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Crafts and small enterprises in the economic periphery of Malawi

Udo Witulski surveys the Malawian informal sector, based on a study he conducted in Kawinga, south-eastern Malawi, in 1983.

Small enterprises in the Malawian economy

Land-locked Malawi, a country about a tenth of the size of the Republic of South Africa, is one of the most densely populated states on the entire continent. At present it has an average of 60 inhabitants per km², a situation that will deteriorate rapidly if the current annual population growth rate of 2,6 per cent is maintained.¹

In 1980 Malawi's labour force of 2 484 000 constituted 44,6 per cent of its total population — 56,7 per cent of its males, 32,7 per cent of its females. Almost all of these people had to find employment in the subsistence agricultural sector; in 1980 the manufacturing sector provided work for only 1,7 per cent of the labour force and the construction sector for only 1,6 per cent.²

Given the rapid growth of Malawi's population, employment creation is of the essence, but is becoming increasingly expensive. Between 1969 and 1981 the average capital/labour ratio doubled from MK 3 500 to almost MK 7 000 per job.³ This increase mainly reflected the creation of employment opportunities in an industrial sector which reflects Malawi's economic dependence on the advanced capitalist nations.

Malawi's economy is characterized by the fact that it exports a limited range of primary products in exchange for its imports of finished goods. Its

economy offers little scope for diversification and its products are vulnerable to high price fluctuations in the volatile international commodities market. In 1983, 92 per cent of Malawi's exports comprised agricultural produce, principally tobacco, tea, sugar, maize and beans. The remaining 8 per cent consisted of unbleached cotton fabrics.⁴

The commercial and agricultural enterprises responsible for Malawi's export production are mostly foreign-owned. In 1971 only 20 of the country's 119 manufacturing firms were controlled by indigenous entrepreneurs. Foreign-owned companies were concentrated in the processed food and beverages sectors, in tobacco, textiles, wood-processing, printing and radio manufacture, in construction, and controlled 50 per cent of the national oil industry.⁵

Malawians have little chance of finding employment in this mainly urban manufacturing sector, which is located largely around Blantyre, in the south of the country. Larger manufacturing firms have become increasingly capital-intensive: almost five times as much investment was required to create a job in manufacturing in 1979 as in the formal agricultural sector and almost fifteen times as much as in the informal small enterprise sector.

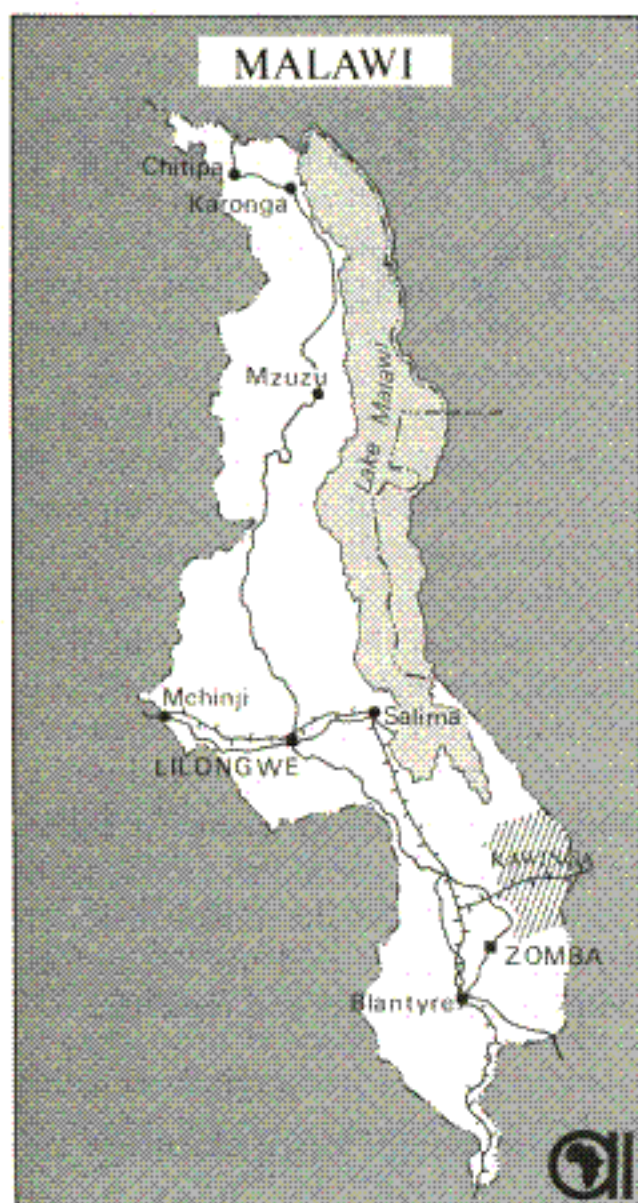
The concept "informal sector" was first suggested as late as 1973, by an International Labour Office (ILO) — sponsored employment mission to

Kenya.⁶ The informal sector is made up of those enterprises and individuals operating outside the mainstream of economic activity and the system of government benefits and regulations.

The potential contribution of rural crafts to Malawian employment

In 1976 Liedholm and Chuta estimated that in Tropical Africa non-farming activities in the rural areas provided primary or secondary employment for between 30 and 50 per cent of rural labour. In this article the focus is on crafts in the manufacturing, construction and repair sectors in Kawinga, south-eastern Malawi. In all of these crafts there exists a variety of enterprises ranging from near "formality" to absolute "informality". Although for the most part these are licensed by the Malawian government, they still do not qualify for inclusion in the official concept of "formality", for the authorities have yet to recognize the economic importance of the rural areas. There is little official goodwill because current development theories subscribe to the notion of a dual developmental approach in which "traditional" activities have no role to play in "modern" economic development.⁷

Until 1983, when a survey was carried out by the University of



Malawi, the number of jobs in the country's informal sector remained a matter of speculation. The survey estimated that there were about 19 000 small enterprise units in Malawi.⁸ If one adds an estimated 7 000 employees to this number⁹ one arrives at a figure of around 26 000 employees in informal enterprises, which implies that small industries provide 37 per cent of all jobs in Malawi's secondary sector.

The location of Malawi's small enterprises

According to Ettema's nationwide sample survey¹⁰ 42 per cent of all small enterprises are located in the towns, where lower transport costs and greater availability facilitate the supply of intermediate products and spare parts. This means that 58 per cent of small enterprises are to be found in the rural areas, compared with less than 20 per cent of large industrial units — the latter being composed largely of the

tea processing plants around Mulanje and Thyolo in the southern region.

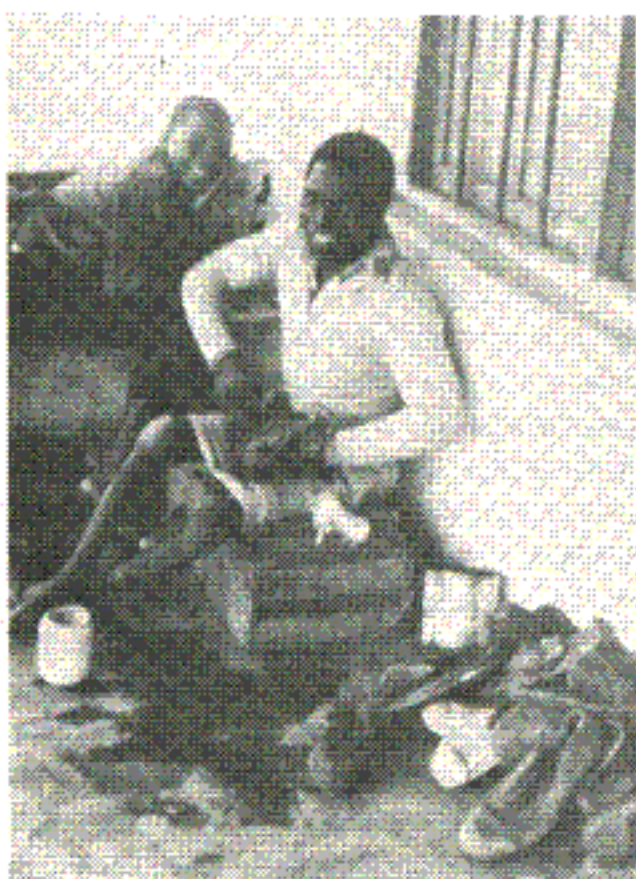
The high proportion of small enterprises to be found in Malawi's rural areas is explained by the large number of traditional craftsmen practising very informal occupations such as pot, mat and basket-making.¹¹ For them a location in or near the villages is preferable, for they cannot afford a workshop, which is in any event a luxury since production can be conducted at home or in the open air. The location of these crafts is determined by the availability of raw materials such as clay, bamboo, reeds and palm leaves. Thus, clusters of pot-makers can be encountered around Ntcheu in the southern region, where clay of good quality is available. A "basket belt" can be made out along both sides of the main road between Blantyre and Liwonde. This "basket belt" is followed by a "mat belt" northwards along Lake Malombe and Lake Malawi, southwards into the Elephant Marshes and eastwards around Lake Chilwa and Lake Chiuta. While basket-makers find palm trees for their required material all over the lowlands and therefore concentrate at the focal points of demand, the availability of reeds, which are mainly used by mat-makers, restricts mat production to the lake and marsh areas. For all traditional crafts, however, the opportunity for sales along the roads is as important as sales in their villages and on markets. The remaining 30 per cent of identified small enterprises comprise rural construction, manufacturing and repair businesses, which are found for the most part in the trading centres. Trading centres and rural towns offer a central location with good traffic connections, and repair services as well as manufacturing businesses are both highly dependent on a regular supply of spare parts and intermediate goods. Tailoring, tinsmithing and carpentry account for almost all of small enterprise production in Malawi. Surprisingly there are only very small numbers of craftsmen involved in blacksmithing and food-processing. Only grain mills are equally distributed over the rural areas, where they can adjust to the de-

mand of their village customers, which leaves them relatively invulnerable to the competition of medium and large processing industries.

Employment opportunities in Kawinga

In mid-1983 a survey was conducted in the Kawinga area in Malawi's south-eastern region, next to the Mozambican border (see map). The Mawinga sample included 600 craftsmen which, with dependents, would imply a total of almost 4 000 people directly dependent on rural crafts for their income, even if additional employees are left out of account. This would amount to over 3 per cent of Kawinga's total population and would not even include the large numbers of traditional craftsmen living in the remoter areas.

A seasonal peak of labour input by the entrepreneurs was distinguished between June and August, when harvesting is usually finished and the demand for products and services is at its peak, since money is available from the sale of food and cash crops. Almost 10 per cent of all surveyed enterprises were established after the rainy season, mostly in the more consumer-oriented branches of clothing, tinsmithing and in repair services. Almost 40 per cent of the interviewed craftsmen employed assistants or trainees. The proportion of enterprises with additional employees is particularly marked in the processing branches of interviewed brickmakers, grain millers and sawyers (96 per cent), while in the manufacturing (carpentry, tinsmith and tailoring professions) and service categories (bricklaying, bicycle, radio and watch repairs) it is about average (40 per cent and 34 per cent respectively). What is responsible for these high averages is the fact that none of the surveyed shoe-repairing and traditional craftsmen employed additional labour in any form. At the lower end of the formal/informal scale are the traditional crafts of mat, basket and pot-production, which offer absolutely no additional employment; at



Shoe repairer in Nsanama south of Ntaja.

the upper end are the professions of grain-milling, carpentry, brickmaking and bricklaying.

Employment figures also reveal the highly seasonal nature of the construction business in Malawi's rural areas. During periods of high demand between April and October, brickmakers employ up to twenty workers simultaneously. In contrast, the other main job suppliers, grain-millers, wood-sawyers and bicycle repair services, dispose of a core of permanent employees. Employment opportunities offered by tailors, tinsmiths, radio and watch repairers are relatively low, but are constant over the whole year.

Estimating the household sizes of the employees to be comparable with those of the rural population, some 2 200 people, or more than 1,5 per cent of the Kawinga population, are dependent to a great extent on employment opportunities offered by small rural enterprises. The Kawinga survey consequently calculated that at least 5 per cent of the total population in this remote rural area receive their income from highly informal manufacturing and repairing activities. This share would be even higher if all traditional craftsmen had been included in the survey. In addition, if other economic

activities such as petty trade, fishing or beer brewing had also been included in the survey, the Kawinga region would have catered for about the same number of non-farm activities as reported by Liedholm and Chuta.¹²

Rural peasants as major source of demand

The number of Kawinga's inhabitants in 1981 constituted 2,3 per cent of Malawi's total population. The majority of the inhabitants of Kawinga belongs to the Yao tribe, a Bantu-speaking people who are mostly adherents of Islam. The annual population growth rate in Kawinga is 2,9 per cent, well above the national average. Immigration is responsible for this population growth to only a limited extent: indeed, in 1982 densely populated areas were already losing inhabitants through family emigration. An under-representation in the male 10 to 35 years population group indicates the high amount of labour emigration into economically more active regions in Malawi. The subsistence farmer desperately needs additional cash income, and over 95 per cent of Kawinga's population earns its living from subsistence farming, which in turn determines the future growth potential of the small rural crafts. Small enterprises most closely connected to agricultural production include grain-milling. Pot and basket-makers, too, supply goods for agricultural as well as for everyday use. The provision of building materials is also a form of enterprise with apparently good prospects, in conjunction with the construction sector: both enterprises obviously depend on the general growth of personal incomes in the rural areas. Repair services chiefly attend to the needs of village farmers, but repaired watches, radios, clothes and leather goods are also often sold to traders, along with the more sophisticated products of traditional craftsmen.

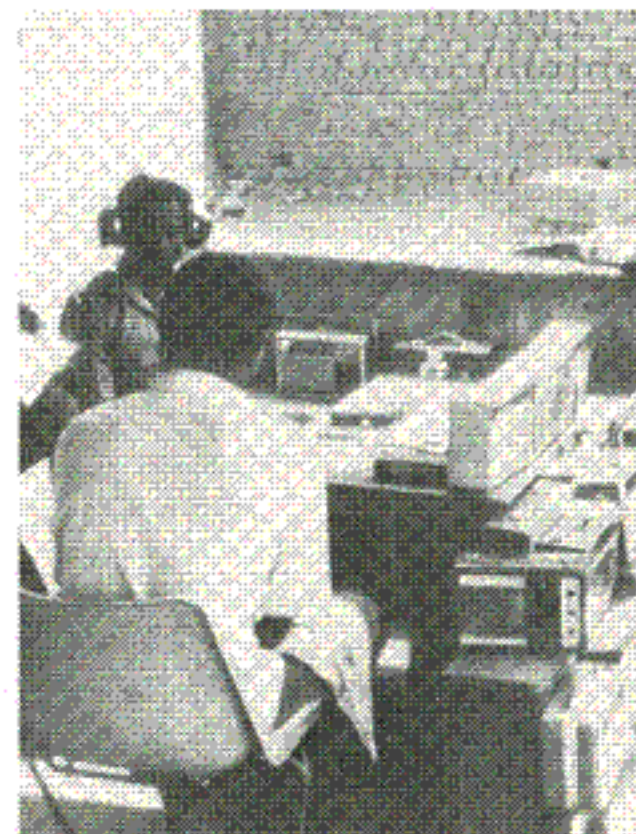
Assuming that there will be an overall increase in agricultural incomes among the rural population, the growth potential of the various rural

crafts and small enterprises also depends largely on their internal structures. Already by 1983 Kawinga's craftsmen appeared to enjoy a higher standard of living than their rural customers. More than 90 per cent of small businessmen interviewed owned fields, mostly in close proximity to their enterprises. Much of the income from their businesses is invested in farm-houses, implements and livestock — which in turn creates rural employment and radiates innovating impulses, the impact of which may also modify the prevailing practice of subsistence agriculture in the medium term.

The running of small enterprises

The average age of the businessmen in the Kawinga sample was 42 years. The class of more successful entrepreneurs — grainmillers, brickmakers, bricklayers and carpenters — were on the average 54 years old. Most of the craftsmen in these categories began earlier in different crafts and then invested their capital and knowledge to create successful businesses. These men are also the farmers ploughing the largest fields, employing the most *ganyu*

Radio repairer in Ntaja.



labourers and keeping the largest numbers of livestock.

Craft manufacturers in Kawinga are overwhelmingly male. Less than 10 per cent of the craftspeople interviewed in the 1983 survey were women. Only pottery-making is an exclusively female preserve, while women provide only 10 per cent of the craftspeople engaged in mat and basket-making. All other craft businesses are run by men.

Many of the traditional craft businesses had been in operation for more than twenty years. These craftsmen constitute a stable population in a stable occupation, while some of the entrepreneurs in the manufacturing and service branches either change or abandon their occupations, or move to the towns. Consequently the "oldest" businesses are located in and around the villages, while the trading centres and markets boast comparatively "young" enterprises with a high entry rate.

In general there is a strong positive correlation between employment and initial investment. In the nationwide survey conducted by the University of Malawi¹³ it was ascertained that in most cases an initial capital outlay of over MK 100 was required in order to create additional employment. More than 50 per cent of the craftsmen interviewed had earned these initial investments as migrant workers. Mining in South Africa, Zambia or Zimbabwe accounted for more than 30 per cent of the total time spent labouring outside Kawinga. But more than 50 per cent of total migrant labour time was spent in the southern region of Malawi, mainly the districts of Zomba and Blantyre. Many of the successful grain-millers, brickmakers, bricklayers and carpenters in particular, had worked outside Kawinga in different professions and had returned to their home district with sufficient capital to open up their new business. It is significant that only 5 per cent of all interviewees earned any important initial capital through *ganyu* labour or by selling crops. A similar percentage had performed contract work on estates or in other professions.

The Kawinga survey found that

for most enterprises location of production and marketing were identical. Naturally this applies to the service branches, since marketing of manufactured products takes place at the craftsmen's premises. The exceptions are the traditional craftsmen who have to travel long distances to the markets if they do not want to sell their products to their fellow villagers or to traders at lower prices.

Profits from pot-, mat- and basket-making are naturally low, although bigger enterprises employing additional workers achieve higher rates of turnover and thus larger profits. Turnover is highest in the mills, at about MK 20 a day, but here the high initial investment and the considerable overheads for oil, diesel fuel and spares, limit average monthly profits to MK 100. In brickmaking both wages and firewood involve considerable expense, while carpenters spend a great deal on transport and the renting of workshops. Bricklaying is obviously the most profitable occupation, though these bricklayers interviewed all had to share their profits with at least one partner. High training fees and limited training opportunities may explain why there are only three bricklayers in Kawinga.

Comparing profits with the average number of days which the businessmen spent working in their enterprises, it was found that profits per labour unit are very high in blacksmithing, grain-milling, carpentry and bricklaying. On the other hand, profits are particularly low for mat- and basket-makers, tinsmiths and wood-sawyers, and in the radio, bicycle and shoe repair businesses. Pot- and brickmakers, tailors and watch repairers enjoy a medium income per labour unit.

Competition for labour between farm and business

The availability of working capital to an enterprise depends on the amount of income the business itself can generate, always assuming that no capital is transferred into other sectors.

Normally, however, working capital is continually being diverted from the enterprise into household consumption and farming investments.

More than 75 per cent of farm-owning businessmen work on their farms during the agricultural season. This, together with second businesses, mainly in seasonal enterprises such as brickmaking, bricklaying and grain-milling also cuts down on the amount of time craftsmen can devote to their traders during the rainy season. Even so, the average craftsman still spends far more time on his trade than on his farming, even during the agricultural season. As a result many craftsmen have to spend a good proportion of their income on *ganyu* labourers for their farms, particularly during sowing and harvest times, when demand for their products and services is at its highest.

Some divide their daily labour time between their farm and their enterprise, working on the farm for an hour or two at dawn and towards dusk. Fortunately little time is wasted between house and fields which were only 2 km or more apart for 20 per cent of craftsmen interviewed. Disadvantages can arise, however, when a craftsman has to situate his business close to his farm, which may be at a distance from the location of optimal demand.

Shortage of working capital

Unless they have sufficient working capital craftsmen may lose valuable time, unable to produce more until customers have bought their wares. This is a severe constraint on the efficient use of labour. Perhaps more important is the lack of working capital needed for intermediate products and spare parts.

Financially imposed delays may lead in time to loss of custom. If a businessman has sufficient working capital, on the other hand, he is able to buy his raw materials in larger quantities, lowering transport costs and reducing the risk of lost trade.

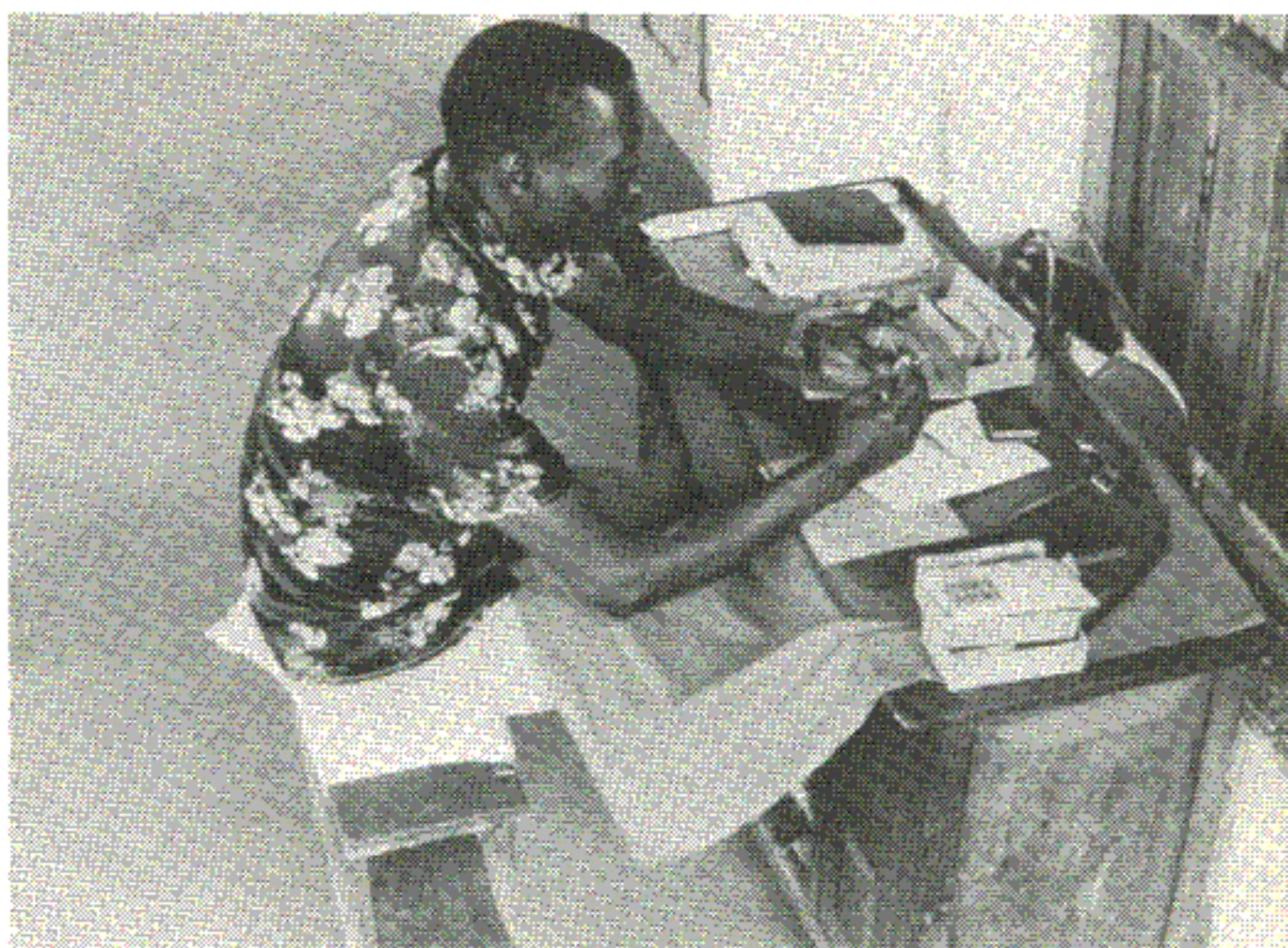
The craftsman's parlous financial situation is aggravated by customers

delaying or defaulting on payment for goods ordered or services rendered. This may leave the craftsman with an unmarketable product or a repaired item which he is not allowed to sell. Inflationary pressures have led to a deterioration of this situation, for the cost of living for those in the lower income bracket doubled during the 1970s, while agricultural incomes increased by only 64 per cent.¹⁴ In the agricultural subsistence sector the position is even worse, cash incomes are very unequally spread according both to farm size and the time of year. This means that demand for craft goods and services fluctuates widely; demand rises shortly after harvesting, declines shortly towards the end of the dry season and peaks for a second time just before the rainy season when the villagers prepare for planting. Demand is at its lowest during the rainy season. It is naturally difficult for craftsmen to adjust their activities to this fluctuating demand since it conflicts with their own interests as farmers in their own right.

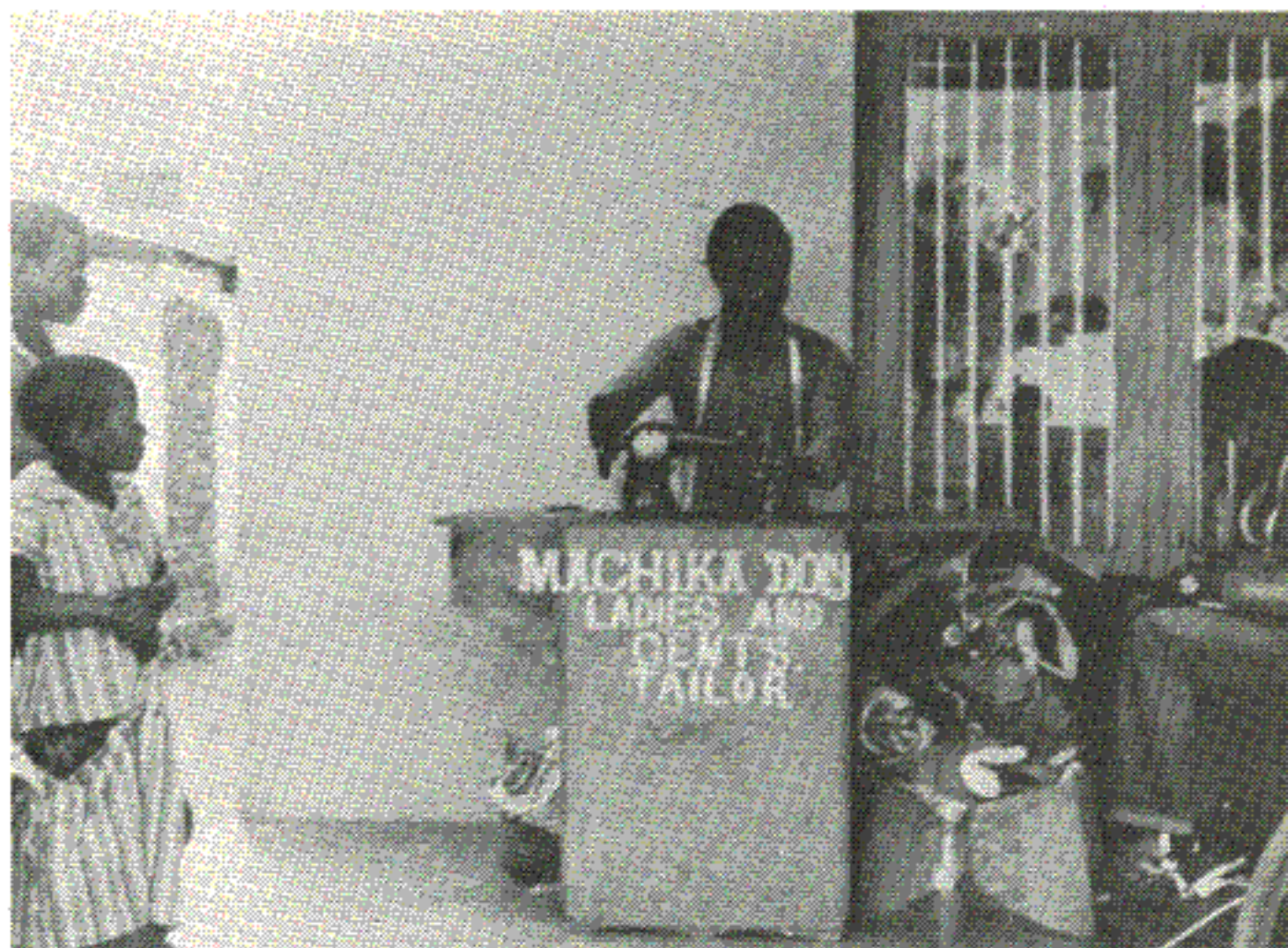
The expulsion of Indian traders

Small businesses also suffer from the absence of an efficient trading class in Malawi. Since the Asian population was restricted to the urban areas of Zomba, Blantyre and Lilongwe in 1974, most rural craftsmen have struggled with the practical problem of marketing their products beyond one day's journey on foot. Establishing a business in a trading centre compensates for this disadvantage to an extent, since one's customers are still limited to the local inhabitants of that centre.

It is noticeable that no traders travel around Kawinga's villages, where they could probably buy up products at cheaper prices. Some basket-makers and tinsmiths manage to sell their manufacturers to traders in market centres, but the distinct impression remains that the 1974 decree cost the rural areas their most effective commercial links to the towns.



Watch repairer in Ntaja.



Tailor at work on verandah of general store in Ntaja. The storekeeper usually owns the sewing machine.



Tinsmiths producing and selling a variety of commodities on the local market of Lilongwe.

Basket makers expanding their production range into the modern sector on the local market in Lilongwe.



Inadequate infrastructure

In the rainy season, which is concentrated between December and March, untarred roads are normally unusable. Buses from Liwonde and Zomba travel no further than Ntaja, on Kiyanga's western border, since the internal road network becomes totally impassable to vehicles. Such conditions create particular problems in the transportation of bulky materials and the distribution of wares within Kawinga. Customers, too, are affected by these conditions. Distances become almost infinite and the marketing area in effect shrinks.

In the dry season transport problems are not too troublesome, although movement of goods and materials still involve significant costs for the local entrepreneur. Grain-millers have the highest overheads in this regard, for they have to travel by car or truck to buy diesel and oil in Liwonde, the only petrol station in Kawinga having shut down. Opportunity costs, too, may exceed the level of mere bus fares, especially when the craftsmen has to walk or travel by bicycle and must close his business for a whole day. This is particularly trying during a period of high demand, when cash is coming in but materials need to be replenished.

Some entrepreneurs in radio repairs and grain-milling mentioned that the absence of electricity was a problem. Some of the grain-millers would immediately install electric engines to make power available. The absence of electricity probably has a limiting effect even in more labour-intensive enterprises throughout Malawi's rural areas.

For the radio and watch repair business, the absence of post offices represents another constraint, for most tools and spare parts have to be obtained from Blantyre or from South Africa.

Competition from industrial and imported products

South Africa's share in Malawi's

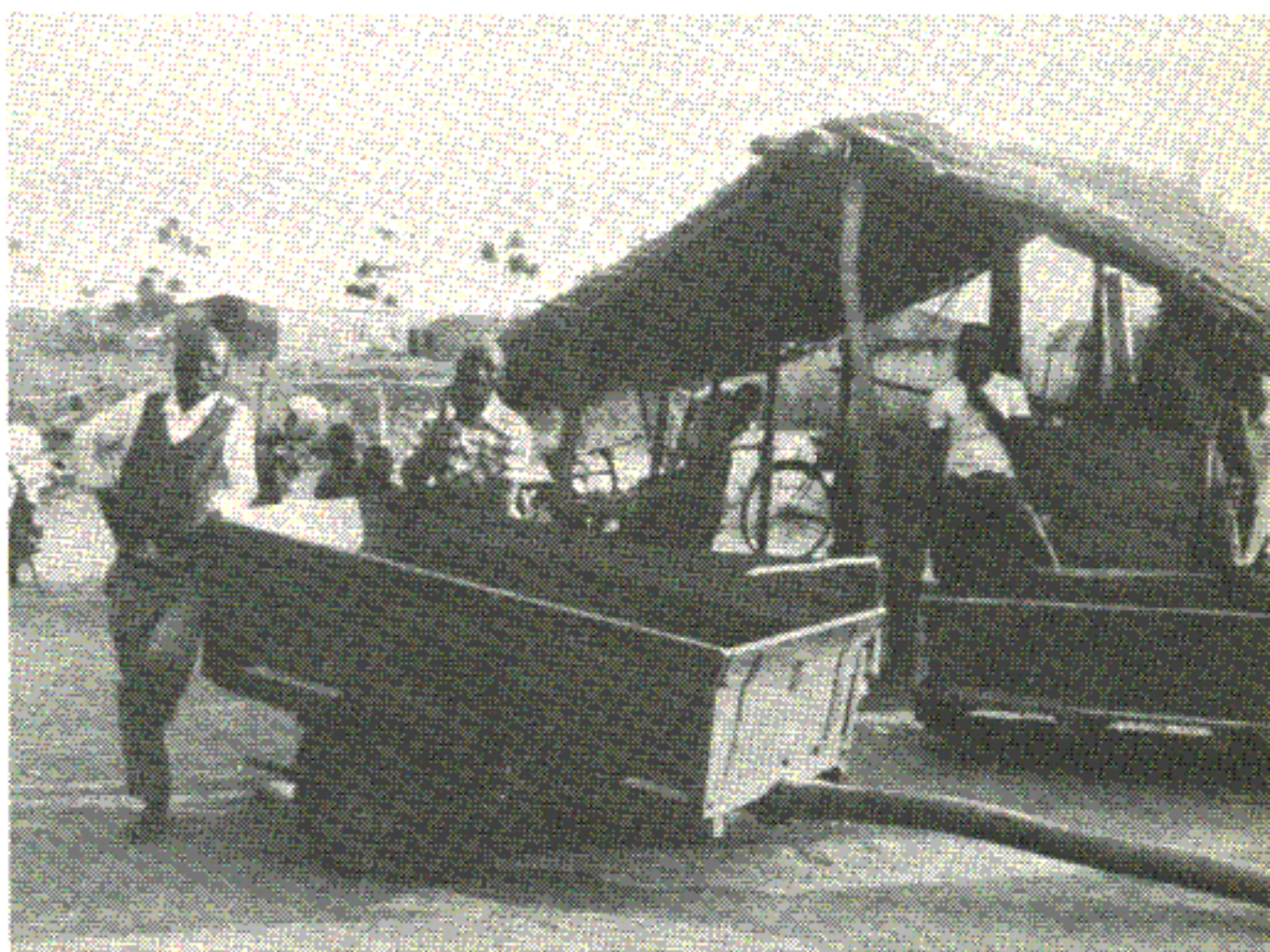
imports rose from 25 per cent in 1975 to over 40 per cent in 1983, while the EEC's share has declined proportionally. Imported goods reach Kawinga via a "Chipuku" depot near Ntaja, where they are purchased by local traders and thus distributed throughout Kawinga.

Agricultural hand tools made by local blacksmiths must withstand fierce competition from industrial manufacturers and imported products, while pottery is being increasingly displaced by imported metal and plastic containers. Beer-brewing has practically ceased as a regular business in Kawinga because of competition from "Malawi Breweries Ltd". Clothes from "Whitex and Sons" and buckets, pots and hoes from "Agrimal", both in Blantyre, are distributed nationwide through 62 "Chipuku" wholesale depots.¹⁵ Elsewhere in Africa, too, the establishment of these semi-government wholesale organizations and official promotion of certain support-substituting industries have often led to the erosion of markets for goods produced by traditional enterprises.¹⁶

The net result is that many small enterprises have to lower their prices in an attempt to undercut their larger competitors, thus reducing profit margins. This, together with the low cash incomes of subsistence farmer customers, means that enterprises have to achieve high rates of turnover in order to remain solvent. It is quite possible that market saturation will soon become a problem unless demand is increased and diversified by rising incomes in subsistence farming. At present low demand in these remote rural areas to some extent protects traditional craftsmen and small-scale entrepreneurs from the competition of cheap mass-produced manufactures.

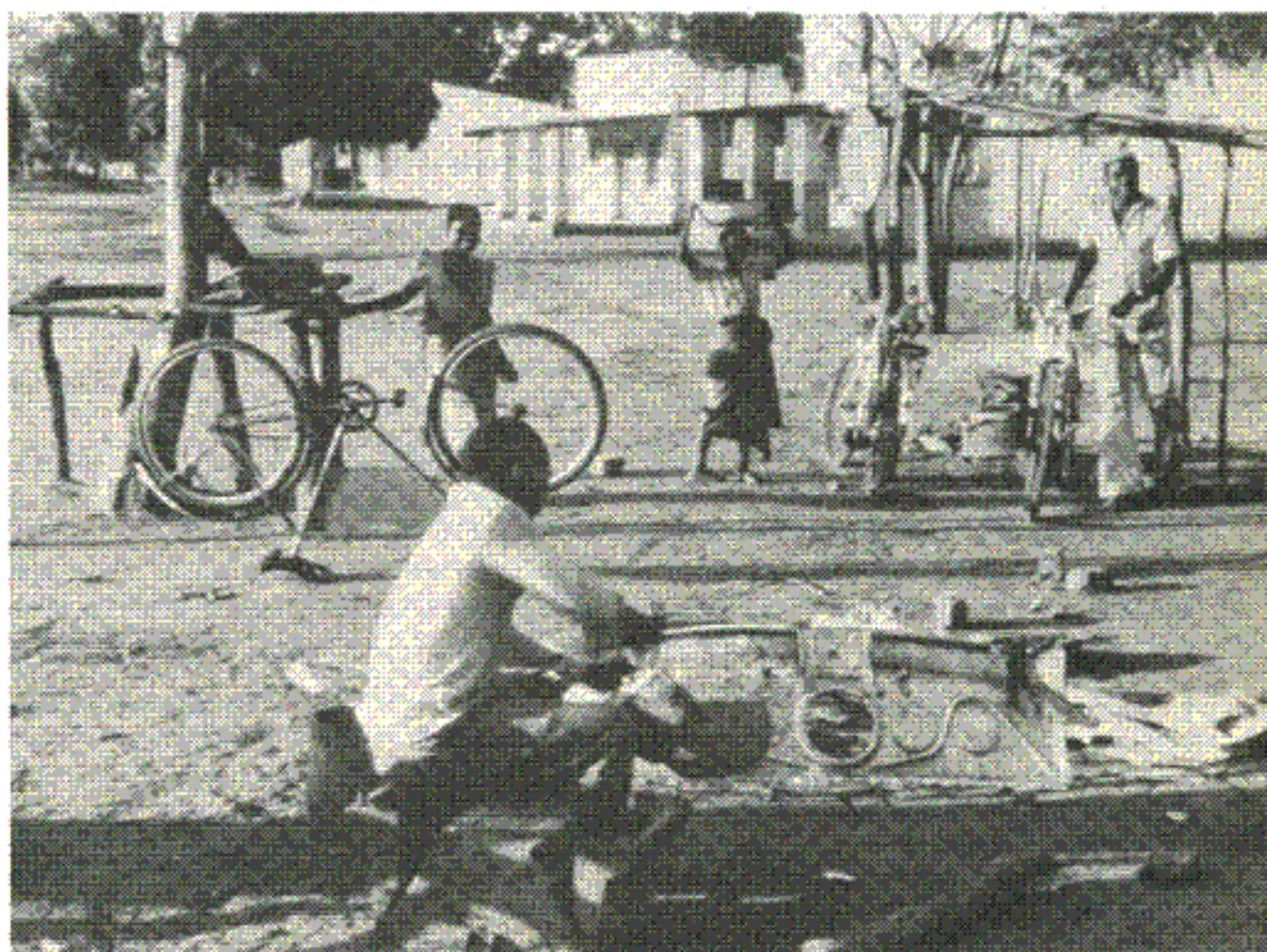
Education and training

Another limiting factor in the informal sector is illiteracy, which affects the management of enterprises by denying them an adequate accounting system. In the absence of records, in-



Successful manufacturers of ox-carts with employees near Mpili mission.

Blacksmith on the main road of Ntaja uses scrap metal from cars as material for pangas, knives, hoes, etc.



come from farming and business are seldom calculated separately, a situation which distorts management calculations. It often happens that income from turnover is compared simply with costs for wages and materials, and the difference is perceived as profit. Other expenses such as license and training fees, transport and opportunity costs and interest in invested capital are left out of the reckoning and this results in denied profits and the viability of businesses being overestimated. Manufacturing enterprises which depend on cheap intermediate products and repair businesses, where location is of the essence in order to meet optimum demand are especially dependent upon reliable knowledge of business conditions. A general lack of education increases the likelihood of enterprises suffering the consequences of mistaken decisions or misperceptions about economic linkages and trends.

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Whither with women's rights?

(continued from p 148.)

place of employment.

These changes would naturally affect the national economies. But adaptations were once made when slaves were freed. Adaptations can once again be made so that the cost of reproducing the future generations and of domestic labour can be borne by the whole society and not just by women.

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