

Opinion

A cameraman's tale: focus and perspective in Kay Chiromo's *Visual Arts of Malawi*

Watson Msosa

UNESCO's much-awaited memorial volume of the late Kay Chiromo is now on the market.¹ Better known for the innovative realism of his portraits, Kay Chiromo's concerns went beyond the canvas. His most eloquent attempt to define these broader interests is the video essay *The Visual Arts of Malawi*, and so it is time to reflect on what he outlines there.²

In many ways, *Visual Arts* stands alone if only because the video essay is yet to be exploited by Malawian intellectuals. There are, however, other video essays on the arts in Malawi. Professor Gerhard Kubik who has filmed in Malawi since 1967 has occasionally edited portions of his enormous corpus.³ His *African Guitar*, which features Daniel Kachamba and other Malawian performers, came out only in 1994. Steven Friedson, in turn, released *Prophet Healers of Northern Malawi* in 1989, followed by *Ingoma Dance of the Ngoni People* and *Malipenga Kazoo Bands* in 1994. Closer to home, Charles Namondwe completed his Masters project *Gule Wamkulu: the Great Dance* in 1992. Even more familiar to local audiences is the work of film crews from the Ministry of Information on dance and other aspects of culture. The list could no doubt be extended to include occasional television documentaries abroad and other amateur work at home. So what is it that Kay Chiromo achieves in *Visual Arts* and what might set it apart?

It should be noted at the outset that Chiromo's film was produced locally. Indeed, Chiromo solicits little technical support, being seemingly producer, cameraman as well as editor. This may demonstrate, on the one hand, that it is possible to embark on ambitious projects with limited resources, or it may simply reflect other constraints from the sponsors. Whatever the case, the production reveals technical compromises that occasionally get in the way. There are aesthetic repercussions for the film but also, more seriously, lapses in delivery of the argument.

One aesthetic embarrassment is Chiromo's use of the camera, particularly his recourse to the zoom. In general, zooming is discouraged in film production because it generates a two-dimensional perspective of the visual field. Thus, the advantage of film which emphasizes the three-dimensional flow of events is lost. As for the editing, the primary limitation is perhaps the editing facility itself.⁴ In a complex essay such as *Visual Arts*, fade outs are essential to mark pauses in thematic development. As it turns out, the film relies almost exclusively on straight-cut edits. It is therefore a testimony to Chiromo's ingenuity that the narrative flows at all. That said, the absence of innovative graphics, such as would be available in a better endowed editing facility, makes for a colourless presentation. On-camera interviews in local languages are, for instance, marred by voice-overs of the narrator which take away from the ambience of the setting. The standard technique is to use subtitles, but this solution was not available to Chiromo. This is further confirmed by the crude final credits which are generated from posters.

Similar technical limitations surface in the editing of the audio track. For instance, when Chiromo explores attitudes of different churches to art, the ambient sound, in reality superimposed, is intended to reflect the music of the respective churches in order to identify them. As the narration shifts from one church to another, the music is crudely intercepted by straight-cut edits. The effect is jarring and suggests thematic discontinuity rather than continuity. A more creative way out of this dilemma would have been to use multiple audio channels, but it is unclear if the production had access to this facility.

The strength of the film, however, lies elsewhere. It is in Chiromo's grand effort to position artists and art production in Malawian communities. Two substantive claims are advanced. First, that art production in Malawian cultures subsists in social functions. Second, that we can understand contemporary visual arts in Malawi by identifying the respective art producers and thus classes of visual arts that these define. The first argument takes Chiromo through a historical survey of various ethnic groups in Malawi and the artistic traditions associated with them. The second argument traces transformations in contemporary art production as a result of government, entrepreneurial, and other institutional initiatives.

Chiromo's *Visual Arts* clearly attests to the depth of the producer's research. In point of fact, the film traces Malawian arts through a period of 3,000 years. While Chiromo provides no rigorous argument to relate akafula rock art to contemporary

Malawian cultures, he does demonstrate that latter rock paintings in the Dzalanyama mountain range belong to the Chewa and reflect contemporary Chewa culture. Indeed, a central thrust of the film is to trace artistic production in what he terms 'social functions'. A survey of decorative arts associated with Chewa, Ngoni and Yao initiation ceremonies, as well as more mundane activities, takes us through *uyeni* beadwork in Ngoni girls and symbolism in *nyau* masks, among other findings. Of special interest here is the interdisciplinary focus of the argument. To trace art production embodied in a social institution is to explore the meaning and significance of the institution itself. Thus the argument leads Chiromo into the respective histories of the cultures themselves.

In the second part of the argument, the central question is perhaps what is being done to promote visual arts in contemporary Malawi. By far the greatest influence on visual arts today is commercialisation. The tourist industry has generated a class of entrepreneurs engaged in mass production of curios and, less prominently, ceramics and graphic arts. Chiromo also traces the impact of recent religions, such as Christianity and Islam, on community attitudes to art and art production. Finally, he profiles select artists such as Cuthbert Medi and colleagues from the University of Malawi. One interesting finding in this segment is the impact of government initiatives in generating forums for specialised talent, such as fabric design at the Malawi Council for the Handicapped factory (MACOHA) and David Whitehead. It is in these innovative forums that the interface between traditional graphic designs and contemporary arts is more prominently displayed.

The power of Chiromo's essay then lies in its scope. To focus on art as cultural history, economic activity, and social production is to engage a complex interdisciplinary debate. In part because of that complexity, Chiromo cannot be much more than descriptive. Indeed, the proposed disjunction between traditional and contemporary artistic production poses a challenging question which Chiromo never pursues, namely, how do artistic traditions that are not embedded in social function survive? Above all, the critical question of how traditional art designs and methods enter into contemporary production is not directly raised. Finally, to dwell on church liturgy, or *ngoma* and *nyau* performances in an essay on visual arts raises the concern: how do we distinguish between visual arts and performing arts? But perhaps it is unfair to expect Chiromo or anyone else to settle these intractable questions once and for all.

In Chiromo's defence, it should be emphasized that technical limitations are likely to plague locally produced video films for some time. Certainly, producers might benefit from exposure to basic theories of film production.⁵ Also, there is need to develop technical expertise for production crews. Above all, production facilities must themselves accommodate innovative ideas. To say all this is to acknowledge that in many ways, *Visual Arts* came before its time. Its lasting contribution remains the boldness with which it defines those connections that Kay saw between his canvas and the texture of Malawian life that his realism embodied so well.

Notes

1. M. Strumpf et al. (eds.), *Kay Chiromo Memorial Volume*. Blantyre: Malawi National Commission for UNESCO and University of Malawi, 1997.
2. K. Chiromo, *The Visual Arts of Malawi*. Zomba: Chancellor College, 1991. VHS 1 hr 24 min. The project was funded by UNESCO and the film was edited at the Chancellor College Audio-Visual Centre.
3. A comprehensive list appears in A. Schmidhofer and D. Schuller (eds) 1994. *For Gerhard Kubik: Festschrift on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, pp. 607-25.
4. see note 2 above.
5. The tendency in current theorising is to distinguish art films from films about art. In his characterisation of dance film, as distinguished from films about dance, F. Sparshott points to innovative uses of a camera that Chiromo's production would certainly have benefited from, especially in components that dwell on traditional performance. See F. Sparshott. 1995. *A Measured Pace: Toward a Philosophical Understanding of the Arts of Dance*. Toronto: Toronto University Press, pp. 440-50.

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
CHANCELLOR COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF MALAWI
P. O. BOX 280
ZOMBA
MALAWI