

Personal Experience of Malawi and views on Malawian society

Country Background

Malawi is a landlocked country engulfed by Zambia to the west and Mozambique to the north east, south west and south. Tanzania covers the north.

Malawi was colonized by the British and English was introduced as official language with several ethnic languages/dialects, up to twenty three but with eight as major ones.

Malawi is an agricultural country. It was believed that the economy of the country was able because of production of tobacco which was by then at 75%. Maize is the staple food. There are other cash crops like tea, coffee and pea nuts

Literacy rate is at about 80% for ages between 15 and 24 males and 70% for girls in the same age groups.

Because of distance and scarcity of food many children do not attend schools hence promoting illiteracy in the country.

With the introduction of school feeding program by other organizations in the country the education rate has gone high and especially girls who were believed to drop out from school very early are able to concentrate on education.

Because of poor infrastructure many children do not attend education to high level. There is a long distance for the children to go to school. Children go to school as far as five miles from their respective homes. Just a few get good education in the country. In the villages a large number of children are victims of child labor. They take care of animals, that is boy child while a girl child is busy with house chores.

Most schools have poor standard of education system with few desks in class. There might be twenty desks for hundred children in class with a small classroom. Each teacher is responsible for about 90 or 100 pupils in class. I don't think all children could get what the teacher says.

Hence, if able children fail to achieve in education great disadvantage is on disabled persons.

Diseases like HIV/AIDS, malaria, cancer and other opportunistic infections are claiming more lives in the country due to poverty level and low level of literacy.

As of now HIV/AIDS prevalence is at 14% but it doesn't show as many people are dying.

Due to high population in the country closer to 13 million people the country is too small to show its developments as many people are starving due to lack of job which stands at about 5% of the whole population.

Because of few trained personnel many people suffer in the country especially children and women.

Even though Malawian education is free especially in primary education but learning materials is a challenge and many fail to proceed as they don't have enough money to buy note books and other learning books.

Being a journalist, I like to get stories and share with the world. Most of the stories I share are based on the problems the country is facing. There are a lot of challenges in the country one of which; education already discussed in the document.

Although the country faces lots of challenges but it is a beautiful country with Lake Malawi as the third largest lake in Africa and other four small lakes of Malombe, Chilwa,

Chiuta and Kazuni. There are mountains with Mulange Mountain as the highest in the country.

There are animals in the parks with Liwonde National Park as one of the best in southern part of Africa.

Personal History:

My name is Mphatso Thole, born on July 7, 1974 in Sankhani Village, Traditional Authority Njewa, Lilongwe in Malawi. I am married to Chipiliro Chibwezo and have three children, Chikondi, Chiyanjano and Chifuniro, from first born to last respectively. Physical address of *Box 650, Lilongwe, Malawi, Africa* - Cell: (265) 9 063 044 Cell: (265) 4 105 564 E-Mail: mcthole@yahoo.co.uk or thetholes@gmail.com website: www.mcthole.blogspot.com

Professional Experience

Doing all media and communication profession including; Feature Writing, Videography; Television Production, research methods for media organizations, Photo Journalism; Desktop Publishing (DTP), Newspaper Editing and Production; Advertising and Marketing, Public Relations; Online Journalism and Website Design, Mass Communication; Media Law and Ethics, Strategic Planning for media organizations and Development Communication.

Abilities/Special Skills

- Ability to design and write feature stories and its body, intros, developing story's style, how to unite the story, the rhyme, clarity, freshness, the light tough-humor anecdotes, planning and gathering materials for magazine feature, narrative piece including writing travelogue.
- Able to do copy edit, giving headings extra impact, type sizes for headlines and intros, electronic editing, headline language and any other job of producing newspapers, magazines, books and in-house publications.
- Ability to follow the style of the house, judicial system, journalism ethics, copyright defense of defamation, ethics in news gathering, ethical issues in photojournalism, freedom and control of press and law of defamation
- Able to implement role of journalists in human communication process, concepts of press freedom, research trends in mass communication and role of the press in society.
- Ability to for ethics of the role of the press in rural development, how to make rural news interesting and bringing awareness of development to rural communities.
- Able to appreciate the work of computers and manipulate applications to design and produce camera-ready copies like; flyers, simple design, newsletters, Magazines, basic elements of a computer, sharing information over the network including skills of word processing, Page Makeup (Applications: Aldus Page Maker and Quark Express), design process, Drawing Application and Graphics.
- Able to gather information and compile it into reports for publication.
- Able to utilize the Print Media in Public Relations.
- Able to communicate in PR field.

- Able to shoot video, directing and editing in different kinds of computer programmes of the studio.
- Skills in different types of still cameras, video and digital camera.
- Able to process films in dark room.

Writing stories including features

Home Village Visit Christmas Experience (21st – 29th December 2007)

One of the stories I was interested is the home visit where I learnt a lot from people I grew up with.

It is tradition my family and I, every Christmas holiday go to my home village experiencing typical village life amongst people where I was born and teach my little girls; Chikondi, Chiyanjano and Chifuniro to know how and where their father was born and grew as a teenager.

On 21st December 2007 I left Area 24 in Lilongwe boarding a local minibus for home village. The journey is about 140 kilometres. It takes 125kms traveling by bus and 15 kilometres is covered by hiring push bikes (bicycles).

We had to hire four bicycles, one carrying Chippie, my wife and our youngest daughter Chifuniro. The second picking Chikondi and Chiyanjano, the third loaded with our traveling bags and the last picking the father (Mphatso). We had to travel almost one hour to cover the journey.

As it was the first day in the village I met one of the villagers, a drunkard who welcomed us.

In a couple of minutes I asked him how he does understand the word 'CHRISTMAS'. He said that Christmas is a day of enjoying, eg drinking beer and relaxing.

Since there is no electricity in the village I had to move around in our village with a torch at night. Many people were busy gathering in small groups in some houses of the village where, (Kachasu), local dry split beer is brewed. It is very strong beer, about 45% of alcoholic content, no wonder how strong it is, these village comrades do not dilute. They just consume it dry. Amazing! I joined them just for a chat and learn what was happening one by one was getting drunk within a short period of time, failing even to pronounce his name. People drink this beer because it is cheap and people easily get drunk with only \$0.20 a bottle of 350milliliters. One of the guys said brewers should at least own a wheelbarrow so that when clients are drunk should be picked back home as they even forget their way back home.

I had the chance of asking some of them to have a clear understanding of what they understand about *Christmas and the birth of Jesus Christ..*

Here are the answers at random:

- Jesus was not born on Christmas Day. The old government (Romans) just put it for people to celebrate
- Christmas is the day for enjoying by making sure that you don't make problems with others
- Christmas is a good day to reconcile as it is the day of God
- As typical Africans, Christmas is just holiday to relax
- I don't know Christmas, I do commemorate because my parents were doing so
- Christmas Day is regarded like Sabbath Day hence not working
- Christmas Day is for the Christians who follow Jesus hence respect what they do

- Christmas is the birth of Jesus Christ, although I am drinking but I have to remember the day
- Jesus is thought to be born on December in Jerusalem

The above answers were of drunkard and non Christians. Most of them worship African traditional beliefs, and are real African people with village life. Most of them have not ever attended school. They don't know how to read and write. They don't know more about what is happening and the changes in the country. They are of primitive life. They just feel good life is to have food. Despite all the struggles they face, they enjoy life as normal.

But one thing I discovered is that people fail to achieve in this village because most of the time people are busy drinking beer from morning to afternoon without doing development. I realized that those I interviewed were men. I was happy to learn about how they do understand the word Christmas but I learnt that since they drink beer more than moderate, early in the morning they wake up very wick and couldn't afford to work well in their farms. Most of the people who are working very hard even in farms are women and have a lot of things to do for the living of the family. In short they make the family strong and move on but being victims of violence. Sometimes women are physically assorted by their spouses.

In this report I have discussed about Kachasu as African dry split beer. It is a beer brewed after fermentation of sugar and maize husks for seven days.

If you want to know about how Kachasu is fermented juts think of how evaporation happens to form rainfall.

It is dangerous beer and many people die of it due to its power and it is not tested by recommended trained brewers (chemically).

Now, I had the chance of doing interview with Christians (not educated but go to church and learn from them. (Remember I had interviews from people who don't go to church and they believe their traditional gods but they have ever heard about the term Christmas. Five people from different denominations had related answers though different explanation. According to the interview, "Christmas is the birth of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Hence as followers we need to keep the date and remember Him". Through the advent period Christians renew their faith in God.

According to my understanding, I have the opinion that most people in the surrounding villages of Mndaka don't know the real meaning of Christmas as I observed that even members of popular denominations like Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterians, don't celebrate the day within the village. They have to go for a distance of 20 kilometres for Christmas Day celebration. Hence many people face challenges of travel. Most of them don't attend Christmas festivals in their churches.

But the most interesting thing in Mndaka village is that the day is celebrated traditionally by organizing cultural dances. When I was in the village last Christmas, I took part in watching traditional dances of Chimtali for females and Mganda for males.

Oh!! One interesting thing this village is how people get prepared for Christmas Day. Boys and girls may be ten in a group do part time work in farming. What they normally do is to consult a farmer in the village so that they could cultivate his/her land, sometimes one to two acres and are given about \$40 which they buy a goat to slaughter for Christmas party. They make a big feast and enjoy the meal together during lunch hour of the Day. After eating they put on new clothes to attend cultural dances. Many people

especially men who drink Kachasu spend almost four days quenching thirsty as part of celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ.

The growing season 2007 – 2008 looks very fruitful and let's hope the rains will end in good time. As I was traveling from Lilongwe to Mchinji I saw many corn (maize) fields with good plants. This is an indication of good harvest but this will be reality after the end of March.

Comparing to the time I was in the village. I can see that many people are still not improving (developing) in life. People are getting poorer and poorer. It is just a handful of households who are enjoying good life. Many houses are grass thatched, leaking when it is raining. Many young girls are giving birth while young increasing the problems.

An example of a young girl aged 16 who gave birth on May 11, 2007 is my own niece. She dropped from school while young hence didn't have settled life of creating her good future. Since life in the village is too tough the child passed away on January 17, 2008.

Many people work very hard in maize (corn) fields but with little harvests as they don't have enough farm inputs as a result in many households food last for seven months.

Most of households have eight to ten people with a small house. Some houses are in the size of a lounge and a bedroom. How can ten people be accommodated in such small house? Most people live by the grace of God.

The only source of income people in Mndaka rely on is farming, land is losing fertility and the country is not giving enough support to boost their agriculture.

As they only survive because of farming, most farmers go to cultivate in the morning and spend less than four hours and go back to rest until the following day. Hence twenty hours of the day are part of their resting time. As I already indicated that the most vulnerable groups in the village in this case Mndaka is women and girl children life is becoming unbearable as most men are lazy without giving hand to women. From the farm, a woman prepares food for the whole family while the husband is staying under the tree sometimes drinking locally made beer or playing what we call Bawo (popular game in the village). Women are always busy thinking of what the family is going to eat in the evening or tomorrow, the husband just comes to ask for Nsima (thick porridge).

By the way I was not happy with one culture which still exists in the village. When visitors come every day, every woman brought food (nsima) for my family and I to eat.

My time in the village, I observed several things including funeral ceremony. It happened that in the nearby village a child died and as one of the villagers I went to attend the funeral. In the village, they don't have mortuaries but they keep the dead in their homes. By order of the village headman and family members of the diseased, people do the ceremony accordingly the rule. Normally we spend a night sleeping outside the funeral house. Some women sleep around the coffin in the house but everybody stays out. While choirs sing and relatives mourning overnight, everyone endures the night. They make fire using logs (this is part of destroying natural resources), and people sleep around the fire warming themselves. People share different stories until they get tired. I had the chance to share with the men I was closer with. The topic of the story was, 'How people could improve soon after harvest.' I shared this with the group because people forget that they suffer during growing season and spend much money on beer forgetting women who worked hard. The response was quite impressive.

Now the day of what we call escorting our dear child who passed away to rest in peace came, I joined those people who went to prepare the grave in the cemetery. Normally

they have chairperson of the cemetery who advises how, where, and when to do the burial. Around 11:00 AM, the cemetery crew was over with preparation of the resting place. While the grave is being prepared a number of people make a local coffin. Due to poverty people make simple coffins using planks (timber) and they wrap with a beautiful new fabric. They did the same this time.

Conclusion

The story above is one of specific areas I like to inform the world. I have written about education which is a key of many problems people face in Malawi. Children die due to malnutrition because of poor education and poverty.

Malawi has lost many people including expectant women because of distance. That means they have to travel to reach nearest hospital.

Countries like America food is not a problem but is different story with Malawi where people have one meal a day. A lot of children become street kids because of being orphans. No one cares to take them to school. Including the government doesn't give support to the needy.

Through my different visitations in villages, I witness a lot of people suffering and children just playing while classes are in progress.

Life expectancy is low at 47.6 because of HIVAids. While HIV/Aids prevalence is at above 40% in the range of ages from 15 to 49 and mortality rate is very high at 76% that is at per 1,000 live births. About 950,000 people are living with HIV/AIDS.

Malawi still stands at one of the poorest countries in the Malawi faces a lot of challenges including HIV/AIDS, poverty, malnutrition, low literacy levels, gender in balances and political misunderstandings amongst party leaders. It is a person at grassroots level who suffers.