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### **Chieftaincy and the distributive politics of an agricultural input subsidy programme in a rural Malawian village**

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**Chieftaincy and the distributive politics of an agricultural input subsidy programme in a rural Malawian village**

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**Abstract:**

The decline of industry in Southern Africa has prompted James Ferguson to question the bases on which the region's poor may justify claims on resources, if not through their labour. This article builds from Ferguson's work by looking at the continuing importance of chieftaincy to distributive politics in Malawi. I use a case study of a government agricultural extension programme in a village in rural Malawi to show the way in which the opportunities its chiefs and its people have had to make 'declarations of dependence' have waxed and waned over time. In the context of the *longue durée*, the programme appears as the latest in a series of interventions that have created opportunities for chiefs and people to make new relationships, and to remake old ones. I use the case to suggest how migrant labour, old agricultural extension programmes, and changes to the status of chiefs within the Malawian state have structured the way in which chiefs have been able to operate in Malawi. Based on the case study, and other research on chiefs in Malawi, I argue that at the contemporary moment chieftaincy may stave off what Ferguson labels 'asocial inequality', but achieves little more.

**Keywords:**

Poverty, chiefs, rural development, Malawi, inequality, distributive politics

## 1 Introduction

In this article I use a case study of an agricultural extension programme to explore the claims that are made through chieftaincy in Malawi and the implications the institution has for social and economic inequality in the country. The Malawi government's Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP), introduced in 2005, was designed to boost the agricultural productivity of the country's poorest farmers in order that they might be better able to produce crops for sale and for their own subsistence (Chirwa and Dorward 2013, Holden and Lunduka 2013, Eggen 2012, Chinsinga 2010). The logic of the FISP was however envisaged differently in the village of Chimtengo Kubwalo, where I did ethnographic fieldwork over 2012 and 2013. People there made claims on FISP resources on the basis of their connection to their Village Head, as much as on their relative ability to produce crops. While resources were not concentrated with the poorest people in the village, neither were they without the ability to influence their distribution. I argue that the way the FISP fertiliser was distributed in the village suggests that the institution of chieftaincy can prevent inequality developing in contemporary Malawi, but only amongst those who are already extremely poor.

By considering chieftaincy I attempt to meet James Ferguson's call for researchers working in Southern Africa to keep their 'ears to the ground' in order that they might understand the different claims people make for the distribution of wealth in the region in the contemporary period (2015 p. 164 also see 2013). The background to Ferguson's call are the global socio-economic changes that he argues are leading to the abjection of many of Southern Africa's poorest people (Ferguson 2015, 1999). Liberalisation and technological change have combined to disconnect hundreds of thousands of people from employment in the region's industrial centres. At the same time land appropriation and degradation means that a return to subsistence farming is no longer a viable option for most. While admitting that historic labour regimes maintained and proliferated significant social inequality, Ferguson suggests that the kind of 'asocial' inequality that has developed in Southern Africa in recent decades is even more troubling (2015 p. 156-157). Rather than being incorporated into the economy on deleterious terms the poor are threatened with being cast off completely, 'irrelevant to capital' (Li 2009 p. 73).

Clearing the ground for the argument he makes about the emergence of a new distributive politics based on 'rightful shares' for citizens, Ferguson emphasises the importance of the state relative to chiefs in contemporary Southern Africa. 'Today, clearly, we are less concerned than we once were with hereditary chiefs and piles of yams and more concerned with such things as state bureaucracies, taxation, and programs of social protection...' (Ferguson 2015 p. 90). However, Ferguson also acknowledges the fact that the rise of labour during the colonial period did not simply mean that old justifications for claims to resources lost moral traction, or have not been important to distributive politics as work membership has declined (2015 p. 141-151, 2013). People have continued to have value beyond their capacity as labourers, as kin and as members of polities under chiefs. This article develops this line of argument in Ferguson's work.

Studying the state and state development and welfare programmes in Malawi necessarily requires studying chiefs. In Malawi chiefs were incorporated into the British colonial government under indirect rule and the importance of 'traditional leaders' within the state has, for the most part, continued to be asserted ever since (McCracken 2012 p. 222-223, Eggen 2011). At the time I did my fieldwork a hierarchy of traditional authority linked 'Village Heads', chiefs over as few as a dozen adults, to 'Group Village Heads', to 'Traditional Authorities' and to 'Paramount Chiefs', the latter having authority over tens of thousands of people or more. Amongst other activities, the literature on chiefs in Malawi suggests that it is they, as much as bureaucrats and officials, who broker government development and welfare programmes like the FISP (Swidler 2013, Englund 2012, Eggen 2012, 2011, Cammack et al 2009).

The case of Chimtengo Kubwalo village suggests the nature of the influence chiefs have over distribution in Malawi, and the extent to which the institution limits or proliferates inequality. I draw out two ways in which the distribution of FISP was justified morally in Chimtengo Kubwalo village. Firstly, village members made strong assertions that each household in the village should

receive at least some FISP fertiliser. Simply belonging to Chimtengo Kubwalo village was a basis for claims for a share of the resources that the Village Head received from central government, through the Traditional Authority and Group Village Head above him. The claim hardly constituted a share based on citizenship of the state, but neither was it based on labour, or 'work membership', to use Ferguson's term. Secondly the distributional 'work' (*nchito*) that the village chief and other members of the village did was acknowledged through the distribution. Ferguson writes of the 'labour of distribution', that making and mediating dependencies is a vital part of social and economic life in Southern Africa, especially as 'productive' labour becomes harder to obtain (2015 p. 94-101). My evidence indicates that Malawians recognise that this kind of distributional work can be time consuming and hard, and that as such chiefs, who undertake a lot of it, may often be justified in taking a greater share of resources like those available on the FISP.

Unsurprisingly though, the moral claims made through the FISP were not uncontested in Chimtengo Kubwalo. As well as highlighting the importance of certain kinds of moral appeals, I also try to make sense of the sanctions that both chiefs and their people may turn to in order to press their claims. Mahmood Mamdani's (1996) proposed that colonial powers turned chiefs into 'decentralised despots'. Dependent on support from the colonial administration 'above' and not their people 'below', chiefs could enrich themselves at their people's expense. While 'despotism' is too strong a word to use to characterize chieftaincy in Malawi in general (Swidler, 2013 p. 324, McCracken, 2012 p. 225, Englund, 2012 p. 75, Eggen, 2011 p. 317), it is true that the position of chiefs of all seniorities rests as much on the relationships they have with others, as it does on the relationships they have with their people. I suggest that chiefs' relative ability to exert influence turns around the availability of these relationships and the effectiveness with which chiefs mediate them. Where chiefs are able to depend on chiefs above them in Malawi's chiefly hierarchy, or on the President and members Malawi's central government, or even on a salaried job, the nature of their dependence on their people changes. Equally, where their people cannot make other 'declarations of dependence' (Ferguson 2015 p. 146) themselves, outside of the institution of chieftaincy, then they will be less able to press claims with their chiefs.

Setting the case of Chimtengo Kubwalo village in historical context, I am able to show the way in which the opportunities its people and its chiefs have to make 'declarations of dependence' have waxed and waned over time. In this *longue durée*, the Farm Input Subsidy Programme appears as the latest in a series of interventions that have created opportunities for chiefs and people to make new relationships, and to remake old ones. These interventions have not simply supplanted one another, but have 'layered up' in the social landscape of the village and the surrounds, shaped by those that have gone before them (Jones 2009 p. 26). I use the case to suggest how migrant labour, old agricultural extension programmes, and changes to the status of chiefs within the Malawian state in the past structure the way in which to which chiefs operate in Malawi in the contemporary period. Based on the case study, and other research on chiefs and FISP in Malawi, I argue that chieftaincy may stave off 'asocial inequality' and prevent people from being cast off completely, but achieves little more.

Long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Chimtengo Kubwalo village in the Central Region of Malawi inspired the focus on chiefs in this article. I spent over fifteen months in Chimtengo Kubwalo between 2012 and 2013, a period that covered one complete cycle of the Farm Input Subsidy Programme. I lived with a family during that time, learning the local language, Chichewa, and participating in the daily life of the village. On my arrival I had only general questions to ask and largely engaged in conversation with people as they went about what they were doing, rather than undertaking more structured forms of interview. As Katy Gardner writes, this kind of participant observation, 'rarely feels like 'proper' research... [but] is, however, the only way that the detailed contexts of peoples' lives and the ways that these unfold can be understood' (2012 p. 11). In the case of this article it became apparent during my time in the village that FISP was perhaps not best understood as a targeted programme to boost productive capacity of the poor, but something that played into social and economic relations in the village in quite a different way.

## 2 The hard work of dependence in Chimtengo Kubwalo village

While the focus of this article is on chieftaincy, in this section I briefly highlight the other ways in which people in Chimtengo Kubwalo justified claims to resources, as I introduce village. The other options they had to make claims are important to grasp in order to understand the relative significance of chieftaincy as a source of support. It is important to emphasise that while people in the village farmed, only a couple of households were able to grow enough food to last them through the year. Numerous studies have shown that while 80 per cent of Malawi's rural population engages in farming relatively few are able to subsist, let alone profit, from farming activities alone (Verheijen 2013, Bryceson 2006 p. 173, Ellis 2003, Englund 1999). Given the difficulties involved in farming for subsistence in the village and in Malawi as a whole, Ferguson's question about how the poor of Southern Africa justify claims to resources is not irrelevant to ask of the country. While they may have land, the difficulties of making that land productive leave Malawian farmers, in one sense, in a similar position to poor Malawians who do not farm at all.

In the rural Central Region of Malawi, where Chimtengo Kubwalo village is located, the household or nuclear family is the main unit of production and consumption (Bryceson 2006, Englund 1999). Agricultural work within households in the village was gendered, although not exclusively so; wives mostly worked cultivating maize, the staple crop, while their husbands took most responsibility for cash crops, and tobacco in particular. Tobacco was the most important cash crop by value in the area; each household that cultivated tobacco grew enough to make one 'bale', a quantity that sold for around MK100,000 (USD 300) in 2013. Farming tobacco was time consuming and required lots of fertiliser, so only men from a few households in the village cultivated it. All of the households in the village that farmed grew groundnuts for sale, which required far less fertilizer than tobacco, but which also sold for much less money. All these crops were cultivated in Malawi's single growing season, which runs from late November or early December through to May.

As is the case across rural Malawi, the members of most households in the village undertook various kinds of work aside from farming (Verheijen 2013, Bryceson 2006, Ellis 2003). Like their farming, this work was also gendered. Men did piecework away from the village while women mostly remained in the village and did piecework there, as well as brewing beer and engaging in other business activities. Rates for piecework varied, but a day's labour making ridges in a field near Chimtengo Kubwalo could earn a pieceworker up to MK 1000 (3 USD). By way of comparison, one man from the village who worked for Chinese contractors in Lilongwe for a couple of months earned MK 15,000 (46 USD). As critics have pointed out, the ongoing importance of such work casts doubt on Ferguson's thesis that poverty in contemporary Malawi should be blamed on disconnection from the labour market (Meagher, Mann and Bolt 2016). The crucial point is agreed though is that the kinds of labour that people in Chimtengo Kubwalo did could not be depended upon in the same way as the kinds of work that had been available in the past.

The overall division of work within the household meant that husbands normally held more money than their wives, and the provision of the former for the latter was a common theme of discussion in the village and around it<sup>1</sup>. Debates about the appropriate distribution of resources beyond the household or nuclear family also took place regularly. An extended kinship system most accurately described as 'cognatic' meant that claims based on a wide variety of relationships could however be made and received by its households (Englund 2002 p. 55-56). Many of these claims were for help (*thandizo*), which did not require immediate or equivalent reciprocation and were normally met in the form of maize. People also offered 'help' (*thandizo*) in the form of their labour. These offers however, like requests made for help of the former variety, were frequently perceived as illegitimate by those who received them and described as 'begging' (*kupempha*). As Davison (1993) describes having been the case in Southern Malawi, households often preferred to pay pieceworkers on formal terms, in cash, rather than leave themselves to face more open claims to

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of contemporary gender relations in rural Malawi see Janneke Verheijen's book on Southern Malawi (2013). My main concern is the politics of the inter-household distribution of the FISP fertiliser, but Verheijen's work provides insights into debates about the intra-household distribution of resources, and particularly that between women and men.

reciprocity from relatives who had helped them with agricultural labour. As in other parts of Malawi, paying a pieceworker in cash did not however always symbolize a marketized relationship between the pieceworker and employer (Englund 1999, also see Verheijen 2013 p. 236-238).

It was the relatively wealthy households that gave the most piecework and help to other members of the village. Of the fourteen households that made up Chimtengo Kubwalo, two were generally regarded as being 'rich' (*olemera*). These were the household I stayed in, headed by a man named David Kaso, and another headed by his brother, Harold. The other households in the village were all considered to be of average wealth for the area, including the Chief's, although they were not completely without differentiation amongst themselves. As in other nearby villages the households in Chimtengo Kubwalo doing best were those that still held capital that had been accumulated in the past.

The main facet of 'very poor' (*osauka kwambiri*) households in the village was that they tended not to farm for themselves, and were itinerant. They relied solely on piecework in the local area, or elsewhere in Malawi, sometimes moving away from Chimtengo Kubwalo for periods of months or even years. When I arrived in the village there were no such families living there. One man who had been away for several years came back to live in Chimtengo Kubwalo in 2013, after the FISP fertiliser had been distributed there. Having gotten married he and his wife relied on piecework and help from other households in the village and local area for the rest of the time I was in the village.

It was partly because of requests for help for the very poor that the wealthiest households in Chimtengo Kubwalo and the surrounds made little in the way of 'profit' (*phindu*). They also had to put much of the money they made in one year back into growing enough maize and other crops to survive the following year. Like their fellow villagers, David, Harold and the members of their households still had to engage in the 'work of dependence' (Ferguson 2015 p. 94), making and meeting claims from their extended family, fellow villagers and the Chief. Their connections to the market were not strong enough to depend upon in absence of support from the village.

Despite being poorer than David and Harold, connection to Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo<sup>2</sup> was particularly important to all the households in the village. This was not just because of the ritual and ceremonial functions he fulfilled as a chief (Swidler 2013), but also because as Village Head he mediated all the government development projects and programmes that happened in the village, including the FISP.

### **3 The impact of the Farm Input Subsidy in theory and in practice**

In September 2012 fertiliser and the FISP were common topics of conversation in Chimtengo Kubwalo as people's attentions turned to the planting season. Aside from piecework and the sale of tobacco, government and non-government development programmes were the main conduits through which resources held in the wider economy entered the village. The FISP was by far the most important of these. The prospect of being able to buy a bag of fertiliser at the FISP rate of MK 500 (USD 1.50) was particularly appealing in 2012 because of the huge increase in the market price of the input from the previous year, up to MK 15000 (USD 46) from MK 8000 (USD 25)<sup>3</sup>. The change in price had led to people having to recalculate the amount of fertiliser they might be able to get on the open market. Most people felt they needed two or three bags to come close to farming enough food to meet the subsistence requirements of their families. Those farmers intending to farm tobacco required much more.

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<sup>2</sup> In Malawi the village chief takes the name of their village. Ann Swidler writes this reflects the way that chiefs embody the community in their person (2013 p. 325). The case of FISP in Chimtengo Kubwalo shows that this connection could not however be taken for granted and had to be worked for.

<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to stabilise the national economy following its dramatic decline in the last years of Bingu wa Mutharika's presidency, the government of Joyce Banda devalued the kwacha by 33% in May 2012 (BBC 2012). This move, and subsequent inflation, was responsible for the dramatic change in the cost of fertiliser.



Chirwa and Dorward (2013) outline the official logic for the distribution of subsidised fertiliser under the FISP in their detailed study of the programme. Upwards of fifty per cent of Malawi's population are meant to receive support in the form of subsidised fertiliser and seed varieties under the FISP. In the iterations of the programme that existed in the years immediately prior to 2012 Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security staff, chiefs and village members are meant to identify a village's neediest households at 'open meetings', following the village's registration for the programme (Chirwa and Dorward, 2013 p. 105-106). It is these households that receive coupons that they then exchange, with the requisite payment, for fertiliser. Each complete coupon is made up of a voucher for NPK fertiliser, and a voucher for Urea fertiliser<sup>4</sup>. To redeem both NPK and Urea a MK 1000 (3 USD) payment is required on presentation of the coupon, MK 500 (1.50 USD) each for a 50 kilogramme bag of Urea and a 50 kilogramme bag of NPK. The official rationale of the programme at the time I was living in Chimtengo Kubwalo village was that by targeting poorer farmers, it would improve their ability to produce crops, both for their own subsistence, and for sale on the market (Chirwa and Dorward 2013). In the programme the person's value is in this way defined by their ability to produce. It is for this reason that in analysis the FISP is categorised as a traditional 'productivity enhancing' development programme, rather than a universal or unconditional one, of the kind that Ferguson analyses (Ellis and Maliro 2013, Ellis 2012, Devereux and Macauslan 2006).

Evidence from across Malawi suggests however that chiefs have in fact had 'substantial autonomy' to direct fertiliser as they wish (Holden and Lunduka, 2013 p. 6, also see Chirwa and Dorward 2013 p. 105, Verheijen 2013 p. 233-234, Eggen 2012 p. 9-11, Chinsinga 2010 p. 25). As James Ferguson work shows, autonomy with respect to one relationship tends to derive from dependence on another. In the case of FISP, senior chiefs in particular seem often to have been able to depend on their connections in central government, and to officials and bureaucrats, rather than on the chiefs and village heads below them in the hierarchy of traditional authority. The latter chiefs, and the people they are responsible for, have little means to press claims with the former for FISP inputs.

But there is also evidence that chiefs are not always able to distribute FISP fertiliser in a way that is at odds with the interests of poor farmers, even if inputs are not concentrated in their hands as the official logic of the programme dictates. Village chiefs seem to be particularly constrained in this respect. Eggen for example, writes that 'equal sharing - with some tolerance for slightly more resources to the chief - is a norm firmly positioned in local discourse' (2012 p. 17). Harri Englund describes people choosing a new Village Head for themselves, partly because of discontent over the way their chief had been distributing FISP inputs (Englund 2012 also see Verheijen 2013 p. 209-210). While some manage to do so, it seems that it is often difficult for Village Heads to act against the interests of their people.

People in Chimtengo Kubwalo asserted the moral 'justice' (*chilungamo*) of a similar distribution to that which Eggen describes, and demonstrated the capacity to effectively press for the FISP fertiliser to be shared in this way. People told me the fertiliser should and would be shared equally, as one woman put it '*one, one, one, one, it will be shared one bag per [household]*'. This was the position of the people I talked to who lived in surrounding villages as well. To Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo, and other villagers, extent of the provision of fertiliser by Malawi's Presidents was the key measure by which they were judged. President Bingu wa Mutharika, who had instituted the FISP, was remembered as a good President, because he had 'provided fertiliser'. President Kamuzu Banda, Malawi's first President after independence was similarly remembered for 'caring' for the people through his provision of fertiliser. I discuss the history of agricultural inputs later in the article. For now, it is important only to emphasise the fact that people implied that Malawi's Presidents sat at the top of the country's hierarchy of traditional authority and that in their claims on FISP fertiliser were not just based on membership of the village but also the fact the President also had distributive responsibilities towards them.

In was by President, through the hierarchy of chiefs, that people in the village explained the FISP would be distributed. There was no meeting with an agricultural extension agent in the village, the

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<sup>4</sup> There are also vouchers available for hybrid maize and legume seed (Chirwa and Dorward 2013 p. 183-193).

work of mediating the distribution in the village falling to Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo. Villagers told me that this was how the distribution had always been handled. Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo visited everyone in the village to discuss the FISP over the course of October and November, the distribution of the coupons and their exchange for fertiliser being expected sometime at the start of December. Many villagers also went to Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo's house to ask him for FISP fertiliser. These discussions took place while Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo was also attending various meetings with other village chiefs, the Group Village Heads and the Traditional Authority. He was absent from the village a lot of the time, walking for several hours a day, either to see the Group Village Head, or the Traditional Authority, to check on the status of the FISP coupons. Other village chiefs joined him.

It was through this hierarchy of chiefs that villagers explained that the fertiliser coupons would be distributed. Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo worried towards the end of November that the FISP coupons might not make it into his hands at all. There had been reports on the radio of instances of senior chiefs and government officials appropriating FISP fertiliser coupons and redirecting them away from Village Heads and their people in other parts of Malawi. Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo was concerned that something similar might happen to the coupons destined for the area around the village. In the end the village was assigned twelve coupons, equivalent to twenty-four bags of fertiliser. This was the number they had been allocated the previous year, and Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo was reasonably satisfied.

The fertiliser was not however spread equally around the village, '*one, one, one*', as people had said it would be. Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo explained he would get four bags, while the three other wealthiest households in the village also received more than the others. David's household would get three bags, Harold's four, and Yamikani's three. Yamikani was the head of what was regarded as the wealthiest of the households in the village, after David's and Harold's. This left every other household with one bag of fertiliser. When I asked poorer members of the village what they felt about the distribution, they explained that it was to be expected that these households would receive more as they were headed by 'big men' (*aakulu*). The 'big men' justified their shares as using the same reasoning. David pointed out that he had the largest family in the village, including several 'orphan' children whose parents had died or moved elsewhere, and had no one to care for them. He, Harold and Yamikani said that many of the villagers 'depended' (*kudalira*) on them for food in the hungry season. Poorer than David, Harold and Yamikani, Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo's receipt of a larger share of fertiliser was explained by virtue of the fact he was the chief of the village. He told me he was entitled to this share because of all the 'work' (*nchito*) he had done organising the distribution, and because of the other distributional 'work' he did as village chief throughout the year.

The resignation of the poorer members of the village implied that Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo, with the support of other chiefs, and of David, Harold and Yamikani, was able to act without much regard for them. When I pushed questions about the position of Village Heads like Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo people agreed that they 'controlled the fertiliser'<sup>5</sup>.

However, even as people described the 'control' chiefs had over FISP inputs, they also implied limits to that control. Reflecting Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo's own assertions, several people described the 'hard work' the Chieftiancy involved, and the lack of 'profit' (*phindu*) that was to be gained from it. Most expressed reservations about wanting to fulfil the role themselves. Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo himself complained that he spent a lot of time mediating 'cases' (*milandu*)<sup>6</sup>; 'I just go around and around' (*kuyendayenda*). Stating that the chieftaincy was a desirable position could of course lead to troubling accusations of covetousness; modesty has tended to be expected amongst prospective chiefly candidates in Malawi (Englund 2002 p. 141). But not all of the reservations people expressed about chieftaincy can be put down to the fear of accusation. Nor can Chimtengo Kubwalo's own

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<sup>5</sup> They also mentioned other advantages that derived from the position. Amongst these benefits was the monthly stipend chiefs received, of a few thousand kwacha, and the good food they got at communal gatherings.

<sup>6</sup> This was the term used to describe meetings that took place to resolve disputes. Cases were heard by chiefs at all levels of the hierarchy, escalating up it where resolutions could not be agreed at a certain level.

complaints simply be explained as instrumental appeals for sympathy. Events that surrounded the distribution of the FISP fertiliser in the village in 2012 served to suggest the limits of the power or control Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo and other village chiefs had in the distribution of FISP.

On our return from the depot where the members of Chimtengo Kubwalo village had exchanged their coupons for fertiliser, David told me that Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo had, at the last minute, decided to take one of Yamikani's bags of fertiliser for himself, leaving Yamikani with only two, and the chief with five. The decision provoked far more comment and complaint than the original distribution, suggesting moral limits around how much wealth a chief might justifiably accrue for himself and his own household. Over the following days it became apparent that no one in the village thought what the chief had done to Yamikani was 'just' (*chilungamo*). Limbani, one of the poorer farmers in the village complained, '*It is not just - we have no money*', locating Yamikani's family with his own poorer household, rather than with David and Harold's. David and Harold also agreed that what Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo had done was 'not good'. When I spoke to Yamikani he did not say much about what had happened but admitted he was 'angry' (*kukwiya*) with the Chief.

Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo meanwhile told to me that Yamikani was just 'causing trouble' and 'being insolent' (*kuchita chipongwe*). But he was also anxious, and tried to get other villagers to talk to Yamikani on his behalf in order to 'console' (*kupepetsa*) him. A few weeks later Chief Chitengo Kubwalo and Yamikani were on speaking terms again but the Chief continued to worry that Yamikani might be 'causing trouble'. He explained to me that he was worried Yamikani might be leading a group of villagers, including Limbani, to support his 'removal as chief' (*kuchotsa amfumu*).

The head of a neighbouring village, Chief Chimtengo Kutsidya, had even more problems than Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo when he took a coupon that he had initially allocated to a woman in his village. The woman, Esnarth Mitambo, was by local standards, 'very poor' (*osauka kwambiri*); she headed her household alone and had relied on piecework to survive for most of her life. In October Chief Chimtengo Kutsidya told her that she would receive FISP fertiliser. However the Chief subsequently decided to take a greater share of the village's fertiliser for himself, by withholding Esnarth's coupon. She did not take this well; 'Kutsidya will cry for what he has done' Esnarth insisted while talking to some Chimtengo Kubwalo villagers and myself. With the support of some other members of Chimtengo Kutsidya, and Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo and other local chiefs, Esnarth called a 'case' against Chief Chimtengo Kutsidya that was heard by the Group Village Head. Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo came back saying that Chief Chimtengo Kutsidya had been contrite, and ended up complaining to the Group Village Head, "*I do not want to be a chief, it should go to someone else, take [the chieftaincy]!*" The coupon had ended up back in Esnarth's hands after the hearing, but Chief Chimtengo Kutsidya had remained head of the village.

These cases suggest that while the arrangement of the FISP did not mean fertiliser and other inputs were concentrated with the poorest people in Chimtengo Kubwalo and the surrounding villages, neither did it necessarily mean that Village Heads could act without any regard for them. Everyone I talked to in the village had aspirations to 'make profit', by selling livestock or crops, or by getting decent, salaried employment; they did not valorise egregious dependence on kin, fellow villagers or their chiefs. Yet, given the weakness and caprice of the market, greater dependence on it, relative to dependence on family, fellow villagers and chiefs was not viable, unless perhaps they could obtain a far greater quantity of resources than were available through the FISP. In this respect people were trapped by their poverty and inequality. At the same time, these cases from the 2012 FISP programme suggest that the actions of Village Heads could be sharply delimited by the actions of the members of their villages. Even the poorest Malawians had some freedom to assert their will, and limit inequality. To understand the extent to which this was the case, it is necessary to consider the programme in historical context.

#### **4 A history of dependencies**

The Chewa, the ethnic group to whom everyone in Chimtengo Kubwalo belonged, were organised in relatively egalitarian, non-hierarchical polities prior to the advent of British rule in the late nineteenth century. Selected and installed by elders on the basis of their 'character' (Marwick 1965 p. 118), the Chewa chief's position remained dependent upon the adequate fulfilment of their responsibilities towards their people, more than on hereditary claims. Where chiefs failed to meet these responsibilities, which included the distribution of resources, new villages and chieftaincies 'budded off' from existing ones (Rangeley, 1948 p. 10, Marwick, 1965 p. 139). As Ferguson argues in his history of the Southern African region (2015 p. 142-146, 2013), the wide and equal availability of land and other resources at the time meant that people had a high degree of freedom to declare their dependence on chiefs of new polities, should their existing leaders fail to adequately fulfil their responsibilities<sup>7</sup>.

The British policy of indirect rule incorporated chiefs into the colonial administration (McCracken 2012 p. 222-223, Eggen 2011 p. 316-317). Indirect rule implied a challenge to the egalitarian political arrangements of the Chewa, chiefs being able to depend on their connection to the protectorate administration to buttress their position against protest from their people. However, even relatively senior chiefs in the hierarchy of 'native authorities' the British established found there was relatively little support for them from the protectorate capital in Zomba (McCracken, 2012 p. 222-230)<sup>8</sup>. This being the case, the extent to which chiefs, and particularly Village Heads, could ignore or oppress their people as, in Mamdani's (1996) oft-quoted phrase, 'decentralised despots', has been debated (Swidler, 2013 p. 324, McCracken, 2012 p. 225, Englund, 2012 p. 75, Eggen, 2011 p. 317).

Chiefs were certainly constrained by the fact that the colonial economy offered people - mainly men - an alternative way of accruing wealth and status, away from the institution of chieftaincy. Many Chewa were amongst those James Ferguson describes 'voluntarily' migrating to labour in the industrial economies of Rhodesia and South Africa during the colonial period (Ferguson 2015 p. 147, McCracken, 2012 p. 178-188, 256-260). At home, where the colonial appropriation of land for estates and plantations was largely restricted to the Southern Region, many Chewa people were also incorporated into the colonial economy as smallholder producers of tobacco. Tobacco production was led by 'Master Farmers' who, having been selected by colonial officials, received training, equipment and inputs that enabled them to become small-scale agricultural capitalists, employing other people on their farms (Mapila et al., 2010 p. 148, McCracken, 2012 p. 251). The relationships that certain individuals were able to forge through migrant labour abroad, and with colonial agricultural extension workers closer to home, meant they could press their own claims with their Village Heads, despite their incorporation into the colonial administration.

Moral debates about the just or rightful distribution of resources accompanied the structural changes that took place in economy and society. People who had not been able to connect directly into the colonial economy as migrant labourers or smallholders, had to find other ways to press claims in the face of the social and economic changes that were taking place. This was particularly true of women (White 1987 p. 228-229, Vaughan 1987 p. 123)<sup>9</sup>, but also of some chiefs (Marwick 1965 p. 181-182). These claims, based on non-market principles, continued to matter to both migrant labourers and Master Farmers. McCracken for example notes relations of kinship and affect remained key considerations in Master Farmer's provision of labour to pieceworkers (2012 p. 251). While migrants used their status as labourers to justify their possession and use of their earnings, neither were they indifferent to claims for distribution made along other lines in their home villages, including on the basis of chieftaincy (McCracken, 2012 p. 185-187, Marwick 1965 p. 181-182).

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<sup>7</sup> Even the hierarchically ordered Ngoni Kingdom that entered and expanded in the region through the early 19<sup>th</sup> century splintered rapidly immediately before the colonial period (Ferguson 2015 142-146, Barnes 1967).

<sup>8</sup> Nyasaland received little investment from the British government relative to other colonies in Southern Africa (McCracken 2012 p. 74-99).

<sup>9</sup> The gendered aspects of labour migration from Malawi have been analysed extensively (White 1987, Vaughan 1987). Some women did migrate (McCracken 2012 p. 184), but most had to work out their relationships with migrant husbands and other male relatives from the villages in which they lived. What Verheijen calls an 'ideology' of male provision developed in Southern Malawi, women using it to press their claims on the earnings of husbands (Verheijen 2013 p. 248, White 1987 p. 228, Vaughan 1987 p. 123).

Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo's predecessor, Chief Chimtengo Three, became a powerful and wealthy man through the different connections he was able to make and maintain through this period. Born Stanley in 1918, he had migrated from the village, at that time simply called Chimtengo, during the 1940s. He subsequently spent long periods working in South Africa through the 1950s and 1960s. Stanley maintained good relations with people in the village through the provision of regular cash remittances. So well did he support relatives and other people at home that on the death of Chief Chimtengo Two, the elders of the village declared him the new chief of the village. This was despite the fact he was still away in South Africa. Stanley's elder brother Pondani stood as acting chief in Stanley's place until he returned to the village to live there permanently as Chief Chimtengo Three in 1972.

On his return Chief Chimtengo Three used his savings to enter the 'Master Farmer' (*Chikumbi*) programme, which had continued to run after Malawi became independent in 1964. At that time, as during the colonial era, those farmers who already had capital were favoured for selection (Mapila et al. 2010, McCracken 2012 p. 251). Villagers remembered that Chief Chimtengo Three continued to amass wealth through farming during the 1970s and 1980s; he planted several stands of trees for lumber, bought hundreds of layer hens and various kinds of livestock. He obtained an ox-plough - a piece of equipment rare amongst smallholders - subsidised fertiliser and loans through the Master Farmer programme. These allowed him to farm a much larger area than would otherwise have been possible.

People emphasised the fact that Chief Chimtengo Three used much of his material wealth to provide for people in the village, as well as for relatives and acquaintances living elsewhere. I was told piecemeal had always been plentiful during Chief Chimtengo Three's chieftaincy while my host David Kaso said on several occasions that Chimtengo Three 'helped many people', including him, with things like school fees. It was the way in which he had used his material wealth to support others, building 'wealth in people' (Guyer 1993), that made Chief Chimtengo Three 'a very big man' in the village and local area.

However, as a man whose wealth derived from work abroad, and through the inputs and equipment he received through the Master Farmer programme, there were distinct limits to which people in and around the village could press 'declarations of dependence' on Chief Chimtengo Three. When his elder brother Pondani died in the late 1970s, Chimtengo Three claimed a large portion of his elder brother's wealth during discussions about inheritance at Pondani's funeral. Chief Chimtengo Three's claim angered Pondani's son Aleke, but because of the Chief's strong position there was little Aleke could do. Aleke moved away from the village to a nearby trading centre and the sides of the family remained estranged for a long time<sup>10</sup>. People in Chimtengo Kubwalo told me that some people had, like Aleke, resented Chief Chimtengo Three's wealth. Harold Kaso said that Chief Chimtengo Three had nonetheless 'just gone ahead, working hard'. People like Aleke that left the village were soon replaced with new arrivals. As a result the village continued to grow in size under his leadership through the 1980s.

Chief Chimtengo Three's ability to just 'go ahead' was in large part due to the political and economic context in Malawi at that time. President Kamuzu Banda and his government had made few fundamental changes to the Malawian economy following independence from Britain. Alterations did begin to take place in the 1970s, migrant labour abroad was curtailed and subsidies and supports for smallholders were removed (Chirwa, 1996, Kydd and Christiansen, 1982). These changes had the effect of forcing more Malawians into labour on Malawi's estates and plantations, which had been taken over by Banda and the government. The pay for labourers on these holdings was very poor compared to that which had been available to them abroad and only worsened following the global oil price crash in the late 1970s (Chirwa, 1996). While subsidies for most smallholders were ended, Banda did continue to support Master Farmers like Chimtengo Three (Cammack et al. 2010). In the

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<sup>10</sup> The shop that Aleke started with what inheritance he did take for himself was still running when I came to live in Chimtengo and it was there that Aleke's son, Jimmy, told me this story.

1970s the Central Region had the highest 'peasant producer' incomes in the country, but also the greatest inequality (Potts, 1985 p. 187, McCracken, 2012 p. 4, Kydd and Christiansen, 1982). Banda's continuing support for a small rural elite through the 1980s only compounded this disparity.

For people in living in Chimtengo Kubwalo the paucity of livelihood options available during the latter part of Banda's time in power meant working for Chief Chimtengo Three and declaring dependence on him was the best option. Even where people like Aleke felt the kind of inequalities of distribution that Chimtengo Three's chieftaincy enlarged were immoral, the economic context of the period meant there were always more people ready to make themselves dependent on the chief than there were who might leave him.

Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo had grown up in the village under Chief Chimtengo Three, but had not had the same opportunities as the old Chief. Unable to work abroad, he took up poorly paid work on commercial estates and on government development projects in the Central Region through the 1980s. It was while he was working on a road in Paskulu near Lilongwe that he met Doris, whom he married and brought back to Chimtengo to start a home and begin farming there. Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo remembered life in the village under Chief Chimtengo Three fondly; there had been lots of fertiliser available in the village at the time, Chief Chimtengo Three's position as a Master Farmer allowing him not just to provide villagers with piecework, but also with fertiliser and other inputs with which they could farm effectively for themselves. However, as Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo was not part of the same lineage as the Chief Chimtengo Three he did not benefit from his prosperity as much as others in the village and Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo's family remained relatively poor. Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo's distance from Chief Chimtengo Three meant was not he able to stake a claim on Chief Chimtengo Three's inheritance when he died in 2007. He and other villagers I spoke to agreed that it was because of David and Harold's close connection to the chief that they received a share of Chief Chimtengo Three's assets, although much of the inheritance went to relatives of the Chief who lived away from the village<sup>11</sup>.

It was, though, precisely because Chimtengo Kubwalo belonged to a different lineage to the old chief that he became village chief himself. David described to me how the elders of Chimtengo met to discuss (*-kambirana*) the succession on the day of Chimtengo Three's funeral, in keeping with 'tradition' (*mwambo*). They decided that it would be 'doing justly' (*-chita chilungamo*) for the chieftaincy to move to another family in the village, other than Chimtengo Three's, and with this in mind selected Chimtengo Kubwalo. Chimtengo Kubwalo said he had been extremely reluctant to become chief, barring himself in his house when he was asked to come to see the elders, only agreeing to take the chieftaincy after some hours; 'I refused vehemently' he told me. When he explained his reluctance Chimtengo Kubwalo made the same complaints about the 'work' involved in chieftaincy that he did on other occasions. But he also cited events that took place around his entrance into the chieftaincy as evidence for his claims about the ambivalence of the position.

Chimtengo Kubwalo and members of the village told me that even as the discussions about the direction of the chieftaincy had been taking place amongst the elders a villager named Kadango Msaka had come to the elders with half a dozen other men and women saying that they would not accept Chimtengo Kubwalo as their chief. Although they argued and negotiated, there was not much the elders could do about Msaka's faction forming a new village and declaring him a chief. A month after Chimtengo Three's funeral another group declared a new chief for themselves as well, a man name Grimson Sauka. Unbeknown to Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo and the village elders, both these factions had courted the support of other local chiefs in their bids to form separate villages. Harold Kaso and Chief Chimtengo Three told me that these village Village Heads had been amongst those who had been 'jealous' of Chief Chimtengo Three in his heyday, but had been unable to do much to

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<sup>11</sup> Neither David nor Harold were close relatives of Chimtengo Three but they and everyone else in the village emphasised the strong affective connection they had built with the old chief. Chimtengo Three's own children had moved away from the village during the 1990s and, according to people I spoke to in the area, rarely came back to help him. Their claim as children was nonetheless strong enough to get a share of the inheritance and take it from the village.

limit his success because of the wealth he had established through his connection into the migrant labour economy and the Master Farmer programme.

The chiefs helped Msaka and Sauka's factions get recognition from the local Group Village Heads and the Traditional Authority. With Chief Chimtengo Three gone, Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo and the villagers who stayed with him found they did not have enough resources or influence to get other local chiefs to side with them. Kadango Msaka became Chief Chimtengo Kutsidya, whilst the leader of the second faction, Grimson Sauka, became Chief Chimtengo Kunjira. As a result of the division Chimtengo Kubwalo became chief of Chimtengo Kubwalo village rather than Chief Chimtengo Four, of Chimtengo village.

FISP was at the centre of explanations I was given for the break up of Chimtengo village. Unsurprisingly the moral valence people in Chimtengo Kubwalo ascribed to Kunjira and Kutsidya's actions was different to the one the chiefs offered me themselves. When I asked Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo about the division he said, 'They [Kutsidya and Kunjira] were causing trouble over the fertiliser, they thought that they would get more if they had their own villages.' David meanwhile said that they had been able to persuade other chiefs to support them by promising to 'share fertiliser' with them. Chimtengo Three, David and other people in Chimtengo Kubwalo spoke of the 'greed' (*umbombo*) of Kutsidya and Kunjira. When I asked them why they had broken with Chimtengo Kubwalo both chiefs said they had wanted to 'get fertiliser'. They did not however feel that they had been greedy, but rather had reasonable concerns about the distribution of resources in the village, given the size to which it had grown to under Chimtengo Three, and Chimtengo Kubwalo's poverty relative to the old chief; 'Chimtengo [village] was too big', Kunjira explained, 'we wanted to control fertiliser ourselves'.

There was little Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo or the village elders could do about the division of the village because of the structure of the FISP programme, and the turn local and national politics had taken in the 1990s. Kamuzu Banda's personal idiosyncrasies and caprice notwithstanding, dependence on him, and senior officials, chiefs and Master Farmers supported by him, had been the only way of assuring security and prosperity during the latter part of his rule (van Donge 1995, Cammack 2010, 2011). On-going donor support secured Banda's position even as the Malawian economy had atrophied through 1980s. After the end of the Cold War however donor priorities changed, a focus on human rights and liberalism creating new political conditions that allowed for Malawians to press their discontentment with political and economic conditions in Malawi. In 1994 Bakili Muluzi replaced Banda after winning the first elections to take place in the country in over thirty years (Resnick 2013, Cammack 2010, van Donge 1995).

Muluzi and his successors to the Presidency repeatedly found their attempts to concentrate power and extend personal control limited by some of the same conditions that contributed to Banda's downfall in 1994 (Resnick 2013, Cammack 2010, 2011). Bingu wa Mutharika introduced the FISP in 2005 after Bakili Muluzi had abolished the Master Farmer Programme and other remaining Banda-era subsidies at the start of his time in power. There is evidence that the Mutharika government subsequently used FISP fertiliser to influence the 2009 elections in its favour, but it is unclear the extent to which it could have influenced voting at the local level (Brazys et al 2015, Dionne and Horowitz 2016). Mutharika's promotion of chiefs in so-called 'podium elevations' (Englund 2012 p. 73-74, Eggen 2011 p. 327) and his prevarication over holding local government elections can be interpreted as attempts to extend control of Malawian politics, through using the hierarchy of traditional authority (Cammack 2011)<sup>12</sup>. Donors certainly viewed Mutharika's actions as means to personalise the government, and responded by suspending aid in 2011 (Cammack 2011). The curtailment of budgetary support, a significant proportion of which was used to fund the FISP, left Mutharika, and those who relied on him, in a vulnerable position (Resnick 2013 p. 125-126, 132).

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<sup>12</sup> As there absence from the article suggests, in fifteen months of living in Chimtengo Kubwalo I heard no mention of any local government representative, or council in the village. All discussion of local politics was centered on chiefs, and other kinds of 'big men'.

The case of Chimtengo Kubwalo village suggests that in this broader political and economic context the FISP can provide a way for rural Malawians to press claims with their Village Heads, at the very bottom of Malawi's chiefly hierarchy. While FISP fertiliser may not be concentrated in the hands of the poorest, this does not necessarily mean that the poor have no influence over the distribution. Chief Chimtengo Three had 'just gone ahead', accumulating and distributing resources in the face of complaints about the morality of his actions from people like Aleke. The paucity of economic options for people in the area, particularly from the end of the 1970s, relative to what Chief Chimtengo Three could offer as one of Banda's Master Farmers, meant that Chief Chimtengo Three could be assured of having more people declaring dependence upon him as chief than leaving him. The rather more unpredictable and fluid nature of political dependencies in the multi-party era means that chiefs and government officials are in greater competition for supporters than they were under Banda (Cammack et al 2010, Cammack 2011). Research on chiefs in Malawi, and the history I have given here shows the existence of this kind of competition has been vital to the ability of people to press claims with their chiefs (Swidler 2013).

Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo's nervousness over what he had done with Yamikani's coupon is understandable in the light of the events that followed his appointment as chief. A lack of opportunities in the past, coupled with contemporary political and economic conditions in Malawi, meant that he was dependent upon the people in his village to maintain his position, and the modest benefits he could derive from it. If he failed to distribute FISP inputs and other resources in a way deemed morally acceptable, the programme provided the resources through which people could establish new relationships of dependence and support under new village chiefs. Chimtengo Kutsidya's complaint at the hearing over Esnarth's coupon suggested though that the share village heads could take for themselves, and the other benefits associated with being chief were perhaps not always worth the work. If Chimtengo Kutsidya really had been being 'greedy', hoping that he would have been able to obtain a significant amount of FISP fertiliser for himself through starting a new village, then those ambitions were being frustrated. The same conditions that had enabled Chimtengo Kutsidya to break away from Chimtengo Kubwalo in 2007, were also those that enabled Esnarth to press her claim on him in 2012.

## 5 Conclusion

I began this article responding to James Ferguson's (2015, 2013) call that researchers pay close attention to the way in which people are making claims on resources in Southern Africa at a time when their labour is increasingly not valued. I have argued that understanding chieftaincy is crucial to understanding the politics of distribution and inequality in contemporary Malawi. The literature on chieftaincy in Malawi highlights the involvement of chiefs in the state but also raises questions about Mamdani's (1996) assertion that chiefs in Africa are 'despots', unresponsive to the demands of their people. The case of Chimtengo Kubwalo village suggests that the benefits Village Heads derive from their position, including the larger shares of resources they may take from programmes like FISP, are justified only because of the distributional work they do, work acknowledged as valuable by their people. Where their direction of resources is felt to be unjust, Village Heads face losing their position, because of the freedom their people have to make new 'declarations of dependence' on new Village Heads. It was only the hard work that he had to do mediating the distribution - all the 'going around and around' - that justified Chief Chimtengo Kubwalo's receipt of a larger share of the village's FISP fertiliser. His inability to take more of the fertiliser for himself, in the face of the claims of his people, was made apparent when he took some of Yamikani's share.

The nature of the 'freedom' that the institution of chieftaincy confers on poor rural Malawians like those living in Chimtengo Kubwalo village, and the way the FISP plays into that freedom is made clearer against the backdrop of history. Harri Englund (2012) describes the way villagers celebrated the 'freedom' (*ufulu*) they demonstrated when they selected a new Village Head for themselves, after their old one had failed to distribute FISP fertiliser in a way that they felt just. There was more ambivalence surrounding the division of Chimtengo village after Chief Chimtengo Three's death. It is telling that Chimtengo Kutsidya and Chimtengo Kubwalo only broke off from Chimtengo village when Chief Chimtengo Three died, rather than when FISP was first rolled out in 2005. The resources



available through FISP were, on their own, not so great as to make leaving Chief Chimtengo Three a particularly attractive prospect. When I was doing my fieldwork in 2012 and 2013 villagers in Chimtengo Kubwalo, Chimtengo Kutsidya and Chimtengo Kunjira had greater freedom to press claims with their Village Heads than they had done under Chief Chimtengo Three, but that was only because their new Village Heads were poor, rather than because the villagers had drastically improved their own positions. Equality had grown, but as a consequence of impoverishment. Villagers in Chimtengo Kutsidya and Chimtengo Kunjira remembered the work and support available under Chief Chimtengo Three as fondly as the villagers that had split from in Chimengo Kubwalo; the old Chief's death and the division of the village was not really something to celebrate.

If not 'despots', the way resources like FISP have been distributed in Malawi, down the hierarchy of traditional authority from central government, means that those chiefs higher up that hierarchy have faced little obligation to distribute resources to those below them. In certain cases even Village Heads like Chief Chimtengo Three may be able to 'just go ahead' ignoring the petitions of their people, because of the strength of their connections outside of their villages. The conditions of contemporary Malawian politics do give some incentive to chiefs at all levels to distribute a minimum of resources to their dependents. However, until options to make new 'declarations of dependence', away from the institution of chieftaincy, as they did when Southern Africa's labour market first developed, it is unlikely that chieftaincy will do any more than help stave off 'asocial' inequality and keep those who are already very poor from being cast off completely.

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