

## **THE UNVOICED TEXT: ALLUSION IN MALAWIAN SUNG POETRY**

GREGORY VAN ALSTYNE

### *Introduction*

ALLUSIONS are employed in various African oral art genres for a variety of purposes. Scholarly treatment of allusion has been limited for the most part to consideration of the strict denotation of the word (or phrase), leaving the further, personal and local associations, derived from local knowledge and experience, largely unexamined. In addition, treatment of allusion in African verbal artistry has overlooked the contemporaneous nature of its application. It is widely recognized now that an oral art text must be 'captured' in actual performance, complete with all the attendant artistic blemishes and inconsistencies as well as the creative surprises that the vagaries of a live performance may entail. With the examination and analysis of the actual performance of a given version of an extant composition, it is revealed that the sung poem is highly sensitive to its immediate social surroundings. This fact is reflected in the allusive content of the text. Furthermore, what can be seen from the range of examples given below is that allusion is intimately tied to the content and ultimate meaning that inhere in the sung poem.

This article draws upon anthropological fieldwork conducted in Malonje village, Zomba, Malawi, between October 1988 and October 1989. During the course of this work I collected over 500 verbal art texts, none of which has ever been committed to print. That is, this corpus of sung poetry comprises an oral tradition.

Allusion may add a dimension of familiarity and intimacy to a narration or, in contrast, serve to encode meanings to be deciphered only by those privy to its particular system of communication. Not only does alluding to actual geographical features as part of the song or narrative's cosmography, as in the *Sundiata* epic of West Africa (see Niane 1965), bring the real into the imagined, it is dependent upon the individual members of the audience fleshing out the details in their minds' eyes. In fact, not everyone in the audience or taking part in an oral rendering of a sung poem knows the full extent of what is being alluded to in the text. For example, with reference to Gbaya storytelling in Cameroon, Noss (1972: 86-7) observes, 'it requires that they be familiar with what is alluded to and that through the allusion they supply their own dimension to the tale.... The world of the tale is normally the immediate world for whom it is told. Rarely is the tale about distant places and persons.'

### *Toponymous Familiarity*

Noss's comment holds true for Malonje village stories.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the *nthano*, or tale, intoned in the Chinyanja language, about a group of girls who are engulfed by a huge fallen baobab tree in which they have taken shelter from the rain, takes place along the banks of the Mulunguzi River, one of the major watercourses that springs from the slopes of the Zomba plateau not far from Malonje village. The area is well known, and can be visualized by every villager listening to or taking part in the 'singing' of the tale.<sup>2</sup>

Paradoxically, detailed description is little used in those genres that are dependent for their imaginative actualization upon numerous allusions to familiar locations. The same can be observed for stock characters and places whose relevant associations are known intimately by the home audience but which often leave a conceptual gap for the ethnographer (cf. Scheub 1975; Seitel 1980). Likewise, the same can be said for the corpus of sung poetry I collected from Malonje.

In a medium of expression such as song, the narrative quality of the text is necessarily condensed in favour of direct allusion to extratextual phenomena that

1. Malonje village, the community in which these sung texts were taped, is multiethnic and bilingual. This is due in part to the propinquity of the village to Zomba, the former colonial seat of political power, to the area's historical prominence as a crossroads for different migrating ethnic groups, and to the village's location in a major population zone with the highest population density in Malawi. Most of the oral texts were collected in one or other of the two major regional languages, Chinyanja and Chiyao.

2. Chinyanja-speakers accurately refer to the telling of a tale as *kuimba nthano*, or 'singing (a) tale'.

are collectively known in greater or lesser degrees by those present and taking part in its performance. My chief field assistant said of Dr Banda, the Malawian head of state, that he has told his *mbumba*, or female political supporters,<sup>3</sup> that although their songs consist of only a few different lines and appear to be simple, they mean a good number of things. In part this is because of the stylistic effect of poetic allusion.

### *Self-Reference and Local Allegiances*

The most common allusion of those taking part in the performance of Malonje song is that of the village itself or the name of the chief (whose name, in any case, derives from that of the village). During the singing of a composition not only do the pair of song leaders make allusive reference to the village and by extension those who live in it, but also members of the group chorus may insert their own phrases in *or outside* the song text, identifying those who are singing as members of the village. In part this phenomenon derives from the performance of wedding songs when the villages aligned with the bride and groom compete to 'outing' the other. Allusive self-reference to the home village of the singers serves to identify them as a cohesive group that has come to show the members of the other village 'what they can do'.

In this way the allusion is used both in the song itself and in extratextual insertions as a means of self-identification, common exhortation, and 'friendly' provocation. This leads to a certain repetitive banality and predictability in a number of songs, but at the same time invests the sung compositions with political and regionally rivalrous overtones that add to the meaning and intent of the song texts themselves.

During the recording of this material the singers were very much aware of the fact that they were being recorded. Many held the view that the 'rest of the world' would be listening to the tapes. In this way the number of occasions on which the singers utilized this particular stylistic device is probably over-represented in my recorded material. In fact, one of the 'big' women, the chief's senior sister (MZD), whose identification with the name of the village was as great as that of the chief himself, was a frequent contributor of such allusions.

These are not random allusions intended to fill otherwise empty spaces in a song. Rather, they are there both for the reasons given above and to serve an implicit political purpose. During the course of a taping session in which the

3. Also used as the generic designation for political songs, the word *mbumba* is the traditional kinship term denoting the female matrikin placed under the guidance and protection of an *nkhoswe*, or uncle/elder brother, the male head of an extended family. His *mbumba* refer to Dr Banda as 'Nkhoswe Number One'.

Chiyao women's initiation song *Mkeka wa Kunsamala* was performed, a temporary resident of the village originally from Mangochi referred by direct allusion to her home district and traditional political leader, Traditional Authority Chief Nsamala of Machinga District:

*Ambe ndamire mkeka wa Kunsamala*

Give me, I must sit on (the) mat of Chief Nsamala

Everyone present at the singing session knew the meaning of her allusion, for a number of villagers have kinship ties with individuals currently living in Mangochi and have taken part in weddings and funerals there. It was repeated several times throughout the course of the first five verses of the song, at which point the chief's senior sister moved along the line of singing and clapping women to 'whisper' in the errant song leader's ear. The succeeding verses did not include the line. It was replaced by

*Ambe ndamire mkeka wa Kumalonje*

Give me, I must sit on (the) mat of Chief Malonje

This latter line featured in the sung verses for the remainder of the song (three additional verses). At the end of the composition the 'big' woman, who was serving as a member of the group chorus, inserted a spoken line in Chiyao as an admonitory epilogue:

*Tulamire mkeka wa ambudye Kumalonje*

We must sit on (the) mat of uncle Chief Malonje

It is clear that the inclusion of an allusion to the chief (and by extension his people) of an area some miles to the north of the village in which the composition was being sung, and who has no political or kinship ties to those present, was an egregious *faux pas* on the part of the song leader. She did not lead the next song.

When local villages are mentioned they are in fact usually destinations to which the persona, or character, of the song is travelling to perform a specific task; while allusions to Malawi, and the major population centres of Blantyre, Limbe, Zomba and Lilongwe are usually depicted as places to journey to for political events, simply to visit, or to escape problems in one's natal village. In the Chiyao women's initiation song *Nje-Nje-Nje*, however, Kawinga, a Mozambican locale near the border with Malawi, is characterized as a place emitting the unending sounds of war.<sup>4</sup> It is a place from which to flee. Malawi itself is cited mainly in political and development songs, for obvious reasons, although it also figures in many other types of song. The names of the major cities of Malawi and of foreign

4. This composition was imported into Malonje village by Yao refugees during the independence war in Mozambique in the 1970s.

places, then, do not offer the same sort of regional competition for recognition, nor do they operate as focuses for individual and collective identity as do neighbouring villages. When localities lying further afield are alluded to in a text there is usually no special allegiance implied.

While the song leader from Mangochi transgressed through her use of improper allusion and was corrected, it should be noted that when she took control of the sung text in the capacity of leader she 'naturally' referred to her own home district and chief. She was doing only what she could be expected to do as song leader. She just picked the wrong context in which to do it. This points up the fact that not only do allusions flesh out the imagined world of the creative text with parts of the real world, but that the 'real world' has an impact upon that text that goes beyond the confines of a creative and recreational pastime. The real world is contextualized in the work of art, while at the same time the work of art is situated within and affected by the exigencies of the real world. In this case, the external world of village identity and domestic politics impinges on the content of a sung poem in the course of its spontaneous delivery.

Allusion to persons in sung poetry, however, is not limited to those to the village chief. There are many occasions during the course of a performance when the singers of the songs are themselves identified, either by their own self-reference or by those taking part in the antiphonal response. As with reference to the chief and village this may also be inserted from outside the sung text. Names of relatives, particularly the names of the performers' fathers, may be inserted in the lines of the texts. Especially in initiation ritual the individual(s) leading the song may refer to the husband or 'owner' (Chinyanja: *mwini*) of the female singer, or to the *mnamkungwi*, or ritual specialist, who controls and ritually protects the ceremony. As a consequence the world of actual people, living and dead, comes to occupy a place in the sung repertoire of the village.

### *Political Personages: The Wider Canvas*

Direct allusion to political leaders, e.g. the President or Ngwazi, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, and to leaders of traditional districts is an established technique of song leadership. In *mbumba*, or political, songs mention of the Ngwazi is especially prominent; unsurprisingly, for these songs are performed in his honour. His name, moreover, features in many other types of song. *Kwende ku Che Kamuzu* or *Kwende kwa A Kamuzu* (Chiyao: Let's go to [Mr] Kamuzu), or *Ndikupita kwa A Kamuzu* (Chinyanja: I am going to [Mr] Kamuzu) are phrases used frequently in the corpus of collected songs. Depending upon the intent of the persona of the song and the narrative context these phrases may mean going to dance and sing before him, going to Lilongwe, the administrative capital of the country, or going to see him personally. While it is in the nature of allusion often

to leave the 'correct' interpretation up to the individual listener, in such cases as these it may also serve political purposes by restricting or obscuring meanings.

Knappert (1982: 25) reports for Swahili poetry: 'this old Swahili tradition of composing political songs with hidden allusions in cryptic language which only the initiated understand, is very much alive today'. So too, in contemporary Malawi, political songs contain allusions that only those privy to their meaning(s) can unravel. In these cases, though, the allusions are meant to relay messages to the political faithful. Hence, they are less restricted in nature.

The composition *Walira Fokasi*, sung in Chinyanja, provides a prime example of allusion to an actual event through reference to the actual people involved. The persons mentioned are Fokasi Gwede, formerly Superintendent of Police, Special Branch, and Fern Sadyalunda, a junior government minister. They were involved in a plot against the government led by the then Secretary-General of the Malawi Congress Party and Minister of State in the President's Office, Albert Muwalo. Gwede and Sadyalunda were imprisoned while Muwalo was executed for treason. In the main chorus of the second verse the singers portray Gwede and Sadyalunda as contrite and sorrowful figures.<sup>5</sup>

L2      *Walira Fokasi*  
Fokasi has cried

CH      *Walira eyae-eee walira*  
He has cried eyae-eee (style) he has cried

[L1][L2] *Mai walira Fokasi uyo*  
Mother (!) that Fokasi has cried

CH      *Walira eyae-ee walira-a*  
He has cried eyae-ee he has cried-d

[L1][L2] *Fokasi wadzimanga*  
Fokasi you have arrested (yourself)

CH      *Wadzimanga we-ekha-a*  
You have arrested y-yoursel-If

5. Every line rendered by a leader pair is considered a line of verse unless included in a main chorus, which may be composed of both leader sung lines as well as chorus lines. When leader sung lines are represented singly they are still considered the same line of verse. In this case the lines performed by the leader pair are sung simultaneously though they have been rendered in separate ways. Leader one is always harmonized by leader two in the singing of a verse line unless otherwise indicated. The chorus lines are sung by the members of the group other than the lead singers who are taking part in the performance. For a key to the symbols used in the song texts see Appendix below.

[L1][L2] *Walira Najere*  
Najere [Sadyalunda's clan name] has cried

CH *Walira eyae-eee walira*  
She has cried eyae-eee she has cried

[L1][L2] *Iiiii walira Najere*  
Iiiii (style) Najere has cried

CH *Walira eyae-eee walira*  
She has cried eyae-eee she has cried

[L1][L2] *Najere wadzimanga—*  
Najere you have arrested (yourself)—

CH *Wadzimanga yekha-aa*  
She has arrested herself

[S1] *Nyadani azimai*  
Be proud women

Jeff Opland has observed of Xhosa oral poetry:

The imbongi, or for that matter any other Xhosa oral poet, does not tell stories in poetic form. Since the praises on which the poetry is based often commemorate events, however, izibongo do refer to actions, but they allude to them elliptically rather than narrate them explicitly in the manner of the epic. (Opland 1983: 146)

So too, in the sung poetry collected from Malonje village allusion to events, whether contemporaneous or historical, imagined or real, is elliptically expressed through pithy phrases and condensed images. In the *mbumba* song just quoted the story of political miscalculation and tragedy is left largely unexpressed. In fact, the only relationship between the text and the underlying event is the mention of two of the main actors involved. Otherwise, nearly all of the story remains subtextual.

Not only is the connection made highly elliptical in manner, but the singers refer to the dramatically *imagined* reaction of the miscreants to the events that have befallen them as a consequence of their rash actions. The incident is artfully portrayed. In other words, it need not have really happened that way. Here the elliptical relationship to the actual event is twice removed. The incident is simply referred to by means of condensed images rather than narrated in a linear fashion. Furthermore, the action pithily portrayed in the text is a creative reconstruction that need never have actually occurred. Finally, the spoken interjection at the end of the main chorus not only exhorts the singers to continue their common efforts at singing and dancing, but also serves as a moral counterpoint to the misdeeds alluded to in the song.

*Histrionics and History*

In the *ngoma* song rendered in Chinyanja *Namulangen*i there is reference to a historical figure:<sup>6</sup>

*Siyo—mama—siyo—mama*  
Siyo (style)—women—siyo (style)—women

*Tsiku anafa A Gomani—*  
(The) day (Chief) Gomani died—

*Ndilibe mawu hoi-sa*  
I have no words hoi-sa (style)

Mention of the great Ngoni chief Gomani, who was shot by the British in 1896, alludes to far more than just his name. Implicit in this reference is the tale of Malawian resistance to colonial rule. Ngoni chiefs, like those of the Yao, were notorious for their bellicose stance against British imperial rule and for their reluctance to depart from 'traditional' ways and adopt 'Western' values.

According to the oral historical account believed to be true by those in Malonje village, the Ngoni chief was a major adversary of the British. Upon his capture, which he allowed to happen because he was tired, the British tried to execute him by firing squad. The bullets, however, simply could not penetrate him. The British then attempted to chop off his head with an axe, but this also proved futile. After these unsuccessful attempts to kill him, Gomani grew tired and told his captors to pick a blade of grass whereupon he would lie down and the soldiers would be able to saw his head from his body. This was duly done. Because he had proved such a difficult adversary the British buried his decapitated body and took his head to England where it was delivered to the Queen as a war trophy. This is felt to have been a fitting tribute to the Ngoni warrior.

The song's male persona states that he was speechless at this period of history, though whether the person speaking witnessed the actual event or, indeed, was alive at the time is a moot point. Clearly, it was, however, a time of great trouble. The funeral of Chief Gomani would have taken more than three days, perhaps more than a week, while everyone mourned. During this period, the cattle were not taken out of their kraals and the people stayed inside their houses. Only 'big' people could have approached the *boma*, or headquarters, of the chief without being captured and killed by Ngoni soldiers. This is the cultural and historical baggage that is attendant upon the allusion to the famous chief's death.

6. This type of song is sung by the Ngoni people. Traditionally, it was sung when the men returned from war (see Mphande 1966). The song discussed here is now sung at beer parties or upon the death of a chief. This song is not 'traditional' to Malonje village. It has been imported by its current performer.



*'In the Graveyard there is no Mercy'*

In the corpus of Malonje song allusion does not confine itself solely to people and places. In a society that has always placed strong emphasis upon communion with the deceased in the form of ancestor veneration, the presence and occurrence of death has been accommodated and incorporated into a specific way of living and of viewing life. Although most villagers are nominally Christian, their respect for the dead, as expressed in remembrance ceremonies and cleansing rites, has seemed to represent the core of belief around which notions of Christian ideology have been appended. Belief in witchcraft and magic, although proscribed by the Christian churches, is also prevalent in Malonje village. Deaths, not surprisingly, may be attributed to witchcraft or evil intentions.

In the Chinyanja women's initiation song *Odi-Odi Tsekula*, for instance, the song begins with a woman visiting a female age-mate who does not want to open the door to her. Both women are quite formal in their mode of address towards each other, suggesting unfamiliarity between them. The woman inside the house asks the caller why she has called upon her when she has never visited her before. Through oblique references to the dead, death and the graveyard she then alludes to the visitor's intention to use bad magic. These allusions are given prominence as the first lines of various verses sung by leader one:

*Akufa sadzigwiriza ee-e-e nanga ine?*  
Dead people don't grip firmly ee-e-e what about me?

*Pakufa tidzangopita-a-a*  
When dying we will just be goi-i-ing

*Akufa sadzigwiriza*  
Dead people don't grip firmly

*Akufa sadzigwiriza*  
Dead people don't grip firmly

*Kumanda kulibe nsoni eee*  
At (the) graveyard there is no mercy eee

*Akufa sadzigwiriza*  
Dead people don't grip firmly

To the audience the allusion to dead people being past the worries and cares of life reflects the visatee's anxieties about the visitor's unknown intentions. The visatee expresses the sentiment that death is the condition of being past worldly cares. After all, in the graveyard death is final. Thus it is implied that opening the door to a stranger may lead to death. In the fifth line of verse nine (sung by leader two) the visitor replies to the woman's verbal prevarication:

*Mai mutondiona*

Mother (honour) you do see me

This counter statement alludes to the fact that the visitor is carrying nothing visible with which to harm the visitee. The implication is that, after all, the woman can see for herself. Yet, those in the audience know that the person intending to do harm could poison the other during her visit. Alternatively, the visit could simply be a reconnoitring mission to see the layout of the house. A magical line could be drawn at the entrance to the house or a root buried in the ground between the house and the *chimbudzi* (Chinyanja: [roofed] pit latrine) to poison the unsuspecting walker.

In another women's initiation song, performed in Chinyanja, the dead are likened to trees. *Amai Ndaima Pano* alludes to the frequency of funerals and the finality of death:

*Amai ndaima pano, maliro ndi mtengo, sindinaone maliro a kale*

Mother I have stood here, (a) dead person is (a) tree, I have never seen (a) funeral of (the) past

—*ndaima pano, maliro ndi mtengo, sindinaone imfa ya kale*

—I have stood here, (a) dead person is (a) tree, I have never seen death of (the) past

*Maliro ndi mtengo*

(A) dead person is (a) tree

This song, then, alludes to death. The female persona laments a death that has just occurred. She implies that funerals were scarce in the past. Her contention, 'A dead person is a tree', echoed by the chorus, refers metaphorically to the completeness of death, alluding to how a tree cut down falls to the forest floor:

[L1] *Ukamva gubudu maliro ndi mtengo amai ndaima pano*

When you hear *gubudu* (a) dead person is (a) tree, mother I have stood here

[L2] *Ati ukamva gubudu maliro ndi mtengo amai ndaima pano*

Ati (style) when you hear *gubudu* (a) dead person is (a) tree, mother I have stood here

CH *Maliro ndi mtengo*

(A) dead person is (a) tree

The finality of death is voiced in the idiophonic sound of a fallen tree, *gubudu*. The singer believes that death and funerals were more respected in the past. Death is now more frequent. Yet this presumption is based upon the observation that

people have become inured to the commonplace occurrence of death and burial. In the past they were not so inured as they are now. Then, a person could live to his or her teenage years before attending a funeral. As can be seen, the implications of these allusions are left largely unexplained. Yet they attain a concise summation of what they mean to express. The song alludes to a universal condition of man in the vocabulary and idiom of sung poetry.

### *Sexual Prohibition and AIDS*

The female persona of the Chiyao wedding song *Mkaitanda Ine* enjoins her husband not to make sexual advances towards her in case he should contract a dreadful disease from such an unmindful action. This is expressed primarily through allusion. In the third line of the first verse the leaders set the backdrop for the cautionary statement:

[L1] [L2] *Mwanache mbeleche liso mbole-mbole*  
Child I gave birth yesterday take it easy

The chorus then provides the allusion:

CH *Mkaitanda ine-eee—*  
(You) do not provoke other thi-i-ings—

*Kum'ona mwanache 'kwaŵa—*  
Seeing it child crawling—

*Nikuitanda ine-eee*  
And then you provoke other thi-i-ings

*Ngachidyog'opa chinyera kog'oya-aa*  
Without fearing dangerous 'venereal' dis-ease

Thus, the woman who has just given birth to a child is admonishing her husband to desist in his untoward actions. Not only is the sex act implied through euphemistic allusion, 'other things', but so is the traditional injunction against couples engaging in sexual intercourse before the new-born child is six months old. It is believed that should this injunction not be adhered to the man will become seriously ill and that if a traditional healer, or *sing'anga*, is not consulted right away the man may die. Through this premature act the man is believed to soak up the woman's 'unclean liquid', which then enters his bloodstream. When the impure liquid 'decays' it poisons him. It is the 'remains' left inside the woman after the birth of the baby that is considered 'dangerous'. It is clear that the

sexually contracted disease is considered deadly. In the last line of the song (the last line of the final main chorus) the singers replace the term *chinyera*, the traditional word for an impure ritual state of being, with *edzi*, or AIDS, the modern loanword for an equally deadly and mysterious disease contracted in the same physical manner:

CH        *Ngadyidyog'opatu edzi kog'oya-aa*  
              Without fearing this dangerous A-AIDS

Such a song as this, performed at a wedding by the 'big' women, serves as a mnemonic admonition to the newly married couple to observe the correct moral and ritual modes of behaviour towards each other. The message of wise counsel is couched in poetic language. It is not stated directly as in bland didactic formulas, but expressed by way of allusive reference. The allusive nature derives not only from the song's direct allusion to specific, but related, kinds of diseases. Rather, the opprobrious nature of such untimely actions are acted out verbally in front of the listeners. The allusive quality of the song attains its full force through the voice of the female protagonist. It is she who states her misgivings about the man's actions and who alludes to the consequences of such behaviour.

### *Generic Cross-Reference*

Reference may also be made in sung poetry to other genres of verbal artistry. Allusion may display a self-referential aspect. As has been demonstrated, geographical place-names, historical personages and events, local chiefs, family members and moral injunctions may be alluded to in sung poetry. Poetic language, in the guise of another generic form, may also establish the allusive backdrop to a sung poem. In fact, without it the song may have no meaning at all.

For example, the women's wedding song *Tsamba Likagwa*, performed in Chinyanja, contains numerous repetitions of the phrase that makes up its title. If the phrase were absent, only personal names and terms of address would be left. The two-word phrase not only embodies the main semantic import of the song, but also alludes to a proverbial expression. To the audience the two words do not stand alone, but form the first part of the proverb, *Tsamba likagwa sabwerera mtengo*, that is, 'When (a) leaf falls it never returns to (the) tree'.<sup>7</sup>

7. There is another extant Chinyanja proverb that begins with the same two words: *Tsamba likagwa manyazi agwira mtengo*. This may be translated as, 'When (a) leaf falls, shame holds (the) tree', and can be taken to mean that whatever actions a child may perform will also affect his/her parents and family; see Salaun 1969: 108 where, however, neither English translation nor exegesis is provided.

Most listeners, then, would know to which proverb it alludes and finish, in their own minds, the incomplete phrase. As this song is sung by young women at weddings it can be assumed that the proverb and the ability to 'fill in the blank', as it were, would be within the ken of most of those present. The allusion to the proverbial expression through the use of an incomplete portion of it, however, is only part of the semantic adjustment that a listener must make. The listener must know the meaning of the allusion and subsequently apply it to the contextual backdrop of the song text.

The allusion, then, not only refers to the form of the proverb, but also to its content. Just as when a leaf falls from a tree, it never returns to it; so too, when a person possesses something, he or she must nurture it, otherwise it will decay or be lost forever. As with most proverbs, the meaning is general enough to have almost universal validity even when applied to specific social situations. In this case, however, the listener has the song text to which to refer for the specific application.

The singer directly addresses the man and woman in turn and advises them that they must regard each other in this light. (The anthropologist is also referred to by name in the text, with reference to his relationship with his own wife.) Thus, in the context of a wedding song the meaning of the proverb alluded to in the text becomes an advisory note to the newly-weds to safeguard the sanctity of their marriage. The allusion is achieved through the partial provision of an extant proverb, the complete form and meaning of which must then be applied to the overarching and interacting contexts of the song's text and the event at which it is being performed.

### *The Anthropologist as Character Actor*

Less rarefied personages may also serve the poetic purposes of allusion. In a number of songs the visiting anthropologist features large as a contemporaneous allusion to present events. New songs can be and are composed to suit new occasions. Nevertheless, in some (and probably most) cases old songs are given new form and relevance by the inclusion of new and fresh allusions (cf. Gunner 1982). In one sense they are 'new' compositions, in that the people or events alluded to have never featured in a song in such a way before. It is through this poetic technique that current events can be included in an already extant repertoire. In fact, the established tradition of sung poetry proves highly sensitive to occasion and context. It is in the nature of Malonje sung poetry to incorporate the surrounding and immediate world of social and political life into the realm of creative expression. In a composition derived from a women's initiation song, *Che Giregi Zikomo*, sung in Chiyao at a beer feast, for example, the anthropologist is thanked directly for a service he had rendered the song leader when she had been

ill. I give verses 7 and 8 here. Due to the improvisational nature of the sung text the second leader has a difficult time harmonizing with the main leader:

- [L1] *Tinjijuga lipe-e—*  
I will beg (a) long gra-ass (blade)—
- [L2] *Tinjijuga lipe*  
I will beg (a) long grass (blade)
- [L1] *Ku Ingalande mkudya mmwedyi zikomo tinjijuga lipe—tinjijuga lipe—tinjijuga lipe-e*  
To England you are going you thank you I will beg (a) long grass—I will beg (a) long grass—I will beg (a) long gra-ass
- [L2] —*ga lipe—ga lipe—ga lipe—ga lipe*  
—beg (a) long grass—beg (a) long grass—beg (a) long grass  
—beg (a) long grass
- CH *Lipe amao-o*  
(a) long grass (blade) mother-r (!)
- [L1] *Tinjijuga lipe-e*  
I will beg (a) long gra-ass (blade)
- [L2] —*ga lipe*  
—beg (a) long grass
- [L1] *Che Giregi zikomo nambo tinjijuga lipe—tinjijuga lipe—mumbere mtera mmwedyi—tinjijuga lipe-e*  
Mr Greg thank you but I will beg (a) long grass—I will beg (a) long grass—you have given me medicine you—I will beg (a) long gra-ass
- [L2] —*ga lipe—ga lipe—ga lipe—ga lipe—nasalire—ga lipe-e*  
—beg (a) long grass—beg (a) long grass—beg (a) long grass—beg (a) long grass—I must tell you—beg (a) long gra-ass
- CH *Lipe amao-o*  
(a) long grass (blade) mother-r

The anthropologist is referred to by his title and Christian name, Mr Greg. He is thanked by the persona of the song who also happens in this case to be the performer herself, for giving her medicine. In fact, the degree of referencing is less elliptical in this instance than is usual in sung texts. The situation alluded to is thereby rendered fairly distinct. Far less direct, though, is the metaphorical

allusion to the service rendered, an allusion that pervades the text in the phrase 'the blade of long grass'.

The grass blade represents the 'insignificant' favour that she requested of the anthropologist, i.e. the provision of medicine. Thus, the favour is alluded to with two very different styles of reference. One is highly metaphorical, the grass blade, and could only be deciphered by those privy to the urgent occasion. The other is an almost prosaic rendering of what had occurred, the straightforward reference to medicine being provided. Furthermore, the text is as much an allusion to the present circumstances of offering thanks as it is to the original favour. Through allusion, then, the anthropologist and the blade of long grass are joined together in the composition as agent and action.

The anthropologist is also referred to in other texts in which he has not escaped some degree of irreverence. In their article on the inclusion of anthropologists in the traditional narratives of the Kuna of San Blas, Howe and Sherzer (1986: 889) state, 'thus what these everyday little narratives do is fix and stabilise the identity of a certain problematic kind of foreigner as marginal natives [*sic*]'. Furthermore, laughter and trickery are seen as ways of 'preserving equality by defeating dignity and social distance' (*ibid.*: 888). To some extent this is also true for the placement of myself in the sung compositions of Malonje village. In the Chinyanja wedding song *Chinangwa Changa*, for example, the unpredictable anthropologist is accused of making off with the singer's cassava:

[L1][L2] *Chinangwa changa n'nasiya pa moto*  
My cassava I left on the fire

CH *Ee-eee*  
*Ee-eee (style)*

[L1][L2] *Ndikamabwera ndipeza palibe*  
When I am coming back I find nothing there

CH *Yaya-aa*  
*Yaya-aa [nickname for a female age-mate]*

[L1][L2] *A Giregi ee-e-ee*  
Mr Greg ee-e-ee

CH *Ee-eeee*  
*Ee-eeee*

[L1][L2] *A Giregi ee-e-ee*  
Mr Greg ee-e-ee

CH *Yaya-aa*  
*Yaya-aa*

The culprit normally cited in the song is an age-mate named Yaya. As can be seen, the chorus never wavers from its assertion that Yaya is the one who always makes off with the roasting cassava from the ashes of the fire. This is the usual rendition of the text. The leaders of the song, however, accuse the anthropologist of the recurring deed. This accusation, furthermore, is accomplished in the presence of the accused, so to speak. I was crouched in front of the singers recording the text.

The effect of this allusion is not to recall some event that occurred in the 'timeless' past but to situate the anthropologist within the current enactment of the song: 'when the members of a society deal with anthropologists through humour, they do more than put individuals in their place. They also create that place, by situating an elusive and liminal social category' (Howe and Sherzer 1986: 891). What is being alluded to at that moment, moreover, is the occasion happening there and then. A 'special' category of person is taking part in the present performance of a sung composition.<sup>8</sup> That is the object of the allusion. Other associations may be adduced to provide further explanation.

The women are also 'playing' with me, as it were. As females who occupy the same generational level as myself these singers can be classified as potential marriage partners. Teasing, in this way, is characteristic of such a relationship. The allusion, however, is ultimately extratextual. The anthropologist is portrayed as a guilty protagonist in the event being acted out at the textual level, while the allusion created, intentionally through his referential inclusion in the text, is to his presence and participation in the performance of that text, that is outside of it.

The singers are, in effect, provocatively 'pointing' him out in the words of the song in order to underline his presence outside of the text. This action then accords, and at the same time recognizes, his singular status as special visitor. It is not that he occupies a 'liminal and elusive category' but, rather, that he is seen to participate in a number of intersecting categories that allow him to be utilized in a creative and entertaining manner.

This interpretation of the situation is given further buttressing by the inclusion of the anthropologist in the Chinyanja wedding song *Kumanda Kulibe Chisoni*, sung at a beer feast. The text of the song is also an allusion to an action and its implications, which are not spelled out in a narrative manner. The concise and oblique rendering of a statement in order to refer to an action that has occurred but is not textualized is a common stylistic trait of sung poetry. The consequence of such an occurrence may be stated in the text but the event may be and usually is left out of the discussion:

8. I prefer 'special' to 'liminal' as a qualifier because the people in Malonje village have lived and worked with Europeans for almost a century. Although Westerners are not deemed to be part of Malawian society, they certainly fit a category coterminous and coexisting with it. I was not part of a totally new and strange phenomenon, but a member of a known and, to be sure, stereotyped social category.



[L1][L2] *A Giregi mulibe chisoni*  
Mr Greg you have no mercy

[L1][L2] *Mwan'tengera*  
You have taken away my

CH *Chibade-eee*  
Darlin-ng

*Amama ndilire bwanji maliro?—*  
Mother, how do I cry (for) (a) dead body?—

*Amama chisheri changa chapita dzulo*  
Mother, my dear one went yesterday

*Amama ndilire bwanji maliro?—*  
Mother, how do I cry (for) (a) dead body?—

*Amama chisheri changa chapita dzulo*  
Mother, my dear one went yesterday

The direct allusion to the anthropologist places him as a central actor in an unfolding drama. He has taken away the woman's loved one. What is left unstated is that the first person addressed (Mr Greg) is leaving with her husband who is in his paid employment. The woman plainly blames the situation on the employer. While away working in another location there is always the nagging possibility that the man will meet another woman who will receive the greater portion of his wages. If the husband has been the bread-winner of the family this can be serious—the thatch-roofed and mud-walled house can dilapidate in three years. Also, there may not be enough garden to support a single family depending upon its produce alone for food. Thus, there is the tragic likelihood that the first wife and family will starve. If the employer had provided her, as he has her husband, with a passport and transport she would be praising him instead. Clearly he has not. This is the main (unstated) import of her claim that he has no mercy.

There is, moreover, no mistaking in which camp the 'European' anthropologist has been placed. His direct inclusion in the text aligns him with White employers and the institutionalized system of migrant labour. Before independence (when passports were introduced) many men travelled to Northern or Southern Rhodesia (now Zambia and Zimbabwe respectively) with their employers to work as gardeners or cooks, or in other domestic jobs. In the song text the anthropologist has been conflated with the colonialist system. In part this is because he is conceptualized as being of a class apart from that of those in the village. After all he is European and enjoys what appears to be an enviable life-style. Certainly, he is envisaged to be as affluent as those other Europeans residing in the Zomba area

who have either been employed by foreign-funded government aid programmes or by Chancellor College, the largest constituent college of the national university, and who have in recent times been the largest employers of Malawians as domestic staff, including a number of people from Malonje village.

Yet once again, the inclusion of the anthropologist in the text must be seen as a form of humorous and artful expression. The singers of the song are teasing me because I am there, involved in the current performance. In contrast to the direct allusion in *Chinangwa Changa*, however, I am not characterized as taking part in a minor peccadillo, the jejune nature of which helps to enhance the humour. Rather, my metonymic association with an unthinking and impersonal system of labour exploitation has a more sobering effect.

Allusion, then, works in a number of interlocking ways in the song text cited above. The text explicitly states that I am taking away the woman's husband. Furthermore, it accuses me of having no mercy. What is left unsaid, however, is the substance of the allusion. The man has opted to remain in employment in an overarching capitalist system in which jobs are at a premium. He has chosen this option in spite of having to temporarily desert his family. The female persona of the song can only lament her personal misfortune. She and her children must reap the consequences of the man's action. The 'dead body' is the husband who may never return. The mention of my name cuts across this dramatic *mise-en-scène* of individual fortune set amidst an enduring politico-economic regime.

In one sense the direct allusion to the anthropologist serves to lighten the effect of the tragic import of the text. Seen in the light of the previously cited song the anthropologist can be viewed as a trickster figure who has light-hearted and humorous qualities, but who, in the dramatic portrayal of the present song, can take on the characteristics of an oppressor (cf. Basso 1979). It is humorous that the anthropologist has been allotted this role; but at the same time the contextual ambience is ambivalent.

Added to these levels of ambiguity is the fact of the anthropologist's presence and interaction during the performance. The composition was performed during the rumbustious and uncontrolled merry-making of a beer feast. Not only is the contemporaneous inclusion of the anthropologist in the song text an allusion to his involvement in its enactment, but it is also a reflection of the festival atmosphere that pervaded its public performance.

### *Conclusion*

These examples underline the fact that the use of allusion in traditional Malawian song, whether to current objects and events or to those of the past, is a complex matter the full denotation and connotation of which must be 'teased out' from the ethnographic context in which the content of the song is placed. For each allusion has its own range of locally restricted associations that bring their own semantic

loads to bear upon the final meaning of the sung text. Each allusion, moreover, interacts with other allusions in the same text, and these must be combined to reach the final statement, as it were, of the composition.

In the past, treatment of allusion has been limited to consideration of the strict denotation of the word (or phrase), leaving the further personal, topical, and local associations derived from local knowledge and experience, largely unexamined. What can be seen from the range of examples given above is that allusion is intimately tied to the content and ultimate meaning of the sung poem.

It is in fact impossible to separate the concept of allusion from that of content. However, the manner in which content is illuminated by means of allusive technique is often through oblique reference and unstated inference. Inasmuch as the nature of language in sung poetry is characterized by compressed and allusive statement, it only serves to enhance the 'unvoiced' aspect of content. Even if the allusive device is directly stated, it still carries with it a load of cultural associations that most passive bearers of the oral tradition will call into play as a means of deciphering the ultimate message of its referent.

Thus allusion may be carried out by direct or indirect reference, but it will always leave some semantic residue unstated. It is this residue that, along with the surface content, will comprise the ultimate meaning of the sung text for the listener. This highlights the versatility of allusion for displaying current concerns in traditional texts as well as voicing moral codes of received knowledge in a new setting. Allusion is one of the most important devices used in the composition of sung poetry in Malonje village.

#### APPENDIX: KEY TO THE SYMBOLS USED IN THE SONG TEXTS

[L1]	lead singer (harmonized)
L1	lead singer (not harmonized)
S1	singer (other than leader)
CH	chorus (group)
!	exclamation
honour	honorific
style	stylistic sound
'—	ellipsis/elision
x—	run-on (singer continues to following line without pause)

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