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Online News Media, Religious Identity and Their Influence on Gendered Politics: Observations from Malawi's 2014 Elections

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Abstract

The rise of the internet has offered the opportunity for the news media to communicate with audiences in many significant ways that may have profound consequences in the shaping of public

opinion and transforming lives in the global sphere. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this article examines ways in which online news media could be used to reinforce gender stereotypes by promoting patriarchal religious beliefs and how this may have huge implications on women's empowerment with regard to political leadership roles in developing democracies.

The analysis is drawn from the 2014 Malawi elections, in which a major opposition party used a campaign slogan peppered with sexist religious and cultural connotations to ridicule and vote out of office southern Africa's first ever female President – Joyce Banda and her People Party (PP). In May 2014, Malawi held national elections and the main contestants were former President Banda representing the PP, Peter Mutharika of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Lazarus Chakwera of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and Atupele Muluzi of the United Democratic Front (UDF). Mutharika and the DPP won the elections to wrestle away the presidency from Banda and her People's Party. This article discusses the campaign slogan – *Sesa Joyce Sesa*[1] – created by the DPP to attack former President Banda in which Malawi's significant online news media sites played a critical role in the diffusion of the gendered campaign mantra to resonate with the religious identity of majority the electorate. The article reflects on the potential of new media to consolidate deep-rooted religious and cultural beliefs that marginalise women for leadership positions and the effect this may have on bridging gender inequalities, particularly in political representation in developing democracies.

About the Author

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[1] Sweep Joyce away.

1. Introduction

On May 20, 2014, the southern African country of Malawi went to the polls to elect the country's fifth president after twenty years of democracy. For the first time, one major contestant was a woman – former President Joyce Banda. The principal candidates in the elections were former President Banda representing the People's Party (PP), Lazarus Chakwera of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), Peter Mutharika of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and Atupele Muluzi of the United Democratic Front (UDF). The elections were won by Mutharika of the DPP with 36 per cent of the votes, Chakwera of the MCP amassed 27 per cent votes while the then-incumbent President Banda of the PP came a distant third with 20 per cent of the votes; the remaining votes were split between the UDF and other smaller parties (for more information, see National Democratic Institute, https://www.ndi.org/malawi).

By the virtue of being Malawi's vice president according to the Malawian Constitution, Joyce Banda ascended to power in April 2012 following the sudden death of President Bingu wa Mutharika. The development made Banda southern Africa's first woman president and the continent's second, after Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf who was elected into office in 2005. In this regard, the May 2014 elections provided an opportunity for Malawi's Banda to seek her own presidential mandate through the ballot box. But it was an organised sexist religious political campaign slogan entitled *Sesa Joyce Sesa* ("Sweep Joyce Away")*,* which was created by the DPP, that dominated the Malawian public domain to underscore that women are expected to be subservient to men. The DPP, which was then an opposition party, utilised social media by transmitting a two-minute YouTube video (*Sesa Joyce Sesa*) which went viral to resonate with the religious and cultural identity of majority of Malawians, and to a great extent contributed to the

defeat of Joyce Banda and the People's Party (PP). Notably, Malawi's established online news media – *Nyasatimes.com* and *Malawivoice.com* – played a significant role in promoting the gendered political campaign by uploading the anti-Joyce Banda YouTube video on their websites and providing multiple digital platforms for audiences to view and share.

Nyasatimes.com is Malawi's first solely online and private newspaper, launched in 2006 by a Malawian – Edgar Msowoya Chibaka – based in Great Britain (Kakhobwe 2009, p.32). Kakhobwe further points out that the online news website has five full-time reporters and 13 freelance contributors stationed in Malawi who publish an average of 10 articles per day. According to the internet demographics company Alexa, *Nyasatimes.com* commands the largest news media audience in Malawi and is ranked fifth as the most visited website in the country following search engines Google, Yahoo, MSN and Facebook (Alexa.com, accessed November 13, 2014). Alexa also shows that 57 per cent of *Nyasatimes.com* visitors are based within Malawi with the rest from Europe, the United States, Asia and neighbouring southern African countries. In 2013, *Nyasatimes.com* had a global readership of around 20 million (Chibaka 2014). Buoyed by its growing audience in 2013, Thom Chiumia, Chief Editor for *Nyasatimes.com* pointed out that "Nyasatimes is a true investment in democracy" (Nyasatimes 2014).

Malawivoice.com is located in Malawi and was launched in 2011 by Noel Kanyuka without an established editorial team except for one founding editor, Justice Mponda. It largely relies on freelance correspondents for news stories. Although it is ranked 52nd among Malawi's most visited websites, way below *Nyasatimes.com*, *Malawivoice.com* is the country's second most visited online news media source (Alexa.com, accessed November 13, 2014). Like *Nyasatimes.com*, it is only available online. What is significant about *Malawivoice.com* is that following the Malawi 2014 elections, its founding editor – Mponda – was appointed press officer for the victorious presidential candidate, Peter Mutharika of the DPP (Masinga 2014). It is also notable that Mponda had previously been arrested, charged and acquitted during the Joyce Banda presidential tenure for allegedly publishing stories that were deemed insulting to her [Joyce Banda] (Malawivoice 2013).

As mentioned earlier, the DPP created the campaign slogan – *Sesa Joyce Sesa* – which was hyped on the *Nyasatimes.com* and *Malawivoice.com* online news sites. In terms of viewership, these aforementioned online news media websites strikingly outpace those run by established media houses in Malawi, including Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (mbc.mw), Zodiak Broadcasting Station (zodiakmalawi.com), the *Daily Times* (times.mw) and the *Nation* newspapers

(mwnation.com), according to demographics from Alexa. Due to lack of clear government regulations regarding standalone online news publications, *Nyasatimes.com* and *Malawivoice.com* are able to publish stories that may not appear in the mainstream media of Malawi, while offering immediacy for readers through the opportunity to respond and debate through multiple forums.

The democratic nature of online news media might offer hope for the marginalised, such as women, to present their emancipatory views, for instance with regard to equality in the running of affairs of the country. This was not the case prior to Malawi's turn to democracy in 1993. Malawi was under the dictatorship of President Hastings Kamuzu Banda (not related to Joyce Banda) for nearly 30 years following independence from Great Britain in 1964. During the dictatorial regime, the role of the woman in politics was that of entertaining and hero-worshiping Kamuzu Banda (Chirwa 2001, p. 4). According to Sturges (1998, p. 199), Kamuzu Banda's Malawi Congress Party (MCP) mobilised women through the *League of Malawi of Women* to accompany and dance for him at political rallies. In the view of Sturges, the role of the woman in political circles during one-party governance was a clear indicator of unequal power relations. Of cumulatively 72 cabinet ministers appointed by former President Kamuzu Banda during the dictatorship between 1966 and 1992, only three were women (Semu 2002, p.85; Christensen 2014). With that respect, the ushering in of democracy in Malawi in 1994 brought many expectations in regards to the participation of women in political leadership roles. If a country is to be regarded as an exemplar of democracy, Parry and Moyser (1994, p. 55) contend, there has to be equality in participation in the major resources and activities that shape up that particular state, including the participation of women in politics.

According to Hyden and Leslie (2002), the media have been influential in shaping the emerging democratic culture in Africa. With the rise of the internet from the late 1980s, an opportunity emerged for the news media to communicate with audiences in much more robust way than ever before. Dahlgren (2013, p. 157) holds that online journalism tends to provide platforms for participatory engagement with the public in much more rapid and multiple ways than traditional mainstream news media. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have now become important institutions of the public sphere (Dahlgren 2013, p. 158).

Similarly, Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant and Kelly (2003, p. 177) postulate that the internet has democratised the means of media production by offering an interactive form of journalism. Social media provide a new form of mediated communication that gives the audience

access to on-demand content and the ability to share and discuss it with others (Haridakis, Cunningham, Sharma & Ponder 2010, p. 585). In the 2014 Malawian elections, the internet offered multiple avenues for citizens to use and learn about the contesting political parties and presidential candidates.

This article critically analyses the discursive construction of the political campaign slogan *Sesa Joyce Sesa* through an intersection of themes – religion as a cultural identity; new media; and gender – with the aim of contributing to the understanding of the ever-growing power of digital media in shaping everyday life, including politics.

2. Analytical and Methodological Approach

In this article, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used to examine the discursive construction of the Malawian opposition party's YouTube political campaign video clip, *Sesa Joyce Sesa*. CDA has its roots in formal discourse analysis. According to Gee (2014, p.226), discourse analysis is the examination of language in use, whether spoken or written, by paying attention to the details of grammar and how they function in communication. Gee further notes that other forms of discourse analysis, such as conversational or narrative, pay attention only to themes and messages.

Unlike formal discourse analysis, CDA encompasses an even wider sphere that includes all of the social practices, individuals and institutions that make it possible or legitimate to understand phenomena in a particular way and to make statements about what is "true" (Hodges, Kuper & Reeves 2008, p. 570). What Hodges *et al.* underline is that CDA is particularly concerned with power relations. Critical theory addresses phenomena and problems not in terms of absolute ideas and predetermined societal development, but in terms of resource distribution and social struggles (Fuchs 2009, p. 70). For Lemke (1995, p. 20) the practice of "critically" analysing discourse illuminates ways in which power is exercised in the interests of the powerful, and how unjust social relations disguise their injustice.

In the context of this article the unit of analysis is a speech act contained in a religious-based political campaign YouTube video clip, *Sesa Joyce Sesa*. Some follow-up posts and comments on other social media platforms such as Twitter were also analysed. The aim was to

understand how such discourses may shape and limit the ways in which individuals and institutions can think, speak or reinforce their identities and power structures.

The article is in five sections. First, to set the scene we must look at how the anti-Joyce Banda political campaign slogan on YouTube – *Sesa Joyce Sesa* – was articulated to audiences at political gatherings organised by the DPP and its presidential candidate – Peter Mutharika – preceding the May, 2014 Malawi elections. Second, we look at the historical overview of the crucial links between religion and politics in the Malawian context. Third, we explore the relationship between religion, gender and cultural identity. Fourth, we examine religion and gender in order to contextualise the role of online news media. Then the article critically analyses the discursive (re)construction of the aforementioned YouTube video clip, before finally concluding the discussion.

3. *Sesa Joyce Sesa*: DPP's 2014 political campaign slogan

Sesa Joyce Sesa, which in Malawi's predominant vernacular Chichewa means "Sweep Joyce away", first came into the public domain in November 2013 when the then DPP presidential aspirant (now Malawi's current president), Peter Mutharika, addressed a political gathering in his home district of Thyolo, southern Malawi. In a prelude to Mutharika's address, George Saonda – a key member of the DPP – delivered a speech that contained rhetorical questions to the audience which were peppered with misogynistic cultural and religious references regarding leadership roles of women in the Roman Catholic Church and the Islamic faith. The rhetoric was contextualised to question Joyce Banda's credibility to lead a country because she was a woman. In response, the audience, which included hundreds of women, joined the orator – Saonda – in heckling Joyce Banda's name.

Following the political rally, the opposition DPP uploaded a two minute video recording of the gathering on YouTube, with a background of jazz-rhythmic sounds. The thematic slogan instantly went viral on in the social media, generating over 4,100 views (Saonda 2013) and turning nearly into a household song across Malawi. While the number of the YouTube views might appear to be small, in the Malawian context this was critical because the country's prominent online news media – *Nyasatimes.com* and *Malawivoice.com*, which attract huge audiences as mentioned earlier

– picked up the *Sesa Joyce Sesa* campaign mantra and provided multiple digital media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to share the opposition party DPP's campaign video clip (*Nyasatimes* 2013a; *Malawivoice* 2014). The following dialogue is an excerpt from the *Sesa Joyce Sesa* YouTube video clip (Saonda 2013):

DPP's Saonda: *Kodi kumpingo wa a katolika, wansembe akachoka, munaona asisteri akudyetsa mgonero?* (In the Roman Catholic Church, in the absence of a priest, does the nun bless the Holy Communion for the congregants?)

 Audience: *Ayiiii!* (Noooh!)

Saonda, chorus: *Sesa Joyce Sesa* (Sweep Joyce away!)

Audience, chorus: *Sesaaaah!* "Sweep her away!!!"

Saonda: *Nanga ku Chisilamu, ku mzikiti Shehe akachoka, munaona mzimayi akupita kutsogolo?* (For Muslims, when the Sheikh/Imam is away at the mosque, do you ever see women lead the prayers?).

Audience: *Ayiii!* (Noooh!)

Saonda, chorus: *Sesa Joyce Sesa!* (Sweep Joyce away!)

Audience, chorus: *Sesaaah*! (Sweep her away!)

Saonda: *Fisi akalowa mnyumba, mwini ake akamwalira, sindiye kuti mkaziyo ndi wache* (A man hired to sleep with a widow in order to cleanse off evil spirits following the death of her husband is not necessarily expected take over the household).

As noted in the foregoing, the religious campaign motto was also fused in with a local proverb called *fisi* (hyena), based on an old tradition within some cultures of Malawi where a man was hired by village elders to sleep with a widow, a few months following the death of her husband, in order to ward off evil spirits from the village. The man would arrive in the middle of the night in disguise following a pre-arrangement with the widow and then depart at dawn. For this reason, the hired man was metaphorically called *fisi* (a hyena), due to similarities with the animal's nocturnal hunting behaviour.

Given the multi-cultural dimensions of the campaign slogan – religious and traditional – the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) manipulated Malawi's main matrix of national identity,

highlighted and spread by online news media *Nyasatimes.com* and *Malawivoice.com* through their digital platforms.

We now turn to a brief history of Malawi in relation to religion, gender and politics.

4. Religion, Gender and Politics in Malawi: Historical Overview

Malawi has a population of about 15 million people comprising 76 per cent Christians and 11 per cent Muslims with the rest belonging to indigenous faiths (Government of Malawi 2008). Of all religions in the country, Christianity has had the most enduring impact on people's socio-religious life world (Matemba 2011, p. 329).

The influence of religion in Malawian politics dates back to the 19th century during the colonial times when the country was called Nyasaland under the British protectorate (cf. Power 2010; McCracken 2000; MacDonald 1970). McCracken points out that in the late 19th century, the mission of the Church of Scotland to spread Christianity in Malawi and the rest of the east and central African region was closely interrelated with the desire of the majority of the British settlers to own and control the region's economy.

Ironically, some locals that had been acculturated into Christianity, led by Reverend John Chilembwe of the Providence Industrial Mission (P.I.M), launched an abortive uprising against the British colonial rule in Malawi in 1915 (McCracken 2012, p. 127; Mtewa 1977, p. 227). While a few white settlers died in the revolt, Chilembwe and majority of his followers were killed by the colonial government (Phiri 2004, p. 271). As the locals continued to press for independence between the 1920s and the early 1960s, both the white settlers and natives used religion as a platform to air the manifold grievances of the society because it was one aspect of community life within which other socio-economic influences could not be ignored (Pachai 1973, p. 212). Pachai underscores that "issues of religion and politics became interwoven". The church in many respects was an avenue for natives to promote political teachings and social movements. As McCracken (1998, p. 234) observes, Levi Mumba, the first President of the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC), a grouping of locals in the nationalist struggle in the 1940s, was trained by the Church of Scotland's missionaries and he "linked his political beliefs to the Christian values" he had learnt earlier. This is in line with an argument advanced by Linden and

Linden (1971, p. 629) that Christianity, far from being an opiate, provided radical apocalyptic themes through which Africans articulated opposition to colonial rule. Natives, Linden and Linden further argue, used biblical texts to legitimise their struggle for independence.

As Nyasaland geared towards independence between 1960 and 1964, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), which commanded the largest following, early on "harassed the Christian based political parties" accusing them of spreading "imperialistic propaganda" (Pachai 1973 p. 243). With that agenda, the MCP crushed all other parties and governed Malawi for 30 years. The intertwining of religion and politics in Malawi came to the fore in 1992, when the Roman Catholic church played a crucial role in galvanising the masses against the dictatorship of President Kamuzu Banda and the MCP (Ross 2004, p. 91).

Through a pastoral letter entitled "*Living Our Faith*" in March, 1992 a grouping of Roman Catholic bishops, the Episcopal Conference of Malawi, openly criticised Kamuzu Banda and his autocratic rule (Cullen 1994, p. 37; Ihonvbere 1997, p. 226). Although ostensibly addressed to the Catholic faithful, the pastoral letter clearly targeted a wider audience and was written in a language designed to provoke public action and political change (Dulani 2009, p. 143). The letter, published in Malawi's predominant *Chichewa* and *Tumbuka* languages, was read out and distributed in all Catholic churches nationwide. Through references to Biblical texts – Ephesians 4:7-16 and Peter 4:10 -11 – and local cultural proverbs such as *Mutu umodzi susenza denga* which in Malawi's vernacular Chichewa means "You cannot solve all problems alone", *Living Our Faith* identified some of the key weaknesses and failings of the one party regime such as limitations on freedom of association and freedom of expression (Ross 1996, p.39; Dulani 2009, p. 144). The power of the Catholic Church as a key player in the political arena was buoyed by the growth in its membership over time. Although the Catholics were not the first Christian missionaries to arrive in the 19th century in what was then Nyasaland, the Catholic Church's membership has grown to three million out of the country's population of 15 million (Dulani 2009, p.154), making it the country's single largest Christian denomination.

As Dulani (2009, p. 151) puts it, the events of 1992 placed religion as one of the few platforms from which criticism of the one-party regime could be made without being silenced. The significance of the letter was so enormous that it was followed up with protests for political change from University of Malawi students and leading Protestant churches such as the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (C.C.A.P) who weighed in with support of the Catholic clergy

(Dulani 2009, p. 145). In Malawi, the C.C.A.P church, Malawi's version of the Church of Scotland, is the second largest Christian denomination after the Catholics (Newell, 1995, p. 256).

To further pile up the pressure on President Kamuzu Banda and his regime, the Catholic and Presbyterian clergies were joined by those of the Anglican Church and the Muslim community, and collectively formed Malawi first political pressure group since independence, called the Public Affairs Committee (PAC), in October 1992 (Newell 1997, p. 258). This pressure group, which still exists today with full support and representation from all major religious denominations, was formed as a vehicle through which meaningful dialogue could be conducted with the government in the interests of the nation. Following the formation of PAC, underground political parties emerged and President Kamuzu succumbed to intense pressure that led to a referendum on democracy in June 1993 and the first democratic elections in May 1994, which were won by President Bakili Muluzi of the UDF party (Dulani 2009, p. 146).

Reverence for religion and religious leaders continues to be evident among Malawian politicians, twenty years into democracy. Matemba (2011, p. 331) observes that during national elections, politicians who ignore the Church by not making appearances at services or by not giving churches gifts of money, say for church refurbishment, certainly risk losing the votes of the Christian voting bloc. For instance, a month ahead of the May 2014 elections, both former President Joyce Banda and leader of one of the major contesting political parties – Lazarus Chakwera of the MCP – participated in a long Good Friday walk called "the Way of the Cross" in the streets of the capital city, Lilongwe, organised by a Roman Catholic Church in remembrance of the path that Jesus Christ took on his way to Calvary as described in the Bible and Catholic tradition (Malawi News Agency 2014). Interestingly, both Banda and Chakwera are not Catholics but members of the protestant Presbyterian and Assemblies of God churches respectively. Christianity is intertwined with the social-cultural norms such that hardly any public function starts without an opening prayer (Matemba 2011, p. 331).

The preceding discussion illustrates that historically, religion, more specifically Christianity, plays an important role in the socio-political arena of the Malawian public. As Matemba (2011, p. 331) argues, religion is the main matrix of Malawi's national identity.

5. Religion, Gender and Identity

The impact of religion on Malawi's cultural identity is of profound importance with respect to issues of gender. Ursula King (King 1995, p.1) argues that gender issues are significant in contemporary society and culture because throughout human history there has existed an asymmetry in the relations of power, representation, knowledge and scholarship between men and women. For King, many current issues and debates about women and their experience, self-understanding, status and roles are still influenced by or indirectly related to religious teachings and world views about women. The historical-cultural embodiments and institutional structures in religion require an investigation of gender-specific issues in very particular ways (King 1995 p. 3). King further contends not only that religion has been a matrix of cultures but that it structures reality – "all reality including that of gender" (1995, p. 4).

In the view of Lövheim (2011, p. 153), religion is shaped in and by social interactions and forms as well as shaping those interactions and forms. For Johnson (2005, p. 759), "our relation to societies and how to participate in them can have magical effects on how we see things". Cultures, such as those that are religious, consist of words and ideas that that are used to define and interpret human experiences. Such cultures are patriarchal in that "they promote male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centred" and are also obsessed with the control of women (Johnson 2005, p. 5). Johnson notes that when a woman finds her way to the top of the hierarchy in a patriarchal society "people tend to be struck by the exception to the rule and wonder how she would measure up against a man in the same position". In the case of Malawi, such social hierarchical structures have become internalised since the advent of Christianity in the 19th century and continue to be reflected in everyday life.

Societal cultural attributes like religion have a huge bearing in the construction of identity which Castells (1997, p. 6) defines as the people's source of meaning and experience. Castells argues that meanings are constructed through the identification of symbols for the purpose of a particular action. Nevertheless, identities can originate from dominant institutions and "they become dominant when and if social actors internalise them, and construct meaning around this internalisation" (Castells 1997, p. 7).

Schlesinger (1991, p.146) holds that the notion of collective cultural identity is problematic in society because it serves as "a screen to reality". By collective identity Schlesinger (1992, p. 153) refers to a national identity, such as Christianity in the case of Malawi. Understanding the impact of global religious beliefs is imperative in the context of

gender relations because global processes simplistically impose gender values (Ghaill & Haywood 2007, p. 220). Although the church can play a role in social change, it often invests its energies in preserving the status quo (Richardson 1981, p. 99). For Richardson, because the status quo favours the interests of the more powerful, religion helps perpetuate social inequality.

With the foregoing observations in mind, let us now delve into the role of the media in the gender discourse. The news media are at the centre of promoting patriarchy in the hierarchical structures within religion, which are then reflected in the general society (van Zoonen 2000, p. 40). The following section will focus on the news media in general in relation to their normative role but it will also specifically tackle the impact of digital cultures on religion and gender with the aim of positioning the Malawian elections case in its proper context. This approach is informed by Christians (2002, p. 37), who argues that comprehending the full impact of digital technologies requires our coming to grips with a multimedia global order that alters the conditions of public discourse in complex ways. In this discussion, that order includes religion and gender.

6. Media, religion and gender

In a democracy, the mass media are expected to operate according to the basic principles governing the rest the rest of society, especially in relation to justice, fairness, and reigning notions of desirable social and cultural values (McQuail 2005, p. 164). The mass media are fundamental conflicting but also unifying agents in a community because democratic ideas are entrenched with a plurality of views in the social world, according to Muhlmann (2010, p. 10). In this regard, Bourdieu (2005, p. 30) recognises journalism as part of a "field of power" within which agents occupy certain positions that may transform or conserve the structure of forces of relations. Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng and White (2009, p. 18) hold that the normative role of the media in democracy should be guided by democratic political systems without violating principles of liberty and equality, because journalists are central elements of public communication which also includes "culture, religion and politics".

Van Zoonen (2000, p.41) notes that the media play a crucial role in the construction of meanings and values embedded in gender discourse. According to van Zoonen, the relation between gender and communication is a cultural one in that media texts carry multiple meanings

and are open to a range of interpretations. We need to develop a cultural understanding of the relation between gender, power and the mass media because "gender is a crucial component of culture" (van Zoonen 2000, p. 6). Badaracco (1997, p. 247) argues that the media contribute to the women's oppression because they disseminate images of women as commodities and portray feminists as a disestablished movement of individuals hostile to traditional values. Gauntlett (2008, p. 7) however, contends that over the years, there has been a transformation in the way women are portrayed in the media, observing that some global icons such as US pop artist Beyonce and Oprah Winfrey use television to challenge gender stereotypes.

In the view of McCullagh (2002, p. 151), one key aspect of the media lies in its power to shape the nature of social consciousness and public opinion. McCullagh further argues that through the accounts of "reality" that the media transmit to audiences it can influence the view that they form about the nature of the social world. Canclini (1992, p. 22) postulates that the media have the power to impose bourgeois values and opinions upon the lower class in society through the diffusion of dominant messages and the "unconscious manipulation of audiences".

In engaging with religion, the media inevitably engage with culture, that is, with the manifold ways in which meaning is articulated, negotiated and lived out by social groups (Begbie, 2003, p. 94). Taking this point further, Campbell (2003, p. 213) observes that debates over religious-related ideals have reached another level with the advent of new media technologies such as the internet. Campbell (2003, p. 221) cites a growing trend in which online communities immerse themselves in narratives that highlight topical issues such "gender and power relations". In the view of Campbell, the mediation of symbols, values and norms concerning identity and meaning increasingly takes place in computer-related media networks which effectively can transcend time and place, "thereby connecting people in different places who share the same interests". In this perspective, understanding the significance of social media and the consequential impact of the content towards audiences is imperative in regards to the notion of religious identity, gender and politics.

For Christians (2003, p. 302), although new communication technologies such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter have revolutionised communication, the online media is vulnerable to value-laden judgments in society and manipulates audiences to accept them and "even welcome them eagerly". Work by Gibson and McAllister (2011, p. 230) on the 2007 Australian political campaigns concluded that by employing the YouTube, some candidates drew

upon existing supporters to reach out to significant minority voters who were open to persuasion: 'In particular, Green [party] voters were found to have been significantly influenced by their exposure to web-based election material particularly that of the more interactive variety' (Gibson & McAllister 2011, p. 240). New media platforms can also serve as catalysts for the reproduction of traditional and problematic understanding of male dominance and female subordination (Lövheim 2013, p. 24).

With specific focus on Africa, media scholars Banda, Mudhai and Tettey (2009, p. 2) observe that since the advent of new media on the continent from the late 1980s, there have been significant economic and structural as well as cultural changes in societies. One noticeable aspect that has come about with the digital media on the continent is that because of their participatory nature "they tend to emphasise the importance of the cultural identity of local communities" (Banda *et al.* 2009, p. 7), and this is central to developing democracies like those of sub-Saharan Africa. Bosch (2010, p. 269) points out that in South Africa participatory journalism – where citizens play an active role in collecting, reporting and disseminating news and information – is the most striking manifestation of the digital cultures.

The above discussion illustrates that the media – both old and new – are entangled in conflicting roles in relation to gender and religion which may enhance or constrain democracy, specifically in regard to principles of equality and human rights. The interplay of religion, media and gender on Malawi's democracy was vivid in the May 2014 elections in the case of the DPP campaign slogan, *Sesa Joyce Sesa* which sets the context of our next analytical discussion.

7. *Sesa Joyce Sesa*: Analysis

Given the role played by religion in shaping Malawi's cultural identity, it comes as little surprise that religious-gender implications were a major factor in the 2014 Malawi elections. Malawi, as noted by Moto (2004, p. 346), is a patriarchal society and the *Sesa Joyce Sesa* campaign slogan created by the DPP resonated with this historical aspect of the national identity.

The structure of the campaign slogan relates to what media discourse scholar Norman Fairclough (1998, p. 145) calls "intertextuality." Intertextuality refers to the ways in which the product of discourse (a text) relies on other on other texts for its form or references and the ways in which it incorporates other texts (Bloor & Bloor 2007, p. 7). In the production and interpretation of discourse practices, in this case the *Sesa Joyce Sesa* YouTube video, audiences

were able to draw upon other texts which were culturally available to them to reinforce the notion of gendered power relations.

The title of the slogan in itself, *Sesa Joyce Sesa,* was demeaning because it likened Joyce Banda to "garbage" or "trash" that had to be swept away. This analogy had both cultural and religious connotations. In a cultural context, it is common for rural societies to cast off women deemed to have engaged in immoral malpractices not compatible with traditional beliefs. For example, a wife's refusal to cook for her husband, even when pregnant, is taboo. Such women are taken to traditional courts and may be cast off from the community. In other words, they are "swept away", and for the DPP former President Joyce Banda deserved such treatment.

The *Sesa Joyce Sesa* slogan also bore a religious connotation. In Jewish law, noted in the Bible in Deuteronomy 22:18-21, virginity was of profound importance for women to be defined as "clean" and therefore qualifying for marriage (Richardson 1977, p. 102), and "those persons considered clean were granted the right to participate in religious ceremonies". In the context of *Sesa Joyce Sesa,* the DPP's campaign slogan title typically refers to Joyce Banda as "unclean" or "filthy", like the women described in Job 14:4: "Who can bring what is pure from the impure?" (Richardson 1977, p. 102).

The *Sesa Joyce Sesa* campaign slogan was well constructed to reverberate with the religious identity of Malawians and mock Joyce Banda in regards to her capabilities to continue governing the country. Castells (1997, p. 23) underscores that cultures embedded with deep religious heritage encourage the oppression of women because submission to men guarantees salvation. Although there are some biblical texts which promote the equality of men and women; for example, in Genesis and Ecclesiastes (Genesis 1:27; Ecclesiastes 9:9), the DPP capitalised on those that seem to devalue women.

Employing the local saying called *fisi* (hyena)*,* mentioned earlier, fused a traditional patriarchal proverb into religious beliefs that underline the role of women in society as being subservient to men - just as the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church in Malawi blended traditional proverbs and Biblical texts in their 1992 Pastoral letter to criticise the one-party regime. The *fisi* (hyena) proverb emphasised that former President [Joyce] Banda was just a caretaker president following the death of Bingu wa Mutharika in 2012.

The fusion of gendered religious analogies and cultural beliefs was easily identified by the electorate because these were entrenched in their minds. Joyce Banda herself referred to the

Bible to exemplify to the Malawian electorate that gendered stereotyping is rooted in the Old Testament. During a religious event, the Women's World Day of Prayer, a year before the 2014 elections, Joyce Banda argued:

> When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, Adam blamed Eve. As women we need to know that this was the start of the problems. Even now when I do something, I I always have critics and I sometimes wonder where it is coming from. But we should rather pray hard and not offer excuses because the blame game is part of our creation (Nyasatimes 2013b).

Religious experiences of African women must be seen as embedded in particular historical, social and cultural contexts (Hackett 1995, p. 258). From a CDA perspective, the discourse structure of Joyce Banda's assertions above is significant. The then president expressed her sense of everyday reality to emphasise her point to the electorate on the issue of unequal gendered-power relations. As Bloor and Bloor (2007, p. 5) argue, "when we look at the highly structured organisations that hold most power and that control the way we live and think, we can see that language is an integral part of that control." Joyce Banda attempted to utilise the Women's World Day of Prayer and biblical references to challenge the longstanding religious hierarchical power structures that are entrenched within the Malawian society.

However, in an indirect reference to the religious-based campaign slogan, a Malawian Anglican Bishop, Reverend Brighton Malasa told a congregation a few months ahead of the 2014 elections that political parties ought to focus the campaigns on critical issues that affect Malawians rather than "castigating others" (Wandalo 2014).

At the centre of the diffusion of the gendered political campaign slogan was the online news media. As the *Sesa Joyce Sesa* motto continued to resonate with the rural communities throughout the DPP political rallies, two significant Malawi's online news media – *Nyasatimes.com* and *Malawivoice.com*, as mentioned above – uploaded the DPP YouTube video clip onto their websites (*Nyasatimes* 2013a; *Malawivoice* 2014). This was striking in the sense that the news media, as Hochheimer and Kareithi (2004, p.2) rightly put it, are expected to play a crucial role in democracy building by promoting "diversity, tolerance and respect". The news media in Malawi, in this context, played a contrasting role – which feminist scholar Judith Butler

(Butler 1997, p. 24) describes as promoting "injurious speech". This concurs with an argument advanced by Deuze (2003, p.211) who points out that online news media utilise the potential of the internet, which facilitates platforms for the exchange of ideas and stories, often centred around a specific theme. As for Fairclough (1998, p. 150), to operate successfully, politicians need to command the discourses and genres of the media. This is even more so because with today's new media technologies, discursive practices link one another into what Fairclough further describes as "intertextual chains."

What was noticeable in the way these online news media promoted the sexist religious analogies contained in the YouTube clip was that the content was relayed in a comical fashion. For example, a caption on *Nyasatimes.com* accompanying the video observes: "This guy [Saonda] is hilarious! Enjoy!" (Nyasatime*, 2013a). As for *Malawivoice.com*, the headline for the YouTube video clip was: "Watch Sesa Joyce Sesa featuring DPP's Saonda lambasting JB" (Malawivoice 2013).

Reacting to the video uploaded by *Malawivoice.com*, a comment from Nankungwi noted: "Joyce Banda is the ONLY president capable of destroying Malawi without herself knowing that she is doing so!" (http://malawivoice.com/2014/04/30/watch-sesa-joyce-sesa-featuring-dpps-george-sonda-lambasting-jb/). However, in an interactive comment Sande Wamakani Phiri defended Joyce Banda arguing:

> Joyce Banda is the only one who can rule Malawians! She is got a soul more than
> than rabbit Mutharika who has nothing to offer Malawians! 20 May election JB Boma![2]
> (http://malawivoice.com/2014/04/30/watch-sesa-joyce-sesa-featuring-dpps-george-sonda-lambasting-jb/)

Another commentator, who posted under the name "Dredz", attacked the Joyce Banda sympathiser, Sande Wamakani Phiri in Malawian Chichewa language arguing that: *"Boma*

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[2] Boma! is an indigenous metaphor to mean "the government of the day". In this context the commentator denotes that "come the 20th May, 2014 polling day, Joyce Banda will form the government".

lakwanu, nde ona lero akufuna kuchita kukomoka" which means "Get over it, what a delusionary government, watch out (Joyce Banda) may pass out!" (http://malawivoice.com/2014/04/30/watch-sesa-joyce-sesa-featuring-dpps-george-sonda-lambasting-jb/). This illustrates that the *Sesa Joyce Sesa* YouTube video had an impact on some online media audiences with regards to their views on the presidential candidates. As noted in the above interactive comments, by uploading the *Sesa Joyce Sesa* YouTube video clip, the DPP as well as the Malawian online news media triggered a debate on the leadership qualities of some of the major contesting presidential candidates in the Malawian elections. This is in line with Gibson and McAllister (2011, p. 240) who argue that, in political campaigns, the viral nature of new media platforms such as YouTube may succeed in converting a significant number of voters because of the interconnectedness with other platforms, thereby transmitting messages to other social media users.

The impact of the video clip *Sesa Joyce Sesa* was also reflected among some Twitter users, because *Malawivoice.com* uploaded the video clip on their Twitter account, @Malawivoice (https://twitter.com/malawivoice/status/46152236032434 9952). In response, one user tweeted in Malawi's Chichewa language: "*Ulendo wa ku Domasi wapsa. Sesa Joyce Sesa.*" This meant "She is heading back to Domasi (Joyce Banda's rural home of origin) Sweep Joyce away!" Another Twitter user found the YouTube clip to be amusing, posting a comment with a retweet of the video: "Lol! Sesa Joyce Sesa! She failed us!" These examples underscore the assertion in this discussion that Malawi's established online news media played a significant role in the reinforcement of gendered stereotypes that emanate from religious and cultural beliefs in the identity construct of Malawi.

This throws into question the role of the media in democracy. As Berger (1998, p. 609) argues, the internet can be a medium that is much more empowering than traditional media because of its unparalleled information resources, interactivity and ability to construct community of interests across geographical boundaries. By generating around 4,106 views, multiple shares and tweets as above, the two online news media failed to consolidate the principles of participatory democracy, good governance and human rights, one of which underlines that everyone has the right to take part in the governing of his/her country (Graham, Amos, Plumptre 2003, p. 4). This implies that the media participated in sexual discrimination against former President Banda, contrary to democracy.

Additionally, the media contributed to the marginalisation of women in participatory roles in the politics of Malawi twenty years after the country had abandoned a repressive dictatorial government. As noted earlier, during the dictatorial regime of Kamuzu Banda from 1964-1994, the role of women in politics was identified with entertaining the president through various traditional dances at political rallies. In contemporary Malawi, in light of *Sesa Joyce Sesa* campaign slogan, the online media was seen to further reinvigorate the electorate with cultural and religious beliefs which hinder women's chances of breaking the glass-ceiling with regards to political leadership. This view is informed by Graham (2012, p. 233) who points out that the media are significant in constructing people's everyday worlds, including their religious and spiritual beliefs, identities and practices.

The position taken by *Nyasatimes.com* and *Malawivoice.com* was problematic because the media in this context fell into a DPP political campaign trap to demean the womanhood of former President Joyce Banda as not befitting to stay in a male dominated political territory. In fact, it was retrogressive with respect to Article 21 of the United Nations human rights principles and good governance which asserts that "everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country directly or through freely chosen representatives (Graham *et al.* 2003, p. 4). Chances of a woman governing Malawi were significantly suffocated in this respect.

By engaging with a sexist, demeaning campaign slogan, Malawi's online media played the role which Ghaill and Haywood (2007, p. 173) would describe as that of a "socialisation agent" in that they were involved in teaching females to be inferior to males and limiting the roles and responsibilities that men are able to take up. This was vivid in the way they reproduced the DPP YouTube video, providing multiple avenues for audiences to share it, thereby calling on the electorate to reflect on the religious organisational structures and cultural values and ridicule Joyce Banda.

8. Conclusion

Although online media may have the potential to empower journalists and the public to enhance democracy through multiple participatory platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook, Marien (2006, p. 46) argues that such media are also susceptible to manipulation. In a quest to wrestle political power away from caretaker President Joyce Banda, the DPP created a

campaign slogan that was manipulative of the religious cultural identity of the Malawi populace. Although most forms of religion call for love, peace and tolerance, Christianity and Islam are embedded with some texts that are deemed patriarchal and sexist, underpinning the notion that women are expected to be subservient to men. But for the media to be entangled in a gendered political campaign to sway public opinion through the internet is a paradox of their expected normative role in a democracy.

The digital news media, specifically *Nyasatimes.com and Malawivoice.com,* expected to promote equality and respect for human rights, ignored this role and overlooked the demeaning nature of the DPP campaign mantra, *Sesa Joyce Sesa.* Instead, they were pivotal agents in the reverberation of the gendered discourse of the slogan into the public sphere. Manipulating the language of religious teachings and traditional cultural beliefs for the consolidation of hegemonic masculinity will continue to deny women the potential to take-up critical decision making political positions, especially in developing democracies like Malawi. As Wodak (2001, p. 11) rightly puts it, language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it and to alter distributions of power, but language also provides a finely articulated means for generating differences in power in social hierarchical structures.

Christians (2002, p. 41) underlines that the mass media are not neutral purveyors of information but creators and shapers of culture, adding that it is incumbent upon journalists to be aware that the media are cultural institutions and that digital technologies are not tools but "cultural activities involving design, fabrication and use". The need for communications media to desist from sensational discourses that are socially divisive can be progressive with regards to democracy and good governance.

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