

CHAPTER 3

The Hidden Lessons
of Civic Education*Training the Torchbearers*

The translation of human rights documents is only a preliminary step in spreading the new messages. In countries where illiteracy is common and even the literate have limited access to reading materials, human rights advocates must devise various methods in order to get their messages across. These methods are deployed in civic education, a major component in the work of human rights advocates across Africa. Civic education during Malawi's first decade of democracy targeted ordinary people as citizens whose awareness of human rights was deemed to be deficient. Its methods attempted to create a spirit of informality, stressing the need to engage the audience in a dialogue or to entertain it through song, dance, and drama. Yet both the methods and the messages had often been established before activists entered the venue of their civic education.

Despite its promise of dialogue and empowerment, civic education on human rights in Malawi contributed to making distinctions between the grassroots and those who were privileged enough to spread the messages. The distinction would be irrelevant if civic education were to bring together people with diverse backgrounds to discuss human rights on equal terms. Nobody occupies, however, a social space where discussions proceed as if everybody there were equal. In 1998, James Tengatenga, a Malawian intellectual and more recently an Anglican bishop, was bold enough, if not heretical, to criticize the patronizing attitudes underlying the apparently participatory approaches to civic education in Malawi. Despite their democratic pretensions, he argued, these approaches "suggest coming down to the people. Even when [civic education] is referred to

as blending or being one with the people, one can't help but notice the condescension" (Tengatenga 1998, 188; emphasis in original). Tengatenga's criticism may have been too much ahead of its time, or too politically incorrect, to attract the attention it deserved. This chapter takes his criticism a step further by showing how a leading civic education project marginalized people's own insights into their life situations. At the same time, well-meaning activists believed that their knowledge of rights had not yet touched the lives of the grassroots. Activists sought to "enlighten" the Malawians they considered as the grassroots, also known as the masses. They referred to this process with the Chichewa verb *kumunikira*, which connotes the shedding of light. Activists saw themselves as the torchbearers, the ones who brought light to the darkness.

The distinction between those who need help and those who can provide help is familiar from the world of charity (see Bornstein 2003; Garland 1999). Here, as in civic education on human rights, the providers of assistance feel they have something that others lack. Moreover, the objective is not to upset the balance between those who receive help and those who provide it. Charity differs from structural change, whether by legislation or revolution, in that it presupposes a categorical distinction between the advantaged and the disadvantaged. The former help the latter to sustain themselves, while the distinction itself remains virtually intact. In a similar vein, the civic education project on human rights examined here involved little that would actually have enabled the disadvantaged to lift themselves from their predicament. That this troubling observation was largely unnoticed in Malawi indicated how natural the distinction had become even among human rights advocates.

The purpose of this chapter is to show how the distinction underlying civic education was a consequence of active effort, not a natural state of affairs. The crucial question, in effect, is not *who* did civic education but *how* they assumed their position. Nor is the objective of this book to lament the absence of equality in Malawian society. Rather than expecting human rights advocacy to facilitate the emergence of absolute equality, one might ask another crucial question: did it seek to lift the standards of living among the impoverished majority at all? In this chapter, representatives of a major civic education project in Malawi are the subjects of my ethnographic witnessing. The project had a nationwide network of salaried civic education officers, its reach was made even more comprehensive by a large number of volunteers, known as para-civic educators. Research on how these two groups of people were recruited and trained revealed an emphasis on status that few in the Malawian context could

afford to resist. The differentiation of officers and volunteers from the targets of their civic education was a hidden lesson of civic educators' training. Through certificates, closed workshops, common appearance, and human rights jargon (often in English), a commitment to the project and its particular world-view was generated. Crucial to this emerging quasi-professional identity were those disadvantaged and poor Malawians — the grassroots — who were excluded from the group. The next chapter shows how civic educators put their exclusive knowledge into practice when they faced the expectations and disappointments of the grassroots.

Civic Education: Promises and Perils

Civic education is a relatively recent phenomenon in Malawi, one of those interventions that define the “new” Malawi. Ralph Kasambara (1998), a prominent Malawian human rights lawyer, has described how independent civic education could not take place in Kamuzu Banda's Malawi. Primary schools had a subject known as civics, giving a deliberately unspecific view of government, and the Malawi Young Pioneers visited villages to impose physical and agricultural training on adults. As with much else that took place in public, the glorification of the country's life president was an integral part of this activity. Significantly, the public protests that culminated in the 1993 referendum on the system of government needed little civic education to stir them. Although Kasambara describes the Catholic bishops' Lenten Letter in 1992 as “the first major attempt in civic education” (1998, 240), a more accurate description is that it gave a voice to the grievances that had long plagued the Malawian populace. Malawians hardly needed to be educated about “the growing gap between the rich and the poor” and other injustices. They lacked channels to make their complaints heard.

The referendum in 1993 and the general elections in 1994 introduced a need for new kinds of information delivery. The very idea of these, particularly the concept of free and fair elections, needed to be clarified, not least against persistent misinformation from the outgoing government.¹ Pressure groups, which eventually became political parties, and the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) were among the first to take up this challenge. PAC included representatives from churches and other religious organizations as well as from the Malawi Law Society and the Chamber of Commerce, and its primary task was to engage in dialogue with Banda's regime. Civic education was largely voter education. The independent

press that began to emerge in 1991 quenched the thirst of literate Malawians, particularly in urban areas, for alternatives to the official rhetoric. The Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, then the only local radio station, spread voter education to an even larger audience.

The successful conduct of the elections raised the question of what role civic education would play in a country that had ostensibly achieved universal political and civil freedoms. As Kasambara (1998) has noted, political parties' civic education initiatives quickly degenerated into partisan campaigning. At the same time, there was no doubt that whatever democratic reforms the new government was able to launch, information about its new institutions and laws would not reach Malawians by itself. Particularly unfortunate was that the MBC once again became the mouthpiece of the ruling party, failing to be the objective conduit of information that many had hoped for; Television Malawi (TVM), established in 1999, had the same fate (see Kayambazinthu and Moyo 2002). A study of Malawians' awareness of their rights enshrined in the new constitution and other laws revealed, several years after the 1994 elections, widespread ignorance (HRRC 1999). A similar, more sophisticated study, also conducted several years after the transition, indicated comparable problems in Zambia (Chanda 1999).

The Malawian study has, however, a condescending approach that is absent from the Zambian study. Rather than being content to list the empirical results from a survey on Malawians' awareness of democratic rights, the study speculates on their intellectual capacities to gauge the idea of human rights in the first place. It laments that “the level of illiteracy in Malawi as in other Third World countries is quite high, so high that many people do not have the necessary intellectual competence and capacity needed to articulate such a subject as human rights” (HRRC 1999, 54, 68). While the study points out that human rights need not be incompatible with Malawian social and cultural realities, it conveys the need not only for more information on specific legal provisions but also for education of the masses on the idea of human rights. I return to the issue of illiteracy and ignorance in the next chapter. Here it is important to keep in mind that condescending attitudes are never far below the surface in the Malawian context of civic education. The evidence in this book shows how activists in human rights NGOs and projects forged a style that asserted their special status in several subtle ways. Their penchant for titles, formal credentials, and the English language, for example, resonated with both Banda's vanity (Phiri 1998) and the expressions of power elsewhere in postcolonial Africa (Mbembe 2001).

The contrast to Zambia must not be exaggerated, but it is illuminating to consider how the approaches in the two studies may lead to different notions of civic education. The Zambian study was written by Alfred Chanda (1999), chairman of the Foundation for Democratic Process (FODEP), who stressed the limited awareness of human rights among groups such as academics, teachers, and students.² FODEP worked, in effect, with these and other educated Zambians in an effort to create a nationwide network of experts who could facilitate others' claims and demands. The aim was not so much to educate millions of Zambians on abstract concepts, or even on specific laws, as to ensure that there were competent persons to monitor human rights violations. In Malawi, on the other hand, human rights NGOs and projects often assumed responsibility for training their own personnel, who were sent to villages and townships to conduct meetings, often very soon after their recruitment. A notion of "signposting" (*kulozera*) was developed in reference to a duty of civic educators, who, when they received questions, were to direct people to organizations and authorities, regardless of whether those organizations and authorities had the capacity to assist. Seen in a positive light, signposting at least gave poor Malawians the prospect of social or economic change. In practice, as my analysis in the next chapter shows, signposting could also be little else than a way in which the project disengaged from the predicament of exploitation and marginalization among the Malawian poor.

Human rights activists' tireless touring of Malawi to educate the populace on the concepts of democracy and human rights gave them a *raison d'être* between the elections. As such, civic education mitigated the confining concept of democracy as multipartyism and electoral competition. It contrasted with Kasambara's (1998) conclusion that civic education had reached an impasse. Had he written his review in 1999, when the second posttransition general elections were held, or thereafter, he would have noticed this new boom in civic education. Although several foreign donors supported these initiatives, Denmark and the wider European Union were particularly generous. The above-mentioned study on Malawians' awareness of human rights was conducted by the Human Rights Resource Centre (HRRRC 1999), which had been known as the Danish Centre for Human Rights until 1997. The Danish involvement began in 1996 with training activities and various grants for Malawian NGOs. HRRRC continued this work, becoming the resource center its name suggested, with its own library and other facilities. Its grants supported the emergence of a whole range of Malawian human rights NGOs, but the

abrupt withdrawal of Denmark from Malawi in 2001 made HRRRC dependent on a number of other donors.³

The single most important intervention in the field of civic education took place on the eve of the general elections in 1999. The European Union started to fund a comprehensive project of voter education, known as the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE). While the Republic of Malawi was the official "owner" of the project, it was managed by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GIZ). It also claimed partnership with a number of organizations in Malawi and Germany, including PAC, but in practice NICE used its elaborate structure of officers to pursue its own civic education project. After the 1999 elections, NICE expanded to cover five thematic areas: local democracy, the environment, food security, gender development, and HIV/AIDS and health. According to its leaflet, the main objective was "to promote democratic values, attitudes and behavior at a grassroots level in both urban and rural Malawi through the provision of civic education services."⁴ By the end of 2002, these "services" were provided by twenty-nine district offices, three regional offices, and a national office, employing over forty professionals and over ninety members of support staff. The reach of the project was greatly enhanced by over ten thousand volunteers, the para-civic educators mentioned previously.

Finding a NICE Job

With its systematic effort to have an office in every district, NICE was an outstanding example of a project whose coverage of the country was virtually equal to, if not greater than, that of the state. District offices ensured that this coverage extended to villages and townships through a network of volunteers, trained and closely supervised by full-time officers. "Every second village" belonged to the orbit of NICE, I was told by the project manager, a German expatriate leading the entire operation from the national office in Lilongwe. Although he and many others in NICE's professional staff emphasized their association with the grassroots, the fact is that NICE fitted uneasily into a vertical state/society opposition. This opposition — common in the minds of activists, scholars, donors, and the general public far beyond Malawi — situates the state "above" society, which, as a consequence, either challenges or supports it "from below" (for critiques, see Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Lewis 2002; Migdal 2001). Yet NICE, despite the apparent "ownership" by the Malawian people, was a

transnational project that participated in governing Malawi with resources that in many cases exceeded those of government departments.⁵

Crucial to the work of governance that NICE performed, even despite itself, were the many subtle ways in which its officers and volunteers created a sense of belonging to an exclusive community of human rights experts. If vertical images are at all accurate in this context, it is the grassroots that was placed "below" NICE. Among salaried officers, the sense of exclusiveness began already at the recruitment stage. Vacancies for civic education officers prompted hundreds of applications, but only a few were selected for interviews. A university degree was not a requirement for civic education officers. Most of them had a background as teachers in primary schools, while others, for example, had experience as journalists. During the interviews, all the candidates received the same set of questions, which examined whether they understood the notions of democracy and human rights as defined by NICE. The recruitment process also included an assignment that tested the candidate's acumen in defusing difficult situations during civic education. These situations were typically politically charged, and the candidate was expected to show his or her skill in avoiding the expression of his or her own political views. According to the rules of NICE, political partisanship was one of the greatest mistakes that a civic education officer could make. Active members or officers of political parties were not, therefore, allowed to join NICE in any capacity.

After recruitment, several factors served as incentives to commit oneself to NICE. For civic education officers, for example, a competition had been established whereby they could earn a salary increase.⁶ Each officer was evaluated by the national office every year, in practice by the expatriate project manager. Officers could earn up to one hundred points for excellence in civic education, twenty points for administrative skills, and five points for some innovation of their own. Every forty points brought a salary increase of forty kwacha (about fifty-five cents in U.S. currency). In 2001, the lowest overall score was sixty-three points, while a regional officer received the best result, ninety points. Para-civic educators, despite their position as volunteers, were likewise enticed to work for NICE through, for instance, competitions that tested their capacity to mobilize the grassroots for public meetings. Districts were divided into zones, some of which followed constituency boundaries; and others, the boundaries of chiefdoms. Different zones were occasionally asked to compete over the number of meetings organized there or over the number of participants in those meetings. The winners received prizes, usually cash, for their efforts.

Frequent workshops and seminars deepened officers' and volunteers' belonging to NICE. Their stated objective was "capacity building," but as

my detailed account of workshops for volunteers shows later in this chapter, their immediate outcome was an appreciation of the distinction between NICE and the grassroots. Workshops served this purpose at every level of NICE's internal hierarchy, with officers spending a considerable amount of their time in attending them. National workshops, for example, were organized no fewer than four or five times a year. They were organized by one of NICE's three regional offices and attended by national, district, and regional officers. National workshops often had guest speakers, including academics from abroad, and their topics varied from the specific training and administrative skills needed in NICE's work to more general issues pertaining to its thematic areas. Regional workshops, on the other hand, were organized every second month, and they brought together national and regional officers. Regional officers, in turn, had the duty to conduct workshops with district officers. The combined effect of these workshops was that all officers were in constant collaboration with their peers and superiors in the NICE hierarchy.

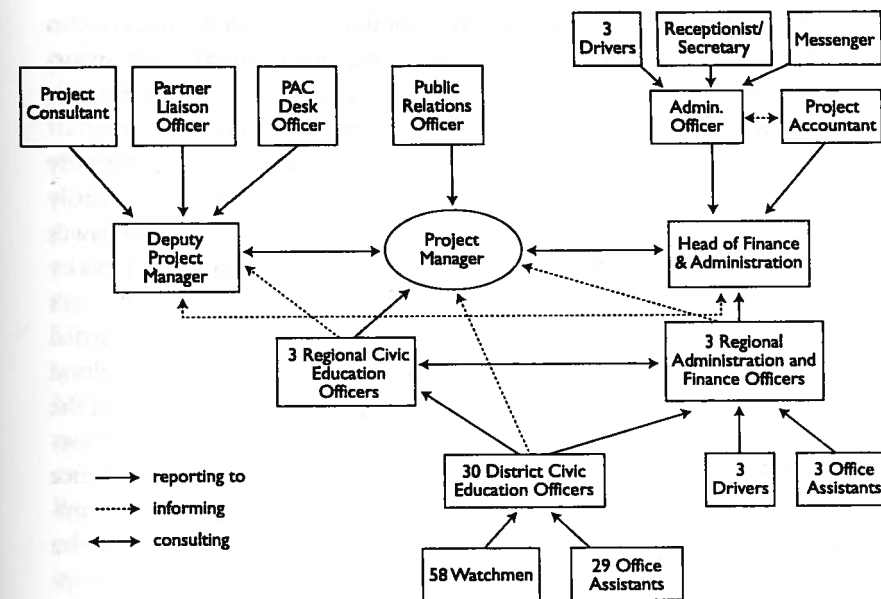
Workshops had a monetary aspect that represented an interesting contrast to the meetings that officers and volunteers held with the grassroots. Officers attending workshops were not only reimbursed for their transport costs; they also received daily allowances whose total value, especially among high-ranking officers, could surpass their monthly salaries.⁷ "We have to give them something," the expatriate project manager remarked to me, but critical to the constitution of hierarchies in NICE's work were the ways in which its officers dismissed similar claims for compensation among the grassroots. The highest-ranking officers developed a concept of "goat culture," which was intended to preempt any material demands they might encounter during civic education exercises. A regional officer began to explain the concept to me by saying that "not all is lost to Westernization." Malawian villages, he continued, still had a community spirit, which came to the fore during, for example, weddings. Villagers assisted one another by contributing firewood and food. In a similar vein, villagers who received NICE for a visit should not expect money; on the contrary, they should feed officers and volunteers. Eating together, the regional officer said, made people feel closer to NICE. It gave villagers, he concluded, a feeling of ownership.

The official information leaflet from NICE likewise defined "goat culture" as a practice that "intensifies team building by utilizing local resources at grassroots level by preparing and eating food together while discussing issues." Hidden in such statements was one of the ways in which officers and volunteers actually differentiated themselves from their hosts: they were to help the community in resolving its problems,

and in turn the community was responsible for feeding and hosting them. Another example of such differentiation was officers' ability to travel to remote venues of civic education in hired vehicles, often large four-wheel drives, conspicuously arriving in villages where ownership of a simple bicycle was a sign of affluence. As the next chapter shows in more detail, officers also freely flaunted their mobile telephones, suits, elaborate hairdos, and high-heel shoes in front of impoverished village crowds. Under such circumstances, goat culture represented little else than an attempt by the well-off to manipulate local moral codes for their own benefit. Malawians have long been exposed to such manipulations, from the concept of *thangata* (assistance) during late colonialism (Kandwire 1979; Mandala 1990)⁸ to various projects involving "community participation" in postcolonial times. Common to these initiatives was the use of idioms of "assistance" in mobilizing people for projects that, in many cases, were clearly exploitative.

NICE officers' access to allowances and various paraphernalia of smooth professional life was, in other words, in sharp contrast to how they saw their relationship to the grassroots. While ordinary Malawians were expected to assist NICE officers in carrying out their civic education "services," officers' sense of an exclusive professional community also presupposed their unquestioned devotion to certain hierarchies within NICE. The organogram for NICE, obtained from the national office, is explicit about different persons' responsibilities toward one another (see figure). It is a strikingly hierarchical structure, with consultation the prerogative of only the highest-ranking officers, and everyone accountable, in the last instance, to just one person, the project manager.⁹ Hierarchical relations permeated the NICE structure from officers to volunteers. District officers reported to regional officers; office assistants, who since 2002 were also used in delivering civic education, were most directly controlled by district officers. The volunteers, or the para-civic educators, also had a hierarchy of coordinators and ordinary volunteers, who assumed different responsibilities in their zones.

One effect of frequent workshops and strict hierarchies was that top officers were able to closely monitor the messages that civic education put forward in NICE's name. This was particularly conducive to maintaining the nonpartisan status of NICE, which, as mentioned, was a recurrent theme during recruitment and subsequent training sessions. For example, when PAC and several other human rights watchdogs engaged in a heated debate with ruling politicians in 2002 over the question of a constitutional amendment to allow President Muluzi to stand for a third term in office,



Organogram for the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE).

NICE stayed quiet. Its highest-ranking officers convened internal workshops to advise lower-level officers on how to react to questions about the issue from volunteers and the grassroots. Paradoxically, by insisting that officers and volunteers declined to participate in any such discussions, NICE merely served the interests of the ruling party that wanted to spread its own propaganda.¹⁰ At issue was not only the contradiction between NICE officers' civic education messages exhorting participation in public life and their own timidity in addressing political disputes, but also the way in which NICE, an organization with a capacity to reach the majority of Malawians, contributed to undemocratic governance by remaining apolitical on issues that threatened to rip the nation apart.

The Pacification of Youth

A major challenge that NICE faced in its attempt to remain apolitical was the views and aspirations among its youthful volunteers. Although officially only those who were at least twenty years old could work as vol-

unteers, it was difficult to control this requirement. I met volunteers who said, privately, that they were as young as seventeen, and the vast majority of volunteers were still in their early twenties. At every meeting or workshop I attended, about two-thirds of the volunteers were men.

Studies from elsewhere in Africa have shown that youths, particularly young men, are a volatile force in political developments, all too easily enticed into violence (Ellis 1999; O'Brien 1996; Richards 1996). Malawi's first two regimes after independence appeared to have understood this by creating special youth organizations in the ruling parties. During Banda's regime, the Youth League and the Malawi Young Pioneers safeguarded discipline and obedience in their neighborhoods and villages (Englund 1996). In Muluzi's Malawi, the Young Democrats, the youth wing of the United Democratic Front, grew increasingly important in enforcing loyalty to the head of state (Englund 2002c). In both cases, physical violence was integral to young people's political role. At the same time, both examples from Malawi also support the observations from elsewhere in Africa that rather than being a counterforce in society, youths are often manipulated by their elders (Bayart et al. 1992).

One of the differences between the one-party state and political pluralism was, however, the new opportunities for identification presented by the larger number of parties and organizations, such as NICE. Malawi's young population, on the other hand, also faced unprecedented frustrations as the divide between aspirations and opportunities became sharper. As mentioned in the introduction, the new dawn in politics in the early 1990s was not followed by prosperity. If anything, the new government fed unrealistic expectations by claiming to empower youths and women, in particular, through new educational and economic opportunities. The Youth Credit Scheme and various credit schemes for women, benefiting mainly those who were well-connected to the ruling elite or who already had profitable businesses, failed to establish small-scale enterprises as viable sources of income generation (Chinsinga 2002, 26). The introduction of free primary school education in 1994 created chaotic scenes throughout the country, because the number of teachers did not keep pace with the increasing numbers of pupils, with unqualified teachers and a lack of teaching materials making quality education a distant dream in most schools at both primary and secondary levels. The pass rate for the school-leaving examinations in secondary schools was particularly dismal from the mid-1990s onward. While the pass rate was 48 percent in 1990, by 1999 it had fallen to just under 14 percent.¹¹

Under such circumstances, NICE's demand for a vast pool of volunteers was bound to be welcomed by youths, who found their prospects for edu-

cational and economic success shattered. NICE participated in the pacification of youth as a volatile political force by requiring nonpartisanship, on the one hand, and by offering them both symbolic and material trappings to enhance their status and self-esteem, on the other. Although volunteers received monetary rewards usually only when they attended workshops outside their own areas, the mere belonging to NICE distinguished them from the rest of the country's poor. All NICE volunteers received a letter of introduction allowing them to approach local dignitaries such as village headmen, church elders, and party officials directly. They conducted civic education and obtained from NICE certain crucial symbols of their special position, such as a gleaming white T-shirt that bore NICE's emblem. Moreover, at some workshops regional or district officers presented them with certificates. One regional officer described these certificates to me, with neither irony nor apology, as "symbols of power." By flaunting certificates and official letters in their houses and during civic education, volunteers participated in their own small way in the display of power that used such documents as resources for status distinctions, as in much of postcolonial Africa (Mbembe 2001; Simpson 2003).

At the same time, NICE also created distinctions among the youths who were associated with it. Salaried officers were better-placed than volunteers to pursue the lifestyle of professionals. These distinctions recall a frequent observation in the study of African societies — biological age can be a poor indicator of a person's social status (see Fortes 1984). The processes by which NICE contributed to distinctions among young people were also a part of wider shifts in power and authority in the lifeworlds of its officers and volunteers (Durham 2004). The government's unfulfilled promises to volunteers had diluted their enthusiasm to be identified with the category of "youths" (*anyamata*). What many of these school-leavers wanted was recognition as *adults*, both in their capability to assume responsibilities in their own lives and in distinction to the uneducated multitudes, whose poverty was all too reminiscent of their own. While less successful than officers in achieving adulthood, however, volunteers experienced enough enhancement of status to contain their explosive frustrations.

The Making of Self-Regulating Subjects

Before we consider how NICE's internal workshops contributed to the inculcation of certain values and beliefs among its officers and volunteers, it is important to note the wider social world in which they lived. Insofar

as membership in NICE presupposed a measure of self-regulation, particularly toward overtly political issues, it was a precarious achievement, always threatened by the critical ideas that the expatriate project manager and Malawians alike harbored. The expatriate manager had worked in Africa for several years and took a passionate interest in democratization in various African countries. He had worked in Zimbabwe before Malawi, and in privacy he would often explain politics in one country in terms of the other. He appeared to me to be mistaken in his comparison of Robert Mugabe and Bakili Muluzi because of the two leaders' investment in radically different rhetorics, but his inclination to see dictatorial tendencies in an ostensibly democratic president was interesting. A combination of linguistic and economic factors had made his social network among Malawians very narrow, largely confined to his work. While his managerial status made it difficult for him to develop rapport among Malawians, other expatriates provided a community in which he could express his views among like-minded peers.

What was striking about these confidential exchanges among expatriates, most of whom worked for development projects and private enterprises, was the inversion of the views they expressed otherwise. Expatriates were moderate and cautious at work or resolutely impartial when Malawians, particularly representatives of the Malawi government, were present. When at expatriate-only parties or meetings, they became fierce critics of the government. Muluzi's desire to change the Constitution to allow him a third term in office was roundly condemned, and many expatriates admired the resolve of the clergy to oppose the move. NICE's expatriate manager, however, was able to hold apparently contradictory points of view. On the one hand, he joined his expatriate peers in deploring the setback in Malawi's democratization. On the other hand, much of his work during this period consisted in ensuring that nobody associated with NICE would express opinions on the issue. He issued directives to officers and convened internal workshops to train them to defuse excitement about the debate among volunteers.

The expatriate manager's contradictory conduct was partly informed by his understanding of what the project's survival depended on. He felt that the project was under constant surveillance by the Malawi government, and the presidential adviser on NGOs and civil society was a particularly potent source of anxiety. Much as the project manager would use this anxiety to gain personal credibility and respect among his critical expatriate peers, the practical effect was to depoliticize NICE. Yet this effect would not have been profound without the expatriate manager's

own belief in the content of NICE's work. To be sure, the survival of the project served his personal interests as its unquestioned leader, whatever the formal arrangement of "ownership." Equally important, however, was the expatriate manager's embrace of the notion that democratization is predicated on a transformation in values and attitudes. He was eager to question the view that poverty poses an obstacle to democratization, and Malawi had clearly become a test case for him, an experiment to show that by adopting the right values and attitudes, the grassroots would deliver a democracy. As a subject, the expatriate manager was as much self-regulating as he was constrained by the Malawi government. His belief in the power of attitudes and values maintained the nature of power in Malawi. The impoverished majority was depicted as the source of thwarted democratization, asked by NICE to transform the society by the mere force of attitudes.

The life-worlds of NICE's Malawian officers and volunteers were riddled with comparable contradictions. Fluent critics of the government in private, they would in public place the onus of democratic change on the grassroots. Although activism in political parties was proscribed among officers and volunteers, some had previously been involved in the local organizations of various parties. Many others had always been unwilling to work for political parties, viewing party politics as the deceitful pursuit that the Chichewa term for "politics," *ndale*, suggests.¹² Participation in the activities of NICE, in any case, heralded the end of political activism, but it could not eliminate political opinions. Yet, the identification with NICE often seemed to elevate officers and volunteers to a position above party politics, the reach of NICE being virtually equal to that of the ruling party and, as such, offering them an alternative moral high ground. Through this position, it became possible for officers and volunteers to observe party politics with studied detachment. The position was associated with connections to foreign donors, and it graced its occupants with righteousness. Political disputes were rare among the officers and volunteers I worked with, because those who were too obviously partisan were quickly dismissed from NICE. Whatever they might learn about democracy and human rights through their work for NICE, it was clear that their interest in public life had not emerged because of NICE. If anything, it had arisen *despite* NICE, assuming an increasingly depoliticized content once they began to work for the organization.

Material considerations influenced the conduct of officers and volunteers, just as they did with the project manager. For primary school teachers, employment with NICE could entail a tenfold increase in their

salaries. As mentioned previously, regional and district officers were able to sustain the lifestyles of Malawian professionals, involving obligations as the providers of extended families. Married with children, many officers also accommodated nephews and nieces in their houses and paid their school fees. Among even those who were relatively young, officers had often acquired positions of considerable authority in their families. Their opinions were sought when illnesses or funerals occurred, they offered advice on businesses and sometimes entered joint commercial ventures with their relatives, and they were in demand as the guardians (*nkhoswe*) of new marriages. Crucial to these multiple roles and obligations were the connections, widespread among Malawians virtually regardless of their class (Englund 2002d), that urban dwellers cultivated in their rural areas of origin. The village was the ultimate home; both “village” and “home” were spoken of with the same concept of *mudzi*. My observations indicated that home villagers saw little difference between NICE and other “top jobs” (*ntchito za pamwamba*) that successful relatives in towns were seen to occupy. On the other hand, there was little in officers’ conduct to suggest that the messages of NICE had any relevance outside their working hours. Civic education was a professional duty, separate from the life-world of familial obligations.

Human rights discourse in Malawi, with its emphasis on individual freedoms, was less consequential in officers’ own lives than subtle notions of honor (Iliffe 2005). As urban villagers, salaried officers were deeply involved in rural relations while pursuing careers in other districts or in towns.¹³ Although often only marginally older in age than volunteers, officers had achieved a decisive break from the confines of “youth” as a social category. Volunteers’ situation was more ambiguous, largely because of their greater material insecurity. As mentioned above, volunteers also enjoyed access to some paraphernalia of an enhanced status and even access to cash through competitions or participation in workshops outside their own areas. Without regular income, however, they were unable to become full adults, the trappings offered them by NICE sufficient for mere courtship in contrast with officers’ more respectable obligations. As such, civic education itself became a resource to negotiate a new status. Volunteers were less eager than officers to make a distinction between civic education and personal life. While both came to absorb the lessons of civic education as self-regulating subjects, volunteers appeared to discover in them grounds for challenging aspects of the established order in local settings. For officers and their project manager, a major preoccupation was to prevent these challenges from rocking the status quo.

The Desire for Status

In order to gain a deeper insight into the process by which youthful volunteers came to take apolitical civic education for granted, their training workshops must be considered. For ease of reading, I focus here on one workshop, but the conclusions I draw from my participation in it apply, in my experience, to other NICE workshops as well. The example workshop was held in 2002 to train volunteers, known as para-civic educators, or PCEs. Both a regional and a district officer were in attendance and directed the proceedings. Thirty-one volunteers participated, out of whom twenty-one were men and ten were women. With the exception of four volunteers who were over thirty years old, all were in their early twenties or even younger.

The workshop was one in a series of meetings between officers and volunteers, its purpose to equip the volunteers with skills to carry out civic education, known as *maphunziro*, “studies.” Most volunteers had already conducted civic education for several months, even years. As such, the impact of the workshop was not simply the acquisition of new skills but also the renewal of the commitment to NICE as an organization. By coming together, volunteers from different zones and full-time officers could negotiate, explicitly and implicitly, what it meant to belong to NICE. As my analysis below shows, crucial to this negotiation was the production of certain hierarchies and status distinctions, both among NICE representatives themselves and, above all, in relation to the assumed targets of civic education.

The language of democracy was on everyone’s lips during the workshop. It was used to steer the workshop itself, as when the regional officer, who dominated the event, frequently referred to the need to do things in a “transparent” manner, sometimes saying it in English, sometimes as *moonekera* in Chichewa. Any item on the agenda that required a decision became a solemn occasion for self-consciously democratic debate, with the regional officer addressing the gathering as *nyumba* (house), from Nyumba Ya Malamulo (house of laws), the Chichewa term for Parliament. He also solicited views from women, always regarded as a separate group, as a routine aspect of the deliberations. The items calling for decisions included what expectations the participants had toward the workshop and the rules by which they should conduct themselves during it.

In practice, however, various hierarchies guided the proceedings. Hierarchies and the unremarked desire for status distinctions were evident, for example, in the seating arrangement in which the officers and

myself were seated before a half-circle of volunteers. The officers were the only participants with mobile telephones, and although one of the rules stated that they should be switched off, the officers kept them on, displaying them on the table before them and frequently taking calls. Volunteers, for their part, wrote their names on cards and placed them on their desks. Some added improbable titles such as "Hon." and "Doctor" before their names. While no reference was made to me during the deliberations, as the only white person and foreigner, I became the guest of honor, an inescapable feature of almost any public event in Malawi. It was in this role that I was asked to say a few words both in the beginning and at the end of the workshop.

My presence facilitated, in fact, an early display of status distinctions at the workshop. Although I had known and worked with the district officer and several volunteers for a number of weeks, this was the first time I met the regional officer. When he arrived, several minutes later than everyone else, he at first ignored the others and rushed to greet me. He then pulled aside the district officer, but the two stayed within an easy hearing distance from me. The district officer explained my presence as a part of the research I was currently conducting in Malawi. The regional officer looked displeased and said that I should have sought permission from NICE's national office. The district officer pointed out that I had a letter of introduction from the University of Malawi. The regional officer asked her to fetch it from me. After taking his time to peruse the letter, with the group of volunteers watching us, he went outside to make a phone call to the national office. He came back, smiling, and explained that the national office had given me permission to stay, because my project was not considered to be political. Later during a break I wanted the regional officer to see the irony of the incident. Deploying the current discourse, I remarked that I had thought NICE was a decentralized organization. He responded, in all seriousness, that, while NICE was decentralized, it had to be wary of politics.

The avoidance of politics was a central preoccupation during the workshop. Yet the politics of officers' and volunteers' own conduct passed unremarked. My attendance at the workshop without the regional officer's prior knowledge violated the entrenched habit in Malawi, from offices to villages, whereby subordinates must not assume initiative without consulting their superiors. The district officer may have been too intimidated by my own status as a white man to question my motives to study her work. On the other hand, because she had not discussed my presence with the regional officer, she may also have begun to take it for

granted. In any case, the regional officer's reaction was not a mere demonstration of the proper protocol within NICE. He could certainly have made the decision about my participation on his own, but by considering the case in front of an audience of volunteers he gave an indication of his own superior status. In this sense, his phone call to the national office was not so much an act of submission as a proof of his direct access to the top of NICE's hierarchy.

As the workshop progressed, the status distinction between the two officers took more serious forms. The regional officer interrupted his colleague on several occasions to correct her or, again significantly before an audience, to instruct her on how to conduct the workshop. Toward the end of the workshop he had virtually taken over as the chairperson. On several other occasions, however, the two officers appeared as one unit in relation to the volunteers. The officers referred to themselves and were addressed by volunteers as *a kuofesi*, "people from the office." The volunteers, in turn, were the ones responsible for "villages" (*midzi*). During the workshop, status distinctions among the volunteers also became apparent in the extent to which, for example, some disagreed with their peers or simply felt able to express opinions. On the whole, however, the sentiment at the workshop was amiable and clearly encouraged everyone's identification with NICE. The meal allowance of MK 150 (just over US\$2), which could have bought a volunteer at least three meals, was generous for a one-day workshop, as were the complimentary soft drinks and cookies served during the day. Every volunteer was also given a pen and a notepad, items that were gratefully taken back to the poverty from which the volunteers had come.

Learning to Be Special

Implicit in the proceedings was the effort to construct the grassroots as the object of civic education. This was achieved through an explicit focus on volunteers as resourceful individuals who possessed knowledge and skills that could benefit the grassroots. Volunteers, in other words, were made to appear as those who could assist the grassroots. The distinction between volunteers and the grassroots did not exist prior to the arrival of organizations such as NICE. All volunteers were from the same social setting as the people they were supposed to assist, embedded in many complex ways in local social relationships. Moreover, the distinction between the volunteers and the grassroots was achieved at the workshop not

through a discussion of the messages that civic education spread but by training the volunteers to understand *how* the messages should be presented to their audiences in villages and townships.¹⁴ Volunteers' previous knowledge about their social world, including their facility with basic courtesies, was made into "skills" (*luso*) and codified in exotic-sounding English concepts.

The first item on the agenda, after the opening prayer and a discussion on workshop rules and expectations, was the question, "What is NICE?" (*NICE ndi chiyani?*). Although most volunteers had heard the answer to this question at virtually all the workshops they had attended before, its purpose was clearly to reaffirm both the official answer and the volunteers' commitment to NICE. A volunteer drew the NICE emblem on a flip-chart, and the officers explained at length the involvement of the European Union and the German agency GIZ. This apparently direct link to the outside world, where affluent white people funded NICE, was crucial to volunteers' identification with the specific role assigned to them in the organization's hierarchy. Volunteers were able to imagine their belonging to a transnational community. It was, moreover, a transnational community that promised an alternative to the networks of patronage that ruling politicians maintained by exploiting foreign aid. Yet a similar desire for access to external links, a similar salience attributed to what Jean-François Bayart (2000) calls "extraversion," underlay both the governmental and the non-governmental strategies.¹⁵

Another initial theme, repeated over and over during the workshop, was the nonpartisanship of NICE. The district officer, for example, announced that "we are not politicians" (*ife sindife andale ayi*) and "we do not have a party" (*tilibe chipani*). She and the regional officer, on several occasions during the workshop, used the verb *kwunikira* to describe the purpose of NICE's civic education. Its most appropriate translation in this context is "to enlighten," from the basic meaning "to shed light on a spot with a lamp or fire to see a thing" (*walitsa pamalo ndi nyali kapena nsakali kuti uwone chinthu*) (Centre for Language Studies 2000, 349). They stressed the need to invite local party functionaries to civic education sessions and to show them equal respect by applauding them when they spoke. The officers also explained that the colors in the NICE emblem resembled those that the Malawi Congress Party used, but it was every volunteer's responsibility to prevent misunderstandings among the grassroots. In a similar vein, the regional officer later rejected a suggestion from one volunteer to hoist flags on the location that NICE held meetings. Because Malawi's political par-

ties also used flags, he explained, ordinary villagers would be confused if NICE also had a flag.

This effort to avoid identification with political parties — from specific parties to the general manner in which they conducted rallies in Malawi — had an immediately obvious reason. Many areas were sharply contested in Malawi's multiparty politics, and the Young Democrats of the UDF had intimidated and assaulted supporters of other parties across the country. Yet the stress on nonpartisanship, coupled with the idiom of enlightenment, also contributed to a distinction in another sense. The representatives of NICE sought to convey the impression that they were not consumed by the passions underlying political squabbles. In effect, they were not only outside politics but also *above* it. It was NICE that could invite all the parties to its meetings, giving their officials equal representation while reserving to itself the privilege of distributing nonpartisan information. As can be seen in the next chapter, this nonpartisanship provided little "enlightenment" when the impoverished crowds confronted NICE representatives with questions about the causes of their predicament.

The audiences that civic education officers and volunteers encountered were diverse and often vociferous. Workshops like the one discussed here were, therefore, important in inculcating self-esteem and self-confidence in NICE representatives. In addition to the imagined external links and their position above politics, volunteers were introduced to certain personal characteristics that set them apart from the grassroots. These characteristics of individual volunteers (*zomuyenereza munthu kukhala PCE*) were initially identified in small groups that subsequently presented their findings to the two officers. A recurrent theme was education, the need for a volunteer to be "educated" (*wophunzira*), "someone who has been to school" (*wopita kusukulu*), and "smart" (*wozindikira*). Each time the regional officer asked the others to endorse these characteristics presented by small groups, the response was invariably a loud and enthusiastic "yes!" (*ee!*). The issue of education clearly struck a chord with the youthful gathering of volunteers. Although volunteers were formally required to have only the primary school graduation certificate, most of them belonged to the category of young people who had, as mentioned, unsuccessfully pursued secondary education. By offering a context in which youths could feel that their education had not been wasted, NICE also ensured commitment to its cause.

The emphasis on education was not, of course, merely a consequence of the current crisis in Malawi. It resonated with the unrivaled channel to personal advancement that formal, Western-style education had repre-

sented in both colonial and postcolonial Africa (Serpell 1993; Simpson 2003; Stambach 2000). The crisis of expectations and opportunities in Malawi made the quest for academic success more desperate than ever. During the workshop, another aspect of education, first introduced by Christian missions, also received a great deal of attention. Volunteers' self-esteem was enhanced by frequent references to the neat and clean appearance as one of their defining characteristics. Several participants emphasized the need to "take care of oneself" (*kudzisamala*), particularly by washing oneself frequently (*kusambasamba*). The emphasis was also on smart clothes, with nobody mentioning modesty in dressing that would suit village settings.

This fascination with appearance, with personal cleanliness, not only gave the impression that the grassroots had particular problems with hygiene; it also resonated with another legacy of colonialism as a "civilizing" mission. Several scholars writing about southern Africa, for example, have demonstrated a close correspondence between ideas of hygiene and self-improvement in the patterns of consumption, medical work, and domestic relations that various colonial agents introduced (see, e.g., Burke 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Vaughan 1991). In Malawi, such patterns have continued to symbolize progress, embodied no less by Banda's puritan style of dressing than by Muluzi's flamboyant one. Few volunteers could afford suits or elaborate dresses, but many of them wore at the workshop fashionable jeans and the kind of sports gear that African-American youth culture has made popular across the globe. The regional and district officers embodied success by clothing themselves in a suit and a dazzling white dress, respectively.

To situate the emphasis on cleanliness within wider colonial and postcolonial processes is not to produce a far-fetched historical analogy. Large-scale historical processes boil down to such mundane and taken-for-granted dispositions as the emphasis on personal hygiene. It consolidates existing inequalities. As my fieldwork in rural Malawi has taught me, villagers generally do take a bath once or twice every day, but their poverty does not allow for patterns of consumption that distinguish the well-off as heavily perfumed and fashionable citizens. However unlikely NICE's volunteers were to attain these patterns of consumption, the emphasis on cleanliness at the workshop expressed the *desire* for a status that would set them apart from those who were considered in need of civic education. By imagining themselves as particularly clean, the volunteers also imagined themselves as belonging to the category of Malawians who had historically had the power to define what progress and development consist of.

The Supremacy of English

Another mechanism of status distinction, also resonating with wider colonial and postcolonial processes, concerns linguistic resources. Most participants, and especially the regional officer, spoke a language that was a mixture of English and Chichewa. While English expressions and words often appear in the spoken language of urban dwellers in the region (see, e.g., Kashoki 1972; Kayambazinthu 1998; Moto 2001), the regional officer's discourse made a notion of "code switching" between different languages and registers somewhat spurious. Consider, for example, how he responded to a volunteer's question about involvement in conflicts that occur in villages:

Izi zikachitika inu mukapereke lipoti kuofesi. A kuofesi akaona nkhaniyo ndi yofunikadi kuti pakakhala mediation . . . chifukwa m'mene mukakambirane nkhani ija . . . ambirife sitinapange training ya kufield ya conflict resolution.

When these things happen, you should report to the office. When people in the office see that the issue is important, that there should be mediation . . . because how you could discuss that issue . . . many of us have not done training in the field of conflict resolution.¹⁶

Although Chichewa could have expressed the substance of the regional officer's reply, which suggested that conflicts were to be reported to district offices because few volunteers had been trained to mediate them, he chose to include a few English words in formulating his reply. The impact was to make Chichewa seem like a language that lacked the vocabulary used in "conflict resolution," with even "discussing" (*kukambirana*) becoming a technical procedure that could be performed only by those who were specifically trained.

Another common strategy among Chichewa speakers who want to use English is to introduce English expressions with the verb *kupanga*, "to do" or "to make." In the above extract the regional officer used this verb to refer to "training in the field of conflict resolution." The next extract is from his explanation of the difference between "dominant participants" and "docile participants."

Amafunikanso pamsonkhano, koma kofunika ndi kupanga notice, kupanga control. Pali ena amati madocile kapena timid participants, anthu ofatsa, ali phee. Amenewa kofunika ndi kupanga jack-up.

They [dominant participants] are also needed at the meeting, but it is necessary to notice [them], to control [them]. There are others who are called docile or timid participants, quiet people. It is necessary to jack-up [them].

In order to express the activity at issue in English, the regional officer used the verb *kupanga* three times in this short extract. Such uses of English, commonly followed by all participants at the workshop, were based on linguistic patterns that were widespread in the region.¹⁷ They had developed independently of the official Anglo-American standards of English and were inadequate communicative tools for, for example, African immigrants in Europe (Blommaert 2001, 2002). Yet their specific effect in the Malawian setting was to create distinctions that contributed to local inequalities.

Several studies have shown the high esteem that Malawian elites attach to English, with many insisting that their children speak only English (see Matiki 2001; Mtenje 2002a, 2002b; and Moto 2003).¹⁸ To be sure, a person's recruitment to a formal occupation usually presupposes good knowledge of English. Malawians who are in the habit of using English in their everyday interactions with other Malawians often seek, consciously or unconsciously, to associate themselves with those few who have succeeded in their educational and professional life. Here they maintain another colonial legacy that had its most extreme postcolonial result in Kamuzu Banda's Anglophilia. He never spoke Malawian languages in public, he always dressed in the most conservative costume to be found in the modern English wardrobe, and he established the "Eton of Africa," Kamuzu Academy (see Short 1974). However detested he is among contemporary human rights activists in Malawi, his thirty years of rule did much to entrench the colonial legacy of regarding England and the English language as the prime sources and symbols of progress.¹⁹

The frequent use of English during the workshop supported two tacit objectives. On the one hand, by referring in English to various skills and methods in civic education, the participants were able to make them seem like elements of an exclusive body of knowledge. The participants were, for example, taught that "open air technology" referred to the use of materials and facilities that were available in the venue of civic education. "Information market," in turn, describes the method whereby the audience was asked to write down their preferred topics on cards and to display them as in a market. When NICE representatives were unwilling to consider some of the chosen topics, they either ignored them or gave the audience "signposts" to other organizations (see the next chapter). "Edutainment" and "energizers" were also among the technical English terms the volunteers were asked to learn. Both referred to the importance of entertainment in civic education.

On the other hand, the participants could also detach themselves

from the grassroots, understood to be dependent on Chichewa and other Malawian languages, by bemoaning the problems of translation. These problems appeared time and again during the workshop, because, for reasons that were never explained, the regional and district officers used English concepts as the foundation for their discourse. For example, they first mentioned concepts in English, such as "poster," "report," "sitting plan [*sic*]," and "experience," and then asked the audience to suggest equivalents in Chichewa. While for some concepts the equivalents were quickly identified, many others prompted volunteers to lament the poverty of Chichewa, exclaiming, for example, that "Chichewa is problematic!" (*Chichewa ndi choruta!*). For example, despite the existence of *chidzivitso* for "poster" and *kaundula* for "report," *positala* and *lipoti*, respectively, were established as the translations.

These attitudes toward translation were another indication of the desire to associate civic education with symbols and resources that were external to the reality of the grassroots. Volunteers, under the officers' leadership, moved between two languages, one associated with quality education and opportunities, the other with impoverishment, disadvantage, and ignorance. The assumed civilizing and progressive undercurrents become apparent when one realizes that the movement between the languages was one way. In their efforts to find word-for-word rather than idiomatic translations for English concepts, the participants saw English as the unquestioned source of discourse. If Chichewa equivalents were not forthcoming, the problem was necessarily in this language, not in English. Here the workshop upheld the inequality of translation that also underlay the official translations of human rights discourses in Malawi and Zambia. The embrace of the same inequalities by Malawians who had no background in translation was a measure of the similarity of these inequalities to wider historical processes.

Educating Elders

The tacit teachings at the workshop, from personal cleanliness to language use, were crucial to the transmission of more explicit messages. The overt theme was to train the volunteers to acquire skills (*luso*) to be deployed in civic education. While issues such as cleanliness and language served to enhance volunteers' status and self-esteem, the issue of skills revealed in a more obvious way that the volunteers' recognized distinction between themselves and the grassroots was a precondition for civic education. A

central item on the agenda was “the skill to teach elders” (*luso lophunzitsa anthu akuluakulu*). This item recognized the challenges of conducting civic education among adults, particularly elders, who were customarily seen as the embodiments of wisdom and authority. The very idiom of “teaching” (*kuphunzitsa*), rather than, for instance, “discussing” (*kukambirana*), betrayed NICE representatives as the ones with knowledge.

The challenges of imparting this knowledge received somewhat ironic remarks from both the volunteers and the officers, often provoking laughter. A volunteer, reporting from a small-group discussion, observed that “elders do not make mistakes, they merely forget” (*akuluakulu salakwa, amangoiwala*). The district officer also stressed that “we do not disagree, we only add a little bit” (*sititsutsa, timangoonjezerapo*). The meaning of elders “forgetting” and NICE representatives “adding” something was immediately apparent to the volunteers. Their “skills” included subtle ways of making elders agree with civic education experts’ indisputable knowledge.

The idea that elders’ knowledge was somewhat deficient was expressed in various ways. The most common strategy, for both volunteers and officers, was to shift the deficiency from the category of elders to the category of villages (*midzi*) and to give examples of ignorance and false beliefs there. “In villages they believe that AIDS is caused by witches!” (*Kumidzi amakhulupirira kuti edzi imachokera kwa afiti!*), one volunteer exclaimed. The officers warned, however, against embarrassing elders in public. A better strategy was to solicit several viewpoints on the same issue, and when the right answer appeared, the civic educator would start repeating it in different forms. The intent would be to make the crowd accept the message without appearing to impose it on them. Elders, in turn, would seek to avoid embarrassment by aligning themselves with the emerging dominant view. In their work of gradually overcoming resistance, volunteers would also encourage those individuals in the crowd who appeared to understand the civic education message quickly.

Several techniques were at civic education officers’ disposal to persuade the crowd to accept their viewpoints and messages. Adults differed from children, it was observed during the workshop, in that they wanted to feel equal to their teachers. In this respect, the volunteers were advised to perfect the skill of “lowering oneself” (*kudzitsitsa*) in order to adopt the “level” appropriate to the crowd. For example, when teaching youths they should “take the level of youths” (*kutenga level ya anyamata*), and when teaching chiefs they should “take the level of chiefs” (*kutenga level ya mafumu*). As with politicians, so too with other social categories — civic

educators moved among different categories at will, enlightening those who remained trapped in their particular world-views and roles. This workshop was one among many to induce the volunteers to regard themselves as being outside and above “culture” (*chikhalidwe*) no less than politics. The grassroots, also known as villages, existed as the audience of messages that only civic education officers fully understood.

Several aspects of their training contributed, therefore, to youthful volunteers’ identification with NICE and its practice of civic education. These disillusioned school-leavers had found an organization that improved their self-esteem by defining them as intrinsically different from the impoverished multitudes. Certificates confirming participation in training workshops, formal letters, personal appearance, linguistic resources, and various “skills” distinguished them from the grassroots. Consistent with their new status, they would categorically condemn, for instance, villagers’ erroneous ideas of the causation of afflictions such as AIDS while conveniently ignoring the extent to which witchcraft gripped the imagination of educated Malawians (see Lwanda 2002). Volunteers’ particular concern was to *teach* elders, betraying a generational tension that had increased in the region as youngsters faced greater constraints to advancement than their parents had experienced. Here NICE’s pacification of youth also controlled interpersonal and intergenerational tensions. These tensions have occasionally culminated in the harassment and killing of suspected witches, especially in the context of rapid economic recession and political upheaval, with elderly people accused of holding back prosperity (see Ashforth 2005, 256–257; Niehaus 2001, 154–155). By using the messages on democracy and human rights as their swords, civic educators were unlikely to unleash physical force against elders.

Revelations and Hidden Agendas

“Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation is like a lamp in the darkness” (*ACentre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation ali ngati nyali m’mdima*). These words ended an audio tape on which a Malawian NGO, through the performances of the popular comedians Izeki and Jacob, informed citizens about their constitutional rights.²⁰ The idioms of “light” and “darkness,” of “enlightenment,” were by no means confined to NICE. Civic education programs in Malawi on human rights commonly used them to convey how radical the new message was. While the above quote identified the NGO itself as the source of light, activists gen-

erally considered their civic education on new laws and democratic principles as having this revelatory potential. There can be little doubt about the need for such revelations. In a country where the only mass media worthy of the designation, namely, the radio, continued to be a tool of misinformation after the democratic transition, information on new laws and rights was not easily available. The paramount task of organizations providing civic education was to carve out a space where the substance and implications of human rights could be debated.

This chapter has raised doubts about the success of civic education in Malawi in carrying out this necessary task. Civic education on rights and democracy gained new momentum after 1999, but its relation to taken-for-granted hierarchies in society remained poorly recognized. Although the youths associated with NICE were often genuinely concerned about the state of democracy in their country, an effect of their training workshops was that identification with certain quasi-professional markers overrode identification with the targets of their civic education. The allure of status distinctions was irresistible in a country where youths faced an unprecedented divide between their aspirations and opportunities. After having been fed on a diet of hopes for progress and personal advancement during their school years, the last thing Malawian youths expected was to be identified with the poverty and disadvantage from which they had started. NICE provided one context to satisfy the desire for status.

The social and economic crisis in which NICE operated was only one reason why its civic education may not have empowered the rural and urban poor. The crisis undermined the radical potential of civic education when it was combined, first, with a specific view on education and, second, with the impact of the Malawian state on civic education programs. As mentioned, NICE announced in its public relations materials that its main objective was "to promote democratic values, attitudes, and behavior at grassroots level." It is this emphasis on values and attitudes that most directly contributed to the possibility that civic education on rights merely maintained entrenched inequalities. NICE's objective, calling for behavioral change, may be seen to address the need to educate citizens both *about* and *for* human rights (Engelbronner-Kolff 1998, 14). Yet it fell short of enhancing the capacity of the disadvantaged to confront the power relations that underlay human rights violations. No Freirean "pedagogy of the oppressed" (Freire 1970) was involved in the idealistic belief that the right values and attitudes, in the absence of transformative action against structural inequalities, were enough to institute democracy. Especially disturbing was NICE's assignment of the duty of changing atti-

tudes to the grassroots. As the next chapter discusses in more detail, it was a subtle way of avoiding mention of the wider power relations that had made the grassroots the audience of civic education in the first place.

This avoidance of mentioning power, already seen in NICE's insistence on nonpartisanship, was essential to the smooth running of the project. The state in Malawi retained considerable influence over the precise content and capacity of foreign-funded projects. As explained earlier in this chapter, the state was not "above" the donor-sponsored "civil society" as a more encompassing structure. Some NGOs were superior to the state in their capacity to reach the populace and to offer their employees considerably more attractive salaries and transnational links. Yet the balance between the state and the nonstate was precarious, forever subject to negotiation. As discussed in the introduction, a law requiring the registration of NGOs came into force in 2001, giving the state the final say in defining legitimate organizations. Diplomatic confrontations were also important weapons in the arsenal of the state to control and curtail the operations of organizations whose foreign donors were represented in the country.

This tension was particularly apparent in NICE's case, because its status as a "project initiative" was a constant source of ambiguity. While its donors emphasized its "ownership" by the Republic of Malawi, cabinet ministers and senior government officials often interrogated NICE's expatriate project manager about its true identity. A presidential adviser had reportedly accused NICE of acting "like an NGO" without being registered as such. Paradoxically, among expatriate donors and Malawian civil society activists, such accusations served to strengthen the belief that civic education projects were politically consequential. Rather than these accusations and threats being seen as one way of cowing human rights NGOs and projects into nonpolitical themes, they were taken as evidence for the impact of civic education. "We must be getting it right, since the government wants to close us," NICE's expatriate manager remarked to me.

NICE is, in point of fact, an example of how a civic education project with transnational links contributes to undemocratic governance. As Dorothy Hodgson (2002, 1093) has noted in a Tanzanian context, while the "donor community" encompasses a wide range of actors — some secular, others religious; some willing to challenge the state, others acquiescent — most donors prefer to sustain themselves by depoliticizing the interventions they sponsor. The trend is common among externally funded NGOs and projects, with the initial excitement with "empowerment" in new democracies changing into "service delivery" (Fisher 1997,

454). Note, for instance, NICE's promise to provide "civic education services." From the content of its messages to the ways in which it channeled popular frustrations into distinctions regarding the grassroots, NICE depoliticized civic education and controlled popular challenges to the state and transnational governance (Howell and Pearce 2001; Jenkins 2001). The next chapter takes a closer look at the content of these messages and how civic education officers responded to the demands they encountered among the grassroots.

CHAPTER 4

Watchdogs Unleashed?

Encountering "the Grassroots"

During the time I conducted the fieldwork for this book, the National Initiative for Civic Education held public meetings on its five thematic areas (local democracy, the environment, food security, gender development, and HIV/AIDS and health), led by its representatives but actively soliciting contributions from participants, known as the grassroots. Few could deny that the five themes appeared to be of immense relevance to Malawi. Food security was precarious in many rural and urban households, partly because of adverse environmental and climatic conditions and partly because of new agricultural policies that had removed subsidies. The country's incidence of HIV/AIDS was one of the worst in the African pandemic, with the imbalanced power relations between the sexes partly accounting for its spread (Lwanda 2002). All these problems culminated in the need to institute a democracy in which all citizens would be treated with dignity and downtrodden Malawians' claims would be heard.

How did the officers and volunteers of NICE respond to these challenges? As was seen in the previous chapter, most of them were young people, themselves frustrated by the economic and political impasse at which Malawi appeared to be after a decade of democratic experimentation. The previous chapter also indicated, however, that NICE created an organization of quasi-professionals who were taught to think of themselves as separate from the grassroots. Identification with the organization, rather than with the concerns of the grassroots, became paramount. This process stemmed from the imperative that the sponsors and man-