

Love and homophobia in Malawi's spoken-word poetry movement

Harri Englund

By the early 2010s, a number of Malawian poets in their twenties had begun to pursue aesthetic alternatives to the poetry associated with academic writers at the University of Malawi. Although in many cases recipients of tertiary education themselves, the new poets have sought to substitute the elliptical expression of the earlier generation with a language that teems with popular idioms and slang words. As poetry directed at 'the people', its medium is spoken word rather than print, performed to live audiences and distributed through CDs, radio programmes and the internet. Crafted predominantly in Chichewa, the poems also address topics of popular interest, from current affairs to football to trouble with money and love. As such, key figures in the movement did not fail to produce verse about homosexuality after Malawi's controversial 'first gay wedding' in 2009.

The event was an engagement ceremony (*unkhoswe*) rather than a full-blown wedding (*ukwati*). Yet it attracted immediate attention both nationally and internationally, and the couple were promptly arrested and charged under Malawi's anti-sodomy laws (Biruk 2014; Demone 2016). Despite the threats by several foreign governments to suspend development aid to Malawi, the couple were sentenced by the courts and then pardoned by president Bingu Wa Mutharika after a visit by the United Nations' secretary general. Malawi was rife with rumours, some of which described the 'marriage' as a conspiracy by which non-governmental organizations had tested the state's willingness to apply legislation inherited from the colonial era. Popular scepticism was fuelled by one of the partners marrying a woman after his release from prison, while the other settled in Cape Town as a transgender person.

The controversy served to galvanize the politicization of homosexuality in Malawi (Currier 2018). Anti-homosexual sentiments found a fertile ground in which to grow in the elitism that had marked Malawian attempts at human rights activism after the restitution of multiparty democracy in the early 1990s (Englund 2006). The emphasis on civil and political liberties, propelled by activists' decision to translate the concept of human rights into Chichewa as 'birth-freedom' (*ufulu wachibadwidwe*), resonated poorly with the experiences of hunger and economic difficulties among the populace. As elsewhere in contemporary Africa, political and religious opprobrium against homosexuality arose from specific historical conditions, much as it may have depicted the orientation as alien to 'African culture' (Aterianus-Owanga 2012; Boyd 2013; M'Baye 2013).

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The spoken-word poets presented here pandered to no politician or pastor. Nor do their verses amount to a silencing of all debate, as appears to have been the intent of certain other popular artists. The successful musician and member of parliament Lucius Banda, for example, stopped his live performance abruptly in 2015 after he spotted two male members of the audience in a romantic embrace.¹ Beyond their homophobic tone, the poems presented here evoke a plurality of viewpoints, a sense of the poet debating the particular stance he or she has taken in the debate. Such plurality does not make them any less disturbing, but the poets' choice of issues to be raised in debates on homosexuality – and their uses of language – merits close attention. They appear even more complex when seen in the context of their creators' other works. Not only have these same poets performed poetry in the service of progressive campaigns against gender-based violence and the discrimination suffered by people with albinism, they have also penned and performed love poems whose depictions of male and female desires have asserted unusual equality in a popular culture often marred by misogyny.

Born-free poets

Robert Chiwamba and Evelyn Pangani were among the first to start performing poetry in a deliberate effort to dispense with some of the aesthetic features of modern Malawian poetry. Both were born around 1990 and were thus young children when political and constitutional changes took place. Their trajectories are not identical. Chiwamba, a graduate in public administration at Chancellor College of the University of Malawi, owes more than he may admit to the legacies of literary ferment in that institution. It is Chiwamba who has done the most to represent the new poets as a movement, and his entrepreneurial approach has helped convene the poets for live performances and, since 2016, on the internet platform *sapitwapoetry.com*, which by 2019 had featured work by over 130 Malawian poets. Pangani, whose highest academic achievement is a diploma in journalism, has been a popular voice in the movement and one of the few female writers and performers. Between 2011 and 2015, she did her part to lend coherence to the new movement by hosting a poetry-reading show on Joy Radio, a commercial station broadcasting from Blantyre. Towards the end of the 2010s, she ceased to release and to perform new poems despite continuing to write them. She cited her becoming a mother and her lack of funds to record the poems as reasons for her withdrawal.

Chiwamba was born in Balaka in southern Malawi to Lomwe and Yao parents. Despite some efforts at ethno-linguistic revivalism since the democratic transition (Kamwendo 2002; Kayira *et al.* 2019), colonial and postcolonial policies had consolidated Chichewa as Malawi's most widely spoken language by the 1990s, and it was the only language spoken at Chiwamba's home. He found his calling as a poet when he was a student at Chancellor College, initially as a way of entertaining his fellow students with colloquial verse on mundane topics, but he soon developed an ambitious agenda for the new movement. Although he audited lectures and workshops led by academic poets, Chiwamba perceived a gap between what they took to be poetry and the kind of language that would make poetry resonate with

¹Lucius stands by anti-gay position', *The Nation*, 29 December 2015.

Malawi's populace. The more some of his lecturers questioned the status of his and his peers' writing as poetry, the more determined he became to assert the need for new poetry for new times. Apart from the diminishing need to deploy elliptical expression for political reasons, as discussed below, Chiwamba felt that by the twenty-first century Malawians were generally living in a world of instant communication where proverbial wisdom was becoming obsolete. In one of our conversations, he claimed that proverbs (*miyambi*) and esoteric idioms (*mikuluwiko*) had largely disappeared from everyday language. He described the question he posed to himself as follows: 'If people don't understand proverbs, what will I benefit from using them? [*Ngati miyambi samva, ndipindula chiyani?*']'

Pangani had begun to write poetry as a teenager in her home district of Blantyre and did not share Chiwamba's formative experience as an aspiring poet in a university. She wrote verse in English as a secondary-school student but switched to Chichewa in 2008 to reach a wider audience on the radio. Pangani soon found herself in the company of like-minded writers who, assembled both virtually and in live sessions by Chiwamba and his peers, experienced unprecedented fellowship. Pangani's passion was to write verse about women and girls, particularly about the importance of schooling and the need to reduce the domestic chores that hampered many girls' education. Such messages proved popular among governmental and non-governmental agencies, which invited Pangani to perform at various functions. It is a vocation she has pursued as a teacher of poetry among schoolchildren, sponsored by Save the Children.

The opportunities to perform offered by various organizations are another facet of the movement's public presence. Chiwamba has been a prolific contributor to such events, his portfolio of collaborators including Malawi's ombudsman, UNESCO and the World Bank, along with a number of NGOs. In some cases, the organizations have commissioned poems on particular topics, while in others the poets have performed work from their existing repertoire. Never slow to seize opportunities, Chiwamba has also had the movement adopt annual themes in recent years: gender-based violence in 2017 and discrimination against people with albinism in 2018. Despite their potential to generate income, these campaigns and functions have not made anyone a full-time poet. Pangani sells home-made furniture in Lilongwe, while Chiwamba works for the Malawi Revenue Authority as a tax collector in the remote northern district of Karonga. He prefers the permissive attitude of his superiors there to the more restrictive regime that might prevent his travels if he worked in Malawi's urban centres.

A new aesthetic

Chiwamba and his peers pursue their vision of a poetry movement in the aftermath of the Malawi Writers Group, which nurtured literary talent during the one-party era led by the 'President for Life' Kamuzu Banda (Mphande 1996; Vail and White 1991: 280–98). Some of its members came to enjoy international publishing success – notably Frank Chipasula, Jack Mapanje, Lupenga Mphande and Paul Zeleza – but the origins of the group lay in youthful enthusiasm not unlike what drives the current movement. Its early interventions in the 1970s also included comparable efforts to bring, through open-air recitals and plays, literary works to wider audiences than could be achieved through its academic base

at Chancellor College and the other constituent colleges of the University of Malawi (Mphande 1996: 94–6). Such was the stranglehold of Banda's regime on creativity, however, that poetry became the group's principal medium for, as the members saw it, its propensity to disguise politically sensitive observations in indirect and elliptical expression. By the same token, the texts were written rather than spoken, save for the meetings between a select group of insiders, and English became the principal language in which the poetry was written.

The conditions under which the attendant aesthetic arose were severe enough, as attested by Mapanje's imprisonment in 1987–91 and by the exile of older writers, such as Legson Kayira and David Rubadiri. No sooner had Malawi celebrated its independence in 1964 than Banda's autocratic impulses came into view. The 1965 Public Security Regulation gave him the powers to detain without trial anyone accused of holding dissenting views, while legislation in 1968 established the Censorship Board to criminalize possessing, importing, publishing, distributing or displaying any text or other printed matter deemed 'undesirable' by the regime (Mphande 1996: 81). As Mapanje (2002: 184) has recalled, the poets developed a language in which to elude the omnipresent censor by, among other strategies, coining new words such as 'to accidentalise'. A shared 'code of imagery' (Vail and White 1991: 281–2) was key to the poets' work.

The challenge the twenty-first-century spoken-word poets have issued concerns both the aesthetics and the purpose of poetry in the so-called new Malawi. Immediately after Malawi's first multiparty elections in over thirty years in 1994, Mapanje welcomed the new era from exile in the United Kingdom by announcing the need to 'reconstruct the stories of thirty years of Banda's autocratic rule without fear' (1995: 14). He insisted on 'de-autocratization' as the necessary condition for such reconstruction, not only in the structures of government but also in the imaginative resources that writers would draw on. Malawians seized on the new freedoms, however, in ways that the country's internationally best-known poet and the founding member of the Writers Group found hard to condone. A few years after calling for fearless writing, Mapanje bemoaned that the mushrooming newspapers had become 'ebullient to the point of being irresponsible' (2002: 178). Poems, written in English and Chichewa, were a striking feature of the more than a dozen newspapers that began appearing as soon as the political situation allowed (Kishindo 2003). Few of the poets had published before, let alone were members of the Writers Group, but this period 'actually saw the greatest number of published poets in the literary history of Malawi' (Chimombo and Chimombo 1996: 78). Yet while Mapanje regretted the abuse of freedom of expression, the newspaper poets' academic critics noted the 'very uneven quality' that ranged from 'plain statement to true poetry' (*ibid.*: 86). It is the academic critics' propensity to place themselves as the arbiters of poetic taste that the new spoken-word movement has sought to challenge.

Many of the poets of the early 1990s disappeared with the short-lived newspapers, but Chiwamba, Pangani and their peers would have been too young to participate then. Nor, as mentioned, do newspapers or other print publications play a significant role in the dissemination of their poetry. It was private radio stations rather than newspapers that proved resilient in the media landscape of the new Malawi (Englund 2011: 31–6). Most stations aired regular programmes of poetry recitals, and these contributed to the growth of the spoken-word movement. The spoken-word poets' thematic range in the 2010s was also considerably

broader than the preoccupation with politicians and electoral politics in the poems of the early 1990s. Yet the apparently limited aesthetic and technical command of poetry has continued to draw derision from academic critics.

One of those critics is Benedicto Malunga, the long-time registrar at the University of Malawi and a renowned Chichewa poet. Although he published his first poem as a student at Chancellor College in 1981, his preference for writing in Chichewa made him a somewhat marginal figure in the Writers Group. Over the years, his poetry has featured many times on the radio, in the Chichewa curriculum in secondary schools and even on the internet platform curated by Chiwamba, making him the best-known poet in Malawi – ahead of, as he proudly told me, Mapanje, whose fame is largely international, beyond the country's small academic community. He does not, however, see Chiwamba and his peers as carrying forward his legacy in Chichewa poetry. In my conversations with him, Malunga described the new spoken-word poetry as deploying a 'bastardized language' and 'campus humour'. Every generation of students, he asserted, had its campus jokes, but they could hardly become the stuff of poetry. He also dismissed Chiwamba's claim that proverbs no longer featured in Malawians' language by pointing out their frequent use by political and religious leaders. Malunga saw himself as maintaining high aesthetic standards in Chichewa poetry, citing as examples imagery and diction in one of his anthologies (Malunga 2001) and the translations he had prepared. They include the epigraph of W. B. Yeats' poem in his translation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe 2004). In 2018, he was also hoping to finalize his translation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* before the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections.

The teachers of literature at Chancellor College have not been more receptive to the new movement. A lecturer in Chichewa told me that he had assigned Chiwamba's poems in the classroom to provoke a debate on what constituted 'real poetry'. Chiwamba's poems served as examples of how not to write poetry, although the lecturer admitted that interesting discussions could ensue when students were confronted with such examples. For this lecturer, Chiwamba's poems were often too long and repetitive, evidence of the poet's inability to use idioms and proverbs to shorten his text. The lecturer saw this lack of technical mastery as a consequence of Chiwamba's study of social sciences rather than literature. The very popularity of his poetry, the lecturer felt, threatened the development of creative writing in Malawian languages. Inspired by Chiwamba, many others could adopt his low standards.

Chiwamba's response to these criticisms was twofold. On the one hand, he was keen to convince me of the care with which he had considered the aesthetic and technical aspects of his poetry. He had attended some of Malunga's lectures on poetry and cited him saying that not all the elements that constituted poetry needed to be present in any given poem. Chiwamba also regretted that all types of poetry were talked about in Chichewa using just one word, *ndakatulo*. What would, he asked rhetorically, 'spoken word' be in Chichewa? On the other hand, Chiwamba was also anxious to assert a difference between the new movement and the poetry favoured by academics. He was explicit about the entrepreneurial spirit in his efforts to galvanize a spoken-word movement as an expression of views and concerns held by the majority of Malawians. It not only entailed accepting topics that may have been too mundane for more high-

mindful poets; it also required the kind of language people spoke in their own lives, although, crucially, this was enlivened by the poet's humorous and inventive uses of words, some of which were non-standard Chichewa. Repetition was another deliberate aesthetic feature for poems prepared to be performed, not a sign of the poet's incompetence. That critics would continue to dismiss his poems as 'cracking jokes' (*kuseketsa*) and 'only telling stories' (*kungokamba nkhani*) was of little consequence to Chiwamba. The popularity of his poetry was his reward.

Debating *mathanyula*

Unbeknown to each other, Chiwamba and Pangani prepared poems against homosexuality in the wake of the 2009 controversy over the 'gay wedding' mentioned earlier. Chiwamba's poem *Takana mathanyula* (*We Refuse Homosexuality*) was actually his second on the topic, prepared hard on the heels of *Mudzafa imfa yowawa* (*You Will Die a Painful Death*), which had described in graphic detail the gruesome demise that awaited homosexuals. The idea for this poem had occurred to Chiwamba before the events in 2009, but its original subjects were armed robbers rather than homosexuals. It may be a measure of the poet's opportunism that he changed the subject as events unfolded, but both Chiwamba and Pangani insisted to me that they stood fully behind the homophobic mood of their poems. Despite his ambition to bring his performances to various national and international stages, Chiwamba even claimed that he would not be deterred by organizers' threats to boycott him. The popular demand for these poems drove their defiance. They enjoyed plenty of airtime on various radio stations, and *Takana mathanyula* has been one of the most downloaded poems on the movement's website for years. Chiwamba's live audiences have come to expect it as the boisterous finale of his performances, not unlike a pop star belting out his or her greatest hit.

Whether Chiwamba and Pangani met the popular demand simply by parroting what people wanted to hear is a more complex issue than it may seem. On the one hand, they have not used their poetic licence to reform the language in which homosexuality is talked about in Chichewa. The connotations of *mathanyula* are hardly neutral, let alone conducive to a sympathetic attitude. It summons images of sodomy, and it conveys a sense of coerced sexual acts. Before the current controversies, *mathanyula* was used for what senior men did to their younger male companions in the same-sex settings of prisons and mines. It was also the word for male rape in other contexts. Activists have struggled to translate 'gay sex' into Chichewa and have often preferred to use English words. On the other hand, Chiwamba and Pangani diverge from the popular norm by de-emphasizing the alleged Christian case against homosexuality. In her poem *Ndalama za nyansi sitikuzifuna* (*We Don't Want Dirty Money*), Pangani mentions the issue early on in order to move on to other observations. Both of them did mention to me their Christian faith as one reason for their anti-gay attitudes, but as an Anglican (Chiwamba) and a Roman Catholic (Pangani), they have had no direct association with evangelical and Pentecostal preachers most commonly found to voice public condemnation of homosexuals. In Malawi, as Chiwamba pointed out, the influence has gone the other way, with some pastors citing his poems in their preaching.

Nor would ‘hate speech’, or indeed ‘homophobia’, exhaust the contents of these poems. To be sure, Pangani’s poem evokes disease and filth in ways that can only be regarded as demeaning, while Chiwamba’s ends with what appears to be incitement to violence. Yet the bulk of both poems addresses Malawi’s colonial legacies and its more recent democratic experiments. Chiwamba summons an overwhelming consensus on the anti-gay sentiment by repeating the question about what everyone is saying in the various contexts of everyday lives. He achieves this mood also by deploying Chiyao and Chitumbuka, Malawi’s other major languages, to ask the same question, and by listing several different names for God, as though the sentiment cut across religious divides. At the same time, his poem mimics the new democratic era by conveying the debate on the views one can hold on the issue. They include the claims that anti-gay Malawians are hypocrites for not admitting vices among the heterosexual majority, that Malawi has no distinct culture of its own within which to regard homosexuality as alien, and that consensual sex between adults is no one else’s concern. It is Malawian activists and their foreign sponsors who appear in both poems to kill all debate. The crux of both poems is a warning against taking Malawians for granted, however ‘polite’ or ‘mild-mannered’ (*ofatsa*) or ‘poor’ (*osauka*) they may seem.

The vitriol aimed at Malawian activists is consistent with popular suspicions about NGOs as strategies for self-enrichment in the new Malawi (Biruk 2018; Englund 2006). In her conversations with me, moreover, Pangani explained her urge to write *Ndalama za nyansi sitikuzifuna* as a response to what she saw as President Joyce Banda’s weakness in resisting foreign demands for gay rights. Although Banda never implemented new policies or laws in this area during her short reign, the female poet felt compelled to protest because of the female president’s perceived feebleness. The poems also draw on historical notions to express critical thoughts. Pangani mentions ‘colonialist’ (*mtsamunda*), while Chiwamba goes further back in history to summon slavery (*ukapolo*). In a particularly striking verse, Chiwamba swears that if homosexuality represents freedom, Malawians will choose to return to slavery ‘in Egypt’.

Some of the claims and imagery in Pangani’s poem derive from her internet searches, such as the evocation of ‘twelve diseases’ and the emphasis on ‘anal cancer’. They indicate the origin of her objections to homosexuality in anxieties that cross national boundaries, whatever the violation of national self-determination that her poem highlights. Indeed, the connotations of sodomy in *mathanyula* may resonate with popular reflections on sex and power more widely in contemporary Africa (see Geschiere and Oroock 2020; Meiu 2020). On the other hand, some of the imagery in both poems, despite Chiwamba’s claims about disappearing proverbs and idioms, deploys well-established Chichewa tropes. Among others, they include, in Chiwamba’s poem, *maliro a njoka* (lit. a snake’s funeral) for disrespect, *kwa mtu wa galu tatemetsa nkhwangwa pamwala toto* (lit. hitting a rock with an axe by the dog’s head) for ardent refusal, and, in Pangani’s poem, *kampeni kumphasa* (lit. a small knife hidden in a mat) for plotting. Alongside such established idioms are more recent ones, some of which require knowledge possessed by Malawians living in urban areas, such as *chintuwitsa mbali inayi* for a ‘four-sided scone’ in Chiwamba’s poem. The challenges that these phrases present to the translator are a measure of the ambitious language that the spoken-word poets pursue despite their opposition to academic poetry.

Gender equality

The themes of neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism, pitting homosexuality against patriotism, had become common in African anti-gay discourses by the early 2010s. While the two poems described above may have added little to these themes, their popularity helped raise the profile of spoken-word poetry in Malawi and vindicated, for the poets themselves, the aesthetic orientation they had chosen for the movement. As mentioned, however, these poems must not be considered in isolation from their writers' other works. Chiwamba and Pangani have also penned and performed love poems, whose evocation of gender relations unsettles the association often made in the activist literature on homosexuality that anti-gay sentiments uphold a 'heteropatriarchal' social order (Epprecht 2012: 228). Homophobia, in this view, tends to correlate with conservative attitudes to gender relations in heterosexual relationships. Yet when considered with regard to Malawi's male-dominated, often misogynistic popular music, Chiwamba's and Pangani's love poems can appear positively countercultural. Men and women have remarkably similar feelings in Chiwamba's *Takumana pano pamsika* (*We Met Here at the Market*), while female desire gets woven into a poem about love and devotion in Pangani's *Ngati mawa sindifika* (*If I Don't Arrive Tomorrow*).

Takumana pano pamsika describes a chance meeting between old flames in a market place. Both of them have arrived with their spouses and children, only to become acutely aware of how past desires are not easily extinguished in the present. The symmetry between male and female cravings not only introduces rhythmic repetition to the poem but also asserts an equivalence between the genders. For each gesture, thought and feeling that the poem attributes to one party, it finds the same for the other. The poem's narrator assumes responsibility for failing to marry his old flame in the refrain 'dilly-dallying, my dilly-dallying / Stupidity, my stupidity' (*Koma chidodotu ine chidodo / Kupusa ineyo kupusa*). The refrain is consistent with the man's role as the active one in courtship, marked in Chichewa by the active tense 'to marry' (*kukwatira*) for a man and the passive tense 'to be married' (*kukwatiwa*) for a woman. Yet the poem's egalitarian ethos is such that even this convention gives way to some debate about who bears responsibility for the unfulfilled union. In the end, the couple resolve, as 'religious people' (*opemphera*; lit. 'those who pray'), to accept the burden of convention in a tearful farewell.

Intimacy between two lovers outweighs any other consideration in Pangani's *Ngati mawa sindifika*. More lyrical in its praise for romantic love than *Takumana pano pamsika*, it centres on the prospect of the narrator's sudden death – 'If I don't arrive tomorrow' – and deploys several bodily and natural metaphors to convey the depth of her love. Her heart leaps with joy because of her lover; when closing her eyes, she sees only her lover's image; if the lover is disappointed in politics, she is too. Towards the end, this comparatively short poem gives counsel to the lover in the event of death before it returns to the present bliss in remarkably sensual imagery.

The expression of female desire, written by a female and delivered in a female voice, breaks convention where *Takumana pano pamsika* appears to suppress emotions for the sake of convention. Yet both poems convey countercultural courage. *Ngati mawa sindifika* asserts the woman as the active partner in an intimate, sexual

relationship. *Takumana pano pamsika* reveals that even ‘those who pray’ – and a deacon at that – can harbour extramarital passions, not because of wanton lust but as subjects infatuated with memories of past intimacy. The significance of these poems when discussing their ‘homophobic’ counterparts is not simply the seriousness with which they explore the meaning of romantic love where it often seems absent (Thomas and Cole 2009). If the ‘homophobic’ poems acquire, in addition to what critics might consider their intrinsic hate speech, a hypocritical quality when compared with the poems written for international organizations, these love poems may help cast some doubt over the charge of opportunism.

Both Pangani and Chiwamba explained to me the autobiographical nature of these poems. Pangani penned hers to be performed at her own wedding. While its origins in celebrating the matrimonial bond may mitigate misogynistic misgivings about female sexuality, the poem nevertheless delivers an alternative to the common trope in Malawian middle-class weddings – the bride as her groom’s helper. The hapless narrator in Chiwamba’s poem, on the other hand, is to some extent the poet himself. The personal circumstances contribute nuance that the ultimately impersonal attacks on homosexuality lack. The aesthetic of people’s poetry shows itself capable of questioning convention.

Acknowledgements

While I bear the sole responsibility for the accuracy of the transcriptions and translations of their poems, I am greatly indebted to Robert Chiwamba and Evelyn Pangani for their kind cooperation throughout this project, including their patient and insightful discussions with me of these poems line by line, word by word. Ahmmardouh Mjaya at the Centre of Language Studies in Zomba offered further assistance in translating the poems, as did Alick Bwanali and Pascal Kishindo with their reflections on wider issues in Chichewa historical and socio-linguistics.

Supplementary materials

The following supplementary materials are available with this article at <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000255>>:

Photographs of the poets: Evelyn Pangani and Robert Chiwamba

The audio recording of Evelyn Pangani’s performance of *Ndalama za nyansi sitikuzifuna*

The audio recording of Evelyn Pangani’s performance of *Ngati mawa sindifika*

The audio recording of Robert Chiwamba’s performance of *Takana mathanyula*

The audio recording of Robert Chiwamba’s performance of *Takumana pano pamsika*

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Abstract

By the early 2010s, a number of Malawian poets in their twenties had begun to substitute the elliptical expression of earlier generations with a language that resonated with popular idioms. As poetry directed at 'the people', its medium is spoken word rather than print, performed to live audiences and distributed through CDs, radio programmes and the internet. Crafted predominantly in Chichewa, the poems also address topics of popular interest. The selection of poetry presented here comes from a female and a male poet, who, unbeknown to each other, prepared poems sharply critical of homosexuality and what they regarded as its foreign and local advocacy. The same poets have also gained success for their love poems, which have depicted intimate desires in remarkably compatible ways for both women and men. The poets who performed 'homophobic' verse went against popular gender stereotypes in their depictions of romantic love and female and male desires. This introductory essay, as a contribution to *Africa's Local Intellectuals* series, discusses the aesthetic challenges that the new poets have launched in the context of Malawi's modern poetry. With regard to gender relations in their love poems, the introduction also considers the poets' possible countercultural contribution despite their avowed commitment to perform for 'the people'.

Résumé

Dès le début des années 2010, plusieurs poètes malawites d'une vingtaine d'années avaient déjà commencé à substituer un langage faisant écho à des idiomes populaires à l'expression elliptique des générations précédentes. En tant que poésie s'adressant « aux gens », son mode est oral plutôt qu'écrit, et elle est déclamée en public et distribuée sur CD, à la radio et sur l'Internet. Ces poèmes, principalement en langue chichewa, traitent aussi de sujets d'intérêt populaire. Les poèmes présentés ici sont ceux d'une poétesse et d'un poète qui, sans le savoir mutuellement, ont préparé des poèmes vivement critiques de l'homosexualité et de ce qu'ils considèrent comme l'action étrangère et locale en sa faveur. Ces mêmes poètes ont également connu du succès avec leurs poèmes d'amour décrivant les désirs intimes de façon remarquablement compatible pour les femmes comme pour les hommes. Les poètes auteurs de vers « homophobes » vont à l'encontre des stéréotypes populaires de genre dans leurs descriptions de l'amour romantique et des désirs féminins et masculins. Cet essai liminaire à la rubrique lettrés locaux de la revue *Africa* traite des défis esthétiques qu'ont lancés les nouveaux poètes dans le contexte de la poésie moderne au Malawi. S'agissant des relations entre les sexes dans leurs poèmes d'amour, cette introduction examine également la possible contribution contre-culturelle des poètes, en dépit de leur engagement avoué à s'adresser « aux gens ».

Two poems on homosexuality

Ndalama za nyansi sitikuzifuna / *We Don't Want Dirty Money*

Evelyn Pangani

Ndinu olemera inde
Indeed you are rich
 Kwanuko mtereshi, tofu, ndalama zisisowa
At your place there is no lack of cash, dosh, money¹
 Galimoto, ndege mumapanga nokha, ndikudziwa
Car, aeroplane you make on your own, I know
 Koma mukakhala muzane
But when you are together, you should tell each other
 Kukakhala kuyera khungu ndi kwanu
Being light-skinned is your own business²
 Ife ndalama za nyansi sitikuzifuna
We don't want dirty money³

Paja mumati tikamakamba nkhani iyiyi tisamatchulepo Mulungu
You say when we talk about this issue, we must not mention God
 Mwati, 'olo, unatilinga koma nkhani iyiyi ndi yapansi pompano'
Saying, 'Although it created us, this issue is about worldly matters'
 Chabwino ndavomera, sindikambapo za Baibulo
Alright, I agree, I shall not talk about the Bible
 Ngakhalenso nalonso mwamvemve lidanena
Although it also says very clearly
 Kuti mathanyula ndi nyansi zenizeni pamaso pa Mulungu
That homosexuality is proper filth in God's eyes⁴

Munakhala bwanji inu, kuipa moyo kumeneku bwanji?
How come you are like that, wishing others ill?
 Nthawi zonse kampeni kumphasa ndi ife
Every time plotting against us⁵
 Pansi mtedza Malawi
Malawi, be alert!⁶

¹*Mtereshi* and *tofu* are slang expressions for 'money' (*ndalama*); they are less common than *makobidi*, which the poet chooses not to use.

²Being 'light-skinned' (*kuyera khungu*) is considered desirable in Malawi, and its rejection is an early sign of defiance in the poem.

³When money is *nyansi*, it is 'dirty', not only for its illicit or immoral aspects, but also because it is repulsive in a visceral sense.

⁴*Nyansi* is translated here as 'filth'.

⁵*Kampeni kumphasa* is a common idiom for plotting and evokes 'a small knife' (*kampeni*) hidden under 'a mat' (*mphasa*).

⁶*Pansi mtedza* is an idiomatic command that urges vigilance against an impending threat. It literally asks to 'hide the groundnuts' and was used in this sense to warn against marauders.

Bwenzi ili ndi lachiphamaso
*This friendship is hypocritical*⁷
 Zolowere nkudyere mwana ndiye uyu
*Familiarity with that one results in eating a child*⁸

Unkati ndiwe bwenzi pobweranso utathamangitsidwa ngati mtsamunda
*You were saying you were coming again as a friend after you had been chased away as a colonialist*⁹
 Unkati utithandiza pachuma chidziyenda bwino
You were saying you would help us run the economy well
 Koma chipalanilaneni ubwenziwu chikuchitika n'chiya?
But since this friendship began, what has been happening?
 Udanenanso kuti tisinthe ulamuliro pofunika demokalase anthu azidzilamulira mwau-fulu
You also said that we should change governance for people to rule themselves freely in a democracy
 Molemekezanso wachibadwidwe
*With respect for birth-freedom*¹⁰
 Koma lero akutilamulira ndi nda?
But who is ruling us today?

Pokukukhulupirirani kuti ndinu anzeru
Believing you that you were wise
 Poona kulemera kwa maiko anu
Seeing the wealth of your countries
 Tidatsata ndondomeko zonse za kayendetsedwe ka chuma
We followed every plan of managing the economy
 Ngakhale dongosolo la kamedwe ka mankhwala kuchipatala
Even the plan of administering medicine at hospital
 Koma lero chikuchitika pachuma m'dziko muno n'chiya?
But today what is happening to the economy in this country?
 Pano poti kwalowa njoka udatisasa
*Now that the snake has come you throw us out*¹¹
 Ukuti tikonze kaye njira zathu zoyendetsera chuma
You are saying we should prepare our own ways of managing the economy
 Tikazilongosola ubweranso
When we are putting them in order, you come again
 Tsono apa ukubweranso ukuti tikapanda kuvomereza amuna adzikwatirana
Now that you are coming again, you are saying that if we don't allow men to marry men
 Akazinsu okhaokha sutithandiza
Or women to marry women, you will not help us

⁷ *Chiphamaso* is something that 'kills the eyes' and obscures the true state of affairs. It is commonly translated as 'hypocrisy' by English-speaking Malawians.

⁸ 'Eating a child' (*kudyere mwana*) likens duplicitous friendship to witchcraft (*ufiti*).

⁹ *Mtsamunda* is an established idiom for 'colonialist' and evokes the figure as stealing agricultural land.

¹⁰ *Wachibadwidwe* refers to *ufulu wachibadwidwe*, 'birth-freedom', and is the most common gloss for 'human rights' in Malawi.

¹¹ *Kwalowa njoka*, 'the coming of a snake', expresses an economic downturn and *udatisasa*, 'you throw us out', deploys the verb *kusasa*, which is commonly used for 'brushing off dust' to describe how Malawians are treated during a downturn.

Pakuti tikuphwanya ufulu wachibadwidwe
Because we are violating the birth-freedom
 Chibadwidwe ukunena iwecho ndiye chiti?
*What birth-freedom are you talking about?*¹²
 Ngati ukufuna moyo wathu osangonena bwa?
If you want our life, why don't you just say so?
 Zikakhala ndalama ndi zanu
If it is money, it is yours
 Ife ndalama za nyansi sitikuzifuna
We don't want dirty money

Malingaliro ako pa ife ndi oipa nthawi zonse
Your thoughts on us are bad every time
 Bwanji umatinamiza nthawi zonse?
How come you lie to us every time?
 Ndife osauka inde
Indeed we are poor
 Koma ife siouma mitu
*But we are not dull*¹³
 Malawi walero osauka ali ndi mawu
*Today's Malawi, the poor have something to say*¹⁴
 Paja demokalase udati ndi boma la anthu lochita zomwe anthu akufuna
As you said, democracy is the government by the people to do what the people want
 Koma lero ukufuna bomali lidzichita zofuna nda?
But today who is it that wants the government to meet demands?

Nanga bwanji polimbikitsa za mathanyulazi
And what about when encouraging that homosexuality
 Sukutichenjeza za matenda khumi ndi awiri owopsetsetsawo?
*You did not warn us about the dangerous twelve diseases?*¹⁵
 Bwanji sukutichenjeza kuti tisanayambe kuchita za nyansizi mwaufulu
How come you did not warn us that before we start making that filth freely
 Tiyambe tamanga zipatala za khansa
We should build cancer hospitals
 Ndi kuphunzitsa madotolo ochuluka akadaulo wakhansa wa kotulukira chimbudzi?
*And train several doctors to specialize in anal cancer?*¹⁶
 Kutinso HIV idapezeka koyambirira mwa amuna okhaokha amathanyula 1979
 mpaka 1981
Or that HIV was found only among homosexual men from 1979 to 1981
 Isanapezeke mwa anthu ena
Before it had been found in other people?
 Sukunena zimenezi bwa?
How come you don't say that?

¹²Throughout the poem, the 'you' being addressed is the disrespectful second-person singular *ive*, along with its verbal prefix *u-*.

¹³*Ife siouma mitu* summons the idiom of being 'dry-headed' (*kuuma mutu*) in a denial that Malawians are dull or stupid.

¹⁴*Malawi walero*, 'today's Malawi', alludes to a previous era when poor Malawians were taken for granted by the political elite as acquiescent subjects.

¹⁵*Matenda khumi ndi awiri*, 'twelve diseases', comes from the poet's internet searches and is never detailed in the poem.

¹⁶The poet expresses 'anal' with recourse to *chimbudzi*, a word for both toilet and faeces.

Za anamphulika a ululu ogwira ziwalo za manyazi omwe ukuti azichiritsidwa ku nyansizi
*About the blistering swellings in private parts that you say will be healed through filth?*¹⁷
 Simukunena bwa?
How come you don't say?
 Zoti amuna ochita mathanyula adzayenera kumavalanso matewera
That men doing homosexuality also have to wear nappies
 Ena ataika muzikhwama paulendo kamba ka chimbudzi chomwe chidzangotuluka ngati kasupe
Some they put into a suitcase when travelling for faeces will flow like a fountain
 Bwanji simukunena?
How come you don't say?

Ikadzaphulika miliri khumi ndi iwiriyo pa kamodzi
When those twelve epidemics erupt at once
 Mudzathana nayo bwanji inu mwakonzeka kulowa m'gulu la ochita mathanyulalo?
You who are ready to join the group doing homosexuality, how will you finish them?
 Ndalama sigula moyo m'dzikumbukira
Money does not buy life, remember that
 Lamoyo phukusi umasunga wekha
*The bundle of life, you take care of it by yourself*¹⁸
 Malungo enieniwa akutipha
That big fever is killing us
 Nanga ikabwera miliri khumi ndi iwiri yowopsayo
What about when those twelve serious epidemics come
 Tidzatha bwanji?
How will we manage?

Atithera mudzi mathanyula
Homosexuals finish off our village
 Pobweretsa matenda ovuta kutchula
*By bringing diseases whose names are hard to mention*¹⁹
 Edzi ikuwatha kale anthu m'midzimu
AIDS already finished off people in the villages
 Kulili ikabwera miliri inayi?
What about when the other epidemics come?
 Musadayambe kuchita mathanyula awa fufuzani
Before you have started doing that homosexuality, investigate
 Matenda ena mutalowetse munowa
You will enter other diseases here
 Adzatha dziko lonseli
They will finish off the whole country

Nthawi yokana kukakamidwa kuchita zinthu tsopano yakwana
Time to refuse being forced to do things has now arrived

¹⁷The genitalia are not named in the poem but are expressed through the euphemism *ziwalo za manyazi*, 'embarrassing body parts'.

¹⁸*Lamoyo phukusi*, 'of life, the bundle', deploys a common lyrical device in Chichewa poetry to put the attribute before the noun. In ordinary language, the phrase would be *phukusi la moyo*.

¹⁹*Matenda ovuta kutchula*, 'diseases whose names are difficult to mention', is a euphemism for venereal diseases, such as the 'anal cancer' mentioned earlier.

Ngakhale ndi zovuta koma tingathe
Although it is difficult, we shall be able
 Kuzichotsa unyolo olamuliridwabe ndi azungu ngakhale tili pa ufulu
*To remove the shackles of being ruled by white people even when we have freedom*²⁰
 Ndalama za nyansi sitikuzifuna
We don't want dirty money

Takana mathanyula / We Refuse Homosexuality

Robert Chiwamba

Ndiye inu mukuti bwa? Awo akuti bwa? Iwo akuti bwa?
So, what are you saying? What is that one saying? What are they saying?
 Tonse tikuti takana mathanyula
We are all saying that we refuse homosexuality
 Inuyo mukuti bwanji? Awowo akuti bwanji? Iwowo akuti bwa?
You there, what are you saying? That one there, what is he/she saying? What are those ones saying?
 Tonse tikuti takana utchisi wokwatirana amuna kapena akazi okhaokha
*We are all saying that we refuse the filth of men marrying men or women marrying women*²¹

Dzana munabwera monong'ona kudzatinyengerera
The other day you came quietly to lure us
 Kuti mwabweranso ndi kaufulu kena
*That you had come again with another small freedom*²²
 Kokwatirana amuna kapena akazi okhaokha
Of men marrying men or women marrying women
 Mwina tingakakonde
Perhaps we might like it
 Tinakuuzani
We told you
 'Get out'
Get out
 Utchisi sitimapanga
Filth we do not make

Dzulo munabwera ndi anzathu odziyesa okha ozindikira
Yesterday you came with our friends who think they alone are clever
 Kaya mumati amabungwe omenyera ufulu
You say they are organizations fighting for freedom
 Ufulu wa mimba zawo, za achagogo awo ndi za chakazawo
The freedom of their bellies, of their grandparents and of their wives
 Kudzatiuza kuti mwabwera nawo am'dziko lathu lomwe
To come and tell us that you came with our own compatriots
 Anthu achipala chimodzi omwe akuvomereza zimenezi
*People of the same anvil accepting those things*²³

²⁰ *Unyolo*, 'shackles', associates a contemporary lack of freedom with historical bondage.

²¹ Where Evelyn Pangani uses *nyansi* for 'dirt', Robert Chiwamba's choice, with similar connotations of filth and unhygienic practices, is *utchisi*.

²² *Kaufulu* renders *ufulu*, 'freedom', in the diminutive.

²³ 'Anvil' is the literal meaning of *chipala*, referring here to people of the same mould.

Nafe tisaumiritse mtima
We shouldn't be hard-hearted
 Tinakuyankhani si ife maliro a njoka
We answered to you that we were not without respect²⁴
 Musatitengere kokatiyesa koma mutipulumutse kuzakwaipa muvulala
You should not put us in temptation but you should save us from evil, you get injured²⁵
 Lero ngati sizinamveke mwabwera ndi kamzungu
Today as if it was not clear, you came with a little white person
 Katanyamula chintuwitsa mbali inayi
Who had brought a four-sided scone²⁶
 Kumatiopseza mwati tikapanda kuvomera nyansi zafuluzi
To scare us that if we do not agree with the filth of that freedom
 Anyamula chintuwitsa chake
Helshe will take away his/her scone
 Ndipo tikhaula, tigona ndi njala
And so we will suffer, we will sleep with hunger
 Ife tikuti basopu
We are saying, 'Watch out'²⁷
 'Get out'
 Get out
 Nyamukani inuyo, okumenyerani ufuluwo ndi chintuwitsa chanu
Leave you lot, the ones fighting for that freedom with your scone
 Mudzipita musatitengere kokatiyesa
You must go, you should not put us in temptation

Inuyo mukuti bwanji? Awowo akuti bwanji? Iwowo akuti bwa?
You there what are you saying? That one there, what is helshe saying? What are those ones saying?
 Tonse tikuti takana mathanyula
We all say we refuse homosexuality
 Tawamveni amalawi akuyankhula kumisika, m'maminibasi ndi kumijigo ndi kumababashopuku akuti bwanji?
Listen to them, Malawians are talking in markets, in minibuses, at boreholes and in barbershops, what are they saying?
 Onse akuti mathanyula amawanyansa ngati makhololo a nkhumba
All are saying that homosexuality disgusts them like the pig's phlegm
 Ndithu monga bulu okakamizidwa kutsinje tafika
Indeed like donkeys forced to a river we have arrived
 Koma madzi okha sitimwa madolo
But the water we the brave ones will not drink
 Mbamba ngati mathanyula ali ufulu
I swear if homosexuality is freedom
 Tonse aMalawi tasankha kubwerera kwa Aiguputo kuwukapolo
All of us Malawians choose to return to slavery in Egypt

²⁴ *Maliro a njoka*, 'the snake's funeral', is the fate of those lacking respect and honour.

²⁵ Both 'you should not put us in temptation' (*musatitengere kokatiyesa*) and 'you should save us from evil' (*mutipulumutse kuzakwaipa*) draw on biblical Chichewa.

²⁶ The scone stands for a bribe, and *chintuwitsa* received its name from smearing flour (*kutuwa*) on its eater's lips.

²⁷ *Basopu*, for 'watch out', comes from the Afrikaans *passop*.

Ndithu zotiuza kuti m'chilengedwe chanu

*Indeed to tell us it is natural*²⁸

Kukhala ndi chilakolako kwa mwamuna kapena mkazi mnzanu

To live with a desire among men for fellow men or women for fellow women

Kwa mtu wa galu tatemetsa nkhwangwa pamwala toto

*We refuse in the strongest terms*²⁹

Mbwerera zanu tazimva, utsiru wanu tawuona

Your nonsense we have heard, your foolishness we have seen

Makani anu atikwiyitsa

Your stubbornness has angered us

Taunika chilichonse choyenera kuunikidwa

We examined everything that had to be examined

Tapeza kuti ndi mbwerera, sitingavomere anta

We found it is nonsense, we cannot agree

Kuti ndevu ndi ndevu zipsopsonana, mwikho

*That a beard would kiss a beard, a taboo*³⁰

Sitingalulutire, lipstick ndi lipstick, akupsopsonana, malaulo

*We cannot ululate lipstick kissing lipstick, a bad omen*³¹

Mukauzane kuzipinda kwanu kokambiranako

Go and tell each other in your meeting rooms

Takana mbwerera

We refuse nonsense

Si inu kodi munabwera pa dzana kudzatiuza

Was it not you who came the other day to tell us

Titsatire demokalase

We should adhere to democracy

Ulamuliro wa chigulu?

The rule of the majority?

Lero chigulu chikuyankhula

Today the majority is speaking

Chikuti takana mathanyula

It is saying we refuse homosexuality

Ana m'mwe n'kuti cici? Wewewo akuti cici? Wawodyo akuti cici?

What are you saying? What is that one saying? What are they saying?

Wosope tukanire mathanyula

We are all saying that we refuse homosexuality

Sono imwe mukuti uli? Awo akuti uli? Iwo akuti uli?

You there, what are you saying? That one there, what is he/she saying? What are those ones saying?

Ise tonse tikuti takana mathanyula

*We are all saying that we refuse homosexuality*³²

²⁸ *Chilengedwe* as 'nature' and 'natural' derives from the verb for 'creating', *kulenga*. It refers to all those things, human and non-human, created prior to and independently of any earthly creature's efforts.

²⁹ The poet combines two separate idioms for ardent refusal – *kukanitsa kwa mtu wa galu* (to refuse strongly by the head of a dog) and *kutemetsa nkhwangwa pamwala* (to strike an axe on the rock).

³⁰ *Mwikho* has been adopted into Chichewa from Chilomwe, an endangered language, and its connotations of prohibition are commonly translated as 'taboo' by English-speaking Malawians.

³¹ *Malaulo* is a sign of possible future misfortune and is derived from *kulaula*, a verb for cursing.

³² The previous four italicized lines are in Chiyao and Chitumbuka, languages with large numbers of speakers in southern and northern Malawi respectively.

Choyamba mathanyula ndi tchimo lomwe Yehova, Mphambe, Ngwazi, Chiwothamisi
Firstly, homosexuality is a sin that Jehovah, God, Hero, the Almighty,
 Chilengathambo, Osaodzera, Madalamadala, Kuntunda adana nawo koopsa
The Creator of Clouds, the One Who Never Slumbers, the Elder of Elders, the Top One
*hates profoundly.*³³

Ndipo amatha kulanga ndi osachita nawo omwe bola ngati ali m'dzikolo
And it can punish even those who don't practise it as long as they are in this country
 Ndiye mumabwera ndi timfundo tanu topoyira
So, you come with your small confused ideas
 Ati bwanji inuyonso mumachimwa, kuba, kugona ndi akazi kaya amuna osakhala anu,
 kutamba mkati?
Saying, 'Don't you sin too: theft, sleeping with a woman or a man not your own, bewitching?'
 Koma ndi liti lomwe munamva kuti kutamba kwathu tikufuna kuti kukhale ufulu?
But when did you hear that we want our witchcraft to be freedom?
 Ndikuti ndi liti lomwe munamva kuti umbava ndi uhule wathu tikufuna womerezedwe
 ngati ufulu?
I am saying: when did you hear that our robbery and prostitution should be accepted
as freedom?
 Ndi liti tikuti munamva tikufuna ufulu woyankhula miseche?
When was it, we are saying, when you heard us wanting the freedom of speaking in
swear words?
 'Shut up'
 Shut up

Tonse takana mathanyula
We all refuse homosexuality
 Chachiwiri, mathanyula amatsutsana ndi chikhalidwe cha Chimalawi komanso cha
 umunthu
Secondly, homosexuality is against the Malawian culture as well as humanity
 Ndiye china chimaimika mkono
*And so, a thing raises its arm*³⁴
 Ati 'chikhalidwe chake n'chiti?
Says, 'What is that culture?'
 Azimai athu akumavala maleggingiwa
Our women can wear leggings
 Si chikhalidwe chathu, tilibe chikhalidwe cha Chimalawi ife, osatinamiza'
It is not our culture, we don't have a Malawian culture, don't lie to us'
 Kodi ngati tilibe chikhalidwe chathu
If we don't have our culture
 Unduna wachikhalidwe timakhala nawowa
The Ministry of Culture we have
 Ndi wachikhalidwe cha kuti kapena ku Djibuti?
Is about culture from where or from Djibouti?
 'Foolish'
 Foolish

Tonse takana mathanyula
We all refuse homosexuality

³³The poet's list of God's names does not include the most common one – *Mulungu*. Like *Mulungu* itself, many of the names predate Christianity and Islam.

³⁴The poet places the subject in the class of inanimate nouns.

Chachitatu, mathanyula ali ndi kuthekera kothetsa mtundu wa anthu a m'dziko lathu
Thirdly, homosexuality has the potential to finish the humankind in our country
 Poti ana samabadwa m'menemo
For children are not born in it
 Ndiye chamathanyula china chimafunsa 'mtundu utha bwanji poti ena adzikwatirabe
 amuna kapena akazi n'kubereka ana?'
So, another of the homosexuals asks, 'How does the humankind end when others will still
*marry men or women and give birth to children?'*³⁵
 Kupusa basi, ndani adzikuberekera ana kuti udzipanga nawo mathanyula?
Simply stupid, who would make children for you to do homosexuality with?
 Shupiti
Stupid

Tonse takana mathanyula
We all refuse homosexuality
 Ndiye akumadzakhalanso ndi timfundo tina
So, they also have other small ideas
 Ati 'zochitika pakati pa anthu akuluakulu oti agwirizana kuchipinda zitayeni siziku-
 khudzani'
Saying, 'What happens between consenting adults in a room, let it be, it is not your concern'
 Chiyani?
What?
 Bwanji, mchemwali akagona n'mchimwene wake ngakhale ali aakulu timamanga?
How come we arrest a sister and brother who sleep together even if they are adults?
 Pachifukwa chomwechinso zikutikhudza ndipo awa timanga
Because it concerns us and we arrest them
 Akawamasula, timanganso
When they release them, we arrest them again
 Tikangomva amasulidwanso apolisi athu akawamanganso
As soon as we hear that they have been released again by our police, we go and arrest
them again
 Kungomva mphekesera zoti akutuluka, ife kuwadikirira panja ndi kuwamanganso
To hear only the rumour that they are coming out of prison, we are waiting for them outside
to arrest them again

Njinga saimbira belu pakaliyala
*The passenger does not ring the cycle bell*³⁶
 Malawi asiyerani amalawi apange okha malamulo
Leave Malawians alone to make their laws
 Ndiye kwa inu amabungwe omenyera ufulu wa mimba zanu
And you from the organizations that fight for the freedom of your bellies
 Amene mukumatuma anthu kuti adziyesa zida muwapweteketsa ndipo basobu
You who send people to test weapons to hurt people, watch out
 Osamatiputa dala, kumatiponda zala, potiona ofatsa
*Don't provoke us deliberately, don't step on our toes just because we seem polite*³⁷

³⁵Another of the homosexuals' is again rendered in the class of inanimate nouns.

³⁶The passenger here is a foreigner who tries to control the journey.

³⁷*Ofatsa* translates as 'polite', 'gentle' and 'meek' and questions similar stereotypes about Malawians as in Evelyn Pangani's poem.

Kufatsa *sikupwambana* titha kumenya *mambama*³⁸
 Being polite *is not being stupid*, we can slap
 Timachitira dala, poyesa pokambirana timvana
We try our best to discuss and understand each other
 Koma inu mwati 'zokambirana a-a'
But you say, 'No discussion'
 Koma kumatiopseza 'chithandizo tilanda'
But you threaten us, 'We take away aid'
 Uku mukukisana pambalanganda
*At the same time, you are kissing in the open*³⁹
 Komatu muwasamale anthu akutoperani mafana
Indeed, be careful, people have become tired of you lads
 Ulendo wina sadzakupititsaninso kupolisi anta
Some other time they won't take you to the police, no
 Adzangokuthyolani mphafwa
They will just pierce the liver

Two poems on romantic love

Ngati mawa sindifika / *If I Don't Arrive Tomorrow*

Evelyn Pangani

Lero lino tili limodzipa
Right now that we are together
 Mitima yathu isanadukize m'bebe uwu ukumvekawu
*Before our hearts are broken*⁴⁰
 Dziwa ndimakukonda
Know that I love you

Pomwepa tikulankhulana apa
When we are talking to each other over there
 Dziwa m'mlingaliro mwanga suchoka
Know that you won't leave my thoughts
 Pomwepa tikugwirana zikhathopa
When we are holding each other by the palms of our hands
 Mtima wangawu ukuyambasa iwe
My heart searches blindly for you

Mgundo ukugunda m'mtimamu ndi wachimwemwe chifukwa cha iwe
The heart is beating happiness because of you
 N'katseka masowa mwadala
When I close the eyes deliberately
 Kutsinzina mongothyolera
*Eyes closed, the neck turned to one side*⁴¹

³⁸The italicized words are in Chiyao.

³⁹*Mukukisana* deploys the slang version of 'kissing'. The verb was *kupsopsonana* earlier in the poem.

⁴⁰The imagery is of hearts stopping for a moment because of future suffering already anticipated.

⁴¹*Mongothyolera* alludes to *kutyolera khosi*, 'to lean the neck', a feminine gesture in courtship and flirting.

Chako chithunzithunzi ndicho ndimachiona
Your image is what I see

Kukadzacha tsiku lina ine osadzuka
One sunrise I will not wake up
 Zambiri usadzalire
Do not cry too much
 Chimodzi chokha udzagwetsere msozi
Once only shed a tear
 Ndicho chikondi chakhatakhata tisanuliranachi
This love we pour for each other is thick⁴²

Kuwala kwa dzuwa kokomaku
The sun's beautiful brightness
 Kuomba kwa mphepo ya yaziyazi
The cool breeze blowing
 Sindikumva kukoma ukandikumudwitsa
I won't feel the sweetness if you disappoint me

Pena dziko likamaseka pogirigrishidwa ndi zisudzo achita andalewa
Sometimes the country laughs when tickled by politicians' dramas
 Sizindikomera ukakhumudwa
They don't please me if you are disappointed

Mwina mawa sindifika
Maybe I don't arrive tomorrow
 Chimodzi chokha udzadzitame nacho
Only one thing you should praise yourself for
 Unapangitsako moyo wanga kukoma
You made my life sweet
 Dziko langa unapangitsa kukhala lokwanira
You made my world sufficient
 Ngati mawa sindifika
If I don't arrive tomorrow
 Dziwa unali wanga wapamtima
Know that you were my dearest

Lero lomwe lino tiye kugombe la nyanja
Right now let us go to the lakeside
 N'kakuchengete monga wakowako namwino
I will go and take care of you as your very own nurse

⁴²The imagery is of the lovers pouring a thick substance into each other's containers.

Takumana pano pamsika / We Met Here at the Market

Robert Chiwamba

Takumana pano ndi pamsika
We met here at the market
 Ndi mkazi amene ndinkamufunitsitsa kwambiri
With a woman I used to desire passionately
 Nayenso adandikondetsetsa koopsa
She too used to be madly in love with me
 Koma chidodotu ine chidodo
But dilly-dallying, my dilly-dallying⁴³
 Kupusa ineyo kupusa
Stupidity, my stupidity
 Ndakumana naye ali ndi amuna ake ndi tiana tawo tiwiri
I meet her she is with her husband and their two small children
 Nanenso ndili ndi akazi anga ndi tiana tathu tiwiri
I also have my wife and our two small children
 Akunamizira kuwamwetulira amuna ake chonsecho akumwetulira ine
She is pretending to smile at her husband, all the while smiling at me
 Nanenso kudzanamizira kumwetulira akazi anga pansi pamtima ndikumwetulira iye
I also pretend to smile at my wife, while with all of my heart smiling at her
 Wandiphinyira diso kundilozero amuna ake mwachinsinsi cha mayi
She winks at me to point out her husband to me as a woman's secret
 Nanenso ndamuphinyira diso ndikumulozero akazi anga mwachikondi cha bambo
I also wink at her to point out my wife to her as a man's love
 Pakanakhala kuti palibetu iwo akanandihaga uyu
Had he not been there, she would have hugged me⁴⁴
 Pakanakhala palibe akazi anga ndikanamuhaga uyu
Had my wife not been there, I would have hugged her

Takumana pano ndi pamsika
We met here at the market
 Ndi mkazi amene ndinkamukondetsetsa kwambiri
With a woman I used to love very much
 Nayenso adandimvetsetsa koopsa
She also used to understand me extremely well
 Koma chidodotu ine chidodo
But dilly-dallying, my dilly-dallying
 Kupusa ineyo kupusa
Stupidity, my stupidity
 Ndikukumbukira tinkakulira limodzi padzana
I remember we grew up together in the past
 Ndithu tinkachezera mugulu limodzi ifeyo
Indeed, we used to hang out in the same group
 Ndikadwala ankathamanga kudzandiona ndi kundilimbikitsa
When I fell ill, she used to run to see me and to encourage me

⁴³Chidodo evokes procrastination. Repetition and the pronoun 'I' (*ine*) render it as a self-rebuking exclamation, complete with the suffix *-tu* for the added emphasis on being 'really' slow.

⁴⁴'Hugging' is expressed here as *kuhaga*, derived from English, but the poet also uses the verb *kukumbatira*, adopted from Chiyao, later in the text.

Nayenso zikamuvuta ndinkakhala lake thandizo lopezekeratu
When she also ran into difficulties, I used to be her reliable helper
 Tinkasekererana ndi kusereulana koopsa
We used to make each other happy and to tease each other a lot
 Tinkangokhala ngati chibwenzi
We just used to be like lovers
 Tonse tinkadziwa kuti ndinkamufuna
We both knew I wanted her
 Inenso ndinkadziwa kuti ankandikonda
I also knew she loved me

Takumana pano ndi pamsika
We met here at the market
 Ndi mkazi amene ndidamuona okongoletsetsa chilengeleni dzikoli
With a woman I have seen to beautify the world since its creation
 Nayenso akundiona owoneka bwino koopsa
She also sees me as extremely good-looking
 Koma chidodotu ine chidodo
But dilly-dallying, my dilly-dallying
 Kupusa ineyo kupusa
Stupidity, my stupidity
 Tikufunatu tonse tipeze mpata tiyankhulane
We both really want a chance to talk to each other
 Koma tonsetu mumsika muno talowa ndi achikondi athu
But we both came to the market with our dearest
 Sikuti achikondi athuwa sitimawakonda
It is not that we don't love our dearest
 Koma mtima inu mtima makani nanunso mukudziwa
But the heart, as you know, is a stubborn heart
 Anthu amene tidakondana kuchokera kalekale
People we have loved for a very long time
 Anthu amene tidadziwana kuchokera kusikelo
People we have known since the infant scales⁴⁵
 Mitima yathu ikufuna itasenderanso chifupi
Our hearts want to come closer
 Khutu langa likufuna litamvanso mawu ake
My ear wants to hear again her voice
 Mapiarikaniro ake nawonso akufuna atamva mawu anga
Her ears also want to hear my voice⁴⁶
 Koma musaiwale inu ndi mumsika muno tabweramo ndi okonedwa athu ndi ana athu
But you must not forget that we came to this market with our dearest and our children

Takumana pano ndi pamsika
We met here at the market
 Ndi mkazi amene ndinkamukondetsetsa kwambiri
With a woman I used to love very much

⁴⁵The imagery is of intimacy arising from knowing each other ever since postnatal health checks.

⁴⁶While the previous line uses *khutu* for 'ear', the word here is *mapiarikaniro*, adopted from Chiyao.

Nayenso adandikondetsetsa koopsa
She also loved me very much
 Koma chidodotu ine chidodo
But dilly-dallying, my dilly-dallying
 Kupusa ineyo kupusa
Stupidity, my stupidity
 Tiana tathutu tatsogola tikudutsana tisakudziwana
Our small children are in front and pass each other by without knowing
 Kuti mayi awa ndi ine tikanatha kukhala makolo awo
That this mother and I could have been their parents
 Pakamwa pathu pakufunitsitsa patayankhulana
Our mouths yearn to speak
 Koma tikuyenera kungodutsana ngati sitikudziwana
But we just have to pass by as if we didn't know each other
 Chifukwa panapita nthawi yaikulu tisonaonane
Because a long time has gone since we saw each other
 Komaliza n'kamene anandiimbira lanya ukwati wanga ndi mayiwa n'tamanga
The last time was when she called me on the phone after I had married that woman
 Akulira kundifunira zabwino
She was crying and wishing me well
 Nanenso chaka chimodzi m'mbuyo mwake n'kuti ntalira pomufunira chabwino chi-
 modzimodzi
I also cried a year later while wishing her well in the same way

Takumana pano ndi pamsika
We met here at the market
 Ndi mkazi amene ndinkamukondetsetsa kwambiri
With a woman I used to love madly
 Nayenso andimvetsetsa koopsa
She also understood me extremely well
 Koma chidodotu ine chidodo
But dilly-dallying, my dilly-dallying
 Kupusa ineyo kupusa
Stupidity, my stupidity
 Wanamatu kwa amuna ake ndi kukhulupirira kuti waiwala china chake
She did trick her husband into believing that she had forgotten something
 Si uyu akubwerera wakungofuna kundiona?
Is it not her who is coming back only wanting to see me?
 Nanenso ndikunama kwa akazi anga ndionjezere mayunitsi
I also trick my wife that I need to buy more airtime
 Mwina ndikumana naye
Maybe I will meet her
 Ndakumana naye apayu ndi mkazi amene ndidamukondetsetsa kwambiri
The one I met there is the woman I loved very much
 Akundimwetulira ndipo kuoneka bwino kwake ndi konkuja ngati sanachembezeko
She is smiling at me and looking as good as back then as if she had not aged⁴⁷
 Inenso ndikuoneka bwino lomwe ngati kale
I also look as good as in the past
 Tikukhumba zina zake m'tima mwathu
We yearn for certain things in our hearts

⁴⁷'Ageing' in a woman deploys the verb *kuchembeza*, which means childbearing.

Ndikumuitana m'mene tinkatchulirana kale kuti mbuzi
I call her a goat like we used to name each other in the past
 'Mbuzi iwe n'chifukwa chiyani sunandivomere?'
*'You the goat, why didn't you accept me?'*⁴⁸
 'Mbuzi iwe n'kanavomera bwanji usanandifunsire?'
'You the goat, how could I have accepted before you had proposed to me?'

Takumana pano ndi pamsika
We met here at the market
 Ndi mkazi amene ndidamukondetsetsa kwambiri
With a woman I loved madly
 Nayenso adandimvetsetsa koopsa
She also understood me extremely well
 Koma chidodotu ine chidodo
But dilly-dallying, my dilly-dallying
 Kupusa ineyo kupusa
Stupidity, my stupidity
 Takomedwatu tikukumbatirana ngati simumsika
We get carried away in embrace as if it was not at the market
 Nthawi ikutichepera koma achikondi akudikirira
Time is short for us as our dearest are waiting for us
 Akuliratu mwana wamkazi
She indeed is crying, the female child
 Nanenso sindingapirire misonzi ikulengeza
I cannot prevent either tears from forming
 Sitingapange chibwenzi chaseritu
*We could not have a secret affair*⁴⁹
 Ndife opemphera
We are religious people

Takumana pano ndi pamsika
We met here at the market
 Ndi mkazi amene ndidamukondetsetsa kwambiri
With a woman I loved very much
 Koma sadakhalepo wanga
But she was not to be mine
 Nayenso adandikonda koopsa
She also loved me very much
 Koma sindinakhaleko wake
But I was not to be hers
 Chidodotu ine chidodo
But dilly-dallying, my dilly-dallying
 Kupusa ineyo kupusa
Stupidity, my stupidity
 'Mwinatu kudalembedwa anthu okondana zedi asamakwatirane?' akundifunsa
'Perhaps it is written that people who love each other enormously should not marry?'
she asks me

⁴⁸ *Mbuzi* (goat) is normally an insult, but its reciprocal usage here is another indication of egalitarian intimacy between the speakers.

⁴⁹ *Chibwenzi chaseri* is an affair that takes place 'behind the house'.

Pano zaka khumi m'mabanja athu
Now ten years have passed in our families
 Koma timakumbukiranabe tikuuzana
But we tell each other we still remember each other
 Vuto lake mafoni namba sitingagawane
The problem is we cannot share phone numbers
 Tingadzalowe m'kuyesedwa
We could be put into temptation
 Nthawi yatha msanga, make mwana angandifunse mafunso ndikumutsanzika
Our time is finished quickly, my child's mother may ask me questions and I bid her goodbye
 Kulakalaka kumupsopsona
Wanting desperately to kiss each other
 Koma ndangokumbukira ndine dikoni komanso pano ndi pamsika
But I just remember that I am a deacon and here is at the market
 'Tenga handikachifi yanga, nawenso kwaya yangayi uzikandikumbuka ngati sitidzakumananso'
'Take my handkerchief, take it to remember me if we never meet again'
 'Nawenso kachite chimodzimodzi' akundiuzana
'You too do the same,' she is telling me
 Chifukwa chiyani nthawi zambiri Mulungu simumalola anthu omwe tinagwirizana ndi kukondana koopsa
Why so often God does not allow the people we agree with and love very much
 Kuti tikwatirane n'kutipatsa ena m'chikondi chathu?
To marry us but gives us others for our love?
 Koma tikuganizirabe ajawa
But we are still thinking about these ones
 Ajawa mukuwadziwa inu mukuwadziwa
These ones, you know them, you know them

Tinakumana paja panali pamsika
Where we met was at the market
 Ndi mkazi amene ndidamukondetsetsa koopsa
With a woman I loved very much
 Nayenso adandikonda movuta
She also loved me passionately
 Koma chidodotu ine chidodo
But dilly-dallying, my dilly-dallying
 Kupusa ineyo kupusa
Stupidity, my stupidity
 Mkazi ameneyu, tsiku lina, tsiku lina
That woman, some other day, some other day
 Koma inu, tsiku lina
Ah you, some other day
 Ayi zikomo
Ah, thank you