

Robinson, Amanda Lea. 2024. *The Political Logic of Cultural Revival*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 256, ISBN: 9780198909712.

Ken Lipenga

Malawi University of Science and Technology.

“Do cultural organisations serve a political purpose?”

Years ago, when Mulhako wa Alhomwe was being born, I was both a politician and the organisation’s first Chairman. The late Malawi’s President, Bingu wa Mutharika, an intellectual with a soft spot for heritage, discussed the idea with a small group of us long before anyone imagined cultural centres and annual festivals. His longing was genuine and his motive, in my view, non-political: a desire for a community long marginalised to recover its language, memory, and pride. But once a quiet people begin to stand tall—*Alhomwe noophiya* — politics, like a stray goat, will always find its way in, whether invited or not.

In this carefully researched and theoretically grounded study, Amanda Lea Robinson, Professor of Political Science at Ohio State University, captures this inevitable entanglement of culture and politics with elegance and restraint. Drawing on fieldwork that included interviews with traditional leaders and with myself in my own village, she shows how cultural revival increases visibility, and how visibility, whether welcomed or resisted, carries political consequences. Cultural revival, Robinson suggests, rarely remains culturally neutral once it enters public space. These consequences are not necessarily sinister; they are structural and, in many cases, unavoidable. The intellectual force of the book lies in Robinson’s central concept of “ethnic visibility”—the idea that identity becomes politically salient not simply through historical grievance or emotional attachment, but through the everyday practices that make a group publicly noticeable. Language use, naming patterns, dances, festivals, dress, even the renewed circulation of traditional cuisine: these are not merely cultural expressions, but social signals that both reflect and reinforce belonging. Visibility itself, Robinson argues, becomes a form of political presence even in the absence of explicit political mobilisation.

This framework helps explain a phenomenon often observed but rarely theorised with such clarity: why cultural revival can generate pride faster than it transforms daily practice. Communities may stand taller before they fully recover fluency in their own language; symbols may return before habits do. Robinson persuasively demonstrates that symbolic recognition often precedes deeper cultural recovery. The concept travels well beyond Malawi, offering a lens through which to understand identity movements across Africa and elsewhere. Her analysis also resonates with something I have observed over the years in my unofficial role as the Chief Provider of Lhomwe Baby Names—a sort of one-man naming committee. To this day, I receive messages from expectant parents seeking “proper” Lhomwe names. Pride has undoubtedly risen; practice, however, continues to negotiate with modernity. Robinson explains this tension convincingly: cultural pride may surge quickly, but deeper revival—language use, naming conventions, everyday tradition—moves at the pace of a tired ox-cart, not a political campaign.

A book of this ambition, however, inevitably invites a few critical reflections. While the concept of ethnic visibility is powerful, it occasionally risks over-privileging symbolic markers at the expense of material conditions. Visibility does not unfold in a vacuum; it intersects with class, education, urbanisation, and access to state

resources. At times, the analysis might have been strengthened by more sustained attention to how economic inequality mediates who gets to be visible, and on what terms.

More locally, the book also reveals how easily questions of linguistic precision can be overlooked, even in otherwise careful scholarship. In the Malawian context, such details matter. The language of the Lhomwe people is properly Ehlomwe, not Chilhomwe: *chi-* is a Chewa prefix, while *e-* belongs to the Lhomwe linguistic system itself. Prefixes, like people, carry histories of power, and when one wanders into another's grammatical territory it is rarely innocent. At moments in the book, *chi-* appears to be quietly loitering where it does not belong—a small slippage perhaps, but one that inadvertently reproduces the very hierarchies of recognition and dominance that cultural revival movements seek to undo. These criticisms, however, do little to diminish the book's overall contribution. They are better read as signs of a work that opens up productive debate rather than closing it down.

For scholars of African politics, identity, and culture, *The Political Logic of Cultural Revival* offers a clear conceptual tool for understanding how heritage becomes politically meaningful without being deliberately politicised. For Malawian readers and policymakers, the book provides a timely reminder that cultural initiatives—however well-intentioned—do not operate outside power. They shape public space, redistribute recognition, and recalibrate relationships between communities and the state.

Robinson neither romanticises cultural revival nor treats it with suspicion. Instead, she shows how culture does what culture has always done: it gathers people, gives them names, teaches them to stand taller—and, in doing so, quietly rearranges the political landscape. This is a book that deserves to be read not only by scholars, but by cultural practitioners and policymakers alike, especially in societies where identity, history, and governance continue to negotiate their boundaries in public view.