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Dance, gender, and popular music in Malawi: the case of rap and ragga

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Abstract

Rap and ragga musics have found a place on the musical landscape of Malawi over the last decade, exemplified in a nation-wide scene characterised by competitions. Recordings and associated materials of rap and ragga that inform Malawian youth interpretations tend to emphasise male participation and masculine symbols. Competitions are male-dominated in their organisational structure and participatory roles. Though the articulated focus of these events is the musical component, movement practices are at the core of the scene, comprising part of contestants' performances and the more informal activities of spectators. Female involvement as dancers is much greater than as music-makers, making attention to dance crucial for understanding gender dynamics. Our exploration of intersections between dance, music, gender and class provides insight into the reasons for and implications of male dominance in this popular music/dance scene.

Over the last decade, rap and ragga musics have emerged as significant genres of social and musical practice on the cultural landscape of Malawi. From the urban density of Blantyre to the rural remove of Chitipa, rap artists from the USA and ragga stars from Jamaica peer from t-shirts, posters, and video screens, while the heavy urban beats common to each genre bellow from cassette stalls, transistor radios, taxi vans, and bottle shops. Locally produced rap or ragga is not as common – or even economically viable – but some performance opportunities exist, most notably the rap and ragga competitions that sit at the performative core of a string of local scenes traversing Malawi.[1] Rap and ragga competitions occur most frequently in bars or community centres in urban areas, especially in the cities of Blantyre and Lilongwe, but occasionally in smaller cities, towns and rural communities.[2] Male youth (teenage boys and men in their twenties) dominate all aspects of these competitions and males are largely responsible for the discourse of and about rap and ragga in the country, effectively constituting these events and the surrounding scenes as mostly male spaces within a heavily masculinised general popular music and dance environment in Malawi.[3] Some young women and teenage girls do participate, most commonly as spectators, but occasionally as vocal performers. The most active form of female participation is through dance.

During a competition, the mostly male competitors (often in small groups) deliver original lyrics to pre-recorded backing tracks. These are usually dubbed copies of instrumental cuts from rap or ragga cassettes sold in market stalls or retail

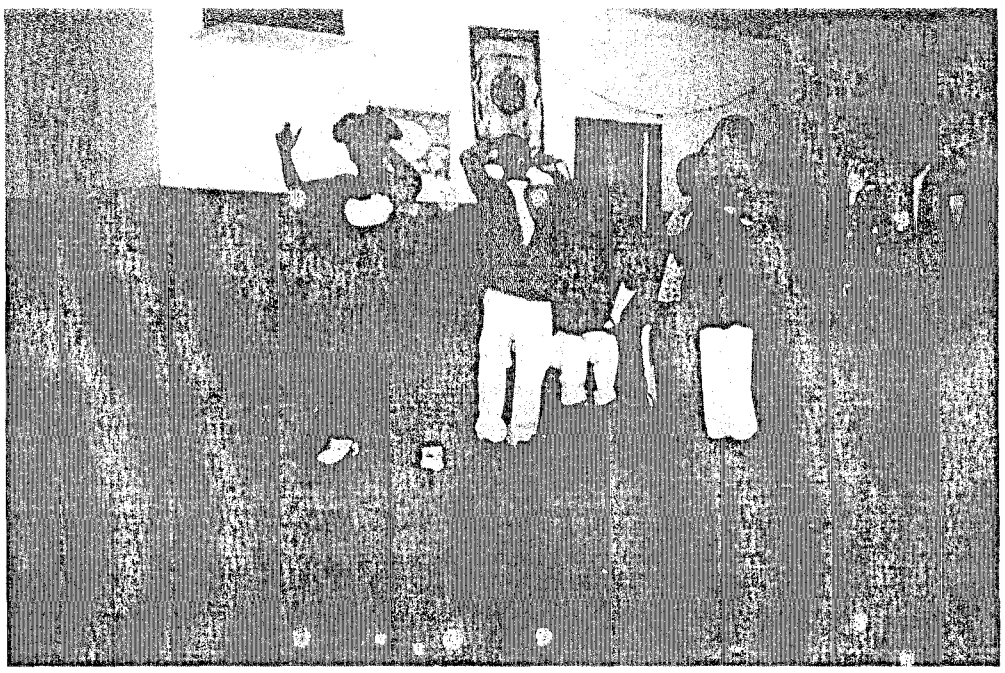

Figure 1. Red Finger and Meck I.B., members of a Blantyre-based ensemble known as the Ghost Face Clan, participating in the competition at Chemba's Nite Club. Credit: John Fenn.

outlets. The emphasis of and articulated reason for the competitions is the lyrical content and vocal artistry of competitors. Movement, however, also figures prominently. Before the official beginning, crowds of male and female youth usually gather to chat and dance informally on the designated dance floor to recorded music popular at the time – Malawian hits, Congolese kwasa kwasa (also called rumba or soukous), South African kwaito, and North American rap or R&B. This informal dance activity continues throughout the event during breaks between contestants and often after the conclusion of the music competition. Movement by the rap and ragga competitors is an important factor in their evaluation by both peers and judges, and occasionally formally organised dance contests follow the music components.[4]

In this paper, we describe and analyse two competitions that occurred during the summer of 2000 in the city of Blantyre, Malawi's largest urban centre. We selected competitions associated with contrasting socio-economic locations and populations because of the significant relationships between gender and class in the country. Our analytical frame extends beyond the male-dominated musical component to encompass the larger event, with special attention to movement practices, allowing for an in-depth examination of the gender processes at work (cf. Cowan 1990). Our analysis yields insight into (i) the processes through which a music/dance scene becomes gendered; (ii) relationships between class and the manifestation of gender dynamics within this music/dance scene; and (iii) ways in which performance events – and specifically movement practices – can be used by participants for negotiating and resisting dominant gender ideologies.[5]

Chemba's

The first competition occurred on 6 August 2000 at Chemba's Nite Club, located in the high-density neighbourhood of Zingwangwa within Blantyre. Residents of Zingwangwa are diverse in terms of socio-economic class, though are weighted toward lower and middle income ranges. The neighbourhood is lively, with a bustling market, a variety of small stores, a football field, and numerous bars, offering public spaces for people to stroll, socialise, and conduct business. Taking advantage of this vibrant social environment, the event's organisers – a promotional team called Emjita that is dedicated to encouraging youth talent – intended this event to be the initiation of a regular Sunday afternoon competition series.

Chemba's Nite Club consists of a simple 1,100 square-foot room with concrete walls painted white and blue that are decorated by advertisements for beer and Coca Cola products. A short bar sits along one edge next to the entrance, defining one dimension of the central open space that constitutes the dancefloor. On this occasion, the room was cleared of any tables, and chairs neatly lined the perimeter. These types of bars are common in Malawi and attract a primarily male clientele. Women who frequent them are often decisively assumed to be 'bar girls' or prostitutes. These women flaunt normative gender behaviour for Malawian females by wearing revealing clothing, spending time in places gendered as male, drinking alcohol in public, and/or engaging in sexual activities with multiple partners. Women (and teenage girls) going to such establishments, especially at night-time, risk the stigmatising label of 'bargirl'. The choice of Chemba's for a rap and ragga competition therefore had implications for the gendering of participation: it occurred in a location where males could go without concern for their reputations, while for young women it was potentially problematic (cf. Koskoff 1987, pp. 6–7; Van Nieuwkerk 2001). That the event occurred in the afternoon and was specifically designated as a youth event alleviated the tension somewhat, and limited female participation did occur.

Many of the people attending this competition were residents of the neighbourhood, and their socio-economic backgrounds reflected its general make-up. Because of its location in a bar, some attendees were there independent of the competition. Clustered around the bar were a group of men and a few women (probably publicly classified as 'bargirls') drinking and paying scant attention to the competition. Participants active in the event included about forty to fifty male youths (ages 15–25), and around ten females who all appeared to be in their teens. Some of the young males were drinking beer and smoking, activities considered highly inappropriate for young females to do in public. The females were more likely to sit quietly, drinking soft drinks.

The event started with the organisers checking the sound equipment and playing a variety of recorded musics. The rap and ragga competition consisted of approximately nine all-male contestant groups, a mixture of solo and duet acts. When called by the emcee, the contestants moved into the designated performance space, a small area against the wall where the microphone was located, and performed a short segment of their original lyrics over an instrumental. Rap dominated this competition, with only a brief appearance of ragga singing style in one performance. The emcee ushered people on 'stage' and efficiently terminated their performances at the end of the allotted (and approximate) three minutes. Though the flyers advertised an all-male competition followed by an all-female one, the latter did not occur, most likely due to a lack of willing contestants.

Pregnant in the performances of the contestants were identifiers of masculinity and 'America', along with class markers situating youths as residents of the area.[6] Most contestants wore clothing that they associated with 'gansta' rap from the United States: baggie pants, vests, knit caps, camouflaged clothing, and heavy sneakers. Malawian rap aficionados' careful research of popular magazines and music videos from the USA shaped their choice of clothing and accessories. Limited access to much of what they see in United States media led to creative interpretations and bricolage of clothing items available from second-hand clothing vendors in markets, imported from South Africa or the Middle East, or locally made.

The clothing fashions of participants contributed much to the aesthetics of their performance, and the aggressive lyrics, including sexual imagery and United States slang, underscored the masculine ethos. Performers' movements echoed this masculinity, with gesturing and punctuated rhythmic movement emphasising lyrics. Most movement was in the upper body, with competitors waving or thrusting their arms in the air to accent syllables or follow the beat of the instrumental. Youths fixed their hands in kinetic symbols borrowed from rap videos and magazine photos, referencing their favourite stars while mimetically reinterpreting gestures of which they had little first-hand knowledge. In addition to arm and hand motions, competitors bounced their heads to the beat, took on slack torso postures, and defiantly shifted their bodies from side to side.

During the course of the rap and ragga competition, little audience activity occurred. Most sat along the walls, with individuals occasionally walking across the room to exit, move to a new seat, or chat with friends. The few female youths attending the event sat in small clusters and rarely got up from their chairs. No one danced during the contestants' performances nor between them, and there was not much explicit audience reaction to the competition. Occasional enthusiasm exhibited by some seated males waving their arms above their heads rhythmically to the beat was the exception.

Following the rap and ragga competition was a dance competition that consisted of five individual or group contestants. This was the only segment of the event that contained active female participation. As soon as the first dancer took to the floor, audience attention and response increased significantly. Those standing near the door clustered around the dance floor, and many of those seated moved forward or oriented themselves more directly toward the performers. The first two contestants were individual males dancing dgoing, a musical and dance style rooted in South African urban popular culture. Confident in their self-presentation, their dancing was characterised by highly fluid, jelly-like movements of their knees and ankles while they moved their feet through complicated patterns. During their performances, audience members stood, clapped, whistled, and moved in place.

The third set of contestants consisted of two female dancers, both wearing jeans and button-down blouses, cosmopolitan identity markers associated with urban environments and Europe and North America. They danced to domboro, a Congolese musical style related to kwasa kwasa. The dancing emphasised fluid articulated buttock movement, much attention to the knees, and subtle movements of the feet. In popular music videos from the Congo and in nightclubs in Malawi, this type of dancing is ubiquitous and often highly sexualised, with emphasis on sensual movement of the buttocks and erotic interaction between dancers. Facing one another in close proximity, two dancers (either two males, two females, or one male and one female) direct hip thrusts at one another with knees overlapping. These two female

contestants were much more reserved than dancers we have observed in other contexts. They faced each other from about three feet away, with their gazes directed down or out over the heads of the crowd. The sensuality of their movements was limited and little physical interaction occurred between them. Nevertheless, the audience's enjoyment of this dance was evident by their clapping, cheering, and dancing in place.

Two more females followed in the fourth contestant slot, and domboro was also their music of choice. These two dancers were stylishly dressed teenage girls, with one wearing a shiny long white skirt, a black tee-shirt, and her hair in long corn row braids; the second wore white trousers and a black tank top. As with the previous two, their movements drew on standard domboro repertoire, but without the sensual elaboration that might be found in other contexts. There was an air of reserve, though the dancers' agility indicated that they were probably capable of ramping up the erotic quotient. While they danced, a third female joined wearing jeans, a white baggy tee-shirt, and platform tennis shoes. The three formed a small circle, and each focused on her own moves. Then a male youth entered the circle and quickly paired off with the dancer wearing the white skirt, leaving the other two females to dance as a pair. At this point, there was greater sensual interaction between the two pairs of dancers though again it was more reserved than we have observed elsewhere. Audience response increased significantly.

The final contestants were a group of three males dancing to rap music. Both dress and movements marked their affiliation with rap. One wore large baggy trousers that hung low on his hips, a look not often seen in Malawi, and they all wore tee shirts and heavy basketball-style shoes. The dancers faced each other, making strong punctuated steps and thrusting their arms in the air. Crowd response was minimal, and after less than a minute the emcee cleared them off the dance floor.

Legends

Our second example took place in a downtown Blantyre club called Legends on 10 June 2000. With three dance floors, three bars, and a large outdoor courtyard, Legends caters to middle- and upper-class patrons with an emphasis on night-time activities such as dancing and drinking. There is usually a steep cover charge, and bar tabs run much higher than at locations such as Chemba's Nite Club. Legends also attracts ex-patriots such as NGO workers living in Malawi, European business people, and travellers just passing through.

Legends' urban location and orientation infuses the club with a cosmopolitan air (cf. Hannerz 1990; Turino 2000) manifested in a range of ways. From the deejays' set lists, to the clothing fashions worn by patrons, imported beer selections at the bars, and security in the enclosed parking lot, Legends exemplifies translocal urban experience and is a central site for popular music consumption and practices (e.g. dance) on the Blantyre scene.

Staff from a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) called Youth Arm, whose focus was educational and outreach efforts on issues such as HIV/AIDS and civic education, organised this competition. Two of Youth Arm's staff members formed their own promotional group to stage the Legends competition, and made efforts to divorce this competition from any association with those run by the NGO because they did not want to risk tarnishing Youth Arm's name by holding an event at a bar. The organisers negotiated with the owners for the competition to overlap with

the 'teen disco', a regular event held by the club for youth on Saturday afternoons, guaranteeing a sizable audience and pool of potential competitors. They also structured the event as the third round of a competition that Youth Arm had sponsored two weeks earlier, guaranteeing slots to several artists (individuals and groups) who most likely would not have participated otherwise due to the event's social and economic class context.

As a result, the crowd at Legends for the Saturday afternoon extravaganza was much more diverse socially than it would have been for a typical teen disco or rap and ragga competition. The audience and many of the participants at the competition represented upper striations of Blantyre's class segmentations who tended to identify themselves with Euro–North American social practices. It also attracted contestants from lower-economic strata in various high-density neighbourhoods around Blantyre who had participated in previous Youth Arm competitions. As a result, some of the participants at Legends overlapped with those at Chemba's.

Taking place in a small self-contained dance area of Legends, the event was formally framed by a deejay booth and stage at one end of the room and a registration table at the entrance. Youths paid as they entered, signed up for the competition if they wished, and received a numbered badge indicating the order of performance. On the improvised stage in front of the deejay booth – a large piece of plywood supported by empty bottle crates – performers had a visibility not always available at rap and ragga competitions. As such, movement played a large role in performance, and participants employed several styles of movement linked to the two genres of rap and ragga. Movement was also central to non-competitor participation, as audience members danced continuously throughout the event.

This competition featured more raga-specific performances than the competition at Chemba's, though overall, rap dominated. In Malawi, ragga is a predominantly male genre, and its related symbols of Rastafarianism, dreadlocks and marijuana are associated more with masculinity than femininity. The first competitor in the Legends event offered a prime example of Rasta-flavoured ragga performance, marching onstage with exaggerated high-stepping motion to a mid-tempo backing track. His long dreadlocks complemented the red, green and yellow uniform he wore, and he further displayed his embrace of Rasta beliefs by waving a version of the Jamaican flag. A male friend of the performer in the audience mirrored this onstage performance with exaggerated ragga-style dance on the floor directly in front of the stage, but for the most part the audience shied from dancing. These two expressed the most overt reggae/ragga signifiers, with subsequent ragga contestants either displaying no overt symbols other than their musical style or incorporating small symbolic visual displays (e.g. dreadlocks or Rasta colours on some piece of their clothing) and more subtle movement practices referencing the most basic moves associated with ragga, a rhythmic high knee stepping.

Unlike at the Chemba event, the rap performances at Legends were not exclusively male. There was one female rap duo as well as a female member in the winning duo. Male rap contestants conformed in large part to the kinesic patterns discussed in relation to the Chemba event: kinetic emphasis of lyrics with hand gestures, overtly masculinised delineation of space, head nodding to the beat – all mimetically drawing on imported music videos from the United States. The all-female duo essentially stood still during their performance, with slight swaying to the beat giving little visual emphasis to their restrained rapping. The winning male–female duo exhibited interpretations of iconic rap gestures such as flashing hand signals, pumping fists in the air,

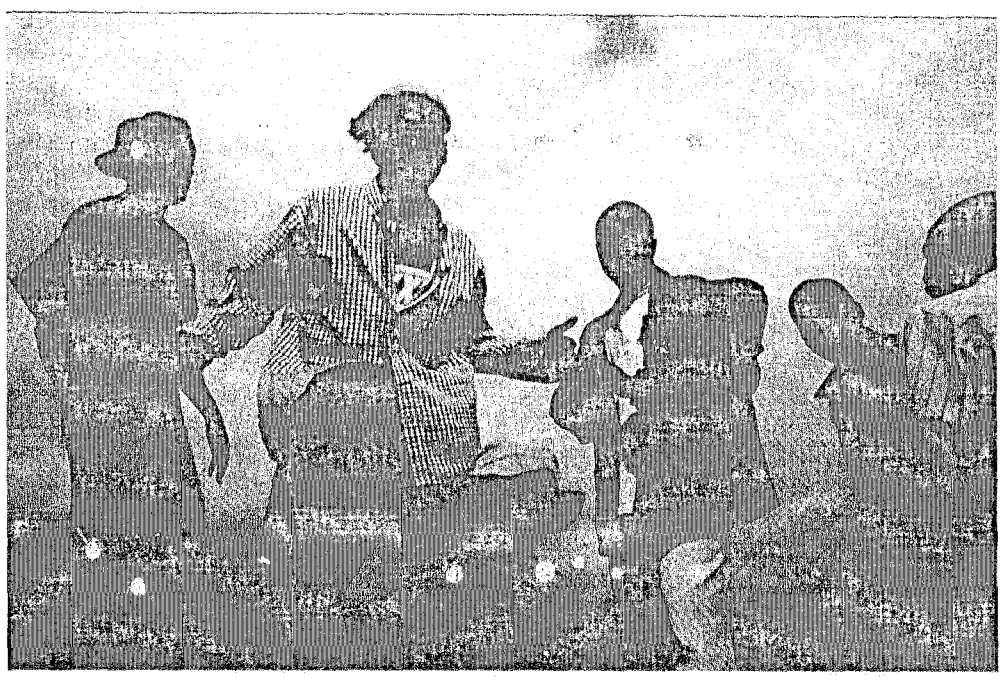

Figure 2. Rap and ragga ensemble Ghost Face Clan rehearsing for an upcoming competition. Credit: John Fenn.

and emphasising syllabic structure of the lyrics with arms and hands, but with a slight imbalance of attention focused on the male rapper.

As the audience at Legends grew, the crowd on the dance floor thickened. Primarily male at first, the balance between male and female drew closer to even over the course of the competition. In between performances, the deejay played popular dance songs from a variety of genres but restricted to youth-oriented styles mostly of North American and European artists that would be typically heard at the regular teen time disco. He did not play kwasa kwasa nor any other African popular musics commonly danced to in other Malawian bars, dance halls, and other social events. Though the audience at Legends paid attention to the musical elements of the competition, cheering for certain participants and after particular lyrical phrases, movement was a more widespread frame of social practice. A factor in the judging of the competition was 'stage work' or movement, audience members danced during and in-between performances, and the space itself was marked in a broader social context as a site for dancing.

Processes of gendering in scene and event

The above descriptions illustrate the heavy gender bias toward males in the Malawian rap and ragga scene, but also the ways in which participation becomes structured along gender lines. In this section, we explore the processes and social dynamics that contribute to this extensive maleness. Paralleling Sara Cohen's discussion of the indie rock scene in Liverpool, we argue that the Malawian rap and ragga scene is actively

produced as male through a combination of who participates, the nature of participation, and local social values and attitudes about gender (Cohen 1997). Males dominate the organisation of competitions: they usually initiate, plan, advertise and serve as the emcees and deejays. Judges are also usually male, though at the Legends competition one of the three judges was female, and males comprise a significant portion of the audience. Males dominate the musical competition – the articulated focus of these events – with at most ten per cent of participants being females. The preponderance of males in positions of power coupled with higher numbers of male attendees genders these events in a manner that is intimidating to and exclusive of much female involvement.

The popular music culture surrounding the rap and ragga scene is also heavily masculinised. The foreign artists most known in Malawi are males who embrace and display images of masculinity intercut with themes of aggression, violence, alcohol and drug consumption, sexual explicitness, objectification of females, and vulgarity.[7] Males involved in the scene in Malawi often do not incorporate these themes in their day-to-day lives, as many are studious youths whose goals diverge sharply from the worldviews they interpret in rap. However, they performatively embrace such themes in their choices of dress, lyrics, and movement or posturing – options that would be highly marked as deviant for a female participant.

Normative social values pervasive in the country regarding proper male and female behaviour are also a contributing factor. In addition to the gendering of public spaces such as bars discussed above, cultural factors such as conventions of female modesty serve to further entrench male domination of rap and ragga musical practice. It is considered women's and girls' responsibilities to avoid the sexual gazes and advances of males by limiting their presence in certain types of public spaces (e.g. bars), wearing clothing that is not sexually revealing, and avoiding conversations and other advances by males to whom they are not related. These ideals make it problematic for a female to put herself on a stage, presenting her body and self for males' visual and potentially physical attentions. Further, it is not generally considered appropriate for females to express desire or sexuality in public settings, making it difficult for them to compose or perform the types of lyrics common in the rap and ragga songs with which they are familiar.

Concerns over teenage pregnancy and the very real threat of HIV/AIDS further problematise this scene for females. Though males and females engage in activities that result in both pregnancy and HIV infection, many families exert greater effort in restricting their daughters' mobility and opportunities for engaging in sexual liaisons than they do their sons. This bias is in part connected to ideas about male and female independence and vulnerability, but also stems from reaction to the predatory social phenomenon of 'sugar daddies', adult (often married) men who seek out young women or teenagers to be their girlfriends. 'Sugar daddies' offer attractive material incentives, items that the girls may not otherwise be able to procure, and sometimes successfully lure young females into sexual relationships. Being out in public, in bars, and especially performing, puts a girl at the risk of attracting such attention feared by many parents.

Intersections of gender and class

Class issues complexify the gender dynamics discussed so far. A massive gap between rich and poor, with little chance for economic advancement, characterises Malawi's

social structure. Around eighty per cent of the population lives in poverty, most of whom have limited access to education, material resources, and jobs (Lwanda 1996, p. 19). Success as a rap and ragga competitor is at least partly based on an individual's access to foreign media sources from which one learns musical aesthetics, moves and poses, styles of lyrics, appropriate clothing, and ways of talking. Important media sources include magazines, sound recordings, and music videos – all of which are more readily accessible to youths who have greater financial resources at their disposal. Moreover, regardless of one's actual economic standing, participation in rap and ragga is loaded with class markers. Skill and knowledge of these genres is generally associated with higher social positions defined primarily by economics and education.

Because those with greater access to economic and educational resources usually have greater involvement with a rap and ragga scene, intersections between gender and class necessarily impact on women's participation. In Malawi, intersections of class and gender feature significantly in the social lives of girls and women: different gender norms and expectations exist for females of different economic classes. Common associations exist between those in upper economic levels with European/North American cultural values, including ideas about gender. Richer families usually provide similar educational and financial opportunities for their sons and daughters and generally allow their daughters greater freedom of mobility, hence the larger presence of female youths at the Legends event than at Chemba's Nite Club. Many Malawians familiar with European and North American cultural practices are aware that 'white' women frequent bars without the stigma of being prostitutes.[8] That Legends is located in downtown Blantyre, owned by white South Africans, and attracts a clientele that includes expatriates and Malawians from higher economic echelons, contributes to its identification as a 'foreign' or European/North American type of venue. Though Legends does attract 'bargirls', its 'foreign' identification makes it one of a few bar venues in Blantyre where female presence is not automatically stigmatised. Female along with male youths from wealthier families are frequent participants in the teen disco and by extension the rap and ragga competition described above.

By contrast, in most of the poorer families we have encountered, neither the female youths nor the parents embrace foreign ideas about the acceptability of female presence in bars. The types of bars in lower-income areas, such as Chemba's, tend to be male spaces where the female presence is for the most part limited to bargirls, making it especially difficult for female youths to participate in competitions at these locations. Even most girls and women from wealthier families who might regularly go to Legends or similar venues would generally not frequent a place like Chemba's because of the stigma. Girls from poorer families also tend to have less access to financial resources than their male counterparts. In many poorer families, especially in rural, but also to some degree in urban areas, women are expected to marry young and to engage primarily with tending to agriculture or small business ventures, caring for children, and other domestic activities. Men, on the other hand, are expected to marry when older and are responsible for providing materially for their families through some type of money-making venture, a job or running a business. Therefore, men generally have a longer time during which they are classified as youths (pre-marriage) and usually have greater access to public space and cash, giving them more opportunity to participate in activities, such as rap and ragga competitions, that occur away from home and require money.

Yet another factor impacting relationships between gender, class, and participation in rap and ragga, is proficiency in English. English language skills are necessary for understanding the lyrics of foreign artists and reading information in English language sources about them.[9] Advanced skills in English stem primarily from the quality and quantity of the formal education a particular youth has had, factors strongly influenced by gender and class. Overall, Malawian boys are more likely to advance through primary and secondary school, especially in rural areas. Urban areas may show more gender equity in terms of access to public primary education, but males are still more likely to continue studies through secondary school. Coupled with the younger age of marriage for many females – at which time they usually stop their studies – gender differentials in access to education prevent many women and girls from gaining the same English language skills as their male counterparts. However, urban families from higher income brackets can, and often do, send their children to private schools with more resources and more robust curricula. The greater participation of young women as rappers at the Legend's event can partly be attributed to the class factor, as many of the attendees that afternoon came from upper- and upper-middle-class families.

Intersections of class and gender also shape the kinds and amount of leisure time enjoyed by young Malawian males and females. Youths from lower economic strata tend to have less leisure time as they may go to school and contribute to their family's economic pursuits, be it farming, business or working. Female youths are especially expected to help the women in their families with all the household tasks, often leaving them with little leisure time for music-making. Those youths from richer families, by contrast, have more flexibility for how they use the time when they are not in school. Again, however, girls from these families are generally expected to help with domestic activities and the caring of younger children, whereas boys have more time to spend with their friends engaging in such things as composing and practising song lyrics. Normative gender behaviour expectations provide a social frame for understanding the mechanics of gender and class within the rap and ragga scene of Blantyre and even Malawi as a whole. But how do these dynamics play out in competitions, specifically with regard to movement practices?

Reinforcing *vs* resisting gender norms

According to Jane Cowan (1990), dance events can be sites for both reinforcing and contesting the dominant gender ideology of a population (cf. Hanna 1988, p. xiii). To a large extent, rap and ragga competitions reflect and reinforce gender norms that restrict females' public activities and venues for self-expression. At the same time, these events also provide opportunities for the contestation of normative gender behaviour, and participants do resist and subvert social standards, thereby contributing to the negotiation of gender ideals within the immediate contexts and within the larger population.

On the one hand, few females participate, and when they do, they tend to exert a great deal of self-control on stage, the dance floor, and even when seated in chairs. The gaze of many is lowered, an expression of subordination and modesty in Malawi, their movements are subtle, and their interactions with others (especially males) limited. Males, by contrast, tend to move freely throughout the space, their gazes are more direct both when performing and when not, and they interact freely with friends and strangers alike.

Yet, in the examples we presented, some females performed on stage, momentarily challenging the overwhelming maleness of the scene. And when dancing, whether as contestants or general audience members, they articulated a freedom of expression and mobility contrary to many broadly-held expectations for social behaviour. They may have toned down their movements because of concern over attracting too much attention, but they were in bars, and they were breaking down the taboo against bodily expressivity in a space generally associated with sexualised male behaviour.

Many of the females who participated also embraced local markers of emancipation, such as wearing trousers, which was illegal during the Banda era because they emphasise the shape of a woman's thighs and buttocks – bodily features considered highly erogenous zones in Malawi. Though no longer illegal, many Malawians still feel that the wearing of trousers by females is inappropriate for these same reasons. Many young women attending rap and ragga competitions also wear high heels, carry their bodies confidently, and otherwise demonstrate personal commitment to promoting a strong sense of self that deviates from what they may believe to be culturally and socially sanctioned.

The dialectic between resisting and reinforcing gender norms – the tension between contestation and consent – highlights the role of individual personality in navigating social organisation. The winning act at the Legends competition was a male–female duo, with the female having a prominent role on stage. A talented and strong presence, she rapped confidently and forcefully in a manner often observed in – and attributed to – male performance. However, off-stage her charismatic energy gave way to more normative behaviour. During the award presentation she deferred to her male partner as he received the prize and the crowd's approval. And in the courtyard after the competition, she again deferred to him when we started a conversation with her about her involvement with rap music. Following Anthony Shay, it is important to recognise that such exceptions to expected patterns of behaviour do not necessarily prove that a given social environment is more open, but rather that certain individuals have personalities that make their behaviour somehow more acceptable in certain contexts (1999, pp. 134–5). Their subversive pushing of the boundaries can, however, contribute eventually to social change.

Conclusion

Rap and ragga in the Malawian context constitute a set of lively scenes that localise two globalised popular music/dance genres. Most of the recordings and associated materials of rap and ragga informing Malawian youth interpretations of these musics emphasise male participation and masculine symbols or themes. Competitions further entrench the gendering of these scenes. These are male-dominated in their organisational structure and participatory roles, and entering the venues where they often occur or putting oneself on stage as the explicit centre of attention can be problematic for Malawian women.

Though rap and ragga competitions are sites for the contestation and negotiation of gender norms, it is important to maintain critical balance in analysing this point. We noticed that to a large extent these events served to replicate gender divisions and roles, and furthermore that allowances for female participation by males in leadership positions specifically, and broader cultural values more generally, are limited. While females do participate in rap and ragga competitions, the gendered structures and values within Malawi society, the rap and ragga scene, and specific events, makes it

unlikely that the degree of female participation will increase dramatically in the near future. Nonetheless, examining the circumstances and particularities of both male and female participation in rap and ragga events moves us toward insights into the processes of gendering intertwined with music, social practice, class dynamics, and cultural systems.

Malawian popular music in general is male dominated, with class and gender dynamics similar to those we discussed for rap and ragga serving to replicate dominant gendered power relations between male and female performers or fans. Much of our inquiry, then, can serve as a base from which to analyse the social forces and institutions undergirding Malawian pop of all genres. And the analytic frame we argued for is applicable to popular music scenes outside of Malawi, where movement practices often rival musical practices in terms of constituting the ethos of a given scene. It is in the 'background' noise of dance and movement that normative expectations are both challenged and confirmed, and paying attention to the complete picture allows for more holistic analyses into the social roles of popular musics and the constitution of social roles through popular musics.

Endnotes

1. Based in the theorising of scholars such as S. Cohen (1999) and W. Straw (1991), we take these scenes to be social and material entities – i.e. groups and particular localities – as well as 'meaningful concepts' (Cohen 1999, p. 241) within which people engage music. Such scenes also represent localised manifestations of widespread cultural phenomena, anchoring globalised musical forms such as rap and ragga in particularities of place (cf. Straw 1991; Mitchell 2001).
2. Competitions are always rap *and* ragga competitions, as the two genres are intricately intertwined in Malawi along social, cultural, and aesthetic lines. Not all those who listen to or sing rap will enjoy ragga, and vice versa, but the sociality surrounding the two genres draws on a shared pool of urban cosmopolitanism and heavily masculinised discourses of independence or toughness.
3. B. Diamond and P. Moisala explain in their introduction to *Music and Gender* that the symbols of certain musical genres are 'heavily overlaid with gendered concepts, concepts that may be reflected in song lyrics, performance style, or discourse about the genre and style' (Diamond and Moisala 2000, p. 5).
4. See Fenn III (2004) for a broader examination of rap and ragga scenes in Malawi.
5. Our analysis in this paper stems from ethnographic fieldwork conducted primarily during the summer of 2000 while we were living in Blantyre, but also draws on ongoing discussions about gender and popular music practice in Malawi that we have had while pursuing our individual research projects from 1996 to the present. In preparing this paper, we reviewed field notes as well as several hours of videotape we shot at competitions in 2000.
6. 'America' is commonly used in Malawi to refer to people and materials from the United States of America.
7. Cheryl Keyes (2002, pp. 162–3) and William Erik Perkins (1996, p. 49) explain that the United States media has promoted male rap artists over females ones thereby creating a false illusion that it is a predominantly male genre with little female participation, while Tricia Rose has examined the position of women as fans and performers in New York City hip hop (Rose 1994, pp. 146–82). With regards to the global transmission of hip hop music and culture, this strong bias toward male artists results in few recordings of female rap artists from the United States ending up in Malawi.
8. In mainstream Malawian discourse, most foreigners (with the exception of those from other African countries and South Asia), and by extension their cultural practices, are generally categorised as 'white', subsuming the United States, Canada, European countries, Australia, New Zealand, China, Japan, and White South Africans.
9. For further discussion on language ideologies and the comparative role of English in Tanzanian and Malawian hip hop musical practice, see Perullo and Fenn (2003).

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