

Chinyanja and the Language of Rights

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ABSTRACT

Discourses on human rights are among the most enduring consequences of the wave of democratisation that swept across sub-Saharan Africa during the 1990s. The "rights-talk" is spread by, among others, non-governmental organisations that consider "civic education" on rights as one of their major tasks. This article examines the case of Chinyanja in order to highlight challenges in the attempts to translate the rights-talk into vernacular languages. In Chinyanja, "human rights" are translated as *ufulu wachibadwidwe wa munthu*, literally "the freedom that the person is born with". In the context of persistent poverty and insecurity among many Chinyanja-speakers, such a translation appears to feed reactionary counter-discourses that criticise democracy for bringing "too much freedom". The article discusses theoretical problems in translation, particularly the question of linguistic relativity, and argues that translation is best seen as conversation with existing notions. By exploring the notion of interdependence in Chinyanja proverbs, the article finally demonstrates how extreme individualism and conservative counter-discourses do not have to constitute the only alternatives in Chinyanja debates on rights and democracy.

Keywords: Chinyanja, human rights, democracy, proverbs

INTRODUCTION

The wave of democratisation that swept across sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1990s, bringing multiparty politics in its wake, has had some enduring consequences despite widespread concern over its depth and sustainability. Much has changed at the level of discourse, if not always in practice. The making of claims, often asserting various "rights", has become vociferous in tandem with a perceived freedom of expression and association. However precarious their achievements are, the organisations, groups and individuals promoting and claiming rights are in many countries the most visible custodians of the new pluralism in sub-Saharan Africa. A new public discourse has emerged, its liberal tenets shared by virtually all politicians and non-governmental organisations. This discourse, if shared, does not entail consensus. On the contrary, what is shared is a certain world-view in which subjects are rights-bearing groups and individuals, all engaged in perpetual struggles to claim their rights in society. As "rights-talk" (Adams 1997; Dembour 1996), the new pluralist discourse depends on particular linguistic strategies in order to be heard.

While there is every reason to celebrate, and to consolidate, the deliverance of many African polities from the iron rule of autocratic leaders, the current discourse on rights must not be taken for granted. One fundamental issue is whether the rights-talk, based on liberal tenets, can ever address effectively social and economic injustices that are structural and historical; whether, in fact, the rights-talk merely claims shares in an ultimately unequal distribution of welfare without confronting the structural causes of inequality. Another important issue to be researched further is the emergence of counter-discourses in political pluralism. Some of these alternative discourses are reactionary and yet products of the rights-talk itself. For example, it has been observed that the introduction of human rights as a "modern" and "civilised" phenomenon has produced assertions of valued "traditions" and "cultures". "Culture-talk" opposes "rights-talk" while both are in fact elements of the same contemporary situation and reinforce each other (see Mamdani 2000).

This observation raises another fundamental issue in understanding rights and democratisation in countries emerging from autocratic rule. The issue is how rights, as discursively imagined objects of thought, are introduced to the populace in these countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, this inevitably leads to ask how rights are translated, because many are dependent on vernacular languages in communicating their grievances. Culturally insensitive translations may provoke reactionary counter-discourses and undermine popular participation in the democratisation process. This article explores some of the theoretical issues in the translation of rights, including the relation between language and world-view. Against the spurious notion that a transformation in world-view is indeed necessary if comprehensive human rights are to be attained, this article also considers certain proverbs for the light they shed on the issues of rights, value and dignity. Proverbs deserve attention, because they have existed in society longer than the rights-talk.

The concerns of this article arise from political and economic transformations among the Chinyanja-speakers in Malawi and Mozambique with whom I have been engaged in ethnographic research over the past ten years.¹ Although shaped by very different colonial and postcolonial regimes, both countries came to embrace elements of liberal democracy during the 1990s. Malawi remained under the conservative and oppressive rule of "Life-President" Kamuzu Banda from its independence in 1964 until the multiparty elections in 1994, following a referendum in 1993 where the majority had rejected the one-

¹ In Malawi, where Chinyanja is a national language, the official name of the language was Chichewa from 1968 until 1999 (Nkhoma 1999: 210). Kamuzu Banda, the autocrat who was ousted from power in 1994, is widely seen to have acted tribalistically when he ordered in 1968 that Chinyanja should be called Chichewa. Chewa was the ethnic identity which received Banda's tacit approval as the core of Malawian culture (see Vail and White 1989). Although there are people who consider themselves as Nyanja, Chinyanja is a trans-ethnic language, its name referring to *nyanja*, "lake", and to the peoples living in the region near Lake Malawi. The language is also widely spoken in parts of Mozambique, and it is a *lingua franca* in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, and in Zambia's Eastern Province.

party system of government (Phiri and Ross 1998). In 1994, Mozambique also held multiparty elections, following a peace treaty in 1992 that had ended a prolonged civil war (Hall and Young 1997). Both countries have since then sustained multipartyism and civilian rule, with numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs), responding to aid donors' call for "good governance" and a "vibrant civil society", playing their part in ensuring the flow of development aid. One conspicuous section of these NGOs focuses on rights, from the most encompassing human rights to more specific group rights. An important aspect of their own understanding of their purpose is the need to "educate" and "sensitise" the populace on rights, inevitably leading to attempts to translate the discourse on rights into various vernacular languages.

In Chinyanja, "human right" is translated as *ufulu wachibadwidwe wa munthu*. During my field studies, I have noticed that it is the notion of *ufulu* that frequently causes controversy, with many claiming that democracy (*dimokalase*) itself is problematic because of *ufulu*. The notion connotes "freedom", the Chinyanja monolingual dictionary explaining it as *mwai wokhala momasuka, mokondwa ndi mopanda mantha* (a chance to live liberated, with happiness and without fear; see Centre for Language Studies 2000: 345). The problem with this translation of human rights may arise from the way in which freedom is defined as *wachibadwidwe wa munthu*, the core here being the verb *kubadwa*, to be born. *Ufulu wachibadwidwe wa munthu* is, therefore, "freedom that a human being is born with".

In both Malawi and Mozambique, the democratic reform has been followed by a widespread sense of unfulfilled promises, with rampant poverty posing a threat to public security (Englund 2001). This experience of insecurity – among the poor no less than the well-off – is compounded by the way in which politicians and NGOs seem to cherish *ufulu* as the essence of democracy. Many of my interlocutors – including both villagers and the urban poor – have pointed out that *ufulu*, when not restrained, has much in common with insolence (*chipongwe*) and lack of respect (*kusowa kwa ulemu*). By insisting on such freedom as a "birth-right", human rights activists may inadvertently evoke their own criticism. It is necessary, therefore, to pay close attention to the problem of translation in the rights-talk, and to investigate how specific notions receive their meaning in a particular language.

1. TRANSLATION AND WORLD-VIEW

The dominant discourse on human rights is universalist, vehemently opposing the relativist argument that the preoccupation with human rights is a historically and culturally specific phenomenon that is restricted to "the West" (see e.g. Wilson 1997). Its universalism is predicated on the assumption of shared humanity, a condition that cuts across all distinctions based on sex, age, nationality, culture, religion, occupation, health, education, and so forth. The

aim of this article is not to assess the truth of this view – the fact that the universalist discourse on human rights has been adopted by many Africans themselves makes the pragmatic task of investigating its consequences much more urgent. However, whether its universalism is warranted or not, it is plausible to examine the tenets of the discourse as elements of a particular world-view. After the Cold War, the discourse on human rights has gained new momentum with the expansion of liberal democracy in the world. An emerging critical scholarship on this trend argues that liberal democracy is not “the end of history”, a technical – and final – solution to the ills of the humankind. Critical attention is being devoted to liberal democracy as a cultural project in which particular values, norms and practices are inculcated into ordinary citizens. Crucial to the attendant world-view is a distinct notion of the human subject, a notion that “trumpet[s]...the uncompromising autonomy of the individual, rights-bearing, physically discrete, monied, market-driven, materially inviolate” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 3).

In many sub-Saharan African countries, human rights activists confront, therefore, the challenge to convey a new world-view to people who have long experienced autocratic rule. In so far as the liberal world-view presumes that human subjects are, or ought to be, autonomous individuals, the challenge may seem formidable. African ethnography has demonstrated that numerous ritual and mundane practices on the continent make the human subject a composite, a relational being composed by various social and spiritual relationships (see Riesman 1986). In this regard, African languages may not offer apt lexical and idiomatic notions for the autonomous and discrete individual postulated by the liberal world-view; not, at least, notions that would carry a positive value among native speakers. The challenge for human rights activists is to either accept the possibility of misunderstanding when they translate the rights-talk into vernacular languages, or to devise neologisms. Both alternatives, it would seem, require additional interventions, such as “civic education”, in order to be successful.

My discussion carries, however, an assumption that must be made explicit. Not only do I assume that the rights-talk represents a particular world-view; my concern with the translation of this rights-talk also seems to assume a correspondence between language and world-view. According to this assumption, the speakers of particular languages are likely to subscribe to particular world-views. Expressed in this way, the assumption is unvarnished and in need of critical scrutiny. The idea, often associated with the thesis of linguistic relativity, that language, thought and culture are inter-linked has appeared in various philosophical and religious traditions for centuries (see Gumperz and Levinson 2000: 3). In linguistics and anthropology, the thesis came to be known as “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” after Benjamin Whorf’s initial formulations in the early 1940s (Koerner 1992). This hypothesis came under attack especially from the 1960s onwards, when cognitive science appeared to permit the identification of universals even in linguistics (see e.g. Rosch 1977; Lucy 1992). The highly technical approach of cognitive linguistics has had its

common-sensical counterpart in the assertion that the relative ease with which persons can learn new languages disproves the assumed correspondence between language and thought.

The thesis of linguistic relativity, in its unvarnished form, is unambiguously discredited, and a recent effort to revisit the debate admits, "it would be pointless to attempt to revive ideas about linguistic relativity in their original form" (Gumperz and Levinson 2000: 7). There are, however, salient issues in the thesis that may inspire further research. An important pre-condition for identifying these issues is the realisation that the original thesis may have been mistaken in its focus on linguistic expressions in isolation, as if meanings were lodged in lexicon and grammar. Recent developments in anthropological linguistics, drawing upon the ethnographic approach, have shown that cognitive science is not the only alternative to the discredited thesis. The salient issues of variable meanings – and the attendant challenges to translation – can be re-addressed when linguistic utterances are studied in context. Talk is embedded in a framework of other activities, and it is through this framework that it becomes meaningful (Goodwin and Duranti 1992: 17). Theories of use in context replace, therefore, theories of context-free lexical and grammatical meaning (Gumperz and Levinson 2000: 8).

One set of theoretical issues opens out as another disappears. "Context" is by no means a self-evident notion, and major descriptive problems are raised when it is analytically demarcated. For example, talk may presuppose context in order to be meaningful, but talk also shapes context and provides a context for further talk (Goodwin and Duranti 1992: 31). The demarcation of context is not an empirical given; the decision on what constitutes "enough" context for a particular phenomenon must be theoretically motivated (cf. Silverstein 1992). The contextual meanings that the rights-talk assumes, moreover, bespeak relations and contests of power that must be made explicit. Critical Discourse Analysis – an approach to the study of talk that has emphasised the importance of political context – has devoted insufficient attention to these issues and, as a consequence, treated the political context as mere background (Blommaert 2001: 17). What Critical Discourse Analysis is expected to highlight and clarify – "hidden" power relations – have already been given in its background description of an unequal and asymmetric "context" in which linguistic events take place.

Social and political context is, in other words, more than mere background to discourse. More fruitful perspectives into translation are possible when discourse and its social and political context are understood to constitute one another – social relations and political processes generate conditions for discourse, but precisely because they are discursively imagined, they are also generated by language. Conversation, in fact, provides a better metaphor than textual translation for the problems of understanding between variable discourses, because those discourses and their attendant world-views are embedded in one continuous history (Pálsson 1995). In this sense, it is no wonder that differences in grammar and lexicon do not alone explain

interpretive diversity and the consequent challenges to translation (cf. Gumperz and Levinson 2000: 10). Idioms and other lexical items are embedded in a dynamic field of social and political relations. If *ufulu*, for example, puts the understanding of human rights in peril and provokes reactionary counter-discourses among contemporary Chinyanja-speakers, the explanation must not be confined to the assumed unsuitability of an isolated lexical item. The question as to why this particular lexical item should be unsuitable must be posed, its answers to be sought in an ethnographically and historically informed analysis of Chinyanja-speakers' social and political context.

2. RIGHTS AS FREEDOM

The above theoretical reflections indicate that even if it is plausible to equate the tenets of liberal human rights discourse with a particular world-view, difficulties in translating that discourse do not inhere in grammatical and lexical differences which would signify incompatible discrepancies in the way that languages structure perception and thought. In so far as problems of translation are problems of conversation between different world-views, these problems must be understood historically, in the context of changing social and political relations. It is evident that *ufulu*, connoting "freedom", came to be chosen as the translation for "rights" as a result of a specific political history. Malawi, reflecting the country's prominence in standardising Chinyanja, spearheaded this translation, and its intellectuals, activists and opposition politicians saw democratisation precisely as a process of achieving "freedom". *Ufulu* denoted all those privileges and rights that Kamuzu Banda's government had denied for the vast majority of the populace. A leaflet used in Malawian civic education, for example, asks *ufulu ndi chiani?* ("what is freedom?") and gives this answer: *ufulu ndi ngati chishango chokutetezani kwa boma kapena anthu ena* ("freedom is like a shield which protects you against the government or other people"). The answer in English in this bilingual leaflet reads: "Rights are like a shield that you can hold up against the state, and sometimes against other people" (see CHRR n.d.a). Not only are "rights" misleadingly translated as *ufulu*, the Chinyanja translation also lacks the qualifying *can* and *sometimes* of the English version.²

Liberty may be a common ideal that inspires popular protests against dictatorship everywhere in the world, but for Chinyanja-speakers its semantic field has become an entrenched aspect of the post-authoritarian era. The translation has established rights as freedom instead of defining specific freedoms – of expression, worship, and association, among others – as rights,

² Note also the difference in the titles of this bilingual and illustrated leaflet. In English, the title is *Simplified Graphical View of Human Rights in Malawi*. In Chinyanja, it is *Kufotokoza za Ufulu wa Anthu*, "explaining the freedom of people" – a considerably more assertive and sweeping title than its English counterpart.

always controlled by other rights. This order of the rights-freedom interface is highly consequential for the way in which the discourse on human rights has come to be understood by Chinyanja-speakers.

Political history may explain how *ufulu* came to denote "rights" in Chinyanja, but the ensuing controversies over its meaning can hardly be understood without considering the qualifying *wachibadwidwe wa munthu*, "that which the person is born with", which apparently gives a Chinyanja definition for "human rights". As my discussion of Chinyanja proverbs later in this article suggests, this translation is at variance with established Chinyanja notions of the human subject. In order to appreciate the ways in which human rights NGOs and activists have used this translation, it is necessary to begin by examining the translations of key documents in this field. Human rights NGOs commonly regard this translation work as crucial to their attempts to reach the "grassroots" in sub-Saharan Africa. However, it appears that the work of translation has so far been conducted in a rather haphazard manner, with little co-ordination between NGOs and between the translators they use. In Malawi, NGOs appear to put more effort into producing simplified English texts of legal documents than into critically assessing their translations into Chinyanja and other vernacular languages. NGOs often contract outsiders to provide the translations, but the "experts" used is a diverse group of people, from secondary-school teachers to qualified lawyers to professional linguists at the Centre for Language Studies in the University of Malawi. While the University houses the most competent linguists, NGOs show little consistency in enlisting its services, but nor, on the other hand, is it obvious that its linguists have time for the kind of research that the translation of a new discourse would require.³

In this article, my own translations of the Chinyanja translations used in the human rights education and advocacy are not in idiomatic English, nor have I always consulted the official English translations that provide the basis for the Chinyanja translations. Instead, I try below to give a sense of how these translations are likely to appear to Chinyanja-speakers themselves. Thus, for example, The African Charter on Human and People's Rights, a document of the Organisation of African Unity, is translated as *Pangano la mu Afrika la Ufulu Wachibadwidwe wa Anthu*, "the African agreement on the freedom with which people are born" (MHRRC n.d.a). United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights is translated as *Ufulu Wachibadwidwe Wokhazikitsidwa ndi Maiko*, "the freedom that the person is born with as established by the countries" (MHRRC n.d.b). United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of the Child is translated as *Mgwirizano wa Malamulo pa Ufulu Wachibadwidwe wa Mwana*, "an agreement on the rules (laws) on the freedom that the child is born with" (Unicef n.d.).

The notion of the human subject in these translations is that of an autonomous, independent individual. For example, The African Charter on

³ On the Centre for Language Studies in Malawi, see Kamwendo (1999).

Human and People's Rights defines an essential human being, stripped of his or her social and cultural identities:

Munthu aliyense ali ndi ufulu m'panganoli mosayang'anira mtundu wake, khungu kaya ndi wamkazi kapena wamwamuna, mpingo, ndale kapena maganizo ena, dziko kapena gulu limene akuchokera, chuma, kobadwira kapena udindo uliwonse (MHRRC n.d.a: 3; "every person has freedom in this agreement disregarding his or her tribe, skin or whether the person is a woman or a man, church, politics or other opinions, country or group where he or she comes from, wealth, the place of birth or any position").

The Declaration of the Rights of the Child conveys a similar sense of the human subject:

Mwana aliyense ali ndi ufulu malinga ndi mfundo zimene zakhazikitsidwa mu mgwirizano uno mopanda tsankho, mosayang'ana mtundu wa mwanayo, maonekedwe a khungu, mkazi kapena mwamuna, chilankhulo, chipembedzo, ndale kapena kusiyana maganizo, fuko, kochokera, chuma, kulumala, chibadwidwe kapena mkhalidwe uliwonse wa mwanayo, makolo, ena omulera ndi m'mene aliri (Unicef n.d.: 3; "every child has freedom, according to this agreement, without discrimination, disregarding the tribe of that child, the look of the skin, female or male, language, religion, politics or differences in opinion, clan, the place of origin, wealth, disability, a characteristic he or she was born with or any habit of the child, parents, others who care for him or her and how they are").

In accord with basic liberal views on the human subject, the autonomous individual is in these definitions an abstraction, embodying essential humanity that exists prior to all social relationships. This essential humanity is equated with freedom, *ufulu*, and the ideas of what constitutes a "child" are especially provoking for established Chinyanja notions of the human subject. According to the translated human rights discourse, the child is a full human being, complete with his or her individual freedom. The translation of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child asserts that *mwana ali ndi ufulu wolankhula maganizo ake* (Unicef n.d.: 7; "the child has the freedom to speak out his or her opinions"). A leaflet entitled *Kuzunza mwana* ("to harass a child"), published by a Malawian NGO in its series entitled *Dziwani ufulu wanu* ("know your freedom"), states that *kuzunza mwana ndi kumuonongera mwanayo ufulu wake wina womwe ndi wofunikira kwa mwanayo m'chikhalidwe chili chonse* (CHRR n.d.b; "to harass a child is to destroy his or her freedom which is important to the child in every culture"). My discussion later in this article on established Chinyanja notions of the human subject highlights the potential for miscommunication in these translations.

Another way of exploring the notion of the human subject in the Chinyanja translations of the human rights discourse is by considering how the limits to

individual sovereignty are expressed. The translation of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights contains a section entitled *Udindo*, "duty" (MHRRC n.d.a: 11). It states that *munthu aliyense ayenera kugwiritsa ntchito ufulu wake popanda kusokoneza ufulu wa ena* (MHRRC n.d.a: 11; "every person must exercise his or her freedom without confusing the freedom of others"). The translation of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child also states that

Ufulu uli ndi malire, koma malirewa angakhazikitsidwe pokhapokha malamulo atero ndipo ndi wofunikira pofuna: a) kulemekeza ufulu wachibadwidwe kapena mbiri ya anthu ena; kapena b) kuteteza dziko, kukhazikitsa bata, kapena ndi umoyo wa anthu (Unicef n.d.: 7; "freedom has a limit, but this limit should be established only when the laws so demand, and when it is necessary to a) honour the freedom that other people are born with or their reputation, or b) to protect the country, to establish calm or well-being among people").

According to these translations, freedom is the ultimate value, and its infringements are permissible only in so far as their exercise threatens the freedom of other autonomous individuals. Significantly, when this translated human rights discourse draws upon such salient Chinyanja notions as *ulemu* (respect), *kulemekeza* (to honour), and *umunthu* (humanity), they are also represented as properties of autonomous individuals. For example, the translation of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights stipulates that *munthu aliyense ali ndi ufulu wopatsidwa ulemu pa umunthu wake ndi mphamvu ya chilamulo* (MHRRC n.d.a: 4; "every person has the freedom to be given respect for his or her humanity by the power of law"). A leaflet from a Malawian NGO also insists that *inu monga munthu, muyenera kulandira ulemu wa umunthu. Choncho boma ndiponso anthu ena ayenera kulemekeza ufulu wa munthu alieyense* (CHRR n.d.a; "as a human being, you must receive respect for humanity. Thus the government and other people must honour every human being's freedom"). Missing in these translations is, on the one hand, a notion of rights in the plural, with some rights taking precedence over others, thereby constraining and qualifying abstract "freedom". The translation of rights as "freedom", on the other hand, also fails to acknowledge humanity as a social condition in which fundamental moral sentiments bind persons together and oblige them to show mutual respect. Such an obligation is likely to arise less from an individual's claim to freedom than from his or her experience as a social being who is related to others.

In the light of such unfortunate translations, miscommunication and misunderstanding, feeding conservative counter-discourses, are virtually inevitable. Among Chinyanja-speakers, a major counter-discourse against the rights-talk revolves around a perceived conflict between youths and elders. For instance, when some school children in Malawi took advantage of the festivities during the National Education Day in 2001 by consuming alcohol, their teachers referred to the excessive "freedom" that democracy had brought to the country.

One teacher is reported to have commented rather despairingly, "There is just too much freedom in this country. If we discipline them [school children] they will take us to court and we will be the losers".⁴

3. DISCOURSES FOR AND AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS

The Chinyanja translations of the human rights discourse are ubiquitous in Malawi and parts of Mozambique and Zambia. Together with the discourse on HIV-AIDS, the discourse on human rights is cherished by aid donors and ruling politicians as a persuasive index of "change" in these countries; the more there is talk about HIV-AIDS and rights, it is assumed, the more open and democratic is the society. The difficulties of urban-based human rights NGOs to reach the rural "grassroots" are compensated by the fact that the human rights discourse is also spread by radio programmes and other forms of mass communication, by religious leaders', politicians' and development workers' speeches, and, perhaps most significantly in rural areas, by the current school curriculum. Both primary and secondary schools provide lessons that introduce pupils to the discourse. These lessons are not only part of Social Studies, they are also included in the study of various other subjects, such as languages. Textbooks on Chinyanja, which is a compulsory subject in schools that follow the Malawian curriculum, contain chapters on *ufulu wachibadwidwe wa munthu* in both primary and secondary schools. The following abbreviated extract from a Chinyanja textbook for Form 1, the first year in secondary school, is an illuminating example of how pupils are taught to grapple with this discourse. The story is entitled *Moyo wa anyamata ndi atsikana amakono* ("the life of boys and girls nowadays") and presents a conversation between three men.⁵

"Inu a Chakamba, ine moyo wa anyamata ndi atsikana athu a masiku anowa ukundidabwitsa", adatero a Chakhala pokamba ndi a Chakamba uku akusasa fumbi kumbuyo kwa buluku lawo.

"Mwatero a Chakhala, mukudabwa nawo bwanji moyo wa anyamata ndi atsikana amenewa?", adafunsa motero a Chakamba.

"Masiku ano mtsikana kapena mnyamata ukamulangiza kuti asamabwere mochedwa pakhomo la makolo ake chifukwa choti kunja kuno kwaopsa, mumadziwa momwe amayankhira?", a Chakhala adafunsa motero.

"Ayi ndithu ambwana, amati chiyani?", adatero a Chakamba poyankha.

⁴ Quoted in "Drink mars Schools' Day", *The Nation* (Blantyre), 20 July, 2001.

⁵ In the interest of brevity, I have left out sections that describe the environment and other aspects that are not germane to the conversation on human rights. As before, my translation into English is not idiomatic but a rendering of the senses in which the story is most likely to be understood by Chinyanja-speakers.

"Aa! Koma inu muchita ngati simukukhala m'dziko mwathu momwe muno. Bwanji mufuna kundikambitsa mbwerera. Inu simudziwa kuti achinyamata athuwa masiku ano ukawalangiza kuti akule ndi moyo wabwino kuti tsogolo lawo lidzakhale labwino, poyankha amangoti, 'Izo ndi zanu ine ndili ndi ufulu wanga wachibadwidwe woti ndingathe kuchita zomwe ndifuna. Ngati inu makolo anu amakuuzani zimenezi kalelo lidali vuto lanu.' Kodi ufulu wachibadwidwe utanthauza kusamvera makolo ako omwe adakubala?", adatero a Chakhala pokambirana ndi anzawo aja.

"Ndipo inu a Chakhala mwangotokosa pa chilonda chomwe chikundivuta ine tsiku ndi tsiku. Vuto lomwe ndili nalo ine ndi limeneli. Anyamata anga awiri aja, safuna kumwera zomwe ine ndi mayi wawo timawalangiza", a Chakamba adadandaula motero. "Pano ndinenepa anyamata amenewa sikuti ali kunyumbaku ayi. Wawo ndi mowa ndi fodya wanadzeradzera wadzayu basi."

"Vuto lalikulu lomwe ana athu ali nalo tsopano ndi loti amaganiza kuti miyambo ya makolo athu ija yomwe yatithandiza ife kuti tikule ndi moyo wabwino ndi kufika misinkhu yathu ino iwo alibe nayo ntchito. Amati iwo tsopano ali ndi ufulu wonse wachibadwidwe wochita zomwe afuna popanda wina owaletsa", adatero a Chakhala m'kudandaula kwawo.

"Aa! Moti amaganiza kuti kuba katundu, kupha anthu ena kapena kusutha fodya kapena kumwa mankhwala ozeledzeretsa munthu, monga achitiramu ndi ufulu wachibadwidwe?", adafunsa motero a Chakamba akupukusa mutu wawo.

"Ndi chonchitu ambwana...", a Chakhala adavomereza mwamtheradi.

"Ayi, si zoonza izi a Chakhala", a Chikadza adadula pakamwa a Chakhala motero.

"Ine ndaonadi kuti mukuunthama pachipande akuluakulu inu", adatero a Chikadza poyamba kufotokoza kwawo. "Akati ufulu wachibadwidwe sikutanthauza kuchita zoipa zokhazokha ayi. Komanso ufulu wachibadwidwe siukhalira anyamata ndi atsikana okha ayi. Umakhalira ife tonse. Ufulu wachibadwidwe utanthauza kuti munthu aliyense, kaya ndi mwana kapena wamkulu, mtsikana kapena mnyamata, mayi kapena bambo, ali ndi ufulu wakewake wochita zinthu zomwe mtima wake ulakalaka mosam'kakamiza ayi. Pa nkhani yokakamizayi, ife amuna ndiye timanyanyira kukamiza amayi kapena ana kuchita zinthu zomwe iwo eni safuna kuchita."

"Tsono mawu ali m'kamwa mwanu a Chikadza mukateronso ndiye mwakamba zinthu zosagwirizana ndi nkhani yomwe ine ndi a Chakambawa timadandaula yokhudza mavuto omwe tikukumana nawo ochekera kwa ana athuwa", a Chakhala adawalongosolera motero a Chikadza.

A Chakadza adanetsa nati, "Nkhanizi ndi zogwirizana pagona nkhani yonse ndi pom'kakamiza mwana, mayi kapenanso bambo, kuchita chinthu china chilichonse chomwe iye mwini sakufuna kuchita. Taonani

mumati munachoka panyumba panu kupita kuntchuwa chifukwa choti simumafuna kuti akazi anu akusiyireni m'phika woti muzisonkhezera moto. Nanga pamene inu simunaonetsa ufulu wanu wachibadwidwe?", adafunsa motero a Chakadza uku akumwetulira.

"Iyo ndi ntchito yachikazi mukunena apa, inu a Chakadza. Ife tikunena za vuto la ana athu masiku ano losasamalira miyambo ya makolo athu yomwe ndi yaphindu", a Chakamba adafotokoza motero.

"Mukanena kuti ntchito yachikazi a Chakamba, ndiye chifukwa chake tikugwiritsa amayi, amuna, anyamata ndi atsikana ntchito yolemetsa pamene ife abambo tikugwira ntchito yopepuka. Kodi sikuwakaniza anthu ena ufulu wawo wachibadwidwe uku wogwira ntchito yolingana ndi mphamvu zawo?", adafunsanso a Chikadza.

A Chakhala powayankha adati, "Nanga imeneyo ndi nkhani? Tsono mumati ana anu angathe kuphunzira bwanji ntchito zapakhomo kuti asadzakuchititseni manyazi akadzalowa m'banja?"

"Kodi inu a Chakhala, kukakamiza mwana wamng'ono kukagwira ntchito ya tikiti kwa anthu ena m'malo mom'tumiza kusukulu kuti mwana uja aphunzire kapenanso kuwakakamiza ana kuti atsate miyambo yopanda phindu pamene eni ake sakufuna, sikuwalanda ana amenwa ufulu wawo wachibadwidwe?", adatero a Chikadza posavomereza zomwe adakamba anzawo.

"Ambana, ine ndiye ndafika pachigono panga. Nkhani imeneyi tidzailondoloze bwinobwino mawa kuntchuwa tikabwera kutsosa. Ine ndikuona kuti enafe sitimvetsetsa bwino tikati anthu onse akhale ndi ufulu wawo wachibadwidwe. Ineyo ngati bambo ndikuona kuti ana pamodzi ndi akazi athuwa amatilandanso ufulu wathu wachibadwidwe wotha kusankha choti tiwachitire", a Chakhala adatero pomaliza. (Chilora and Kathewera 2000: 170-172.)

"You Chakamba, the life of boys and girls puzzles me nowadays", said Chakhala when he was talking with Chakamba and wiping dust from the back of his trousers.

"Is that so Chakhala, how does the life of those boys and girls puzzle you?", asked Chakamba.

"These days when you advise a girl or a boy that they should not come home late at night because it is not safe outside after dark, do you know how they answer to you?", Chakhala asked.

"Not really, what do they say?", Chakamba said in reply.

"Ha! You are as if you did not live in this country of ours. Don't you know that when you instruct our youths nowadays so that they grow up with a good life and their future will be good, in return they just say, 'I have my freedom I was born with and I can do what I want. If your parents told you those things in the past, that is your own problem.' Does the freedom that the person is born with mean that one does not obey the

parents who gave birth to oneself?”, Chakhala said while talking with his friend.

”Now you Chakhala have touched on my sore spot. The problem that I have is precisely this. Those two boys whom I have do not want to listen to what I and their mother want to tell them”, Chakamba bemoaned. ”Even now when I am speaking, the boys are not at home. Their life is only in drinking and smoking”.

”A big problem which our children have these days is that they think that our ancestral customs are useless, although those customs helped us to grow with a good life to reach the stage where we are now. Youngsters say that they have all the freedom they were born with to do what they want without anyone preventing them”, Chakhala complained.

”Ha! Indeed do they think that stealing, killing other people or smoking or drinking alcohol are all freedom that they were born with?”, Chakamba asked, shaking his head.

”That’s how it is...”, Chakhala admitted knowingly.

”No, it is not true, Chakhala”, Chikadza cut short what Chakhala was saying.

”I feel that you elders are telling lies”, Chikadza said, beginning his own explanation. ”The freedom that the person is born with does not mean doing only bad things. Nor does the freedom that the person is born with belong to boys and girls only. It belongs to us all. The freedom that the person is born with means that every person, whether a child or an adult, a girl or a boy, a woman or a man, has their own freedom to do what they desire without anyone forcing them. We as men force women and children to do what they do not want to do.”

”What you are saying now, Chikadza, does not agree with what I and Chakamba are complaining about the problems with our children which we face”, Chakhala explained to Chikadza.

Chakadza continued to say that ”what I am saying concerns all those instances in which a child, a woman or a man is forced to do what the person in question does not want to do. For example, you leave your house to play *ntchuwa*, because you do not want your wife to give you the task of taking care of cooking. By so doing, don’t you display your freedom that you were born with?”, Chikadza asked, smiling.

”What you are talking about is women’s work, Chikadza. We are talking about our children’s difficulty to look after the ancestral customs which are beneficial”, Chakamba explained.

”When you say women’s work, Chakamba, you give an excuse for us to make women, young men, boys and girls do heavy work while we grown-up men perform light work. Is that not denying others their freedom that they were born with to do work according to their abilities?”, Chikadza asked again.

Chakala answered, "Is there a problem? How can your children learn domestic chores in order to prevent you from being embarrassed when they found their own families?"

"You Chakhala, to force a young child to have a job instead of sending him or her to school to learn, or to force him or her to follow customs which are not beneficial while the child does not want them, is it not to steal the child's freedom that he or she was born with?", Chikadza said without consenting to what his friend said.

"My friends, I have had enough. We'll discuss this issue carefully tomorrow at *ntchuwa*. It seems to me that some of us do not understand when we say that everyone should have his or her freedom that they were born with. I as a man think that children together with our wives also steal our freedom that we were born with to choose what we want to do for them", Chakhala said in the end.

This text is followed by a number of questions and exercises which ask the pupils to reflect on the arguments in the story from different angles. For example, after making the pupils describe Chakhala's and Chikadza's contrasting perspectives, the textbook requests them to reflect on the question *nanga inu muganiza kuti ana amawalandanso bwanji makolo awo ufulu wachibadwidwe wawo?* (Chilora and Kathewera 2000: 172; "do you think that children also steal the freedom that their parents were born with?"). This lesson in Chinyanja also expects that the pupils hold debates and write essays on the issues raised in the story. In debates, "one group" (*gulu limodzi*) is asked to agree with the statement *abambo masiku ano ana ndi akazi awo akuwalanda ufulu wachibadwidwe powakakamiza kuchita zomwe safuna* (Chilora and Kathewera 2000: 173; "nowadays men steal the freedom that their children and wives were born with by forcing them to do what they do not want to do"), while "another group" (*gulu lina*) is asked to argue against this statement.

The textbook story is a rich and, according to my field experiences, realistic account of the current Chinyanja discourses for and against *ufulu wachibadwidwe wa munthu*. It illustrates a major conflict that many Chinyanja-speakers consider as integral to the discourse on human rights - the conflict between "elders" (*akuluakulu*) and "youths" (*achinyamata*). The protagonists in the text associate elders with "ancestral customs" (*miyambo ya makolo*) and youths with *ufulu wachibadwidwe*. On the basis of his own experience, Chakhala bemoans the way in which youths appeal to the discourse on *ufulu wachibadwidwe* when they refuse to obey their parents and claim, emboldened by the freedom that the new discourse appears to promise, "I can do what I want" (*ndingathe kuchita zomwe ndifuna*). Chakamba articulates the sinister side of the new discourse when he refers to killing, stealing and drunkenness as corollaries of *ufulu wachibadwidwe*. Chikadza is left with the task of defending the new discourse against the two men's misconceptions. He insists that both elders and youths are included in the notion of *ufulu wachibadwidwe* and that

some individuals, especially women and children, are subjected to abuse that makes the new discourse indispensable.

It is crucial to observe that *ufulu wachibadwidwe* is not the only new discourse in this exchange of opinions. Its opponents also have to define such notions as *miyambo ya makolo* in novel ways in order to enter the debate in the first place. In other words, *ufulu wachibadwidwe* does not only stimulate positive discourse; it also defines a framework in which its critique can be expressed. As such, the subtleties of Chakhala's view on the human subject are easily lost when he finds himself forced to defend *miyambo ya makolo* against arrogant youngsters, embroiled in a counter-discourse that is abstract rather than subtle, conservative rather than innovative. Traces of subtlety in *miyambo ya makolo* can be detected, for example, in Chakhala's view that these customs enabled him and his peers to "grow" (*kukula*) and to "reach our stage in life" (*kufika misinkhu yathu*). The customs are not, in this view, oppressive tools in the hands of exploitative elders, but, on the contrary, means by which every person becomes a responsible adult. The underlying assumption is that no one is born as a complete person; one continues to "grow" in a moral sense even after attaining physical maturity. Instructive is also Chakhala's reaction to Chikadza's denial of gender differences in the work that persons can perform. Chakhala's concern is not only whether a woman knows household work as an individual; he asks, "How can your children learn domestic chores in order to prevent you from being embarrassed when they found their own families?" A woman who does not know her work, in Chakhala's view, causes embarrassment not only to herself but also to those who are responsible for her growth as a person – her parents. The view, refusing to consider the woman as an autonomous individual, calls into attention those relationships that "gave birth to you" (*adakubala*), made one a person in the first place.

In the end, Chakhala is unable to counter *ubale wachibadwidwe* with these subtleties. The power of the new discourse is such that it provides its own critique. Chakhala notes, rather lamely, that elders' *ufulu wachibadwidwe* is stolen by their children when children choose what elders can do to them. He yields, in other words, to the power of the new discourse, not by succumbing to youths themselves but by adopting some elements of the discourse in order to defend his interests. In this emerging counter-discourse, *miyambo ya makolo* are likely to denote little more than abstractions, bearing meagre resemblance to dynamic cultural practices, ever more alienated from the concerns and aspirations of the 21st century youths. In this counter-discourse framed by the translated human rights discourse, the "freedom" to practice and impose on others *miyambo ya makolo* comes to define the *ufulu wachibadwidwe* of elders. What was once a distinct notion of the human subject is now subsumed under the individualism of the human rights discourse.

4. THE PROVERBIAL PERSON

What are the prospects for Chinyanja-speakers to achieve consensus on the meaning and value of human rights? Are they, as long as there are tangible differences in interests, locked into an endless dispute that, in point of fact, is a conversation of the deaf? My discussion above suggests that the current translation of the human rights discourse, insisting on rights as "freedom", is indeed in the process of creating a distinct context for Chinyanja-speakers' arguments about rights. The process demonstrates how discourse, after emerging in a political context in which "freedom" appeared as a paramount value, itself becomes a context for further discourse and action. *Ufulu wachibadwidwe* has, in other words, *framed* the scope of what Chinyanja-speakers are likely to apprehend as politically possible. Is, therefore, their particular brand of liberalism and its critique "the end of history"?

The answer would be affirmative only if particular discourses could exhaust the potential of natural languages. Like any living language, Chinyanja is versatile, offering vast linguistic resources for alternative world-views. The critical question is not so much what are the limits of the language than what are the historical conditions under which that language is put into use. Many Chinyanja-speakers continue to subscribe to world-views that are difficult to reconcile with the discourses for and against the rights-talk. The most obvious examples are those religious world-views in which persons experience such unity with their spiritual brothers and sisters that the autonomous individual of the liberal rights-talk becomes a suspect proposition (see Englund 2000). Somewhat similar notions of personhood are also apparent in more mundane contexts of moral thought in Chinyanja. The continuing use of ageless proverbs in both urban and rural areas gives evidence of the potential in Chinyanja to offer linguistic resources that may help its speakers to counter the unfortunate consequences of the rights-talk. Although proverbs are amenable to variable uses and meanings according to the situation, a striking aspect of Chinyanja proverbs is their view on the human subject. After the recent publication of Chakanza's (2000) collection of over 2,000 Chinyanja proverbs, the opportunity to explore the Chinyanja proverbial person has been greatly enhanced.⁶

This exploration can begin with a consideration of how the notion of *ufulu* appears in Chinyanja proverbs. Chakanza's collection contains three proverbs that explicitly focus on *ufulu*. One of them is *ufulu wa ng'ombe wokweteza mchira*, "the freedom of the cow to wag its tail", followed by the Chinyanja explanation *pali anthu amene amati akachitiridwa zabwino sathokoza*, "there are people who are not grateful when something good is done to them".⁷ *Ufulu* is

⁶ My understanding of the proverbial person resonates with ethnographic observations on everyday non-discursive practices among rural Chinyanja-speakers, especially with those practices that sustain their livelihoods and kin-relationships (see Englund 1999).

⁷ Chakanza's collection is based on both his own field research and previously published collections. Each proverb has an "explanation" in Chinyanja and a literal and idiomatic

here associated with animal behaviour, the morally dubious state of simply receiving without the requirement to reciprocate. Another proverb brings *ufulu* to the human domain by stating the imperative of reciprocity: *ufulu ubwezera ufulu*, "freedom gives back freedom", explained as *zabwino zimabwezera zabwino*, "good things give back good things". The third proverb on *ufulu* is even more explicit about the nature of *ufulu* as an acquired condition, as opposed to something one is born with: *ufulu nukhala nako*, "freedom is to have something", explained as *munthu wosauka sangathe kuchitira anthu ena za ufulu, koma munthu wosasowa ndiye apatsa mwaufulu*, "a poor person cannot freely do things to others, but a well-off person gives freely". These notions of freedom are considerably less abstract than *ufulu wachibadwidwe*. They take into account the fact of socio-economic differentiation, even inequality, and point out that freedom is contingent upon human action. Only animals have freedom as their birthright.

The accompanying view on the human subject stresses *interdependence*, not simple dependence nor independence. This view is again expressed as a contrast between humanity and animality in the proverb *kali kokha n'kanyama, tili tiwiri n'tianthu*, "what is by itself is a little animal, when we are two we are little human beings". Human beings are, in other words, defined by their sociality, and the limited moral and practical value of "one" is a recurrent theme in Chinyanja proverbs. To cite but a few: *chiswe chimodzi sichiumba chulu*, "one termite does not mould an ant-hill"; *munthu satola kanthu ndi chala chimodzi*, "a person does not lift anything with one finger"; *mutu umodzi susenza denga*, "one head does not carry the roof"; and, a proverb that is unlikely to endear women and most Christians, *mkazi mmodzi, diso limodzi; akazi awiri, maso awiri*, "one wife, one eye; two wives, two eyes". These proverbs do not exclude the possibility of the subject as an autonomous individual; they reveal the practical and moral difficulties that follow from such a disposition.

Interdependence entails recognition of the relational production of distinct entities. In simple terms, one exists and prospers by virtue of one's relation to the other. Chinyanja proverbs assert, for example, that *nkhokwe ilimba ndi mphanda*, "the granary is firm on strong poles"; *nkhali ilira mafuwa*, "the cooking pot needs supporting stones"; and *mtsinje wopanda miyala susunga madzi*, "a stream without stones does not keep water". People are like the granary, the cooking pot and the stream, all embedded in supportive relationships. A similar insight is expressed by those proverbs that deplore selfishness and audacity. They include, among many others, *ine-ine, sindimtenga*, "the one who says 'me-me', I won't take him"; *nzeru n'zanga adaphika nyemba zofumbwa*, "the one who trusted his or her own wisdom cooked beans which were eaten by weevils"; and *kangakanga kanakanga*,

translation into English, all presumably Chakanza's own contributions. I give here the Chinyanja explanations as they appear in his collection, but most translations into English are mine, again intended to capture the Chinyanja meanings rather than to produce idiomatic English.

”insistence that ‘this is mine’ failed”. As the elaboration of the last proverb puts it, *munthu usamati ‘izi n’zanga ndekha’, chifukwa tsiku lina ukadzapeza vuto, udzasowa wokuthandiza*, ”do not say ‘this is mine alone’, because one day you will be in trouble and lack assistance”. Reciprocity in times of trouble is a major theme in Chinyanja proverbs; for example, *mnzako akapsa ndevu, m’zimire, mawa adzazima zako*, ”when your friend’s beard catches a fire, extinguish it for him, because tomorrow he will extinguish the fire on yours”; and *maliro n’kulirana*, ”to have a funeral is to weep together”. Related through such practical and moral imperatives, persons depend on one another to the extent that, as one proverb states, *posamba mfulu kapolo asambira pomwepo*, ”where the free person washes, the slave washes too”. The elaboration of this rather provocative proverb is *munthu ukakhala pantchito, chomwe bwana wako wapeza monga phindu, ndalama kaya ndi zida, nawenso umadyerera nawo, ngakhale usanapemphe*, ”when you are working, your master’s profit makes you eat more, even before you have asked for it”.

Lest I am suspected of an unduly selective reading of the multifaceted corpus of Chinyanja proverbs, it is necessary to consider also those proverbs that stress the value of self-reliance. Dependence is no less deplorable than independence. One proverb states that *khasu liposa mako ndi tate wako*, ”a hoe is more important than your mother and father”. This proverb is elaborated in the statement *munthu uyenera uzidzidalira wekha pa moyo wako pogwira ntchito*, ”you must help yourself in your life by working”. Another proverb makes the underlying moral sentiment explicit: *munthu sakula pakamwini, akula pakake*, ”a person does not grow on someone else’s resources but on one’s own”. Such proverbs do not justify individualism, because they merely state the precondition for morally acceptable personhood. Persons are embedded in social relationships, but they can be moral agents in those relationships only in so far as they make the appropriate effort. *Khasu lobwereka silikhala kuthyoka*, ”a borrowed hoe does not take long to break”, outlines the need to possess resources if this effort is to be successful. As mentioned above, *ufulu nukhala nako*, ”freedom is to have something” – it is only by commanding the necessary resources that a person can engage in moral behaviour and acknowledge the fundamental interdependence of human subjects (cf. Englund 1999).

CONCLUSION

The extensive Chinyanja corpus of proverbs demonstrates considerable linguistic resources for discourses on morality. Both the extreme individualism of *ufulu wachibadwidwe* and its conservative critique can be countered by the nuanced wisdom of the proverbial person. It is not their language that confines Chinyanja-speakers to certain narrow-minded understandings of human rights, prompting the need for civic education. The critical question is why the translation of the rights-talk has not been more attentive to the subtleties of

moral thought that Chinyanja offers. Why, for example, has little use been made of proverbs, even though many human rights NGOs recognise the need to utilise various techniques in conveying their messages to the "grassroots", such as drawings, drama and music? Neither of the two answers that suggest themselves is particularly flattering to the advocates of human rights. On the one hand, the neglect of proverbs and other existing linguistic resources may indicate condescending attitudes towards vernacular languages among human rights advocates, or sheer ignorance of their potential. On the other hand, if the full implications of the proverbial person are appreciated, they may reveal more problems in the dominant liberal view on the human subject than human rights advocates care to contemplate. In any case, a natural language is not to be blamed for controversy and misunderstanding. After all, *ufulu wachibadwidwe* reveals that Chinyanja can also be manipulated to produce an extremely individualistic notion of the human subject.

In spite of the liberalisation of their politics and economies, Chinyanja-speakers in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia continue to live under conditions of poverty and fragile public security. Unfulfilled expectations feed discontent, even conflict, and divergent interests are not, therefore, likely to become less acute in society. Under such conditions, the translation of a potentially emancipatory discourse is a precarious undertaking, bound to spark off more controversy if it is not developed in conversation with existing notions. Rather than to look for a correct translation in isolated lexical items, the case of Chinyanja obliges us to establish a language of rights that accepts sociality as intrinsic to the human subject.

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