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Author(s): Daniel N. Posner

Source: *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 98, No. 4 (Nov., 2004), pp. 529-545

Published by: American Political Science Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4145323>

Accessed: 08-04-2019 17:03 UTC

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The Political Salience of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas Are Allies in Zambia and Adversaries in Malawi

DANIEL N. POSNER *University of California, Los Angeles*

This paper explores the conditions under which cultural cleavages become politically salient. It does so by taking advantage of the natural experiment afforded by the division of the Chewa and Tumbuka peoples by the border between Zambia and Malawi. I document that, while the objective cultural differences between Chewas and Tumbukas on both sides of the border are identical, the political salience of the division between these communities is altogether different. I argue that this difference stems from the different sizes of the Chewa and Tumbuka communities in each country relative to each country's national political arena. In Malawi, Chewas and Tumbukas are each large groups vis-à-vis the country as a whole and, thus, serve as viable bases for political coalition-building. In Zambia, Chewas and Tumbukas are small relative to the country as a whole and, thus, not useful to mobilize as bases of political support. The analysis suggests that the political salience of a cultural cleavage depends not on the nature of the cleavage itself (since it is identical in both countries) but on the sizes of the groups it defines and whether or not they will be useful vehicles for political competition.

Cultural differences are claimed to be at the root of many of the world's conflicts, both within states (Gurr 2000; Horowitz 1985, 2001; Lake and Rothchild 1998) and among them (Huntington 1996). Yet the mere presence of cultural differences cannot possibly be a sufficient condition for the emergence of political or social strife, for there are far more cultural cleavages in the world than there are conflicts. A reasonably competent ethnographer, dispatched to almost any country in the world, could probably enumerate dozens of differences among the peoples he or she was sent to study. These might include the color of their skin, the religions they practice, the dialects they speak, the places from which they migrated, the foods they eat, the clothes they wear, and the marriage rituals they practice, among many other attributes. Yet the vast majority of these differences are likely to play no role as axes of political competition or social conflict. Members of the society in question might readily acknowledge these differences if asked about them, but they will almost certainly view only a tiny fraction of them as relevant bases of social identification or political division.¹ This presents a puzzle:

Why do some cultural differences matter for politics and others not?

To pose this question is not, of course, to deny that political differences sometimes do follow cultural lines. In settings as diverse as Belgium, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Cyprus, and New York City, political cleavages and cultural differences correspond closely. Indeed, it is frequently argued that the political divisions in these places are made deeper precisely because they hew to ethnic boundaries as much as they do (Horowitz 1985; Lijphart 1977). But for every cultural cleavage that serves as a basis of political division there are numerous others that have no political import at all. The cultural division between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland may be highly salient, but not the one between Presbyterians and Episcopalians. The cleavage between citizens of Ile-Ife and citizens of Oyo may be central to the politics of southern Nigeria, but not the cleavage between Catholics and Muslims (Laitin 1986). Even Rwanda, a country usually assumed to be divided by a single cleavage between Hutus and Tutsis, also contains other bases of social division in its midst, such as that between Hutus of the south and northwest and, among Tutsis, between members of the repatriated diaspora and those who have been long-time Rwandan residents (Straus 2004). In principle, any of these cultural cleavages might have emerged as the central axes of political division in these countries. Why, then, did some of them become politically salient while the others remained politically irrelevant?

This paper proposes a simple answer to this question. I argue that the political salience of a cultural cleavage will depend on the sizes of the groups that it defines relative to the size of the arena in which political competition is taking place. If the cultural cleavage defines groups that are large enough to constitute viable coalitions in the competition for political power, then politicians will mobilize these groups and the cleavage that divides them will become politically

Daniel N. Posner is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Box 951472, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1472 (dposner@polisci.ucla.edu).

The author thanks Lovemore Hauya, Nahomi Ichino, Joseph Musukwa, Grace Kamusikili, Charles Kasambala, Mzee Nkhwachi Nyirongo, and Ian Shaba for their research assistance; Kimberly Smiddy for her hospitality in Lilongwe; and Carles Boix, Wiseman Chirwa, Matthew Kocher, Michael Thies, Matthew Turner, James Vreeland, Jennifer Widner, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments. I also received helpful feedback from participants at the University of Chicago Comparative Politics Workshop, the Working Group in African Political Economy, the Laboratory in Comparative Ethnic Processes, and the Hoover Institution U.S. and World Affairs Seminar. I am grateful to the Center for Social Research in Zomba, Malawi and to the Institute for Economic and Social Research in Lusaka, Zambia for facilitating this research, and to the James S. Coleman African Studies Center at UCLA and the UCLA International Institute for their financial support. All errors are my own.

¹ Fearon and Laitin (1996) provide the striking estimate that, in Africa, there has only been one instance of ethnic violence for every

2,000 cases that would have been predicted on the basis of cultural differences alone.

salient. If the cultural cleavage defines groups that are too small to serve as viable bases of political support, then these groups will go unmobilized and the cleavage that separates them will remain politically irrelevant. The cultural differences between the groups will still exist, but there will be no political importance attached to them.

The idea that the political salience of a cultural cleavage lies in nothing more than the sizes of the groups that it defines contrasts with traditional approaches to the question of why some cleavages matter rather than others. For example, it is often assumed that what matters for the salience of a cleavage is the degree of cultural differences between the groups (e.g., Caselli and Coleman 2002).² By this logic, a cleavage between Christians and Muslims would be expected to be more salient than one between Anglicans and Lutherans. A slightly different approach emphasizes not the degree of difference between the groups but the nature of the difference. By this logic, certain kinds of social cleavages—for example, those based on race—are simply assumed to have more power than others in generating salient social and political divisions.³ A third approach, exemplified in the classic work of Lipset and Rokkan (1967), emphasizes the historical emergence of social cleavages over time and the progressive displacement of one by the next. By this logic, the salience of one cleavage over another is a function of the particular stage of historical development in which the political system happens to be located at the time. Yet a fourth approach emphasizes how the experience of colonialism led to the reification of some social cleavages over others (e.g., Young 1994). For example, Laitin's (1986) investigation into the nonpoliticization of religious divisions in Yorubaland shows how the experience of British colonialism endowed social identities revolving around connections with one's ancestral city-state with hegemonic status vis-à-vis other kinds of identities. In his account, it is the marriage between the local legitimacy of city-state elites and the power of the colonial state that makes the city-state identity category salient.

In all of these approaches, either the specific characteristics of the groups in question, the history through which they were constructed, or the particular kind of cleavage that divides them is central to the explanation for why the cleavage comes to matter politically. In the structural approach advanced in this paper, predictions about which axis of social division will emerge as politically relevant depend on none of these factors. The origins of the cleavage (emphasized by constructivists) and its cultural content (emphasized by primordialists) are irrelevant. All that matters is cultural demography: the sizes of the groups that the cleavage defines relative to the political and social arenas in which they are op-

erating. Let me stress that my goal is not to suggest that group size is always the most relevant factor. Rather it is to demonstrate the plausibility of this spare and powerful hypothesis by drawing on a natural experiment that permits us to rule out competing explanations for why one cultural cleavage came to emerge as the axis of political competition and conflict rather than another.

A NATURAL EXPERIMENT

The natural experiment I draw upon is made possible by the division of the Chewa and Tumbuka peoples by the border between the African countries of Zambia and Malawi. The Zambia–Malawi boundary follows the watershed of a set of low hills that run from southwestern Tanzania to northwestern Mozambique, roughly parallel to the shoreline of Lake Malawi. The boundary was originally demarcated by the British South African Company in 1891 to distinguish the territories of what were then called Northeastern and Northwestern Rhodesia.⁴ Like many African borders, the one that separates Zambia and Malawi was drawn purely for administrative purposes, with no attention to the distribution of groups on the ground. As a consequence, it partitions the Chewa and Tumbuka peoples, leaving about two-thirds of each group on the eastern side of the border in Malawi and about one-fourth of the Chewas and one-third of the Tumbukas on the western side in Zambia.⁵

The division of the Chewa and Tumbuka communities by the Zambia–Malawi border provides a laboratory-like opportunity for comparing the salience of an identical cultural cleavage in different settings. In taking advantage of this natural experiment, I join a number of other researchers (e.g., Asiwaju 1985; Laitin 1986; Miles 1994; Miles and Rochefort 1991) who have also exploited the partitioning of ethnic groups by national boundaries. The difference between my study and theirs is that mine emphasizes the effects of the partition on intergroup relations. For these other authors, the unit of analysis is the ethnic group, and the partitioning of the group by the national boundary is employed to study how members of the same community respond to different social and political environments. In this study, the unit of analysis is not the ethnic group but the cultural dyad. Rather than explore how members of the same community respond to different national “treatments,” I explore how the relations between a pair of groups vary as a consequence of the different environments in which those relations are taking place.

It turns out that the relations between Chewas and Tumbukas in each country are quite different. In Malawi, interactions between members of the two

² This assumption is the motivation for Fearon's (2003) index of cultural diversity, which distinguishes among groups based on the structural similarities in the languages spoken by their members.

³ For a response to the position that racial divisions are somehow different from other kinds of cultural cleavages, see Horowitz (1985, 42–46).

⁴ Northwestern Rhodesia later became Northern Rhodesia and Northeastern Rhodesia later became Nyasaland. After independence in 1964, these territories became Zambia and Malawi, respectively.

⁵ Figures are from Grimes and Grimes 1996. The Chewa population does not sum to 100% because the Chewa community extends into neighboring areas of Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

communities are often antagonistic (Chirwa 1998). Members of the two groups tend to see each other as political adversaries. Since the advent of competitive multiparty elections in 1994, each group has been associated with its own political party and voters from each community have rarely crossed party lines (Kaspin 1995; Posner 1995). Although the hostility between Chewas and Tumbukas in Malawi has never generated outright violence, informed observers have suggested that it easily could (e.g., Kaspin 1995; Vail and White 1989). In Zambia, by contrast, Chewas and Tumbukas tend to view each other as ethnic brethren and political allies. Since independence, they have overwhelmingly supported the same political party. The prospect of violence between members of these groups is almost unthinkable. When asked what makes Chewas and Tumbukas different from one another, most Zambian members of these communities will tell you, "We are the same."

The border that separates Zambia and Malawi thus does more than simply partition the Chewa and Tumbuka peoples. It also demarcates two completely different zones of intercultural relations. Whereas the cultural cleavage between Chewas and Tumbukas is highly politically salient in Malawi, it has almost no political salience in Zambia. The objective cultural differences between members of these two communities may be the same on both sides of the border, but the salience of the cultural cleavage that divides them is different. What explains this striking cross-border contrast? Why are Chewas and Tumbukas allies in Zambia and adversaries in Malawi? Why is the cultural cleavage between these two communities so much more politically and socially important in one country than the other?

CHEWA—TUMBUKA RELATIONS IN ZAMBIA AND MALAWI

Experts on Zambian and Malawian politics would probably be willing to stipulate that relations between Chewas and Tumbukas are more amicable in Zambia than in Malawi. The secondary source literature on these countries is full of references to the political and social divisions between these groups in Malawi but entirely silent on the nature of their relations in Zambia (which one would have to take as evidence that cleavage between them is not important).⁶ Nevertheless, to confirm that Chewa—Tumbuka divisions are in fact deeper in Malawi than in Zambia, I collected original data in the border area of both countries during July and August 2001.

Research Design

To document the degree of social distance between Chewas and Tumbukas in each country, I administered a questionnaire in four villages: two Chewa

villages (Mkanda, Zambia, and Mkanda, Malawi),⁷ and two Tumbuka villages (Mwase-Lundazi, Zambia, and Kapopo, Malawi). Each pair of villages was located directly across the border from each other. Their locations are depicted in Figure 1.

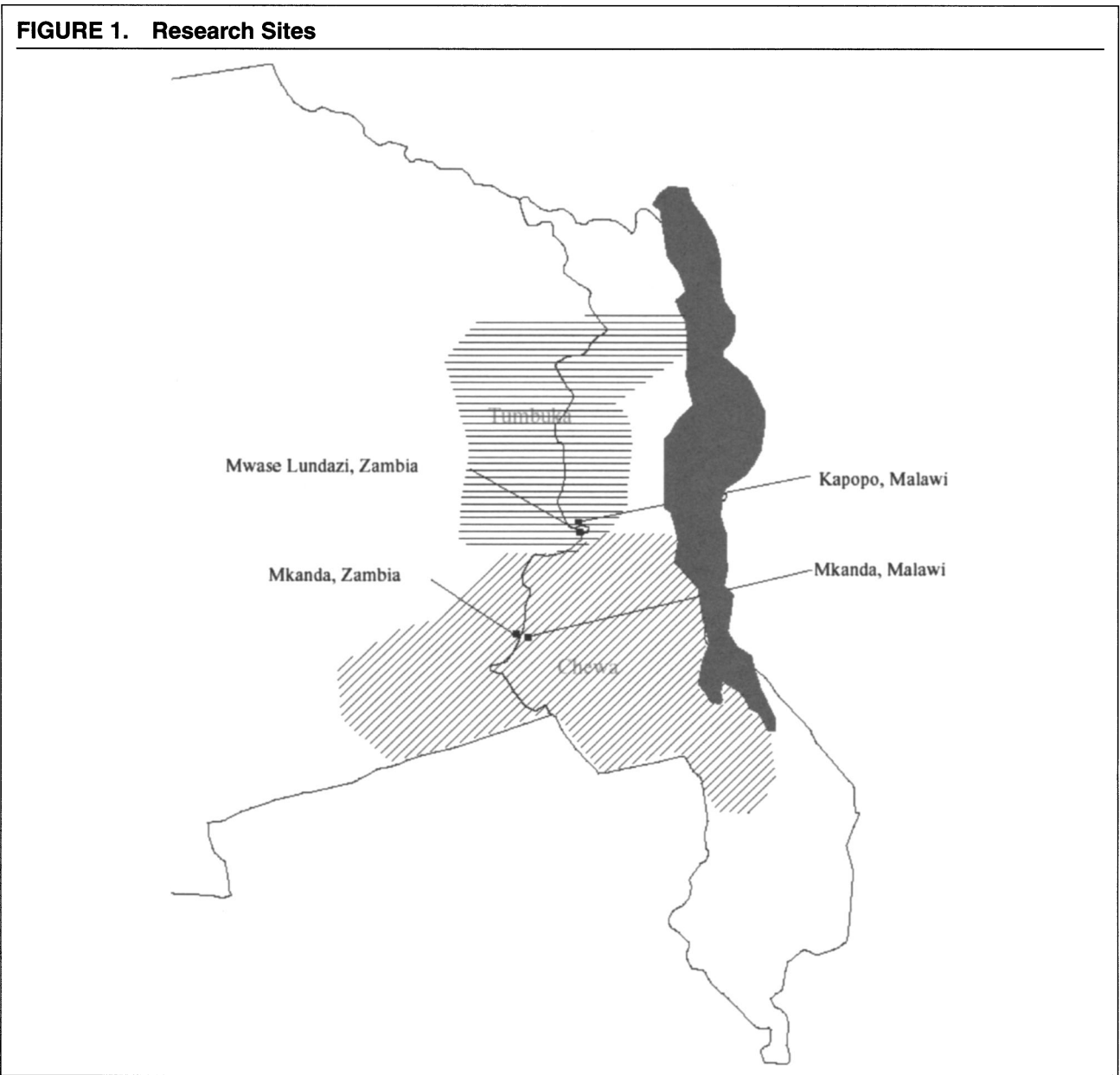
I selected the four research villages with two criteria in mind. The first was the homogeneity of their Chewa and Tumbuka populations. In the midnineteenth century, Ngoni invaders from South Africa settled in what was to become the Zambia—Malawi border area and became interspersed with the region's longstanding Chewa and Tumbuka inhabitants. Because the Ngoni practice was to marry local women, adopt local laws and customs, and otherwise incorporate themselves into the communities they conquered, the Ngoni invasion did little to alter the preexisting Chewa and Tumbuka cultures (Barnes 1954; Tew 1950). The presence of Ngonis in any of the four research villages therefore probably would not have affected the analysis. Nonetheless, to guard against the possibility that it might, I specifically selected villages that were homogeneously Chewa or Tumbuka. To prevent the possible contamination of villages by exposure to Ngonis living nearby, I also chose each Chewa and Tumbuka village pair so as to be equidistant from the nearest significant concentration of Ngonis.

My second criterion was similarity across each Chewa and Tumbuka village pair. Given that the purpose of the exercise was to be able to rule out competing explanations for whatever variation in intergroup relations that I might find, it was important to control for as many potentially confounding factors as possible. I therefore choose pairs of villages that were very close together, on the logic that this would provide a natural control for geographic and ecological factors that might affect villagers' welfare or modes of agricultural production and, thus, potentially their attitudes toward outgroup members. Mkanda (Zambia) and Mkanda (Malawi) are within 15 kilometers of each other and occupy nearly identical ecological niches. The same is true of Mwase-Lundazi and Kapopo. Indeed, both pairs of villages are so close to each other that several respondents reported regularly visiting friends and relatives across the border in the other village. Agricultural production in all four villages is also very similar, revolving around the production of maize and groundnuts for local consumption and small amounts of tobacco for domestic and international markets.

I was also careful to select villages that were equally exposed to national political affairs in their respective countries, as well as to domestic markets, and to members of the other cultural community. I proxied for exposure to politics and markets by distance from paved roads (which was approximately eight kilometers in all cases) and for exposure to members of the other community by distance from the nearest Chewa or Tumbuka village (which was equal in each pair). The only meaningful difference between the village

⁶ In addition to the sources cited above, see also Bates 1976, Dresang 1974, Gertzel et al. 1984, Kishindo 1998, and Vail 1981.

⁷ Both villages take their name from Chief Mkanda, who lives in Malawi but exercises his traditional authority on both sides of the border.



pairs was the fact that Mkanda (Zambia) and Mwase-Lundazi were on the Zambian side of the border and Mkanda (Malawi) and Kapopo were on the Malawian side.

I began my work at each of the four research sites by visiting the local chief to present my credentials and request his permission to carry out interviews in the surrounding area. Having granted his permission, the chief would then provide a messenger to accompany my research team to the neighboring subvillages, where we would repeat this process with the local headmen before actually beginning the survey work. Though tedious and time-consuming, such formalities are essential for village-level work of the sort we were undertaking. The time it took for introductions to be made and permissions to be granted allowed for news of our business in the area—and, critically, word

that this business had been approved by the chief—to filter through the community. This was indispensable for securing the willing cooperation of our respondents. It was also particularly important given that the survey we were administering required respondents to make candid statements about potentially sensitive subjects.

We interviewed 42 respondents in each of the two Zambian villages and 48 respondents in each of the two Malawian villages, for a total sample of 180. We selected respondents through a random stratified quota sampling procedure (with stratification by gender and age) from every third unrelated household.⁸ The surveys were conducted in the respondent's local language

⁸ Age categories were 18–26, 26–44, and 45+ years. Each category contains approximately one-third of the voting-age population.

(either Chichewa or Chitumbuka). We asked five questions:

- What, if anything, makes Chewas different from Tumbukas?
- Do you think Chewas (Tumbukas) here would vote for a Tumbuka (Chewa) if he were standing for president?
- What about you? Would you vote for a Chewa (Tumbuka) if he were standing for president?
- Are you married?
[If married] Are you married to a Chewa (Tumbuka)? [If no] Would you have considered marrying a Chewa (Tumbuka)?
[If not married] Would you marry a Chewa (Tumbuka)?
- In general, how do people here feel about Chewas marrying Tumbukas?

In addition to the formal surveys, I also conducted focus groups in each of the four survey sites to gather further information about the characteristics of each village and the history of Chewa–Tumbuka relations in the area.

The Differing Salience of an Identical Cultural Cleavage

The purpose of the first open-ended survey question was to confirm that the objective cultural differences between Chewas and Tumbukas—or, more accurately, respondents' perceptions of these differences—were the same in both countries. This was necessary to establish to rule out the possibility that the difference in the salience of the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage was a product of greater objective differences between these groups on one side of the border than on the other.

Again and again, respondents in all four villages identified the same attributes as distinguishing members of the two communities. Many began by pointing to differences in the two groups' languages and traditional dances. Others pointed to the communities' different norms regarding *lobola* (brideprice) payments: Whereas Tumbuka parents customarily demand payment of seven cows from their daughters' suitors, Chewa parents require only a chicken. Several respondents pointed out that Tumbukas are patrilocal, whereas Chewas are matrilineal. Others mentioned that Tumbukas insist on the ritual cleansing of the wife after the death of her husband, while Chewas do not. One respondent noted that Tumbukas use long hoes and Chewas use short hoes. Another noted that whereas Tumbukas do not make ridges when planting groundnuts, Chewas do.

While the specific cultural practices that respondents mentioned varied somewhat from person to person, nearly every interviewee on both sides of the border (83% overall) was able to identify at least one attribute, tradition, or custom—and often several—that made Chewas and Tumbukas culturally different from one another. On average, respondents mentioned 1.36 differences ($SD = 0.97$), although 23% of Zambian

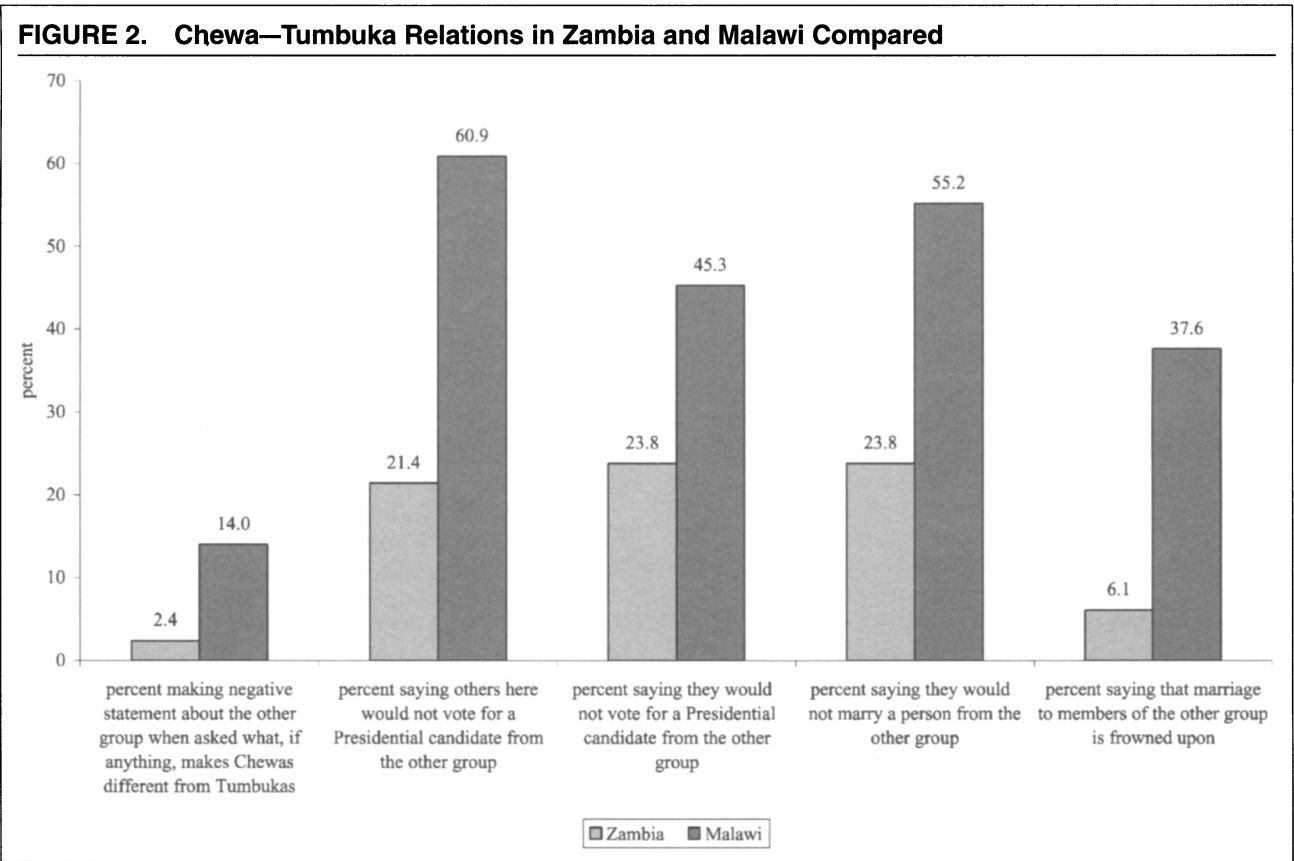
respondents and 15% of Malawian respondents mentioned none. Among those who mentioned at least one difference, the average number of differences mentioned was nearly identical on both sides of the border: 1.66 for Zambians ($SD = 1.0$) and 1.70 for Malawians ($SD = 0.91$).

Zambian and Malawian respondents did differ in one important respect. Malawians occasionally supplemented their list of objective differences with negative statements about members of the other community. For example, several Malawian Chewas volunteered that, in addition to having different cultural practices, Tumbukas are *odzikonda* (literally, they “love themselves”). Others referred to Tumbukas as nepotistic, selfish, or boastful. One Chewa summarized the relations between the two communities by saying that, between the groups, there is *mpatukano* (loosely, “great division”; literally, “going different ways”). Some Malawian Tumbukas also had negative things to say about Chewas. More than one Malawian Tumbuka respondent characterized Chewas as “crooks” or as being “too clever.” Others referred to them as “lazy.” While the number of Malawian respondents who volunteered such negative characterizations was fairly small (just 13 of the 93 who answered the question), this stood in marked contrast to the Zambian respondents, only two (of 83) of whom supplemented their objective characterizations of Chewa–Tumbuka differences with negative comments about members of the other group. In fact, the modal Zambian response to our request for a list of differences between Chewas and Tumbukas was to emphasize that “We are one” or “We are united.”

The different views held by Malawians and Zambians about members of the other group were demonstrated even more clearly in the responses to the next four questions. The first asked respondents whether they thought that people in their village would be willing to vote for a member of the other group if such a person were running for President. Whereas only 21% of Zambians said they thought that others would be unwilling to support a candidate from the other community, fully 61% of Malawians said they thought their fellow villagers would be unwilling to vote across group lines. When asked what they themselves would do (a formulation that usually leads to more inhibited answers and lower professed levels of intergroup antipathy), 45% of Malawians still insisted that they would not support a member of the other group, compared to just 24% of Zambians.

These response patterns carried over from the political sphere into the realm of private social relations. In response to the question about whether they would marry a member of the other group, just 24% of Zambians said they would not, compared to 55% of Malawians.⁹ When asked more generally how people

⁹ Given the ethnically homogeneous nature of the survey villages, individuals would have needed to go to some lengths even to find a spouse from outside of their own group. Hence, the vast majority of respondents were answering the intermarriage question in terms of



in their community felt about members of one group marrying members of the other, only 6% of Zambians said it was frowned upon, whereas 38% of Malawians said so. Note that these differences cannot be attributed to the possibility that respondents on one side of the border had greater exposure to members of the other group than respondents on the other side: Both Chewa villages were equidistant from the nearest concentration of Tumbukas, and both Tumbuka villages were equidistant from the nearest concentration of Chewas. Also, all villages were located equally far from paved roads that might have promoted exposure to outsiders or facilitated out-migration by those who were more open to marrying outside the group.

The gulf between the Zambian and the Malawian respondents on all of these questions is made clear in Figure 2. For all four questions, the observed difference between the Zambian and the Malawian response patterns is significant at $p = .01$ in a two-tailed test. These differences are all the more remarkable when we remember that the proximity of the village pairs (less than 15 kilometers in both cases), the porosity of the border, and the peripheral location of the four research sites from the center of each country's political affairs almost certainly generated a bias *against* finding

a difference between the Zambian and the Malawian respondents. If anything, the findings must be viewed as a lower bound on the true difference in the salience of the Chewa—Tumbuka cleavage in each country.

In Table 1, I revisit these results in a series of logit regressions in which I control for respondents' tribal affiliations, gender, and age and the number of cultural differences they mentioned in response to the open-ended question about Chewa—Tumbuka differences. I include this last variable to control for the possibility that the difference in the salience of the Chewa—Tumbuka cleavage in Zambia and Malawi might be a product of different perceptions about the objective differences between these communities in each country. If the degree of perceived cultural difference between Chewas and Tumbukas matters in shaping intergroup relations, then we might expect respondents who mentioned more differences to be more hostile to members of the other community. This would be reflected in a significant positive coefficient on the *Number of Differences* variable.

The analysis yields several interesting results. First, the coefficient on the *Number of Differences* variable is insignificant in all four regressions, signaling that the perceived degree of cultural difference between the two communities has no effect on respondents' attitudes toward members of the other group. Second, in both countries, Tumbuka respondents demonstrate more hostility to Chewas than Chewas do to Tumbukas, particularly when it comes to the issue of intermarriage. Third, women are significantly less willing to marry

the hypothetical (i.e., whether they would have *considered* marrying a member of the other community). Only 7.1% of Zambian respondents (6 of 84) and 5.2% of Malawian respondents (5 of 96) reported that they actually were married to a person from the other ethnic group.

TABLE 1. The Determinants of Chewa–Tumbuka Relations						
Dependent Variable	Country ^a	Tribe ^b	Gender ^c	Age	Number of Differences	Constant
Believes others in the area would not vote for a presidential candidate from the other group	1.98*** (0.370)	0.77* (0.360)	−0.60 (0.360)	0.31 (0.219)	0.07 (0.187)	−1.92*** (0.510)
Say <i>they</i> would not vote for a presidential candidate from the other group	1.16** (0.353)	0.91** (0.348)	−0.78* (0.349)	0.04 (0.208)	−0.07 (0.190)	−1.33*** (0.478)
Say they would not have married (have considered marrying) a member of the other group	1.89*** (0.410)	2.05*** (0.416)	−1.57*** (0.405)	0.16 (0.231)	0.07 (0.208)	−2.11*** (0.557)
Say that, in general, marriage to a person from the other group is frowned upon	2.43*** (0.533)	0.86* (0.428)	−0.91* (0.427)	0.37 (0.255)	−0.03 (0.238)	−3.24*** (0.718)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *Ns* = 172, 175, 176, 172. * *p* = .05; ** *p* = .01; *** *p* = .001.
^a Country coded 0 for Zambia, 1 for Malawi.
^b Tribe coded 0 for Chewa, 1 for Tumbuka.
^c Gender coded 0 for female, 1 for male.

outside their group than men. This is perhaps not surprising given the generally low status of women in both Chewa and Tumbuka societies and the preference of women to maintain links to ethnic kin who might offer them protection from abusive husbands or in-laws.

The most important finding, however, is that, controlling for all of these other factors, the most powerful determinant of a respondent's attitudes toward members of the other community is his or her physical—and, it bears underscoring, *from an historical perspective, entirely accidental*—location on one side of the Zambia–Malawi border or the other. Malawian respondents are significantly less willing to vote for a presidential candidate from the other group and significantly less willing to marry across group lines than are their otherwise identical Zambian counterparts. These findings accord with the received wisdom from the secondary source literature: Both in the political realm and in the sphere of social relations, the divisions between Chewas and Tumbukas run much deeper in Malawi than in Zambia. The objective cultural cleavage that separates members of one community from the other may be the same, but the salience of that cleavage as a marker of political and social division is altogether different.

WHY CHEWAS AND TUMBUKAS ARE ALLIES IN ZAMBIA AND ADVERSARIES IN MALAWI

Why are Chewa–Tumbuka relations so different in the Zambian and Malawian survey villages? The literature on intergroup relations offers a number of potential hypotheses, nearly all of which can be ruled out on the basis of research design.

Modernization explanations (e.g., Deutsch 1961; Huntington 1968) provide no leverage in accounting for the differing salience of the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage, since there are no discernible differences in the level of development of Chewa and Tumbuka respondents in each country, no differences in resource

scarcity, and, by design, no differences in the levels of the respondents' exposure to national political affairs across the village pairs. Nor does the so-called "contact hypothesis" (Forbes 1997) offer an explanation, since the Chewa and Tumbuka villages on each side of the border were selected so that Zambian and Malawian respondents would have similar levels of exposure to people from the other ethnic group.

The effects on ethnic relations of political institutions such as electoral rules and federalism have received much attention in recent years (e.g., Horowitz 1991; Reilly 2001; Reynolds 1999). Yet their impact can also be ruled out, since both Zambia and Malawi have identical single-member plurality electoral rules and very similar, highly centralized, candidate selection procedures. They also have parallel histories of alternating one-party and multiparty governance since independence (which both countries achieved in 1964). Both countries also share a unitary political system, with very little effective power devolved to local authorities. Colonial history also offers few bases of differentiation, since Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia) and Malawi (formerly Nyasaland) were both not only British colonies but, between 1953 and 1963, also partner states in the British-controlled Central African Federation.

Another possible explanation for the different findings in each country is that the timing of the survey work might have caught the two countries at different points in their respective electoral cycles and that this might have predisposed respondents in one country to have been more conscious of intergroup tensions than their peers across the border. Elections tend to be a time when cultural differences are exploited by vote-seeking politicians, so proximity to an electoral contest might plausibly bias the salience of ethnic divisions upward.¹⁰ If anything, however, the timing of the

¹⁰ Bannon, Miguel, and Posner (2004) find a strong positive relationship between the proximity of an election and the salience of ethnicity in an analysis of nine African countries.

electoral calendar should have heightened the salience of group divisions in Zambia rather than in Malawi. The survey work for the project was conducted in July and August of 2001, at a time when Zambia was preparing for a general election to be held four months later, in December of that year.¹¹ Malawi, by contrast, had most recently held a national election in 1999 and was not scheduled to hold its next one until 2004. To the extent that preelection ethnic mobilization affected the survey results, it should have made Chewa–Tumbuka relations more adversarial in Zambia than in Malawi. The bias, if there is one, therefore runs against the reported findings.

Two additional case-specific explanations also merit consideration. General similarities in colonial history aside, a well-known explanation for the animosity between Chewas and Tumbukas on the Malawian side of the border traces it to the impact of the Christian missionary societies that settled in the central and northern regions of the country during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Vail 1981; Vail and White 1989). There are two variants of this account. The first of them stresses the different emphasis placed on African education by the missionary societies that came to dominate in each region. According to this account, Tumbukas were fortunate to be settled by missionaries associated with the Livingstonia Mission, a branch of the Free Church of Scotland that put great stress on education. Chewas, meanwhile, had the misfortune of being settled by missionaries from the White Fathers (a French Catholic group) and the South African Dutch Reformed Church—societies that, for reasons of ideology and racism, invested little energy in promoting African literacy (Vail and White 1989).¹² Thus, when the British colonial administration began hiring African clerks and teachers to staff its growing bureaucracy and schools, it focused its recruiting among the Tumbuka, since they were the most qualified. According to Vail (1981, 145), Tumbukas comprised more than 50% of the highest-ranking Malawian civil servants in 1969, despite constituting only 12% of the Malawian population. The educationally disadvantaged Chewas, by contrast, were comparatively underrepresented in these positions. Not surprisingly, this skewed distribution of civil service and teaching jobs, along with the attempts made by the government after independence to redress the imbalance by favoring Chewa job applicants over Tumbukas, was a source of conflict between the two communities. Thus one plausible explanation for the high salience of the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage in present-day Malawi is that it is a legacy of the lopsided educational endowments of each community caused by their different missionary experiences during the colonial period.

The problem with this explanation is that the same missionary societies that settled among the Tumbukas and Chewas on the Nyasaland (Malawian) side of the border also set up outposts across the border among the Tumbukas and Chewas in Northern Rhodesia (Henkel 1985). By 1925, the Free Church of Scotland was running 313 mission schools in the eastern part of Northern Rhodesia, including a large number in the Tumbuka-speaking areas (Snelson 1974). In the same year, the Dutch Reformed Church and White Fathers were running nearly 750 schools between them, largely in Chewa-speaking areas (Snelson 1974). Yet while the Free Church of Scotland schools were committed to promoting literacy, the White Fathers and Dutch Reformed Church schools provided little more than a “smattering of what passed as education” (Snelson 1974, 80). The disparity in the educational commitment of these societies is reflected in the gap in the educational attainment of Chewas and Tumbukas in the areas in which these groups worked. Drawing on data from the 1992 Zambia Demographic and Health Survey (Republic of Zambia 1992), I estimate that the average number of years of education in predominantly Tumbuka districts was more than double that in predominantly Chewa districts during the colonial era: 3.5 versus 1.6 years.¹³ This gap is almost identical to what I estimate for the Tumbuka- and Chewa-dominated districts across the border in Malawi.¹⁴ The differences in the intergroup resentments among the Zambian and Malawian respondents in my 2001 survey thus cannot be attributed to differences in the colonial era educational endowments of Tumbukas and Chewas on either side of the border.

A slightly different explanation for the high salience of the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage in Malawi emphasizes not the amount of missionary education that Chewas or Tumbukas received during the colonial era but its content. As Vail and White (1989) document, the very idea of “Tumbukaness” was the creation of a small group of missionary-educated intellectuals who, in cooperation with their missionary teachers, sought

¹¹ Although the election date had not yet been announced at the time of the fieldwork, the Zambian constitution required that the election be held before the end of the year, so survey respondents knew that it would take place within the next several months.

¹² At Independence, primary school enrollment rates in the Tumbuka-speaking districts of Karonga, Rumphi, and Mzimba were more than double those in the Chewa-dominated districts of Mchinji, Dowa, Salima, and Chikwakwa (Vail 1981, 144).

¹³ I restricted the analysis to men who were 45 years old or older at the time of the survey, whose schooling therefore took place entirely during the colonial period. The Tumbuka-dominated districts were Lundazi and Chama ($N = 46$); the Chewa-dominated districts were Chadiza and Katete ($N = 44$). All four districts are almost entirely rural, so it is unlikely that the differences in average educational attainment were caused by in-migration of better educated people in search of employment opportunities. Indeed, the differences between the Tumbuka and the Chewa districts are probably attenuated by the tendency of the best-educated individuals to migrate out of these districts to seek employment in one of the major towns.

¹⁴ I did, however, find Malawians (both Chewas and Tumbukas) to have slightly more years of education than Zambians. In Tumbuka-dominated districts of Malawi (Rumphi and Mzimba; $N = 216$), the average number of years of schooling for men 45 years of age or older was 4.7; in Chewa-dominated districts (Mchinji and Lilongwe; $N = 151$), it was 2.4. Because Lilongwe and Mzimba districts contain large numbers of urban respondents, the analysis includes rural respondents from these districts only. Again, the tendency of highly educated people to migrate out of these rural areas probably attenuates, rather than increases, the cross-district variation. Data come from Malawi's 1992 Demographic and Health Survey (Republic of Malawi 1992).

to unify the northern tribes under a common ethnic banner to increase their political leverage with the colonial administration. Once constructed for this purpose, Tumbuka ethnic consciousness was then propagated through the curriculum of the mission schools. By this process, a Tumbuka identity took hold in the northern part of Malawi that had no parallel elsewhere in the territory. It is plausible, then, that the high salience of the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage in Malawi might be traced to the success of these early culture brokers in creating a Tumbuka group consciousness that could be deployed in opposition to other cultural communities. The comparative weakness of the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage in Zambia, meanwhile, could be attributed to the absence in that country of a comparable group of missionary-supported intellectuals who were capable of spearheading a similar identity-building project on that side of the border.

Although a constructivist explanation along these lines cannot be ruled out entirely, it does a much better job of accounting for the greater awareness of Tumbuka ethnic identity on the Malawian side of the border than for why differences between Chewas and Tumbukas became a source of political division in one country but not in the other. Viewing one's group as a unified cultural entity may be a prerequisite for the development of a politically salient cleavage between one's own group and one's neighbor. But it in no way guarantees that the cleavage between the two groups will become salient. In this vein, it is useful to recall that what differentiated the Chewa and Tumbuka survey respondents in Zambia and Malawi was not their awareness of the differences between their two communities but whether or not they attached political or social meaning to these differences. The possibility that Malawian Tumbukas might, as a legacy of early twentieth century missionary-promoted culture brokering, be more self-conscious of their cultural identities than their fellow Tumbukas across the border might lead us to expect to find Malawian Tumbukas identifying more differences than Zambian Tumbukas between themselves and their respective Chewa countrymen.¹⁵ But it provides no clear prediction about how they would respond to questions about their willingness to vote for or marry members of the other community. Nor does it provide any explanation for why the cleavage would develop between Tumbukas and Chewas, rather than between Tumbukas and other cultural communities. Indeed, if anything, Tumbuka identity was constructed in opposition to the Ngonis rather than to the Chewas (Vail and White 1989). So if colonial era identity construction were the key, then we would have expected the Tumbuka–Ngoni cleavage to have been more important than the one between Tumbukas and Chewas.

A final potential explanation for the observed differences in Chewa–Tumbuka relations across the two countries is that ethnic relations *per se*—not just those between Chewas and Tumbukas—are simply more conflictual in Malawi than in Zambia. To the extent

that this is the case, the greater salience of the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage in Malawi could be viewed as an artifact of that country's deeper level of interethnic discord more generally. Indeed, there is much evidence to suggest the plausibility of this hypothesis. From 1964 until 1991, Zambia was ruled by Kenneth Kaunda, a president noteworthy for his commitment to nonracialism and national unity (Sklar 2003). Malawi, meanwhile, was ruled from 1964 to 1994 by Hastings Kamuzu Banda, a leader notorious for championing his own Chewa culture, channeling investment and development projects to his Chewa kin, and actively discriminating against members of other ethnic communities—Tumbukas in particular (Kaspin 1995; Vail and White 1989). This is not to say that Kaunda did not sometimes “play the ethnic card” or that Zambia under his rule (or that of his successors, Fredrick Chiluba and Levy Mwanawasa) has been a place where ethnicity has played no role in politics. Kaunda was, at times, a skillful manipulator of ethnic divisions (Bates 1976; Dresang 1974; Gertzel et al. 1984), as have been his successors (Posner, forthcoming). But it is nonetheless the case that ethnic divisions have historically been more central to Malawi's politics than to Zambia's and that this might account for why Chewa–Tumbuka divisions are deeper in the former than the latter.

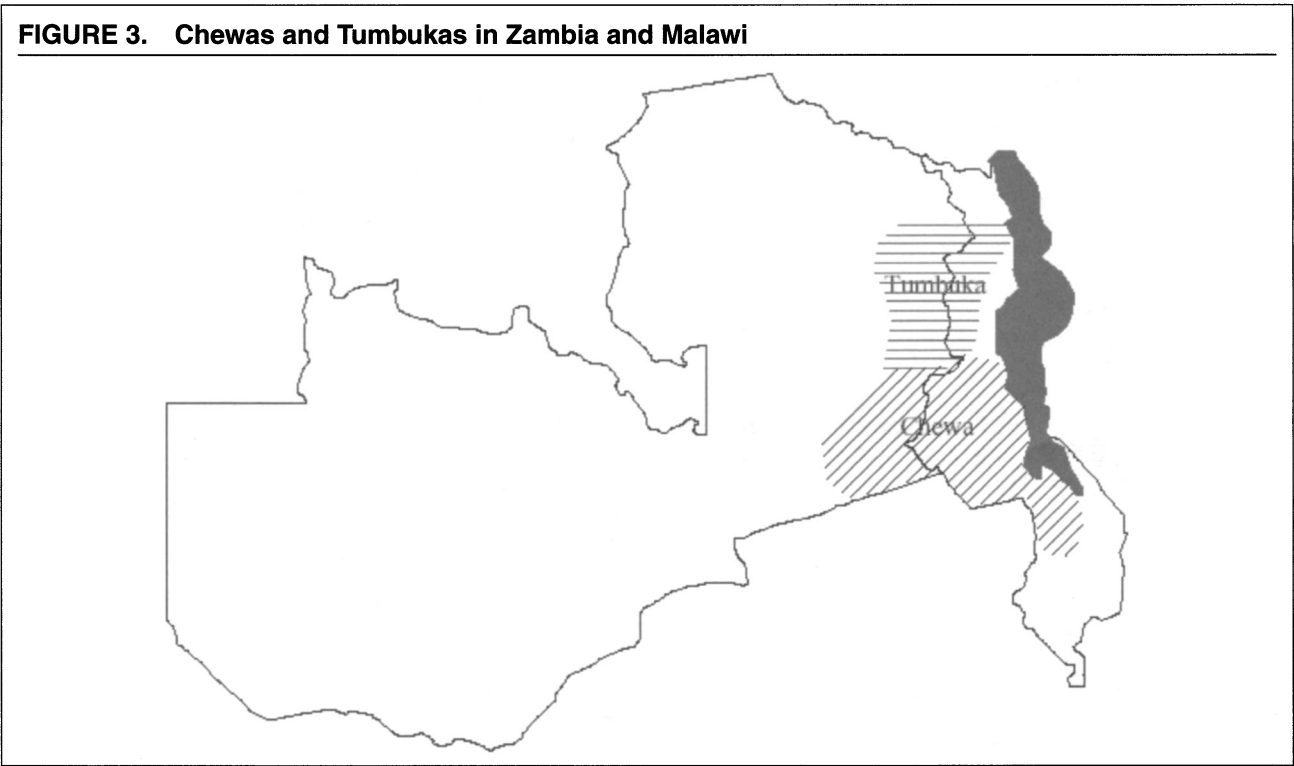
The problem with this explanation is that it conflates two quite different issues. The first is whether Presidents Kaunda or Banda chose to divide their countries along ethnic lines (they both did, albeit to different degrees). The second is why, when Kaunda or Banda *did* use ethnicity as a political tool, they chose to exploit the particular lines of ethnic division that they did. Whether Banda was more of a “divider” than Kaunda is not the central issue. The relevant question is why Banda chose to divide Chewas and Tumbukas, rather than other groups, and why, to the extent that Kaunda also engaged in ethnic political mobilization, he chose to stress ethnic divisions other than those between Chewas and Tumbukas. Simply arguing that Banda exploited ethnicity more than Kaunda is not enough. In order to explain the differing salience of the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage in Zambia and Malawi, one must account for why Banda and Kaunda chose to exploit the particular axes of cultural division that they did.

Group Size and Cleavage Salience

One additional, quite obvious, way in which Zambia and Malawi differ is in their respective sizes—Zambia's land area is almost eight times larger than Malawi's—and in the sizes of the Chewa and Tumbuka communities in each country relative to the country as a whole. As Figure 3 makes clear, the Chewa and Tumbuka communities are both large in Malawi (28% and 12% of the national population, respectively) but peripheral in Zambia (7% and 4%, respectively).¹⁶ Much more

¹⁵ In fact, they identify fewer: 1.2, on average, compared to 1.27 for Zambian Tumbukas.

¹⁶ Malawi's figures come from Fearon 2003. Tumbukas include Tonga- and Nkhonde-speakers. Zambia's figures are from that country's 1990 *Census of Population and Housing* based on answers to the question “What is your Zambian tribe?”



than the differential impact of missionary education or the contrasting styles of the two countries' leaders, this simple structural difference critically affects the relative political salience of the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage on either side of the border.

Politics in Zambia and Malawi, as in other developing nations, revolves around the competition for control over scarce patronage resources—things like jobs, schools, clinics, roads, import and export licenses, tariff exemptions, and access to credit. Because these resources are controlled by the national government, the key to gaining access to them is to build a political coalition that can either capture political power outright (which, in the highly centralized political systems of these countries, means capturing and retaining the presidency) or become a strong enough political force to exert pressure on the person who holds that office.¹⁷ In the course of building these coalitions, politicians find it useful to mobilize their supporters by exploiting cultural divisions that they might exploit. Which should they choose? If the purpose of mobilizing the cultural cleavage is to build a coalition that can help them achieve political power, then it is natural for them to emphasize the cleavage that defines the most usefully sized coalitional building blocks and to ignore those that define groups that are too small to be politically viable. This logic provides a powerful explanation for

why Chewa–Tumbuka differences are so much more politically salient in Malawi than in Zambia.¹⁸

In Malawi, both the Chewa and the Tumbuka communities are sufficiently large as to constitute viable political coalitions in the competition over national power. Thus, when Malawian politicians from the Northern and Central Regions seek to build political support bases, they find the Chewa and Tumbuka groups to be useful building-blocks, and their mobilization of these communities renders the cultural cleavage between them politically salient. There are other cultural cleavages that politicians from these parts of the country might mobilize: those between the Ngonde and Henga, between the Lambya and Sukwa, or between the Ngoni and Tonga, for example. However, none of these other groups are large enough to be useful political vehicles—they are all less than 5% of the national population—so these cultural cleavages remain unexploited and politically irrelevant. Only the Chewa and Tumbuka are big enough groups in this part of the country to represent viable political support bases for the national political stage, so, among the several cultural cleavages that might be mobilized, only the cleavage between the Chewa and the Tumbuka is seized upon by politicians, and only this cleavage comes to matter politically.

In Zambia, neither the Chewa nor Tumbuka community alone has the size to be an effective political vehicle. These groups therefore go unmobilized by Zambian politicians and the cultural differences between them remain politically inconsequential. This

¹⁷ Note that while capturing the presidency may require mobilizing one's coalition in the context of a competitive election, securing resources by exerting pressure does not. Positioning oneself as the leader of a weighty political coalition is thus a central ingredient for political success even in undemocratic contexts.

¹⁸ A formalization of this argument, along with an application to other cases, is provided in Posner, forthcoming.

is not to say that Zambian politicians do not exploit cultural differences in their coalition-building efforts, for they do. Rather it is to say that, when they do “play the ethnic card,” they choose not to emphasize the cleavage between Chewas and Tumbukas. The logic of ethnic coalition-building in Zambia leads them instead to mobilize Chewas and Tumbukas as part of a common coalition of “Easterners.” This “Eastern” coalition, which includes Chewas, Tumbukas, and other Nyanja-speaking groups from the Eastern part of the country (and for this reason is sometimes referred to as the coalition of “Nyanjas” or “Nyanja-speakers”), constitutes just over 20% of the national population. This is a size sufficiently large to permit it to compete formidably in the national political arena, and this accounts for why it is mobilized and for why the cultural differences among its ethnic subunits (including the Chewas and Tumbukas) are ignored.

Thus, in 1991, when President Kaunda embraced an overtly ethnic appeal in that year’s founding multiparty election, he chose to mobilize Chewas and Tumbukas together as Easterners rather than as distinct, competing coalitions (Bratton 1994). Contrast this with Banda’s strategy in Malawi’s first competitive multiparty election three years later. His response was to mobilize Chewas *as Chewas*, and to do so in large part by invoking the threat posed to the community by its Tumbuka rivals (Kaspin 1995; Posner 1995). In playing the Chewa card, Banda was mobilizing a coalition that he had assiduously cultivated over the past 30 years. Banda had chosen to build up the Chewa community in part because he was a Chewa himself, but also because he recognized that if he could bring a handful of other groups under the Chewa umbrella he could construct a coalition that would “provide him with a very large constituency among the common-folk” (Kaspin 1995, 604–5). Through a combination of strategic cultural redefinition¹⁹ and policies designed to force non-Chewas to adopt the Chewa language (Kishindo 1998), Banda slowly augmented the size of the Chewa coalition until it comprised, on paper at least, more than 50% of Malawi’s population. So obsessed was he with the size of the Chewa block that he reportedly ordered the University of Malawi to fire a distinguished British linguist after the linguist observed in a report that official government estimates greatly exaggerated the number of Chewa-speakers in the country (Vail and White 1989, 191). The fact that the size of the Chewa coalition was so clearly more important to Banda than the homogeneity of its cultural makeup suggests that coalition-building calculations were the motivating factor in his invocation of the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage.

Banda sought to build up the Chewa coalition, and played Chewas off against Tumbukas as a means to this end, because he was convinced that emphasizing this cleavage would be politically useful to him. Meanwhile, Kaunda ignored the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage not because, as he liked to claim, he was “above tribe”

but because he did not believe it was a useful line of social division to exploit. Both politicians found it advantageous to mobilize their supporters along ethnic lines, and the cultural cleavage between Chewas and Tumbukas was available for both of them to employ. Yet while Banda chose to emphasize it, Kaunda did not. The reason stemmed from the different sizes—and thus political usefulness—of the Chewa and Tumbuka communities in each setting. The contrasting cultural demographics of the two countries cannot explain why Banda played the ethnic card more vigorously than Kaunda. But it can explain why, when they each embraced ethnicity as a tool for political mobilization, they chose to mobilize the particular cultural cleavages that they did.

Politicians are not the only ones attuned to the logic of ethnic arithmetic. Just as politicians seek to build coalitions of viable sizes, voters also seek to gain entry into coalitions that will permit one of their own to win political power. Thus Chewa and Tumbuka voters in Zambia were responsive to appeals made in terms of their common identity as Easterners, and Chewa and Tumbuka voters in Malawi were responsive to appeals made in terms of their mutual differences. Although Kaunda ultimately lost the 1991 election in a landslide, his strategy of trying to build a unified support coalition among Chewas and Tumbukas worked. He won 74% of the vote in Eastern Province, compared to just 16% in the rest of the country. More importantly, within Eastern Province itself, he received comparably strong support from Chewa- and Tumbuka-dominated districts: 75% of the vote in the Chewa-dominated districts of Chadiza and Katete and 81% in the Tumbuka-dominated districts of Chama and Lundazi.²⁰ In the 1994 contest in Malawi, meanwhile, the country split its vote almost exactly along ethnic lines, with Chewa voters from the Central Region overwhelmingly supporting Banda’s Malawi Congress Party (MCP), Tumbuka voters from the Northern Region overwhelmingly supporting the Tumbuka-led Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), and almost no crossover voting taking place between the two communities (Kaspin 1995; Posner 1995).²¹ The union of Chewas and Tumbukas behind a common political banner that took place in Zambia was entirely absent in Malawi.

²⁰ According to 1990 census data, Chadiza and Katete districts are together 90% Chewa and Chama and Lundazi districts are together 75% Tumbuka. The United National Independence Party, Kaunda’s long-time political organization, boycotted the 1996 election, so the unanimity of Chewa and Tumbuka support is difficult to assess in that contest. However, clear patterns of intraregional unity were evident in Eastern Province in the election of 2001 (Burnell 2003).

²¹ Voters from the ethnically heterogeneous Southern Region rallied behind a third party, the United Democratic Front (UDF), whose presidential candidate, Bakili Muluzi, won the election. In 1999, AFORD and MCP formed an electoral alliance and ran a single presidential candidate. Patterns of party support in the simultaneously held parliamentary contests nevertheless confirm that Tumbuka-speaking Northerners were still overwhelmingly committed to AFORD and that Chewas from the Central Region still overwhelmingly supported the MCP (Ott, Phiri, and Patel 2000; Wiseman 2000). As in 1994, very little crossover voting took place between Chewas and Tumbukas.

¹⁹ Banda would regularly visit non-Chewa regions of the country and tell people that, contrary to their prior beliefs about who they were, they were really Chewa (Vail and White 1989).

TABLE 2. Trust among Chewas and Tumbukas in Eastern Province, Zambia (Percentage)

How Much Do You Trust...	Someone from Your Own Tribe?	Fellow Easterners?	Non-Easterners? ^a
Distrust them at least somewhat	5.6	8.4	18.3
Feel neutral about them	2.8	4.2	20.6
Trust them at least somewhat	91.5	87.4	61.1

Source: Bratton (1998).

Note: N = 71.

^a Average of responses for Southern, Northern, Western, Luapula, Northwestern, and Central Provinces.

While the logic of ethnic coalition-building might help us account for the greater willingness of Chewas and Tumbukas to vote for a presidential candidate from the other ethnic community, it provides a much weaker explanation for the differences we find in the two countries in the nature of social relations between Chewas and Tumbukas more generally. Indeed, one of the most striking findings in my survey results is the much greater willingness of Chewas and Tumbukas to marry across group lines in Zambia than in Malawi. The Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage would appear to be not only less politically salient in Zambia, but also less socially salient. This finding is reinforced by the results of a democratic governance survey administered in Zambia in 1996 (Bratton 1998). The survey asked respondents how much they trust members of their own tribes, people from their province, and people from other provinces. Table 2 reports the levels of trust for people in each of these categories, as reported by the survey’s 71 Chewa and Tumbuka respondents from Eastern Province. The relevant finding is that while reported levels of trust for fellow tribespeople (i.e., fellow Chewas and/or Tumbukas) were roughly equivalent to those for fellow Easterners, both were significantly higher than reported levels of trust for non-Easterners (compare Table 2, columns 2 and 3 with column 4). The survey results suggest that the relevant line of division for Chewas and Tumbukas in Zambia is not between each other but between themselves and people from other regions of the country.²²

What, then, explains the different *social* salience of the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage in each country? One possibility is that social divisions are products of political divisions. Over time, political mobilization and counter-mobilization might breed distrust and animosity that carries over from the political to the social realm. Eventually such sentiments might come to be

²² Unfortunately, the otherwise similar survey administered in Malawi three years later did not include questions about trust, so a comparison of the Zambian findings with findings from Chewa and Tumbuka respondents in Malawi is not possible.

reflected in beliefs about who can be trusted and who is a suitable marriage partner. While this hypothesis is plausible, testing it would require data (currently unavailable) on changes over time in the depth of political divisions, levels of trust, and rates of intermarriage.

Another possibility is that a person’s sense of who they are (and, by extension, who they trust and are willing to marry) is shaped by the boundaries of the social arena they inhabit. It is well documented that human beings have a natural tendency to want to organize their environments into a relatively small (and thus manageable) set of categories (Brown 1986; Mitchell 1974). It is also well known that changes in the situation in which persons find themselves will alter how they think about who they are (Hobsbawm 1996; Kasfir 1979). A possible explanation for the different responses to the intermarriage question among Zambian and Malawian respondents (and for the different levels of trust that Chewas and Tumbukas from Eastern Province exhibit toward Easterners and other Zambians) is that while “Chewa” and “Tumbuka” are large enough categories to be included in Malawians’ mental mappings of their country’s social landscape, they are too small to play that role in Zambia, where they get lumped together as part of the broader category of “Easterners.” People in both Zambia and Malawi might be more trusting of and prefer to marry “one of their own.” But because the scales of the national social arenas they inhabit are different, so too is their understanding of who is, and is not, a member of their own group.²³

The implied counterfactual is that if the Zambian political and social arena were restricted to Eastern Province alone, then the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage would be as salient as it is across the border in Malawi.²⁴ But as long as the boundaries of the political and social arena are congruent with the boundaries of the country

²³ This may explain why, when well-educated Tumbukas were recruited to work as clerks and bookkeepers in the Northern Rhodesian copper mines during the colonial era, they were commonly referred to not as “Tumbukas” but as “Nyasas” (i.e., those from the far east of the country, near the border with Nyasaland), a designation that applied equally to Chewas (Epstein 1958). The category “Tumbuka” was based on too fine-grained a categorization scheme to be part of peoples’ colonywide mental mappings. Of course some of these “Nyasas” actually were from Nyasaland. But no distinction was generally made between those “Nyasas” who were from Nyasaland and those who were from Northern Rhodesia. More importantly, no distinction was made between the Tumbuka “Nyasas,” who made up the bulk of the managerial labor force, and the Chewa ones.

²⁴ I tried to test this hypothesis by asking my Zambian survey respondents to indicate how they would feel if the president were to appoint a member of the other group as the deputy provincial minister for Eastern Province. Unfortunately, there turned out to be two problems with this question. First, the deputy provincial minister has very little effective power over the distribution of resources, so the question was one with very low stakes. Second, and more importantly, President Kaunda, as part of his efforts to build national unity, had historically gone out of his way to appoint provincial ministers from outside of their home areas. Southerners were appointed in Eastern Province, westerners were appointed in Northern Province, and so forth. So when respondents reflected on how they would feel if a Chewa or Tumbuka were appointed as deputy provincial minister, their implicit point of comparison was the appointment of someone from a completely different part of the country. Compared to this possibility, either a Chewa or a Tumbuka appointee was considered quite satisfactory.

as a whole, the cultural distinction between Chewas and Tumbukas in Zambia will be ignored. The national frame dictates a political strategy (and conjures up a mental mapping of the country's relevant groups) that overlooks the differences between Chewas and Tumbukas and aggregates them as a single entity.

THE POWER OF ADMINISTRATIVE BOUNDARIES

To explain why the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage is so much more salient in Malawi than in Zambia, I have emphasized the differences in the sizes of the Chewa and Tumbuka communities vis-à-vis the sizes of the larger Zambian and Malawian political arenas. An additional potentially relevant factor that I have yet to consider is the correspondence in Malawi of the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage with the administrative boundary between that country's Northern and Central Regions. Indeed, for most Malawians, the labels “Tumbuka” and “Northerner” (and, to a somewhat lesser degree, “Chewa” and “Central Region”) mean the same thing. Could the regional boundary be doing some of the work in reifying the cultural division? Might the correspondence between the administrative and the cultural boundary in Malawi be making the cleavage between Chewas and Tumbukas salient?

The situation across the border in Zambia provides useful perspective. The Zambian Chewa and Tumbuka communities are also separated by an administrative boundary—that between the districts of Chipata and Lundazi. Yet the coincidence between the cultural and the administrative dividing lines in Zambia appears to do nothing to make the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage politically salient. This is because the administrative units—the districts—that it defines are themselves too small relative to the national political arena to become useful building blocks for political coalition-building.²⁵ Moreover, the administrative boundary that *does* matter—the provincial one—lumps Chewas and Tumbukas together as part of a common entity, and this probably undermines whatever cleavage-reinforcing effect the Chipata–Lundazi district boundary might have.²⁶ The lesson for Malawi seems to be that if the correspondence between the Northern–Central Region boundary and the cultural boundary between the Chewa and the Tumbuka peoples plays any role in rendering the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage salient, it is only because the communities that the administrative boundary demarcates are already sufficiently large to be useful political vehicles and/or categories for

countrywide social categorizations. It is not the administrative boundary as such that reinforces the cultural cleavage but the fact that it happens to coincide with the dividing line between a pair of big, politically viable units.²⁷

But can administrative boundaries do more than simply reinforce existing cultural cleavages? Providing that they define groups of the right size, might they also have the power to *create* social and political cleavages that have no cultural foundation? To answer this question, I collected additional data among a third Malawian group, the Lakeshore Tonga. The Lakeshore Tonga straddle the Northern Region–Central Region border along the shore of Lake Malawi. One of the most studied ethnic groups in all of Malawi, the Lakeshore Tonga are regarded as having a particularly strong and autonomous culture (Tew 1950; van Velsen 1964). They are thus a particularly unlikely group to have their loyalties divided by the imposition of an administrative boundary within their midst. By taking advantage of the natural experiment afforded by the division of this community by the Northern–Central Region boundary, I sought to test whether they had been.

I administered a survey to 30 randomly selected respondents in villages outside of Nkhata Bay, the largest Lakeshore Tonga population center.²⁸ Nkhata Bay is located approximately 95 kilometers north of the Northern Region–Central Region border. Nearly everyone in Nkhata Bay (and everyone in my sample) is Lakeshore Tonga by tribe and “Northerner” by region. The surveys asked two questions:

- Suppose there were two people standing for president: one person was from Rumphi and the other was from Liwaladzi. Which one would you vote for?²⁹
- Which kind of person would you feel more comfortable marrying: a person from Rumphi or a person from Liwaladzi?³⁰

Rumphi, which is located approximately 125 kilometers northwest of Nkhata Bay, is the unofficial capital of Tumbukaland and a major Northern Region town. When respondents were asked about “a person from Rumphi,” they therefore understood this to refer to a fellow Northerner who was not a Tonga. Liwaladzi is the southernmost discernibly Lakeshore Tonga town. It is located about 130 kilometers south of Nkhata Bay

²⁵ Zambia is divided into more than 60 administrative districts. Leaving aside the district encompassing Lusaka, the capital city, they each contain at most 5% of the national population.

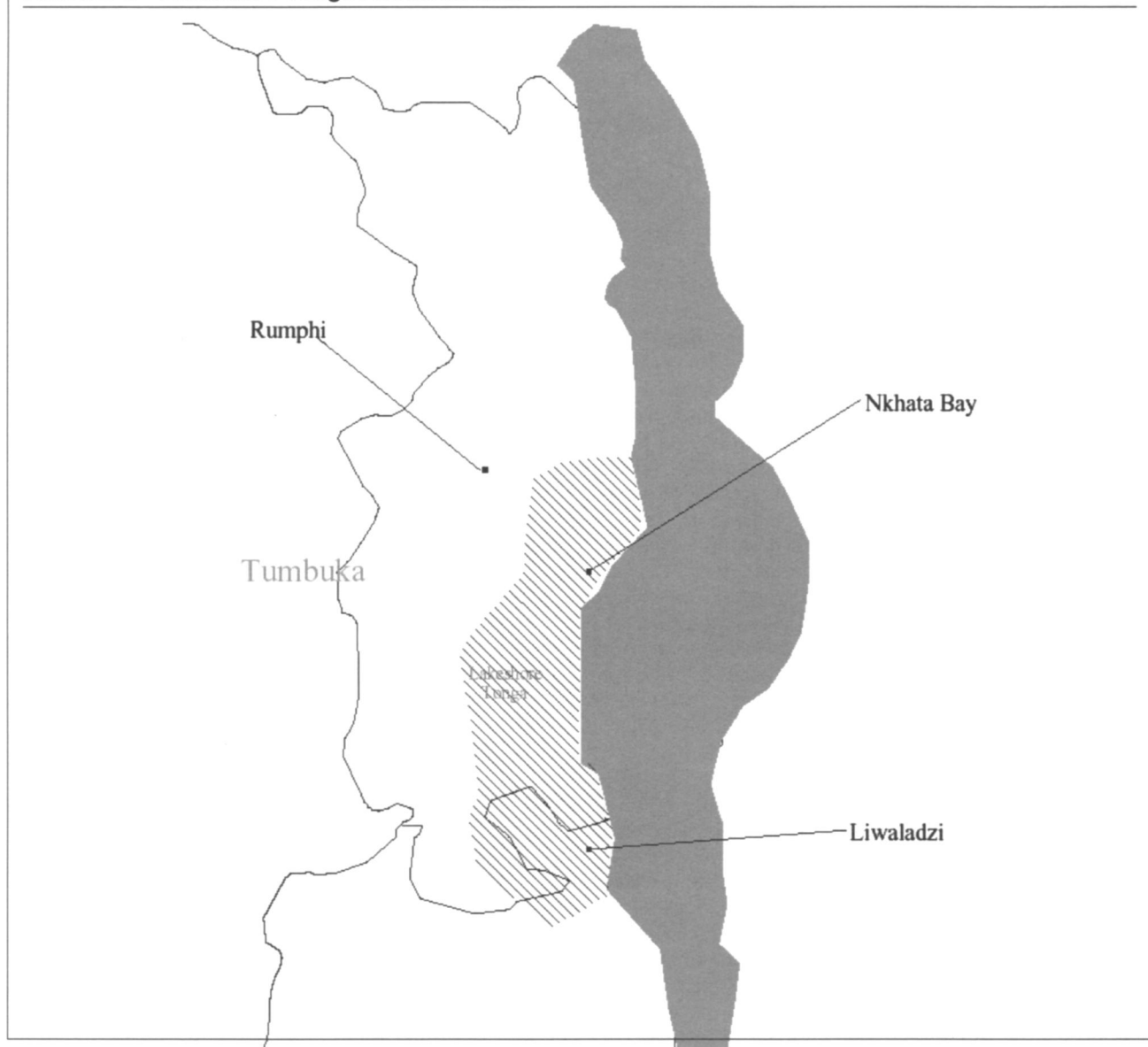
²⁶ Note that if the provincial boundary happened to correspond with the Chewa–Tumbuka cultural boundary—for example, if Chewas were considered “Easterners” but Tumbukas were considered “Northerners”—than the provincial administrative boundary *would* render the cultural boundary salient. It just happens that the cultural unit that matters (being an “Easterner”) includes both Chewas and Tumbukas as constituent parts. I thank Michael Thies for pointing this out.

²⁷ Note that whether these units are viewed as cultural groups or as geographic/administrative regions is irrelevant. What matters is their size.

²⁸ As with the Chewa–Tumbuka survey work, the sample was stratified by age and gender, and respondents were selected from every third unrelated household. The survey was conducted in Citonga.

²⁹ If respondents hesitated to choose one or the other, they were prompted further: “What if you had to choose one of the two? You can assume that the two people are equally qualified. The only difference is that one comes from Rumphi and the other comes from Liwaladzi. If you had to choose one of them which would it be?”

³⁰ If respondents hesitated to choose one or the other, they were prompted further: “What if you had to choose one of the two? You can assume that the two people are the same except that one comes from Rumphi and the other comes from Liwaladzi. Would you feel more comfortable with one than the other? Which one?”

FIGURE 4. Lakeshore Tonga Research Sites

and about 30 kilometers south of the Northern Region–Central Region border. When respondents were asked about “a person from Liwaladzi,” they therefore understood this to refer to a fellow Tonga who was not a Northerner. Figure 4 makes the research design clear.

As should be obvious, the questionnaire was designed to force respondents to choose between their tribal and their regional identities. If they responded that they preferred to vote for or to marry someone from Rumphi, they were indicating that, at least in the admittedly narrow contexts defined by the questions I asked, they valued their regional identity more than their tribal identity. If they responded that they preferred to vote for or to marry someone from Liwaladzi, they were indicating that they valued their tribal identity more than their regional identity. A purely culturalist expectation would lead us to anticipate all respondents to express a preference for Liwaladzi over

Rumphi, since their links to Liwaladzi candidates and potential spouses are based on shared culture rather than simply chance assignment to the same administrative region—only the former being “real.”³¹ The culturalist expectation turns out to be wrong. Nearly half of the respondents (46%) expressed a preference for the fellow Northerner candidate over the fellow tribesperson³² and well over a third of the respondents (38%) expressed a preference for a spouse from the same

³¹ Of course, Tumbukas and Tongas are not that dissimilar culturally. But the cultural ties between fellow Tongas are still much closer than between Tongas and Tumbukas.

³² These findings match Kaspin’s claim regarding the 1994 election that “Tonga voters in the north voted for AFORD [whose presidential candidate, Chikufwa Chihana, was a Tumbuka], while the contiguous Tonga population in the centre gave most of their [sic] support to the UDF [whose presidential candidate, Bakili Muluzi, was a southerner]. The cohesion of ethnicity *qua* ethnicity was thus

region but a different tribe.³³ Although the sample is too small to be more than suggestive, the results should nonetheless give pause to those who would assign special status to cleavages built around “real” cultural material.

In the introduction, I motivated my analysis by noting that the presence of an identifiable cultural difference is not a sufficient condition for the emergence of a salient political cleavage. The results of the Lakeshore Tonga analysis suggest that it may not be a necessary condition either. Whether or not a cleavage matters would seem to depend not at all on the material from which it is built. That material can be as sturdy as the traits, customs, norms, and practices that a professional ethnographer might identify or as flimsy as an arbitrary boundary drawn by an uninformed colonial officer. Much more than the stuff from which the boundary is made, what matters seems to be whether the cleavage defines groups that, because of the scope of the larger political and social arena in which they are located, are of a useful size for political mobilization and/or social categorization.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have drawn on a pair of natural experiments to make two important points about the relationship between culture and politics. The first is that the political or social salience of a cultural cleavage does not follow axiomatically from the fact that the cultural cleavage exists. Some cultural cleavages matter a lot for political competition and social categorization, and others do not. The second key point is that innate cultural differences do not necessarily have greater power than noncultural differences to generate political or social division. Administrative boundaries with no cultural basis whatsoever—in the example explored here, a boundary that partitioned an otherwise homogeneous cultural community—can, under certain conditions, have the power to create salient cleavages. Taken together, these findings suggest that cultural differences are neither sufficient nor necessary for the emergence of political or social divisions.

Although the natural experiments discussed in this paper provide especially compelling illustrations of these two points, neither conclusion is particularly new—or, perhaps, surprising. What is more novel is the paper’s argument about why the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage matters in Malawi but not in Zambia: namely, that the political and social salience of the cleavage depends on the sizes of the groups that the cleavage defines relative to the sizes of the political and social arenas in which the groups are located. In Malawi, Chewas

and Tumbukas constitute large coalitions whose mobilization is politically useful in the national competition for state resources. As a consequence, the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage is highly politically salient in that country. In Zambia, the Chewa and Tumbuka communities are both too small to serve as viable political vehicles in and of themselves, so the cultural differences between these groups go largely ignored. Indeed, when cultural differences are mobilized in that region of Zambia, Chewas and Tumbukas tend to be mobilized together as part of the same broader cultural category. This further reduces the salience of the cleavage that exists between them.

Apart from their own theoretical import, the arguments advanced in this paper have a number of additional implications. One implication is for the literature that employs indexes of ethnic fractionalization to test for the effects of cultural diversity on outcomes like economic growth, political stability, and civil war. With few exceptions (Posner 2004; Scarritt and Mozaffar 1999), these indexes are built from ethnographers’ listings of ethnically distinct communities, often with language or religion as the determining criterion. The problem is that consumers of these indexes implicitly equate objective cultural differences with politically or socially salient differences, and, as this paper suggests, the two are not the same thing. Thus, for example, Morrison et al. (1989) include the Chewa and the Tumbuka in their enumeration of ethnic groups in both Zambia and Malawi. While it is certainly true that the Chewa and Tumbuka are culturally distinct groups in both countries, including them as separate entries in the list of relevant ethnic communities in Zambia would be a mistake if one then used this list to calculate a fractionalization value that purported to measure the country’s politically relevant ethnic diversity. The objective cultural difference between these groups is simply not reflected in the country’s political affairs.

A second implication is with respect to the long-standing debate about the importance of Africa’s arbitrary boundaries (e.g., Englebert et al. 2002). Much of this debate turns on the premise that, because they are arbitrary, Africa’s boundaries are weaker sources of social identity than the “authentic” cultural communities that these boundaries overwrote. One of this paper’s implications is that this premise is wrong: A lack of cultural “authenticity” need not imply that a political boundary is any less politically or socially meaningful than one based on cultural difference. Moreover, the paper suggests that perhaps the key effect of the Partition was to alter the salience of the preexisting cultural cleavages *within* African countries. Whatever salience there may have been to the Chewa–Tumbuka cleavage in Zambia prior to the drawing of the Zambia–Malawi border has clearly been altered by the fact that Chewas and Tumbukas now operate in a political and social environment with a new, much broader, frame of reference. The implication is that the impact of Africa’s colonial era boundary drawing (as well as the impact of a redrawing of those boundaries) may lie as much within states as at their borders.

relatively weak compared to the greater claims of regional affiliation” (1995, 615).

³³ In keeping with the results of the Chewa–Tumbuka analysis, female respondents were much more likely to express a preference for a spouse from the same tribe. Fully 12 of 15 said that they would prefer to marry a man from Liwaladzi. Male respondents were almost exactly evenly split: seven expressed a preference for a wife from Rumphu, six expressed a preference for a wife from Liwaladzi, and two insisted that the decision would depend on other factors.

A third implication is with respect to the role of political entrepreneurs in ethnic mobilization. It is now commonplace to view ethnic political mobilization as a product of the strategic behavior of rational politicians (Bates 1983; Brass 1991; Chandra 2004; Kasfir 1979). Yet I suggest that the behavior of such politicians must itself be viewed as a product of underlying ethnic demography. Political entrepreneurs are necessary agents in the story. They are the ones who do the mobilizing. But, if they hope to be successful, they must be attuned to the cultural demography that they have to work with. And that cultural demography creates incentives for mobilizing the different cleavages in different contexts.

The final implication of the paper is methodological. Like the political actors we study, political scientists are affected by the boundaries of states. Analysis tends to stop where one country ends and another begins. Yet the insights this paper provides were made possible by focusing precisely on the seams between political systems. Natural experiments of this sort are everywhere, and much can be learned from taking fuller advantage of them.

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