

Abstract

The thesis focuses on certain characteristics of the state and of state formation in Malawi, with particular emphasis on the effects of development aid. The methodological and theoretical approach draws primarily on social anthropology. Empirical research included multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Malawi during 2009. The thesis consists of three papers for publication in journals, each focusing on different aspects of the state and state formation, and an introductory discussion.

The first paper – *Chiefs and everyday governance: Parallel state organisations in Malawi* – looks at the institutional set-up of the state. In Malawi, this includes not only the formal institutions, but also the chiefs: the paper sees the chiefs as not primarily ‘traditional’ leaders, but as an integral part of the state. The paper discusses some implications of the fact that two seemingly incompatible state institutions, often filling the same or similar functions, exist in parallel and are available both for subjects/citizens and for public offices. People are thus subject to *parallel rule*: they are simultaneously subjects under a state-enforced chieftaincy, and citizens of a modern state. The position of the chiefs in Malawi has been strengthened and expanded during the last two decades. Ironically, this has been possible due partly to policy choices that have been promoted or introduced by donors, but that have paved the way for the strengthening of an institution incompatible with the liberal democratic values emphasised by the same donors.

The second paper – *Performing good governance: the aesthetics of bureaucratic practice in Malawi* – focuses on bureaucratic practice. In the case observed – agricultural subsidy distribution – the policy of the government (and its donors), of targeting only the poorest farmers, contrasts with local norms for more equal sharing. The public office does not have the authority to overrule local norms, and the targeting procedures therefore fail completely to achieve what they were designed for. Nonetheless, they are carried out with enthusiasm. This may be because of the ‘aesthetic’ qualities of those procedures: they create an image, albeit temporary, of a well-functioning state and a well-organised population. The case is used as basis for a discussion of the role of aesthetics in bureaucratic practice and in state formation, and the role of bureaucrats as mediators between incompatible norms and worldviews: by carrying out the stipulated procedures even when they ‘fail’ – but with primacy to the

aesthetic aspects rather than the instrumental effects – the bureaucrats make possible the continuation of the subsidy programme, in the interests of all those involved.

The third paper – *Making and shaping poor Malawians: Citizenship below the poverty line* – explores some observed and some potential consequences of the poverty line. The idea of distinguishing between individuals and households according to a ‘poverty line’ has been introduced in Malawi only recently, partly in connection with the UN Millennium Development Goals. The poverty line as it is applied in Malawi – the national response to the global poverty line known as *one dollar a day* – in most cases has no local equivalent. But when it is used to identify the intended beneficiaries of development interventions, it becomes of increasing economic, social and political relevance. Those classified as ‘below’ the poverty line have exclusive access to certain state resources. But in practice, by the way poverty interventions are organised, these beneficiaries are also subjected to particular forms of governance, including more intense attempts to reform their rationality and behaviour than what is the case for those ‘above’ the line. By the tendency to organise beneficiaries in groups they also tend to interact with government less as autonomous individuals than those who are classified as above the line. In effect, the poverty line serves to distinguish between two types of citizens – perhaps in contrast to policy objectives of including the poorest as equal citizens.

The three papers refer to different academic debates, but they all point to aspects of state formation associated with aid and development. This is discussed in the introductory chapters. The main argument here is that all papers demonstrate some forms of *dissonance*: here used as a metaphor for the difference between how social phenomena appear when seen through the logic of the state, and how social life is experienced in actual, local, daily interactions. Such dissonance is well known in all states, but seems particularly evident in states receiving development aid. The introductory paper discusses aspects of aid and development that can explain this, building on recent critical studies of aid and development in social anthropology. It points to features that are inherent in all aid, but have become increasingly relevant with the recent changes in development discourse that seem to produce dissonance. Aid can therefore increase the dissonance inherent in all states between reality as it is seen in a state logic, and reality as it is experienced locally.