

## Bemvu District

Malawi is a long thin north south country in the SE of Africa. The 2<sup>nd</sup> city Blantyre is in the South and there is a main road running NW to the biggest city Lilongwe. About 2 ½ hrs drive along this road Bemvu district is either side of the road like a circle with the road running up the middle. There are approx. 8500 people living in this area in 15 villages. The nearer the road the more closer together the housing and there is also a village with shops and a weekly market on the main road called The Staging Post. Electricity runs along the main road which is tarmac supplying some of the nearby houses but once you turn off the main road the tarmac ends and the only electricity supply is from small solar panels with many homes having no electricity at all.

The manse, the CCAP church and Bemvu school are 2 miles off the main road on the western edge of the district. There are some sandy tracks that vehicles can use and also a network of paths to get there. On arrival you pass through the school yard with the classrooms on either side and into a big open square with the manse on the left and the church straight ahead. The square has several large, ancient looking trees that people gather under to talk and a fire pit. To the west is a football pitch and beyond that an amazing view across hilly farmland to the Kirk Mountains that are a small range about 5 miles distant. Behind the church is the cemetery and beyond that a small but steeped side wooded conical hill. This hill is protected and no one can either walk on it or cut down the trees without the permission of the local chiefs. Sometimes the square is full of life especially during school hours when we saw 100s of children getting their Seed for Life school meals and on Sundays of course when many people come from across Bemvu district in their Sunday best to dance, sing and celebrate their faith. At other times early in the morning or as dusk was coming on it was quiet and peaceful. At night it was pitch black with only a night sky littered with stars as every evening we made our way from the manse which was the base for our visit back to the guesthouse. It was also completely silent until something set the guard dogs off who would then howl for about 10 minutes!

The people of Bemvu are primarily farmers. 10% of the population i.e. approx 850 people are members of the CCAP church and only 5 of those people have a salaried job. As well as farming people run micro business such as selling second hand clothes and other people have a trade such as carpentry. In Bemvu buildings are pretty much still built by hand so perhaps this was reflected when we visited the home of Nelson who is a builder and he had one of the most comfortable homes with a lot of animal stock.

We met and saw many more women than men. This is partly to do with men working away in other neighbouring African countries or in Blantyre or Lilongwe where they can get paid work. This means that it is often their wives and children who are running the farms. An unusual aspect of this area of Malawi is the custom for men to move to the village of their wives on marriage and to farm the land of their wives' family. This is what happened to

Dikirani (Our manager who runs SeedforLife project in Bemvu). His father was a business man in Blantyre who ran a shop. They visited family in Bemvu which is where Dikirani met his wife Flossie and hence he became a farmer in Bemvu. It is the custom to marry young in Malawi, often on an arranged basis or for economic reasons soon followed by starting a family. Dikirani was also unusual as he refused to get married until he was 30 as he wanted to make some money and a success of himself before starting a family. It has recently become law that marriage under 18 is illegal but in reality many girls are still getting married under the age of 16.

We also saw many, children, perhaps 2 or 3 for each adult. Malawi is experiencing a rapid increase in population. According to the Population of the World website in 1990 there were 99.8 Malawians/square km compared to in 194.09 in 2017. I will explore some of the social issues linked to this in a later article. One of the things very special about the experience for me was being in an area of Africa only with other black people. For all its beauty, things to see and do and friendly people it evidently isn't a place that is on the international map or a tourist destination and this had the advantage of seeing and experiencing how things really are for the people of Bemvu.

**Jane King**