

# 5th Political Science & Political economy Conference Titles and Abstracts

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*The Political Logic of Cultural Revival: Ethnic Visibility and Electoral Politics in Malawi*

**Abstract:** Understanding the relationship between politics and ethnic identity construction, change, and mobilization is central to the study of African politics. Scholars often note that contemporary ethnic groups were politicized, and sometimes constructed, in response to the political incentives of elites. However, because existing research has focused primarily on the elite side of mass mobilization, we know less about when and how such elite-led attempts at ethnic mobilization actually translate into active political support or lasting cultural change. I address these questions within the context of an ongoing cultural revival among the Lhomwe ethnic group in Malawi. Historically marginalized, the Lhomwe have been aggressively mobilized along ethnic lines since 2008, through the establishment of a formal ethnic association and a new political party. Within this context, I evaluate how and for whom this ethno-political mobilization translates into political support, and whether the campaign of "cultural revival" actually results in systematic cultural change. I argue that the political logic of this cultural revival is aimed at reifying ethnic boundaries, rendering members of the Lhomwe group more "visible." I theorize the ways in which ethnic visibility shapes incentives for ethnic party support and provide empirical support from an original survey and in-depth interviews with Lhomwe Malawians.

