

Review of *Literacies, Power and Identities in Figured Worlds in Malawi*

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The author of the book *Literacies, Power and Identities in Figured Worlds in Malawi*, Ahmmardouh Mjaya is a Malawian, scholar, and lecturer at the University of Malawi. In this book, he explores literacy as a social practice focusing on rural women in Malawi. The social practice of literacy reflects the use of reading and writing in everyday life (Papen, 2006). Mjaya finds the social theory of literacy stronger in the social context and argues that a gap lies in its failure to conceptualise power and identity. This book is responding to this conceptual gap using Holland et al. (1998)'s concept of the figured world. The figured world is "a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters or actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts and particular outcomes are valued over others" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52). Mjaya conceptualises the figured world as "people's imagined areas of interests or activities, which are actualised in real life through various forms of engagement" (p.18).

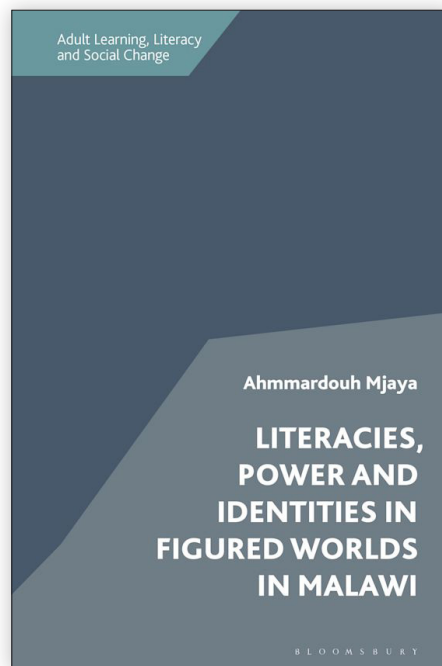
Mjaya's book is based on an ethnographic study conducted in Sawabu village in Malawi where he explores the lived experiences of women in adult literacy classrooms, during conditional cash transfers and other activities in the community. Adult literacy is a key plank

in Malawi's educational strategy, which itself feeds into the country's overall development strategy. However, Mjaya deeply questions the National Adult Literacy Programme for presenting literacy learners as illiterate who need literacy classes to propel them to modern life

and social change. Mjaya finds this reasoning flawed and argues that women's actions depend on their cultural expectations hence change can only be achieved if the entire community changes.

To someone who has never used an ethnographic approach, I find Mjaya's chapter 3 stimulating. Mjaya nicely discusses his choice of an ethnographic approach; however, the real strength of this section is his discussion of the struggles and dilemmas as a researcher. He shares his struggles in finding living space within the community while balancing the need for personal security and living close to the people. However, he emphasises

that living within the community does not make the researcher a full community member, hence Mjaya navigates his own figured worlds while wearing multiple identities assigned by community members. He provides clarity on the applicability and guidance to those who may be interested to use an ethnographic approach in literacy studies.



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Mjaya tests the social theory of literacy, which posits that literacy is fluid and changes in a different contexts. Using the women's experiences, literacy practices and artifacts (information leaflets, money receipts, ration cards, pens, and inkpads), he shows how community members navigated their figured worlds (Chapter 4). Though women were exposed to multiple literacy practices, they needed literacy skills beyond functional literacy. While women navigated their literacy world through thumbprinting (means of signing for those who cannot write), it also exposed the literacy identity of women as those who cannot write. Further, Mjaya critically discusses national policies, showing the gaps in practice, especially in multilingual settings. For example, Ms. Sumani the literacy learner converses with the instructor about managing clean water for drinking. From the extract, Ms. Sumani is knowledgeable on the topic but she lacked literacy skills in Chichewa hence requesting to converse in her mother language Ciyawo. Additionally, Mjaya came across an artifact (road signpost) written in English and Chichewa in the community where learners were being taught in Chichewa only. This example presents a dilemma for policymakers as Chichewa had some practical usage though limited in some situations.

Mjaya's contribution to the social theory of literacy is a pinnacle of the book. Through a figured world (literacy class), he discusses women's lived experiences of power and identity and how literacy played its role (Chapter 5). He paints a picture of literacy learners who change their positioning depending on context. Through these concepts, "the educated/the uneducated," "the knowledgeable/the not knowledgeable," "the intelligent/the struggling," and "the instructor/the learner," Mjaya shows how literacy learning is a context for the negotiation of social relationships. For example, Ms. Msosa identifies herself as "uneducated" reflecting on her writing and reading skills. However, she "read" two pages of her

book at her home reflecting a skill of the "educated." This reflects the fluidity of identities, and that literacy can be empowering or disempowering depending on the experiences in those figured worlds.

Chapter 6 demonstrates women challenging power relationships with the instructors. Through the "school culture," instructors expect learners' to adhere to the standard norms in a formal school like being in school on time, raising hands before speaking and singing songs which gave the instructors power over the learners. This power is contested though, as the learner's agency increases, this is seen as demotivating and disempowering hence resistance. Ms. Upile's case provides a good example where the supervisor directs that only Chichewa literacy graduates will be registered for English literacy classes. However, Ms. Upile registers for an English literacy class despite not being a Chichewa literacy graduate hence ignoring the supervisor's authority. This shows that power is relational and can be negotiated.

In summary, I find Mjaya's work effective in analysing power and identity through the figured world lens. In my opinion, this book is a useful practical tool for a wide audience: literacy experts, postgraduate students, ethnographic researchers, policymakers, and humanitarians. The use of the ethnographic approach is useful to postgraduate students and ethnographic researchers as it acknowledges the challenges of using the approach while assuring the users of its effectiveness in studying literacy subjects. Further, Mjaya made me reflect on my previous work as a humanitarian worker while challenging that my use of literacy artifacts (cashcard) and thumbprinting may negatively affect the dignity of some participants (those who cannot read and write) which is against the "do no harm" humanitarian principle. Further, Mjaya's skill in the incorporation of quotations from his fieldwork and interviews makes the book simple to read and easy to understand.

References

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Papen, U. (2006). *Adult literacy as social practice: More than skills*. Taylor & Francis Group. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uea/detail.action?docID=243110>