

Can African Feet Divorce Western Shoes? The Case of ‘Ubuntu’ and Democratic Good Governance in Malawi

RICHARD TAMBULASI AND HAPPY KAYUNI

University of Malawi, Zomba

ABSTRACT

The paper points out that the concept of ‘ubuntu’, despite variations in interpretations is manifested in modern African societies. Being an African concept in orientation, some African public officers perceive it to be all encompassing and its pursuance is viewed as an empowerment to pay less attention to the ‘Western’ derived principles of democracy and good governance. Taking Malawi as a case study, the paper argues that when public officers undermine the values and principles of ‘ubuntu’ (as was the case with the government led by the Malawi Congress Party) the government becomes tyrannical and oppressive. On the other hand, pursuing ‘ubuntu’ divorced of the principles of democracy and good governance (as is the case with the current government led by the United Democratic Front), the government is prone to serious unfavourable consequences. The paper suggests that both, ‘ubuntu’ and principles of democratic good governance are compatible and complementary.

Keywords: ubuntu, Malawi, good governance, handouts

INTRODUCTION

Ubuntu is the basis of African communal cultural life. It expresses “our interconnectedness, our common humanity and the responsibility to each other that deeply flows from our deeply felt connection” (Nussbaum 2003: 2). This paper analyses the consequences of *ubuntu* when applied by African public officers without regarding the principles of democracy and good governance taking Malawi as a case study. The underlying argument is that *ubuntu* with seemingly good intentions but divorced of the principles of democracy and good governance can lead to undesirable consequences.

This paper is organised into four major sections. The first section is this introduction. The second provides the concept of ubuntu while section three contextualises ubuntu in Malawian political life. Part four analyses the United Democratic Front’s *ubuntu* versus selected issues of democracy and good governance. Lastly we draw a conclusion.

THE CONCEPT OF 'UBUNTU'

Like many doctrines that characterise a way of living of communities with small but crucial cultural variations, *ubuntu* is a difficult concept to pin down as different communities attach different meanings to the concept emphasising the strengths of some aspects they regard fundamental. Moreover, *ubuntu* is referred to differently in different African Bantu languages. For instance, it is *umunthu* in Chewa, *umundu* in Yawo, *bunhu* in Tsonga, *unhu* in Shona, *botho* in Sotho or Tswana, *umuntu* in Zulu, *vhutu* in Venda, and *ubuntu* in Xhosa and Ndebele. In addition, being an African concept and a basis for African cultural abstract feeling, attempts to create concrete definitions of the term prove futile.

At the bottom level however, *ubuntu* is the underlying foundation of African communities' culture. It is a way of life that characterises the communal nature of African communities as it "brings to the fore images of supportiveness, cooperation and communism" (Koster 1996: 111). Nussbaum (2003: 2) conceptualises it as the "capacity in African culture to express companion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interest of building and maintaining community with justice and mutual caring".

The central doctrine of *ubuntu* is *umuntu ngamuntu ngabantu abanye* (Zulu proverb meaning, a person is a person through other persons). In this vein, Sindane and Liebenberg (2000: 38) agree that *ubuntu* affirms the humanity of the individual (the I or subject) in direct relation or reciprocity with the other fellow-human. It is the "principle of caring for each other's well-being...and a spirit of mutual support... (where) ...each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through recognition of the individual's humanity" (Republic of South Africa 1997). Desmond Tutu (1999: 34–35), characterises a person with *ubuntu* as one who is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good; for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes with knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated, when others are tortured or treated as if they were less than who they are.

Perhaps a good illustration of *ubuntu* is the one presented by Nussbaum (2003: 4) in the following Zimbabwean Shona greetings:

"*Mangwani marara sei?*" (Good morning?)

"*Ndarara, kana mararawo*" (I slept well if you slept well.)

And at lunchtime

"*Marara sei?*" (How has your day been?)

"*Ndarara, kana mararawo*" (My day has been good if your day has been good.)

UBUNTU IN MALAWI

In Malawi *ubuntu* is referred to as *umunthu*. The word comes from *munthu*, meaning ‘a person’. So *umunthu* means ‘being a person’. The principles are the same. Basically *umunthu* means *kuchita nzithu mothandizana ndi moganzira mzako* (helping and thinking of others in need). A person with *umunthu* ‘*ndi amene amatenga vuto lanzake kukhala lake, ndikuthandiza anzake moyenera*’ (who takes other peoples’ problems and turns them into his or her own so that he or she can help them accordingly). In Malawian tradition, *umunthu* is portrayed by the following proverbs: *Mwana wa nzako ndi wako yemwe* (someone’s child is your child); *ali awiri ndi anthu ali ekha chinyama* (Those that are more than one are people and he who is alone is an animal); *lende kukankhana* (One prospers with the help of others) and *mutu umodzi susenza denga* (To successfully accomplish a task one needs the help of others).

In Malawi *umunthu* is expressed in social, economic and political aspects of life. The analysis of this paper primarily focuses on the political aspect with much reference to the social and economic arena. Malawi had its first democratic elections in 1994 which saw the end of 33 years of Hastings Kamuzu Banda with his one-party – Malawi Congress Party (MCP) – dictatorial rule and the coming to power of the United Democratic Front (UDF) under the leadership of Bakili Muluzi. The next two sections analyse the degree to which leaders in these two regimes encompassed the ideals of *umunthu*. We will use the words *ubuntu* and *umunthu* interchangeably.

The Malawi Congress Party Regime: Governance without Umunthu?

Most people regard the Banda era as governance without *ubuntu*. The three decades of dictatorial MCP regime were said to be the “most repressive, corrupt, predatory and violent political system in Africa” (Ihonvbere 1997: 225). Tsoka (2002: 2) and Mapanje (2002: 183) note that the regime was characterised by the culture of ruthlessness, repression and abuse of human freedoms where detention without due process, torture, political killings, mysterious deaths, and abductions were common. Banda’s iron rule was without regard of fellow Malawians and considered everyone as a potential threat to his rule. The “thoughtless state of despotism” (Mapanje 2002: 184) and “extreme authoritarianism” (Phiri and Ross 1998: 10) treated others as less humans than the ruling clique. Economically, politically and even culturally, everything revolved around Kamuzu (Hodder-Williams 1974) to the extent that he forgot that a “person is a person through other persons” as the *ubuntu* blood running through his veins would want to believe.

One of the Banda’s most notable predatory elements was the custom of getting forced “gifts” in form of money, domestic animals and other material goods from ordinary citizens and institutions in the country whenever the

president had a public function. At every political or government gathering, the master of ceremonies used to announce an endless list of citizens, institutions, districts, regions and various groups that gave “gifts” to the Ngwazi (President Banda). The justification for the forced gifts was that everything in the country including people’s “private” property belonged to the Life President Ngwazi Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda and the donations were just a way of giving back to Banda what rightly belonged to him. A popular MCP slogan in this regard was *zonse zimene nza Kamuzu Banda* – meaning everything belongs to Kamuzu Banda. The poor were not spared in such forced donations. In fact the township and rural village poor were seen as easy targets by the Malawi Youth Leaguers (the youth arm of the MCP) who were given the mandate to get the “gifts” by force. The money collected was used by Banda and his entourage to buy the “richest and most expensive goods for their comfort from London’s expensive shops, when the rest of Malawi was wallowing in untold physical suffering and material poverty” (Mapanje 2002: 185).

Apart from the forced gifts, the MCP lead government used to snatch property from successful businessmen with the apparent reason that they were rebels (Tsoka 2002: 3). The real aim behind property grabbing however, was that the MCP government did not want anybody to build an economic empire that was greater than Banda’s. In this regard, “party and government officials were on alert to pounce on anyone who dared to show that he was eating well” (Tsoka 2002: 3). To this extent, Banda largely lost hold of the high purpose which had made him once so committed to the welfare of his people, and became preoccupied with personal aggrandizement (Phiri and Ross 1998: 11). Issues of addressing peoples’ poverty were once divorced from the realm of Banda’s regime. In fact, Chinsinga (2002: 27) noted that it was virtually a taboo to consider poverty as a public problem requiring urgent policy intervention.

It can clearly be seen from this discussion that the MCP dictatorial regime was without *ubuntu*. The *ubuntu* concept is inherently democratic as it has built in mechanisms of protecting the individual and society rights. The fact that “an individual is an individual through others” means that one cannot think of encroaching on the rights of others. Since *ubuntu* calls upon people to “believe and feel that your pain is my pain, my wealth is your wealth, and your salvation is my salvation” (Nussbaum 2003: 2), there can be no reason for a person to grab other’s property, get forced gifts from them or abuse fellow humans in whatever form as Banda did. This is the case, as to do such acts to others would amount to hurting oneself because *ubuntu* centres on the recognition of the fact that “I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else’s freedom, just as surely I am not truly free when my freedom is taken from me” (Mandela 1994: 544).

The United Democratic Front Regime: Governance with Ubuntu?

The political leaders in the democratic era regarded governance in the autocratic Banda regime as the very opposite of *ubuntu*, upon which Malawian culture is based. In this vein, for instance, the new president, Bakili Muluzi, would query that in traditional Malawian culture it is the spectators that give a dancer gifts, not the other way round as was in the case of Banda (this was in direct reference to Banda's forced gifts). Because the MCP rule was lacking in *umunthu*, Muluzi constantly referred to it as "*chipani chankhanza* (brutal party) and a party of doom" (Kayambazinthu and Moyo 2002: 94). In an attempt to erase Banda's forced gifts legacy, and institutionalise *ubuntu*, the democratic leaders bred a culture of giving to the people monetary and material handouts. In this regard, President Muluzi personally championed dishing out monetary and material items, including food, to people and institutions on the spot during political rallies and gatherings or whenever "an opportunity avails itself" (*The Nation*, 2 July 2003). Some estimate that he splashed out MWK 10 million (Kwacha is Malawi's currency) in handouts, plus 100 metric tonnes of maize to people each time he had a rally (*Nation Online*, 4 May 2004). To this tune his rule was characterised by his "generosity to the poor and the less fortunate" (*The Nation*, 2 July 2003) so that his supporters referred to him as "*opanda nkhanza* (not cruel, alluding to the difference between 'kind' Muluzi and 'cruel' Banda)" (Kayambazinthu and Moyo 2002: 97).

According to Muluzi, personally giving items to people was seen as an act of *umunthu* since he "reached out to the needy with relief items" (*Daily Times*, 25 June 2003). The argument was that the former "MCP dictatorial regime had plundered from the people and handouts are a way of repaying back" (*Daily Times*, 15 July 2003). He considered it as "an initiative that was benefiting a lot of Malawians" (ibid.) to the extent that at one point he questioned his critics: "Is it wrong to feed the people?" (ibid.). He usually queried: "Is it a sin to assist the poor? If it is a sin then I don't mind going to hell since I cannot allow Malawians to suffer when I have something to give them," (*Nation Online*, 2 August 2004). His belief was that "as for me the little that God gives me I share with the poor of Malawi" (Muluzi, 26 February 2000). To him, the handouts were a "generosity to the poor and the less fortunate" (*The Nation*, 2 July 2003). Moreover, this was a means to "alleviate people's poverty ...since as President I have an obligation to ensure food security in the country" (*Daily Times*, 25 June 2003). In fact those political leaders who were against the act were advised to "wear a human face" by giving handouts to the poor (Muluzi quoted in *African Woman*, November 2003). Since he saw it purely in *ubuntu* terms, President Muluzi "challenged he would not stop dishing out the maize no matter what people say" (*The Nation*, 5 August 2003). This was echoed by the UDF members of parliament who "insisted that Muluzi would not stop dishing out money" (*Daily Times*, 15 July 2003).

When his tenure of office was over, Muluzi did not stop his *ubuntu* works of charity. For instance, soon after leaving the presidency, the former president

disbursed over MWK 312,000 (USD 2,888) to the party leaders who welcomed him from his overseas holiday, assuring them that “he would not stop giving out handouts to Malawians because he has a spirit of sharing” (*Nation Online*, 2 August 2004).

The same *ubuntu* gestures of issuing handouts have also been inherited by Muluzi’s successor, President Bingu wa Mthali, an economist, though on a reduced scale. During his first days of presidency, he resisted giving handouts and he attempted to rule according to the principles of economics. But soon after “many UDF supporters have expressed their annoyance that Mthali does not give out money” (*Nation Online*, 2 August 2004) and after realising that he “has not been popular within the UDF faithful for departing from Muluzi’s culture of handouts” (*Nation Online*, 12 August 2004) he followed in Muluzi’s footsteps. In this regard, in October 2004 Mthali donated MWK 600,000 to the Anglican Church for the construction of a church in Balaka; in July, he also donated MWK 200,000 towards a Catholic Women’s Organisation fund-raising dance, and on his arrival from the African Union summit in September 2004 he distributed money to UDF women who welcomed him at Kamuzu International Airport (*Nation Online*, 17 October 2004).

THE UDF REGIME: UBUNTU AT WORK OR GOVERNANCE BY HANDOUTS?

One may argue that Muluzi’s *ubuntu* acts were personal as he himself once claimed that “everything I give to you is my own money and not government money” (Muluzi, 26 February 2000) and hence immune from public scrutiny. However, as a public officer, he was subject to certain principles which he always had to abide by in the interest of the public. Moreover, democratic governance entails the existence of “a fiduciary relationship between voters and elected political representatives” (Gildenhuys 2004: 92).

Muluzi applied his *ubuntu* acts in isolation of the ‘Western’ good governance principles. At one time when some quarters questioned the *ubuntu* spirit of his handouts, he responded: “Do not just copy Western ideas. Giving each other money in recognition of a good dancer is our culture. These things you learn from England, that is your own affair. Do not be fooled by other people in the name of human rights. Do not bring unnecessary things in this country” (Muluzi, 26 February 2000).

This section analyses Muluzi’s *ubuntu* acts in relation to the principles of governance and democracy to establish possible areas of conflict. We consider six yardsticks: accountability and transparency, equality, individual economic autonomy, violence, corruption, and correct priorities.

Accountability and Transparency

According to Ali Mazrui, democracy aims at making rulers accountable and answerable for their actions and makes the society as open and the economy as transparent as possible (Mazrui 2002: 15). Indeed, accountability and transparency justify the very existence of democracy and good governance. Public accountability and transparency entails the “obligation to expose activities and results of such activities and to explain and justify them in public” (Gildenhuis 1997: 37). In the same regard, to be credible, personal *ubuntu* activities by public officers require adherence to public accountability and transparency.

The problem with Muluzi’s actions of *ubuntu* is that they did not embody accountability and transparency principles to the extent that there had been “mystery surrounding the origins of the maize and money that President Muluzi has been distributing during political rallies across the country” (Centre for Social Concern, December 2003). It appears that nobody, not even the relevant ministries, but Muluzi alone, knew the sources of the financial and food items that he was distributing to the poor. For instance, at one time the Ministry of Agriculture, the Office of the President and Cabinet, the Department of Relief and Rehabilitation, and the Ministry of Poverty Alleviation, which are all institutions officially mandated to distribute relief items to the needy, did not know the origins of the maize Muluzi was distributing (*The Weekend Nation*, 21–22 June 2003). The same applied to the new president Bingu Wa Mthali, where secrecy surrounded the origins of his financial handouts. In his case, at one time the Finance Minister Goodall Gondwe, the President’s Chief of Staff Ken Zikhale N’goma, and the Presidential Press Officer, Prescott Gonani did not know where the money he was donating was coming from (*Nation Online*, 17 October 2004). This was done at the expense of the fact that “secrecy conceals maladministration and corruption” (Gildenhuis 1997: 37) and allows the creation of funds that are not subjected to public scrutiny and public audit and are available to the ruling party for private and party-political purposes (Gildenhuis 2004: 97).

To make matters worse, Muluzi could not yield to pressures placed upon him by the media, civil society and the opposition parties to account for the money and the food items that he would distribute to the people. In fact, he would be furious and charge at those who tried to probe him. Mostly, “he told them to go to hell” (*Daily Times*, 25 June 2003). The following defensive expressions from Muluzi were common in such circumstances: “Who are you to question me? Is it wrong to feed the people? Do I eat at your homes?” (ibid.). “*Fotseki* (nonsense) how can newspapers question that? Do I take the maize from your house? And you the opposition, have I ever come to you to ask for alms?” (*The Nation*, 5 August 2003).

Another matter of concern in terms of transparency and accountability is the fact that both Muluzi and Mthali preferred to personally give out the handouts when there were institutions specifically put in place to distribute relief and humanitarian items to the needy. For instance, Muluzi would distribute food items

to the poor when the Ministry of Agriculture, the Office of the President and Cabinet, the Department of Relief and Rehabilitation, the Ministry of Poverty Alleviation, and numerous Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) were all established specifically to carry out such tasks. If Muluzi's *ubuntu* food handouts were channelled through these institutions, questions of accountability and transparency could be resolved. In addition this also undermined the authority of these institutions and affected their capacity to perform.

Equality

Equality is a difficult issue to address. However, it remains one of the fundamental issues that good governance seeks to address. Equality is treated as instrumentally valuable in fighting poverty and destitution and as necessary for self-respect, collaboration, solidarity and community (Lutz 2001: 782). Black (1979) considers the "failure to treat all persons equally where no reasonable distinction can be found between those favoured and those not favoured" as discrimination.

There have been many concerns that Muluzi's *ubuntu* handouts were discriminatory as they did not accommodate issues of equality. This is the case as these acts were not normally extended to people with opposing political views despite the fact that hunger affects everyone in the country regardless of political orientation. In this regard, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) complained that the relief aid was only being given to UDF supporters, and that opposition supporters were being told to join the UDF if they were to get any (*The Chronicle*, 7 January 2003). Muluzi's justification of maize handouts was that "as a President of the nation he had an obligation to ensure food security in the country" (*Daily Times*, 25 June 2003). One wonders how this would be realised when "the distribution of the maize is not for the common good... but for those who attend UDF meetings" (*The Nation*, 25 July 2003). As Aleke Banda, Former Agriculture Minister noted, "it was wrong for the President to distribute maize at UDF meetings as if UDF supporters are the only ones who are hungry in the country" (*The Nation*, 22 July 2003). Moreover "certain sorts of things, like food...ought to be distributed more equally ... (because) these goods are naturally regarded as peoples' needs rather than mere preferences" (Goodin et al. 1999: 29–30).

If Muluzi's *ubuntu* food distributions were oriented towards the needy rather than his political bedfellows, they would have some credence. This is the case as tackling the hunger crisis is not whether food is given to those who belonged to the ruling party but whether enough food is provided to those who do not have (*The Nation*, 25 July 2003). After all, politicians are elected to serve the interest of the public, not their own or only that of their parties (Gildenhuis 2004: 92).

A Source of Violence

According to Slim (2001: 288), violence “proceeds from a ...root in a human nature which finds sharing profoundly difficult”. In addition, “the poorer ... the society, the more widespread and horrible the violence” (Murphy 2001: 67). Malawi is one of the Southern African countries where poverty is “widespread, deep, perverse and severe” (Malawi Government 2002: 5) with more than 65% of the household expenditure going on food (Kalemba 1997: 23). The World Bank (2002) estimated that as many as 65% of the country population live below the poverty line. This scenario was exacerbated by the country’s 2001–2003 hunger crisis.

Taking this picture into consideration, the inequitable food and monetary handout distributions by Muluzi meant that violence was inevitable as food became the question of life or death. In these instances people do whatever it takes to accomplish preconditions for their continued survival (Goodin et al. 1999: 34). Most of the violence in the country arose as party patriots and ‘unlawful outside beneficiaries’ scrambled to get as much as they could out of Muluzi’s handouts. One of the many instances was in Ndirande, Blantyre, where people were hacked with panga knives, while several others, especially women and children, were trampled on as the crowd shoved during the scramble (*The Nation*, 13 August 2003). One of the victims recalled that “before names were called out, people started scrambling for the maize. Some boys who were not part of the group appeared with knives and managed to snatch away some of our maize and there were no police or any security officials to ensure an orderly distribution” (ibid.). In Karonga, it was a scramble for money handouts that later culminated in violence against women. On this occasion, the UDF Young Democrats (the party’s youth wing) and the party’s women wing “fought over money President Muluzi had handed to them to share” (*The Nation*, 24 October 2003). In addition, chaos resulted and eight pupils were suspended from school when school children were given a bundle of MWK 50 notes by Muluzi to share amongst themselves in Lilongwe (Centre for Social Concern, July 2003). Because of the increased cases of violence, a local civil society organisations in the country, Public Affairs Committee, once warned that “Muluzi’s actions and the resultant violence can bring divisions to the society” (*The Nation*, 25 July 2003).

The Creation of a ‘Begging Nation’

Critics of social welfare theory argue that recipients of grants compromise their autonomy by depending on the state for their support (Mead 1992; Gibson 1998). In addition, dependency erodes initiative and innovation, which are necessary requirements for personal autonomy. Muluzi’s handouts have bred a ‘dependency syndrome’ among many in the country. This is the case as many wait passively for Muluzi to improve their conditions through food or monetary handouts. These

cases of violence and chaos that arise when Muluzi distributes handouts are a testimony to this. Ironically, John Chikakwiya, who is both the Blantyre City Mayor and the UDF Regional Governor for the South, attested to this when he said “these people have thronged the airport because they know that they will get something from you” (*Nation Online*, 2 August 2004) in his welcome speech to Muluzi from his overseas holiday.

Beggars are not a strange sight in most countries. Begging arises from poverty and unequal income distribution. Begging becomes a plausible survival tactic in cases where virtually no alternatives are available. In such instances the alternative is theft. However begging becomes a manifestation of laziness and lack of innovation and initiative where others with the same conditions are able to make ends meet neither through begging nor stealing. In a country where the majority of the people are poor and what they do for a living is a mere alternative of begging and stealing, beggars are mostly people that are lazy and lacking in initiative and innovation. In such instances “people who supported beggars by giving money often contributed to the problem by enabling beggars to survive without having to work” (*African Eye News Service*, 22 November 2000). Muluzi’s handouts only contributed to the achievement of this end. It is not surprising therefore that some quarters demanded that Muluzi “should account for people’s laziness, and was responsible for creating a begging nation since he killed the self-help spirit by introducing handouts as a way of life” (*The Nation*, 13 August 2003). Muluzi himself knew of the effects of his handouts on people’s initiative as he once fumed that “you keep complaining about hunger, and yet you do not do anything about it. You wait for government to assist you. This dependency on government for everything is unfortunate. We cannot go on like this” (*The Nation*, 13 August 2003).

A Seed of Corruption

When elections are around the corner, monetary and material gifts by politicians to possible eligible voters, well intentioned as they may be, are looked at with a lot of suspicion. This is the case as the beneficiaries are more likely to vote for the parties that offer them these favours. In addition, Rose-Ackerman (1999: 138) notes that the personalised nature of the benefits given to voters by incumbents can make it particularly difficult for credible opposition candidates to arise. To level the playing-field therefore, Rose-Ackerman (*ibid.*) advises that politicians must be prevented from giving gifts and valuable favours to constituents.

The timing and secrecy of Muluzi’s ubuntu acts raised a lot of questions and led many to attach different interpretations to them. As the handouts were intensified in the run up to elections, and were mostly issued at “political campaign rallies” (*The Nation*, 2 July 2003), the only logical deduction would be that they were an attempt to buy people’s votes. In this arena, the opposition parties considered the food handouts to be the “politicisation of the relief aid”

(*The Chronicle*, 7 January 2003), while the civil society thought it “would not be wrong to assume that the maize is a campaign tool for the 2004 general elections” (*The Nation*, 2 July 2003). In fact, one Catholic priest went further, warning the faithful against voting for a “candidate whose party is giving out handouts as a way of buying peoples’ votes” (*The Nation*, 19 August 2003). In addition, the African Union (AU) team that was in the country to observe the 20 May 2004 parliamentary and presidential elections was “surprised with the way people at political rallies are given handouts openly, saying in other countries this would be deemed as vote buying and corruption” (*The Nation*, 19 May 2004).

Apart from individuals, Muluzi has also been making his *ubuntu* monetary handouts to government and private institutions. However, these handouts have only been a seed of corruption to the benefiting institutions. This is mainly the case because Muluzi has been issuing handouts without taking into consideration issues of transparency and accountability, as discussed above, and the befitting institutions have tended to follow suit. In addition, the benefiting institutions’ officials regarded the handouts as ‘personal gifts’ although they were clearly meant for the organisations at large, since the same handouts were given to individuals. For instance, when Muluzi donated MWK 6 million to the Rumphi District Assembly, some assembly officials used part of the money for personal projects, cheque payments were made in the names of some of assembly’s accounting department officials, and no contracts were signed between the assembly and transporters identified to carry bricks moulded by the community (*The Weekend Nation*, 4–5 January 2003). In Balaka District Assembly where the former President gave the assembly MWK 10 million for development activities, the councillors at the assembly shared the money amongst themselves as ‘loans’ (*Daily Times*, 3 June 2003). However, history has it that in many instances such loans have never been repaid and are understood as only “gifts”.

Mis-targeted Funds

Lastly, Muluzi’s *ubuntu* handouts were most frequently not targeted at the people most in need as he claimed. It appears that in some instances the priorities for such funds were not well set. On one occasion, for instance, Muluzi paid up to USD 22,000 for people to watch a football match for free and two days later a tree fell on pupils learning under it, killing two (*African Woman*, November 2003). Meanwhile, “the rich obtained private and national health care and the rural areas were still dependent on traditional medicine” (Lwanda 2002: 161). In addition, the former second-vice president Chakufwa Chihana, inspired by Muluzi, bought crates of opaque beer for people who sought employment “so that they could stop worrying and make merry” (*African Woman*, November 2003). However, when they went home they had to face their families who had been on empty stomachs for days. This was also done at the expense of investing in honing the skills of the unemployed so that they could be more readily employable.

CONCLUSION

This discussion does not intend to proclaim that African leadership should not embody *ubuntu*, as that conclusion would be tantamount to African cultural genocide. However, it champions the application of *ubuntu* in harmony with democratic and good governance principles. As illustrated in this paper, *ubuntu*, well intentioned as it may be, can portray a negative connotation if applied by political and public officers while divorcing principles of democracy and good governance. If that happens, such *ubuntu* acts tend to change their meaning and become something undesirable. This has, for instance, caused Muluzi's *ubuntu* reign to be regarded as "governance by handouts" and as one that takes "a charity approach to poverty alleviation" (*African Woman*, November 2003).

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About the Authors: *Richard Tambulasi* lectures at the University of Malawi, Department of Political and Administrative Studies. Currently he is pursuing post-graduate studies at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa. His areas of research interest include: corruption, public management reform, health sector management, sustainable development, local government, and project management

Happy Kayuni lectures at the University of Malawi, Department of Political and Administrative Studies. Currently, he is pursuing post-graduate studies at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa. His areas of research interest include: politics, public policy, housing sector management, sustainable development, and project management.