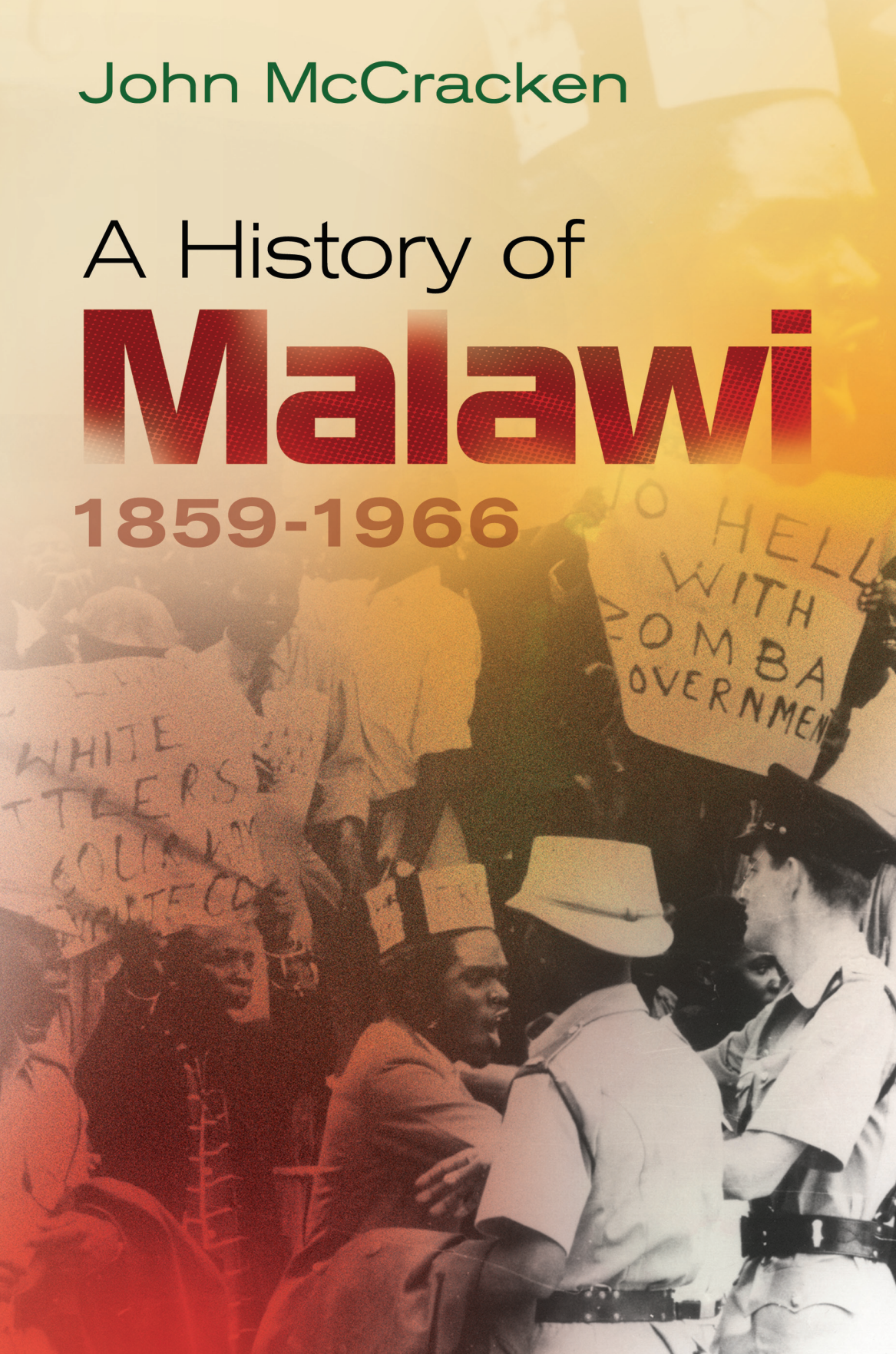
John McCracken

A History of Malawi

1859-1966



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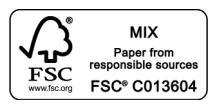

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For Juliet

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Abbreviations

ADMARC	Agricultural Development Marketing Corporation
ALC	African Lakes Company
BCAG	*British Central African Gazette*
BCGA	British Cotton Growing Association
B&EAC	Blantyre and East Africa Company
BSAC	British South Africa Company
CAT	*Central African Times*
CCAP	Church of Central Africa Presbyterian
CDC	Colonial Development Corporation
CDWF	Colonial Development and Welfare
CSHFMR	*Church of Scotland Home and Foreign Missionary Record*
DRC	Dutch Reformed Church
FMC	Farmers Marketing Board
ICU	Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of South Africa
ITC	Imperial Tobacco Company
JAH	*Journal of African History*
JSAS	*Journal of Southern African Studies*
KAR	King's African Rifles
LWBCA	*Life and Work in British Central Africa*
MCP	Malawi Congress Party
NTB	Native Tobacco Board
RNLB	Rhodesia Native Labour Bureau
SOMJ	*Society of Malawi Journal*
TZR	Trans-Zambesia Railway
UMCA	Universities' Mission to Central Africa
WNLA	Witwatersrand Native Labour Association

Note on Terminology

Place names have been spelt in many different ways in Malawi in the past century. I have employed names that were current in the colonial period (hence Port Herald rather than Nsanje and Cholo rather than Thyolo). I have also standardised spellings except where quoting from a contemporary source or providing a contemporary reference. The term 'Malawi' is used for the geographical region covered by the modern nation state and 'Nyasaland' for the British protectorate. 'Malawian' and 'Nyasa' are both used in describing the territory's inhabitants. Chiefly names can create particular problems. In reference to the northern Ngoni paramount chief, I use the spelling 'Mbelwa' in preference both to 'Mombera', the term most commonly employed in the early colonial period and also 'M'mbelwa', a term that has gained in popularity since the 1950s. For almost all of the colonial period, the currency used in Malawi was British sterling. Twelve pence equalled one shilling and 20 shillings one pound.

Glossary

Askari	African soldier (Boma askari: African policeman)
Beni	costumed dance parodying military activities
Boma	government office
Capitao	foreman, overseer
Chibaro	contract labour; slave labour
Chibuku	African beer
Chifwamba	belief that individuals consume corpses to achieve magical power
Chikoti	whip
Chikunda	armed slaves; later, warrior hunters; Sena immigrants
Chiperoni	dry season rains
Dambo	wetland; alluvial floodplain
Dimba	agricultural system involving cultivation on floodplain
Ganyu	worker hired by the day
GuleWamkulu	Great Dance of the secret Nyau society
Hijab	Muslim woman's veil or headscarf
Kachasu	locally distilled spirit
Kwacha	dawn (national symbol)
Lobola	bride price
Madrassa	Quranic school

Malimidwe	agricultural conservation rules
Malingga	stockaded village
Malipenga	military-style dance
Mankhwala	medicine: herbal or magical
Matutu	cultivation mounds
Mbumba	matrilineage group
Mchapi	witchcraft eradication/medicine
Misere	contour ridges
Mphala	dryland, rain-fed agricultural system
Mthandizi	Rhodesian Native Labour Supply Commission
Muzungo	Afro-Portuguese
Mzungu	European
Mwalimu	Muslim teacher
Mwavi	poison ordeal
Nkhoswe	senior maternal uncle or brother
Njala	seasonal hunger; famine
Nomi	youth labour association
Nyau	secret Chewa/Mang'anja cult involving masked dancers
Prazos	estates
Ruga-ruga	Swahili henchmen
Tengatenga	porterage
Thangata	system imposing labour as exchange for rent
Ulendo	journey, tour by district officer
Vyanusi	sprit possession cult in the North
Visoso	millet cultivation method, involving felling and burning
Zunde	large cotton fields

Map 1 Malawi Region, late 19th century

Map 2 Malawi, mid-twentieth century

Map 3 Southern Malawi

Introduction

There can be no better introduction to the character of colonial rule in Malawi than the view from the lip of Zomba plateau looking down on the old colonial capital. In the distance, nearly 50 miles away, rears Mulanje Mountain, a rocky massif divided from its neighbour Mchesa by the Fort Lister Gap, a pass used by slave traders in the late nineteenth century. Further to the south, on the road to Blantyre, looms the jutting eminence of Chiradzulu and, closer to Zomba, the small hill known as Magomero, once the site of the headquarters of A.L. Bruce's Magomero estate, the epicentre of the 1915 Chilembwe Rising. To the north lies Lake Chilwa, a shallow, saline expanse of water, 800 square miles in extent when water levels are high but, on occasions, shrinking to a cluster of pools. Beneath the mountain, the town of Zomba is so overhung with trees as to be only partly visible. Despite the rash of new buildings that have extended its boundaries in all directions, the physical contours of the colonial capital are easy to detect. To the right, on the road to Blantyre, stands the neat army barracks, originally constructed in 1895 with, alongside it, the King's African Rifles Memorial from the First World War and the notorious Zomba prison. Directly below, obscured by trees, is Government House (now one of the Malawi President's numerous State Houses), constructed in stages between 1898 and 1905 and the residence of successive Governors. Lower down the slope is the Gymkhana Club, formerly the social hub of the European community, separated from the commercial zone on the lower side of the road to Blantyre by a golf course and by a cricket field on which the KAR band once played to celebrate the British monarch's birthday. Climbing up the lower slopes of the mountain stand the former homes of colonial officials, high-ceilinged, single storied houses, fronted by wide verandas, all with their own extensive gardens. In a demonstration of colonial hierarchy, the highest houses, those coolest and with the best views to Mulanje, were reserved for the most senior officials. To the left, near to the plunging gorge of the Mulunguzi River, are the twin towers of the Old Residency (now an hotel), built in 1886, five years before the Protectorate was declared by the disgraced Scottish missionary, John Buchanan, on instructions from the British Consul A.J. Hawes. Below are the Botanical Gardens, originally laid out from 1889 by Harry Johnston, the first Consul-General. Near at hand is the two-storied Secretariat, built in 1897, burnt down in 1919 and not re-built until 1950, the nerve-centre of the colonial administration.

Together, Zomba's older buildings provide a remarkable insight into the nature of colonialism. The army barracks and adjacent prison point to the importance of coercion in sustaining colonial rule though the openness of Government House (the brick wall surrounding it was not built until 1966)

suggests that, for much of the colonial period, personal security was not regarded as a problem. The apparently innocuous golf course bordering the main road was a key element in physically enforcing racial segregation. European officials and their families lived on the mountain slope above the golf course, where there had once been several villages; Indian traders and African clerks were directed to locations below the road, close to the market. In a further refinement, junior officers could find themselves relegated almost to the roadside, although never across it. With each promotion came the opportunity to climb higher on the mountain. The modest size of the secretariat and adjacent government buildings demonstrates how limited were the number of officials that the colonial government employed. The lack of architectural ostentation in those buildings suggests that there were few resources available, as well as little appetite among Malawi's colonial rulers for the grand imperial statements in stone made by the Germans in Dar es Salaam and by the British in Pretoria and Delhi. Seen from Zomba Mountain, colonialism in Malawi thus appears as a superficial phenomenon, one that lasted little more than 70 years and influenced only marginally the agricultural practices and social structures of Malawi's people. Yet this would be a misleading conclusion. For, as will be demonstrated, the interactions of local people both with colonial officials, settlers and missionaries in Malawi, as well as with social and economic forces beyond its boundaries had profound if complex consequences that remain of great importance today.

This book is a general history of Malawi, focusing mainly on the colonial period but seeking to place that period in the context of the pre-colonial past. Its notional starting date, 1859, the year of David Livingstone's first visit to the region, has been chosen as marking the initial informal involvement of Britain in the area. The closing date, 1966, marks both the formal withdrawal of Britain with the departure of the Governor General Sir Glyn Jones and the consolidation of the Banda regime with the establishment of the republic of Malawi. Many Malawians in much of the intervening period had only limited awareness of the British involvement; other external actors, ranging from Southern African mine-owners to Italian entrepreneurs and French Catholic missionaries also played their part. Nevertheless, it is the contention of this study that in the century under review British people, starting with Scottish Presbyterian missionaries and including soldiers, speculators, colonial officials and politicians, played a crucial role in shaping the territory. Such an assertion might lead to the charge that what is intended here is a twenty-first century Malawian version of 'East Africa and its Invaders', top-down history written from the perspective of the colonisers.[1] This, however, is not the case. If one central theme is how Britain as a state and the British as people shaped Malawi, an even more important theme is how Malawian people have shaped their own history, often in overt defiance of the colonial order but sometimes too through communal activities unrelated to the colonial presence. There is much here on armed resistance to the colonial occupation, on religious-inspired revolt, on the rise and fall of a fragile labour movement and on the growth of popular nationalism. But room is also given to the creation of dance societies, the eruption of witchcraft eradication movements and the emergence of football as a popular national sport. In particular, the book seeks to reconstruct the life stories of a variety of Malawians, some of them well-

[1] Reginald Coupland, *East Africa and its Invaders* (Oxford, 1938).

known, some of them not, in ways that throw light on specific themes.

Over the past 40 years, popular perceptions of the history of Malawi under colonial rule have been dominated by two contending approaches. The first, developed from the late 1960s and expressed most clearly in the work of Bridglal Pachai, concentrates on nation-building, an activity seen as having its roots in the distant past and reaching a climax with the attainment of political independence in 1964.[2] Colonial rule is depicted as important: positively for its role in dissolving tribal divisions and creating the infrastructure for national unity; negatively for the impetus it gave to the emergence of a united nationalist movement which ultimately challenged British authority and created the basis for the new nation state. The alternative view, most persuasively argued by Leroy Vail in a series of distinguished contributions published in the 1970s and early 1980s, presents the history of Malawi as being, above all, about 'the making of an imperial slum.'[3] This process of impoverishment and underdevelopment began, Vail argued, in the mid-nineteenth century but accelerated with the establishment of colonial rule. Of fundamental importance was the satellisation of Malawi as a labour reserve for the mines and farms of Southern Africa, a process which resulted principally from the policies pursued by imperial and colonial governments in London and Zomba.

It is the contention of this book that, despite their genuine merits, neither of these approaches provides a satisfactory analysis of Malawi's colonial history. 'Nation-building' historians are correct to identify the emergence of a powerful Malawian nationalist movement as a significant theme in the history of the territory (no less than four chapters in this book are devoted to the subject). Indeed, there is a strong case for arguing that without the eruption of popular nationalism in Malawi in the late 1950s the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland would not have been dissolved. Nevertheless, to focus too narrowly on nation-building is to ignore a whole range of political initiatives and social developments not directly connected with the emergence and triumph of the Malawi Congress Party. As Vail and White have demonstrated, evolving patterns of ethnic and regional identity were no less important than the creation of national identity in the shaping of modern Malawi.[4] Social change divided communities rather than contributing to a wider unity. Territorial frontiers provided peasants with zones of opportunity as well as boundaries demarcating national allegiance. Even at the level of political action, it would be wrong to assume that popular protest was necessarily related to nationalist objectives. Workers more frequently went on strike for economic reasons than to advance the cause of national liberation. In some cases at least, peasants involved in popular protests turned for support to traditional religious institutions with the ultimate aim of restricting the

2 Bridglal Pachai, *Malawi: the History of a Nation* (Longman, London, 1973).

3 H.L. Vail, 'The Making of an Imperial Slum: Nyasaland and its Railways, 1895–1935', *JAH,* 16, 1, 1975, pp. 89–112; Leroy Vail, 'Railway Development and Colonial Underdevelopment: the Nyasaland Case' in Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons (eds), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (Heinemann, London, 1977), pp. 364–395; Vail, 'The State and the Creation of Colonial Malawi's Agricultural Economy' in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *Imperialism, Colonialism and Hunger: East and Central Africa* (Lexington Books, Lexington, 1983), pp. 89–112; Vail, 'The Political Economy of East-Central Africa' in David Birmingham and Phyllis Martin (eds), *History of Central Africa* Volume Two (Longman, London, 1983), pp. 200–250.

4 Leroy Vail and Landeg White, 'Tribalism in the Political History of Malawi' in Leroy Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (James Currey, London, 1989), pp.151–92.

advances of the state rather than taking control at the centre.

If the 'nation-building' approach is inadequate, however, so too is the once fashionable 'underdevelopment' alternative: the belief that international capitalism and the establishment of global markets impoverished third world countries. This is not to dispute that exceptional material poverty existed in colonial Malawi, often exacerbated by inappropriate government policies. Colonial planners paid only intermittent attention to the interests of Malawi's African inhabitants, being frequently more concerned with fostering the settler section of the economy and of mining interests further south. Nevertheless, exponents of underdevelopment tend to oversimplify the impact of capitalism in Malawi by stressing only its negative features and ignoring its more positive qualities. Peasants and migrants are seen simply as victims rather than as tenacious individuals carving out opportunities for themselves with varying degrees of success. The portrait of colonial Malawi as a labour reserve for Southern Africa, while accurate for some northern parts of the country, was by no means true of the whole. By the 1940s several competing colonial economies had emerged, with the labour exporting districts of the north being balanced by the settler estate section of the Shire Highlands and by areas where peasant production dominated, notably in the Central Region. In certain respects, indeed, the economic history of colonial Malawi ran contrary to wider Central African trends. Whereas, in the interwar years, white farmers in Southern Rhodesia established their dominance over African producers partially as a result of the intervention of the settler government, in parts of Malawi peasant producers became actively involved in commercial agriculture at a time when the settler sector was in decline. Cash-crop producers in Malawi battled against a host of problems including high transport costs, irregular international prices, an often exploitative marketing system and damage from drought and pests. Yet their story is as much one of achievement and survival as it is of the enduring struggle against poverty.

Back in the 1960s it was almost an article of faith that newly independent African states should be equipped with their national histories but that belief has declined in recent decades, along with faith in the transformative power of national governments and politicians. In some respects, therefore, the unit of study employed in this book is a controversial one. As defined by its arbitrarily established boundaries, the territory known successively as the British Central Africa Protectorate, Nyasaland and Malawi, was an artificial construct, one that brought together a variety of peoples equipped with different languages and cultures upon whom it imposed itself only intermittently during the colonial period. To a great extent, its economy was explicable only as part of the wider regional economy. Most of the ideas and assumptions that influenced its rulers originated in centres far from Zomba. For many of its inhabitants, external events, notably the First World War and the 1930s Depression, had a greater impact than developments originating locally. In this book the terms 'Malawi' and 'Malawians' are employed as useful labels but it is important to stress that virtually no-one used these terms prior to the foundation of the Malawi Congress Party in 1959 (Dr Banda is a partial exception). 'Nyasaland' and 'Nyasa' have a longer heritage, although up to at least the First World War the label 'Nyasa' was largely employed of local people by outsiders rather than by local people to describe themselves.

If the concept of Nyasaland/Colonial Malawi has its problematic features, there are, however, good reasons why it should be employed as the unit of study. For all their apparent fragility, the colonial boundaries have stood the test of time in defining the limits of the post-colonial state. Colonial administrative policies enacted in the Protectorate differed in a number of respects from those introduced in Northern and, especially, Southern Rhodesia. The financial resources available in the three territories varied widely. Discrepancies in access to education and to economic opportunity within Nyasaland created rivalries between communities and regions. Above all, by 1938, Malawian labour migrants in Southern Africa had become acutely aware of perceived differences in racial policies between what they saw as their homeland, Nyasaland, and settler-dominated Southern Rhodesia. In the early 1950s, Malawian activists, many of whom had spent extensive periods abroad, were often drawn towards a regional approach to politics but in practice, with very few exceptions, they eventually became committed to the liberation of the single territory, Nyasaland. Despite valiant attempts to link the new nation to the pre-colonial 'Maravi Empire', the idea of modern Malawi is of relatively recent origin. However, there can be no doubting its reality today.

Two further features are integral to this study. The first is the influence of Christian missions, a central issue in the history of many African countries but one of particular importance in Malawi as a consequence of the exceptional weakness of the colonial state and the remarkable responsiveness to the pioneer missions of many societies in the area. One aspect of this influence was the extent to which the provision of education and health care remained in the hands of missions for much of the colonial period. Of equal importance was the emergence of vigorous, new Christian communities, shaped in a variety of ways by their missionary contacts yet displaying distinctive, African-based forms and beliefs.

The second feature is one that has been stressed by John Iliffe both in his magisterial *Modern History of Tanganyika* (in many respects, the model for this book) and also in his study, *Africans: the History of a Continent*.[5] This is the ongoing struggle, beginning long before colonialism and continuing long afterwards, between peasants and their enemies in the natural world, a struggle complicated by the process of demographic change. At one level, this involved the continuing attempts of rural communities, assisted and sometimes obstructed by colonial experts, to counter the ravages of wild animals and intrusive pests: tsetse fly, rinderpest, red bollworm and others. At another level, it involved the impact of environmental change: soil erosion, the rise and fall of water levels, drought and flooding. As Iliffe has noted, changes in the world of nature have frequently interacted with human interventions: among them the spread of long-distance trade, warfare and the growth of cash-crop farming. In addition, since the Second World War, the struggle has intensified as a consequence of the rapid growth of population in a territory which historically has supported some of the densest concentrations of population in rural Africa. Central to this book is the story of how Malawians responded to the intrusion of imperialism and colonialism in a variety of forms and the role they played in the

[5] John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979); John Iliffe, *Africans: the History of a Continent* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995).

dissolution of the colonial state. However, as Mandala has emphasised, 'ecological change was almost as important as capitalism in the social transformation of the region.'[6] Behind the struggle for political liberation lay population growth, land shortage and increased pressure on natural resources.[7]

6 Elias C. Mandala, 'Capitalism, Ecology and Society: the Lower Tchiri (Shire) Valley of Malawi, 1860–1969', Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1983, p. 261.

7 The most recent study on the topic is Wapulumuka O. Mulwafu, *Conservation Song: A History of Peasant-State Relations and the Environment in Malawi, 1860–2000* (White Horse Press, Cambridge, 2011).

1
The Land & the People

Introduction

For the peoples living in what is now the modern state of Malawi, the forty years prior to the establishment of colonial rule in 1891 was a period of exceptionally violent and rapid change. During those decades, groups of refugees from Southern Africa, collectively known as Ngoni, stormed northwards and again south, seizing people, cattle and agricultural resources and eventually creating three major and two minor conquest states in the region. Yao-speaking peoples from the east of Lake Malawi, wielding guns and trading in slaves, conquered much of the Upper Shire Valley and Shire Highlands; in the Lower Shire Valley, other groups of invaders, Kololo and Portuguese-speaking adventurers, carved out further petty kingdoms. These political upheavals interacted with the dramatic expansion of the slave and ivory trades; this in turn resulted in important shifts in the distribution of population. Many cultivators abandoned the dispersed settlements on fertile ground within easy reach of water where they had previously lived to take refuge instead in stockaded villages, often perched in inaccessible mountainous or island locations. In a number of communities, the concentration of military power led to the increasing subordination of vulnerable groups in society – notably women. Where drought coincided with violent disorder, as most notably in the Shire Highlands and Valley in 1862–63, famine of calamitous proportions resulted, sparing neither young nor old, man nor woman. It is necessary to be wary of the more dramatic versions of the 'disaster school' of central African history. The descriptions of Mang'anja villages in the Shire Highlands in 1859 given by David Livingstone and John Kirk are of near idyllic settlements, well watered and surrounded by shady trees, in which men passed their time quietly smoking cannabis or tobacco and drinking beer when they were not involved in a rich array of agricultural and non-agricultural tasks.[1] Nevertheless, the point must be made that the impact of the colonial state was felt in a region already undergoing many types of change

[1] David and Charles Livingstone, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi and its Tributaries* (London, 1865), p. 109; R. Foskett (ed.), *The Zambesi Journal and Letters of Dr John Kirk*, 2 vols, (Edinburgh, 1965), pp. 236–42

and was inevitably influenced by previous developments.

This chapter offers a description of rural economies and societies before and during the period of disruption as well as an account of the processes of change which provide the background to the emergence of the colonial state.[2] At the broadest level, the history of the Malawi region in the nineteenth century is similar to that of Eastern Africa as a whole in involving the expansion of long distance trade and an intensification of the relationships of agricultural societies with the larger international economy. However, it is the contention of this chapter that there are at least four features that distinguish the pre-colonial Malawian experience with significant consequences for the region's subsequent history. First, levels of population density, particularly near rivers and the Lake, were markedly higher than among any of Malawi's neighbours, as they have remained up to the present day, thus creating the potential for intense disputes over land. Secondly, this land was largely inhabited by matrilineal peoples, members of a cultural belt that extended through Zambia into Mozambique, with forms of social organisation different from those of the patrilineal peoples to the north and south and resulting in somewhat different relations between men and women. Third, while the impact of an expanded slave trade came relatively late to the Malawi region, it struck it with exceptional force and had a variety of important consequences. The significance of the fourth feature will be explored more fully in chapters two and three. The central geographical feature of the Malawi area is the Lake Malawi – Shire River drainage system which extends south to the great Zambesi river and from there to the Indian Ocean. For people with boats, and particularly with steamboats, this waterway was attractive as a means of communication. But this was to ignore the drainage system's most conspicuous characteristic: that over lengthy periods water levels fluctuated dramatically with major consequences for navigation on the Shire.

The natural environment

Malawi is a narrow country, 530 miles long and never more than 100 miles wide. Its boundaries are artificial, the product of colonial treaties. Yet to a certain extent they give shape to a rough physical unity for the whole area is part of the southern extension of the Rift Valley which stretches down Lake Malawi (355 miles long) to the Shire Valley, with high plateaux rising on either side.

The variety of terrain enclosed in Malawi's modern borders has influenced the history of people in the area over many centuries.[3] Stretching from north to south five main mountain ranges – the Nyika and Viphya plateaux and the Dedza, Zomba and Mulanje mountains – rise abruptly from rolling highlands to altitudes of between 6 and 8,000 feet, producing heavy precipitations of rain.

[2] For the problems involved in this undertaking see Megan Anne Vaughan, 'Social and Economic change in Southern Malawi: A Study of Rural Communities in the Shire Highlands and Upper Shire Valley from the Mid-Nineteenth century to 1915', Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 1981, pp. 11–12.

[3] J.G. Pike and G.T. Rimmington, *Malawi: a Geographical Study* (London, 1965); Swanzie Agnew, 'Environment and history: the Malawian setting' in Bridglal Pachai (ed.), *The Early History of Malawi* (London, 1972), pp. 28–48; F. Dixey, 'The Distribution of Population in Nyasaland', *Geographical Review*, 18, 1928, pp. 274–90.

Cold and windswept, these mountain ranges have rarely attracted human settlement. However, on the Nyika plateau iron smelting was conducted by Phoka smiths until the 1930s and, on Zomba mountain, refugees established villages during the disruptive wars of the late nineteenth century.

More important in the human history of Malawi are a series of upland plateaux, including the Mzimba plain in the north, the Lilongwe or Central Province plateau in the centre and the Shire Highlands in the south, all important centres of population in colonial times and beyond. These upland plateaux range in height from 2,500 to 4,000 feet and compose some three quarters of Malawi's land surface. Soils are variable ranging from the leached sandy soils of the Kasungu district, covered in the 1890s with extensive Brachystegia woodlands, to the much more fertile, better drained ferruginous soils of the Lilongwe plain, marked by the presence of Combretum (Acacia) woodlands. To the north of this central plateau region stretches the Mzimba highlands and the Rukuru plain, an area of light sandy soils, innumerable ant hills and scattered stunted trees; in the south-east, in the Shire Highlands, open canopy Brachystegia woodland remained the dominant vegetation type. Except in times of extensive warfare, people tended to settle within easy walking distance of streams or rivers or else by *dambos*, shallow, marshy depressions which retained moisture into the dry season and hence could be used to graze cattle or else for the cultivation of supplementary crops.

Steep escarpments divide these plateau areas from the very different environment of the Lake Malawi-Shire littoral in the trough of the Rift Valley. Less than 200 metres above sea level for much of its length, this valley is considerably hotter and, in the southern sections more arid than the hills rising adjacent to it. Yet by the late nineteenth century it was providing refuge to a substantial although unevenly distributed population, attracted to the area by the availability of year-round water supplies and by the existence of rich alluvial flood plains permitting the cultivation of a variety of crops independent of rainfall, notably at the Karonga plain at the north-west of the lake and in the Lower Shire Valley. Also important was the presence of abundant supplies of fish – most particularly at the southern end of Lake Malawi where the shallow waters and gently sloping beaches made for better fishing than did the steep, rocky shores and deeper waters further north.

It is partly because of the favourable conditions available in this environmental zone that, ever since records have been kept, population density in the Malawi region has always been considerably greater than in any of her East and Central African neighbours: three times that of Tanganyika and Mozambique, four times that of Zimbabwe and over eight times that of Zambia whose overall population today remains smaller than Malawi's[4]. Over the last century Malawi has had the reputation of being a peculiarly impoverished territory, well known for its export of labour. Yet, as Webster has suggested, for much of its pre-colonial history, the region appears to have functioned as a place of refuge at times of drought for people from less well endowed areas.[5]

[4] Figures calculated from Lord Hailey, *An African Survey* (London, 1938) pp. 108; CIA World Factbook, November 2004, www.cia.gov. See also B R Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey of the British Empire* (London, 1949).

[5] J.B. Webster, 'Drought, Migration and Chronology in the Lake Malawi Littoral', *Transafrican Journal of History*, 9, 1 and 2, 1980, pp. 70–90.

Access to permanent water supplies was one factor which attracted immigrants into the Malawi region; another was the comparative reliability of rainfall in the area. Like other parts of southern tropical Africa, Malawi's rainfall is largely influenced by the weather system known as the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone. This passes southward to its southern limit over Zimbabwe in December and January and then retreats northwards in February and March, the whole period being known as the rainy season. In much of Malawi, however, in contrast to more arid territories further south, the South-East Trades, blowing across the Indian Ocean, bring further rain in April, which, in the north, continues sporadically into May. Malawi also benefits from its proximity to the East African coast which means that, even in the dry season, incursions of light rain and drizzle known as *chiperoni* occur over high ground facing south-east. Malawi in consequence enjoys a mean annual rainfall of 45 inches – a figure higher than that of any of her immediate neighbours – with only five per cent of the country in receipt of less than 30 inches of rain, the figure generally considered to be the minimum required for successful dry land farming.

As in much of the rest of Eastern and Southern Africa, however, rainfall can never be taken for granted. Dramatic fluctuations exist within limited areas, with, for example, Mulanje and Cholo districts enjoying average rainfalls of between 65 and 80 inches a year compared with the meagre 33 inches received on average in the immediately adjacent Lower Shire Valley. Moreover, good rains in one year can easily be followed in all but the most favoured districts by drought in the next. Such is the diversity of Malawi's natural resources that no single territory wide drought or famine has yet been recorded (the famine of 2002, the worst in modern times, came close to being territorial-wide).[6] In the Lower Shire Valley, however, drought or semi-drought conditions occurred every six years or so on average and similar conditions prevailed in the Kasitu Valley, north of the Mzimba plain, where hardly a year passed in the 1880s without members of the Livingstonia mission being accused by their Ngoni neighbours of having held up the rain. Fear of drought and famine was thus central to Malawian ideologies.[7] 'When there is no rain at the proper season there ensues much distress. Famine is dreaded above all other evils', wrote an early missionary based in the Shire Highlands in the late 1870s.[8] The central function of all of the major territorial cults in the region was the calling of rain and the prevention of drought; when the rains failed in northern Ngoniland in 1885–86, Scottish missionaries were enlisted to provide additional assistance.[9]

Seasonal fluctuations in rainfall have interacted with more gradual ecological changes. For many centuries, long term variations in the level of Lake Malawi, the Shire River and Lake Chilwa have profoundly influenced economic activities on their shores. All are subject to annual variations of water level of about four feet between the dry and wet season. But they also have been subject to

6 John Iliffe, 'The Poor in the Modern History of Malawi', Centre of African Studies, *Malawi: An Alternative Pattern of Development* (Edinburgh, 1984), p. 251. See also J.J. Stegman, 'Nyasaland Droughts', *Nyasaland Journal,* 4. 1,1951.

7 J. M. Schoffeleers and A. A. Roscoe, *Land of Fire: Oral Literature from Malawi* (Likuni Press, Lilongwe, 1985), p. 10.

8 Duff Macdonald, *Africana or the Heart of Heathen Africa* (London, 1882, 2 vols, reprinted 1969), vol. 1, p 88. See also Iliffe, 'Poor in the Modern History of Malawi', p. 251,

9 John McCracken, *Politics and Christianity in Malawi* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 91–92.

substantial changes in the mean annual water level over lengthy periods.[10] Starting around the time of Livingstone's last visit to Lake Malawi in 1866, the level of the lake and river gradually fell to reach the lowest known levels in 1915 by which time the colonial vision of using the waterway as a major highway into Central Africa had been dashed. Lake levels then rose, covering reefs and inundating fertile rice fields on the south-east arm of the lake. Initially, the rise in the level of the lake had no effect on the Upper Shire River, where water levels fell so low by 1924 that Lake Malombe dried up almost entirely with food gardens being planted on its bed.[11] But in the decade after 1927 the level of the river rose rapidly, permanently engulfing extensive stretches of rich floodland in the Lower Shire valley.[12] Meanwhile, the water level of Lake Chilwa fluctuated in an even more dramatic manner. A shallow, saline expanse of water, Lake Chilwa extended almost to the northern foot of Mulanje Mountain in 1859, at the time of Livingstone's first visit, only to shrink to almost nothing in 1910. Further low levels were reported in 1914–6, 1920–2 and in 1934, resulting on each occasion in heavy mortality among fish stocks, with the survivors taking refuge in surrounding swamps to re-emerge a couple of years later when the lake returned to its normal size.[13]

Production & exchange

Famine, drought, rain and fire constitute the four great motifs in the oral literature of Malawian societies.[14] They come together in one of the most powerful creation stories among the Chewa and Mang'anja peoples, the Kaphirintiwa myth, which starts with the earth, waterless and lifeless. One day, rain falls in a great shower, bringing down a man and woman from the sky with a hoe, a winnowing basket and a mortar. Chiuta (God) also comes down, accompanied by all the animals. Plants and trees grow in the watered earth; there is food in abundance. God, man and animals live together in peace. But eventually the man rubs two sticks together and invents fire. This sets the grass ablaze and the animals run away, filled with rage against him. Chiuta is too old to escape by climbing a tree. But he is rescued by a spider which puts down a thread and lifts him to safety. So God, now driven from earth, announces that man must die and join him in heaven.[15]

The story's significance can be read at a number of levels. Firstly, it comments on the introduction of agriculture and the dichotomy between field and forest, a central theme in Central African history from the beginning of the Iron Age

[10] J.G. Pike, 'The hydrology of Lake Malawi', *Society of Malawi Journal*, 22, 2 (1968); Pike and Rimmington, *Malawi*, pp. 114–18; Robert Crossley, 'Ancient Flood Levels on Lake Malawi', *Malawi Review*, 1, 1 (1982), pp. 11–14.

[11] South Nyasa District Report for 1931, MNA NSF 4/1/3.

[12] John McCracken, 'Fishing and the Colonial Economy: the Case of Malawi', *Journal of African History*, 28 (1987), p. 418.

[13] N. Lancaster, 'The Changes in the Lake Level', in Margaret Kalk, A.J. McLachlan, C. Howard-Williams (eds), *Lake Chilwa: Studies of Change in a Tropical Ecosystem* (The Hague, 1979).

[14] Schoffeleers and Roscoe, *Land of Fire*, p. 10.

[15] This account is drawn from Schoffeleers and Roscoe, L*and of Fire*, pp. 19–20 and from the slightly different version provided by Matthew Schoffeleers, *River of Blood: The Genesis of a Martyr Cult in Southern Malawi* (Madison, 1992), pp. 32–33.

around 200 AD right on into the nineteenth century when peasant farmers were still struggling to cut back and domesticate the bush. Second, it notes the reciprocal relationship between the world of animals and that of the village as expressed most vividly in the ancient *Nyau* cult of the Mang'anja and Chewa peoples where male dancers in masks representing spirits and wild animals [*zilombo*] took part in mourning rites and initiation ceremonies.[16] Animals were dangerous, threatening crops and cultivators alike. But they were also a source of food, hunted by groups of men. It was through hunting as much as through warfare that the ideal masculine attributes of bravery, virility and fierceness could be most fully expressed.[17] Third, it points to the significance of fire as a source of civilisation and authority but also of conflict associated with the arrival in the Malawi region of Phiri immigrants from Katanga. And finally it also touches on the ritual importance of Kaphirintiwa, a 'little flat-topped hill' to the west of the south end of Lake Malawi, believed to be the site of the first of a network of territorial shrines spreading down from central Malawi into the Lower Shire valley and including the Mbona shrine at Khulubvi. It was to the mediums and officials of these shrines that peasant farmers turned for advice and support when confronted by the ever-present threats of blights and pests, floods and drought.[18]

Religious functionaries might provide inspiration and explanation at times of natural disaster brought about by drought or flood. Only skilful cultivators could ameliorate its consequences.[19] The nature of that skill, so John Iliffe has noted, was very different from the skill of the modern large-scale farmer. 'He seeks to control the environment and produce a few specialised crops. The [Malawian] cultivator sought to adapt to the environment and produce as many crops as possible.'[20] In the Lower Shire Valley, successful cultivators were admired for their ability to choose 'the right plots for particular crops', judging 'not only by the nature of the soil itself but by the grass which may be growing on it'. As one informant explained:

> 'Mphumbu' soil will produce a good crop of bullrush millet, 'Ncecha', a light sandy soil, is the best type for groundnuts. 'Ndrongo', a black soil, is ideal for cotton. 'Nsangalabwe', while not suited to most crops, is very favourable for 'Maere' (finger millet, used in brewing the best beer). Of the grasses, 'Nsengere' and 'Nsonthe' show a suitable soil for maize.[21]

[16] The literature on *Nyau* is extensive. I have particularly benefited from the analyses by Schoffeleers, *River of Blood*, pp. 34–41 and by Laurel Birch de Aguiler, *Inscribing the Mask: Interpretation of Nyau Masks and Ritual Performance among the Chewa of Central Malawi* (Fribourg, Switzerland, 1996).

[17] For an extended discussion of this theme see Brian Morris, *The Power of Animals: An Ethnography* (Oxford, 1998), especially pp. 69–74.

[18] J.M. Schoffeleers, 'Introduction' in Schoffeleers (ed.), *Guardians of the Land* (Gwelo, 1979) pp. 2–5.

[19] The discussion that follows is based largely on the following sources: Kings M. Phiri, 'Production and Exchange in Pre-Colonial Malawi', in *Malawi: An Alternative Pattern of Development*, pp. 3–32; Phiri, 'Pre-Colonial Economic Change in Central Malawi: the Development and Expansion of Trade Systems 1750–1875', *Malawi Journal of Social Science*, 5, (1976); Edward A. Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves in East Central Africa* (London, 1975), pp. 1–38; Vaughan, 'Social and Economic Change', pp. 35–81; Elias C. Mandala, *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy* (Madison, WI, 1990); P. T. Terry, 'African Agriculture in Nyasaland', *Nyasaland Journal,* 14, 2 (1961) pp. 27–35.

[20] Iliffe, *Modern History*, p. 14.

[21] A.W.R. Duly, 'The Lower Shire District: Notes on Land Tenure and Individual Rights', *Nyasaland Journal*, 1, 1948, pp. 1–44.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, Mang'anja farmers in the Shire Highlands were growing 'sorghum, beans, millet, pumpkins, cucumbers, cassava and various kinds of Eleusine [finger millet]'.[22] They were also growing maize, the most important of the so-called American crops, high yielding but vulnerable to drought, which had been introduced from the east coast, perhaps in the eighteenth century, and by the 1880s had become 'the chief article of cultivation' in the area.[23] On the *mphala* drylands of the Lower Shire River sorghum and finger millet remained staple crops, often intercropped with pumpkins, groundnuts, cucumbers and peas. But on the *dambo* floodplains adjacent to the river, maize (*chimanga*) was cultivated in greater quantities along with a remarkable variety of lesser crops: beans, sugar-cane, rice and many types of vegetables. Finger millet supplemented by sorghum was the main staple of the Nyanja people of the Upper Shire valley. But around the south end of Lake Malawi maize was once more king, supplemented by sorghum, pumpkins, groundnuts and rice. Further north on the west coast, millet and the easily harvested cassava were convenient crops for peoples harassed by Ngoni raiders; while on the heavily watered Karonga floodplain bananas provided 'a great source of nourishment' for the Ngonde people, supporting denser populations than long-fallow agriculture and requiring less labour than other crops. Maize and finger millet were the main crops grown by Ngoni and Tumbuka cultivators on the Mzimba and South Rukuru plains. Further south, however, it was not until the 1880s and 1890s, according to Kings Phiri, that maize was introduced alongside sorghum and millet as a staple crop among the Chewa.[24]

The variety of crops grown reflected diversity in the type of agricultural systems employed. All over Malawi, as in East-Central Africa more generally, agricultural production was household based, using human labour exclusively rather than the labour of animals, and employing a limited range of agricultural implements: axes, digging sticks and hoes, the latter usually made of iron although, in some parts of central Malawi, of wood. Almost everywhere types of swidden (slash and burn) shifting agriculture were practised, although, as Vaughan has shown, there appears to have been a tendency in the Shire Highlands for the 'woodland' or forest-fallow system, involving the planting of seeds directly into the ashes following the felling and burning of trees, to be replaced by the more labour-intensive 'grassland' or bush-fallow system in which hoes were extensively employed.[25] Under this system, cultivators planted seeds on earth-covered mounds of ash and vegetation (*matuto*). In the neighbouring Shire valley, most crops were planted on flat ground. Among the Ngonde on the Karonga plain it was customary to plant on long ridges composed of grass and weeds covered by earth.[26] Wherever conditions allowed, rain fed, dry land farming was supplemented by the cultivation of maize and other crops in *dambos.* The result, so Livingstone's Makololo porters informed him, was 'that "here the maize had no season" – meaning that the whole year was proper for its growth and ripening'. In times of drought such gardens were particularly appreciated;

22 John Buchanan, *The Shire Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1885), p. 122.
23 Ibid.
24 Phiri, 'Production and Exchange', p. 9.
25 Vaughan, 'Social and Economic Change', pp. 49–51.
26 Terry, 'African Agriculture', p. 32.

there are many accounts of people seeking refuge on the banks of the Shire after their upland crops had failed.

In contrast to the importance placed on agriculture, animal husbandry was largely neglected. No purely pastoralist peoples lived in the Malawi regions; among the indigenous population cattle were kept in extensive numbers only by the Ngonde, who housed them in long sheds kept scrupulously clean. According to Owen Kalinga slightly more than half the population possessed cattle in 1900 with the largest herds being owned by members of the Ngonde political elite who distributed some of them among clients on a temporary basis.[27] Cattle were also of importance in the economy and society of the two major Ngoni kingdoms. 'Each village along the road seemed to have its herds of cattle, some twenty or thirty, others about one hundred in number', Robert Laws remarked of northern Ngoniland in 1878.[28] However, with the exception of Mwase Kasungu and his brother, Chipawila, who owned a 'magnificent' herd of 'perhaps four hundred head' in the late 1880s, only limited numbers of cattle were herded by Chewa farmers on the tsetse-free Lilongwe plain and hardly any in the Shire Valley or Highlands where pockets of tsetse acted as a deterrent.[29] In these districts, chickens, goats and fat-tailed sheep made a more substantial contribution to the food supply and the last two were also used as a form of currency, being exchanged for foodstuffs, iron or salt.

Hunting for meat or skins has been ignored by most historians. But, as Morris has noted, hunting was important in many Malawian communities not just, or even primarily, for the food it provided but also as a social activity associated with the assertion of a particular form of masculinity.[30] In the 1860s, game appears to have been in short supply in the Shire Highlands.[31] But in the Shire Valley, all the way from the Zambesi River to Lake Malawi, there were large herds of hippopotami and elephants along with antelopes of many description: kudu, reedbuck, hartebeest and impala.[32] No hunting guilds of the type that flourished among the Bisa in the Luangwa Valley appear to have existed either here or elsewhere in the Malawi region.[33] But there were a number of professional hunters, hung with charms, using flint muskets and accompanied by hunting dogs, who went in search of larger game.[34] And there were also groups of specialist hippopotami hunters who made a precarious living out of harpooning hippos from canoes, then exchanging the flesh for maize and selling the teeth to Portuguese traders.[35] Traps to catch game were many and varied, ranging from pitfalls used to trap elephants to smaller traps for antelopes and

27 Owen J. M. Kalinga, 'Towards a Better Understanding of Socio-Economic Change in 18th and 19th century Ungonde', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 93, 24–1, 1984, p. 94.

28 Laws to Convenor, Livingstonia Committee, February 1879, *Free Church of Scotland Monthly Record*, 2 June 1879, p. 136.

29 Carl Wiese, *Expedition in East-Central Africa, 1888–1891 A Report,* edited by Harry W. Langworthy, (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1983), p. 253.

30 Morris, *Power of Animals*, pp. 72–74.

31 R.H. Rowley, *The Story of the Universities Mission to Central Africa* (London, 1866), pp. 172–733.

32 Livingstone, *Zambesi Journal*; Foskett, *Zambesi Journal*; Alice Werner, *The Natives of British Central Africa* (London, 1906), pp. 185–92.

33 Morris, *Power of Animals*, pp. 65–66.

34 For a vivid description see Henry Faulkner, *Elephant Haunts* (London, 1868), pp. 173–79.

35 E.D. Young, *The Search for Livingstone* (London, 1868), pp. 239–43; Mandala, *Work and Control*), p. 88.

lesser game, down to and including field mice.[36] At times, these were employed in conjunction with communal hunts in which groups of men and boys, led by chiefs or headmen and armed with arrows, knobkerries and spears, drove animals into nets or pitfalls. Meat was always much prized; but the excitement with which its appearance was greeted suggests that it was only infrequently eaten.

If meat was in short supply in the Malawi region in the mid nineteenth century, fish, fresh and dried, was available in relative abundance. The richest fishing grounds (among the best in Eastern Africa) were Lake Chilwa and the southern end of Lake Malawi. But *chambo, utaka, usipa* and *mpasa* were also caught in considerable quantities in the Shire River and throughout Lake Malawi, notably in the vicinity of Likoma and Chizumulu islands.[37] Fishing techniques were influenced by the character of the local environment. At the north end of the lake and around the islands, where the shores are rocky and steep, fishermen made use of two types of net: the *chilimira*, an open water seine net worked from two canoes, and the *matchela,* a gill net, usually left in the water overnight. At the southern of the Lake, however, the existence of gently sloping beaches made possible the use of *makoka*, large meshed seine nets varying in length from 50 to 400 yards, which were manoeuvred into place by fishermen in a single canoe and then pulled to the beach by ropes. Fish weirs and basket traps were employed on the Shire River and its tributaries. Dugout canoes provided the essential means of transport. They were usually hollowed out of the much-prized *chonya* tree (Breonadia microcephala) or else from *masangu* which was less durable, being a softer wood, but quicker and easier to work. Nets were constructed of local fibres (*bwazi* or *chopa*) and were much admired for their strength and lightness by early European observers.[38]

Fishing played a particularly important role in the economy of the Lakeside Tonga, on the western shore of Lake Malawi, and of the Nyanja people living at the south end of Lake Malawi, near Lake Chilwa and in the vicinity of the Shire River.[39] In contrast to agriculture, which involved men and women in relatively equal numbers, fishing was a gender-specific activity, monopolised almost entirely by men who made use of kinship ties in order to mobilise labour. Among the Nyanja, communal tasks such as setting nets, hauling them to shore and constructing canoes were normally performed by male members of an *mbumba* or matrilineage group, although fish trapping was often undertaken individually. Most fish caught were consumed within the fishermen's *mbumba*, but there was a regular trade to the more agriculturally productive highland regions adjacent to Lake Malawi involving the exchange of dried fish for maize and beans; by the 1860s fish traders from Lake Chilwa were also active in the Shire Highlands.

Dried fish was only one among a variety of commodities – including earthenware pots, tobacco, and foodstuffs – that were widely traded between ecologically diverse districts by the 1860s. Even more important were cotton cloth, ironware and salt, the three main staples of the regional economy.

36 Werner, *Natives*, pp. 189–90.
37 John McCracken, 'Fishing and the Colonial Economy: the Case of Malawi', *Journal of African History*, 28 (1987), pp. 413–29.
38 William Percival Johnson, *Nyasa the Great Water* (Oxford 1922), p. 59.
39 Vaughan, 'Social and Economic Change', pp. 40–60.

There is evidence that, in the Shire Valley at least, cotton production played a significant role going back at least to the seventeenth century. Two main types of cotton were grown, the indigenous *Tonje Kadja* and the imported *Tonje Manga*, and it was noted that although the former yielded less cotton and was inferior in quality to Tonje Manga, 'many people prefer it to foreign cotton' because it made stronger cloth.[40] As a variety of European pioneers observed, spinning and weaving were 'painfully slow' processes, largely dominated by men and resulting in the manufacture of what was a relatively expensive item beyond the means of all but the more affluent customers.[41] Most people living in the Shire Highlands, which were too cold for the successful production of cotton, continued, therefore, to clothe themselves in bark cloth but, when the opportunities arose, they also participated in a vigorous trade in regional commodities as the missionary, Rowley explained: 'The people in the highlands were rich in iron, those in the valley were poor; so when a highlandman wanted cotton to make himself a cloth, he sent down hoes, and such like things, to the valley, and obtained cotton in exchange.'[42]

Cotton cloth was also produced in more limited quantities by Chewa craftsmen in the Mchinji-Kasungu district of the Central region and by Mambwe immigrants from the Lake Malawi-Tanganyika corridor who settled under Ngoni protection in the Rukuru valley from the mid-nineteenth century. In a number of areas, however, cotton cloth was neither produced nor sold. Ngonde cultivators and herdsmen were highly successful in maintaining a balanced and variegated economy, yet the wearing of clothes other than brass girdles and bead aprons was virtually unknown among the Ngonde as late as the 1880s. In the Maseko Ngoni kingdom of Chikusi in 1878, men wore skins or bunches of feathers, with rings of hide on their legs and arms; most women were clothed in pieces of bark cloth although a few instead wore locally produced cotton cloth, described by one observer as being 'rough, strong, and durable'.[43]

If cloth was a luxury, albeit one much in demand, ironware and salt were essentials for the maintenance of the household economy. Outcrops of ironstone were irregularly dispersed: common in the Shire Highlands where Kirk noted that 'Every village has its forge and in the forest are the smelting furnaces'; much rarer in the Shire valley where little iron ore was to be found.[44] On much of the south-west shore of Lake Malawi iron hoes and spears were in short supply and, according to Kirk, 'the people do not appear to know how to work iron.'[45] Inland, in the upland district known as Chimaliro, Livingstone observed 'at every third or fourth village…a clay, fire-hardened furnace, for smelting iron. … As we passed along, men sometimes ran from the fields they were working in, and offered for sale new hoes, axes and spears of their own workmanship.'[46] Further north, on the eastern edge of the Nyika plateau, Phoka smiths were renowned for the quality of their iron hoes, although some abandoned their smelting furnaces

40 Livingstone, *Zambesi*, p. 111.
41 Foskett, *Zambesi Journal*, Vol.1, pp. 240–41.
42 Rowley, *Story*, pp. 230–31.
43 Robert Laws, 'Journey along the Western Side of Lake Nyasa in 1878', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society*, 1878, p. 308.
44 Foskett, *Zambesi Journal*, Vol. I, p. 237.
45 Foskett, vol. 2, p. 375.
46 Livingstone, *Narrative*, p. 536.

in the 1850s as a consequence of the Ngoni invasion.[47]

Because of the skill required in the smelting of iron, it tended to be a specialist activity, conducted in the bush in secret and often involving the use of religious rituals. Men appear to have largely monopolised production, although east of the Luangwa Valley in the 1820s, Chewa women miners and smelters were employed by a Portuguese entrepreneur.[48] In the Shire Valley headmen and chiefs were mainly responsible for smelting the ore they obtained from the Highlands. But in the Highlands themselves, so Rowley noted, 'all may be blacksmiths', although he added that 'but few excel in ironwork'. Mang'anja smiths were claimed to be more skilled than Yao ones 'and the Manganja of the hills better than those of the valley'. Many of the articles produced – knives, spearheads, arrowheads and axes – were 'of such excellent workmanship', so Rowley believed, 'that they might have come from the hands of some of our own workmen'.[49] In the Shire Valley wooden hoes continued to be used alongside iron hoes which only well-to-do families could afford. Wherever they were traded, iron hoes served as items of exchange as well as instruments of agricultural production. Even the heavy Phoka hoe was frequently used for the payment of bridewealth.

Iron-working, like hunting, was overwhelmingly the preserve of men. Salt production, by contrast, was largely dominated by women. As Kjekshus has noted, salt was a vital element throughout East Central Africa for all people existing on a predominantly vegetarian diet.[50] Small quantities could be acquired relatively widely by burning reeds or grasses and then evaporating the ash but high quality sites were in short supply. The best and most famous were on the shores of Lake Chilwa where salt-making took place between May and November on land flooded during the rainy season. Production was in the hands of women of post-childbearing age, perhaps because to indulge in sexual intercourse while making salt was believed to undermine the operation. Salt-bearing soil was washed in baskets or earthenware pots with the residue being distributed through a woman's matrilineage or else traded throughout the Shire Highlands.[51] Women were also mainly responsible for the distillation of salt from the saline soils to be found at the confluence of the Shire and Mwanza rivers.[52] They also played a leading part in distilling salt from the salt springs (*vikulo*) located in a number of streams in the vicinity of Kasungu. Salt, indeed, was the basis for a lively trade extending through much of central Malawi into eastern Zambia and involving the exchange of salt for iron hoes, goats and various types of cloth.[53] Almost wherever salt was produced, political rulers appropriated a carefully assessed proportion of the product as a form of tribute. In the Kasungu area,

47 Augustine W.C. Msiska, 'A note on iron working and early trade among the Phoka of Rumphi, Malawi', *SOMJ*, 34,1 1981, pp. 36–44; Hangson B.K. Msiska, 'Established on Iron, Undermined by Ivory: the Mwaphoka, c. 1380–1810', unpublished paper, Department of History, University of Malawi, 1979.

48 A.C.P. Gamitto, *King Kazembe and the Marave, Cheva, Bisa, Bemba, Lunda, and Other Peoples of Southern Africa* trs.. Ian Cunnison, (Lisbon, 1960), pp.54–5.

49 Rowley, *Story*, p. 245.

50 Helge Kjekshus, *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History* (Heinemann, London, 1977), p.92.

51 Rowley, *Story*

52 Mandala, *Work and Control*, p. 44; Livingstone, *Zambesi Journal,* p. 101.

53 Phiri, 'Production and Exchange', pp. 15–16.

chiefs Kawoma and Mwase derived substantial revenues from their control of the industry. The same was true at the south end of Lake Malawi where the Yao chief Mponda benefited from the presence of salt-pans adjacent to his main village. In 1866 Livingstone witnessed three to four hundred people making salt on this plain.[54] Seventeen years later, it was noted that 'the people in [Mponda's] village are well supplied with cloth …as people come from all quarters to buy salt, of which there is the material for making plenty.'[55]

Trade brought Malawians into contact with a wider international economy. Southern Malawi has a long history of involvement in international trade, going back at least to the late sixteenth century, by which time the Portuguese had occupied the ancient port of Sofala (the site of modern Beira) and seized control of the Swahili trading settlements in the Zambesi Valley at Sena and Tete. Over the next 150 years, the Portuguese focused their attention very largely on the gold trade of the Zimbabwean plateau, south of the Zambesi. However, they also made contact with the Maravi peoples of the Shire region from whom they obtained ivory, *machila* cloth, ironware, salt and food in exchange for Indian-produced cloth, beads and brassware.[56] At this period, Maravi traders regularly travelled to Mozambique Island to sell their ivory. However, by the early eighteenth century Yao ivory traders from east of Lake Malawi had come to dominate long distance ivory trade to the coast, thus rendering this route obsolete and relegating Mang'anja and Chewa communities to the role of primary producers.[57] Whereas, by the mid-nineteenth century, Yao men had come to regard the experience of trade and travel as essential ingredients of Yao male identity, the Mang'anja of the Shire Valley, so Livingstone believed, were 'much more fond of the home pursuits of spinning, weaving, smelting iron and cultivating the soil than [they were of] foreign travel'.[58]

Nevertheless, the Malawi region remained an important centre for international trade, partly as a result of the intervention of new groups of entrepreneurial middlemen. In southern Malawi, it was the expulsion of the Portuguese from the Zimbabwean plateau in the 1690s that provided the initial impetus. By this time, a variety of frontiersmen and adventurers, making use of armed slaves, c*hikunda*, had carved out estates for themselves in the Zambesi Valley which the Portuguese Crown came to recognise as *prazos*. Portuguese-speaking and nominally Catholic, these *muzungos* frequently contracted marriages with African women and increasingly adopted African styles of dress, government and warfare.[59] Following the Portuguese defeat south of the Zambesi, some *muzungos* turned north to the lower Shire valley and the grasslands to the west where they and their *chikunda* hunted and traded for ivory. Some groups of *chikunda* broke away from their masters; others found themselves in direct competition with Yao traders who from the mid-eighteenth century had begun to sell ivory from the Malawi region to Swahili traders at Kilwa. They again both competed and

54 Horace Waller (ed.), *The Last Journals of David Livingstone* (London, 1874), Vol. I, p. 106.
55 Diary of Frederick Morrison, entry for 2 March 1883, Edinburgh University Library [EUL].
56 Malyn Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (London, 1995), pp.77–8; Kings Phiri, 'Northern Zambezia from 1500 to 1800', *SOMJ*, 32, 1, 1979, p. 15. See also M.D. Newitt, *Portuguese Settlement on the Zambesi* (London, 1973).
57 Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves*, p. 58, 76–85; Newitt, *History*, p. 178, 184.
58 Livingstone, *Narrative*, p. 522 quoted in Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves*, pp. 17–23.
59 Newitt, *History*, pp. 217–42.

collaborated with Bisa traders from beyond the Luangwa Valley, who were active in western Malawi and along the banks of the Upper Shire from at least the 1830s. The Bisa, in their turn were in contact with Balowka (possibly Yao) traders from east of Lake Malawi who entered the elephant-rich Nkhamanga area in northern Malawi in the 1770s and 1780s and began hunting and trading for ivory and skins.[60]

By this time slaves from west of Lake Malawi were also reaching such coastal ports as Kilwa, although up to 1800 the flow does not appear to have been large. After 1805, however demand for slaves expanded sharply on the East African coast leading to the more systematic exploitation of the lands west of Lake Malawi. In the 1820s and 1830s some 8,000 to 10,000 slaves annually were exported from this region, so Kings Phiri has calculated, although it is important to stress that many of these were drawn from eastern Zambia and western Mozambique rather than from within the modern boundaries of Malawi.[61] Although the slave trade to Quelimane expanded sharply in the 1820s and 30s, most slaves were drawn from the *prazos* of the Zambesi valley, at this period, leaving the Shire Highlands and Valley relatively undisturbed.[62] Many, however, came from central Malawi where a large number of war captives were available as a consequence of fighting between the various small autonomous chiefdoms that had emerged following the disintegration of the Maravi state system in the eighteenth century.

Political & social organisation

European travellers and missionaries entering the Malawi region in the second half of the nineteenth century believed that people were grouped into tribes, distinguished from each other not only by language, culture and political system but also by physical appearance. Mang'anja men had tattoos composed of raised lines; Yao (Ajawa) of small isolated spots.[63] Later investigation has revealed a more complex and fluid picture, although one that involves a reinterpretation of the concept of ethnic identity rather than its abandonment. In the early 1830s, as the Portuguese explorer Antonio Gamitto recognised, apparently separate tribes in Central and Southern Malawi shared a common cultural and linguistic heritage. Diverse peoples, including the Mang'anja, Nyanja and Makua in southern Malawi and the Chewa and Chipeta in the centre, were 'totally independent of each other, and each is known by its own name. Nevertheless it is beyond dispute that all are of the same Marave race, having the same habits, customs, language etc'.[64] Tribal names often defined a people living in a specific environment: 'Nyanja', the people of the lake; 'Chipeta', the people of the grasslands. For many people, clan rather than tribe was the most important unit of group identity: Yao migration into southern Malawi from the eighteenth century

60 H.L. Vail, 'Suggestions towards a reinterpreted Tumbuka history', in Pachai, *Early History*, pp. 154–55.

61 Phiri, 'Pre-Colonial Economic Change ', p.25.

62 Leroy Vail and Landeg White, *Capitalism and Colonialism in Mozambique* (London, 1980), pp. 22–7.

63 Foskett, *Zambesi Journal*, September 4 1859, p. 243; Livingstone, *Narrative*, p. 376–77. See also Macdonald, *Africana*, p. 16; Rowley, *Story*, pp. 239–40.

64 Gamitto, *King Kazembe*, p. 64.

was greatly facilitated by the manner in which common clan membership was used as a 'vehicle of assimilation across tribal boundaries', linking Yao immigrants with their Nyanja hosts.[65] At a political level, conflicts between chieftaincies frequently took place within an ethnic group, whether Maravi or Yao. At a cultural level, tribes were dynamic organisms, not static institutions, regularly incorporating people of diverse background and, at times, redefining their social boundaries. Many of the Yao who spread east to the southern shores of Lake Malawi were the proud descendants of Nyanja and Lomwe people who had become assimilated into Yao society. By the same token, the term *Chikunda*, initially applied to armed slaves employed on Portuguese estates (*prazos*) in the Zambesi valley, came to be used first of bands of independent warrior hunters and then as an ethnic designation for the thousands of immigrants from the Zambesi region (later still to be known as Sena) who moved in the late nineteenth century into the Shire Valley.[66] Ethnic categories were thus subject to fluidity and change, although this does not imply that they have no explanatory value. Indeed, from the mid-nineteenth century tribal identities in the Malawi region tended to become more distinct at precisely the time that cultural intermingling intensified.

By the early 1860s, when the first party of explorers and missionaries entered the region, a political situation of considerable complexity had been created through the interaction of indigenous and immigrant peoples. Most of those living in central Malawi and south of the lake shared a common language, Chinyanja or Chichewa – spoken with considerable regional variations – and a common culture and clan organisation. Pre-colonial historians disagree about many of the most fundamental features concerning the early history of these people.[67] But it is generally accepted that their origins lie in an intermingling between the earliest inhabitants, the Kafula or Batwa, and immigrants from the Katanga region of modern-day Congo, sometimes identified with the Banda clan, who moved south during the early second millennium. In many traditions, the Banda are portrayed as having a special affinity with the land along with the power of making rain. They were followed, perhaps as early as the fourteenth century, although conceivably as late as the sixteenth, by Phiri clansman (also known as Maravi) who tacitly accepted Banda claims to ownership of the land while asserting their rights to chiefly power over a previously stateless population.[68] Much of the detail of their subsequent political history remains problematic, but there is no dispute that by the seventeenth century three main

[65] Vaughan, 'Social and Economic Change', pp. 61–3.

[66] Schoffeleers, *River of Blood*, p. 22; Allen Isaacman, 'Ex-Slaves, Transfrontiersmen and the Slave Trade: The Chikunda of the Zambesi Valley, 1850–1900' in Paul E. Lovejoy (ed.), *Africans in Bondage: Studies in Slavery and the Slave Trade* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1986), pp. 273–391; H.H. Johnston, *British Central Africa* (London, 1898), p. 391.

[67] For the central debate on the timing and nature of the Maravi incursions see: M.D.D. Newitt, 'The Early History of the Marave', *Journal of African History*, 23 (1982), pp. 145–62; Matthew Schoffeleers, 'The Zimba and the Lundu State in the late Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *JAH*, 28 (1987), pp. 337–55; Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves*, pp. 46–58. Newitt's revised argument can be found in Newitt, *History*, pp. 71–8.

[68] Schoffeleers, *River of Blood,* pp. 22–32; Phiri, 'Northern Zambezia', pp. l-22; Phiri, 'Chewa History in Central Malawi and the Use of Oral Tradition', (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1975); H.W. Langworthy, 'Chewa or Malawi political organisation in the precolonial era' in Pachai, *Early History*, pp. 104–22.

Maravi kingdoms were in existence: that of Kalonga (usually regarded as the founder state) at the southwest end of the Lake; of his kinsman Undi between the Luangwa and the Zambesi rivers; and of his fellow kinsman, Lundu, initially based in the Lower Shire Valley although briefly extending his authority eastwards as far as the Indian Ocean. On several occasions early in the early seventeenth century bands of Maravi mercenaries, renowned for their ferocity, took part alongside the Portuguese in wars of expansion against Karanga rulers on the Zimbabwean plateau.

By the end of the century, however, the Maravi states were in disarray. Lacking effective centralising institutions, they suffered from the increasing devolution of political power to subordinate chiefs like Mankhokwe who emerged as the dominant figure in the Lower Shire Valley, taking the title *Lundu* to himself. Yao traders squeezed them out of the major trade routes to the coast. Afro-Portuguese and *Chikunda* adventurers in search of gold penetrated into Maravi territory north of the Zambezi where they established independent mining camps *(bares)* and intervened repeatedly in local politics. By the early 1800s, the Lundu kingdom was reduced to a section of the Lower Shire Valley and the king was politically impotent. As for Undi, his authority was already well on the wane when the Portuguese official, Gamitto, travelled through his kingdom in 1831 and the decline accelerated during the next three decades. In the grasslands west of Lake Malawi Mwase Kasungu's powerful kingdom arose in an area previously dominated by Kalonga but elsewhere village groupings re-emerged as the most important political units. Rowley's comments on the Shire Highlands in the early 1860s indicate both the extent to which traditions of hierarchy survived along with the degree to which they had been undermined in practice:

> Each little community had its head man, its chief, and too often its separate interest; and although the subordinate chiefs were nominally under a superior … and these superior individuals nominally subject to the Rundo, to whom tribute was paid from all the chiefs, yet this arrangement produced but little good. Central authority existed but in name, unity of action was not the result of it, and patriotism did not exist.[69]

The very name Maravi (often associated with flames) receded into a state of obscurity that was to last for nearly a century.[70] Instead, people of similar culture were identified by regional place names: Nyanja for the people round the south end of the lake and Mang'anja for those in the Lower Shire valley and Highlands; Chewa (a term used by Gamitto in 1830s) for those living west and southwest of the lake; Chipeta, the people of the high grass, a term used for descendants of the earliest pre-Phiri immigrants, now scattered through the Dedza, Dowa and Ntcheu districts of the Central Region.[71]

A somewhat different pattern existed among the Maravi's northern neighbours: the Tumbuka and related peoples to the west of the lake, the Tonga on the lake shore itself and the Ngonde on the plain to the north-west. Despite their sense of ethnic identity, the Tonga and Tumbuka are both mixed peoples with

[69] Rowley, *Story*, pp. 264–5.
[70] Schoffeleers, 'The meaning and use of the name *Malawi* in oral traditions and precolonial documents' in Pachai (ed.), *Early History*, pp. 91–103.
[71] Schoffeleers, *River of Blood*, pp. 25–32.

variegated cultures. The Tonga are an amalgam of at least four different groups, some of Chewa origin, some from the north, while the Tumbuka likewise have been influenced both by the matrilineal Chewa to the south and by patrilineal peoples from western Tanzania. Both originally lacked large-scale centralised authorities, although among the Tumbuka, certain chieftaincies, notably that of Luhanga, controlled more than a single clan. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, the demand for soft, easily carved African ivory in India was leading to a rise in prices firstly in the market towns of Mozambique but increasingly, as time passed by, in the expanding port of Kilwa. Soon traders from the east of Lake Malawi, dressed 'as Arabs', although drawn in particular from Unyamwezi, were making their way to Nkhamanga, the home of the northern Tumbuka, in search of ivory and to a lesser extent, of slaves. Known collectively as Balowoka, 'those who have crossed over the water', they established a loose confederation of states running from the lakeside port of Chilumba west to the elephant-rich Luangwa valley. By the 1820s, however, the authority of this Chikulamayembe dynasty was already on the wane. Lacking effective military or bureaucratic institutions, it was unable to respond effectively to changes in the pattern of trade in the Luangwa valley which diverted the region's ivory away from the trade routes to the east. New traders entered the Henga valley, purchasing slaves and undermining the Balowoka's commercial monopoly. 'When the Ngoni arrived on the scene in the mid-nineteenth century', writes Vail, 'they found a politically disorganised, militarily weak, and socially fissiparous society that proved easy to defeat.'[72]

Some historians have suggested that the Ngonde were also influenced by ivory traders who reached them from the east side of the lake but, in an authoritative study, Owen Kalinga has demonstrated that no such trading contacts existed prior to the late nineteenth century. The Ngonde were related not to other groups in Malawi but to a variety of peoples in western Tanzania with whom they shared a distinctive form of centralised monarchy. In the seventeenth century the Kyungu had been a sacred religious figure, living like the Lwembe of the culturally similar Nyakyusa north-east of the Songwe River in strict religious seclusion. But for reasons possibly connected with the favourable environment of the Karonga plain and the dense settled population attracted to it, the Kyungus from the third quarter of the eighteenth century entered more actively into secular politics while succeeding in limiting the powers of their previously dominant councillors (*makambala*). They also gradually extended the boundaries of the Ngonde state and established reasonably effective control over outlying villages.[73]

It is probable that for most Malawians in the mid-nineteenth century political authority at the level of the chieftaincy was of less importance than the social organisation of villages and households. Mang'anja cultivators in the Shire Highlands and Valley in the early 1860s retained some sense of allegiance to

[72] Leroy Vail, 'The Making of the "Dead North": A Study of Ngoni Rule in Northern Malawi, c. 1855–1907' in J.B. Peires (ed.), *Before and After Shaka: Papers in Nguni History* (Grahamstown, 1981); Vail, 'Suggestions', pp. 150–60; T. Cullen Young, *Notes on the History of the Tumbuka-Kamanga Peoples in the Northern Province of Nyasaland* (London, 1932), pp. 31–47, 82–4; J. van Velsen, 'Notes on the History of the Lakeside Tonga of Nyasaland', *African Studies*, 18, 3, 1959, pp. 108–13.

[73] Godfrey Wilson, *The Constitution of the Ngonde*, Rhodes-Livingstone Papers No. 3, 1969; Owen J.M. Kalinga, *A History of the Ngonde Kingdom of Malawi* (Mouton, Berlin, 1985).

Mankhokwe or even to his rival, the descendant of the original Lundu. But this rarely involved the provision of tribute to the paramount and was most effectively demonstrated in religious terms. Veneration for Mbona, the martyred spirit closely associated with the Lundu paramounts, continued to be widely expressed in the early 1860s and beyond. Mankhokwe, however, lacked military resources and was unable to provide assistance to other Mang'anja chiefs when they were attacked.[74]

By contrast, villages and households continued as viable social units. In common with other peoples of Maravi descent, the Mang'anja were matrilocal and matrilineal: a man normally moved into his wife's home village when he married; succession followed from uncle to maternal nephew rather than from father to son.[75] The consequence was that within a village the core was provided by one or several matrilineal groups (*mbumba)* made up of married sisters, their daughters and unmarried sons. With the exception of headmen, married men in the village were incomers. Bridewealth (the transfer of objects, often cattle, from the bridegroom's family to the family of the bride) was not employed. Instead, the prospective bridegroom performed arduous agricultural services (*chikamwini*) for his mother-in-law, who treated him as an *mkamwini* or workhorse. The upbringing of children and the settlement of disputes both remained responsibilities for members of the *mbumba*, and specifically of the *Nkhoswe*, a senior brother or maternal uncle to whom the group of sisters were presumed to turn for advice.

In this situation, the Mang'anja household, consisting of a wife and her husband, the wife's children and her elderly relatives, functioned effectively as an agricultural unit but less so as a social one. Women and men worked together in the fields, with women probably playing the larger part. However, women ate with their female relatives in separate groups from men and combined together with other women on specific tasks such as beer brewing and the pounding of maize. Husbands did not control the reproductive activities of their wives: children of the union belonged to the wife and her matrikin rather than to her husband. Equally, ownership of land went to the wife; if she and her husband divorced, the land remained with her.

It was, therefore, only in northern Malawi among such patrilineal, cattle-keeping peoples as the Ngonde and, to a lesser degree, the Tumbuka, that marriage could be interpreted as an unambiguously exploitative institution, cementing the dominance of senior men over their wives and other subordinates. Elsewhere, the relations between men and women were much more complex: Mang'anja women performed rituals of humility and respect to men, such as kneeling when they met; yet, in times of peace, they achieved a considerable degree of control over their domestic lives through their ownership both of land and of the produce of their labours.[76] It was women, not men, who had control of grain bins – although it should be added that, as in many other societies, it was

74 Mandala, *Work and Control*, pp. 16–18.

75 The discussion that follows is drawn predominantly from the following sources: Megan Vaughan, *The Story of an African Famine* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 54–56; Vaughan, 'Social and Economic Change', pp. 40–42; Mandala, *Work and Control*, pp. 21–25; Landeg White, *Magomero* (Cambridge, 1987), pp.33–34; K.G.M Phiri, 'Some Changes in the Matrilineal Family System among the Chewa of Malawi since the Nineteenth Century', *JAH*, 24, 1983, pp. 257–274.

76 Macdonald, *Africana*, p. 35. See also Morris, *Power of Animals*, pp. 56–57.

also women not men who took responsibility for child rearing and for such labour-intensive activities as gathering firewood and carrying water as well as cooking and pounding grain.[77] Although there were some women headmen and chiefs, political office-holders were very largely men. However, women played a major role in rain-calling ceremonies and as the 'spirit' wives of Mbona, where they took the lead in organising the shrine.[78] Hunting and warfare, however, remained a monopoly of men, a feature that would grow in significance in the 1860s as the violence associated with slave raiding intensified.

Less ambiguous forms of inequality involved the dominance exercised by elders over youths and of free men over slaves. It was through their control of marriage that elders could most easily exploit the labour of their juniors. Generational tension has been described as probably the most important form of social conflict in pre-colonial East Africa, although, as Iliffe notes, 'exploitation was masked by every man's expectation of becoming an elder.'[79] Among the Ngonde, this tension was institutionalised by the creation of age villages or else of communal dormitories in which young men of a similar age would sleep. Only when they married were these young men recognised as full adults, capable of inheriting cattle from their fathers. Yet marriage was dependent on the payment as bridewealth of several cows which by definition would belong to the father or his fellow senior kinsmen rather than to the son. Consequently young men were often forced to labour in their fathers' fields for several years before being given sufficient cattle to allow them to secure a wife.[80] Those young men whose families did not have sufficient cattle might instead render agricultural services to their prospective wife's parents as a substitute for the payment of bridewealth.[81]

Mang'anja youths were also subject to the dominance of their elders. Expressly excluded from participation in the communal rituals integral to the proper ordering of society, they were also denied access to certain economic activities – notably iron working and salt distillation. Marriage, once more, came to dramatise their subordinate position. Obliged to provide labour services for their prospective mothers-in-law, they were frequently employed on the hardest tasks – opening new fields and maintaining them for a full season – before being permitted to marry.[82] Unlike domestic slaves, however, they could look forward to making the full transition to adulthood.

There can be no doubt that the proportion of Malawians who were domestic slaves increased substantially with the expansion of the slave trade but, even earlier, domestic slavery existed. Unfree labour came in three main categories: children offered as pawns, sometimes in settlement of disputes; women, who either voluntarily enslaved themselves, often at times of famine, or else became victims of the legal process; and war captives of either sex, obtained through kidnapping or military raids.[83] In most parts of Africa, slaves were largely

77 Rowley, *Story*, p. 246.
78 Mandala, *Work and Control*, pp. 23–25.
79 Iliffe, *Modern History*, p. 17.
80 Godfrey Wilson, 'The Nyakyusa of South-Western Tanganyika', in Elizabeth Colson and Max Gluckman (eds), *Seven Tribes of British Central Africa* (Manchester, 1951), pp. 259–60.
81 Kalinga, 'Socio-Economic Change', p. 93.
82 Mandala, *Work and Control*, pp. 29–32.
83 White, *Magomero*, pp. 33–34.

obtained through warfare and similar violence.[84] But in the Malawi regions prior to the Ngoni eruption chiefs and headmen more commonly acquired domestic slaves (*akapolo*) through the manipulation of the legal system.[85] Women slaves were valued both for their productive and reproductive capacities. By taking 'slave wives' Chewa and Mang'anja headmen and chiefs could bypass matrilineal kinship obligations, increase the number of dependants directly under their control and hence expand the labour resources available to them. Free women also were alert to the need to acquire extra labour for their households – an especially pressing consideration in a society where high rates of child mortality prevailed. At Magomero, the mission station founded in the Shire Highlands in 1860, married women frequently seized young girls who had been given refuge by the missionaries. Because slave women and children born into free families were normally assimilated into lineages over time it is frequently suggested that their lot was of a different order to that of plantation or chattel slaves. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to underestimate the extent to which *akapolo* were exploited. Traditions collected by Kings Phiri in the Central region suggest that Chewa slaves 'were generally ill-treated unless they came from local lineages. They were forced to do onerous work with blunt instruments such as worn-out hoes, eat their food from the floor like dogs, and drink their beer from broken or dirty gourds.'[86] Elias Mandala records a similar tradition from the Lower Shire Valley: 'Whenever there was a hard job to be done, they always gave it to a kapolo. He or she would work the whole day without rest; and no one really cared because a kapolo was not a real human being.'[87] Like the youths whom they resembled, domestic slaves were not permitted to participate in iron working or in salt production. Although they worked in the fields alongside freemen, they did not control the product of their labour.

Trade & conquest

From the middle of the nineteenth century the peoples of Malawi were exposed to two new disruptive external influences. The first was the extension and enlargement of the trade in slaves and ivory. As we have seen, long-distance commerce between the Lake Malawi area and the east African coast was already well underway by the late eighteenth century. From the early decades of the nineteenth century, however, a number of developments took place contributing to a dramatic expansion in the scale of trade from the 1840s onwards. Prices paid for East African ivory began to rise sharply from the mid-1820s as a consequence of the growth in the market in Western Europe and America for luxury items made of that material. The cost of trade goods imported into East Africa, particularly mass produced *merikani* cloth, fell steadily as a result of the improvements in production techniques. On the Mozambique coast there was an increased demand for slaves, initially fuelled by plantation owners in Brazil and Cuba and continued from the French Indian ocean island of Reunion. As requests from

84 Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 4.
85 Mandala, *Work and Control*, p. 33.
86 Phiri, 'Pre-Colonial Economic Change', pp. 24–5.
87 Mandala, *Work and Control*, p. 35.

these quarters declined from the early 1850s the pattern of trade shifted northwards to the coastal port of Kilwa, which was strategically placed to meet the new demand for slaves on the clove plantations of Zanzibar and Pemba and, somewhat later, on the grain-producing plantations of Mombasa and Malindi. Not until the 1870s, after the Sultan of Zanzibar had been finally pressurised by the British to sign treaties banning slave trading by sea or on land, did the trade begin to decline although it was at least another decade before the number of slaves taken from the Malawi region fell off appreciably.

Estimates of numbers involved must be treated with considerable caution but it would appear that they roughly doubled between the 1820s and 1860 when Consul Rigby claimed that '19,000 slaves were brought to Zanzibar from the coast of Africa' of whom 'fifteen thousand were from the neighbourhood of the great lake of Nyassa'.[88] Later in the mid-1860s, the number of slaves annually exported from Kilwa, most of them from the interior, was reported to be in excess of 22,000. By this time, so many slaves were being taken from the lake region that, in the vicinity of Zanzibar, 'Wanyasa' had become the name commonly applied to people of slave origin.[89] Decades later the term was still being used on the coast as an expression of common identity and pride, linking ex-slaves to their mythical country of origin. Some even succeeded in making their way back to Nyasaland early in the twentieth century, although none of these is recorded as having made contact with relatives.[90]

The expansion in demand for slaves resulted in fundamental changes in the organisation of long distance trade. Up to the 1830s, Arabs and Swahili on the East Coast of Africa had been content to provide markets for caravans from the interior which were largely controlled by African peoples such as the Bisa, the Nyamwezi and the Yao. From this period, however, the growing profitability of the trade led to the first full-scale Swahili penetration of the interior. The actual numbers involved were small but the Swahili had the advantage over their African competitors of access to capital lent by Indian financiers at Zanzibar and to the most modern firearms available with which they equipped mercenary allies. They were not at first generally concerned with extending their territorial powers, although in the 1840s a trader from Zanzibar, Salim bin Abdallah, settled at Nkhotakota on the west shore of Lake Malawi, where he established a thriving commercial staging post and agricultural settlement. Instead they concentrated in the Malawi regions on dominating the northern trade routes to Nkhotakota and Deep Bay [Chilumba] while sharing the southern routes with Yao traders with whom they had extensive commercial dealings.[91]

Their expansion, however, was not without political consequences. By 1863 Salim bin Abdallah had seized control of the whole Nkhotakota district from neighbouring Chewa chiefs and was regularly sending dhows filled with slaves and ivory to the entrepot at Losewa, described by James Stewart as 'the port or

88 C.P. Rigby, Report on the Zanzibar Dominions, 1 July 1860 in Mrs Charles E B Russell, *General Rigby, Zanzibar and the Slave Trade* (London, 1935), p. 333.

89 Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven and London, 1977), p. 120.

90 Cooper, pp. 240–41, 265–66.

91 Marcia Wright and Peter Lary, 'Swahili Settlements in Northern Zambia and Malawi', *African Historical Studies,* 4, 3, 1971; H.W. Langworthy, 'Swahili Influence on the Area between Lake Malawi and the Luangwa River', *African Historical Studies,* 4, 1971.

landing-place from the western side of the lake for all slave caravans converging towards Kota-Kota and…also the point of departure for newly formed and rearranged caravans leaving the eastern shore of Nyassa for Kilwa'.[92] Following his death in the mid-1870s, his successors consolidated their position by sending groups of ivory hunters to Kasungu and beyond into the Luangawa Valley and by hiring their fleet of between four and six dhows to other traders who wished to transport goods across the lake. They also made use of slave labour to grow a variety of crops – rice, cassava, onions, vegetable marrows, mangoes and paw paws – for sale to passing caravans. Diplomatic alliances were established with a number of local rulers such as Mwase at Kasungu and Kalumo at Ntchisi who were supplied with guns as a consequence of their involvement in long distance trade. By 1879, a separate group of Swahili had moved south from Ujiji on Lake Tanganyika and taken up residence among the Senga people in the upper Luanga Valley where large herds of elephants were still to be found.[93] Two or three years later a group of these Swahili, headed by the wealthy trader, Mlozi, were introduced to the rulers of Ungonde by a commercial ally, the African elephant hunter, Kalumwenzo Sichinga.[94] They quickly established stockaded settlements in the area which they used as bases for the transport of slaves and ivory from the Chitipa highlands and the Luangwa valley to Chilumba and from there by dhow across the lake to Manda.

Further south, Yao traders benefited from commercial contacts with the Swahili which went back at least to the seventeenth century. Over the next hundred years they came to dominate trading networks extending from their homeland in northern Mozambique east to the coast and west through the Shire Highlands to the Luangwa valley while at the same time absorbing members of other ethnic groups – Nyanja, Lomwe and Makua – into a multi-ethnic, clan-based community linked only by the use of a common trading language, ChiYao, and a common set of economic interests.[95] Up to the late eighteenth century Yao traders do not appear to have made their homes in the Malawi region. From the 1790s, however, small groups of refugees, coming in search of food at a time of famine, began settling in the Mangochi Hills to the south west of Lake Malawi. A few years later they were uprooted from this district and forced to move further south by better-armed members of the Mbebwe clan, led by Mkata and Kawinga; they in turn clashed with later immigrants arriving in the 1830s and 1840s led by Msamala and Malemia.

At first, Mang'anja and Yao lived together in comparative harmony. But in the early 1860s disputes arose, explained by Livingstone as a consequence of the inability of the Mang'anja to provide food supplies to meet the considerable body of traders. 'When the provisions became scarce, the guests began to steal from the fields, quarrels arose in consequence', and violent warfare broke out.[96] Unlike

[92] George Shepperson, 'The Jumbe of Kota Kota and some aspects of the history of Islam in British Central Africa' in I.M. Lewis (ed.), *Islam in Tropical Africa* (London, 1966), p. 196; James Stewart, 'The Second Circumnavigation of Lake Nyasa', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society,* vol. 1, 1877, p. 292.

[93] John W. Moir, 'Mambera's to the Basenga Country – Notes', 29 December 1879, NLS 7904.

[94] Kalinga, 'Ngonde Kingdom', pp. 121–26.

[95] Vaughan, *Story*, p.56; Vaughan, 'Social and Economic Change', pp. 60–63; J. B. Webster, 'From Yao Hill to Mount Mulanje', History Seminar paper, Chancellor College, University of Malawi, 1977.

[96] Livingstone, *Narrative*, p. 171. See also Vaughan, 'Social and Economic Change', pp. 143–44.

the Mang'anja, the Yao appear to have had no tradition of large-scale centralised political organisation, but through their involvement in the international economy prominent military and commercial leaders had emerged who owed their power to the acquisition of slaves and the distribution of imported cloth. Possession of guns and ammunition may also have contributed to their military superiority although the few flintlocks they held in the 1860s are likely to have been more important for their psychological effect than as effective military instruments.[97] At all events, Yao chiefs were generally successful in the fighting and within a few years had either eliminated their Mang'anja and Nyanja rivals in the Shire Highlands, the Upper Shire Valley and round the south end of Lake Malawi or else had reduced them to the status of village headmen in Yao-controlled states. Yao traders had also penetrated into the heartland of the old Maravi empire west of Lake Malawi, killing Kalonga Sosola, the last ruler of that title, and establishing a number of rival states, including those of Pemba at the mouth of the Linthipe river, of Tambala inland and of Bibi Kaluundu, on the shores of Lake Malawi, a few miles north of Pemba's settlement.

Culturally and in some respects politically, the Yao resembled the Maravi peoples. Like them they were members of Central Africa's matrilineal belt, tracing inheritance through the female line from uncle to nephew and normally practising uxorilocal marriage. Many shared common clan names with the people among whom they settled, thus providing justification for the view that they were kinsfolk, perhaps returning to their places of origin. Their contacts with the east coast, however, as pioneers of the Arab trading frontier, introduced a new factor into economic and cultural relationships. By the 1870s, coastal influence was apparent among the Yao in the square houses they built, some of them 'with substantial carved doors such as one sees in Zanzibar';[98] in the richly embroidered clothing worn by members of the political elite; and in the fact that at least one chief, Makanjira, on the south eastern shore, had already been converted to Islam. The most important Yao settlements near the lake, Mponda's and Makanjira's, were substantial towns, with populations variously estimated at between 4,000 and 6,000 inhabitants. Dhows were built at Makanjira's, as at Nkhotakota, to carry caravans across the lake. Coastal delicacies – mangoes, paw paws and coconuts – were grown 'with the object' so Abdallah wrote, 'of making the Lake-shore resemble the Coast'.[99]

As Livingstone noted in 1866, Yao men, including Chief Mponda, periodically participated directly in agriculture.[100] Nevertheless, it is clear that in contrast to the Mang'anja, they tended to place the greatest priority on trade, leaving work in the fields largely, although not exclusively to women. Songs sung at the departure of caravans frequently castigated those men who remained at home 'thinking too much about food'.[101] Yao society in consequence tended to be at once more stratified than Mang'anja society and also perhaps more heavily

97 E.A. Alpers, 'The Yao in Malawi: the importance of local research in Pachai', *Early History*, pp. 171–3.

98 Consul Goodrich to Foreign Office, 19 March 1885, TNA FO 84 1702.

99 Morrison diary entry for 8 March 1885, EUL; Robert Laws, *Women's Work at Livingstonia* (Paisley, 1886), p. 4; Yohanna B. Abdallah, *The Yaos* (Zomba, 1919), pp. 43–4. See also Edward A. Alpers, 'Trade, State and Society among the Yao in the nineteenth century', *JAH*, 10, 3 1969.

100 Waller, *Last Journals*, vol. 1, p. 108.

101 Vaughan, 'Social and Economic Change', p. 67.

reliant on its involvement in a wider economy. Vaughan postulates that 'the absence of male labour for clearing new land had led to the cultivation of increasingly infertile soils in the eighteenth century and that this contributed to the famine which propelled the first Yao immigrants into southern Malawi.'[102] By a similar token, chieftaincies formed were based on the prowess of their leaders in the closely allied occupations of trade and war and in their hold over supplies of ammunition and guns. Trading expeditions were usually organised by chiefs but frequently sons or nephews were deputed to lead them in their place. Such men could rapidly expand their own personal retinues armed with guns and hence increase the military resources available to them.

Yao expansion interacted with the penetration into the Shire Valley and Highlands of Afro-Portuguese and *Chikunda* slavers. By the 1840s, demand for slaves was drawing powerful Afro-Portuguese families north of the Zambesi into the area once dominated by the Maravi states. The pioneer family, the Caetano Pereiras, established themselves as the dominant force between the Luangwa and the Shire by 1840, but within a matter of years their authority had been overshadowed by that of the Vas dos Anjos family, led by Paul Marianno Vas dos Anjos II. Known widely by his African title, Matakenya, 'the causer of trembling', Paul Marianno constructed a formidable *aringa* (fortress) at Shamo at the southern extremity of the Shire River from 1853. Using this *aringa* as his base, he bought slaves from Mang'anja elders before turning to raiding as a primary occupation. This alarmed the Portuguese authorities who sent troops to capture his *aringa* in 1858. By the early 1860s, however, Paul Marianno was back on the Shire, where he launched his *Chikunda* in a series of raids up the river and into the Shire highlands, looting and raiding villages. In 1863, he destroyed the Mbona shrine at Khulubvi and killed one of the leading Mang'anja chiefs, Tengani. By the time of his death later that year, he had drawn together Mang'anja and Sena refugees into a new state, Massingere, which stretched from the Ruo to the Zambesi.[103] These people constituted the first wave in the mass immigration into the Shire Valley of predominantly patrilineal *Chikunda* or Sena refugees, bringing with them a variety of new cultural and linguistic influences, including associations of adolescents, known as *nomi* societies.[104]

The impact of the slave trade was immensely complicated by the simultaneous intrusion into the Malawi region of invaders from the south. In the 1820s the rise and expansion of the Zulu kingdom in Natal was accompanied by the migration out of the area of a number of groups of Nguni-speaking people.[105] Two of these, described both as Maviti and Ngoni, entered Malawi in the 1840s having incorporated a variety of conquered peoples on the way. One, led by Zwangendaba, crossed the Zambesi near Zumbo in 1835, halted for four years in Nsenga country, and then continued their northwards advance up the Malawi-

[102] Ibid., p. 69.

[103] Newitt, *History*, pp280, 286, 304–5, 312–3; Newitt, *Portuguese Settlement*, pp. 278–80; Vail and White, *Capitalism and Colonialism*, pp. 30–1; 37; Mandala, *Work and Control*, pp. 67–72.

[104] Vail and White, *Capitalism and Colonialism,* pp. 71–72,170.

[105] The classic account, still useful on the movement of Nguni-speaking people, is J. D. Omer-Cooper, *The Zulu Aftermath* (London, 1966). However, its analysis of the causes of the process of fragmentation and aggregation of chiefdoms in south-western Africa has now been superseded. See Norman Etherington, *The Great Treks: The Transformation of Southern Africa, 1815–1854* (Harlow, 2001) and Carolyn Hamilton (ed.), *The Mfecane Aftermath* (Johannesburg, 1995).

Luangwa watershed as far as Ufipa on the east side of Lake Tanganyika where Zwangendaba died about 1848. The other, led by Mputa ('The Smiter') Maseko, spent a brief period in the Ntcheu area to the southwest of Lake Malawi before making their way up the eastern side into the Songea district which they reached in the early 1840s.

The return of these Ngoni groups into the Malawi regions began in the mid-1850s and led to the establishment of four main kingdoms either within or abutting on the borders of the modern state. Following Zwangendaba's death, a succession dispute occurred resulting in the creation of several factions, all but one of them headed by sons of Zwangendaba. The most powerful of these, that of Mbelwa, moved southwards in the mid-1850s up the Henga valley into the rolling highlands beyond, reducing most of the Tumbuka to subjection and destroying the last vestiges of the Chikulamayembe state. This group finally settled in the tsetse-free Kasitu Valley where Mbelwa was joined by three other brothers, Mtwalo and Mabilabo, who had accompanied him in the march south, and Mpherembe, whose faction joined up with that of Mbelwa's in the early 1870s after several years spent fighting against Bemba chiefs. The Northern Ngoni kingdom thus differed from that of most breakaway Nguni states in that it contained a number of distinct segments, each with its own semi-independent ruler, who nevertheless recognised the ultimate sovereignty of the paramount.

The creation of the Northern Ngoni kingdom marked only one among a number of political developments. Over the next few years Chiwere Ndlovu, an experienced war-lord, raided south into the hinterland of Nkhota Kota, finally establishing a new kingdom deep in Chewa country at Mvera. Meanwhile, Mpezeni, a brother of Mbelwa, led his followers first to Bemba country and then, about 1871, into the area straddling the modern boundary between Zambia and Malawi at Chipata. At almost exactly this time, the prolonged journeying – as much the evasive wandering of refugees as the triumphant march of conquerors – of the Maseko Ngoni was coming to an end. Driven from Songea by a rival group of Ngoni, that of Zulu Gama, they retreated southwards into the Shire Highlands in the early 1860s and then moved again, perhaps under pressure from Yao gunmen, to Domwe Mountain in modern Mozambique from where they could dominate the grasslands stretching north towards Mount Dedza and Ntcheu.[106]

Despite their varied experiences, the Ngoni kingdoms shared a number of organisational features in common. All were 'snowball' states, dependent for their expansion during their period of wandering on the forcible incorporation of a steady stream of male and female captives from the communities among whom they moved. Their basic economic unit remained the household, usually incorporated into a larger village, but in addition young men around the age of fifteen were recruited into age regiments extending across the whole society which were intermittently employed in seizing captives from the Ngoni's neighbours and in carrying off cattle and grain. All made use of Zulu-type military technology – the short stabbing spear and heavy oxide shield – and they also placed a high premium on the accumulation of cattle, the most valuable source of capital available within Ngoni society. Unlike the Yao, they involved them-

[106] T. Jack Thompson, *Christianity in Northern Malawi* (Leiden, 1995), p. 1–15; J. A. Barnes, *Politics in a Changing Society* (Oxford, 1954), pp. 7–23; Newitt, *History,* 257–64.

selves only to a limited extent in the East Coast trade but (popular assumptions to the contrary) they were by no means inexperienced in agriculture, even though it was usually the women who played the largest part. Ngoni kingdoms tended to be hierarchical in nature. Power and privilege was concentrated very largely on members of aristocratic clans originating from South Africa; but outstanding warriors, whatever their backgrounds, could rise to positions of military leadership. Ng'onomo, the senior general in the northern Ngoni paramountcy by the 1870s, was the son of a captive from Delagoa Bay. Chiwere Ndhlovu, eventually the leader of an independent state, was an Nsenga by birth and himself a former captive.

Patterns of violence

The mounting cycle of violence that enveloped central Africa from the 1860s brought in its wake profound changes, political, social and economic, that set the scene for the establishment of colonialism in Malawi. The starting point relates to the changing character of the slave trade. Up to the late 1850s most of the slaves sold to traders by members of the Mang'anja political elite were marginal, sometimes kinless figures on the periphery of society: friendless orphans, criminals and unfortunates accused of witchcraft.[107] As violence escalated, however, these social restraints collapsed. War captives remained an important category of slaves but they were now accompanied by ordinary villagers, seized in raids by armed gangs of Yao or *Chikunda* gunmen, who were no longer prepared to purchase what they could obtain through force of arms. Members of different Yao clans routinely preyed on each other. Individual acts of kidnapping regularly took place. It was more than ever the assumption, in the words of the Jumbe of Nkhotakota, that 'slaves were not like … free people, they were like dogs or cattle, just fit to be done with as he or their masters pleased.'[108]

The journal kept in the late 1870s by members of the Livingstonia mission at Cape Maclear close to the slave route running round the south end of Lake Malawi provides numerous examples of the insecurity that prevailed. One man, Chawisa, a blacksmith by trade, who had sought refuge at the station, had escaped from a slave gang at Nkhotakota, only to be enslaved by a second master, then sold to a third, before ending up making a living by 'mending native guns at the Mission village'.[109] A woman, Nambewe, had been sold and resold several times before running away from her master and taking up with a man, Chikondwi, who fled with her to the station when his owner threatened to sell him. Some husbands sent their slave wives to work at the station for cloth as an alternative to selling them to the coast. Others arrived by altogether more circuitous routes. One woman, Msumata, was kidnapped from her village by an Ngoni raiding party in 1877. They sold her to Swahili traders who abandoned her at Nkopi when she fell ill. She was then enslaved by a local villager and finally moved in 1878 to the refuge of the station. The complexity of motivation among those joining the mission is well revealed in the case of a young man, Saiti, a

[107] Livingstone, *Narrative*, p. 125.
[108] Quoted in Morrison diary entry for 7 December 1882.
[109] Cape Maclear Journal, entry for 9 October 1877, National Library of Scotland [NLS], Ms. 7909.

slave of the local village headman, Mtalika, who 'ran away', the Journal records, 'because having been here on a former occasion working, his master was dissatisfied at his not having given him part of his pay. Further, he has made a large garden and is afraid that on this account he will be poisoned. He also heard that his chief intended to sell him, and also he had a love disappointment.'[110]

What emerges from these stories and from the numerous others available is a systematic pattern of behaviour involving three developments of particular importance.[111] First of these, as White accurately notes, was the establishment of new political linkages in which 'the relationship that came to matter was not that based on kin or "tribe" but that between patron and client, the protector and the protected.'[112] Whoever possessed guns in significant numbers and could offer security was likely to attract dependents to them. In the 1860s and 70s the example set by Paul Marianno and his *chikunda* henchmen was copied not only by a variety of Yao chiefs but also by the Kololo porters brought by Livingstone from Barotseland to the Lower Shire, who successfully created chieftaincies for themselves out of the prevailing conditions of uncertainty.

This is linked to a second development: that with very few exceptions (for example that of the Yao chief Bibi Kulundu) it was men who emerged as patrons and women who became their clients. European observers of Mang'anja society in 1861 were impressed at the extent to which women were able to compete on relatively equal terms with men.[113] However, the upsurge of violence put women particularly at risk, in part because it was men who controlled the means of destruction in society – fighting and hunting with guns and spears. Moreover, the growth of *ukapolo* domestic slavery affected women disproportionately. Yao chiefs in the 1880s employed male slaves 'in farming, building, making baskets, sewing garments, and such masculine pursuits', so a Scottish missionary commented. But they prized women more and were prepared to pay higher prices for them: partly because of their value 'in hoeing the farm, and all such female duties'; more particularly because of their reproductive powers – the fact that they could be utilised as slave wives.[114]

The third development, the growth of domestic slavery, was thus frequently related to the exploitation of women. Historians have at times been chary of using the term 'slavery' as a description of unfree status in African societies. Although it is true that the social distance between slave and master on an American plantation was much greater than that between master and 'slave wife' in a Yao territorial chieftaincy, aspects of the relationship remain the same. Slaves had this in common that they were legal and often real outsiders, removed from their kinship group and hence denied the rights and privileges of the society in which they lived.[115] This was perhaps of particular importance in the case of matrilineal societies like the Yao. In such societies, as Cooper notes, 'children

[110] Cape Maclear Journal, 16 February 1878, NLS Ms. 7909.

[111] For an excellent study of the life stories of slaves from the Nyasa-Tanganyika corridor see Marcia Wright, *Strategies of Slaves and Women* (London, 1993).

[112] White, *Magomero*, p. 49.

[113] Rowley, *Story*, p. 208.

[114] Macdonald, *Africana*, pp. 147.

[115] Lovejoy, *Transformations*, pp. 1–6.; Cooper, *Plantation Slavery*, pp. 2–6; Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers, 'African "Slavery" as an Institution of Marginality' in Miers and Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1977), pp. 3–78.