

TRADITIONAL CHIEFDOMS

*A field experience of the traditional political powers
in the Chewa communities of Central Malawi,
from a development NGO perspective (WASH project).*

*Damien Delaplace
Inter Aide Chiseka Project Officer, November 2009.*

The information gathered in this paper was collected over a three-year period, while managing a WASH project – and living – in TA Chiseka, Lilongwe district, Central Malawi. The sources are mainly the project team, the population, and direct observations. It was done without particular methodology – only for the project work purpose and by personal interest. However several Chewa people – including traditional chiefs – kindly confirmed the exactitude on the information.

1 Hierarchy levels

Household < Family < Chief < Group < Traditional Authority (TA) < Prime Chief

<i>English Title</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Usual scale</i>	<i>Chichewa Title</i>
Household	The nuclear family	3 to 5 pers.	Khomo
Family	Blood related household – matrilineal – and living in the same area.	15 to 30 families	Banja
Village	One or several related family living in the same area - and in good enough relationship.	15 to 40 families	Mudzi
Chief	The <i>Traditional Chief</i> usually has a strong authority on the village.	1 chief	Afumu
Senior Chief	Among several chiefs can be one <i>Senior Chief</i> with more authority. Other chiefs show him more respect.	3 to 5 chiefs	
GVH	The <i>Group Village Head man</i> has a relative authority on Chiefs and Senior Chiefs. All GVH and Chiefs are usually related.	8 to 15 chiefs	Gulupu
Senior Group	Idem as for Senior Chief, but at group level.		Gulupu ayikulu
TA	The TA has a strong authority and political power on all the traditional chiefs. However in practice, due to the large scale, his authority is rarely directly felt on the field. He has authority on the traditional court (same name).	2000 chiefs	Chalogo
Prime Chief	Never heard about it!	3 in Malawi	

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- ✓ Chief, Group, TA and Prime Chief are officially recognized titles. Senior positions are common: a “senior chief” or “first chief” is in between Chiefs and Group. In practice they are recognized and respected by other chiefs.
- ✓ If someone has a title within the hierarchy, then he necessarily has all the inferior titles. Example of chief Chadza: TA Chadza is also Group Chadza and Chief Chadza.
- ✓ Anyhow, people commonly use the generic term “*chief*” to refer any people within this hierarchy - whatever his/her level.
- ✓ The following terminology is commonly use by development workers and the people themselves.

Note about matrilineal¹ (which is not the same as matriarchal²) structure: on daily life bases, it only has a reality at the enlarged family level: in term of blood relationship between families and chieftainship. At household level, women are under the authority of their husband. Gender inequity is rampant: women have no power of decision. Abuses and maltreatments are very common. In practice, the father of a child is accountable to the maternal uncle, who has authority on the children.

2 Chief facts

2.1 Chiefs selection

Chiefs are selected according to the following way:

- ✓ The elder women – they are usually old – of the family gather to debate and select the new chief, among the family members: most of the time among men.
- ✓ The elder women tell the conclusion to the family and request the TA’s approval.
- ✓ A several days ceremony is given.

The main criteria of selection are: equity, wisdom, good behavior, intelligence, ability to rule.

A woman may be designed as chief only by default: in case no appropriate men can be found. So female chiefs are few: from 5% to 10%³.

¹ Matrilinear means that descent is traced through the female line: "matrilineal inheritance". It does not mean that power is in the hands of women: this is matriarchy.

² Matriarchy (form the Greek: *matēr* "mother" and *archein* "to rule"). is a community in which the mother or oldest female is the supreme authority, and descent is traced through the female line. There are no known societies that are unambiguously matriarchal, though women-centered civilization worshipping a “mother goddess” probably existed during prehistory and in ancient civilizations.

³ Female chiefs are much more common in other areas like in Southern Malawi.

2.2 Chief creation & upgrade

A new chief position can be created if a family, when its number of members reaches a critical size, decides to split. It can also be a powerful and ambitious chief who denies the authority of the existing Group and who becomes Group himself - he usually is already a senior chief.

The creation or upgrade of a chief requires payment to the TA (around 40 000 Malawian Kwacha) and his authorization. The TA usually agrees.

The reasons commonly given to create a new chief are (most commons first):

- ✓ A high number of people is difficult to rule
- ✓ Various privileges can be expected from political leaders and according to the chief position: infrastructures, equipments, coupon for fertilizer or cash.
- ✓ The existing chief rules the different families with inequity – he favors his own family – or creates disagreement.
- ✓ Pride, prestige.

Note about creation and upgrade: for the last few years, there has been a huge increase in the number of chiefs. This trend has several causes. Among them are the advantages related to the fertilizer subsidies: families can get more and have better control on coupons. The TAs, who are paid when a chief is created or upgraded, can be cupid. So, to become a chief can be seen as an investment with promising social and financial benefits. This “feudal” system is still very alive in rural areas, despite new societal trends induced by democratization, multi-parties, right and freedom claims.

2.3 Chief replacement

A chief is supposed to be replaced in case of inability to rule, like for example inappropriate behavior, inequity, or health problem. In practice, only death can lead to his replacement. When a chief dies, the way his successor is selected is similar to a new chief selection, except that:

- ✓ the deceased chief’s funeral has to be over - including the grave ceremony which may come up to one year after the burial,
- ✓ the new chief can only belong to the family of the deceased one
- ✓ payment to the TA is less than for a chief creation - about 20 000 MKw.

Note about witchcraft: despite the strength of Christian churches, people usually keep their traditional religion and the associated witchcraft. This is so true that they usually don’t see any death as natural, except for old people. So, it is not rare to have the people believing that the deceased chief was killed by a witch doctor. As witchcraft can only take place within the family circle, the new elected chief may not wish to replace the dead one! In such case, the new chief may have moved far away from his community only a day after his selection. To replace such a chief may take more than 1 year.

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2.4 Chief Representatives

A chief cannot always be available. Moreover, the higher a chief is, the more responsibilities he has, and the less available he is at field level. So chiefs have representatives: a small chief usually has two, a TA many more.

A chief representative doesn't have the power of decision: his duty is to speak in his name and to report to him. So to give a message to him or to have his commitment has a strong meaning.

In practice, representatives can be very important as they are often ruling in lieu of disable chiefs: most commonly in case of their old age, of chronicle disease, of alcoholism...

2.5 Chief names

A name can be associated to different entity like a well, a village, a TA. It is more especially associated to a chief position. The newly selected chief, as he is taking a new title, loses his previous name. His personal name is given to somebody else "*to remember it*".

Geographical names commonly come from the more important chief. For example, a long time ago, the chief *Chadza*, who had the position of TA, gave his name to the areas he was ruling:

- ✓ to the "TA Chadza" as a geographical entity: one may say "*they are about 2000 villages in TA Chadza*" as well as "*TA Chadza died*".
- ✓ to his original village "*the village Chadza*".

Several chief can have the same name. In 2007, to avoid confusion, TA Chiseka requested the chiefs with a similar name to change it.

More commonly, in a same area, the differentiation can be made by adding the adjectives. For example:

- *Kampini Kusi*: Kampini lower
- *Kampini Pakati*: Middle Kampini
- *Kampini Kuntunda*: Highest Kampini.

2.6 Chief duties

Chiefs are usually quite busy. They are involved in:

- ✓ Meeting political leaders
- ✓ Meeting other chiefs, especially the TA

- ✓ Dealing with NGOs (project) and government agencies (e.g. for coupon distribution)
- ✓ “Judging” at the traditional court
- ✓ Ruling their own people in their community
- ✓ Farming for themselves (small chiefs only)

2.7 Chief power and limit

A chief is well respected by his people. It hardly ever happens that one fails to have his people implement the work he requests. However, people disobedience or demobilization can happen: this usually reveals a lack of leadership from the chief himself. Lack of leadership can be due to laziness. However, it is more often due to alcoholism and greediness. This leads to disrespect from its people.

A *Group* has limited power on his *chiefs*. Indeed, it is frequently observed that chiefs follow their own view, especially in case of conflict among them.

A TA has an extremely strong power on any chiefs. Yet, due to the scale of his area, his direct intervention is rare. A community project should not expect much support at this level.

Note about chief conflicts: they are very common, and it is a serious issue. In case of conflict, the communities usually disband. Due to the lack of cooperation, it is then extremely difficult to properly implement any project in the village (which is often understood as a lack of motivation). To address this issue some developing agencies, for example GTZ - within the frame of its support to the decentralization process – is conducting conflict resolution project, as well as chiefs’ sensitization and empowerment (with respect to their social responsibilities).



Among these five chiefs, two are obviously in conflict. This situation hindered the implementation of project activities in the whole village.

3 Governmental connections

3.1 Traditional court

The traditional court (TC) works in parallel with the governmental court. It works at TA level. Chiefs judge at the traditional court. Yet the people working at the court can be transferred by the government from one TA to another.

3.2 TA selection

The central government is very much concerned by TAs, as:

- ✓ The District has authority on TA. When a new TA is selected, he is proposed by the family to the District Commissioner. In practice the DC never rejects the proposition. However due to political pressures, families may have to propose the one selected by the government.
- ✓ TA boundaries fit to the district boundaries. For example there are 17 TAs in Lilongwe District.
- ✓ The government can decide to split a TA in two or, on the opposite, to have one disappear. For example in 1995 the government had TA Massula replaced by TA Chiseka. Later on it was split in two again: TA Chiseka and TA Massula - who was rehabilitated. New boundaries definitions created conflicts at community level.

3.3 Development committees

Development committees are related to the decentralization process. They are under the District Assembly authority, as follows:

- ✓ TA level: Area Development Committee (ADC)
- ✓ Group level: Village Development Committee (VDC)
- ✓ Community level: Village Health Committee (VHC)

The capacities and activity of those committees are closely related on their human and financial resources. In practice, they are inactive.



On the way to Mitundu, TA Chiseka: the sign of a traditional doctor

4 To go further

Political powers are very important at community level. So a community development project should pay particular attention to it. In practice, the success of the activities implementation strongly depends on the support of the chiefs. Each community organization as well as each chief has his specificities. So, when entering a community, time and effort are required to understand these specificities and gain the chiefs' support.

Traditional chieftainship is closely related to tradition, so to culture. Although it is not apparent – people don't talk much about it – the Chewa culture is still very much alive. In reality, the Chewa culture is closely related to traditional religion. This is why, in spite of appearances and the obvious success of Christian churches, traditional beliefs are still very strong. Traditional beliefs are still structuring the whole Chewa identity. Traditional chieftainship, although it has evolved a lot, is directly related to it. The mask dance, or *Gule Wamkulu* (in English the "great dance"), is the most visible – and colorful - part of the *secret societies*: it was inscribed in 2008 on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, as a means of expression. Funerals are also very important: obviously related to religion – death is all about spirit – they are also social events. If not understood, this can seriously disturb a project management.

To go further:

On Chewa Traditional Religion: J.W.M. Van Breugel, (2001), "*Chewa Traditional Religion*", Kachere. Very complete but a bit long to read, a thesis written by a Jesuit father during the 70s (Banda period) about traditional religion – as it used to be in old ages:

Malawian Cultural Museum:

Mua mission: www.Kungoni.org

The UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity:

<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=EN&RL=00142&topic=diapo#/culture/ich/img/photo/thumb/00197-LRG.jpg>



Gule Wamkulu : dancer with mask, drums, and public.

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