

## After the mines

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DOI:

[10.1080/03056244.2016.1273826](https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2016.1273826)

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*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Johnson, J 2017, 'After the mines: the changing social and economic landscape of Malawi-South Africa Migration', *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 44, no. 152, pp. 237-251.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2016.1273826>

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# **After the mines: the changing social and economic landscape of Malawi-South**

## **Africa migration**

*Jessica Johnson*

### *Abstract*

By the early 1970s, Malawi was the most significant supplier of mine labour to South Africa. Since then, for a variety of reasons, mine migrancy has dwindled. Nevertheless, migration to South Africa today looms large in the popular imagination, and is pursued by substantial numbers of Malawians, particularly men. By comparison with earlier migrants, however, their trajectories are less certain, their strategies more piecemeal. This paper will focus on contemporary migration to South Africa by young men from a particular village in Chiradzulu District, southern Malawi. Emphasising perspectives from their home village, it will offer insight into the impact of their migration upon family and gender relations, the social and economic situations of the wives and matrilineal kin whom they leave behind, and the tangible and intangible impacts of aspirations to South African migration.

*Keywords: Malawi, South Africa, Migration, Aspiration, Livelihoods, Gender*

“There is money in South Africa, but we ought to be proud of our *ufulu* (freedom/rights)”. These were the words of Lucius, a man in his early thirties who had recently returned to his rural home after a brief trip to *Joni* (John), as Johannesburg, and indeed South Africa at large, is commonly called in Malawi.<sup>1</sup> *Joni* is the stuff of men’s dreams, and Lucius had patiently saved the money for his passport and ticket in pursuit of that dream. Full of hope, he had made the long journey by road to join a kinsman of his late father in a Johannesburg township. Just a

few months later, however, he returned subdued, fearful of the xenophobic violence he and others expected to occur in the wake of the upcoming 2010 football World Cup. Lucius laid low in the weeks following his return, relishing the freedom to move around under cover of darkness, he explained. But I wasn't the only one to notice that he also seemed to be avoiding prolonged contact with his close kin, expectant as they were of a share of the riches they presumed he had acquired in a land of wealth and opportunity.

At the time of writing, at least five men from the village in which I conducted fieldwork during 2009-2010 are in Joni, working a variety of jobs from the installation of electrical wiring to truck driving.<sup>ii</sup> Many others, including Lucius's elder brother, aspire to make the same journey, linking up with kin and acquaintances and finding gainful employment. Like that of their mining forebears, their migration has a significant impact upon village life, gender relations, and the economic viability of households, as well as upon the aspirations and imagined futures of Malawian villagers. However, by comparison with an earlier generation of migrants during the heyday of the South African mining economy, their trajectories are less certain, their strategies more piecemeal.

More than seventy years ago, Margaret Read lamented the fact that attention was rarely concentrated on the rural homes of migrant workers, where, she said, 'It has been more or less taken for granted that village social and economic life will go on in its traditional manner in spite of the emigration of men' (1942: 613). A great deal has been written since then about migration, and about urban and rural livelihoods in Malawi. Yet, the two are rarely brought together, and studies of life in Malawi often

proceed without mention of the fact that significant numbers of men (and some women) are absent at any one time, many of whom have travelled south for work. In this paper, I will focus on contemporary migration to South Africa by young men from a particular village in Chiradzulu District, southern Malawi. Emphasising perspectives from their home village, the paper will offer insight into the impact of their migration upon family and gender relations, the social and economic situations of the wives and matrilineal kin whom they leave behind,<sup>iii</sup> and the tangible and intangible impacts of aspirations to South African migration.

Labour migration has long been central to the broader Southern African political economy, and Malawi a significant a labour-sending country (First 1982).

Cheap mobile labour has contributed to the unequal development of regional economies, to the exacerbation of social and economic inequalities, and to the formation and perpetuation of racial discrimination. Yet, despite the ‘toxic and intractable legacy’ of migrant labour (Delius 2014: 315), migration to South Africa ‘still provides a vital economic lifeline for many individuals and households’ (ibid.: 321). The notion of migration as an economic lifeline alludes to remittances as a means of transnational redistribution. This journal has already played host to arguments for situating discussions about remittances in the political and not just the economic realm (Obadare and Adebani 2009). In what follows, I make the case for the need to also understand the social context in which gifts and remittances are given and received. Thus, while this article seeks to maintain a view of the larger political economy, it does so by way of a focus upon what James Ferguson has referred to as ‘micropolitical-economic forces’ (1999: 134). These include gendered relations of power (such as those between husbands and wives) and their related economic

dependencies, as well as the management or mis-management of 'economic, social, and cultural assets' (ibid.: 165), which in turn affect migrants' abilities both to support others and to draw upon support in times of need. Broader political economic forces and realities, conditioning the availability of wage labour, wage rates, and the relative import of migrant remittances, cannot be divorced from micropolitical-economic relations. As Ferguson so ably demonstrates in his study of the Zambian Copperbelt, in times of relative decline, when wages are low and employment difficult to secure, migrants and their 'rural allies' are closely linked in relations of mutual dependence, characterised by struggles over the distribution of wages, cross cutting fears of jealousy and witchcraft, and differing assessments of the extent to which migrants are taking account of their rural allegiances. In contrast to the situation on the Copperbelt in the late 1980s, however, migration from Malawi to South Africa remains suffused with considerable hope for economic betterment.

Margaret Read's own take on the effects of labour migration on life in rural Malawi was framed around a comparison between predominantly patrilineal, ethnically Ngoni, areas of the country and predominantly matrilineal, ethnically Chewa, areas. All of the sites she studied were located in what are now referred to as the Northern and Central regions of the country, between Mzimba and Ntcheu. Read was more familiar with the Ngoni speaking, patrilineal settings, and her analysis of the differences between patrilineal and matrilineal social organisation, and their implications for the effects of labour migration, reflects a strong patrilineal bias and limited appreciation of matrilineal ways of life. Her argument hinged on the assumption that marital instability in matrilineal areas was evidence of societal decay. In addition, she, like many others, argued that matrilineal and matrilocal practices had

a detrimental effect on agricultural productivity (Kishindo 2010). Various versions of this theory exist, but in the context of labour migration it was argued that, while living among their own kin, wives in matrilineal areas would grow 'lazy' and cease to cultivate their own land, becoming dependent upon their mothers. Under the watchful eyes of their in-laws, however, patrilineal Ngoni women were held to be more industrious, as well as more morally upstanding. Read identified a trend towards 'a modified patrilocal form of marriage among the matrilineal Chewa' (1942: 629) as an indigenous adaptation to better cope with the strains of male absence (cf. Colson 1962: 644). With the benefit of hindsight, Read's predictions are easily dismissed, and the assumptions behind them have also been convincingly debunked (Brantley 1997; Peters 1997a, 1997b). Not only have matrilineal practices been shown to be remarkably resilient, but the clear-cut distinction between the two 'systems' has been reassessed, giving way to a more fluid understanding of social relations and social organisation.

In the area of this study, matrilineal practices of female custodianship and inheritance of land, matrilineal (uxorilocal) marriage, and a materially and culturally important relationship between male and female siblings are widespread. Nevertheless, in certain circumstances during the course of a marriage, it is not unusual for a couple to reside among the husband's matrilineal kin: in the early stages of a marriage, for example, before the husband has built a house at his wife's home; and in some cases where the husband is the senior member of his matrilineal extended family or holds a position of traditional authority. Other couples choose to rent accommodation in trading centres away from either of their rural homes. Under such circumstances,

wives usually maintain the gardens they have inherited in their own home villages, and they have full rights of disposal over their harvest.

High rates of divorce and remarriage have long been characteristic of matrilineal areas of the country, and contrary to Read's assessment, they do not constitute a symptom of social malaise (Kaler 2001; Reniers 2003). No great stigma attaches to divorce, and while marriage is desirable, it is often experienced serially. Relationships between siblings, or between parents and their adult children, can provide a more consistent source of moral and material support for women's households. As a consequence, 'single' women as household heads, whether divorced, widowed, or the wives of migrants, are not unusual and their situation tends to go unremarked. For the most part, they live among their own matrilineal kin and farm land inherited from their mothers but beyond that, their particular circumstances depend greatly on such factors as their relative age and generation, the composition of the households and matrilineal compounds in which they reside, and the level of material and immaterial support available to them.

Historical evidence suggests that the prolonged absence of male migrants during the twentieth century put strain on gender relations across the country (McCracken 2012: 187), and it is clear that migration continues to affect gender and marital relations to this day (as we shall see below). That the impact of male out-migration is inflected by the matrilineal setting is also apparent and is evident in the relative independence of women as landholders and subsistence farmers, as well as in the kinds of tensions that arise and the lines of support open to women. That said, structural analysis that focuses on the degree to which matrilineality can withstand the pressures of migration

(Read 1942), or indeed flourish in its wake (Colson 1962), is far removed from the to and fro of daily life as it is lived. The effects of male absence cannot be addressed in the abstract, and nor can the designation 'female headed households' tell us much about intra- and inter-household exchange, intergenerational relations of support, or the developmental cycle of households (Peters 1983). In what follows, I focus on the specificities of individual circumstances, and the patterns that emerge from particular case studies, in order to provide insight into the complex and ambiguous impact of migration upon village and marital life in rural Chiradzulu. But first, I discuss the historical significance of migration to South Africa and the vicissitudes of migration over time, with a view to understanding certain continuities and discontinuities with the contemporary situation.

### **Migration to South Africa in historical perspective**

Male labour migration from colonial Nyasaland (Malawi) to the mines, ports, railways, farms and plantations of Southern Africa was so extensive during the early twentieth century, that Read declared: '[t]he chief export of Nyasaland in the past fifty years has been men' (1942: 606). Indeed, Robert Boeder did not exaggerate when he stated that: '[v]irtually every Malawian who has ever lived in the twentieth century has been affected by labour migration either as a participant or as a member of a migrant's family' (1974: 242, cited by Groves 2011: 5). While informal migration began earlier, official centrally-organised recruitment to the Rand gold mines began in 1903. South Africa soon became a key destination for Nyasaland workers, second only to Southern Rhodesia. Migrants from the northern districts of Nyasaland dominated during the earlier decades of labour migration, but by the mid-twentieth century the balance had shifted as more and more men (and some women)



from the central and southern districts journeyed south (McCracken 2012: 256-60; Vail 1984: 23-4). By 1920, 20,000 men were estimated to be working abroad, and this figure is thought to have reached 120,000 by 1935 – more than a quarter of the total population of adult males (Read 1942: 606-7). Leroy Vail cites a District Commissioner's 1937 observation that 'It is now unusual to find any young men in the villages, there being only young wives and their children, and middle-aged and old people' (1984: 18). Indeed, figures quoted by Vail suggest that almost a decade later, by 1946, 'fully 40 percent of the able bodied males were absent from the country' (ibid.: 20). Resulting discrepancies between the resident populations of men and women elicited great concern about the wellbeing of the women left behind, both materially and in terms of their moral fibre. The latter was thought to be at risk from the temptations of adultery and prostitution in the absence of the women's husbands and fathers (see also Brown 1983). Notwithstanding periodic fluctuations in migrant numbers reflecting, in part, the inconsistent attitudes of administrators, migration rates remained high for several decades until the later twentieth century.<sup>iv</sup>

By the early 1970s, Malawi was the most significant supplier of mine labour to South Africa (Andersson 2006: 379), but in 1974, following the death of 74 Malawian migrants in a plane crash, then life-President Hastings Kamuzu Banda banned labour recruitment in the country. The ban lasted for several years and the numbers of Malawians working in the mines declined rapidly 'from over 100,000 in 1973 to fewer than 500 by 1976' (Moodie 1994: 195; see also Christiansen and Kydd 1983; Kydd and Christiansen 1982). Migrant numbers increased again following the lifting of the ban, but they never reached their former levels (Crush, et al. 1991: 105-108). Subsequently, during the 1980s, HIV/AIDS began to cast its shadow over Malawian

labour migration after several workers tested positive for the virus. Between 1988 and 1992, the South Africa Chamber of Mines repatriated more than 13,000 Malawians working in its mines in response to the Malawian government's refusal to screen potential recruits for HIV (Chirwa 1995, 1998, 1999). As a result, figures given by Jonathan Crush suggest that the numbers of Malawian workers employed in the South African gold mines plummeted from over 13,000 in 1988 to 29, five and zero in the next three years respectively (1995: 22). For a variety of reasons, not least the changing fortunes of the mining economy, which saw downscaling and lay offs from the mid-late 1980s, the numbers of Malawians employed in the South African mining industry have never recovered.

To say that approximately five male villagers are currently absent from the village in which I resided, a village with a population of over 600, underlines the difference in scale between earlier phases of migration and the contemporary period. Statistics compiled by a local village committee, showing a population of approximately 55% women across the seventeen villages under the jurisdiction of the Group Village Headman in whose area I was based, indicate that male absenteeism through a combination of national and international labour migration, although not insignificant, is not of the order of magnitude that caused colonial administrators (and some anthropologists) great concern with respect to agricultural sustainability and the moral fabric of society in the mid-twentieth century. Nevertheless, a persistent 'demographic myth' concerning a generalised shortage of marriageable men is indicative of the social memory of mass migration (Bennesch 2011: 117).<sup>v</sup>

Malawian historian Wiseman Chirwa has argued that the end of large-scale migration to the mines of South Africa brought to a 'halt the process of rural accumulation in the Malawian countryside' (1997: 629). Remittances and the goods and money brought back to Malawi by migrants had, he shows, been used to improve the economic position of industrious migrants and their families, providing capital for micro-enterprises, as well as the means of paying school fees and funding home improvements. Despite the accumulation of capital and goods in many rural households, however, Malawi remained one of the poorest countries in Africa (McCracken 2012: 260), a designation that persists to this day with up to 72% of the population living on less than \$1.25 per day (World Bank 2014).<sup>vi</sup> Indeed, throughout the history of labour migration, the lure of South Africa must be understood in relation to the paucity of economic opportunities available within Malawi's borders.

Informal migration, achieved on the initiative of the migrants themselves rather than through the co-ordination of governments and industries, pre-existed, and continued alongside, organised recruitment to the mines (Groves 2011; Makambe 1980; McCracken 2012; Vail 1984). Since at least the late nineteenth century, independent migrants have left Malawi for South Africa either alone or in groups, seeking domestic, agricultural or industrial work, and/or engaging in trade. This kind of migration has often relied upon contacts with friends or kin already in South Africa who could provide accommodation and support (Andersson 2006: 387; 2012; Banda 2008). It is largely these practices that have survived the decline of the mining industry and thrived in the wake of social and economic liberalisation in both countries, particularly from the mid-1990s onwards. It is also during this period that women migrants have begun to journey south in greater numbers. Women often travel

as wives accompanying their migrant husbands, but growing numbers also make the journey as labour migrants in their own right. Chanaichi Banda (2008) has documented this process for Mzimba District in northern Malawi (see also Izzard (1985) and Andersson (2012)). I was not aware of any independent women migrants from the vicinity of my own field site in Chiradzulu, however, and this contrast reinforces arguments about the local specificities of migration histories (Andersson 2012). While the informal nature of contemporary migration means that there are no official statistics on the current scale of labour migrancy, male or female, Banda's informants in Mzimba estimated 'a ratio of one female migrant to every ten male migrants' (2008: 53).

Chiradzulu villagers' oral historical narratives run parallel to the accounts of professional historians. Elderly women could remember the stories of men of their fathers' generation, and those of their own husbands. Back then, they explained, men went south because it was the only option, but they tended not to bring much back by way of consumer goods or cash during Kamuzu Banda's reign (1964-1994) because these would be confiscated at roadblocks. When they returned, it was their bicycles that marked them out as having been to Joni.<sup>vii</sup> Then there was a lull, I was told, a time during the lives of their daughters when few men travelled because Kamuzu had banned it. This they explained in part by reference to Kamuzu's own mean spiritedness and jealousy, suggesting that he did not want his fellow Malawians to prosper. Nowadays, in the time of democracy (*demokalase*), men are travelling to South Africa once more, women observed, but their numbers do not compare to those of the past. Those who do go, however, are able to send more money and goods back to Malawi than was possible before as their possessions are no longer confiscated

along the way. These days when people go to South Africa, they also send money back more quickly. It may not be easy, I was told, but those with *nzeru* (intelligence, capability) are able to prosper.

For many, the experience of Malawi-South Africa migration today is vastly different from the heyday of the regional mining economy. Multiparty democracy and economic liberalisation have paved the way for increasing numbers of Malawians, male and female, to make the journey south once again, but gone are the days of organised mass migration to the mines. Nowadays, the majority of migrants' trajectories more closely resemble those of the independent migrants of the past, who preferred to take the risks associated with seeking their own employers, generally with the support of kin and acquaintances who had already made the journey.

### **Reality bites**

Independent migration entails significant uncertainty and insecurity, for migrants must find their own accommodation and seek employment in locations that bear little resemblance to the towns and villages with which they are familiar in Malawi. This was evident in Lucius's reflections on his unhappy sojourn: 'To go to South Africa and return alive' he said, 'is *mwayi* (luck, chance, fortune); you are always close to death'.

When I asked him what he had in mind when he said that Malawians should be proud of their *ufulu* (freedom, rights), Lucius explained:

Here you can walk around and you won't be stopped by the government (*boma*); you can sit like we are now on this porch [we were drinking tea outside my house] and no one will come along and threaten you or shoot you. You can walk on foot anywhere and nobody will stop you to see your papers. If you have money, you can count it anywhere, even with people watching and you will not be at risk. People don't count their money in public in Johannesburg...

Thus he spoke to the sense of vulnerability and insecurity he had felt on the streets of Johannesburg, and he revelled in the freedom to roam the Chiradzulu villages at night, visiting his friends and kin. While he was in South Africa, the pending 2010 football World Cup had sparked rumours of a repeat of the xenophobic violence experienced in South Africa during May 2008. Many foreigners felt threatened and large numbers chose to leave in advance of, or during, the tournament (IRIN News 2010; Kelly 2010). The World Cup may have been an exceptional event, but fear and anxiety among migrants is somewhat more routine. Lucius was far from unique among foreign migrants in feeling vulnerable in South Africa and discrepancies between the expectations of migrants and their kin and the reality of life in South Africa can be profoundly painful (see, e.g., Worby 2010). In this vein, I was recently told that another man I knew from the village had contacted his kin to tell them that he is struggling (*kuvutika*) and would like to return to Malawi. The advice of the kinswoman in whom he confided, however, was to persevere so that he should return home with the means to ensure that he would not suffer in Malawi as well.

Lucius never spoke to me about the financial aspects of his trip, other than to remark on the high cost of the uncomfortably long bus journey home (R800 or MK16,000 with additional fees of R50 at each of six border posts). There was disquiet amongst

his closest matrilineal kin, however, when it became clear that the gifts they had anticipated were unlikely to materialise. For a while, there was talk of some luggage (*katundu*) that had been transported to town for Lucius to collect, but still, this was not the return they had envisaged. With ‘Johannesburg itself...figured as the very incarnation of prosperity’ (Worby 2010: 427), Malawian villagers who awaited the return of their kin did so in keen anticipation of the gifts of goods and cash that those working there could surely not fail to acquire.

Such expectations did not spring from nowhere: tangible evidence of migrant remittances was not difficult to come by. Contributions received from migrant kin were put towards the mundane and the ceremonial: from food, house building and agricultural endeavours, to initiation rites, weddings and funerals. In the village in which I was based, the mother of a young male migrant was saving up money sent by her son, storing it with a trusted friend so that she would not waste it. Her ultimate goal was to purchase iron sheets for the roof of her house. A stone’s throw away, an elderly mother bought maize to supplement her meagre harvest with the money her son sent; and just across the path, another woman invested money sent by a matrilineal kinsman (via his wife) in the door- and window-frames of her new home. The following year, she put a second cash gift towards the cost of initiating her teenage daughters. The same man’s wife bought daily necessities for herself and their two young children with the money her husband remitted: principally foodstuffs, soap and clothing. She was also able to hire piece workers (*ganyu*) to help prepare her fields for the planting season, and she was hopeful of receiving money for fertiliser when the time came for planting the next year’s crop.

As is evident from the uses that the money is put to, for the most part remittances tend not to be of an order that would lead to pronounced or immediate social differentiation. The recipients of remittances may enjoy relative privilege and some cushioning from the worst ravages of rural poverty, but they are by no means removed from reliance upon subsistence agriculture, or the daily search for food and firewood (Bryceson 2006; Maphosa 2007). In addition, the perception of these women as recipients of wealth from abroad could inspire jealousy and lead to increased demands for assistance from their own kin and neighbours, as well as a decrease in support from those matrilineal relatives, principally brothers and maternal uncles, who might otherwise have supported them but who would assume that their needs were being met by their absent husbands or sons. Successfully navigating these various obligations and dependencies, and being seen to do so by those around them, can be challenging and yet it is crucial to their moral standing as adult women capable of participating in intra- and inter-household exchange (Englund 2008).

The social and economic positions of wives awaiting remittances from their husbands also tend to differ according to residence, which often accords in turn with their relative age and the duration of their marriages. As I mentioned above, it is not uncommon for younger women, especially those married for the first time, to reside amongst their husband's kin in the early stages of their marriage, until their husbands are able to build houses in their wives' matrilineal home compounds. These women, who may not yet have borne children, or who are perhaps mothers to just one child, often find themselves more vulnerable than their more senior counterparts who generally live amongst their own kin in houses built by their current or previous husbands. As more established wives of longer standing, or as mothers to grown up



children, their status in the village and moral credentials are usually more firmly entrenched and their positions more secure. Surrounded by their matrilineal relatives, they are less subject to the oversight and critiques of their husband's kin, and somewhat removed from disagreements that might arise over the division and use of remitted goods and funds. These women are able to maintain greater independence with respect to the money and gifts remitted, which are usually sent to them for distribution.

As well as feeding into their wives' relationships with their kin and fellow villagers, gifts of goods and money also carry moral freight for the migrants who send them, serving to acknowledge the contributions of kin towards their own success – perhaps by means of direct financial contributions towards their passport or travel, or assistance in establishing contacts. Less directly, gifts are given to those upon whose agricultural labour, care or financial support migrants have depended in the past, in particular, their matrilineal kin, in addition to their wives and children who maintain the fields and homestead in their absence. The moral obligation to recognise and maintain such ties through gifts and remittances that serve as 'an indication of social commitment and respect' (Moore and Vaughan 1994: 176) can be keenly felt, to the extent that, as Eric Worby has shown for Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg, those unable to meet the expectations of their kin may feel compelled to sever ties altogether, choosing 'social invisibility over visible immorality' (2010: 431). The dangers associated with perceived immorality and the neglect of constitutive relationships, often expressed through fear and suspicions of witchcraft, can have very real consequences, especially for those migrants (the majority) who plan eventually to return (Ferguson 1999).

That Lucius's trip had been brief, and certainly not long enough to have amassed significant wealth, combined with the fact that he had returned early because of his perceptions of insecurity, lessened expectations of gifts, which were soon largely forgotten as he was reincorporated into village life. For Lucius, those few difficult months in 2010 foreclosed all dreams of a South African future. Instead, his experience spurred him on to carve out a path to economic security closer to home: first as an entrepreneurial brick maker on his wife's land, and more recently by furthering his education so as to train as a primary school teacher.

### **A story of migratory success**

Some nine months earlier, another man from the same village had made a more triumphant return from Cape Town, where he had lived and worked for two years. Chisomo arrived in a hired pick-up truck loaded with gifts and high tech possessions. When a friend and I visited him at his home the day after his return, we found his house (which was soon to be rebuilt with burnt bricks and an iron sheet roof) stuffed to the brim with suitcases and large bags, as well as a bicycle, stacks of CDs and DVDs, piles of clothing, blankets and children's shoes. He eagerly showed us the larger of his two stereos, equipped with CD player, double cassette, USB and SD card ports. Indeed, for the duration of his visit, his home was to be transformed by his new stereo equipment, TV, and DVD player (powered by a diesel generator) into a hub of village entertainment. He himself was dressed in good quality trainers, three-quarter length trousers, a black logo-ed T-shirt and a large silver crucifix necklace, topped off with a khaki fabric peaked hat. My notes from the time include the observation that he would not have looked out of place on the London tube. To my friend, he appeared as

the epitome of successful labour migration. As he proudly displayed his wares, promising that nestled amongst them were gifts for my companion, she and the many children who had crushed into his living room with us voiced their admiration.

During his visit, Chisomo made good on his promises of gifts to kin and close friends, including my friend, who received a warm coat, a canister of deodorant, a necklace, and a pair of towelling slippers. He also rekindled his relationship with his first wife, the mother of his eldest daughter, from whom he had been divorced several years prior to his departure for South Africa when she chose not to move with him to his matrilineal home after the death of his grandmother. His third wife had been living with him when he left for Cape Town, but she had been accused of bad behaviour and evicted by his kin during his absence. Chisomo's first wife would give birth to twins some eight months after his return to South Africa, and she and their infant children have since joined him in Cape Town.

The treatment of Chisomo's third wife by his matrilineal kin parallels that endured by the wife of Jere, another of the male villagers currently living in Joni, when her young stepdaughter alerted her mother-in-law to her alleged infidelity. Both of these marriages were relatively recently contracted and both women were living among their husband's matrilineal kin while they were abroad. Such instances underline the difficulties of sustaining marriages through periods of prolonged absence, especially for younger or more recently married women, and the tensions that can arise between spouses and their in-laws, particularly when remittances are at stake. After his wife was 'chased' (*thamangitsidwa*) away, to employ the local idiom, Jere married a woman from a neighbouring district on a return trip to Malawi. His new wife also

began married life by moving to live with her mother-in-law in Chiradzulu, but some months later, in a further parallel with Chisomo's trajectory, she joined Jere in South Africa.

The ability to take one's wife to South Africa is viewed by villagers as the ultimate sign of success. Men tend to travel alone in the first instance, leaving their wives and children behind in Malawi, but they usually hope that, once they are sufficiently established in South Africa, they will be able to return for their families.<sup>viii</sup> Those like Jere and Chisomo who fulfil this ambition are relatively few, but they serve as prominent examples of what is possible for those with the capacity (*nzeru*) to succeed. However, once a migrant's wife and children have migrated with him, his ties to his rural home may weaken, and given the higher cost of living in South Africa, such men tended to remit goods and money to Malawi less frequently than those whose wives and children had remained. Indeed, in the months since Chisomo's nuclear family joined him in Cape Town, grumblings about his apparent stinginess, or unwillingness to share his wealth, have been heard in his village home, despite his recent contribution towards the coffin of a senior matrilineal kinsman.

### **Dreams and aspirations**

Such criticism notwithstanding, role models like Chisomo serve to reinforce the idea that South Africa is a land of prosperity, keeping alive the dream of betterment in a foreign land that many seek to emulate. At present, dreams of travel are also fuelled by increased contact between villagers in Malawi and their migrant kin in South Africa. Mobile technology makes regular communication possible in a way that it was not in the recent past, bringing Joni closer to home as it were, by making life

there more immediate and familiar.<sup>ix</sup> This latter point was well illustrated when a male migrant from a nearby village passed away in South Africa. Unable to arrange for his body to be brought home to Malawi for burial, his relatives settled on a more novel solution: they managed to bridge the distance between the two countries through the use of mobile phones, uniting mourners in the observation of simultaneous funeral rites. Periodic phone calls informed his family in Chiradzulu of the progress of the funeral ceremony in Johannesburg, as large numbers of villagers gathered at his village home to mark the event in much the same way as they would have done in the presence of his body.

Given the cost of international phone calls, however, calls home tend to be short and I was often surprised by just how little information was transmitted when villagers spoke to their migrant kin. It was not uncommon for the mothers or wives of migrants to be unable to answer my questions about where their sons or husbands were staying, whether they had secured employment, and of what kind. Thus, the details and potential hardships of life in South Africa remained obscured for many, and the abstract dream of prosperity and success endured. This lack of clear insight into life in South Africa perhaps explains the reaction of the woman cited above who responded to the frank admission of a kinsman residing in Cape Town that he was ‘struggling’ (*kuvutika*) and wanted to return home by encouraging him to stay on long enough to acquire the means of securing his livelihood in Malawi. It seemed to me at least that she had been afforded only a very limited understanding of what struggling in South Africa might mean. For her, as for many others, foundering in South Africa raised the spectre of a personal failing, a lack of capacity (*nzeru*) to make the most of undeniable opportunities for economic success.

For those who continue to dream of migratory travel, the acquisition of a passport is the essential first step and often constitutes an ambition in and of itself. The cost of applying for a passport remained prohibitive for many, and as such acquiring one was generally a long-term aim. Men often spoke of saving for a passport as the object of their economic endeavours as they tended cash crops, moulded bricks, or engaged in small-scale trade. Thus it was that when the local Group Village Headman (GVH) wanted to impress upon his matrilineal heirs (his sisters' daughters) the sacrifice that he was making in order to serve as traditional authority and family head, the words 'I could be in Joni' were enough. As a passport holder and secondary school graduate, he could indeed have been in South Africa, but instead he was in Chiradzulu striving for the 'development' (*chitukuko*) of the seventeen villages under his jurisdiction, and doing his best to oversee the maturation of his potential successors. 'People are always asking me why I don't get a well paid job somewhere else', he said, 'I have a driving licence and I could work for much more money than I am able to make here.' He made these comments in the context of a lecture about the importance of education, however, and he ended by saying that if he could *pulumutsa* (save, salvage, deliver) two or three of the young girls before him by ensuring their own educational and subsequent professional success, remaining in Malawi would have been worth the sacrifice.

All those present to hear the Group Village Headman speak were familiar with Lucius's experience in South Africa, for he was the GVH's younger brother. Nevertheless, the words 'I could be in Joni' contained within them all that South Africa continues to represent to Malawian villagers – hope, aspiration, prosperity: in

short, the good life. That someone with a passport, driving licence, and foreign contacts would forego migration struck his audience as sacrifice indeed, and underlined the seriousness of his message: they must focus on their schooling and succeed in their own right so that his own renunciation would not be in vain.

## **Conclusion**

Migration from Malawi to South Africa no longer occurs on the scale of the mid-twentieth century, when Malawi was the most significant supplier of mine labour. In place of organised mass migration, contemporary migrants follow another precedent, that of independent travel relying on contacts with kin and acquaintances who have already made the journey. This article has focused on current trends in migration from Malawi to South Africa from the perspective of a particular village in Chiradzulu District, in the matrilineal south. I have shown how the impact of male out-migration is inflected by the matrilineal setting of the migrants' rural homes: matrilineal norms affect residence patterns and the relative importance of relationships between spouses, siblings, and in-laws, shaping the experiences of those 'left behind' and the concerns of the migrants themselves. Yet we have also seen how these experiences are affected by the specificities of individual biographies and circumstances: their relative ages, for example, as well as the duration of their marriages, and their moral standing within the local community. Moral considerations have been shown to have another relevance too, with respect to the remittances migrants send home that may serve to acknowledge constitutive attachments to those upon whom they have earlier depended. Recipients of remittances also run the micropolitical-economic and moral gauntlet as they make decisions about how to spend the money received and with whom to share it. Another aim of this article, then, has been to demonstrate the

interconnections between broader political-economic shifts and socio-cultural aspects of life in rural Malawi that might otherwise seem unrelated but which are intimately shaped by these forces and their impacts upon employment opportunities and remuneration. Throughout, I have emphasised the difficulties faced by migrants in South Africa, the vulnerability they often feel, as well as the discrepancies between the expectations of would-be migrants and their kin and the harsher realities of life in South Africa for many of those who make it there. Nevertheless, for many in Malawi, Joni remains an almost mythical place where great wealth is thought to be accessible to those with the capacity (*nzeru*) to seize their opportunities. With paltry prospects for formal employment within Malawi, Joni's lure, and the capacity of South Africa to fuel the dreams and aspirations of Malawian villagers seems unlikely to diminish.

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> All names are pseudonyms. See Englund (2006) for a discussion of the use of the Chichewa word *ufulu* (freedom, plural *maufulu*) to translate the English 'rights'.

<sup>ii</sup> I carried out fieldwork in rural southern Malawi from January 2009 to September 2010, and then returned for several weeks in September 2013, and for six months from April 2015.

<sup>iii</sup> As Caroline Archambault (2010) has pointed out, the phrase 'left behind' carries undesirable baggage. I do not mean to imply that migrants' wives are not actively involved in migration decisions or that remaining in their rural homes is incompatible with 'a larger strategy to live meaningful productive and domestic lives' (ibid.: 939).

<sup>iv</sup> As was the case in Malawi, rural areas in other countries of southern Africa were also interdependent with the South African mines, see, e.g., First (1983) on Mozambique, and Murray (1981) for a view from Lesotho.

<sup>v</sup> Rijk van Dijk (2014) encountered a similar myth in Botswana and shares Bennesch's historical interpretation.

<sup>vi</sup> UN statistics put this figure at 62% (United Nations Development Programme 2014).

<sup>vii</sup> On the purchase of bicycles by returned migrants, see McCracken (2012: 259).

<sup>viii</sup> As noted by Banda for men from Mzimba District (2008: 54), male migrants from Chiradzulu also tend to marry prior to their departure for South Africa, as opposed to migrating in order to accumulate the wealth or status necessary to attract a spouse. That bridewealth is not paid in this part of the country is no doubt a relevant factor here.

<sup>ix</sup> For more on the impact of mobile telephony on the African continent, see, e.g., Archambault, J. S. (2012) and de Bruijn, et al (2009).



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