

“Partying with a Purpose” at Malawi’s Lake of Stars Festival: Tourism and the Global Political Economy

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ABSTRACT

Founded in 2003, the Lake of Stars Festival (LOS) has grown to become the largest annual beach party in Malawi, and one of the largest on the African continent. The festival has received acclaim from media outlets for not only organizing an enthralling party, but also being sensitive to the destination’s people and culture. Modeled after other large festivals such as Glastonbury and Live Aid, the festival invites attendees to the beaches of Lake Malawi to party—but with culture, development, and aid in mind. This article examines the “party with a purpose” model by analyzing the case of LOS through the perspective of political economy scholarship. It pays particular attention to the raced, classed, and gendered power dynamics within the global tourism industry and the aid-based development sector. While analyzing the ways LOS benefits Malawi and allows Malawians space to be active agents, the article also focuses on the ways LOS contributes to the inequalities in the global tourism sector. It concludes that LOS benefits Malawi by advancing mass tourism, cultural awareness, and tourism development, and allowing Malawians an opportunity to be active agents within the constraints of the tourism industry. However, the festival simultaneously reproduces and reinforces global inequality due to its development and aid goals as well as the structure of global tourism, development, and international aid industries.

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Introduction

Founded in 2003, the Lake of Stars Festival (LOS) has grown to become one of the largest annual beach parties in Malawi, and one of the largest on the African continent. It is an award-winning festival that has received acclaim from media outlets such as Everfest, the BBC, CNN, and the *Guardian* for not only organizing an entertaining party that appeals to party tourists, but also being sensitive to the destination’s people and culture. Modeled after other large festivals such as Glastonbury and Live Aid, the festival invites tourists to the beaches of Lake Malawi to party—but with culture, development, and aid in mind.¹ Festivals with charitable missions raise awareness of destinations, cultures, and philanthropic causes. For example, Live Aid and Live 8 managed to raise awareness among Global North audiences about poverty in the Horn of Africa; they also facilitated changes to Global North government policies toward the region, resulting in the partial cancellation of Africa’s debt.² Although such concerts have the potential to benefit Global South countries and their citizens, due to their peripheral location in the global political economy, such festivals can also marginalize them. Therefore, it is important to understand the global sociopolitical and economic contexts in which festivals occur.

David Picard and Mike Robinson broadly define festivals as “celebratory events” organized for a variety of purposes such as displaying wealth, military might, royal authority, or cultural heritage.³ Over the past twenty years, the number of festivals in Malawi organized by cultural or ethnic heritage associations aiming to preserve culture, advance popular music, display art or fashion, and promote government events has increased substantially.⁴ In part, this growth sprang from efforts at promoting local cultures, from maneuvering by political elites, and from Malawi’s ratification of the 2003 UNESCO convention directing the government to increase cultural conservation efforts. As one of the first festivals initiated during the period of renewed interest in preserving culture, LOS has played a significant role in promoting the country’s creative and tourism sectors, particularly through conducting event management workshops. Malawi now hosts a plethora of festivals centered on music such as the Sand Music Festival, Ufulu Festival, and Tumaini Festival. Importantly, LOS is Malawi’s largest international art event and one of the few music festivals that successfully draws domestic and international tourists, many of whom are considered party tourists.⁵ Therefore, LOS is often touted as beneficial to Malawi and Malawians by LOS representatives, travel writers, bloggers, and journalists, Malawi government officials, and other proponents of tourism.

This article examines the “party with a purpose” model by analyzing the case of LOS in Malawi. It explores the ways the festival challenges what commonly constitutes party tourism by highlighting LOS’s successes in creating mass tourism enclaves, raising cultural awareness, and providing entertainment while fulfilling diverse charitable objectives. It also focuses on the ways in which LOS’s approach reproduces and reinforces global inequality, paying particular attention to the power dynamics within the global tourism industry and the development and aid sectors. It argues that although LOS’s seemingly inclusive “party with a purpose” model serves to challenge

1. Malawi Travel Marketing Consortium, “[Lake of Stars Festival](#),” Malawi Tourism, accessed November 18, 2022; Clyde Macfarlane, “[Lake of Stars Festival: A Party with a Purpose](#),” *Mail & Guardian*, October 23, 2015.
2. Julie Grant, “[Live Aid/8: Perpetuating the Superiority Myth](#),” *Critical Arts* 29, no. 3 (May 4, 2015): 310–26.
3. David Picard and Mike Robinson, “Remaking Worlds: Festivals, Tourism and Change,” in *Festivals, Tourism and Social Change: Remaking Worlds*, ed. David Picard and Mike Robinson, Tourism and Cultural Change 8 (Clevedon, UK: Channel View Publications, 2006), 1–31.
4. Lisa Gilman, “[The Politics of Cultural Promotion: The Umthetho Festival of Malawi’s Northern Ngoni](#),” in *Public Performances: Studies in the Carnavalesque and Ritualesque*, ed. Jack Santino (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2017), 164–88.
5. Gilman, “Politics of Cultural Promotion”; Hivos, “[Hivos Supports the 15th Anniversary of Lake of Stars Festival in Malawi](#),” Hivos, October 9, 2018; Amelia Duggan, “[Festival Fever: Five of the Best Art and Music Festivals in Malawi](#),” *National Geographic*, May 16, 2019; Malawi Plus, “[16 Best Festivals and Events in Malawi](#),” Business and Travel Guide, Malawi Plus, May 24, 2023.

6. Robert I. Rotberg, *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa: The Making of Malawi and Zambia, 1873–1964* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Farai Sevenzo, "Bedtime for Banda," *Transition*, no. 85 (2000): 4–29.

7. Alice Magombo and Christian M. Rogerson, "[The Evolution of the Tourism Sector in Malawi](#)," *Africa Insight* 42, no. 2 (September 1, 2012): 46–65.

8. Rotberg, *Nationalism in Central Africa*; Sezenzo, "Bedtime for Banda"; William Finnegan, "[There Is Something Wrong in the Paradise](#)," *Transition*, no. 55 (1992): 4–22.

9. Finnegan, "Something Wrong in Paradise"; Magombo and Rogerson, "Evolution of Tourism"; Michael Bennett Sepula and Jacqueline C. Korir, "Tourism and Hospitality Policy Strengths, Weaknesses and Effectiveness—Lessons for Malawi," *International Journal of Economics, Business and Management Research* 3, no. 5 (2019): 140–54.

10. Magombo and Rogerson, "Evolution of Tourism"; Francis (Frank) Mark Ivan Johnston Jonathan Waters 2nd October 1942–23rd December 2020," *Society of Malawi Journal* 74, no. 1 (2021): 52–55.

11. Jan Mosedale, "Neoliberalism and the Political Economy of Tourism: Projects, Discourses and Practices," in *Neoliberalism and the Political Economy of Tourism*, ed. Jan Mosedale, Current Developments in the Geographies of Leisure and Tourism (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2016), 1–20; Jonathan Said and Khwima Singini, "[The Political Economy Determinants of Economic Growth in Malawi](#)," ESID Working Paper 40 (Manchester, UK: Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre (ESID), University of Manchester, 2014); Magombo and Rogerson, "Evolution of Tourism."

inequalities in the global tourism industry with respect to Malawi and Malawians, LOS is equally a part of a global capitalist effort that contributes to and reinforces existing unequal power relations that serve to marginalizes Malawi and Malawians. Importantly, it highlights how this festival both challenges and reinforces inequalities in the global tourism sector.

The Political Economy and the Promise of Tourism

Due to its touted benefits, Malawi has been paying greater attention to tourism than it did in the past. Formerly known as Nyasaland, Malawi is located in southeastern Africa. Under colonial rule, the country was a part of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, which amalgamated three territories—Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and Nyasaland (Malawi)—into one federal state. The colonial administration concentrated their "development" efforts on building large farms and infrastructure in Malawi's neighboring countries. Malawi's primary role was as a source of labor for Zambia and Zimbabwe, resulting in Nyasaland's underdevelopment.⁶ Therefore, tourism to Nyasaland during these times was minimal, primarily consisting of White tourists from Northern and Southern Rhodesia or from the Republic of South Africa (SA), which had larger numbers of White settlers.⁷

The country emerged from colonialism with a cash-crop economy supported by tobacco. Dr. Kamuzu Hastings Banda quickly consolidated his power after independence in 1964, ruling Malawi as a one-party dictatorship until 1994.⁸ Tourism development was not a core part of Banda's development strategy, owing to a desire to maintain an agriculturally based economy. Banda's tourism policy aimed at attracting regional White tourists from Zambia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and SA. Accordingly, there was little financing for tourism development other than modest investments in small-scale tourism infrastructure projects such as government-run hotels. Banda also set up a tourism board and other industry boards to manage tourism activity. These efforts resulted in tourism arrivals increasing from 6,494 international arrivals in 1967 to 50,098 in 1974.⁹ Part of this growth is attributed to a global surge in young Global North backpackers, overlanders, and other budget travelers worldwide, some who made their way to Malawi. During that era, tourists came to know Malawi as "The Warm Heart of Africa." This endearing tagline (coined by Banda's Irish tourism officer Frank Johnston) was meant to brand the country as a tourism-friendly destination and remains the country's tourism moniker today.¹⁰

During the 1980s to early 1990s Banda continued his policy of making modest but strategic investments into tourism infrastructure, including building Kamuzu International Airport in 1984. Generally, tourism development remained a low priority for him due to several competing factors. Politically, he was facing growing opposition due to human rights abuses and intolerance toward political opposition. Economically, Malawi had joined the ranks of the poorest nations in the world due to the failure of Banda's strategy aimed at diversifying the economy. After a period of instability, Banda staunchly followed the World Bank's structural adjustment programs (SAPs) advocating deregulation, privatization, and open competition. These policies weakened the agriculture sector, which was central to Malawi's economic agenda; for example, the cotton industry was decimated.¹¹ Banda leaned closer to SA's apartheid government for economic stability, thereby alienating anti-apartheid advocates. Nevertheless, in collaboration with SA, Malawi was heavily promoted as a neutral and welcoming place for White tourists whose travel

12. Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 171; Magombo and Rogerson, "Evolution of Tourism"; Finnegan, "Something Wrong in Paradise."
13. Magombo and Rogerson, "Evolution of Tourism"; Sepula and Korir, "Tourism and Hospitality Policy."
14. David Harrison, "Pro-Poor Tourism: A Critique," *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 5 (2008): 851–68, Magombo and Rogerson, "Evolution of Tourism"; Sepula and Korir, "Tourism and Hospitality Policy"; International Monetary Fund, *Malawi: Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper*, Country Report No. 2012/222 (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, August 2012).
15. Magombo and Rogerson, "Evolution of Tourism"; Sepula and Korir, "Tourism and Hospitality Policy."
16. Alfred Chawua, "Chakwera Launches Tourism Masterplan: Urges Citizens on Positive Talk for Country," *Nyasatimes Newspaper*, April 5, 2022.
17. Lloyd George Banda, "Tourism Development and Economic Growth Nexus in Malawi—A Time-Series Data Analysis, 1985–2015," *International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality* 1, no. 2 (January 4, 2021): 12–20; Wanjohi Kibicho, *Sex Tourism in Africa: Kenya's Booming Industry* (London: Routledge, 2016).
18. Banda, "Tourism and Economic Growth"; Elemot C. Chauma and Cecilia Ngwira, "Managing a World Heritage Site in Malawi: Do Residents' Sentiments Matter?," *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 17, no. 2 (March 4, 2022): 142–57.
- options were curtailed owing to economic sanctions, including travel bans targeting SA. Tourism promotion in SA resulted in Malawi becoming a top destination for White tourists, who grew to dominate Malawian resorts. This controversial alliance kept Malawi's tourism industry afloat with annual tourism visits registering 162,559 by 1994.¹²
- With the advent of democratic rule in 1994, President Bakili Muluzi's government prioritized tourism by making it an integral part of the national development and economic growth strategy. Consequently, the Department of Tourism was upgraded to the Ministry of Tourism. Malawi's tourism growth remained modest, though, due to inadequate marketing funds and declining numbers of game animals. In 2002, Muluzi's administration decided to shift its focus by attempting to attract high-end tourists who tend to spend more due to higher levels of disposable income.¹³ Accordingly, tourism promotion centered around presenting Malawi as a luxury destination for eco-tourism. However, most tourists continued to be budget-conscious tourists such as overlanders and backpackers. Another change in the post-Banda era involved prioritizing the poor as the beneficiaries of tourism development. Championed by development agencies, pro-poor tourism (PPT) strategies became popular worldwide in the late 1990s due to a resurgence of the idea that tourism would alleviate poverty. The government launched the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy (MPRS) in 2002, which focused on empowering the poor through national pro-poor growth strategies. Subsequent policies such as Malawi's Growth and Development Strategies (MGDS) also focused on benefiting the poor through pro-poor strategies. Since these policies identified tourism as a key sector to help realize pro-poor growth, the government eagerly supported PPT initiatives.¹⁴
- Malawi's economic and development policies continue to regard tourism as essential to the country. Every political administration since the Muluzi administration has pledged to revive the country's economy, prioritizing tourism in their economic growth and development agendas. Encouraged by multilateral organizations, they profess faith in tourism as a path to development, economic diversification, foreign exchange revenue, and job creation. Despite zeroing in on tourism in national development policies, Malawi's tourism industry continues to struggle. At the national level, tourism has not resulted in the benefits proponents promised, and the current tourism infrastructure cannot yet support the mass tourism they desire.¹⁵ Nevertheless, tourism is still considered a priority for growth and the country is still committed to increasing its market share in tourism by attracting leisure tourists from overseas, since most of its visitors are regional. The current government is supporting these aspirations by providing financial incentives. Malawi's current president, Lazarus Chakwera, recently renewed efforts at expanding tourism by launching a \$660 million tourism masterplan in 2022 to bolster investments in tourism infrastructure.¹⁶
- Despite existing infrastructure challenges, contemporary Malawi can still be considered a quintessential tourism destination for leisure tourism to Africa due to offering "sun, sea, sand, and safaris," which are important for competing in Africa's tourism space. At the core of the country's marketing strategy is Lake Malawi, which covers 20 percent of the country's landmass and has natural beach areas.¹⁷ The strategy also emphasizes Malawi's wildlife, archaeological sites, rock paintings, and traditional dances such as Gule Wamkulu as points of product differentiation. However, Malawi competes with neighboring countries in its nature and cultural tourism sectors and is often dwarfed by its larger, better-known neighbors.¹⁸ It is within this competitive tourism

19. Richard Sharpley, "Tourism: A Vehicle for Development?," in *Tourism and Development: Concepts and Issues*, ed. Richard Sharpley and David J. Telfer, 2nd ed., Aspects of Tourism, v. 63 (Clevedon, UK: Channel View Publications, 2015), 11–34.

20. Peter U. C. Dieke, "Tourism in Africa's Economic Development: Policy Implications," *Management Decision* 41, no. 3 (January 1, 2003): 288.

21. Felix G. Bello, Brent Lovelock, and Neil Carr, "Enhancing Community Participation in Tourism Planning Associated with Protected Areas in Developing Countries: Lessons from Malawi," *Tourism and Hospitality Research* 18, no. 3 (July 2018): 309–20.

22. Chauma and Ngwira, "World Heritage Site."

23. Grace Kamanga and Felix G. Bello, "Exploring Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Adoption in the Tourism Industry: The Case of Malawi," *Tourism Review International* 22, no. 2 (September 19, 2018): 117–30; Bello, Lovelock, and Carr, "Enhancing Community Participation," 7.

24. Samantha Chaperon and Bill Bramwell, "Dependency and Agency in Peripheral Tourism Development," *Annals of Tourism Research* 40 (January 1, 2013): 132–54.

landscape that the LOS festival was welcomed by Malawi's government. While the festival has received largely positive media attention both inside and outside Malawi as well as in non-academic literature, tourism development in Africa has not been as auspicious as promised; moreover, critics contend that tourism perpetuates unequal power relationships and uneven development. Therefore, perspectives offering critiques of tourist-attracting festivals in Africa such as LOS merit greater attention.

Critical Tourism Literature

As defined by tourism scholar Richard Sharpley, tourism is the "social phenomenon which involves the movement of people to various destinations and their (temporary) stay there."¹⁹ Despite the growing recognition of tourism by African governments, businesses, and nonprofits, there is little academic writing about tourism on the continent. Most research on tourism in Africa centers around the touted benefits of tourism, with only a minority of scholars bemoaning its negative impact. Notable among the latter is tourism scholar Peter U. C. Dieke, who contends that tourism in Africa has led to the "destruction of social patterns, neo-colonialist relationships of exploitation and dependence, [and] inflationary pressure."²⁰ Although Dieke accurately points out Africa's marginalization in tourist exchanges and the overrepresentation of foreign companies in the industry, his analysis does not adequately engage with the race, class, and gender dimensions of power.

Similar patterns have been observed in the recent scholarship regarding tourism in Malawi. Felix Bello, Brent Lovelock, and Neil Carr have argued that local communities have been alienated from the tourism planning process.²¹ Additionally, a study by Elmot Chauma and Cecelia Ngwira found that interactions between guests and hosts were limited, with residents reporting being alienated from tourism and not seeing much benefit from investments in tourism infrastructure.²² Studies by Grace Kamanga and Felix Bello, which considered the impact of corporate social responsibility programs on communities, concluded that tourism companies in Malawi did not reinvest in the local community. Although important for illuminating power relationships in the industry, such studies also ignore the lingering race, gender, and class power relations in the industry that are part of the colonial legacy. In fact, Bello, Lovelock, and Carr present such critiques as fringe: "one extreme perception of tourism development and its effects is the view that it is a form of colonialism and imperialism."²³

Far from extreme, postcolonial theories that intersect with political economy approaches provide a space for critical historical-global analysis, critical politics, and perspectives suspicious of Western liberal modernity in tourism studies. Influenced by Samir Amin and Andre Gunder Frank, dependency theorists such as Jan Mosedale, Polly Pattullo, Raoul Bianchi, and Stephen Britton have influenced critical tourism research using political economy approaches. Dependency theories suggest that the world is divided into a core and a periphery.²⁴ The core consists of rich, powerful countries that are perceived as "developed," for example the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. The periphery consists of poor countries with less power that are regarded as "undeveloped" or "underdeveloped," for example Kenya, Egypt, Mauritius, and Zambia. Notably, Britton uses this core-periphery framework to argue that tourism is the latest form of colonialism. He contends that colonialism and capitalism inform the global

25. Stephen G. Britton, *Tourism and Underdevelopment in Fiji*, Monograph/Development Studies Centre, no.

31 (Canberra: Australian National University, 1983). See also Chaperon and Bramwell, "Dependency and Agency"; Raoul V. Bianchi, "Towards a New Political Economy of Global Tourism Revisited," in *Tourism and Development*, 287–331.

26. Britton, *Tourism and Underdevelopment*; Polly Pattullo, *Last Resorts: The Cost of Tourism in the Caribbean*, 2nd ed. (London: Monthly Review Press, 2005); David Harrison, "Development Theory and Tourism in Developing Countries: What Has Theory Ever Done for US?" *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 11, no. S1 (2015): 53–82.

27. Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1966; repr., New York: International Publishers, 1976); Bianchi, "Global Tourism Revisited."

28. James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Todd Cleveland, *A History of Tourism in Africa: Exoticization, Exploitation, and Enrichment, Africa in World History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2021); Bianchi, "Global Tourism Revisited."

29. John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1990); Bianchi, "Global Tourism Revisited."

30. Harrison, "Development Theory and Tourism"; Bianchi, "Global Tourism Revisited"; Sepula and Korir, "Tourism and Hospitality Policy."

tourism sector and maintain uneven colonial power relationships. Therefore, production, social organization, and trading relationships benefit the Global North. He argues that the commercial and entrepreneurial power of Global North countries enables them to dominate the Global South, because of the Global South's dependency on the Global North for tourists and capital. Britton further contends that this structure allows core countries to exploit peripheral countries in the tourism industry, resulting in their active underdevelopment.²⁵ His application of the core-periphery framework to tourism is useful for understanding power relationships in the global tourism industry.

Political economy and postcolonial perspectives regard tourism development as modernity projects. They are suspicious of tourism projects because, they argue, they produce inequality and dependence, benefiting the Global North. Britton argues that in host destinations, businesses are primarily foreign-owned and money from airlines, hoteliers, tour operators, and travel agents is largely managed or reinvested overseas. Such leakages result in little tourism money circulating in host countries. Additionally, scholars such as Patullo criticize the preference for imported goods over local goods used to cater to tourists; they also criticize the privileging of foreign personnel in upper management while low-wage service jobs are reserved for local employees.²⁶ Such critiques of tourism development posit that the global tourism industry has a mostly adverse impact on the Global South and that it embodies what Ghanaian president and postcolonial scholar Kwame Nkrumah defined as "neo-colonialism." That is, tourism development subtly allows former colonial rulers to reinforce neoliberal capitalist expansion and the cultural subjugation of former colonies.²⁷

Dependency theorists such as Britton argue that poor Global South nations that are located at the periphery of the global economy do not control the tourism industry. Global South citizens typically do not have access to copious amounts of capital and many do not have the disposable income that affords them the privilege to travel. Therefore, they are junior partners in North-South tourist exchanges and cannot compete on a level playing field.²⁸ Sociologist John Urry's analysis of the tourist gaze provides us with a framework for understanding raced, classed, and gendered tourist-host relationships. He argues that White Global North male tourists wield more economic and social power than their Global South hosts. This means countries like Malawi and its predominantly Black citizenry do not control the industry and occupy a marginal status in the industry.²⁹

Studies using business and tourism management perspectives tend to be positivist, technical, and generally focused on cost-benefit analysis. They tend to simplify complex raced, classed, and gendered power relationships and concentrate on incorporating the Global South within the neoliberal modernization framework. Therefore, they are inclined to suggest "sustainable" or "alternative" methods such as volunteer tourism (voluntourism).³⁰ Such approaches address the ways African countries can attract, increase, and manage tourism within the confines of current global capitalist accumulation rather than challenge the uneven structure of the industry. Since the tourism industry is informed by a neoliberal global economy—which is characterized by the uneven and unequal free flow of capital, goods, and people across borders—such approaches entrench Global South countries further in a position of dependency.

Importantly, tourism scholars such as Samantha Chaperon and Bill Bramwell argue that the

31. Bianchi, "Global Tourism Revisited"; Chaperon and Bramwell, "Dependency and Agency."

32. Alice McCool, "[This Festival Founded by Brits in Malawi Swears It's Not Problematic](#)," *Vice*, October 6, 2016; Malawi Travel Marketing Consortium, "Lake of Stars Festival."

33. Malawi Travel Marketing Consortium, "Lake of Stars Festival"; McCool, "It's Not Problematic."

34. Portobello Tents, "[Lake of Stars](#)," Portobello Tents, accessed January 11, 2023; Lake of Stars, "[About Lake of Stars](#)," Lake of Stars, January 11, 2023.

35. Macfarlane, "Party with Purpose"; McCool, "It's Not Problematic"; EverFest, "[Lake of Stars 2022 in Walthamstow, United Kingdom](#)," Lake of Stars in Walthamstow, Everfest.com, accessed November 16, 2022.

36. EverFest, "Lake of Stars 2022."

37. EverFest.

38. Portobello Tents, "Lake of Stars."

39. Michelle Duffy and Judith Mair, "[Future Trajectories of Festival Research](#)," *Tourist Studies* 21, no. 1 (March 2021): 9–23.

40. Nick Ray, "[Counting the Stars at Malawi's Lakeside Music Festival](#)," *Lonely Planet*, September 15, 2015. "Wellies" is another term for gumboots/rainboots.

application of dependency theories to tourism tends to imply that the economy is overarching and deterministic, oversimplifying it in a way that leaves little room for Global South actors' agency. Therefore, they advocate a more nuanced analysis of tourism that acknowledges the potential for periphery countries and their citizens to retain benefits and make strategic choices even if their ability to be active agents is constrained by external global forces.³¹ Considering calls for scholarship in the political economy of tourism that is inclusive of its complexities, this article first examines the ways that LOS challenges global inequalities. Then it explores the extent to which LOS reproduces and reinforces global inequalities.

Case Study: The Lake of Stars Festival

LOS is an international event that invites attendees to a three-day beach party along the shores of Lake Malawi, headlined by international DJs and musicians. The festival was launched in 2003 by British citizen William Jameson after a visit to Malawi where he worked as a voluntourist for the Wildlife Society. His trip encouraged him to start hosting electronic music nights with college friends in Liverpool's clubs. Named after a popular sorghum-based beverage mimicking a traditional homemade beer popular throughout southern Africa, the "Chibuku Shake Shake" club nights grew popular and were subsequently hosted in places such as Ibiza, a popular party tourism destination in Spain.³² At times, the DJs included Malawian music in their line-up, which the crowd responded well to. Encouraged, Jameson used the contacts gained from the European nightlife network to start a similar party in Malawi, giving rise to LOS.³³

Aiming to create an event impacting the economy, highlighting art, and promoting Malawi as a tourism destination, the annual festival started out with seven hundred attendees. Its blend of local and international talent—it managed to feature acclaimed musicians such as Lucius Banda, Mafikizolo, Oliver Mtukudzi, Young Fathers, Freshly Ground, and Sauti Sol—made it more popular in subsequent years.³⁴ Prior to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the festival was amassing an average of four thousand domestic and international attendees annually. Today, travelers from across the world, representing thirty countries, descend on the chosen location every year to attend the festival. This includes tourists from the United Kingdom, China, Norway, Germany, Australia, and the United States; it also includes expatriates living in Malawi and across southern Africa.³⁵ The festival has become one of the largest tourism events in the country, injecting an estimated \$1.7 million into the Malawian economy each year. Earning an award from Fest300 as one of the top festivals in the world, LOS is now recognized by festival industry site Everfest as a formidable international festival.³⁶

Similar to festivals like Glastonbury Festival, Coachella Music Festival, and World of Music, Arts, and Dance (WOMAD), LOS centers around music, dancing, and an overall festive atmosphere.³⁷ According to Portobello Tents, a festival services site, "there is a fantastic party vibe and you'll be sure to spend long, hot days by the lake, boogying your flipflops off."³⁸ Partnerships with industry actors support the festival by providing facilities, campsites, alcohol, or music needed to create a celebratory atmosphere. Therefore, LOS largely seeks to attract tourists whose primary motivation for visiting the country is to attend the festival and accompanying parties in a warm climate on the sandy beaches of Lake Malawi.³⁹ As *Lonely Planet* travel writer Nick Ray highlights, "It's WOMAD without the wellies [rainboots], Glastonbury on the sand, with sunshine almost guaranteed."⁴⁰

41. Sheena Carlisle and Caroline Ritchie, "Permission to Rebel: A Critical Evaluation of Alcohol Consumption and Party Tourism," *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 25–44; McCool, "It's Not Problematic."

42. Ray, "Counting the Stars."

43. Samuel Seongseop Kim et al., "The Role of Family Decision Makers in Festival Tourism," *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 29, no. 2 (June 2010): 308–18.

44. Picard and Robinson, "Remaking Worlds," 3.

45. Picard and Robinson, "Remaking Worlds"; Carlisle and Ritchie, "Permission to Rebel." Festival tourism, party tourism, and event tourism are closely related since festivals are events that attract tourists. However, defining the differences and similarities between these forms of tourism is beyond the scope of this article.

46. Carlisle and Ritchie, "Permission to Rebel."

47. McCool, "It's Not Problematic"; Macfarlane, "Party with Purpose"; Mark Jayne et al., "Drunken Mobilities: Backpackers, Alcohol, 'Doing Place,'" *Tourist Studies* 12 (2012): 211–31; Portobello Tents, "Lake of Stars."

LOS's ability to offer the four S's of mass tourism—sun, sea, sand, and sex—in Malawi helps keep the festival competitive; additionally, the festival offers many elements that specifically attract party tourists.⁴¹ The entertainment and parties typically last late into the night, featuring a host of popular international DJs. Past line-ups have included well-known names such as British duo My Nu Leng (Tommy Jackson and Jammo Irving), Andy Cato (from the group Groove Armada), and DJ Goldierocks (Sam Hall), who has played at festivals such as Glastonbury and Ibiza Rocks.⁴² Therefore, as evidenced by its ability to attract popular international acts, local artists, large crowds, and industry awards, LOS has earned a solid global reputation as a party destination.

Party in Paradise: LOS as Party Tourism

Celebratory festivals as defined by Samuel Kim et al. are characterized by their annual occurrence, short duration, and location in a confined space.⁴³ Given these boundaries, LOS can be considered a festival since it takes place annually over three days in different exclusive tourist enclaves in Malawi. Picard and Robinson argue that festivals inherently attract tourists and thereby constitute tourism. They describe the term "festival tourism" as an elusive one describing the "general pattern of tourism development in the developed world over the last 50 years or so [that] intersects at numerous points with occasions of festivity, carnival and performance rituals."⁴⁴ Since LOS is a festival that attracts tourists, it falls under the purview of festival tourism as well. However, because LOS is also a festival attracting young tourists from around the world to party at—and ancillary to—the main event, it constitutes both festival and party tourism.⁴⁵ Since LOS is inextricably linked to the accompanying parties at hotels, bars, campsites, and clubs, this paper examines this festival as a party tourism event.

Party tourism as defined by Sheena Carlisle and Caroline Ritchie involves similar elements as mass tourism, including "sunny coastal destinations, easy transport infrastructure, purpose-built accommodation facilities, a good image and presence via media and tour operators" but adds "invitations to participate in group-drinking activities such as pub and bar crawls, boat parties and nightclubbing."⁴⁶ Although these characteristics are applicable to the Malawian context, Malawian spaces also have unique characteristics that distinguish them from party tourist locations in Global North countries such as Spain. For example, they typically have less restrictive zoning requirements, attract relatively fewer global visitors than destinations such as Cancun or Ibiza, and occur in gated shopping centers or resorts; thereby, venues are generally more spread out—which presents challenges for "crawling." Therefore, this paper broadly defines party tourism as travel to a destination for a temporary stay involving party attendance, whether the party is planned or incidental and regardless of whether party attendance was the primary or partial reason for the trip.

Party tourism is inseparably related to the alcotourism (alcohol tourism) and recreational drug tourism subsectors. Many LOS attendees stay at nearby hotels or on location at nearby campsites erected around the beach for the festival where alcohol and other recreational drugs are accessible. Alcohol consumption and drug use are also integral to the LOS experience, especially for backpacking attendees.⁴⁷ Research on backpackers in Australia by Jayne et al. has highlighted that alcohol consumption and drunkenness is key to backpacking holidays. Carlisle and Ritchie have also shown that alcohol is regarded as essential to the party tourism experience. Excessive alcohol consumption is common among young party tourists, who

48. David Bell, "[Destination Drinking: Toward a Research Agenda on Alcotourism](#)," *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy* 15, no. 3 (January 1, 2008): 291–304; Carlisle and Ritchie, "Permission to Rebel."
49. Jayne et al., "Drunken Mobilities."
50. Jane Flanagan, "[Malawi Pins Hopes on Gold Standard of Cannabis](#)," *Times UK*, December 1, 2020; McCool, "It's Not Problematic."
51. Carlisle and Ritchie, "Permission to Rebel"; Jonas Martiny, "[End of Party Tourism in Mallorca?](#)" DW.com, June 27, 2022; Grzegorz Iwanicki and Anna Dłużewska, "Party Space in Cracow and WaSAw: Partying and Conflicts," *Ekonomiczne Problemy Turystyki* 44 (2018): 139–45.
52. Felix Schlagwein, "[Budapest Moves to End Party Tourism](#)," DW.com, July 24, 2020.
53. Hyung Yu Park, *Heritage Tourism* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
54. Sharif Gemie and Brian Ireland, *The Hippie Trail: A History, 1957–78* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2017); Magombo and Rogerson, "Evolution of Tourism."
55. Kevin EG Perry, "[Malawi's Lake of Stars Festival: Banging the Drum for Africa's Musical Heritage](#)," *Guardian* (US edition), October 7, 2016; McCool, "It's Not Problematic"; Macfarlane, "Party with Purpose"; Catherine Makhumula, "[Re-Imagining Dzaleka: The Tumaini Festival and Refugee Visibility](#)," *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 5, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 1–18.

are in part motivated to attend festivals for alcotourism.⁴⁸ Therefore, it is unsurprising that accommodation venues like the Funky Cichlid, which caters to backpackers, often hosts festival after-parties with music, beer, and cocktails.⁴⁹ Some attendees also participate in planned or incidental recreational drug use during LOS. Malawi is home to a popular strain of marijuana called Malawi Gold (*Chamba*), which has given rise to a small, illicit, underground marijuana tourism industry.⁵⁰

Alcohol- and drug-influenced behavior has earned party tourists the reputation of being problematic for residents in established party tourism destinations. A typical party tourism experience involves engaging in noisemaking, rowdiness, excessively drinking, risky sexual activities, or other transgressive behaviors. Therefore, some party tourists are often perceived as menaces in host destinations such as Mallorca (Spain), Cracow (Poland), and Budapest (Hungary).⁵¹ For example, Budapest gained notoriety as a hotspot for young party tourists, which resulted in resident complaints about noise, late hours, drunkards, garbage, urine stench, and drug dealers. Therefore, the city's mayor is trying to encourage partygoers to take interest in cultural tourism, which he contends party tourists disregard.⁵² One of his motivations may be that, as scholar Hung Yu Park has noted, tourists interested in the destination's culture and nature tend to spend more money.⁵³

In Malawi, Kamuzu Banda infamously initiated a strict dress code in Malawi, banning bell-bottom pants (women were not allowed to wear pants altogether), large afros, and long hair for men. These laws in part targeted the wave of hippies entering the country in the 1970s. The draw of Malawi Gold made Malawi a popular destination for low-budget travelers pushing the boundaries of the "hippie trail" beyond Asian borders. However, many of them were considered undesirable owing to their association with drugs and behavior considered incompatible with Malawian culture.⁵⁴ Given the lingering conservative nature of Malawi's political class, LOS's efforts to fuse party tourism with a cultural component would be met with less resistance.

A Purpose-Driven Party: LOS's Charitable Mission

Cognizant of the negative perceptions of party tourists, LOS's founder quickly encouraged attendees to take part in an immersive experience incorporating a variety of activities. The festival line-up was deliberate in selecting Malawian musicians—both newcomers and established—seeking national and international exposure. It also intentionally brought awareness to minority groups living in the country. Notably, it provided a platform for Amahoro drummers from Burundi living in Dzaleka refugee camp to perform, which drew attention to their struggles as displaced people and allowed them space to represent themselves as active agents. The potential for marginalized musicians to retain agency and realize benefits from festivals has been explored in the Malawian context by Catherine Makhumula, who has argued that despite institutionalized constraints, refugee artists at the Tumaini Festival in Malawi can exhibit some form of agency. This is important in providing a contrast to humanitarian festivals such as Glastonbury, which sometimes exoticize host countries by presenting them as little more than aid recipients.⁵⁵

Attendees also experience related cultural artforms which the organizing team coordinates, including poetry readings, traditional Malawian dances, sports, theatrical performances, film

56. EverFest, "Lake of Stars 2022"; Malawi Travel Marketing Consortium, "Lake of Stars Festival."

57. Portobello Tents, "Lake of Stars."

58. Carlisle and Ritchie, "Permission to Rebel."

59. Hazel Andrews, *The British on Holiday: Charter Tourism, Identity and Consumption* (Clevedon, UK: Channel View Publications, 2011).

60. McCool, "It's Not Problematic"; Macfarlane, "Party with Purpose"; EverFest, "Lake of Stars 2022."

61. EverFest, "Lake of Stars 2022."

62. Macfarlane, "Party with Purpose"; Tom Sangala, "[Tourism Boost as Salima Hosts LOS](#)," *Daily Times* (Malawi), accessed November 19, 2022; Lake of Stars, "[Other Projects](#)," January 11, 2023, Lake of Stars.

63. Harrison, "Pro-Poor Tourism," 856.

screenings, TEDx-style talks, and volunteer opportunities. They are further encouraged to participate in tourist activities at the festival or nearby venue such as swimming, snorkeling, kayaking, hiking, and other activities available at venues catering to LOS tourists.⁵⁶ This more holistic approach to party tourism helps attendees move beyond the archetype of the drunk, menacing party tourist insensitive to a destination's residents and culture. LOS attendees have in fact received the support of local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Malawians, and the government. In 2016, the then-minister of tourism, Ken Lipenga, even skydived into the festival during its opening ceremony to promote tourism activities outside of the party. As Jameson explains, "it's not just about throwing a big party. It's also about building something [an event] that can inspire people."⁵⁷

When traveling abroad, party tourists typically expect to relax and abandon everyday responsibilities that they would otherwise deal with at home. Essentially, being on vacation in the festive enclave affords them an opportunity to unwind and revert to irresponsible—and even childlike—behavior.⁵⁸ Tourism scholar Hazel Andrews's research on British tourists on vacation has highlighted that such permissions are facilitated or reaffirmed in mass tourism party enclaves by industry players such as holiday package organizers.⁵⁹ However, following the example of festivals such as Glastonbury, WOMAD, and Live Aid, LOS organizers encourage participants to act responsibly. In other words, attendees are encouraged to contribute to the economy and development of Malawi actively as a core element of their festival experience—that is, to party with a purpose.⁶⁰

According to Jamerson, LOS's official mission is "to work in the fields of the arts, tourism and development to provide entertainment whilst developing people and places."⁶¹ Importantly, LOS is a for-profit organization that promotes and generates revenue from Malawian arts and tourism sectors. Its contribution to Malawi's socioeconomic development is its business model and corporate social responsibility program, which often overshadows its for-profit roots. Nonetheless, LOS relies on volunteer labor from both attendees and participants. This includes international artists and DJs who perform for free. LOS's direct contribution includes donating part of its ticket sales to charitable organizations operating in Malawi. They also donate items such as bedsheets and mattresses to Kamuzu Central Hospital. Furthermore, recycled wood used at LOS is often converted into school desks or benches and donated.⁶² The festival organizers partner with nonprofits working in Malawi such as the United Nations Population Fund, Girl Effect, Save the Children, and the Jacaranda Foundation to realize their charitable agenda.

Through its charitable endeavors, LOS organizers take deliberate action to meet their development-focused mission and goals. Notably, many of their activities are compatible with pro-poor growth strategies embedded in Malawi's development agenda. Key elements of PPT involve integrating the poor into global markets by increasing job and entrepreneurial opportunities, relying on the private sector (with the cooperation of local and national government), acknowledging that the wealthy will disproportionately benefit, and focusing on development (education, water, health, etc.).⁶³ However, the extent to which the organization behind LOS actually challenges inequality in tourism industry begs further investigation.

64. Malawi Travel Marketing Consortium, "Lake of Stars Festival."

65. Beverley Mullings, "Globalization, Tourism, and the International Sex Trade," in *Sun, Sex, and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean*, ed. Kamala Kempadoo (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 55–80; Pattullo, *Last Resorts*; Simon Carter and Stephen Clift, "Tourism, International Travel and Sex: Themes and Research," in *Tourism and Sex: Culture, Commerce, and Coercion*, ed. Stephen Clift and Simon Carter, *Tourism, Leisure, and Recreation Series* (London: Pinter, 2010), 1–298.

66. Signe Arnfred, "African Sexuality/ Sexuality in Africa: Tales and Silences," in *Re-Thinking Sexualities in Africa*, ed. Signe Arnfred (Uppsala, Sweden: Nordic Africa Institute, 2004), 59–78; Jason Mitchell, "[Western Tourists Have Returned to Africa. Will Business Travellers Follow?](#)" *Investment Monitor*, November 26, 2021; Cleveland, *Tourism in Africa*.

67. Cleveland, *Tourism in Africa*; Pattullo, *Last Resorts*; Mullings, "Globalization, Tourism and International Sex."

68. Gilman, "Politics of Cultural Promotion"; Magombo and Rogerson, "Evolution of Tourism."

69. Mitchell, "Tourists Returned to Africa"; Landry Signé, [Africa's Tourism Potential: Trends, Drivers, Opportunities, and Strategies](#) (Washington DC: Africa Growth Initiative at Brookings Institution, December 2018).

70. World Bank, [World Bank Open Data](#), accessed December 13, 2022.

71. Mitchell, "Tourists Returned to Africa"; Signé, *Africa's Tourism Potential*.

Challenging Global Inequalities?

One of the most visible contributions of LOS is its economic impact. Since its inception, it has generated an estimated over \$4.7 million for Malawi's tourism industry.⁶⁴ LOS operates in a multimillion-dollar global tourism industry with potential for large profits for the Global South. According to scholar Landry Signé, approximately one billion people travel internationally. Due to technological advances, rapid globalization, and greater disposable income, more people have been traveling internationally since the 1960s, giving rise to mass tourism. The Global South has become increasingly attractive for tourists seeking to "discover" new, "unspoiled" destinations. Consequently, Global South destinations have expanded their services to meet their demands. Today, tourism has grown to become one of the largest global industries.⁶⁵ Although this growth slowed because of the 2020 COVID-19 travel bans, as the tourism industry recovers, there still is a potential for enormous profits. Therefore, the industry remains attractive to African countries due to opportunities for economic diversification, poverty alleviation, and socioeconomic development.⁶⁶

Promises, Profits and Global Prominence

African nations have been competing for tourism revenue since the 1960s, when the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other multilateral organizations began touting tourism as an engine of growth for the Global South. Encouraged by tourism potential and the relative willingness of multilateral organizations to provide funding for tourism projects, African countries leaned toward tourism development over the years. By the early 2000s, the industry had gained prominence as a potential foreign-exchange earner, job creator, and income generator for Africa.⁶⁷ Additionally, during the post-Banda era the environment in Malawi was more conducive to tourism investments, owing to the government trying to preserve Malawian cultures and prioritizing tourism.⁶⁸

Increasing numbers of tourists were visiting Africa in the years immediately preceding the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly 37.4 million tourists were visiting sub-Saharan Africa annually by 2018. Southern Africa in general accounted for 49 percent of all international travel arrivals to Africa, compared to 28 percent for eastern Africa and 23 percent for western Africa.⁶⁹ According to the World Bank, Malawi received 871,000 tourist visits in 2018, a number that was still relatively low in comparison to Mozambique's 2,870,000 visitors, Zambia's 1,072,000 visitors, Tanzania's 1,506,000 visitors, and Zimbabwe's 2,580,000 visitors that same year, but was a huge increase from the 424,000 visitors that Malawi received in LOS's initial year (2003).⁷⁰

Given these numbers, tourism has indubitably brought revenue to African nations. The International Finance Corporation (IFC) reports that tourism was accounting for approximately 7 percent of Africa's overall GDP by 2019, thereby injecting \$169 billion into the continent's economy.⁷¹ According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), in 2019, international (non-African) tourism inbound receipts in Africa amounted to a total of \$24.7 billion. Tourism receipts from African tourists the same year accounted for 55 percent of the continent's tourism and travel spending. The tourism sector's contribution to Malawi's GDP was 7.3 percent in 2019, generating \$622.2 million. With ticket prices averaging around \$38, Jamerson reported in 2022

72. Mitchell, "Tourists Returned to Africa"; World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTTC), "[Malawi, 2022 Annual Research: Key Highlights](#)," *Economic Impact Reports* (London: WTTTC, March 2022); Perry, "Malawi's Lake of Stars Festival."

73. Signé, *Africa's Tourism Potential*; Banda, "Tourism and Economic Growth"; Mitchell, "Tourists Returned to Africa"; Britton, *Tourism and Underdevelopment*; Malawi Travel Marketing Consortium, "Lake of Stars Festival."

74. Pattullo, *Last Resorts*; Olivier Dehoorne, Christelle Murat, and Nathalie Petit-Charles, "[International Tourism in the Caribbean Area: Current Status and Future Prospects](#)," *Études Caribéennes*, no. 16 (May 18, 2011); Signé, *Africa's Tourism Potential*.

75. Ray, "Counting the Stars."

76. Chauma and Ngwira, "World Heritage Site," 11.

77. Cleveland, *Tourism in Africa*; Chauma and Ngwira, "World Heritage Site"; Pattullo, *Last Resorts*.

that LOS was responsible for contributing approximately \$1.6 million toward the tourism sector annually.⁷² In itself, this should be considered a significant achievement.

LOS is also an important vehicle for marketing Malawi's people and places. The festival contributes to increasing Malawi's international exposure as a tourism destination to people who may have otherwise not known about the country. As Britton argues, Global North tourist organizations have the advantage of being in direct contact with international tourists, who may not always know where they want to travel. Therefore, they serve as intermediaries by packaging the tourism product for Global North markets. According to Signé, beach and safari trips are the most popular subsets for international tourists to Africa. Therefore, LOS promotes Malawi's beaches, landscape, and wildlife. However, its larger neighbors Mozambique and Zambia also offer the same products, which presents challenges for Malawi's visibility. As Britton highlights, the desirability of a destination is influenced by unique attractions for consumption. Accordingly, after traveling to neighboring countries, Jamerson sought to differentiate Malawi through a tourist-focused festival attracting audiences that may have not initially chosen Malawi, nor even Africa.⁷³

When Global North tourists started seeking "exotic," "unspoiled" destinations, the Caribbean became a prime market due to its beaches. Subsequently, the Caribbean islands grew to receive disproportionate volumes of tourism relative to their size. When Global North tourists started to progressively look for new destinations, they increasingly thought of Africa's coastline. Therefore, LOS attracted beach-seeking tourists by marketing the festival in Malawi as a big beach party reminiscent of those in the Caribbean.⁷⁴ As *Lonely Planet* travel writer Nick Ray observed in an article about LOS, "Pinch yourself, this is not the Caribbean, but Malawi, one of the lesser-known gems of this incredible continent, boasting beautiful beaches that defy its landlocked location."⁷⁵ As such, LOS has been beneficial in bringing attention to Malawi as a tourist destination.

The Politics of Participation and Culture

On the ground, however, interactions between Global North tourists and Africans are often limited and staged. Critics argue that residents are rendered invisible, appearing only as props for tourist experiences. For example, research by Chauma and Ngwira on Malawian attitudes toward tourism showed that residents near the Chongoni Rock site felt disconnected from the tourism development: "We only interact with tourists when they want us to perform the *Gule wa Mkulu* dance for them. Otherwise, they just come and visit the painting with no interactions whatsoever with the local people."⁷⁶ This is a pattern throughout the continent, where African people are typically not visible in tourist exchanges unless they are there to serve or entertain. Tourists typically expect to observe Africans singing and dancing in traditional clothes as a marker of authenticity. Thus a common criticism about Global North to Global South tourism is that residents are reduced to being one-dimensional and tourists are disconnected from their lived experiences. Residents also complain of not having genuine interactions with tourists. This is consistent with Pattullo's argument that affluent tourists are often segregated from impoverished locals in typical interactions between Global North and Global South tourists.⁷⁷

Sensitive to such sentiments, LOS festival organizers are intentional in including Malawians in all facets of the festival experience in tangible ways. Malawians participate as attendees,

78. Journalist Alice McCool expounded from her travel experiences that clubbing in Africa is often characterized by “white tourists and NGO types going to certain clubs, and locals sticking to others.” McCool, “It’s Not Problematic.”

79. McCool, “It’s Not Problematic”; “Mafikizolo to Headline Lake of Stars Arts Festival,” *Mail & Guardian*, August 12, 2014.

80. In 2019 alone, the tourism industry was responsible for creating 586,500 jobs, or 7.7 percent of total jobs in Malawi. World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTTC), Malawi, 2022 Research Highlights; Sangala, “Salima Hosts LOS”; Jim Evans, “Midias PRO2C Is Star on Lake Malawi,” *LSi Online*, October 20, 2011.

81. Macfarlane, “Party with Purpose.”

82. Cleveland, *Tourism in Africa*; EverFest, “Lake of Stars 2022”; Pattullo, *Last Resorts*; Haretsebe Manwa, “Women and Tourism in Southern Africa,” in *Sustainable Tourism in Southern Africa: Local Communities and Natural Resources in Transition*, ed. Jarkko Saarinen et al. (Clevedon, UK; Channel View Publications, 2009), 69–76.

83. Banda, “Tourism and Economic Growth”; International Conservation and Clean-up Management (ICCM), “About ICCM: International Conservation and Clean up Management,” *ICCM Malawi*, 2020; Damaris Agweyu, “I Refuse to Be Boxed’, Zilanie Gondwe on Following What Feels Good,” *Qazini*, January 27, 2022; Hivos, “Hivos Supports the 15th Anniversary of Lake of Stars Festival in Malawi.”

comprising 60 percent of the audience, which is distinct because clubbing in sub-Saharan Africa is often divided along racial lines.⁷⁸ LOS is one of the few festivals that successfully attracts international tourists as well as wealthy domestic tourists who are often neglected as consumers by government agencies. Malawians are also an integral part of the festival performance line-up, often collaborating with artists from other Africa countries or outside Africa. These interactions provide a space for networking between individuals that may not otherwise have had the opportunity to collaborate or meet. Malawian NGOs also participate and do so as partners, not only as subordinates or entertainment. For example, LOS partners with the CNN Hero Marie da Silva’s Jacaranda Foundation. The foundation’s orphans perform as a part of their school choir but also benefit by watching other acts, participating in pre-festival workshops with the celebrities where they interact and learn about music. This form of active participation, which is less hierarchical, allows them to retain agency and benefits.⁷⁹

LOS’s management team contributes to creating jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities that are inclusive of Malawians too. They typically provide vendors and businesses stalls—for a fee—where they can sell their products and make a profit. Entrepreneurs linked to the festival report experiencing significant increases in sales during the festival. LOS also leads to job creation, with the festival contributing roughly one hundred jobs to the nearly six hundred thousand jobs created in the tourism industry.⁸⁰ In addition to paid labor, LOS relies on both international and local voluntourists. Local volunteers (primarily from the urban areas such as Blantyre and Lilongwe) volunteer in exchange for tickets. Their volunteer work includes building stage sets, bartending, and other activities, which provides them the opportunity to build different skill sets and gain work experience.⁸¹ Volunteering also provides Malawians the opportunity to appear as benefactors for local charitable initiatives in a development space where they are predominantly featured as recipients of aid. By including Malawians as volunteers, LOS challenges racialized labor practices in the development industry, in which the dominant face of a voluntourist is a citizen of the Global North.

The structure of LOS’s management team also helps to mitigate racialized and gendered hiring practices in the industry. LOS is managed by Jameson and his Malawi-based team, with the support of a UK-based one. A common criticism about the tourism industry by critics such as Pattullo is that the best and highest-paying jobs are reserved for foreigners while locals perform low-paying jobs centered on servitude. Furthermore, tourism scholar Heretsebe Manwa argues that the tourism industry in Malawi has historically been male-dominated, with hosts typically being men.⁸² However, rather than relying on foreigners and men to be the “spokespeople” of the festival, LOS has made efforts to hire Malawian women professionals experienced in the tourism or cultural sectors in Malawi. As an example, their head of media, Zilane Gondwe, is a recognized name in Malawi’s tourism and culture sector, having initiated cultural, artistic, and nonprofit events challenging gender inequality. Likewise, project manager Sharmila Elias is experienced in the region’s travel and hospitality industry. She is at the forefront of initiatives helping to mitigate damage to the environment. Therefore, rather than hiring Global North “expatriates” in these roles, the organization includes racial minorities and women within their management ranks. Additionally, LOS festival organizers have also partnered with other organizations to promote the role of women in the arts, which creates spaces for women’s participation.⁸³

The festival is also inclusive of local communities who live in the vicinity of the festival locations.

84. McCool, "It's Not Problematic"; Perry, "Malawi's Lake of Stars Festival"; Duffy and Mair, "Festival Research."

85. Perry, "Malawi's Lake of Stars Festival"; McCool, "It's Not Problematic."

86. Picard and Robinson, "Remaking Worlds," 4.

87. Harrison, "Pro-Poor Tourism," 855.

88. Harrison, "Development Theory and Tourism," Samir Amin, *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World* (London: Zed Books, 1990).

Residents living near the festival participate in artistic activities and workshops organized by the festival. For example, a pre-festival concert was held for residents so that they could experience the entertainment. Additionally, an "ideas" festival was held for secondary school pupils to encourage them to exchange ideas about development. The festival has grown into a space for musical expression and serves as a springboard for other artistic and cultural events across diverse groups. Inclusion of all resident cultural groups is important because, while festivals foster a sense of community for dominant groups, such events can exclude minority groups like refugees.⁸⁴ LOS actually includes Amahoro drum performances from Burundian refugees in their line-up, rather than excluding them for not being representative of Malawian culture. In 2016, Jameson collaborated with Congolese musician Menes La Plume, a refugee living at the Dzaleka camp near Lilongwe, to initiate the Tumaini Festival. The camp, which is located on the outskirts of Lilongwe, is home to over 52,000 refugees.⁸⁵ LOS's efforts at inclusivity cannot be overstated because it demonstrates their commitment to redressing exclusion by flattening social hierarchies.

As demonstrated above, LOS makes efforts to benefit Malawi and Malawians by allowing space for Malawians to retain agency, albeit within the constraints of the structure of the tourism industry. Through their "party with a purpose" approach—which embodies PPT strategies—they work toward challenging inequalities in the global tourism industry. However, festivals like LOS do not operate in a vacuum. LOS's ability to challenge inequality or affect change is informed by the global political economy and actors in the global tourism industry. Therefore, it is important to examine the ways LOS's approach may also reinforce and contribute to inequality in this sector.

The Problem with Party Tourism: Reinforcing and Reproducing Inequalities

Although LOS makes efforts to provide benefits, it is important to recognize that embedded in the planning and management of all festivals oriented toward tourism are neoliberal, capitalist ideologies, contexts, or roots that need unpacking.⁸⁶ Tourism scholar David Harrison argues that strategies like PPT are formulated to "incorporate the poor into capitalist markets by increasing the employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, and more collective benefits, available to them [and notably rely] on and must be integrated into, wider tourism systems."⁸⁷ Therefore, it is important to examine LOS's tourism model with consideration of the structure of the political economy and the dominant economic ideologies that inform Africa's tourism industry.

Power, Dependency, and Global Tourism

LOS operates in the context of a global tourism industry characterized by unequal and uneven power relationships. Due to neoliberal capitalist developments, African nations have been encouraged by development organizations, governments, and policymakers to follow the same path to "development" as the West and to "modernize" their tourism infrastructure. As Harrison notes, modernization is, around the world, the default mode of thinking deployed for tourism development. Using variations of world systems, underdevelopment, and dependency theories from political economy, critics of tourism development argue that external economic, political, institutional, and social structures actively cause underdevelopment for poorer nations while simultaneously enriching wealthy ones.⁸⁸ As Chaperon and Bramwell explain, this occurs because of the foreign ownership and control of profitable tourism businesses that facilitate

89. Harrison, "Development Theory and Tourism"; Chaperon and Bramwell, "Dependency and Agency."

90. Harrison, "Development Theory and Tourism"; Cleveland, *Tourism in Africa*; Britton, *Tourism and Underdevelopment*.

91. Dehoorne, Murat, and Petit-Charles, "International Tourism in the Caribbean Area"; Pattullo, *Last Resorts*.

92. Harrison, "Development Theory and Tourism"; Bianchi, "Global Tourism Revisited"; Amin, *Delinking*.

93. Ferguson, *Global Shadows*; Amin, *Delinking*.

94. Amin, *Delinking*; Bianchi, "Global Tourism Revisited"; Harrison, "Development Theory and Tourism."

95. Cleveland, *Tourism in Africa*; Harrison, "Development Theory and Tourism"; Ferguson, *Global Shadows*.

expatriation of wealth. In essence, dependency theorists argue that former colonies are not underdeveloped because of internal factors such as a failure to progress through the series of stages dictated by modernization approaches. Rather, they point to imperial capitalist expansion, which makes countries poor in part by rendering them dependent on Global North for development.⁸⁹

According to Britton, the tourism industry is structured in a way that makes developing countries subordinate and unequal partners in tourist exchanges. The subordination of African countries in the tourism industry is attributed to the power relationships between rich and poor nations, which informs their ability to negotiate travel or trade policies. Power relationships also determine one's probability of becoming a tourist. For example, citizens of wealthy countries are more likely to have disposable income, and hence to become tourists. Poor countries therefore become reliant on rich countries for tourism income. This traps poor nations like Malawi in a dependent relationship with Global North countries due to the poor nation's marginal position in a global political economy that the Global North controls.⁹⁰ For example, when Caribbean island nations oriented their economies toward tourism development, they became heavily dependent on tourism.⁹¹

Increasing reliance on tourism is problematic for African nations because their integration in global tourism is structured to keep them dependent. As sociologist James Ferguson argues, the current global economy has left little space for Africa outside its role as provider of raw materials. The location that a country occupies in the global political economic system determines whether a country is privileged or disadvantaged from capitalist production. Africa's marginal location in the global economy means that countries such as Malawi are disadvantaged. Dependency theorists such as Amin contend that the current global world order divides countries into two primary regions, a core and periphery in which the core is dominant and exploits African countries in the periphery for raw materials.⁹¹ World systems theory—an extension of dependency theory—makes similar arguments but includes a "semi-periphery" region to make space for wealthier countries in the periphery such as South Africa, Jamaica, Brazil, or India. Importantly, the country's location in this global economic system determines the country's level of power and influence; upward mobility is rarely attainable. Since Malawi is considered a periphery nation in this model, it is marginalized and disadvantaged in tourism exchanges.⁹³

A central contention of dependency and world systems theories is that poor states are impoverished, and rich ones enriched, based on how well they are integrated in the global system. In these models, resources such as raw materials and labor flow to the core for industrial production and manufactured consumer goods to flow back to the periphery. The periphery becomes reliant on the core to purchase their raw materials and supply manufactured goods to them. This relationship creates development within the core and underdevelopment in the periphery; that is, it stunts growth in African nations.⁹⁴ In the case of tourism to Malawi, the Global North or "core" supplies tourists (and their economic, commercial, and political interests), while Malawi, as a "periphery" nation, supplies resources like land (beaches, mountains, forest, lake, etc.), culture (music, dances, singing, etc.), and labor for tourist consumption. Critics contend that Global North tourists and corporations yield such great influence under this system that the countries of the Global South are rendered "playing fields" or "amusement parks" catering to their dreams.⁹⁵ Since Malawi is in the periphery, it leaves Malawians attending or working with

96. Bianchi, "Global Tourism Revisited"; Harrison, "Development Theory and Tourism"; Said and Singini, "Political Economy in Malawi."

97. Britton, *Tourism and Underdevelopment*; Samantha Page, *Development, Sexual Cultural Practices and HIV/AIDS in Africa* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2019).

98. Jonathan Mafukidze, "A Discussion of Migration and Migration Patterns and Flows in Africa," in *Views on Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa: Proceedings of an African Migration Alliance Workshop*, ed. Catherine Cross and African Migration Alliance (Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press, 2006), 103–29; T. Bisika, "[Sexual and Reproductive Health and HIV/AIDS Risk Perception in the Malawi Tourism Industry](#)," *Malawi Medical Journal* 21, no. 2 (July 23, 2009).

99. Patrick Greenfield and Sundus Abdi, "[Prince Harry Wildlife NGO under Fire after Elephants Kill Three in Malawi](#)," *Guardian* (US edition), October 1, 2022; Solister Mogha, "[Shoot to Kill Poachers—Malawi Legislators](#)," *NyasaTimes*, December 8, 2016.

100. Greenfield and Abdi, "Elephants Kill Three."

101. Mogha, "Shoot to Kill Poachers"; Amy Dickman et al., "Wars over Wildlife," *Conservation & Society* 18, no. 3 (2020): 295–97.

LOS vulnerable to exploitation by LOS, LOS's partners, and Global North tourists.

The influence of foreign tourists and corporations is evidenced by the dominance of foreign players such as transnational corporations, tour operators, and hoteliers that minimize the profits of local players in local tourism industries. Critics like Patullo and Britton argue that foreign players drain wealth from tourism profits by sending money back to their home country, importing foreign goods and materials, and hiring foreign employees for top management jobs. In these respects, tourism endangers livelihoods and further marginalizes those relying on tourism for survival who are typically hired for low-wage labor and work in poor conditions. This is the case in Malawi too where the tourism industry that LOS operates in is foreign-dominated and tourism policy caters to the interests of foreign investors, transnational organizations, and Malawi's elite.⁹⁶ As Britton contends, the tourist economy in peripheral states is owned by foreign interests and members of the elite. Development researcher Samantha Page defines Malawi's elite as comprising high school- or college-educated English-speaking Christians who work for government, NGOs, or private companies.⁹⁷ Although Malawi's elite do benefit somewhat, most of LOS's partner hoteliers, restaurants, and tourism operators are foreign-owned, which leaves spaces for leakages. Critics further contend that foreign domination in tourism does not protect the interests of citizens and has been detrimental to peripheral-country citizens who have lost access to land, property, or resources—and even their lives.

Citizens in peripheral nations have lost control over their own bodies (and lives) through sex tourism and human trafficking. The presence of sex tourism is likely to occur at tourism enclaves such as LOS because sex workers support the tourism industry. According to demographer Thomas Bisika, Malawians working and interacting with the tourism sector are likely to engage in commercial sex with tourists or sex tourism. This may leave them vulnerable to human trafficking. For example, Malawians have become victims of human trafficking by sex tourists and are trafficked to European cities such as the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy. The victims, including children, are sourced from areas such as Mangochi and Salima, which are popular beach destinations and former LOS host destinations.⁹⁸

Deaths have occurred due to tourism development projects as well. A series of deadly incidents has been occurring in Malawi due to translocating elephants for conservation and tourism. As recently as 2022, elephants being moved to Kasungu National Park by Malawi Park Services with their NGO partners (African Parks and International Fund for Animal Welfare) rampaged through villages, killing Malawians. According to a village association spokesperson, Malidadi Langa, the charities failed to complete a fence meant to protect villagers, some of whom were trampled by loose elephants.⁹⁹ He noted that such incidents show that "conservation agencies care more about animals than people."¹⁰⁰ To promote conservation and tourism, Malawi's political elite debated enacting shoot-to-kill policies in Parliament as recently as 2016. Such anti-poaching legislation authorize rangers to kill poachers to protect wildlife. Although this was rejected, such policies occur de facto because private security firms and conservation management organizations such as African Parks protect endangered species and have considerable leeway in enforcing anti-poaching efforts. Such efforts dehumanize Malawian people while simultaneously humanizing species like elephants and rhinos that are treated as part of the country's national identity.¹⁰¹

102. Mosedale, "Neoliberalism and Tourism"; Ferguson, *Global Shadows*; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Harrison, "Development Theory and Tourism."

103. Ferguson, *Global Shadows*; Harrison, "Development Theory and Tourism."

104. Mosedale, "Neoliberalism and Tourism"; Ferguson, *Global Shadows*; Harrison, "Development Theory and Tourism."

105. Chawua, "Chakwera Tourism Masterplan."

106. Evans, "Midas PRO2C"; Lake of Stars, "Other Projects."

Naturally, LOS was not directly culpable for the above incidents. However, it does not have a fixed location and thereby relies on partnerships with hoteliers, airlines, national parks, and other players in the industry that contribute to the malaise in the industry. For example, LOS partners with African Parks and other conservation nonprofits in the tourism industry. LOS's website also promotes tourism to Liwonde and Majete National Parks, which are managed by African Parks, and promotes involvement in volunteer conservation projects. They do not seem to be making any ethical demands from their partners to take accountability or redress structural inequalities.

Neoliberalism, Globalization, and LOS

The tourism industry is inextricably linked to pervasive neoliberal ideologies embedded in the current global political economy. According to scholar David Harvey, at its core, neoliberalism advances the idea that individual autonomy, abilities, and entrepreneurial freedom will best advance societies. That is, "the market" should direct the destiny of human beings, with few restrictions. Essentially, it involves the promotion of unregulated markets as the optimal strategy for economic development and growth coupled with a reduction of state involvement. It is characterized by a push for individual property rights, free markets, free trade, and free flow of people across borders.¹⁰² Neoliberal policies were promoted worldwide in the aftermath of WWII by global financial institutions (World Bank, IMF). Structural adjustment policies enshrined neoliberal policies in Malawi and the rest of Africa in the 1980s. However, coupled with globalization, they led to a plethora of harmful socioeconomic consequences. According to Ferguson they were "dangerous" and "destructive"; instead of alleviating poverty, these policies created mass poverty, unemployment, poor work conditions, unmanageable debt, uneven income distribution, and uneven economic growth and development.¹⁰³

Neoliberal policies in the tourism industry may also have weakened African governments' ability to protect local businesses, citizens, and resources. According to Mosedale, neoliberal policies have led to a "rollback" of government. In practice, deregulation, privatization, and the free flow of goods are detrimental for the Global South because they prevent countries of the latter from being able to negotiate fair agreements or leverage resources for their advantage. Open competition creates unhealthy rivalries between countries that vie to provide the cheapest labor and highest incentives in what is known as a "race to the bottom."¹⁰⁴ Such heavy competition has influenced Malawi to lower entry barriers in tourism too. In 2022, President Lazarus Chakwera thus announced his delight at being able to offer "free import duty, free import excise, VAT-free importation on selected goods such as furniture and furnishings, catering equipment, and off-road game vehicles" as an incentive for corporations contributing to tourism development.¹⁰⁵ Although LOS did not directly influence this decision, the organization clearly stands to benefit from it because it lowers the cost of bringing equipment and goods. Tax incentives also reduce government profits needed for funding education, health, and other social services, which ironically, LOS supports as part of its development agenda. Since neoliberal policies discourage social services, governments become more dependent on festivals like LOS and other foreign entities to fulfill these services as development aid.¹⁰⁶

Visa issuance politics clearly demonstrate the interplay of political power, neoliberal economics, and dependency in tourism. To allow the free flow of tourists across their borders, African countries are encouraged to lower visa fees, thereby reducing direct tourism revenue for

107. Lameck Masina, "Malawi Waives Visa Fees for Key Tourism Source Countries," *Voice of America*, December 16, 2022; Avitus A. Agbor, "Africans and the Costs of Obtaining Visas for International Migration: A Disquisition on the Trends, Implications and Biases in the Policy Framework," *Cogent Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 2021).

108. Brian Itai, "Covid-19 Pushes Lake of Stars to 2022," *Nation Online* (Malawi), June 22, 2021; Olivier Monnier, "A Ticket to Recovery: Reinventing Africa's Tourism Industry," *News, International Finance Corporation-World Bank Group*, June 8, 2021; Masina, "Malawi Waives Visa."

109. Monnier, "A Ticket to Recovery"; Duffy and Mair, "Festival Research."

110. Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*.

111. Manwa, "Women and Tourism in Southern Africa"; Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*.

112. Cleveland, *Tourism in Africa*; Perry, "Malawi's Lake of Stars Festival"; Ray, "Counting the Stars."

governments. However, Malawians are burdened with high visa fees as tourists to Global North countries. Malawi only instituted reciprocal visa fees to Global North countries in 2015; therefore, tourists attending LOS were not required to pay visa fees until that year.¹⁰⁷ Notably, in the wake of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, Global North countries instituted multiple travel restrictions—both discriminatory and indiscriminate—targeting Africa. This slowed down tourism to Malawi, which consequently dropped by 80 percent. Accordingly, international events such as LOS were cancelled for three years, further impacting revenue. However, to encourage tourism, by 2022 visa fees for Global North countries such as the United States and United Kingdom were waived. Such external factors (including years when LOS was cancelled because organizers decided to focus on other projects) demonstrate the extent to which tourism is reliant on external events—and whims—of the Global North.¹⁰⁸ One may even argue, with Michelle Duffy and Judith Mair, that events like the recent pandemic expose the extent to which tourism supports neoliberal exploitation and injustices.¹⁰⁹

The Tourist Gaze at LOS

In addition to the structure of the wider tourism industry, power and inequality are also reinforced through tourist-host interactions at LOS in raced, classed, and gendered ways. Urry argues that tourists are taught how to look at—or experience—host destinations. Urry calls this systematic way of "seeing" host destinations the "tourist gaze." The gaze is filtered through one's sociocultural environment and exposure to literature, art, music, photographs, fashion, and other mass media that guide tourist expectations during travel. The Global North's tourist gaze objectifies Global South countries as "exotic" and their citizens as "Others."¹¹⁰ In these interactions, Global North gazers (tourists) who can afford to travel are in positions of power over those being gazed at; therefore, the Global South objects of the gaze (the hosts) are subordinated. This power structure creates class distinctions between Global North tourists (and the country's elite) with their Global South hosts. Therefore, interactions between Global North LOS attendees and Malawians are ultimately uneven.

Globally, the archetype tourist is a wealthy White European/American male, whereas the typical host and worker is a poor Black woman. Therefore, in most of southern Africa, women are vulnerable to exploitation by Global North and local tourists. The raced, gendered, and classed division of labor in the tourism industry marginalizes Malawian women in tourist spaces. As noted by Manwa, the tourism industry is male-dominated in Malawi, with men typically working as servers, hotel workers, and other service-related jobs. This leaves Malawian women vulnerable to exploitation by both Global North tourists and their male counterparts. Due to the dominance of the White male gaze, all tourist experiences are oriented toward this gaze—this orientation is evident even when women or men from other racial groups participate as attendees.¹¹¹ This can be seen through the deployment of Western notions of Africa as either a rugged wilderness or a romanticized Eden to promote the festival. Such imagery often evokes colonial imagery, suggesting that Africa's wilderness needs to be explored or tamed by Global North—often White and male—citizens. Travel writers, travel bloggers, and LOS's website often set expectations by deploying imagery about Africa's flora and fauna in their promotion of the event to attract this gaze.¹¹² They juxtapose party imagery with the imagery of wilderness, exploration, adventure, or Eden. Cognizant of how compelling the idea of Africa as a wilderness is in tourists' imagination, Malawi's national parks have resorted to importing lions, cheetahs, elephants, rhinos, and other

113. Kevin Sieff, "[Cranes, Planes and Automobiles: Saving Africa's Wildlife](#),"

Fayetteville Observer, May 21, 2018;
MacCannell, *The Tourist*.

114. MacCannell, *The Tourist*.

115. Bello, Lovelock, and Carr,
"Enhancing Community Participation."

116. Chauma and Ngwira, "World
Heritage Site."

117. Chauma and Ngwira, "World
Heritage Site"; McCool, "It's Not
Problematic."

animals. Therefore, the landscape is staged for tourist consumption, which demonstrates that the tourist gaze informs the experiences for both hosts and guests.¹¹³

Although primarily geared toward popular music, LOS contributes to the commodification of ethnic groups in Malawi by deploying imagery of Ngoni Gule Wamkulu dancers and Burundian Amahoro drummers prominently on their website and through advertising. The line-up of past festivals and videos on their website also include performances by traditional masked dancers and Amahoro drummers; such performances are often commodified for the tourists' gaze. This constitutes what Dean MacCannell refers to as "staged authenticity,"¹¹⁴ meaning tourism experiences (settings, events, and interactions) that are unnatural in the destination but are designed to represent those experiences as realistically as possible for the tourist's desire. Such experiences tend to alter the behavior of residents and, ultimately, traditional cultural practices. In a study conducted by Bello, Lovelock, and Carr in Mangochi, a tourist city where LOS has held the festival, residents complain that the Gule Wamkule dance has become commercialized for tourism in ways that are eroding authentic traditional experiences. Residents explain that the dance is now often performed void of its meaning or context, including by some who are not meant to perform the dance.¹¹⁵ This is consistent with findings by Chauma and Ngwira in other tourist areas like near the Chongoni Rock Center where boys are being initiated in large numbers by the Chewa to accommodate tourist expectations. Residents report feeling compelled to perform dances for tourists because community members and government officials advise them that tourism will benefit their community.¹¹⁶

According to folklorist Lisa Gilman, presenting such performances without context for tourist consumption conforms to ideas about Africa as primitive and the Global North as modern, and may reinforce stereotypes about Africa rather than promote cross-cultural understanding. Sociologist Trevor Jamerson explains that cultural and racial differences in tourism tend to be equated with value and are considered a marketable asset because the industry values experiencing cultures that are different. Therefore, rather than being denigrated, the racialized Others are embraced and arranged for consumption, thereby concealing the realities of institutionalized racism and objectification that occur in the tourism industry beyond rhetoric by organizers focusing on issues of cultural uniqueness and symbiotic relationships. This provides festival organizers considerable power to highlight or shape the parts of Malawi's culture they consider valuable for consumption by the partygoer. Consequently, although aiming to be inclusive, certain cultures still end up being excluded, depending on which cultures are considered marketable.

Therefore, the tourism LOS attracts has not been mutually beneficial economically or culturally. Tourism has not led to the touted benefits and profits for many communities interacting with LOS. Since most Malawians earn an average of \$20 per month, the \$38 cost of tickets is still prohibitive for many who argue that the high entrance fee makes attendance exclusive. When coupled with costs of transportation and accommodation, access to LOS becomes unaffordable for the vast majority without sufficient financial resources. Consequently, most Malawian attendees are part of the elite. In contrast, residents at Chongoni Rock were upset because they needed funding for community projects but observed tourists not paying fees to visit the area. Malawian residents have also lamented LOS's use of volunteers, arguing that LOS should instead pay Malawian volunteers due to global inequalities.¹¹⁷

118. Bello, Lovelock, and Carr, "Enhancing Community Participation"; Cleveland, *Tourism in Africa*.

119. Grant, "Live Aid/8."

120. Magombo and Rogerson, "Evolution of Tourism"; EverFest, "Lake of Stars 2022"; Bianchi, "Global Tourism Revisited."

121. Renato Rosaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia," *Representations* 26 (April 1, 1989): 107–22.

122. Rosaldo; Grant, "Live Aid/8"; Cleveland, *Tourism in Africa*.

Malawi's predominantly Black political elite have limited access to tourism establishments, which are often owned by foreign companies. Therefore, White foreign owners of hotels and restaurants are the largest beneficiaries of LOSs tourism revenues. Malawians, on the other hand, report low wages, poor working conditions, unfair dismissals, and discriminatory hiring practices. For example, in the Bello, Lovelock, and Carr study, residents reported being targets of racial discrimination and being subjected to racial slurs by White foreign owners and managers of tourism establishments. These racialized interactions that privilege White Global North citizens over Black citizens are consistent with other studies of places in Africa where colonial-era racial hierarchies continue to inform relationships and power dynamics in the tourism sector.¹¹⁸ Therefore, neoliberal capitalist tourism expansion allows citizens from former colonial rulers to reinforce cultural, economic, and political subjugation in the former colonies.

The Problem with Purpose: Modernity, Development, and Colonialism

Colonialism spread ideas about Global North superiority and the benefits of colonial interventions. That is, the Global North was destined to aid Africans to improve their own socioeconomic development. Although they have evolved, such sentiments are enduring and continue to disempower countries in Africa through events like LOS. They perpetuate the notion that Africans are incapable of forging a prosperous future without the Global North's assistance in the form of foreign aid.¹¹⁹ As arts scholar Julie Grant highlights, Band Aid used songs and events (Live Aid/8) to portray Africans as helpless victims who could not help themselves due to their lack of education and primitiveness. Organizations such as LOS play a similar role by coming to Malawi to help Malawians "save themselves" through tourism events. Such approaches are informed by the Global North's ideas regarding their own superiority, which are rooted in the colonial project.

The phrase "Lake of Stars" whence the festival's name comes, was coined by Scottish explorer David Livingstone in the 1870s. Livingstone was the first European explorer to visit and map out Lake Malawi, thereby ushering in British colonial rule, characterized by socioeconomic and political inequality. Livingstone's travel writing and his descriptions of the area's flora, fauna, and inhabitants informed British public perceptions about Nyasaland. Nyasaland became a British "protectorate" for the purported reason of improving Nyasaland for its own peoples' benefit. For Livingstone, it also became an area to spread his missionary work and antislavery campaign. Therefore, the colonial system can be conceived as an early form of development that laid the foundation for contemporary development ideology, interventions, regimes of rule, and inequalities. Early tourists to colonial Nyasaland wanted to recreate Livingstone's experiences exploring Malawi by retracing the path he took. Other tourists connected to the Church of Scotland sought to continue his missionary work.¹²⁰ LOS's adoption of a phrase coined by Livingstone both evokes and perpetuates what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo terms "imperialist nostalgia," a longing for a lost imperial era that ignores the violence of colonialism.¹²¹ It provides insight on how power is embedded in the language used in tourism, which postcolonial scholars argue is not neutral. Livingstone's legacy lives on in global popular culture, having been the subject of numerous movies, books, and artwork. Therefore, LOS perpetuates the problematic history of travel from the UK to Malawi, which is inextricably linked to ideas about the "White man's burden" to intervene by modernizing Nyasaland.¹²²

123. Harrison, "Development Theory and Tourism"; Ferguson, *Global Shadows*.
124. Cleveland, *Tourism in Africa*; Harrison, "Development Theory and Tourism"; Ferguson, *Global Shadows*, 176–93.
125. Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010); Grant, "Live Aid/8."
126. Moyo, *Dead Aid*; Said and Singini, "Political Economy in Malawi"; Peter G. Strasser, "[An Anti-Corruption Bureau's Inexorable Endeavor: A Study of Malawi's Cashgate Scandal](#)," *Washington and Lee Law Review Online* 73, no. 1 (2016).

The term "development" is a contested term with several meanings that have been reimagined over time. Early ideas about development were rooted in colonial resource management practice and theories that focused on exploiting European commercial interests and trying to "civilize" or "modernize" Africa, which was viewed as "primitive." According to Grant, development was premised on similar ideas in which Africa was the object of European linear growth models and modernization projects meant to mimic the West. Therefore, "development" was essentially a continuation of colonial modernity ideology and practice that ultimately benefited the Global North.¹²³ Likewise, tourism development is perceived by its detractors as just another modernization project. Ideas about modernizing "traditional" Africa are contentious, yet still thrive in the development sector.¹²⁴ Thus the focus on development by LOS and their NGO partners is problematic because it is linked to ideas about "primitive" Africa as the object of Global North modernization projects.

A core feature of development is the obligation of providing foreign assistance to support development efforts or provide humanitarian relief. Economist Dambisa Moyo argues that apart from emergency relief aid, the billions of dollars sent in aid to Africa to reduce poverty and increase growth are not working. She argues that the development aid industry is actually detrimental to Africa's growth and development because the aid industry is characterized by paternalism in which Africa and Africans are patronizingly treated as children and objects of development. Like development, foreign aid is presented in the context of being an altruistic, moral obligation to help countries "develop"; however, it enriches the Global North, which compels recipients to use Global North goods and services, providing them political influence. Foreign aid provides benefits in some areas; however, its overall impact in Africa has not achieved its intended goals and is controversial.¹²⁵ For example, Malawi is reliant on foreign aid for 40 percent of its budget, with some of that support earmarked for tourism development, wildlife, and culture. However, this also impacts its ability to control the quality of its institutions, spending, finances, and rent-seeking behavior. Incidentally, in 2013 the tourism ministry was the center of "cash-gate"—a financial scandal involving government employees funneling looted funds in a government-wide high-level corruption scheme. Key players included the country's budget director and underpaid civil servants in the Ministry of Tourism.¹²⁶ Reliance on foreign aid therefore creates a space for bypassing the government, financial shenanigans, social hierarchies, and continual dependence on aid, thereby maintaining Global North influence. LOS's participation and partnerships in the aid system is therefore linked to paternalism, dependency, and an industry that ultimately entrenches global inequalities.

Conclusion

Although LOS has good intentions through its "Party with a Purpose" model, and allows Malawi and Malawians some agency, it operates in an industry that is entwined with global inequalities. This impacts its ability to meet its own objectives in a meaningful way. For LOS to effect change in the lived experiences of everyday Malawians, it ultimately needs to reject its own practice and ideology of "aid" and "development" and reflect on its own position in Malawi. To be clear, LOS has made efforts to benefit Malawi as well as provide Malawians a space to be active agents in the creative and tourism sectors. However, many of its strategies are aimed at integrating Malawians into the global economic system rather than addressing inequalities embedded in the tourism industry. Therefore, LOS also contributes to and reinforces inequality. For LOS to

truly contribute to the country, LOS needs to target the bigger project of structural and global inequalities that inform their work in the tourism, development, and international aid industries.

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