consensus on strategies to access those resources.

If a chief behaves badly, the 'traditional' procedure is for his subjects to report him to a higher chief if they fail to solve the issue locally. I heard of several cases where villagers wrote to the DC, however, complaining about the conduct of their chief. This resulted in corrective letters from DC to chief, although removal of a chief is very unlikely. This, however, demonstrates the interface between the two forms of rule: the *subjects* under a chief can act simultaneously as *citizens* with respect to the DC.

All the examples outlined above are evidence of the recognition of two forms of rule and sometimes of a real choice between them. In many cases the choice may not make much difference in practice and the option is more relevant to local political discourse than to practice. Actually bypassing chiefly rule depends on the locality, context and individual abilities, because interacting directly with the government requires initiative, as well as oral and written language skills. If one chooses 'civil society' as the basis for interaction, one needs the social skills and investment to join or establish a CBO. If one's driving force is dissatisfaction with the chief, one requires considerable courage to bypass the chief. In the words of a newspaper columnist:

Should someone steal your goat [...] and you report him to the village court, [...] both yourself and the suspect will each be required to pay two big chickens. Should you choose to by-pass the village head and report directly to police, justice will be dispensed at no cost. However, your head will label you a rebel, rude, proud and arrogant. He may even disown you [expel you from the village]. Such is the dilemma many poor Malawians are silently suffering at the hands of some cruel traditional leaders.⁶⁵

Hence, while rural Malawians are exposed to both forms of rule and are indeed aware of the options, only a few of the most resourceful have the real option of utilising the duality of the state for their benefit by selecting the institutions appropriate to their own interests.

also elsewhere.

⁶⁵ See 'How Costly is Traditional Justice?', *Malawi News*, 17–23 October 2009.

A State Hierarchy of Chiefs

We have seen how the system of indirect rule has developed into what may be more precisely termed *parallel rule*: in rural and to some extent urban areas, chiefly rule exists side-by-side with formal government and civil society. Until recently, this dualism existed only below DC level in the institutional hierarchy. Recent political developments have led to some expansion of parallel rule upwards: chiefs have increasingly gained recognition and power above the district level of government.

Previously, Malawi had only three Paramount Chiefs representing the highest level of the chief hierarchy, two ruling over the Ngoni and one who together with some Senior Chiefs rule over the Chewa/Nyanja ethnic groups⁶⁶. Since 2007, however, President Bingu wa Mutharika has used the Chiefs Act to *elevate* four other chiefs to the rank of Paramount Chief, representing all major ethnic groups (Lomwe, Tumbuka, Ngonde and Yao). Only smaller groups, representing about 10 per cent of the population,⁶⁷ are (still) without the highest level of the chief hierarchy.

The elevation of the Yao Paramount Chief illustrates the dynamics involved in establishing a new ‘traditional’ authority in modern government. In colonial times, the British dethroned most senior chiefs because of their role in slavery. When colonial policy changed, Yao chiefs were among the first to be re-installed: ‘[F]or the British the more “traditional” Africans were, the better, and they warmly embraced the most obviously conservative Africans in the area, Muslim Yao chiefs’.⁶⁸ Traditionally, Yao politics on the macro-level consisted of fluctuating interactions between chiefs in alliances or in opposition to each other, with no single ‘chief of chiefs’ or king.⁶⁹

This changed at the height of the election campaign in February 2009, when the president declared: ‘I have decided to promote Senior Chief Chikowi due to his loyalty and

⁶⁶ There are approximately 30 Senior Chiefs, who represent a middle position between Traditional Authority and Paramount Chief not explicitly mentioned in the Chiefs Act. Not all Senior Chiefs are subordinate to a Paramount Chief – and for the Chewa chiefs, their highest authority lives in Zambia. To complicate further, the chief hierarchies in Malawi are organised according to a mixture between territorial and ethnic criteria, so whether they rule over an ethnic group or a territory is not always clear. These factors make the local manifestations diverse and complex, but they do not change the overall logic of the state hierarchy discussed here.

⁶⁷ National Statistics Office, *Population and Housing Census* (Zomba, 2008).

⁶⁸ L. Vail and L. White, ‘Tribalism in the Political History of Malawi’, in L. Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989), p. 169.

⁶⁹ E. Alpers, ‘Trade, State and Society among the Yao in the Nineteenth Century’, *Journal of African History*, 10, 3 (1969), pp. 405–20.

hardworking spirit. He has remained loyal to my government and myself and for this he has to be rewarded'.⁷⁰ This came after Chikowi, against the general rule that chiefs do not engage in politics, publically supported the president and banned other political parties from holding rallies in his territory. Together with supportive chiefs in other parts of the country, he had already received a pickup truck as a gift from the president.

Chikowi was generally known as a poor leader. Officials called him corrupt, and subjects complained that he was not interested in development but only in 'politics' (*ndale*). Two years earlier he had been arrested and held in custody on accusations of corruption, only to be set free shortly thereafter. It is widely believed that he was released on direct instruction from the president. Other Yao chiefs were more popular, more senior, better educated and more likely candidates for promotion according to clan hierarchies; some have claimed Chikowi is not even a 'true' Yao, because he is of mixed lineage. Other chiefs therefore disliked his appointment, but accepted it.

After his re-election the President seemed to lose interest and did not find time for Chikowi's inauguration until November that year. The ceremony was held in a schoolyard of the remote hamlet of Mayaka. An impressive number of VIPs attended, among them several ministers, members of parliament, higher chiefs from Yao areas and Paramount Chiefs from all other tribes of Malawi, joined by some thousand onlookers and reporters from national TV. A well-known media figure acted as master of ceremonies.

The audience was first entertained by dance troupes representing the different tribes of Malawi and local traditions within the Yao areas. The Ngoni performance occasioned comment from the audience for including girls dancing bare-breasted, which was not seen as being a Malawian tradition but foreign (Zulu and Swazi) – and definitely not appropriate to a Muslim Yao chief. Finally, the main guest, President Bingu wa Mutharika, arrived after having been flown in on a military helicopter that dramatically passed low over his audience. He gave a long speech which was primarily addressed to the chiefs, instructing them to familiarise themselves with government policies and to tell their subjects to work hard and to support the fight against AIDS. He claimed that his

⁷⁰ 'Mutharika Elevates Chikowi to Paramount Chief', *Nyasa Times*, 15 February 2009. See www.nyasatimes.com

government was more democratic than the previous one because it paid the chiefs more respect. Addressing Chief Chikowi he added that his new status was not hereditary and his successors would not be Paramount Chiefs unless the president should so decide.

The other speakers mainly reiterated acknowledgement of Chikowi's new position. On behalf of the Paramount Chiefs, *Inkosi ya Makosi* (chief of chiefs) Mbelwa IV described this as a historic event, for the Yao finally had a Paramount Chief. He asked all Yao to support Chikowi in order 'to keep people united'. He also warned against the risk of HIV as a consequence of 'harmful cultural practices'.

This was followed by the ceremonial exchange of gifts. Chikowi received two refrigerators from the President (some of the audience suggested it was because two of his five wives had had electricity installed), five bicycles and some cash. In return, the president received a traditional bow and arrow from Chief Chikowi – a symbolic exchange of 'tradition' against 'modernity'. A similar pattern was seen in the other gifts. The Inspector General of the police presented Chikowi with a large packing box, obviously a big flat-screen television. In contrast, Chikowi received goats and chickens from other chiefs, including former peers who had now become his subjects.

The inauguration did not significantly produce any change in Chikowi's material status, except that his salary increased from MWK50,000 to MWK72,000 (about USD500). He still works for and reports to his 'home' DC, but his local status has been raised significantly. Everybody knows that he is one of the president's men. His impunity had already been demonstrated by his being released from custody on the earlier charge of corruption. Chikowi is met with respect wherever he goes in his blue pick-up, often accompanied by a group of subordinate chiefs. He is frequently seen at the District Assembly for no obvious reason. Rumour has it that he is asking for 'favours' from the DC and has been threatening to 'report' to the president if the DC does not grant his requests.

Those rumours, whether true or not, indicate what may be interpreted as a radical change in the state hierarchy. A new position for chiefs exists above the District Commissioner. This does not mean a formal change: the Paramount cannot instruct the DC, whereas the DC can overrule him. Nevertheless an ambiguity has evolved in the state hierarchy at and above DC level. I tested this point in several group discussions, asking 'who is more

powerful, the DC or the Paramount Chief? The question always led to a discussion, evidence that people felt some ambiguity about the issue. Typical arguments were that the Paramount is ‘closer to the president’, but that the DC on the other hand is the highest authority in a district. In most cases the discussion ended in favour of the DC.

The key to the Paramount Chief’s new status is his perceived personal relationship with the president in return for loyalty. Thus, regardless of the confusion at DC level a new state hierarchy now exists that extends all the way to the president in parallel with the formal hierarchy. The logic is simple. With some exceptions, all rural and most urban dwellers are subject to a Village Head or a Town Chief, again under a Group Village Head, who belongs to a (sub) Traditional Authority subordinate to a Paramount Chief, who in turn is directly subordinate to the president. That hierarchy constitutes a ‘chain of command’ that reaches everybody within the Paramount’s jurisdiction through only a few links, bypassing the DC and the formal government. It is based on personal relations of subordination, where the local representatives of state power are given fused powers to make people adhere to presidential instructions, even including disciplinary measures not limited by the rules of a modern judiciary.

So far the president has not used the new structure except informally in election campaigns and in communicating general policies and public interests, as in the inaugural ceremony discussed above. The most natural use of the higher chiefly hierarchy is as a channel for general diffusion of presidential decrees and government policies. Indeed, it may prove more effective than the formal institutions attaining more ambitious norms for modern governance, namely attempts to change people’s behaviour.⁷¹ As an example we may take the government’s attempts to get people to work hard in the fields, as reiterated in presidential speeches and state media. Agricultural extension workers do not have the capacity or authority to exert influence, or enough local knowledge to monitor people’s work. If the same message is transmitted through the chiefs, however, it can be backed up by almost daily monitoring in a context where the chief has the necessary knowledge and sanctions to ensure that all his subjects do as they are told. Whereas the formal government lacks legitimacy, authority, knowledge, capacity and methods to ensure that

⁷¹ M. Foucault, ‘Governmentality’, in G. Burchell, G. Colin and P. Miller, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991).

people follow government instructions, the chiefs constitute a regime that no local resident can escape.

There are certain similarities between the chiefly hierarchy now available to the President, and the party system that was available to Kamuzu Banda. The similarities stop at the qualitative aspects, however and there is no possibility that the chiefs can be used in a similar way. The checks on presidential powers in Malawi are effective enough to halt any widespread use of the chiefly hierarchy in ways constitutionally illegitimate or strongly against public opinion. In the foreseeable future, hence, there is no risk that this hierarchy can threaten the general constitutional state system – and it remains a parallel, but not an alternative, state hierarchy.

Conclusion: Subject and Citizen

Two parallel state organisations exist in Malawi – the formal government, and the hierarchy of chiefs. They intersect at several levels, most intensely at district level, but merge at level of the president, who controls both organisations – the bureaucracy through his role as the executive, and the chiefs through a combination of clientelism and direct subordination. The two hierarchies are associated with different languages of power that seem incompatible. Historically, duality in governance has been mainly relevant to outside observers, as most local people were exposed to only one of the hierarchies, depending on whether they resided in rural or urban areas. In Malawi today, the two forms of state power exist simultaneously as recent developments in Malawi have aligned the two state hierarchies into parallel structures. The duality of the African state is of practical relevance when it becomes a matter of choice available to the individual, and the result is not a bifurcated state, but an ambiguous one. While the hybrid state of different and incompatible sets of rules and norms within the formal institutions is well known, the ambiguity in Malawi also involves confusion with regard to who should be seen as representing state power.

The actual implications vary according to contexts and localities. This is an empirical question open to further research, but some general dilemmas can be expected. In local discourse it translates into highly practical questions. Who represents the government locally: the local chief, or the government official? As long as they agree, this is not a problem – but what if they don't? Who can overrule the other? If the local chief behaves

badly, should he be reported to the DC or to his superior chief? Should a conflict be solved by the chief or by the court?

Local government faces similar dilemmas. Should it be left to the chief to select beneficiaries of government services? If ‘community participation’ is required in a government programme, does that mean the time-consuming process of involving large numbers of people – or should one mainly consult the chief? If an extension worker does not find the local chief co-operative, can he or she approach other people in the village directly? Those options are sometimes made explicit as general policies or instructions on a higher level, but appear more often as local adaption among lower-level officials in their daily work. Officially, the chiefs have a marginal position in local governance, often resulting in conflict between prescribed procedures and pragmatic considerations – and the latter often lead to using the chiefs.

The answers to these dilemmas involve a choice between different state forms. One alternative is rule by chiefs, which at least in principle represents old-fashioned authoritarianism, leaving the individual as a subject with little autonomy or rights. But since chiefly rule also often means local knowledge, pragmatism, consensus-seeking, conflict avoidance and a judiciary that seeks reconciliation rather than punishment – it may still be the preferred option even for those who are subjects.

The other option is a formal system that is, at least in principle, bureaucratic, professional, rule-based and non-clientelistic and that, to varying degrees, recognises the individual as a rights-bearing citizen. As opposed to the all-embracing, personalised relation to the chief, the formal state is organised in sectors, with no particular person representing all state powers. Seen from the perspective of the individual, that state form is less familiar, more abstract, more difficult to manipulate and hence not necessarily more attractive even though it is democratic.

Government officials make this choice whenever they interact with their constituencies. For most individuals, however, the option can rarely be utilised. Either the government official has already made the choice, or the costs of interacting with government as a citizen are too high for the individual. Bypassing the chief can attract sanctions, moreover, the oral or literacy skills necessary to communicate with bureaucrats, or the social skills needed to establish a civil society group necessary to access some

government resources, may not be available. In such cases, the parallel system does not enhance people's options or provide any additional rights or resources. People live with a dissonance between a language of democracy, freedom and rights, and a state practice dominated by chiefly rule where those ideals cannot be realised. Thus only a few individuals -- with the skills, resources and courage to bypass chiefs and access the state directly -- can take advantage of parallel rule to avail themselves of the rights and other benefits of direct, civil rule.

In urban areas chiefs are less dominant, and straddling the two forms of rule is not as difficult. Nevertheless, it doubles the number of procedures in, for instance, land and property transactions and issuing of formal documents.

Finally, the president has established for himself greater scope in his execution of power. For him, recourse to the formal bureaucracy involves democratic, constitutional, technical, procedural and other checks on his power. Moreover, the bureaucracy is so weak in capacity that it is normally not able to fully implement even the most basic instructions or policies. In striking contrast to this stands the chieftaincy. The president needs only to issue orders to a handful of higher chiefs, who will in principle forward them down through a hierarchy of subordinate chiefs, reaching all the people through a few personal links, constrained by none of the checks on presidential power found in the bureaucracy, and is thus for some purposes more effective. On the other hand, chiefs' capacity is limited and their usefulness for the president is probably limited to what people see as legitimate purposes for presidential power

The choice between state forms presented to individuals, some with more of a real choice than others, is not only a matter of strategy in each specific case. On the aggregate level, these choices constitute state formation. The way the state works on the local level in Malawi today is indeed not only an effect of policies and deliberate decisions at the central level, or of the constitution, but also of pragmatic considerations, often against policies, by the president, individual subjects/citizens and thousands of government officials.

Some implications for theory follow from this. The recent growth of interest in state building, state formation and governance in academic disciplines, as well as in (development) practice, has been dominated by a focus on the constitutional and

institutional arrangements and administrative capacities of the state. Bureaucratic effectiveness is seen as a main indicator for state capacity. In the case of Malawi, this is misleading. The chiefly hierarchy is a crucial part of the state, but it evades most academic attempts to measure state capacity. When I asked informants how Malawi has managed to remain stable and peaceful, a common answer was simply, 'the chiefs'. Here lies a lesson for academic research. Even using the most rudimentary definition of state capacity – control of the population and territory – the chiefs constitute perhaps the most important state agency in Malawi. They enable state control through conflict management, dispute settlement and crime prevention in ways that, after the dismantling of the one-party system, may not be done as effectively by any formal government agency within the foreseeable future. In addition, for many other purposes of state power, the chieftaincy forms a supplement to the formal government through its potential to act as an effective agent for implementing policy. The price, however, is a local state system totally incompatible with the liberal democratic ideals to which the government is committed.

PAPER 2

Performing good governance:
the aesthetics of bureaucratic practice
in Malawi

Performing good governance: the aesthetics of bureaucratic practice in Malawi¹

Based on ethnographic research carried out in Malawi, this article discusses some bureaucratic procedures that are implemented with enthusiasm, even though they do not produce the effects they are designed for. These procedures seem to be more meaningful as aesthetic expressions rather than being the result of instrumental considerations. They create an image, albeit temporary, of a 'legible', well-organised society and a knowledgeable, caring state. That image may not reflect current realities in Malawi, but it points towards a future form of statehood towards which the country is progressing. The case study from Malawi is used as basis for a discussion of the role of aesthetics in bureaucratic practice and some of its implications, including mediating between seemingly incompatible norms, and between local and abstract social realities.
[bureaucracy, state formation, aesthetics, Malawi, performativity]

Introduction

Many studies of bureaucracy have explored the multiple dimensions of bureaucratic practice beyond instrumental considerations of serving policy purposes. Some point to the effects of bureaucratic practice in constructing certain social orders (e.g. Herzfeld 1992; Gupta 1995; Mitchell 1999; Trouillot 2001; Ferguson & Gupta 2002), or ideas of the state and stateness (e.g. Blom Hansen & Stepputat 2001; Krohn-Hansen & Nustad 2005; Gupta & Sharma 2006). These studies reflect aggregate, long-term and perhaps unintended 'side effects' of bureaucratic practice; most studies are less explicit about the immediate motivations and associations of the bureaucrats involved. Some studies that are more explicit about the motivations of bureaucrats focus on their instrumental strategies, but towards purposes that may not correspond to policy intentions. Their behaviour may be

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part of a strategy for access to resources, the consolidation and expansion of state power, or a demonstration of authority (e.g. Ferguson 1990; Das 2004; Mosse 2005; Crais 2005; Gupta & Sharma 2006). Thus, even many studies that are critical of instrumentalist ideas of bureaucracy seem to focus either on another, aggregate, level as opposed to the immediate meaning available to the actors involved, or they expand the instrumentalist rationality to a wider set of interests.

This article presents a case of bureaucratic practice in Malawi, which seems difficult to understand in terms of any level of instrumental considerations from the point of view of the bureaucrats involved. Moreover, it is difficult to see potentials for aggregated effects that correspond to the governing techniques that are applied. This conundrum is reflected in the example that after weeks of work by bureaucrats in classifying individuals, their efforts are effectively nullified by the local population in a matter of hours. It causes the bureaucrats to appear unable to govern, which is exposed to practically everyone within their constituencies. Hence, the procedures produce neither a population according to state logic, nor any favourable ideas of the state or of state bureaucrats. Nevertheless, the procedures are carried out eagerly and with as much enthusiasm as can be expected from Malawian bureaucrats.

In trying to understand these observations, I turn to the field of aesthetics. What is difficult to understand according to any instrumental consideration may seem to be meaningful from an aesthetic perspective. In this case, procedures that seemingly do not produce 'real' social effects corresponding to the governing techniques used, nevertheless create, albeit temporarily, an *image* of such effects. That image reflects ideas of a future form of stateness towards which Malawi may progress. That state includes a well-known, manageable population, and correspondingly, a knowledgeable state that provides services according to individual needs. As an image it appears to be meaningful mainly due to its aesthetic qualities. The procedures may also serve utilitarian effects, discussed later, but not in the domain of state effects that correspond to the governing techniques involved. Those effects are made possible precisely because they 'fail' to produce the instrumental effects they are designed for. Hence, it is by carrying out procedures according to primarily aesthetic rather than instrumental considerations, that the utilitarian effects are made possible.

The primacy of aesthetic qualities, even in practices that also serve more instrumental purposes, are self-evident in other more expressive state practices (Handelman 1990; Parkin et al. 1996; Apter 2002). Aesthetic features are rarely explicit in studies of bureaucracy, except in some studies on the production of documents (Stirrat 2000; Riles 2006), although they can be seen as being implicit in other studies of, for instance, policy (Apthorpe 1997; Mosse 2005) or diplomacy (Weber 1998; Neumann 2005). It reflects, perhaps, a dichotomy in which the more expressive state practices are seen in ceremonial public events, whereas everyday bureaucratic practice takes care of the more instrumental state functions. Perhaps remnants of that dichotomy still exist even in critical studies of mainstream, instrumentalist ideas of the state. For instance, Blom Hansen and Stepputat, who certainly cannot be accused of instrumentalism, sort their observations into ‘practical’ and ‘symbolic’ *languages of stateness*, assigning typical tasks of the bureaucracy – knowledge and control of the population – to the practical and instrumental side (2001, p.7).

The case reported here draws on participant observation undertaken during a ten-month period of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, during which I aimed to study aspects of state formation, most of it in contexts other than the bureaucracy. This article focuses only on bureaucratic practice and should not be read as claims about ‘the state’ in Malawi, for two reasons. As demonstrated by much recent anthropological research (e.g. Blom Hansen & Stepputat 2001; Trouillot 2001; Das & Poole 2004; Krohn-Hansen & Nustad 2005) more interesting analyses of the state can be developed from viewpoints other than government agencies; and viewing the bureaucracy as a proxy for the state would be misleading. Moreover, I do not see the case as reflecting anything particularly Malawian or ‘African’, but as illustrating a more general aspect of bureaucratic practice.

The Farmer Input Subsidy Programme in Malawi

In the areas of my fieldwork in southern Malawi, the general idea of the state at the time (2009) was of a ‘good’ president who cares about his people; and useless, poorly performing, selfish and often corrupt bureaucrats. Villagers had little direct interaction with government officials, except for health and education services and infrequent visits to villages by extension workers. Those interactions demonstrated general disrespect for field-level government officials; an effect of the ‘freedom’ (*ufulu*) achieved since

democratisation (Englund 2006) and in gross contrast to the previous one-party rule where state officials were feared. Informants sometimes complained that government officials came more often to count the villagers, rather than to deliver any services. The main point of interaction between villagers and the government is the village chief, who functions as a gatekeeper in most interactions (Eggen, forthcoming). In contrast to extension workers, the authority of chiefs is almost never questioned.

The positive evaluations of the president at the time were due largely to his success in providing agricultural subsidies. Most Malawians are smallholder farmers, and access to subsidised farm inputs is among the most important criteria when they evaluate their government. Universal subsidies to all farmers were provided during the first decades after independence, but were then dismantled during structural adjustments in the 1980s (Harrigan 2000). Judging from political history as narrated during my rural fieldwork, the provision of subsidies was a main reason behind the popularity of Kamuzu Banda's brutal rule, and conversely, the lack of subsidies became a major challenge to the legitimacy of the new democratic governments since the introduction of multi-party democracy in 1994 – 'you can't eat democracy' was a commonly heard expression.

In local political discourse (observed during the presidential election campaign in 2009) the question of subsidies remains a major political issue. Several attempts at re-establishing general agricultural subsidies since the 1990s have failed (Chinsinga & O'Brien 2008), partly because donors, the World Bank in particular, were strongly against universal subsidies: the trends at the time pointed towards targeted inputs. Since 2000, some targeted schemes have been initiated. But these were limited in scope and poorly implemented, and donors and creditors were concerned about the costs of expansion.

In 2005/2006, however, the newly elected president Bingu wa Mutharika launched what eventually became known as the Farmer Input Subsidy Programme (FISP)² – without donor commitments, and in the face of strict warnings against budget overruns. Soon after, some donors pledged support and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reluctantly accepted the corresponding budget deficits. Even the World Bank supported the programme, justifying this deviation from its own policies by explaining that the

² Formally, FISP consists of annual stand-alone programmes with slightly different names but they are normally viewed as one continuous programme.

programme was about *smart subsidies* as opposed to *universal inputs*³. Smart subsidies target only those most in need, and avoid market disturbances by using vouchers that give farmers the choice of where to buy subsidised inputs rather than granting a monopoly to a government agency (Dorward et al. 2008).

The FISP programme soon demonstrated tremendous success and (helped by good rainfall) led to record-high production of agricultural outputs, while also boosting the president's popularity. Informants during my fieldwork left no doubt that the programme was the president's most important achievement. It also led to enthusiasm internationally as a contribution to food security and economic growth.

The modalities change slightly each year, but the general principle is that selected farmers receive coupons giving them the right to buy fertilizer at a heavily subsidised, affordable price, and to receive free seeds. The number of coupons allocated to each village is based on its population size, so that the same proportion of farmers receives coupons in every single village throughout the country. This is quite the opposite of traditional schemes where subsidies were available to all, but with some geographic variation. In each village the beneficiaries are identified as 'resource poor' Malawians who nevertheless own and cultivate land, paying particular attention to the vulnerable such as those who are elderly, HIV positive, orphans or disabled.

The identification of beneficiaries involves enormous challenges, since the government has no general knowledge of the individuals in each village. There is no population register, except one at village level maintained by the chief. That register is normally handwritten in a notebook and used mainly for registering births, deaths and land transactions. It lacks most of the information needed to categorise households according to the criteria specified by the government. In any case such registers would not be reliable, partly due to suspicions that the chiefs manipulate them for their own benefit. Ideally, agricultural extension workers should collect the required data through extension services. But each worker covers vast areas and interacts so infrequently with each village that in most cases the data would be insufficient and inaccurate.

³ <http://go.worldbank.org/KIGRBOO0B0>

As a result, the organisation of *smart subsidies* puts heavy demands on government administrative resources. Implementation of the programme is the single most resource-demanding event in the government each year, dominating all levels of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security for months. During the most intense weeks the Ministry also draws on manpower and vehicles from other ministries.

Procedures for implementation

For the 2009/2010 season each beneficiary received four coupons, for two types of fertiliser and two types of seeds. A new feature of the season was that, to avoid corruption and misuse, in the absence of other general ID card systems, the beneficiaries had to present their voter identification card used during the election a few months earlier, and the coupons were marked with the number of that card. This was a response to widespread accusations of corruption from the early years of implementation, with rumours of ‘ghost recipients’ and even ‘ghost villages’ which enabled civil servants and chiefs to keep coupons for themselves.

I observed the procedures for selecting beneficiaries and distributing coupons by joining one team of ten junior officials and some seniors from a District Agricultural Development Office in southern Malawi. Most of the juniors were extension workers, but some were office personnel and extension workers from other ministries who had been called in as supplementary resources. This was one of two teams, which was assigned to distribute coupons to 17,053 beneficiaries among 41,899 households. I joined the team part time over about eight weeks, in parallel with more long-term fieldwork in one of the villages due to receive subsidies from the very same team.

About two months earlier, the agricultural extension workers had developed lists of all farm households in each village. The handwritten lists had been sent to the capital, Lilongwe, for data entry, and then returned. The office was now ready to start the process in two phases: one to select beneficiaries, and the next to distribute coupons. Mass meetings were organised with groups of adjoining villages; two mass meetings daily over two weeks in each phase. Detailed procedures had been developed by the central ministry and were presented at staff meetings during the last week before embarking on the task. As preparation for my later arguments, the procedures are presented below first in an idealised version, based on observation of many similar village meetings.

A few days prior to the first meetings, all chiefs had been told to inform their subjects about the meeting to be held in a school yard. Large numbers of people attended the meetings – varying from a few hundred to perhaps two thousand. Most arrived in the early morning, and waited patiently in small groups for the agricultural team. The delegation arrived with the junior officials travelling on the flatbed of a lorry, with the seniors seated in the front or following in a separate car. One of the senior officials called all the chiefs together; prayers and welcome speeches were delivered, and the official explained the basic principles of the scheme, including the criteria for selecting beneficiaries. He then asked the chiefs to organise their subjects into groups. Each village group found a shady place where they waited patiently for a junior official to approach them. This person, bringing the printed list of all households in the village, informed them about the specified number of beneficiaries – this year amounting to 41 per cent of the households in each village. He or she had been instructed to select the most ‘resource poor’ in consultation with the Village Development Committee and the chief, while ensuring *transparency* and *accountability* in the plenary group, and to handle any complaints by calling in one of the seniors. Upon selection of beneficiaries, the official compiled new handwritten lists, now containing only the names of the *beneficiaries* and the serial numbers on their voter identification cards. These were again sent to Lilongwe for new data entry.

About two weeks later, printed versions of those lists were returned. The distribution of coupons was conducted in similar mass meetings, but this time the lorry also carried a wooden chest containing the coupons, with armed police officers – a rare sight in rural Malawi – to guard it. The chest was taken off the lorry and carried to the site for the meeting where it served as the visual centre of attention. A similar number of people gathered in these second meetings, although most of them knew that there would be no coupons for them. This time senior officials spent more time on speeches. They gave detailed and strict instructions on how to use the coupons and took the opportunity to present the Ministry’s latest advice on agricultural techniques. They also warned strongly against re-distributing, re-sale or other forms of misuse of the coupons. Then people were again organised into village groups, waiting. When a junior official finally found time, the villagers positioned themselves in orderly queues before the officer. Each beneficiary showed the identification card and received four coupons, then applied their signature, either in writing or with a thumbprint. These signed lists were sent back to the Ministry as

proof that subsidies had been distributed to those who qualified, with all measures in place to avoid misuse or corruption.

I was struck by the well organised and harmonious interaction between the agricultural team and the villagers. During village fieldwork I had been told that the distribution of coupons during previous years had been very controversial, but I had not enquired about details. Hence, I was expecting conflict at almost every corner. And indeed, there were protests and complains, but mostly against the total number of coupons allotted for each village. Those protests were silenced when people accepted that it was beyond the power of the extension worker to make decisions. To my initial surprise, the actual selection of beneficiaries rarely gave rise to protest.

I was also struck by the visual, aesthetic qualities of those mass meetings. Imagine seeing them from a bird's eye view: while waiting for the agricultural team to arrive the crowd was disorganised, chaotic and noisy, concentrated in the shady places or around some vendors who used the opportunity to sell food. This changed when the Ministry team arrived. Everybody gathered and listened quietly to the officials before re-organising themselves, on government instructions, into better structured, more equally sized village groups. While waiting for the extension officer to get to their group, many chiefs used the opportunity to discuss other village matters, so the groups were much less noisy and better organised than before. The state organisation into groups, then, also led to better internal organisation even before the state representative arrived. When he or she approached, people queued up with exemplary discipline, like school children lining up for class. The use of forms, lists, signatures and fingerprints added to the appearance of a professional, bureaucratic state and a well-organised society attentive to government instructions. Combining the visual appearance with the knowledge of what the transactions were all about, it can be viewed as a performance demonstrating a well-known population organised by the state and neatly classified according to needs; and correspondingly, a knowledgeable state that shares life-saving resources through procedures designed to ensure that scarce resources are provided only to those who need them most.

These visual qualities were acknowledged when a high-profile observer, a deputy director from ministry headquarters, joined us for a few days to monitor distribution 'in the field'. She was visibly proud of what she saw and repeatedly told me how she regretted that I

had not brought a camera to be able to share the images with others. At one of the village meetings, the team leader told the chiefs upon arrival that they should make their subjects behave in a ‘calm’ way, since the ministry was observing – indicating a preference for the importance of appearances.

Village re-distribution

However, closer observation over time revealed many disharmonies in the idealised picture above. When gathering before the first village meeting to register beneficiaries, I asked some junior team members how they could identify the most *resource poor*, since almost everybody in a village was desperately poor. I was assured it was not a problem: discussing the selection in the plenary village group ensured an open and transparent process, and inclusion of the Village Development Committee (VDC) representatives served to balance the power of the chief. The officials also made their own judgements, by sight, from people’s clothes and appearance. Only a few hours later, I learnt that those assurances did not reflect reality. I joined three officials, in turn, throughout the day. If the chief had already brought a list, they copied that list, with only some amendments to make it fit to the pre-set number of beneficiaries. From previous fieldwork I knew that VDCs were generally non-functional, and if one existed, it was subordinate to the chief and had little potential of balancing his power. One official, a newly educated, hard-working woman motivated for the task, in one case protested against the chief’s list, claiming that he had ‘failed to choose the neediest’ – but instead of making her own judgement she gave the chief another hour to revise the list. If a chief had not prepared his or her own list, two of the officials that I observed collected all voter ID cards in a random sequence, then started on top until the pre-determined number of households had been reached. The third official simply started at the top of his own list of households, ticking off everybody until he reached the pre-set number. In practice, that meant that all villagers whose names started with a letter before about ‘M’ in the alphabet ended up as beneficiaries. In all cases, the chief’s name was put at the top of the list, even though he is seldom among the poorest. I was told that this is done out of ‘courtesy’. Strikingly, this arbitrary selection of beneficiaries did not, except for a few cases, lead to any protest.

The officials also ticked off all ‘female headed households’ as beneficiaries – implicitly assuming widows or divorced women. But none of the officers asked about their status;

instead they just ticked off all households where the listed representative had a woman's name. That was the name of the person who represented the household when the extension officers had first visited the village to register households. As I had observed during previous fieldwork, the one who happened to be at home was routinely listed as the representative, and this was frequently a woman since men tend more often to be away from the house during daytime. Female informants told me that even if asked about it, they would present themselves as 'head of the household'. Most are married according to matrilineal traditions and the definition of 'head' is not clear. Hence, the number of 'female-headed households' on the list was substantial – normally more than half on each list – but this did not reflect realities in terms of vulnerability.

The lack of protest against what seemed like gross mismanagement and arbitrary selection became easier to understand soon after the actual distribution of coupons during the second phase of village meetings. After receiving coupons, each village group met again in a nearby place. The chief took out his village register and instructed the people to share the coupons according to new instructions. Since the shops that distribute inputs are instructed to provide only to those who can show a matching identity card, the practical solution was not to share the coupons on the spot, but to arrange for one or two other persons to accompany each coupon-holder to the shop, and to share fertilizers and seeds just after purchase. The agricultural officers called this process 'pairing'.

The new principle of distribution in most cases involved equal distribution to each household, sometimes except for people who have paid jobs, or who are seen as strangers in the village. Some chiefs gave more to households with larger farms, considered to be 'in need' of more fertilizer. In all cases observed, and as reported during later interviews, the chief and one or two of his assistants did not share their coupons. This was explained as a 'fee' for administering the system, or in some cases the chief claimed that the government wanted it that way.

In some village groups, the instructions from the chief led to protests, at times turning into fighting. These were the cases of conflict that I had been warned about, which I had expected during observation of the official procedures, only they occurred afterwards. That was not surprising, perhaps, as this was the first time the villagers were discussing real distribution: everybody involved had known that the official selection would not be

the final result. Any protests to the government representatives had concerned only the number of coupons, not their distribution.

When discussions became tense, sometimes an official, or one of the police officers who had been guarding the chest of coupons, came over to the group. They were reluctant to interfere, but asked the group to be quiet or to leave the venue and continue their discussion elsewhere. One senior official sometimes begged the chief to delay sharing the coupons until they had left the venue. He explained to me that although he could not stop it, he did not want to ‘know’ that people were violating government instructions. But the officials had a practical concern: the beneficiaries received two different bags of fertilizer (NPK and urea) – one bag to be applied when planting, and the other a few weeks later. It is important not just to share the bags, but to split each in two. The team leader solved the problem by informally allowing the junior officials to explain to the villagers how to share, without reporting back to him. He justified this to me by explaining that it was done ‘from a technical point of view’ and was not an acceptance of re-distribution.

I learnt later that the practice of re-distributing inputs after reception of coupons is widely known by practically everybody involved, even at higher levels in the Ministry.

Nevertheless, Ministry staff spend weeks or months on procedures for the identification of beneficiaries, well aware that only hours after distribution the whole selection process is made void at the village level. Why those investments, given that a great deal of administrative resources could have been saved by simply distributing the inputs equally to everyone, with the same end result? Surely, the design of the procedures for ‘smart subsidies’ is probably a donor adaptation, since universal subsidies seem to be the preferred option in domestic political discourse (Chinsinga & O'Brien 2008). But the heavy investment in implementation at all levels seems disproportionate. In the many discussions with donors, sometimes quite tense, the focus has been on budget overruns, corruption, and the role of public versus private agencies – precision in targeting beneficiaries has not been an important issue.⁴

At the local level, donor adaptation is even less important. Being a white researcher from a donor country I could not avoid being associated with the donors. Normally a methodological constraint, in this case it also helped; the fact that the officials made no

⁴ This claim is based on media reports, documents and information shared by one donor representative.

attempts (as far as I know) to hide, excuse or justify the fact that their targeting procedures had failed, indicated that donor adaptation is not important. When I drew attention to the village re-distribution, the officials seem a little bothered, and responded with statements like this: ‘What can we do? We give them instructions and then they do something else’. But this did not seem to reduce their enthusiasm for the procedures. On the contrary, most of the officials seemed eager and even proud when demonstrating procedures to me – even knowing that I would soon learn that they would be nullified in the villages. When observing some of the same officials before this programme, they were very poorly motivated, and often did not even bother to report at work (cf. Anders 2005). Participation in the subsidy programme was strictly mandatory, as were most other duties, but staff easily found excuses for not taking part in other duties, even when directly instructed to do so. But subsidy distribution was obviously an exception. The allowances received for the ‘field days’ cannot explain the enthusiasm; they were merely symbolic and even seemed to reduce motivation, since rumours indicated that the senior officials took a much larger share.

My main concern in the following discussion is not the way that the procedures are carried out, but the relatively high enthusiasm among otherwise poorly motivated junior officials about the whole exercise. It is difficult to identify any instrumental effects of the targeting procedures that are relevant to the bureaucrats involved. They do not strengthen their authority vis-à-vis the farmers; on the contrary, they demonstrate their complete powerlessness as compared to the village chiefs. My later discussions with farmers receiving subsidies revealed that the agricultural extension officers, already viewed as weak, certainly did not improve their status vis-à-vis the villagers, as a result of the subsidy distribution process.

The fact that the deputy director from the central Ministry proudly encouraged me to take photos (perhaps to share with donors) even knowing that I knew the procedures did not produce effects according to donor requirements, indicates that there may be other – and I believe aesthetic – aspects that caused the procedures to be viewed as meaningful.

Performing modern statehood

I use ‘aesthetic’⁵ here, as opposed to ‘instrumentalist’, in a rather straightforward meaning to denote those aspects of the procedures that relate to how the procedures appear rather than what they lead to, from the point of view of the bureaucrats involved. As an initial note, the procedures involve one component, *form filling*, which has been studied with regard to its general aesthetic qualities (Brenneis 2006). This is an important component also in this case, and a similar approach would be possible. But form filling is only one in a sequence of actions and here I try to understand the whole sequence. Moreover, rather than very general aesthetic qualities, I try to understand how the procedures may provide meaning in the particular context – as an aesthetic expression rather than an instrumental action.

In a dichotomy that views bureaucracy as instrumental and locates expressive practices elsewhere in the state, the former is typically associated with modernity, whereas expressive ceremonies tend to be associated with the past. Handelman (1990, p.78) establishes a typology of public events and then claims that the *model for* type of public events – those expressive state actions that most directly serve instrumental purposes – is rarely found in modern states because bureaucracy has taken over the more instrumental purposes of the state⁶. Geertz (1981) presents not only the non-instrumental ‘theatre’ state in contrast to the ‘modern’ state, but also as a state which attempts to re-create an even more distant political structure (p.15). The same can also be said for many expressive practices in ‘modern’ states, whether referring to cultural and national origin, the constitution, a revolution, or other historical events.

In this case, however, the aesthetics seem to be forward-looking. For modern statehood to be meaningful, a government needs to demonstrate the ability to govern its population and take care of its welfare (Foucault 1991). This depends on the state’s knowledge of its population to a sufficient degree of detail to enable state control and manipulation, often on an individual level (Pasquino 1991). Historic trends and current discourse point towards a future Malawian state based on those features. In the meantime, officials are

⁵ Aesthetics as a branch of philosophy is of less relevance here.

⁶ Handelman clearly acknowledges the aesthetic focus of bureaucrats, but this is expressed in public events (often organised by bureaucrats) rather than in everyday bureaucratic practice.

acting as if it were already established, by applying techniques that correspond to that form of statehood.

To enable large-scale state manipulation of individuals, according to Scott (1998), states are engaged in an ongoing *project of legibility* (p.80). This involves simplification of the population by classifying individuals according to the aspects that are of official interest, making the population 'legible' on the aggregated, larger scale. I relate to the bureaucratic *rationality* described by Scott, and not to the general state project and assumed state effects that he describes (cf. Coronil 2001; Ferguson 2005; Li 2005). In the case of Malawi, Scott's *high modernist* aspirations remain just aspirations; the *project of legibility* is an *aesthetic* project that creates the *image* of a legible population, not the actual effects. Scott (1998) acknowledges the aesthetic aspects, but in his analysis this is of lesser concern: in most cases aesthetics is seen as adding value to projects that are primarily about rationalist social engineering, or as serving instrumental purposes, for example: 'the assumption is that if the arrangement looks right, it will also, *ipso facto*, function well' (p.225).

In an aid-receiving country like Malawi, the need for legibility is most keenly expressed in development interventions, which often aim at targeting only certain categories of individuals. As a general mode of state governance, this is relatively new to Malawi. The colonial powers, ruling by indirect rule, saw little need for classifying individuals. The one-party system that followed was based on repressive control over the population secured through party organisations, which extended to practically each village. It provided sufficient knowledge of the population to exert control at the local level with little need for aggregation to higher levels. Large-scale government interventions were either universal, or otherwise it was left to individuals to actively seek services (for instance, health and education); hence such regimes did not require classification of individuals according to standardised classifications.

After the introduction of multi-party democracy in 1994, Malawi adopted *good governance* from the international development discourse. The bureaucrats were already well accustomed to new public management and norms for small, efficient state apparatuses that works according to standardised measures of performance, preferably through large-scale quantification and aggregation of data (Anders 2005). *Good governance* includes new public management, but merges it with a broader political

project that includes a range of other interests in terms of policy and administration. Although given varying emphasis, most versions of good governance (see e.g. OECD 2009; Grindle 2004) include *effectiveness* and *efficiency*. The point of departure is a professional bureaucracy that knows the population in detail and designs precise interventions to ensure maximum utilisation of scarce government resources by targeting only those who are most in need of assistance. It is difficult to imagine good governance without a legible population. Presented as apolitical and closely integrated with funding, good governance has been generally accepted as a shared norm.

There is a time dimension associated with *good governance*. It merges both political and administrative aspects of modern statehood into one single concept with linkages to a historic development towards modernisation: ‘As the concepts of human rights, democratisation and democracy, the rule of law, civil society, decentralised power-sharing and sound public administration gain importance and relevance, a society develops into a more sophisticated political system and governance evolves into good governance’ (European Commission 2003; § 5). Thus, the future state practises *good governance*.

With the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG), a legible population is more urgent than ever. Each government is part of a global project that necessitates the classification of individuals according to standardised categories. Each country is committed to reporting progress based on monitoring changes for all individuals within given categories. Consequently, the main driving force behind the need for legibility nowadays is not the *high-modernist* projects described by Scott (1998), but the MDGs which represent an unprecedented global project requiring population legibility.

In Malawi, government practice is changing to adapt to the new modalities. The bureaucracy is already loaded with norms, standards and indicators (Anders 2005), adopted mostly from international development discourse, and government interventions increasingly require the classification of individuals according to standardised criteria, often referring to the MDGs. These indicators include a poverty line, which is new to Malawi and has no local equivalent. Interestingly, the poverty line corresponds quite precisely to the criteria for access to subsidies – in defining about 40 per cent of the population as ‘poor’ (NSO 2009).

Nevertheless, in the short and medium term, the government of Malawi is not able to govern according to a standardised classification of individuals. Despite a government decision taken as early as 1994 and subsequent parliamentary decisions to establish a *National Registration and Identity System*, no general population register exists. The only general registers are the chiefs' registers, which are imprecise and incomplete and cannot be used for aggregation to the national level. There are attempts to establish registers in individual sectors, such as health and education, but these remain incomplete. The legible population necessary for practising modern governance, therefore still belongs to the future.

In the meantime, information required to provide targeted services must be produced for each intervention. Extension workers in sectors like health, agriculture, or social welfare produce simple registers for their own use. These are not standardised, are often handwritten, and as with the chiefs' registers, cannot normally be used for aggregation. Registration exercises are often repeated as new forms are filled in, or a new extension worker takes over with a fresh notebook⁷. The fact that considerable resources are spent on repetitive local-level mapping of the population, while less effort is put into more permanent registers that would probably save administrative capacity, is perhaps an indication that the production of data in itself is seen to be meaningful, even when not justifiable in terms of efficiency norms. The continuous production and reproduction of knowledge about the population can be considered to be an enactment of modern governance, in which the population is legible and the government uses its knowledge to design interventions appropriate for each category of individuals.

The procedures for selecting beneficiaries for the subsidy programme fall into a similar type of practice. They perform the ideals of modern statehood to a much greater degree than they actually reflect them. In that way they offer meaning, regardless of whether or not they produce the effects for which they were designed. The *project of legibility* in Malawi is first and foremost an aesthetic project. By simulating the techniques of modern statehood the actors create the image of a possible future Malawian state. The fact that the aesthetic qualities are not explicitly communicated does not reduce their aesthetic qualities; on the contrary, it is particularly the lack of reference to expressive aspects that

⁷ This statement is based on my various work assignments in development programmes in Malawi within the sectors of health, disability, HIV/AIDS and agriculture, where such registers have been a key focus.

the procedures fit in with the ideas of a professional bureaucracy in appearing to be merely instrumental.

In addition to legibility, the programme expresses other aspects of good governance. It demonstrates a government that is able to control and organise its population in non-coercive ways. On the initiative of the government, practically everybody within the invited population willingly leaves any other duties that day and organises themselves according to government instructions – a rare experience for junior officials who otherwise must struggle for authority vis-à-vis the chief. The fact that conflict and chaotic negotiations start shortly after the coupons have been signed for – the moment marking the end of government interaction during the programme – underlines the contrast between a chaotic local community outside the domain of the state, and an ordered society when interacting with the government. Other aspects of modern statehood are evident in the voter identification cards as a requirement for receiving coupons. It illustrates the electorate-state contract where voting is exchanged for access to state resources. This was indicated by the team leader, who described the card as ‘proof of citizenship’.

The agricultural subsidy programme thus creates the image of a modern state with a population that is known, controlled and organised by the state. It is implemented in every single village throughout the country, thereby demonstrating this image to every rural household. Already an annual event, the programme has turned into what can be viewed as an annual re-creation of the state and society as a particular, imagined, sort of social order. Most of that social order exists, however, for only a moment. At least in terms of the most time consuming and seemingly most important part of this event (the targeting of beneficiaries), the effects are nullified shortly after, leaving the bureaucrats appearing to be powerless and life in villages unaffected.

I have used *aesthetics* in combination with *performance* to discuss certain aspects of state practice. The term *performativity* has been applied in studies of some forms of bureaucratic practice, such as foreign policy (Weber 1998; Laffey 2000), primarily relating to state sovereignty. I understand *performativity* here to indicate a degree of pretending something vis-à-vis an audience. In the Malawian case, it appears that the agricultural officers are performing statehood to no audience besides themselves. From the point of view of the villagers, the bureaucrats fail both in to realising the form of

statehood they enact and in creating such image – and notably, the officials did not seem to worry much about this. The procedures seem meaningful even if everybody involved knows that the image created does not reflect reality in any precise way. I therefore find ‘aesthetics’ better than ‘performativity’ in capturing and explaining the qualities of these procedures.

Aesthetics and its utilitarian effects

The subsidy procedures in this case cause the bureaucrats to appear powerless vis-à-vis the local population, and as a failure in implementing government policies for targeting beneficiaries. Under general norms of bureaucratic rationality this makes them poor bureaucrats. Let me therefore indicate some ways to justify their activities beyond the aesthetic aspects discussed above. There is no contradiction between immediate aesthetic aspects and utilitarian effects – indeed, that combination is more or less the expectation for many more expressive state practices. Even if aesthetic associations are primary, instrumental considerations such as those described below are probably carried out by many of the bureaucrats involved. Still, just as might be said for more expressive state practices, it is by locating the practice in an aesthetic domain that many of the practical effects are possible.

Overall, the subsidy programme is among the most important contributions to food security and economic growth in Malawi. True, that could have been achieved in easier ways without attempting to implement the targeting procedures. But even those procedures may have positive effects, despite not immediately functioning as intended. Insisting on preferential treatment for the most vulnerable may serve to change local discourse and perhaps create some social consciousness towards pro-poor distribution. The explicit mentioning of the elderly, handicapped, or HIV/AIDS affected people may provide those households with some basis for argumentation in local negotiations.

Moreover, it is targeting of beneficiaries that enables the subsidy programme to facilitate the co-existence of two incompatible principles for distribution. The government, adapting to donors, pursues targeting of the poorest. In the villages, equal sharing – with some tolerance for slightly more resources to the chief – is a norm firmly positioned in local discourse. Unequal distribution may lead to envy or jealousy, resulting in local conflicts, sometimes with disastrous effects including accusations of witchcraft. It is even

reflected in the national anthem, which identifies, in the first stanza, jealousy (*nsanje*) as one of the nation's three enemies (besides hunger and disease). Commenting on agricultural subsidies, a chief said to a newspaper:⁸ 'The idea of choosing few poor people creates enmity. We would rather be poor and united [than rich and divided]'

There is also a pragmatic aspect: since internal differentiation in villages is limited and the subsidy inputs are quite substantial, favouring the poorest 40 per cent would easily lead to better yields among some of them, than among many of those 'too rich' to receive inputs. Instead of leading to more equality, it might turn the economy upside down. That possibility is particularly worrisome since local poverty is often explained by laziness or alcohol or marihuana abuse, while the richer are viewed as hard working. This was one of the main arguments against favouring the poorest in the area of my fieldwork.

Both principles of distribution – targeting and universalism – are fully valid principles both in state practice worldwide, as well as in (Western) political and distributive philosophy, but they are incompatible. As long as the government and local communities of Malawi insist on mutually incompatible principles, and the government lacks the means to enforce its own principles, the only way to solve the problem lies in the aesthetic domain. Aesthetics makes possible the creation of an *image* of poverty targeting according to government policies, while simultaneously allowing the villagers to apply the locally preferred principles for distribution. That is what enables government and donor support for continuation of the programme in the coming years, in the interests of all those involved.

Paradoxically, smooth implementation of the programme is made possible only by 'failing' (cf. Mosse 2005). If the government had succeeded in targeting beneficiaries according to international norms, it might lead to never-ending local quarrels about who should qualify, and accusations of corruption and witchcraft. That might again reduce political support for the programme. If the government did not even design interventions for *smart subsidies*, it would make some donor support impossible. Certainly it would be difficult for the World Bank, which has rhetorically locked itself into not supporting universal subsidies⁹.

⁸ Group village head Atikoliwe in Thyolo, according to *The Nation*, Malawi, 1 October 2008.

⁹ <http://go.worldbank.org/KIGRBOO0B0>.

But the potential effects of the procedures extend beyond the actual intervention. The bureaucrats are mediating between not only distributional principles, but different versions of reality. Life in a village is complex, dynamic, and ever-shifting, known only to those in the village. Individuals are so diverse that it is not possible to classify anybody along simple definitions without gross over-simplification. On a higher level, society is chaotic and non-legible for insiders as well as outsiders. Viewed from central positions of the state, much of society is not observable and any precise form of legibility is not achievable, making any idea of 'governing' a society far-fetched. But in Malawi, as elsewhere, government is not very impressive, either. It is often faced with insufficient capacity, poor management, poor motivation, arrogance and elitism, clientelism, or corruption, and in many cases has less concern for the poorer part of the population than for the middle class. To most of the population, the reality of many government practices would, if known, reduce its legitimacy, and farmers in Malawi already have a clear idea of this situation.

The procedures described here cause both 'state' and 'society' to appear more orderly than they are. Like a lens, bureaucratic practice, when placed between the government and its population, alters reality. Whether seen from the perspective of 'the state' or 'society', bureaucratic procedures enable the chaos on 'the other side' to appear as social order. Governments translate non-legible, non-governed, chaotic local realities into a legible, well-organised and manageable population. Seen from the village, the procedures make the state appear more knowledgeable, standardised, rule-based, rational and science-based, and as caring for individuals with emphasis on the poorest – in stark contrast to common ideas about bureaucrats among Malawian villagers. Hence, such procedures improve the image of both poles in the relationship. Even if, as in this case, the image lasts for only a moment, it is perhaps sufficient to enable better interaction between the various actors. By such mechanisms, bureaucratic procedures enhance not only this particular subsidy programme in Malawi, but any government interventions that depend on the idea of a legible population, as well as a professional bureaucracy, to gain political support. Donor support, in particular, depends on a smoothly functioning government and a legible population. In an aid economy that often seems dominated by aesthetic considerations (Stirrat 2000), the image of such a state is perhaps sufficient, even if key actors involved know it is not a precise reflection thereof. For the government of Malawi that image is important as it makes possible not only funding, but also greater

autonomy, through aid modalities with fewer conditions and less micro-management attached. In that respect, the bureaucrats do their government a great service.

The aspects discussed above have some resonance with the form of aesthetics of power demonstrated by Mbembe (2001), in which ‘the pretence becomes the dominant modality of transaction between the state and society, or between rulers and those who are supposed to obey’ (p.129). Mbembe focuses on ceremonial events instead of everyday bureaucratic practice, but one effect is comparable: aesthetics enables seemingly conflicting social entities – in Mbembe’s case brutal rule and its opposition; in the Malawi case incompatible distribution principles – to co-exist. In Mbembe’s case this becomes possible by transforming brutal rule into the domain of conviviality and fantasy, thus making both rule and opposition ‘powerless’. In the case of Malawi, at first sight it makes the bureaucrats ‘powerless’, but in more substantial terms it is the donors who are ‘powerless’ in a process in which the bureaucrats are merely mediators. The farmers are the winners in that relationship: they gain access to subsidies distributed according to local norms, the only cost being that they have to spend two days participating in the targeting exercise. A comparable, historically more distant case is the ‘imperial spectacle’ in colonial Africa, which served colonial rule well by displaying visual expressions that created favourable images of colonial, rational logic and a more legible local ‘culture’ (Apter 2002). The Malawi case of ‘bureaucratic spectacle’ appears very different, and the state logic it expresses stands in stark contrast to the imperial spectacle, but the effects are comparable.

The similarities with other Africa cases do not, however, make this case particularly ‘African’ or ‘postcolonial’. The political contexts are radically different – in Mbembe’s case brutal dictatorship characterised by fear for bureaucrats; in the Malawi case ‘freedom’ characterised by disrespect. The Malawi case does not even show traces of the grotesque and obscene in Mbembe’s discussion. Indeed, it seems more natural to view the Malawi case as an import from (Western) aid rather than as an ‘African’ or postcolonial feature of bureaucracy. After all, it refers directly to Western aid, and it is probably not a coincidence that many studies of comparable phenomena seem inspired by the development relation (Apthorpe 1997; Stirrat 2000; Riles 2000; Mosse 2005; Green 2009). It may, however, also reflect the fact that studying a developing country makes a difference in terms of methodology: in a bureaucracy that is ineffective in instrumentalist

terms, the procedures are often stripped of functional effects, perhaps leaving the aesthetics to be relatively dominant. In the 'failure' to achieve the purposes they are designed for, the procedures reveal rather more of their aesthetic qualities.

In any case, I believe comparable features of bureaucratic practice are also relevant elsewhere. This is demonstrated, with more or less explicit reference to aesthetics, by studies of different bureaucratic practices such as the production of documents (Riles 2006), diplomacy (Weber 1998), speech writing (Neumann 2005), consultancy (Stirrat 2000), policy development (Apthorpe 1997) and policy adherence (Mosse 2005). And of course, many of the multitudinous studies of expressive, visual, symbolic, or other aspects of state practices than bureaucratic procedures explore quite comparable mechanisms. Thus, as a form of state practice, the case presented here is hardly new, but it contributes towards balancing a well-established dichotomy that tends to locate those forms of state practice elsewhere rather than within everyday bureaucratic practice.

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PAPER 3

Making and shaping poor Malawians:
Citizenship below the poverty line

Making and shaping poor Malawians: Citizenship below the poverty line

The article explores a series of events in the global discourse on development and on governance: the emergence of 'the poor' as a class of identifiable individuals rather than an abstract category; the preference for targeted development interventions; the organization of beneficiaries into groups which are then used as sites for application of 'governmentality'; and the Millennium Development Goals, which have necessitated national and local poverty lines corresponding to the global poverty line. One implication is that those below the poverty line may constitute a particular type of citizens: more subject to attempts to reform their rationality and conduct, and less the autonomous individuals that are presupposed by liberal democracy.

Poverty alleviation does more to poverty than reducing the number of poor people or the burden of their poverty. When poverty is to be alleviated primarily by interventions specifically targeting those classified as 'poor', there are political implications. The political dilemmas are well known in studies of social policy in industrialized countries (Katz, 1989; Rothstein, 2002). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) appear a-political, or even anti-political in distorting development discourse away from broader political questions (Saith, 2006). But they do provide a strong, implicit push for introducing or strengthening policies for targeting the poorest (Fischer, 2010). This article explores some aspects of the MDGs and the corresponding poverty line in terms of citizenship for the poor.

Development interventions relate to a shared international development discourse where concepts and representations exist on a highly abstract level, but are implemented in diverse local contexts, leaving practitioners with the mandate to relate local realities to discourse. On this background, critical approaches in social anthropology claim that policies fail or produce unintended effects, partly because abstract ideas in development discourse do not match local experience (Sachs, 1992; Mosse, 2005). Even if policies

‘work’, the assumption may be that they have limited impact, for instance because they are located in ‘projects as slices of manageable reality’ (Green, 2003: 140). The poverty line discussed in this article clearly belongs to those abstract ideas, which is not likely to correspond to actual social organisation. Nevertheless, it may transform realities even outside the interventions where it is implemented. This is partly due to the MDG no. 1, which presupposes that a poverty line can be meaningfully applied in national and local contexts. Current modalities of aid create incentives to establish local realities on the ground that can correspond to general, standardized ideas and concepts in international discourse. Thus, if a poverty line does not exist, practitioners may try to make it empirical reality. The appropriateness and effectiveness of a poverty line in producing the intended end effect (poverty alleviation) is outside the scope of the article (cf. Vandemoortele, 2009; Chibba, 2011). Here I focus on other potential effects, which are probably unintended, but cannot be explained by ‘failure’. Rather, they reflect success in policy implementation, but with political implications outside the scope of the relevant policies.

Introduced as a mainly technical challenge, the poverty line is so politically potent – as shown in the history of Western welfare states – that it is certain to have political consequences other than those intended. It lays the foundation for a new form of social classification, whereby those classified as falling below the line are subject to other forms of governance than those above the line – in effect constituting another type of citizens. Such effects on citizenship have been noted in many studies of domestic social policy (Cowen, 2005; Harriss-White, 2005; Katz, 2002; Marshall, 2009); this article focuses on similar attempts at classification extended to a global project.

‘Citizenship’ has a range of meanings, and the actual local manifestations will depend on local contexts (Jones and Gaventa, 2002; Robins et al., 2008). I see citizenship less as a reflection of political intentions than the often-unintentional effects of state practices: in broad terms ‘practices (juridical, political, economic or cultural) which define a person as a competent member of society, and which as a consequence shape the flow of resources to persons and social groups’ (Turner, 1993: 2). Development agencies increasingly emphasize citizenship for the poor – sometimes explicitly, normally implicitly as part of ‘rights-based development’, ‘participation’ or trends that have been termed ‘inclusive neoliberalism’ (Craig and Porter, 2006; Kabeer, 2005; Green, 2008; Hickey, 2010). The form of citizenship promoted is rarely specified, but in the context of liberal democracy

we can at least assume that it presupposes politically autonomous individuals who interact with the government on terms equal for all. However, as this article argues, the actual effects may be the converse: a specific type of citizenship for the poor, whereby they interact with government not as autonomous individuals, but as members of certain *communities* so designated for the purposes of governing.

The cases presented from Malawi build on ethnographic fieldwork during 2009, where I carried out participant observation in one rural and one urban area, in addition to observing two large-scale government interventions: the distribution of subsidized agricultural inputs, and the implementation of a cash-for-work programme. The more general arguments also build on observations made in the course of about ten years of work in management and as consultant for development agencies. I believe the main arguments are valid also in other countries where poverty targeting according to a poverty line is new, as is the case in many developing countries. There are exceptions – most notably India, where poverty targeting is already well-established, and whose experiences clearly demonstrate the political dilemmas and contest involved (Saith, 2005; Fernandez, 2010).

The Emergence of *the poor* in development

Some years ago I was working for a Norwegian NGO with management responsibility for development projects in fifteen countries. During a meeting in 2004 with our main donor, Norad, I was asked how many of our direct beneficiaries were ‘below the poverty line’. I had no idea. When specifying reporting requirements for the following year, I asked all collaborating institutions, government and non-governmental, to indicate the total number of direct beneficiaries above and below the poverty line. Although I had the *one dollar a day* threshold in mind, I asked respondents to use the national definition if one were available. I attached an Excel spreadsheet template, and a staff member stood ready to aggregate the figures for reporting.

Responses from the partner institutions varied greatly. Some had figures available, most had not. Some asked which poverty line I meant, as there were different national thresholds. None of them referred to *one dollar a day*. Most of the interventions in question, mainly within agricultural development, had not previously distinguished between *direct* and *indirect* beneficiaries. Questions arose about whether to count the

whole family of a farmer as direct or indirect beneficiaries; or how to measure the number of beneficiaries of hillside forest management to stop soil erosion.

My initiative never yielded useful aggregate data to present to the donor. But the case illustrates the interrelatedness between international development discourse and local realities. I had signalled a donor interest that was relatively new to most partner institutions. Requests like mine, together with thousands of other, similar interactions between donors and recipients, have made the poverty line a dimension that development management must relate to. Today many professional institutions involved in development aid would be able to answer such questions quickly, readily filling in the spreadsheet: their monitoring and evaluation systems are already designed to produce such information, or their interventions are designed to target only those below the poverty line. To be sure, income- or consumption-based assessments of poverty are not common as guidance for interventions at the local level. Other indicators, predominantly economic – and probably seen as a proxy for a national poverty line, are developed locally to enable a distinction between households or individuals, and to determine who should benefit from interventions.

Such classification reflects the idea that *the poor* can be identified and classified according to generalized economic criteria for the purpose of guiding development interventions, or for reporting at aggregate level. That idea has permeated development discourse and practice to the extent that it is perhaps difficult for young professionals to imagine development without it. But as a key dimension in development discourse and practice it is relatively new. The poor are of course not new, and poverty alleviation was one of the key motivations for modern development aid. But during the early decades, the poor as a generic class of identifiable individuals were much less dominant. For the purpose of justifying aid, individual anecdotes or abstract representations of poverty were sufficient. National discourse both in North and South favoured universal provision of resources (Mkandawire, 2005). Trickle-down effects were expected to yield almost automatic benefits for the poor from economic growth, so no particular attention to the poor should be necessary. To the extent that knowledge of the local (poor) people was needed, this was generally ensured by having staff to work ‘in the field’ instead of producing abstract, aggregated data for use in design, implementation and reporting of interventions. International development discourse – exemplified, for instance, by the

Pearson Report or the Second UN Development Decade (Pearson, 1969; United Nations, 1970; Ziai, 2011) – normally referred to poor countries or societies; poor people, meaning individuals, were mentioned only occasionally, and the specific measures for their improvement were specified at macro-level. Most studies of poor people did not focus on their poverty but on other issues, like health or demography. But even when poverty was the issue, ‘the poor’ seemed to denote general populations rather than a particular class of individuals (see e.g. Myrdal, 1968).

But poor people gradually entered development discourse as a more specific concern. *Trickle down* lost credibility and *basic needs* came in focus. A range of ideological and other factors combined to support targeting rather than universalism in service delivery in North and South (Mkandawire, 2005). Social policy was integrated in the dominant international organizations (Deacon, 2007). The broad ambitions for political and administrative reform of poor countries since 1990s, integrated in *good governance*, always insist on policies aimed at *poverty reduction*. Today, *poverty alleviation* has become synonymous with development. With the alignment of national policies and aid, in particular through Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP), this goes well beyond only those interventions financed by development aid. The MDGs built on this discursive background, establishing poverty alleviation as a ‘super-norm’ in international development (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 2009).

‘The poor’ here refers to certain individuals who can be identified, classified according to general criteria, studied and helped out of poverty through targeted interventions, whose success in changing individuals can be reported on aggregate level – provided that there exist sufficient knowledge and expertise, together with financial and technical resources. The poor are less of a political problem than a predominantly financial and technical challenge to be solved in development bureaucracies (Li, 2007: 7). Thousands of researchers work on classifying and identifying the poor, estimating their numbers and composition, and – joined by other experts and practitioners – analysing and prescribing solutions to their poverty. Thereby the *causes* of poverty have become decontextualized: the solution is seen to lie in the relation between the poorest and the welfare state or the donors, rather than in more immediate relations with the non-poor in society through broader political changes or social mobilization (Banik, 2010; Bebbington, 2007; Green and Hulme, 2005d; Mosse, 2010; Saith, 2006).

Ironically, the only meaningful motivation for producing all the expertise is to get people out of poverty so that the expertise becomes irrelevant. The whole purpose of the category is to empty it. However, to achieve that, according to current norms for targeted interventions, one must first identify the individual poor, so that appropriate interventions can be organized to target precisely those persons. The initially abstract category must be made empirical, before again being abstract once it has been emptied.

The poverty line

If ‘the poor’ denotes an identifiable class of individuals, it becomes vital to identify them. Who are the poor? The authors of the first World Development Report (WDR) on poverty in 1980 seemed hesitant to answer, claiming that a universal definition of poverty was not viable (World Bank, 1980: 33). Nevertheless, the report went on to estimate the number of people in absolute poverty defined along a rather arbitrary poverty line (the income of the 45th percentile in India). In the next WDR on poverty ten years later, the authors were still uncomfortable about a universal poverty line (World Bank, 1990). The report stated that knowledge of the poor was ‘essential if governments are to adopt sound development strategies and more effective policies for attacking poverty’, but in discussing country-specific issues it used only national poverty lines (1990: 24). A universal poverty line, albeit ‘inevitably somewhat arbitrary’, was declared ‘needed to permit cross country comparison and aggregation’ (1990: 27). Note that the global poverty line was needed not for national poverty alleviation, but in order to meet the additional demands of international development discourse.

The parallel establishment of the Human Development Index and much other literature on poverty reflected widespread acknowledgement that poverty cannot be measured by income alone (UNDP, 1990). However, the HDI classifies countries, and only the World Bank matched the trends of the time in focusing on individuals. That perhaps explains the paradox that an income-based definition became widespread at the same time as the multidimensionality of poverty was widely accepted. Soon *one dollar a day* (now adjusted to 1.25 USD) became the most widespread definition of absolute or extreme poverty, together with an upper poverty line of *two dollars a day* for those less poor (Ravallion et al., 1991; Ravallion et al., 2008). The meaning, applicability and precision of such a distinction are continuously challenged and often heavily criticized (Saith,

2005; Addison et al., 2009a; Anand et al., 2010), but outside academia it stands as the authoritative global definition of poverty. The key point here is not the actual definition, but the idea that it is possible to draw such a distinction between individuals according to a general definition based on income or consumption.

The universal poverty line made possible the idea of ‘the poor’ as a particular class of individuals that cuts across societies. They appear to constitute something like a specific world population, or rather, two: the *two dollar a day* poor and the *one dollar a day* poorest. In a discursive context where ‘the market’ is expected to improve life for most poor people, we can imagine a distinction between the poor, who are able to benefit from the market, and the poorest, who are not and are thereby made objects of special government interventions. Thus, the *one dollar a day* poverty line distinguishes between two types of people. Those above the line are seen as active, dynamic, and economically beneficial as producers or consumers. As actors in the market, according to neoliberal norms they are ideally granted considerable autonomy and are subject only to general government regulations. By contrast, those below the line are deemed non-productive, redundant as labour and as consumers; the passive recipients of government interventions (cf. Bauman, 2005). Agency is found mostly in the other end: the state institutions in charge of transforming those below the poverty line into productive actors able to take care of themselves in the market without the need for further government interventions. The metaphors – with military associations – of *fighting* poverty and of *target groups* reflect ideas of active service providers and passive recipients. Even some of the more progressive development policies seem to limit the agency of the poorest primarily to their right to *participate* in decisions that directly affect them, and in improving their own lives – but not as being important in society in general (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2000).

The poverty line has obvious spatial dimensions, reflected in metaphors like *the bottom billion*.¹ Ideally, interventions *lift* the poor *above* the poverty line, to help the poorest in ‘getting the first foothold on the ladder’ (Sachs, 2005: 24) from which they will be able to climb further ‘up’ in the market. When compared to the vertical logics behind earlier development theory, the ladder metaphor demonstrates the change in discourse: while

¹ The metaphor is mentioned as reflecting the idea of spatial distinction, and not as denoting the poor under discussion here. Paul Collier, who made the term widespread, was referring to the total population of the poorest countries, and not the *one dollar a day* poor.

development was previously seen as a (vertical) ‘take-off’ for poor countries (Rostow, 1960), a comparable move upwards is now expected by poor individuals.

Making the poverty line empirical

With the MDGs, implicitly calling for targeted service provision towards those below the lower poverty line, the poverty line has become more of an empirical necessity. To be sure, the MDG framework explicitly encourages governments to use national poverty lines where available. The main point here is not the actual definition, but the idea that an income- or consumption-based definition of poverty at the individual level should guide government interventions. The MDGs seem to be effective in shaping government policy and practice in many countries (cf. Fukuda-Parr, 2008; Poku and Whitman, 2011). They were introduced in the context of general re-organization of aid towards alignment of recipient and donor policies and practices, as reflected in the PRSPs and later the OECD Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Their basic parameters could be integrated in in the increasingly harmonized policy making, planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting of not only aid flows, but most of government interventions in aid-receiving countries. Thus, key concepts, including – via MDG no. 1 – the poverty line, were transformed from global discourse to national and local practice by establishing a new set of parameters for public service, well beyond those that are aid-financed. Even though not precisely applicable, the poverty line is familiar to all agencies involved in development, and serves as a reference for many interventions. My own earlier request to collaborating institutions serves as just one case of the myriads of interactions that make the poverty line relevant. Initially existing in very abstract form in international discourse, the poverty line has become a key reference for countless development interventions around the globe.

National poverty definitions are well known in many countries, often based on criteria other than income or consumption (Saith, 2005). But in Africa, prior to the MDGs these were most often used for analytical purposes, and not to guide interventions. To the extent that development interventions targeted the poorest, local criteria were often employed, rather than a national definition. Moreover, the whole idea of a distinction between ‘poor’ and ‘less poor’ according to primarily economic criteria is often not compatible with local organization and discourse: the distinction simply does not exist

(Iliffe, 1987; Rahnema, 1992; Little et al., 2008). If so, the poverty line is a new dimension not only in state practice, but in social organisation.

Creating a poverty line at the national level: Malawi

Reflecting general trends towards targeting (Mkandawire, 2005) and more direct donor influence (see for instance, World Bank, 1995) many development interventions in Malawi since the 1990s have been designed to reach particular categories of individuals – *beneficiaries*. These are typically identified in terms of gender, age, diagnosis, family or socio-economic status, often very specific to the intervention in question. One report identified more than 40 different target groups for social protection programmes alone (World Bank, 2007: 26). Increasingly, however, interventions are designed to target *the poorest* in general. Since, except for a relatively small middle class, most Malawians can be categorized as poor by most standards (for instance *two dollar a day*), such targeting means distinguishing between the poorest and the less poor. The latest survey classifies 39 per cent of the population as *poor*, and 15 per cent as *ultra-poor* (NSO, 2010). The upper definition is the one that reflects the lower poverty line of *one dollar a day* when Malawi reports progress on the MDGs. The poverty line is based on consumption and expenditure, and the estimates are based on a statistical model and not local data (NSO, 2005).

In contrast to targeting based on age, gender, family situation or diagnosis, that distinction is not based on any local yardstick. Local terms used for poverty (*umphawi*) or ‘being poor’ (*-sauka*) are broader and refer to many other causes of trouble than economic poverty, including lack of social network (Iliffe, 1987: 7). My fieldwork revealed that rural farmers generally saw themselves as poor, and when discussing the poorest it meant the very few particularly destitute households. Some of those were seen as ‘deserving’ their poverty because of ‘laziness’ or marihuana abuse; others, such as orphaned households, were pitied. I guess that those destitute households combined roughly constitute those who are categorized as *ultra-poor* in national surveys – and many of them are target groups for specific interventions (e.g. Miller, Tsoka, & Reichert, 2010). The *poor*, reflecting a distinction that cuts through each village in classifying roughly 40 per cent of the population as poor – as the national poverty line does – has no local equivalent. A locally more appropriate way to apply a consumption-based

distinction between poor and non-poor would relate to time rather than internal stratification: except for the few richest and poorest, the ability to meet basic needs in the remaining majority is less a function of household characteristics than one of fluctuations in agricultural outputs.

An absolute poverty line as applied in Malawi seems needed not mainly for effective poverty alleviation, but because of demands in international development discourse. A 1996 World Bank study claiming to be '*the first attempt to analyse poverty in Malawi using nationwide data on household expenditures and income*' gave up the attempt to establish an absolute poverty line, using relative cut-offs instead: the 40th and the 20th percentiles, respectively, of national incomes and expenditures (World Bank, 1996: 2). The report made it clear that an absolute poverty line was needed 'as a baseline for making time-series comparisons or for making comparison with other countries' – in other words, to feed into (global) development discourse, rather than for practical purposes. When the report went on to speak of information 'vital for formulating policies and programs that will have the maximum impact in reducing poverty', a relative poverty measure was deemed sufficient (1996: 23).

The national poverty definition is still used primarily in surveys and not to guide targeted interventions at the local level. Interventions targeting the poorest normally select according to project-specific indicators or are negotiated in each village.² Nevertheless, many development agencies implicitly claim that their interventions exclusively reach those below the poverty line when reporting their interventions as contributions to MDG no. 1. All interventions are supposed to feed into a reporting system under implementation at district level, which works according to standardized criteria and is designed to feed directly into Malawi's reporting on progress on the MDGs (Government of Malawi, 2008). The system classifies individual beneficiaries of all interventions, distinguishing between *ultra-poor* and *moderately poor*. Data are to be collected not only from government extension workers, but also from all NGOs working on the village level. It means that most practitioners involved in implementing development projects must relate to a poverty line that still does not exist at the local level: it has to be

² In addition to drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork, my statements about development interventions in Malawi are based on consultancies and management responsibility for development agencies, including seven country visits observing health, HIV/AIDS, microfinance, agriculture and disability interventions in most districts of Malawi from 2003 to 2009.

constructed.

Agricultural subsidy distribution

The history of agricultural subsidies serves as a relevant case not only because it illustrates a historic shift towards targeting, but because subsidies constitute a dominant part of the state contract in rural Malawi. They are a major issue in election campaigns, and political history as told in rural areas puts considerable emphasis on a government's shifting interventions in agriculture over time. When observing subsidy distribution during fieldwork, I heard chiefs and farmers claiming that subsidies were expected in return for voting for the president, as a protest against distribution also to villages that had voted for other candidates. This reflects a view of subsidies as the right of (loyal) citizens.

During the first decades after independence, agriculture was generally subsidized through fixed prices on inputs and outputs, and a heavily loss-making (subsidized) credit scheme (Harrigan, 2000). In practice, that system favoured the economically most active individuals. Subsidies were dismantled following structural adjustment, and various efforts to re-establish general subsidy schemes during the 1980s and 1990s failed (Chinsinga and O'Brien, 2008). In 2000/2001, a new approach was sought when the government established a nationwide programme for targeted subsidy inputs aimed solely at the 'most vulnerable' farmers. This was poorly implemented and generally ineffective until a Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP) was established in 2005/2006.³ Soon it became a huge success, internationally celebrated as an African contribution to achieving MDG no. 1.

Targeting contrasts with previous subsidy schemes by establishing two types of farmers – or citizens – within each village: those eligible for state subsidies, and those expected to purchase the same inputs with money earned in the market. The proportion varies each year, but is typically around 40 per cent of the population – roughly reflecting the national poverty line. The programme does not apply a clear-cut poverty line, but targets the 'resource-poor but full-time smallholder' Malawian farmers, with preference to categories of particularly vulnerable households (Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, 2009). During fieldwork, statements of both junior and senior officials also

³ The name has changed over time; FISP refers to the name used in FY 2009/2010.

indicated preferences for ‘hard-working’ poor farmers, not least the economically most active – as opposed to targeting only the poorest. Domestic political discourse appears to favour universal subsidies (Chinsinga and O’Brien, 2008). Thus, there is an apparent discrepancy between different political rationalities, where targeting the poorest seems a donor adaptation.

The actual selection presents a great practical challenge not only because the information is not available for selection, but also because the underlying principles are not accepted locally. One argument heard during fieldwork is that poor people are often lazy or drunk, while hard-working farmers can better benefit from subsidies. In practice, targeting fails not because of lack of precision, but due to local opposition to the underlying principles (Eggen, forthcoming). Nevertheless, even when failing, the subsidy scheme sends a powerful message: by annual negotiations in plenary meetings for every single village all over the country, the principle of differentiation along poverty indicators is clearly communicated to all farmers in Malawi.

The Malawi Social Action Fund

Another major intervention aiming at economic improvement is the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF). It was established in 1995 and extends all over Malawi with a range of subprojects, including small-scale infrastructure, cash-for-labour, microfinance and social support schemes. Initially, there was little selection of individuals. The cash-for-labour programme, for example, was based on *self-targeting*, assuming that only the poorest would voluntarily join the programme due to low payment (Chirwa et al. 2002).

MASAF’s focus on particularly vulnerable individuals – orphans, the disabled, the elderly, street children and so on – was reflected in a separate subproject to sponsor NGOs intending to target these groups.

Interest in specific individuals increased over time, as a review of programme documents indicates.⁴ In the first phase, MASAF I (1995–99), the individual *beneficiaries* (around 100,000 each year) were mentioned with some reference to gender, but little else on their status. Documents focused on the number of projects, and total number of workdays

⁴ The review consulted all Annual Reports, selected studies and official presentations of the programme; most are available at www.masaf.org.

rather than the number of workers, reflecting a management focus on economy and infrastructure rather than the welfare of individuals. When poverty was mentioned in reports, the reference was almost always to poor communities, not individuals. MASAF II (1999–2003) refers explicitly to poor individuals and less to the number of projects. It also applies a tripartite distinction between the *non-poor*, the *poor*, and what are referred to as the *core poor*, *ultra-poor* or *very poor* – the confusion in terminology may indicate that the concept was not familiar. MASAF III (2003–15) is more detailed in targeting ‘individuals in targeted poor and vulnerable households’ in general, as well as ‘the disadvantaged, poor and vulnerable groups (i.e., malnourished children, orphans, street children, the aged, widows, widowers, foster parents, the destitute, those affected by HIV/AIDS, people with disabilities, and others) who do not have the capacity to mobilize themselves and solicit resources for the purpose of improving their livelihoods’.⁵ Its design relates explicitly to the MDGs, and the reports feed into Malawi’s reporting on the MDGs on the assumption that all beneficiaries are below the poverty line – sometimes explicitly specified as *one dollar a day* and not the national poverty line.⁶

While there is no doubt about priority to the poorest, there are few detailed guidelines or instructions on local selection procedures. In the cash-for-labour project, government officials have been instructed to select by ‘participatory wealth ranking in community meetings’.⁷ What I observed during my fieldwork was that local chiefs were asked to select beneficiaries, after first being instructed that only the ‘neediest’ should be chosen. The officials insisted on selection in public meetings in which the government officials took part; however, in the cases observed there had already been a prior meeting where beneficiaries had actually been selected, and were now to be presented to the officials.

A new category of citizens

Whether in the case of agricultural subsidies or in MASAF, the officials involved are expected to target interventions according to a poverty line that does not (yet) exist locally. In the case of subsidies my observations indicate that targeting generally fails, and in the case of MASAF it is at best very imprecise. Given that poverty targeting is a

⁵ <http://www.masaf.org/component/ssp.htm>.

⁶ MASAF report January–March 2005.

⁷ MASAF Public Works Sub-Project Guidelines 2009 (no date or publisher indicated).

new experience in Malawi, this should not be surprising. With more experience and improved procedures, targeting may be more exact in future. However, while the practical effects are limited, targeting may still impact on local discourse: In the absence of clear criteria, the poverty line remains something to be negotiated for each specific intervention. Those negotiations – always in plenary – reflect and communicate to most of the population that there is a distinction between the *poor* and *the poorest*.

This is a new state-initiated classification, not paralleled in any earlier large-scale state interventions or in local organization, but of economic, social and political significance. It distinguishes between those ‘poor enough’ to qualify for government resources, and those expected to manage on their own in the market or by producing their own food with inputs bought at market prices. The latter qualify for government services only temporarily, as in education, health problems or in cases of famine – specific situations, in which everybody qualifies as citizens. In contrast, the poor are a specific class of individuals who qualify exclusively with regard to certain interventions. This in turn means that they constitute a particular type of citizens.

As in international discourse, also in Malawi this has clear spatial dimensions. The poverty line is a horizontal line that cuts through communities and not between them, and reflects ambitions of *lifting* the *poorest* out of poverty. One MASAF report states: ‘This enables the target group to better cope with social and economic risk and *graduate from the core poor category*.’⁸ By ‘graduating’ to ‘above’ the poverty line, they would be only slightly better off in economic terms, but would enter into a qualitatively different relation to the government. In other (non-MASAF) documents I have seen yet another poverty category, which better illustrates the spatial logic of a vertical movement: this is the *transient poor*, who are ‘at risk of *slipping backwards* into the ranks of the core poor’ (IFAD, 2007: 2, emphasis added) or who ‘may *slide* towards [...] poverty’ (World Bank, 2007: 18, emphasis added).

Governing *the poor*

The focus of most poverty interventions is not primarily to provide material resources that immediately ease their poverty. Much wider ambitions of reform corresponding to

⁸ MASAF report 2002/2003, p. 31, my emphasis.

governmentality are closely linked to poverty alleviation, in developed and developing countries alike (Cruikshank, 1999; Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Gupta, 2001; Li, 2007). Interventions are merged with attempts to change the rationalities and conduct of the beneficiaries – in short, transforming people into better citizens. Whether the aim relates to economic conduct or to social and political change – like democratization, empowerment or gender equality – the techniques are often integrated in *civic education*. To *civic-educate* is already firmly established as a verb in the area of my fieldwork. Those ambitions add to the de-contextualization of poverty, in that change is sought in the poor themselves rather than in their environment – ironic, since categorization along a poverty line otherwise has the effect of rendering irrelevant the distinction between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. In the language of citizenship, it reflects a focus more on forming good citizens than simply granting them access to citizenship.

Such strategies coincide with another development in international discourse: the emergence of *community*, which configures ‘the imagined territory upon which these strategies should act’ (Rose, 1996: 331). The relevant *community* may be a village or a neighbourhood; formal organizations; religious, ethnic, or lifestyle communities; or purely imagined, ‘virtual’ communities of, e.g., drug users, HIV-infected or disabled. A similar community focus – indeed, fetishism – has been seen in development practice. Donor-driven interventions insist on being *community-based*, using community as the ‘territory of government’, both as entry point and forum for consultation, and as vehicles for implementation of interventions, as key arena for attempts to transform the members into better citizens (Dasgupta and Beard, 2007; Li, 2007: 232–6).

According to Rose, community has taken over from *the social*, referring to a particular view of Western states on the national population (1996, 1999). In that view, the individual was a product of society – an obvious contextualization of poverty, but also subject to a highly moralizing approach to the individual’s obligations towards society ‘enacted and regulated through the mediating party of the State’ (Rose, 1996: 330). Although *society* and *the social*, or the related *population* existed as objects of colonial rule and later independent governments (Chatterjee, 2004; Mitchell, 1988; Scott, 1998), in Africa they did not have a similar magnitude. Both colonial and later independent governments applied a form of rule that assumed a national population organized as groups – whether racial, ethnic, clan-based, residential, or regional, and not as *social* as in

Western welfare states (Mamdani, 1996). Ambitions to reform individuals were limited, and focused more on their productivity than their welfare and conduct. Hence, unlike in Western states, where *community* stands in contrast to a previous domain of *the social*, in Africa it can be seen as a continuation of colonial attempts at ‘civilizing Africans as communities, not as individuals’ (Mamdani, 1996: 22). To be sure, other forms of interaction with government are available, as liberal democratic ideas have also begun penetrating government practice (Eggen, 2011). Still, for most purposes poor Africans interact with government not as individuals, but as members of a given community.

Regardless of origin and function, *community* is associated with a natural social unit with internal social dynamics different from the more contract- and market-based interactions that form the basis of *society*. Community is ‘is a moral field binding persons into durable relations. It is a space of *emotional relationships* through which *individual identities* are constructed through their bonds to *micro-cultures* of values and meanings’ (Rose, 1999: 172, emphasis in original). The myth of community as something unitary seems even more dominant in development than in Western discourse, and is closely associated with homogeneity, common interests, solidarity and consensus seeking (Cleaver, 1999). This is reflected in development interventions that insist on consensus rather than balancing different interests through democratic decision-making procedures. Community, thus, represents a qualitatively different forum for negotiation than, for instance, formal democratic structures designed for negotiating among diverse and conflicting interests.

The myth of community also shapes the idea of the individual: as long as diversity within a community is not recognized, there can be little room for individualism and internal differences. That may seem to conflict with trends towards targeting, which involves attempts to identify and isolate individual beneficiaries. And indeed, this is a problem, at least as long as community equals the village, which fits poorly with targeted interventions. A village does not fit any targeted development intervention: whether based on age, sex, socio-economic status or diagnosis, almost any classification of beneficiaries will cut through any village. A civil-society organization, presumably consisting of members with common characteristics and interests, is better suited. However, in most places there exists no appropriate Community Based Organization (CBO) to fit the respective target groups of different development interventions. Hence, if development interventions presuppose a community that represents a target group, it must

be established for each targeted intervention. And so, CBOs flourish. There are farmers' clubs, savings and credit groups, school committees, self-help groups, women's groups, youth clubs, orphan support groups, human rights groups, home-based care groups, groups of people living with HIV/AIDS, disability groups, and so on. The members often have little else in common than sharing a certain classification of relevance to state interventions. They probably join because membership is a prerequisite for getting access to government resources. The process of forming groups and using them as forums for consultations and territories for attempts to transform their members is supported by a whole field of technical expertise to ensure that the groups fit the needs in development (Li, 2007: 234). Nevertheless, the idea persists that they are 'real' and 'natural', and preferably autonomous and a-political, since that is presupposed by the rationality of using them as territories of government.

Moreover, in addition to the groups formed by direct intervention, similar groups exist elsewhere with few other local functions than enabling access to resources whenever the government or a donor turns up with an intervention that needs a CBO. My research in Malawi revealed such groups in almost every village. Some were purely local initiatives; others were remnants from previous development interventions, now dormant while waiting for new projects. They typically focus on orphan care, HIV/AIDS, reforestation or other donor-friendly issues. Most have few if any local activities except, perhaps, monthly meetings and a small revolving fund. Some have a proposal ready for submission when the opportunity arises. Others have only a constitution, normally a handwritten note: samples I collected from several localities show striking similarities, indicating that the members are familiar with group formation. These CBOs add to the myriad of groups established from above by government and donors, and share the same characteristics: tailor-made for enabling development through 'community'. Thus, civil society in this regard is not the domain of autonomous voluntary associations intended to balance the power of the state or to serve as basis for political negotiations (Gellner, 1994; Chatterjee, 1998), but has been exclusively selected, even designed, for state interventions, as mandatory, not voluntary entry points to interaction with the government. Liberal democracy did not bring about the politically autonomous individual that it presupposes.

A community of the poor

Since around 2008 the cash-for-labour subproject of MASAF has been increasingly integrated with its Savings and Investment Promotion subproject.⁹ The idea is that people should not only benefit from cash: they are also encouraged to form savings and investment groups. The aim is to ‘*promote a culture of savings and investments, in particular among participants of the public works program, to enable them to graduate out of public works and other Government programs*’.¹⁰ In one case I observed, practically all beneficiaries agreed to form groups, and only few days after receiving the cash they presented a handwritten constitution. Most groups were still in existence nine months later, and a built-in plan for monitoring over three years indicates expectations that the groups will become permanent. Attempts to use these groups as territory of governance aiming at reforming individuals go well beyond management of their funds: the members of the groups are ‘subjected to several interventions like training in business, saving mobilization, money management and other developmental initiatives in health, agriculture, etc.’.¹¹

Whether MASAF succeeds in enabling people to ‘graduate out of public works’ is doubtful. First, the amount received for work (about USD 17 in total) is far too little to kick-start saving. Most members will probably use the money to repay loans or to purchase agricultural inputs. Moreover, experience indicates that groups often cease to function when interventions end (Swidler and Watkins, 2009). In any case, organizing, training and monitoring the groups probably require more resources per beneficiary than the cash amount originally distributed. This indicates a priority towards group formation over cash transfer as a strategy against poverty. A similar priority is indicated by the immense popularity of *community-based approaches* in development elsewhere: despite studies showing that group formation is not particularly effective in achieving development goals (Mansuri and Rao, 2004; but also see Thorp et al., 2005).

The case of MASAF illustrates an important and probably unintended implication of targeting: If the community is seen as the most relevant territory of *governmentality*, and the relevant ‘community’ is a CBO tailor-made for a targeted intervention, in effect it is

⁹ In recent years, management of both subprojects has been transferred to other management structures, but they still represent a direct continuation of MASAF and part of the same funding arrangements.

¹⁰ Project paper, World Bank. Permanent URL: <http://go.worldbank.org/4H43L1XZF0>. Emphasis added.

¹¹ MASAF Public Works Sub-Project Guidelines 2009 (no date or no publisher indicated).

mainly those targeted for a development interventions who are put under that particular form of governance. Correspondingly, targeting beneficiaries in practice also means selecting which individuals to focus on more intensely to reform their rationality and conduct. Those efforts may go beyond what is immediately relevant to the objective of the interventions, as in the case of MASAF above, where health was included, or in the case of HIV/AIDS interventions – which include attempts to reform intimate aspects of personal and social life, which are integrated with almost any type of development intervention. This may well be a practical adaptation, as when a group is already established, it is already available for other purposes of government, but perhaps it also reflects ideas that those particular individuals are most in need of reform. In any case, the key point is that those targeted for access to resources are also the ones who are subjected to attempts at reforming their rationality and conduct.

The trends towards organising beneficiaries in groups for application of techniques for reforming the individual is already established as a practice in many targeted development interventions. What is more recent is that the poverty line becomes the targeting criterion – as opposed to criteria based on age, sex, family situation or diagnosis. To the extent that the poverty line is a new form of classification, it constitutes to a larger extent a state-enforced distinction between two types of citizens subject to different forms of governance. There are some noteworthy counter-tendencies in the increasingly popular approaches to poverty alleviation through cash transfers, which can be seen as a contrast to the ambitions to reform the poor. But is perhaps not coincidental that such poverty initiatives so far seem more widespread in middle-income countries less dominated by aid and therefore less subject to the hegemony of development discourse, or where a larger share of the poor individuals can be categorized as *two dollar a day* poor (Fiszbein et al., 2009; Hanlon et al., 2010).

Microfinance serves as a good illustration of the logic. Among practitioners it is widely acknowledged that credits and other ‘bank-like’ services are most feasible for the less poor, whereas revolving funds mobilized within savings and credit groups are more appropriate among the poorest, especially in rural areas. In the latter version, the same groups often also integrate other development purposes often explicitly aimed not only at promoting economic rationality but at almost any other development objective. In ‘bank-like’ microfinance, on the other hand, groups may be used to provide security for loans,

but seldom for other purposes. In Malawi, two public microfinance institutions reflect the same distinction: The MASAF subproject presented above, and Malawi Rural Finance Group Ltd, targeting the less poor and interacting with individual farmers.¹²

Conclusions

Since state classifications are not only of immediate economic relevance, but also have social and political relevance, the construction of a new category is important. In the case of the poverty line as currently applied in development discourse and practice, this is not a side-effect of state practice, but a deliberate political project currently being implemented as a joint effort by policy makers, researchers, experts and practitioners. The implications of comparable processes seen in different stages in the history of Western welfare states indicate the political potentials. In the case of Malawi, the poverty line is new, and it is too early to offer conclusions as to the actual effects. The cases presented here indicate changes in state practice and not in society; and the most immediate effects thus far have been seen in discourse – including plenary negotiations on access to government resources in practically every village. Greater economic, social and political relevance may be seen over time.

However, since similar changes are underway in many other states as a result of shared reference to the international discourse, Malawi is also a case of a broader trend. The MDGs constitute a coordinated attempt to change state practice almost worldwide. In combination with other efforts to integrate aid flows and domestic public-sector spending, they permeate the design, financing, management and reporting of other state practice than those financed by aid, and by reporting requirements even non-governmental agencies. As a result, the development practitioners involved are increasingly expected to relate to a poverty line on the ground. It does not necessarily equal *one dollar a day*, but still, it reflects a distinction that has been imported from the international discourse, and that in its current form and application is new in many contexts. If it is not possible to categorize individuals precisely along the poverty line, the issue has to be negotiated, in Malawi normally in open meetings, as part of each intervention. Such local negotiation – about citizenship – is perhaps more effective in confirming the economic, social and

¹² There are plans to privatize the Malawi Rural Finance Group Ltd.

political importance of classification than if identification were done by consulting a formal register.

Schematically, some of the implications of a poverty line can be summarized as follows. First, individuals are classified along a poverty line constructed for the purpose of government interventions, and reflecting, albeit imprecisely, the global poverty line. Second, resources for poverty alleviation target only those who fall 'below' that line. Third, as a precondition for access to those resources, beneficiaries are organized in groups. Thereby they not only constitute a category: they are also supposed to be a 'community' – often designed for the purpose of a state intervention, and whose membership is not much a matter of choice for poor individuals. Fourth, by implication through the way the community serves as the social basis for interaction with the government, the autonomous individual presupposed in liberal democracy are made less relevant. Individual agency is further limited by the assumption of internal homogeneity within community, and by the facilitation of democratic mechanisms qualitatively different from what is expected in formal democratic structures, aiming at consensus rather than acknowledging and balancing conflicting interests. Fifth, the same 'community' groups are used for the application of a range of government techniques aimed at moulding their members into better citizens. Reform ambitions may extend well beyond the economic conditions that were the initial criterion for selection, to include social, political or other dimensions of rationality and conduct.

The various implications mentioned above are not necessarily directly related, but often coincide, whether as a result of normative preferences or mainly as a practical adaptation of targeting, since targeting makes available a group of beneficiaries also for other purposes of government. When they coincide, they establish a particular type of citizens below the poverty line: those qualifying exclusively for access to certain resources, but on the condition that they are subject to particular forms of governance.

The local distinction resembles development-discourse ideas about two types of world citizens: Below the poverty line are those who qualify for governmental poverty alleviation assistance to 'lift' them out of poverty – not primarily by providing material resources, but by reforming them. One political implication is that the poorest, seen as objects of state interventions rather than as active participants in the market, become detached from the rest of society where they are already seen as economically redundant.

The sole relevant political objective is to *remove* them by lifting them above the poverty line – now not only a national, but a joint global project in the MDGs. The less poor, by contrast, are welcome in the globalized economy. Being self-sufficient, they are not a burden, but economically promising as producers or consumers. Hence, they do not pose a political problem and can be left to their own devices, subject to a minimum of government regulation. Many of them are only marginally better-off in economic terms than the poorest, but their relation to the state can be qualitatively very different indeed.

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