

Against the Norm: Religion, Witchcraft, and the Re-Integration of Elderly and “Socially Dissident” Returnees

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns
Mzuzu, Malawi

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Cover photo: The clock tower in the Central Business District (CBD) of Mzuzu. The picture also shows a new modern road which is a sign of progress in the city, even though we are still fighting so many social ills. Photo by Alfred Huma.

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Introduction

This report explores lived reintegration experiences of Malawian returnees from Johannesburg, living in Mzuzu, Malawi. Mzuzu is one of the four cities in Malawi, with a population of 221,272 (National Statistics Office, 2018). In this study I explore the challenges and opportunities that the returnees face reintegrating to Mzuzu, focusing particularly on the experiences of elderly returnees and those who break with traditional, often religiously and socially conservative norms in Malawian society. I also provide recommendations to work toward solutions for these returnees.

In this paper, I agree with observations made in a similar study conducted by Ahmadi Yaser Mohammad Ali (2013) in Afghanistan, where he observed that elderly returnees face numerous challenges with their reintegration to their societies of origin. However, this paper identifies challenges that are specific to elderly people in Malawi. These include witchcraft accusations, changes in the business terrain, broken families, challenges with freedom of thought, hunger, extended families which strain them, loss of resources, and lack of social security. The report points out that there are initiatives aimed at helping elderly returnees, but these are not adequate to help them reintegrate smoothly.

A Note on Terminology

In order to explain elderly returnee experiences in this paper, I use several terms. My use of the term “elderly” in the report is in line with the World Health Organization (2002) argument that realistically, an elderly person in Africa is someone who is above 50 years of age. I have used this age limit because there are less than 2 million people who are above this age in a population of 17,563,749. This means that if someone reaches that age in Malawi, he or she is amongst the oldest of the population. I have also used the word returnees to describe residents of Mzuzu who left for South Africa and decided to come back home. I also refer to these returnees as migrants, to mean that they left Mzuzu for Johannesburg, and came back. I am careful to use such a broad view of migrants because most migrants from Malawi are not given refugee status and most of them are categorized as economic migrants, yet they migrate for a complex mix of reasons that include both forced displacement and economic drivers—a concept commonly known as “mixed migration.”

In the study I have used the word “reintegration” to mean a process in which migrants are enabled to re-establish themselves in a society of their country of origin (International Organization of Migration, 2020). I use the term “Nsima” to describe a local staple food that is prepared from maize flour and is usually eaten at lunch or supper. “Chikondamoyo,” on the other hand, is a local kind of cake with very basic ingredients that people eat for breakfast. I

have used the word “reintegration” to show that the migrants were part of the community, but they left and they had to adapt again to the communities that they once left behind.

The Author's Position in Mzuzu

I am a student at Rhodes University in South Africa, where I am a candidate for a Master of Arts in Media Studies. In 2018, I wrote the report with the Refugees in Town Project titled; “Staying Rooted: The Significance of Value Transfer for Integration of Malawian Refugees.” In this report, I sought to understand the lived experiences of Malawians residing in Johannesburg. After completing my coursework, I decided to return home to Mzuzu, where I conducted research. As a returnee myself, I became curious about the reintegration experiences for those who also left Johannesburg—forming the basis of this paper.

I was interested in conducting this study because elderly returnees are usually discriminated against in Mzuzu, which is heartbreaking. I believe that no one should be afraid of their lives or be socially excluded because of their age. I also have elderly relatives who have lived their entire lives closing their ears from witchcraft accusations, being tormented in their own cities .

As a returnee from South Africa, I have firsthand information and experience with what life is like for Malawians in Mzuzu. As such, I have subjectively interpreted the events. I cannot help but introduce some of this bias into this paper. At the same time, as a returnee in Mzuzu, I have also experienced several challenges and opportunities that directly impact my integration experience, and themselves constitute important data points.

I also have many relatives, colleagues, and friends in Mzuzu who introduced me to elderly returnees. Their stories profoundly influenced me. They went further than what I experienced and introduced me to a new perspective on reintegration and what it means to return. I had long, informal conversations with them, where they expressed their views on integration and being a returnee over a certain age.

People in northern Malawi speak a number of languages such as Chichewa, Tumbuka, and English. However, the majority of the elderly people speak Tumbuka, and they felt more connected to me when I used this native language. I was hence more able to share in-depth information about their lives and experiences. I therefore did not hesitate to have conversations with elderly respondents in Tumbuka.

Lastly, I am agnostic and I have personal experiences in regard to how people who are not religious are treated in religiously conservative Malawi.

Location

Mzuzu is near Lake Malawi. Migrants travel through Mozambique and/or Zimbabwe on the way to cities and towns in South Africa. Some search for jobs, others flee persecution. Base map imagery © Google 2020.



A Note on Methods

In writing this report, I based the findings on my own experiences, observations, and conversations about the experiences of returnees living in Mzuzu. I interacted with residents of Mzuzu, two of whom are elderly returnees from Johannesburg and three of whom have lived in the city for many years.

My situation as a Malawian returnee from Johannesburg who lives in Mzuzu affects my research. From my own experiences and those of the people around me, I have come to interact with elderly returnees who have openly shared their experiences with me. My observations and conversations took place over the course of approximately two months. However, I also draw on my lived experiences over the past 19 months living in Mzuzu, having returned from Johannesburg as a returnee myself.

Reintegration Experiences

Why Do Some Mzuzu Residents Leave, then Return?

During my stay in Johannesburg, I observed that elderly Malawian migrants to Johannesburg are commonly referred to as economic migrants because most of them leave for Johannesburg to find better jobs. Though this is true in some cases, numerous other Malawians leave for another reasons. Some of these reasons have nothing to do with the economy, and include leaving because of witchcraft accusations, homosexuality, non-traditional beliefs, and perpetual hunger.

In my stay with migrants in Johannesburg, I observed that migrants face a number of challenges such as lack of health insurance, poor housing, and unemployment. This may force them to return home. Some even find out that the children who they left in Mzuzu have been violated by relatives, which further encourages them to come back home.

Challenges to Reintegration

Religion, Culture, and Custom

Witchcraft Accusations Leave Returnees Guarded and Excluded

There are many setbacks that make reintegration a challenge for all returnees, but especially elderly migrants. One of the setbacks is that most people in Malawi suspect elderly people of practicing witchcraft, so they always have to be careful of what they say to avoid suspicion. Witchcraft accusations are very common—and very serious. If one has accumulated wealth in Malawi, most people think that you have practiced magic to accumulate that wealth. In Mzuzu, people believe that “witches” sometimes sacrifice their relatives and magically put them in their businesses as slaves so that they can make more money. For example, people believe that it is not possible to successfully run a maize mill without killing someone and putting him or her in the maize mill. Many also believe that some people kill their relatives, such as their first-born son, so that they can use them to make concoctions and potions.

The people who are most vulnerable to these witchcraft accusations are the elderly. This is because life expectancy in Mzuzu is so low that it is not easy to understand how the few elderly people could have survived to old age without having special powers or by using magic. The elderly are accused of using witchcraft not only to protect themselves from death but also to bewitch others and even teach young children witchcraft. Sometimes when people receive food from an elderly person, they receive it in public but throw it away privately because they think she or he wants to bewitch them.

Because of this, the community sometimes does not develop a deep and lasting relationship with elderly returnees. Apart from that, elderly people sometimes are left in fear of not

knowing how someone may interpret their efforts toward reintegration, which in the long run prevents them from developing good relations with younger members of society and ultimately, reintegrating into their communities of origin.

Mphande, a 52-year-old returnee, noted:

Some elderly people are indeed witches and they do not only bewitch people but they also teach young children witchcraft. This is why sometimes people get angry and some are killed. However, as for me, I am not known for witchcraft. I practice magic but I do so just to protect myself and my family and not to cause harm to others.

I have observed that some elderly Malawian migrants are afraid that they may be bewitched by friends and relatives, so sometimes they visit witch doctors to give them charms to protect them from people with bad or jealous intentions. Sometimes when one is sick, one may also go to witch doctors before going to the hospital, just to make sure that the illness does not actually come from witchcraft.

While I was in Johannesburg, I also observed that Malawian elderly migrants attempt to use magic to secure jobs. They believe that if one does not obtain charms from areas such as Phoka in Malawi before leaving for another city, they may struggle to find jobs. Even if you have not been bewitched, people believe that charms would make your application for a job more desirable. The charms are made in different ways, sometimes they may be cut into someone—called Simbo in Tumbuka—or the witch doctor may burn charms and trap the smoke of the charms in the job application envelope which you write in advance before you leave from Malawi.

The habit of using charms for protection is deeply rooted in Malawian culture. Many parents in Malawi take their children to witch doctors just a few days after they have been born, so that the children live with magical protections for the rest of their lives. When someone wants to bewitch them, the witch may get heavily injured hence may never attempt to play with them again. This is considered normal for most Malawians, and not evil because the intention of the practice is not to cause harm to others, but just to protect oneself from the world of perceived witches. Magic is not stigmatized in Malawian society, yet the type of magic that elderly returnees are so often accused of is associated with witchcraft and is considered evil and vile.

Not all elderly returnees practice magic or are believed to practice witchcraft. Some of the most devout and religious believe that God's protection alone will suffice. However, for some, even if they are falsely accused of practicing magic they become the talk of the city. Word travels fast and people retaliate to the extent that some of the accused are even killed or their property is destroyed. It is a crime in Malawi to accuse someone of witchcraft, but it's difficult for the police to deal with mob justice.

Broken Social Bonds

Parents also struggle to relate to their children once they return and are hence unable to develop meaningful relationships with them. This may be especially true for older migrants who

may have children who are grown and have formed their own opinions on social issues. In Mzuzu, there is a tendency that when someone has left for Johannesburg, they don't leave with their family because it is expensive to live there. Some elderly migrants, however, end up finding other women in Johannesburg, forgetting about their families back home. Returnees usually leave their new wife in Johannesburg. Because of this, returned parents rarely spend time with their children, creating wide social distance between them. This makes it difficult for the returnees to reintegrate into society because their children are not always on their side when the false witchcraft accusations emerge.

Some men who had left also complained that when they arrived back in Mzuzu from Johannesburg, they found that their wives had given birth with other men. Some returnees know this in advance through WhatsApp or Facebook so they prepare in advance psychologically to face this traumatic situation. But there are some who are caught by surprise where they just find out that all along, when they thought they were sending their wife food, they were actually just sponsoring their wife's new marriage. Sometimes they even find that the new husband was actually wearing the clothes that they left at home. This creates anger and frustration because by this time, they are too old to remarry. For some, this makes them lose confidence in love and they start living reckless lives, which further complicates reintegration and can break social bonds.

In some instances, the wife is found with another man's child but they did not get married. Some men are able to forgive this because they understand that they had been away for too long. Such decisions come with embarrassment because many people in Mzuzu will view you as weak if your wife goes to another man¹. The status quo takes away their perceived masculinity and they have to close their ears to public speculations which lead to frustration and depression.

Depression is a challenge in Mzuzu because there are no counselors available where one can go for help. Many elderly migrants, especially men, do not even share their worries with friends, because a man showing emotions is considered weak in Malawi. Sometimes one may complain to friends, but this may not be enough. Worse still, depression is not perceived as a disease so people may just laugh or they may offer unrealistic advice to embrace the depression, because "God is preparing them for greatness." All of these experiences further isolate male elderly migrants and complicate reintegration as they become increasingly distant from their communities, families, social networks, and the lives they once knew.

Broken family ties for elderly returnees also put them—especially returnee men—at further risk of witchcraft accusations. In desperate attempts to preserve their relationships with their wives, some men try to cast magic spells on them, so that they cannot sleep with other men while they are not around. Many men may also "lock" the private parts of their wives away when they migrate. One such ritual involves the husband buying a folding knife and hiding the blade in a plastic or wooden cover, then giving the knife to the wife for her to fold it closed, thereby

¹ The paper is mostly talking about men at this level because overwhelmingly, it's the man who leaves for Johannesburg and returns, while women overwhelmingly stay behind in Mzuzu.

“locking” her. The husband then takes the knife and hides it. He believes that if another man attempts to sleep with his “locked” wife, the man will get stuck, and the only way the man can come out is when the husband reveals the knife by removing it from its cover. This is one of the many methods that some elderly migrants use to “lock” their wives.

Some men prefer to leave their wives with their parents as a way of restricting them. Still others come back with a new wife and force their original wife into a polygamous marriage. Each of these acts can further erode trust and fray social bonds necessary for returnee social reintegration.

Religion is Weaponized

If one left Mzuzu because they do not believe in God, things do not really change when they return. The majority of Mzuzu residents are religious the measure of someone’s morality is their belief in religion. Most governmental and non-governmental organizations claim to operate on non-religious grounds but the truth is that they are informally deeply rooted in religious dogma. For example, before any meeting commences in Mzuzu, participants are expected to pray so that they can call upon the Holy Spirit to bless their activities. Even politicians do the same and coin their political slogans along religious lines. Non-religious people will hastily be described as cultists or witches and will bear the brunt of false allegations or accusations.

Most of the institutions that I have worked with have a non-religious rule or clause where they claim that their organization does not affiliate with any religious philosophy or dogma, hence employees must not mix religion with work. However, I have observed that since most of the organizations were dominated by religious people, the only time they call for a “non-religious” clause is when I, just like the Christians and Muslims, also wants to be heard. So, the clause is put in place just to silence unconventional views.

When I worked as a teacher at some point and I was teaching evolution, I explained to the students that it is the most accepted theory in the scientific community that tries to explain the origins of life. While I was teaching, a student raised his hand and angrily asked me to leave his God alone. I looked across the class and I realized how the students felt frustrated and I didn’t know what to do. I felt lost for simply teaching an important scientific theory.

When the government revised the curriculum, I was not surprised that they had decided to include creationism in the curriculum so that it should be taught side by side with the theory of evolution in secondary schools. I got frustrated because we are now teaching a different kind of science and our children are moving backwards to the dark ages as the rest of the world is moving forward.

Religion—especially Christianity—is deeply-rooted across Malawian society and individuals are taught to conform from a young age. Young people quickly step in line with religious principles that permeate into cultural and social interactions across all areas of life. It is ostracizing to not be traditionally religious, or to be seen as engaging in cultism or witchcraft. As an adjunct lecturer in Communication Studies, I observed that when I was giving examples, students always viewed them positively when the examples were part of beliefs accepted in traditional

religious circles. Students protested if I gave examples in class that challenged religious doctrines. So, as an agnostic lecturer, I always have to keep these “strange” views to myself, otherwise I would lose the entire class. In many ways, I was ostracized in my professional community and by my students and their families for my beliefs.

For this reason, when I observe elderly people, I also see my own experience reflected in them. This goes beyond just religion in Malawi’s highly socially conservative society. I have observed that elderly returnees who support minority rights also face a lot of challenges to reintegrate. Gay people in Mzuzu are seen as a disgrace to God and the nation, such that people who support their rights are viewed negatively and despised. I personally have a friend who lost his wife because of this stigma: when they were dating, the wife, then fiancée, didn’t care to meet many of his close friends. When they finally got married and she learned that some of his closest friends were gay, she got angry and asked for a divorce. Relatives didn’t want to intervene through counselling because they could not understand how someone could be so evil as to be gay. If someone is friends with gay people, they are seen as not religious and as a cultist. This makes integration for returnees who fall into any of these categories nearly impossible, elderly or not.

Economic Challenges to Re-Integration

Lack of Social Security

The other challenge is that most people do not have social security in Malawi. There is social security, but it is very selective and only a very small part of the population who have connections with tribal chiefs or politicians receives it. There are also all sorts of poverty mitigation interventions from time to time, by NGOs, churches, clubs, and the like. However, these are also sometimes hijacked by politicians who would like their followers to benefit more, in a cycle of corruption. In addition, elderly people who were once in South Africa will usually not be considered poor or ultra-poor, even as they are evidently struggling, and may not be eligible for these initiatives. Sometimes it is because they have better clothes or they have a number of modern household items which they brought back with them, which are more readily available in Johannesburg. Yet they are socially isolated, poor, and have few to no social safety nets or connections to draw on. In many ways, this makes them worse off than people who are embraced by the community. People argue that if they are truly that poor, they should just sell their clothes and their property.

Furthermore, when elderly returnees return to Mzuzu, they find that things have changed and it becomes difficult to get used to the business terrain so that they can earn a living operating a small business or as an employee. Because of this, most of them languish in destitute poverty and they sometimes regret coming back to Mzuzu. Mphande described his challenges:

When I came back from Johannesburg, I had money. We could eat three times a day and pay for the children’s fees with minimal difficulty. However, since I decided to stay, problems keep coming and I can’t go back because it’s very tough to make money when you are elderly.

Hunger Makes Re-Integration Secondary

Hunger also makes reintegration of returnees difficult in Mzuzu. Every year there are episodes of hunger in Mzuzu. Even when the government says there is enough food, very few can afford to have a balanced diet or even eat three times a day. Elderly returnees are even more insecure because they do not have the strength to farm. It is difficult for returnees to properly socialize when they don't have anything in their stomach.

Since Mzuzu has a primarily agricultural economy, most elderly returnees turn to farming for their everyday needs. They sometimes open a maize and vegetable garden so that they can have the maize needed for making staple foods such as Chikondamonyo and Nsima from the maize and relish from the vegetables. However, fertilizer, which is necessary for growing maize, is so expensive that most of them cannot afford to buy it. Sometimes they buy just enough to apply to the maize near their house, but this is usually not enough to feed them for the entire year, leading to extreme food insecurity.

Head-of-Family Responsibilities

Apart from that, in Malawian society, elderly people are looked upon as custodians of their clans. Each time there is a problem in a clan, the society looks up to them for solutions. Sometimes they are even responsible for taking care of their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. This is a huge responsibility. Some family members may even indulge in early marriage and still expect support for paying bride price from the elderly returnees. In Mzuzu there are many incidents of early marriages where young girls and boys rush to marriage and end up having many children. Since most of them are not economically prepared for this, they end up leaving the children with their parents which in the long run overwhelms them, putting more strain on the elderly and making it difficult for them to spend time and energy on reintegrating themselves.

People in Mzuzu also think that the moment someone was outside the country, s/he might have been exposed to a lot of opportunities, hence must be better off economically than those who were left behind. Because of this, upon their return, relatives flock to their houses asking for all sorts of help such as school fees, food, and even coffins when there is a funeral. In order to live up to the expectations, elderly returnees cover these costs, leaving them financially paralyzed.

Sometimes the elderly returnees do not actually have the money to meet such obligations and in such case, resentment grows as relatives and friends think s/he just doesn't just want to help. In the event that they really believe him that he is struggling, the elderly returnee becomes a laughing stalk as some members of the community do not understand why someone who was in Johannesburg could have come back home empty handed.

Moving Forward: Opportunities and Recommendations

Opportunities for Reintegration

Although there are many barriers to the reintegration of returnees from Johannesburg in Mzuzu, there are also some opportunities to help resolve these challenges. For example, the Secular Humanism Association in Mzuzu has been pushing for an end to witchcraft accusations in Malawi which, in part, has opened up people's perceptions on witchcraft accusations. However, what I have heard from people around Mzuzu is that some people think the Secular Humanism Association itself must be formed of witches because in their opinion, there is no way one can challenge a witch. This leads to an endless cycle of accusations.

These sentiments suggest witchcraft accusations will lead to continued setbacks for elderly returnee integration. However, it is commendable that people are rising to create a more accepting and understanding society. The Malawian government has also been on the forefront condemning these social abuses. Yet the government is also a perpetrator: when people are accused of witchcraft, the police imprison the "witches" on the pretext that they are protecting them from the public because even the police themselves widely believe in witchcraft. This contributes to a seemingly endless cycle of double standards that specifically impacts elderly returnees and may be difficult to break. Most of these cases are supposed to be handled by tribal chiefs but this is also problematic because chiefs themselves most often believe in witchcraft.

Conclusion

The study has shown that elderly migrant returnees in Mzuzu and those who dissent from traditional conservative social norms face a number of setbacks that makes it difficult for them to fully reintegrate in Mzuzu. These challenges include witchcraft accusations, hunger, social pressure, lacking social security, poor relationships between the children and their parents, and managing the strain of providing for large families. However, there are NGO and government anti-poverty initiatives. Behavior change campaigns by the Secular Humanism Association are also beginning, albeit slowly, to help ease these challenges. These findings demonstrate that elderly returnees face serious challenges regardless of their important roles they play in their cities and towns, but also that these challenges cannot be resolved by a few individuals. We must all work together across Malawian society and the migrant diaspora for systemic social change.

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About the RIT Project

The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

www.refugeesintowns.org

About the Author

Mwaona Nyirongo is a student at Rhodes University in South Africa, reading towards Master of Arts in Media Studies. In his studies, he explored the relationship between critical social theory and critical media studies, to understand how minorities are treated in the world and media spaces. He is interested in studying the integration and reintegration of Malawian migrants. He currently in Malawi conducting master's research.

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

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