

Brown Woman/White Man



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“Azungu, Azungu, give me my money,” calls out a little girl as I walk down the crimson dirt road in her direction. She is standing with a group of children along the side of a blue house in the village. “Where are my sweeties?” an even smaller boy asks, clearly emboldened by the older girl’s command. I clap my hands together and then open them like a book to reveal my palms—the official gesture that signifies the lack of something requested. The blue house is owned by two young sisters who braid hair for money; it is a popular meeting place for nubile women, who are often found sitting out front chewing sugarcane while watching the sister’s nimble fingers transform strands of artificial tresses into neat plaits. That day, however, the women are absent. Instead, a band of children have gathered and once I approach them, I see that they were there to watch the frenetic mating rites of two ducks on a pile of earth.

In my various travels, I find that children in agricultural communities are unfazed by such rituals: they are a natural part of life, and the rhythm of the seasons that promote procreation. Animals copulating in public are commonplace. It is the azungu sighting that is astonishing.

Azungu is Chichewa for “white man,” the name Malawians gave the European missionaries who ventured there in the 19th century to bring them Jesus, the most notable azungu to have ever traveled to this small slip of a country. Today, the term refers to any foreigner: anyone who is different.

Malawi is one of Africa’s poorest countries, but it is highly agricultural. As long as the sun and the rain are benevolent, no one goes

hungry. It is a peaceful nation, and freedom from conflict has fostered a generally laid-back, kindly disposition—Malawians proudly bear the moniker: The Warm Heart Of Africa.

A few years ago I traveled there to pursue independent study through my graduate program. I lived and worked with a community of Italian missionaries in Balaka Township, located in the south, who established the country's second most prominent television station. Malawi is a former British colony, and life within the mission was a fusion of Italian and Anglo cultures—e.g. meals often consisted of pasta and afternoon tea was compulsory. English remains the country's official language, but Chichewa, the mother tongue, is the hallowed speech in the village. I found it essential to intermingle with the locals in their domain, though my lack of that colloquial language transformed me into a part-time mute. Still, I often ventured into the village, in order to fully experience the beating of that warm heart.

The dirt road on which I was traveling runs through the center of town. It joggles along a series of small, stucco houses and straw-gated huts that enclosed clandestine clubs where chamba (marijuana) and homemade beer are leisurely consumed. Eventually, the road intersects with a wide paved street that leads to the marketplace: a microcosm where everything from produce, livestock, shoes and clothing, pots and pans (hammered from discarded car parts), and cell phones could be purchased.

Along this asphalt road there is an ever-present cadre of women attired in chitenje (colorful material worn as a skirt-cum-apron), who sit on bamboo mats, and sell sweet potatoes. Several have babies tied to their backs with similarly colorful strips of cloth. Sometimes our eyes would meet and they would inquire, "Muli bwanji?"—How are you? "Ndili bwino"—I am fine—I would reply, always forgetting to follow with Kaya inu?—And how are you? They would suck their teeth, or laugh. Like theirs my skin is brown: but I am azungu, nevertheless.

Most African Americans have no concrete idea from which part of the immense continent their ancestors hailed, and I am no different. I once visited Ethiopia, and was struck by how similar I was to its citizens: they are typically tall, with chiseled faces, and have almond-shaped eyes. Malawians are made up of several ethnic groups such as the Chewa, Lomwe, Yao, and Ngoni—who compose the largest tribal groups in the

country. In Balaka Township, most of my neighbors were small people with round, full features. I saw no trace of my heritage there. But once I entered the marketplace, I blended in with everyone else. Though a few suspicious eyes sometimes followed my movements, there was far too much activity for me to be under prolonged scrutiny.

The hammering of sheets of aluminum keeps time with the music of hundreds of boom boxes, and the thick odor of barbecued goat meat and mandasi (small doughnut-like cakes fried in peanut oil) creates both audio and olfactory sensory overload. Fishermen hawk their wares in covered stalls, while battling unrelenting flies. Ancient women sell various produce grown on their own small plots of land; their faces are marked with creases wrought by time, like the rings of redwood trees. I am fascinated to find foods at the market that are as familiar as my own name: peanuts, tomatoes, eggplants, and dried corn kernels that are ground and used to make a porridge called nsima, Malawi's emblematic dish. During the 15th century, Portuguese slave traders exchanged various foods between parts of Africa and the Americas. I wonder what the various tribes thought when they first encountered such exotic foods as the tomato—would it have been as curious to them as the mpoza, a pine-cone shaped fruit that taste like vanilla custard, is to me?

When the market finally begins to break down, I retrace my steps back to the street that intersects with the road that leads to the mission. The sweet potato women now seem like the guardians of a portal that leads to a world that is not their own. As I approach them a toddler leaves the comfort of a woman's lap and teeters over in my direction. "Azungu," she whispers, and offers me a large ruddy potato that she had been holding in her tiny hand. "Zikomo"—thank you—I reply, and then purchase several others, from a woman swathed in vibrantly printed fabric.