

MOYA ALIYA MALAMUSI

Moya Aliya Malamusi in the field

INTRODUCTION

In this article I would like to introduce the reader to the ways how I work in the field. In order to make this introduction as authentic as possible I am reproducing parts of two field research reports which I have written in other contexts. Both reports concern research I was carrying out in Malawi, southeast Africa.

The first report describes in which way I discovered, by mere chance, Mario Sabuneti, the performer of a home-made drum chime from Mozambique. The text is intended to show that in field work we should not be rigidly attached to just one topic; but we should be open and ready to change the subject of our research any time it is necessary. If we don't find what we are looking for, perhaps we find something else instead, which may be even more important.

The second report shows another aspect of my work. It gives the reader a glimpse of what happened to my life-long friend and co-worker Donald Kachamba (1953-2001) and to me (see also our CD, Malamusi 1999b) on a field trip to the medical practitioner Paulo Luka in Ntcheu district. My narrative shows that we field workers have to be ready to endure all sorts of hardships in order to carry out our work. Sometimes our experiences can also be quite funny.

1. IN SEARCH OF GUITARIST ALAN NAMOKO (1988)

In field work it often happens that as a researcher you travel a long way searching for something you have in mind. In the middle of your search you discover that you cannot get it under any circumstances, but instead you suddenly meet something else that was not at all in your mind... Then you should just work on this and not miss the chance!

This is exactly what happened to me. On the January 12, 1988 I thought of preparing a trip to town where I would see a certain guitar playing group called

Chinvu River Jazz Band, whose leader was a well-known Alan Namoko (cf. Mmeya 1983; Kubik et al. 1987: 29). Asking many people in Blantyre for his whereabouts I was told that nowadays he was not seen very often, but at Bangwe township people might be able to tell me more. In Bangwe I inquired at the *talaveni* (from English “tavern”), the beer garden where he used to play. But there, too, people did not know where he had gone with his band, saying he had not been heard of for long time. Next I went to the tailors and shoemakers in the township to ask whether they had seen him. The shoemaker told me: “If you want that band, ask his relatives who stay at Namatapa area”. I did not know where that place was, so he was kind enough to take me there. It was not very far. The relatives told us that Alan Namoko and his band had gone to their home village, and that they did not know when they would come back. Now I asked where that was and they gave me their address. I was still determined to arrive there, even if it was far. I found a man with a car and negotiated a price for taking me to Namoko’s home village called Mangazi near Nansadi in Thyolo District.

Just before arriving at Nansadi near Thyolo, we found boys with fishing lines at the Luchenza river and stopped to ask them for the way to Mangazi village. They told us to continue on the road we were driving. I asked whether they knew the Chinvu River Jazz Band and they said: “Yes indeed, we know them, but you will not find them there, because they have just passed here (!) going to the other side of the river where they said they will play at a millet beer party (*mowa wa masese*).”

So then we left the car and began walking and asking people as we were walking on. Everybody said: “Yes, they have just passed here, but we don’t know where they went!”

So much for the twists and turns of field work! Now we were very tired and began to think of having failed. Feeling defeated we went back to Bangwe township near Limbe, where we had come from. Suddenly, when we arrived at the market of Bangwe, we found many people assembled at a certain spot. I told the driver to stop, believing that perhaps Namoko was playing here after all. Instead, we heard the sound of a strange style of drumming (*ng’oma za maimbidwe achilendo*). I approached the group; listening carefully, I became enthusiastic about this music to the point that I offered to pay for one song. This is called *kubecha nyimbo* in Chichewa. For musical groups which play in a public place such as a market, or at a bus station, much of the money which they earn comes from *kubecha*. People in the gathering audience pay for songs of their choice.

When the group had finished the song I had paid for, I approached the band leader, asking him about his band, where they came from and what kind of music they were playing. Mário Sabuneti said:

“Gulu lathuli ndilochokela ku Mulanje, ndipo nyimbo zomwe ife tikuimba ndizochokela ku sekhere chamba cha makolo athu, amakonda kuimba pa mowa, ndinsopamasewera ena aliwonse. Koma iwo saimba ngati momwe tikuimbilamu ai, ife timaimba mwina ndipo tinachula dzina lina la chamba chimenechi timati Samba Ng’oma Eight, chifukwa ndimaimba ndekha ng’omazo. Choyamba ine ndinaphunzila ng’oma za sekhere kuchokela kwa bambo wanga ndipo nditadziwa ndinayamba kumaimba nthawi zonse pamodzi ndi bambowo, koma kenaka ndinaganiza kupanga ng’oma zanga zokwanila eight ndipo ndikumayesa kuimba mofanana ndi sekhereyo koma kenaka ndinaona kuti zikukhala bwino ndipo ndinayamba kuphunzitsa anzangawa kufikila lero lino.”

(From my original Chichewa field notes).

“This our band comes from Mulanje, and the songs which we are playing are derived from *sekhere*, a type of music and dance of our grandparents which they like to perform at beer parties and also at any other kind of social event. However, they don’t play in the style we are playing; we play in another way and also gave this music another name. We call it *Samba Ng’oma Eight*, because I play all these drums alone. First I learned to play the drums of *sekhere* from my father and when I knew well I began to perform all the time together with my father. Eventually I thought of making eight drums of my own, and I was trying to play in a way similar to *sekhere*. When I was satisfied with the instruments I began to teach my friends and this has been so until today.”

(see fig. 1 and fig. 2)

2. THE MAGIC BROWN PAPER OF PAULO LUKA (1994)

The information following here is a summary of research data gathered during our second visit to the medical practitioner, Paulo Luka, beginning October 6, 1995. On the first day of this visit, Paulo Luka took me and my companion, Donald Kachamba, to various parts of his clinic and he allowed me to photograph his activities extensively, and also the objects he had collected from people he had identified as wizards and witches (see series of photographs). While Paulo explained to us some of these objects, Donald Kachamba recorded him.

Since there was much other interaction at the same time, visible in some of the photographs, and since we eventually became participant observers, when we were allowed to experience his *vidiyo* (!) (from English “video”) I will not transcribe his explanations here literally from our tape, but instead present our data in the form



Fig. 1: This is the way Mario Sabuneti sits when playing his drum-chime. The three high pitched drums are set up on his right side. The photograph also shows how the two rattle players use to sing their songs: Julius Sabuneti, who is Mario's brother (left) and Samuel Magwela. January 13, 1988, Chileka.

of a narrative including my own thoughts and interpretations while we were on the spot.

First, Paulo Luka took us to a place in his clinic where he used to keep the witchcraft objects he had confiscated from some of his clients. He was keeping them in a big bag (*chithumba*). He put them out one by one, placing them on a mat, or holding them in his hand, so that I could photograph while Donald recorded his explanations. All these objects were once in the possession of *amfiti* whom he had denounced, and all were once used as magical instruments to kill. We got an overview of the *amfiti*'s "weapons", such as horns (*nyanga*). The term *nyanga* refers quite generally to any lengthy object that is used to keep lethal substances (*chinthu chosungila mankhwala oopsya kuti aphe*), such as original animal horns – hence the origin of the term – but nowadays also lengthy plastic bottles.

Next he put out some of the *nsupa* (phials), originally always a small calabash, but nowadays also plastic containers of similar shape. He also showed us *afisi* (hyenas) which can be various objects; sometimes an animal tail (*nchila*) can have the function of a "hyena" (*nchila umakhoza kukhala fisi*). *Fisi* (hyena) is a common transformation employed by a wizard or witch. Then he showed a remarkable example of a wizard's/witch's aeroplane (*ndege*) which is used by the *amfiti* for dislocation, when they want to fly from one place to another, in order to bewitch a person who resides far away. Paulo Luka explained that the *amfiti* also had a "hiring service" (*bayala*). If a *mfiti* lacks transport to another area where he wants to kill his brother or perhaps make him sick (*kukapha kapena kukadwalitsa m'bale wawo*) he will be assisted by other *amfiti* who are in possession of flying facilities and he can hire their plane (*ndege*). If he wants to move quickly to a remote place he then asks someone with a plane. Paulo Luka continued to explain that there are many different kinds of witchcraft aeroplanes (*zilipo zamitundu-mitundu*). But the

one which we saw and photographed was made from a tortoise shell (*chigabado cha kamba*).

Paulo also pulled out of his collection in the bag the bones of children (*timafupa taana*). The *amfiti* dig out the corpse of a child from the grave, eat the flesh, and what remains – the bones – they keep them for various uses in further witchcraft activities. Then Paulo told us again about the *dziphaliwali* (lightning) used by some wizards/witches and he began to mention his *vidiyo* which he was keeping in a certain house and through which his clients would actually see the witchcraft activities of some others going on in their home villages.

I became very curious about this *vidiyo*. Myself and Donald Kachamba wanted to find out what that was, but when I politely requested Paulo Luka to show it to us, we saw from his facial reaction that in his heart he was not very happy about our request. I had no idea why he should be so reluctant, since he had always been so generous with us. Eventually, when we continued to bring up the issue of the *vidiyo*, he said: “All right, let us go, so that you see some other people who are watching it right now, and get an idea what is going on there!” We then entered a very small house, not subdivided into rooms; it was all just one room (*kanali kopanda chipinda komwe*). Inside there were some people sitting and gazing at a large yellow-brown paper which had been fastened on a wall of that room. The people were quiet; there was no sign that they were in any state of being possessed by spirits, and yet they all were seeing something on that *vidiyo* – the large khaki-brown paper, while neither my companion nor I noticed anything at all! The eyes of three people whom we found inside were fixed on that “screen”. When we asked them what they were seeing there, everyone explained what they were seeing; one of them said he was seeing a person standing next to a coffin ready for burial; another one

Fig. 2: From time to time the two rattle players, while they are singing, also use a police whistle. This picture shows one of them whistling. January 13, 1988, Chileka.



said: “I am seeing a certain mother whom I know from our home village sprinkling medicines on my veranda”, and the third person told us: “I am seeing a hyena running away with a child it has kidnapped (*ndikuona fisi akuthawitsa mwana*)”.

To our dismay, we were seeing nothing at all. We found that it was hard for us to believe everything what those people were saying; but we also had doubts about our own sanity. Was it perhaps we who were stupid (*dzitsiru*)? In our hearts we were overcome by the desire to see on that *vidiyo* what sort of witchcraft activities were going on in our own village in Chileka, but we noticed that Paulo Luka somehow resisted our desire for a personal experience of his *vidiyo*. Within a short while, he left us alone with those people inside the hut.

It gave us quite a bit of worries that Paulo Luka apparently did not want us to learn the truth about his *vidiyo*. When we left the hut in search of Paulo in order to approach him once again with our desire, we heard from other people that he had already left his clinic and gone home! Time had run out, but we did not want to leave his place defeated, so we went back to the Ntcheu administrative post for finding a place in the local rest house to stay overnight, with the aim of seeing Paulo Luka early next morning.

Next morning our thoughts had not changed that we wanted to experience that *vidiyo*, and then, perhaps in the afternoon of that day, return to Blantyre-Chileka. This was in our thoughts. But when we went to the *sing'anga's* house, we received the surprising news that he had left for Blantyre in the middle of the night, after certain people had come to fetch him. This startled us indeed. When we asked about his wife, we were told that she was here and had already left for the clinic (*chipatala*) of her husband. We knew, of course, that the wife was involved in his medical practice, and that they helped each other; so we thought perhaps she might be willing to reveal to us the secret of seeing something on that khaki-brown paper.

At that stage we did not know why Paulo Luka did not want us to experience his *vidiyo* and that behind it there was his fear, that we as research workers (not clients) might find the experience very uncomfortable. If we actually were subjected to the rite allowing us to experience the *vidiyo* like the others (*ngati ife tichitedi nawo mwambo wowonela nawo vidiyoyo*) we might have to stay in his clinic for two full days. In fact, everything that we had been told that morning, that some people had taken Paulo Luka to Blantyre in the middle of the night, eventually turned out to be a lie. He was seriously hoping that we would get tired waiting and just leave the place, without the *vidiyo* experience.

However, he did not anticipate the determination of those young men we were (*ife anyamata amakani*)! Since we had decided to find out about the secret we went

again to his clinic where we found his wife together with some boys who were helping her to administer medicines to their clients. We told her that we had already reached an agreement with her husband to let us experience the *vidiyo*, but since he was absent at the moment, what about her showing it to us, we asked her. Without any hesitation the wife said: "All right", and that we should enter the little hut where the *vidiyo* was. Then she told her assistant that he should go and clean two small cups and come back with them into that hut. In the meantime a woman had arrived in distress crying that her child had been caught last night by a hyena, when it was going outside to urinate; she wanted to know what was really behind it, suspecting witchcraft, and so she also entered the little hut. Paulo Luka's wife was inside and we saw her with a plastic bottle, in which there was a whitish liquid and she began to pour some of it into my cup, then some of it into Donald Kachamba's cup, then she drank some of it herself, probably to demonstrate that it was not poison, and finally she gave some of the liquid to the woman client who now shared the *vidiyo* hut with us. The substance looked like rice water and it reminded me of what we call in Chichewa *chisunje* or *chitiwi*, i.e. the water in which pounded maize is soaked (*kubvika*) and kept for some days until it gets soft, before spreading it out for drying. This water has a characteristic smell. What Paulo's wife gave us to drink had a smell that was somewhat similar. Each of us drank about 0.1l (one decilitre).

Thereafter she said that we should just remain quiet and look at the khaki-brown paper on the wall. We followed her instruction and stayed silent. The entrance to the hut was closed in order to block the disturbing daylight; it was now dim in the little hut, and soon there was not enough air, and also it was unbearably hot, while the eyes of the three of us were just gazing at the wall where that big paper was attached. After about 25 minutes we observed that the woman next to us who was in such distress began to shake violently, and talk various things in a manner that I began to ask her: "Are you fine?" She did not reply at all, and continued to talk things of her own.

After a short time I began to experience a state that was strange (*zachelendo*) with my head working as if I were under the influence of alcohol, and I began to discern things that seemed to pass across the paper (*zinthu zoyenda*), but no subjects such as people or anything in relation to our village. I asked Donald: "Have you started to see anything?" He replied: "Yes, I am beginning to see this and that, but my body is not in good shape, I want some water to drink." So I shouted, calling a person outside to bring some drinking water, but the manner I shouted was as if my head was like that of a mad person (*munthu wamisala*). We began to ask ourselves for how long this mental state of us would continue, and the answer was: we don't know.

Before we got as far as seeing those witchcraft things we had thought we would discover, we decided to get out of there, but what a surprise: we could hardly stand on our feet, we did not get out of that hut walking but crawling, moving out on hands and feet like small children. That we should stand, even for a moment, was very difficult due to dizziness. When we had reached outside, in the fresh air, we were only calling for drinking water; but the water they brought us, I have no idea what kind of water that was and where it came from. I think it was mere luck that we did not catch any serious infection.

We then tried simply to remain quiet, but experiences such as these were really alien to our lives. Donald Kachamba began to raise criticism about our field methods; he said: "But we are idiots indeed! Why did we press for this sort of experience, while our host did not want us to get involved with this so-called video. If it had ended with our death, the people in our village would not even know where we had gone!" He continued to say that the greatest foolishness was that we both had drunk the liquid at the same time, without a control person, leaving our car outside and our research equipment unattended.

Our drugged state continued for a long time, and I began to realise that it was already lunch time, and hunger began to hurt us. I tried to rise up from the ground

and walk a bit, at least as far as the place where we had parked our car. Thereafter, Donald also arrived and I noticed that he was in much better shape than I, with a bit more of strength. At this point we tried to say good-bye to all the onlookers who had gathered to watch what we fools had done. It was very hard for me



Fig. 3: The two people in their gowns are the *sing'anga* Paulo Luka and his wife, helping each other in their work to uncover the trouble of the people who come to them for consultation. They wear a kind of uniform with Christian symbols, all in white, upon which the names Yosefe and Petulo are written. At Chipula village, T. A. Njolomole, Ntcheu District, October 6, 1995. Photo no. 95/28, author.



Fig. 4: Consultation of a husband and his wife with conjugal problems, before entering the room to see by themselves on the brown magic paper what has happened to the wife. Eventually she confesses that she had sexual relations (*chigololo*) with another man whose name she reveals to be Njema; this was the man, she admitted, who was all the time after her. In the background of Paulo Luka's consulting room we can see another couple waiting to be attended. At Chipula village, T. A. Njolomole, Ntcheu District, October 6, 1995. Photo no. 95/2/12, author.



Fig. 5: Medicines to be rubbed into scarifications are those which many *asing'anga* rejoice to prescribe. Here we see a young man in Paulo Luka's clinic who has just scarified his father's right foot (*kuchekela*) and rubbed in medicines to cure the disease that has afflicted his legs. At Chipula village, T. A. Njolomole, Ntcheu District, October 6, 1995. Photo no. 95/2/20, author.

to get our car going, because my hands to grasp the steering wheel were too weak, even for any kind of operation. Eventually we drove away very carefully. As we proceeded, Donald said that it would be impossible to arrive in Chileka the same day; he proposed we should drive to Biriwiri store near Ntcheu to his former wife, Mrs. Hanna Kaukonde, eat something and even sleep there.

This was a wise proposal; so we set off there. She received us well, gave us clean water to drink, and something to eat. At that juncture I began to vomit terribly, in contrast to my partner who seemed to have supported that drug much better than I. The same day Donald resumed our research (!) and made tape-recordings of

story telling in his former wife's place. Myself I was ill and exhausted. People in that place began to tell lots of unpleasant stories about that drug which Paulo Luka used to give his patients so that they would see on that "video" who had bewitched them or their relatives. Apparently the substance came from Mozambique, Paulo Luka's origin. It was impossible for us to find out what it was, but in any case our research was not pharmacological. We have checked Jessie Williamson's book on plants in Malawi, and so far not discovered any description of a substance that would match with our experience.

In the evening I began to feel better and think normally, but my stomach was still in an awful condition. We then slept at Hanna's place. Next morning we felt that we would be able to drive slowly back to our research base and home in Chileka. Now we knew why our host, the *sing'anga* Paulo Luka had not wanted us to drink that particular "medicine" (*mankhwala*) and why he seemed to run away from us when we insisted upon experiencing the *vidiyo*.

Obviously, Paulo's clients were convinced that the khaki-brown paper was a special video to allow them to watch those wizards and witches who had hurt them, at work. For me, however, the credibility of anybody who would say "I was watching such and such" on Paulo Luka's *vidiyo* had ended that day. We had experienced by ourselves that it was only the power of that drug which induced that hallucinatory experience in the person's brain; that all those things were in their thoughts. The result of our experience was simply my conviction that there were powerful mind-altering drugs, and that everything Luka's clients were believing to see actually took place in their own thoughts. But I know if I gave such a statement before the *sing'anga* Paulo Luka, he would vigorously deny it and accuse me of spreading lies with the intention of denigrating the good reputation of his medical practice (*kuiipitsa dzina lawo la using'anga wabwino*), while my statement is simply based on my own experience of what happens to a person after consuming that substance.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Research in cultural anthropology can be described in Chichewa, my first language, as *kafukufuku wa mbiri za wanthu ndi zikhalidwe zawo*. The term *mbiri* includes what can be called in English "tradition", "history", "customs" etc. *Zikhalidwe* refers to the ways people stay and behave within their societies.

Naturally, there are many different methods a researcher can use, and everyone has to find for themselves the answer according to what he or she wants to know through research. In this article I have tried to show how the same person, alone or

in company, can choose between different strategies. In the first example I ended up discovering a remarkable group, *Samba ng'oma*, and I put my experience on record for others and the research community to share it. In the second example, Donald Kachamba and I wanted to know what the secret was behind that strange brown paper which the *sing'anga* (medical practitioner) Paulo Luka was using to make his clients see the wizards and witches. What was its magic (*matsenga*)? We soon learned it with considerable discomfort.

But there are also warnings. People whom we meet during fieldwork react differently to our curiosity. Some people in southeast Africa (and anywhere else in the world) will allow us to do our work. Others will think of it as a commercial undertaking, i.e. that we are doing all this in order to make money out of them, their photographs, their voices etc. In such a case one may get this typical question in Chichewa: “*Tsopano mukatero, ndiye m'matani?*” (And now, when you do these things, what is it that remains to be done?) It is a very indirect, even polite way to remind the researchers of something they should not forget. It may happen that a stranger will not understand the meaning behind this phrase. But the answer to this question is: *kulipira* (to pay)! The person wants to say: “And now, if you record on tape the voices of these people, how much money do you normally pay to them?”

We do, of course, recognize the legitimate demands of informants, helpers, interpreters and many others. But the situation can be unpleasant, if we happen to arrive in the footsteps of someone who misbehaved, or a tourist who paid excessively, for example for just one musical performance which he wanted to sponsor. The result can be serious misunderstandings, such as people thinking of us as the next “sponsors” or as “donors” acting on behalf of some organization.

Problems can also be created by the opposite behaviour. It can be that a previous researcher or visitor to the village would take people's hospitality for granted without any consideration of their needs and their social and economic situation. In such a case, the reaction we then get may be frosty. People always transfer their previous experiences upon a newcomer.

Finally, I have to stress that researchers should make themselves acquainted with the language spoken in the place where they want to work. Not being familiar with the language means to be entirely dependent on interpreters to be hired, and the patience of those people may be directly proportional to the money they receive. If they receive too little, they may take revenge, by shortening or distorting the information they give to researchers. It can even happen that false information is given out of pure malice.

Speaking the language not only increases the researchers' chances of being accepted locally – because it demonstrates that they too care about the people –, it also helps to assess the validity of any information.

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