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Peasants, Politics and Survival in Colonial Malawi, 1891-1964

by

Lawrence A.B. Malekano

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

at

**Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
September, 1999**

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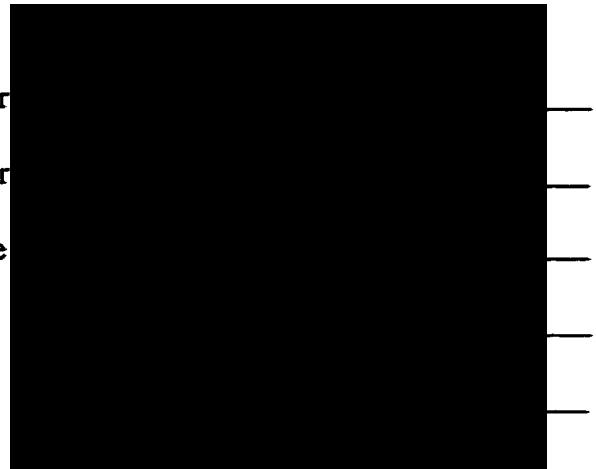
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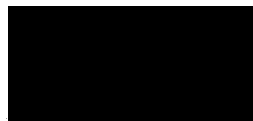
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DEDICATION

To the Memory of *Magetchi* and *Elise*

and

For the Love of *Wangisa* and *Ndikufera*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication	iv
Table of contents	v
List of maps and tables	vii
Abstract	viii
Abbreviations	ix
Acknowledgements	x
Chapter 1: Introduction and Research Methodology	1
Chapter 2: Colonial Penetration and Patterns of Change in the Rural Economy .	29
2.1: Local Economies and Communities Before 1891	30
2.2: Land alienation and Peasant Options in the Rural Economy	44
Chapter 3: Colonialism, Peasants and the Making of Rural Protest and Negotiation	57
3.1: The Issues of Contention	60
3.2: The Labour Question	74
3.3: The Resilience of the Peasantry	86
3.4: The Case of Africans on the Private Estates	93
Chapter 4: Peasant Politics and Resistance to Colonial Domination	107
4.1: Overt Resistance in Malawi's Colonial History	109
4.2: Everyday Forms of Resistance and Negotiation	123
4.3: Post-War Policies and Peasant Resistance	136
4.4: Other Arenas of Rural Struggle and Resistance	146
4.5: Conclusion	156
Chapter 5: Peasants' Survival and Advancement Strategies in Colonial Malawi	157
5.1: Casual or Seasonal Employment as a Survival Strategy	159

5.2: Subsistence and Survival: Agricultural Production	162
5.2.1: Production and Sale of Foodstuffs as a Survival Strategy	170
5.3: Beer and Liquor Production as a Survival Strategy	187
5.4: Fish Trading and Livestock Development	191
5.5: Retailing and other forms of Micro-trading	200
5.6: Conclusion	210
Chapter 6: The Politics of Survival: Gender and Production in Colonial Malawi	211
6.1: Historical Background: Women's Experiences in Africa	212
6.2: Women on the Shire Highlands Estates: An Overview	224
6.3: Women in Wage Employment	238
6.4: Invisible Workers: Women in Food Production and Non-Farm Enterprises	245
6.5: Conclusion	265
Conclusion	267
Bibliography	271

Maps and Tables

Figure 1: Map of Malawi	21
Figure 2: Map of Nyasaland	22
Figure 3: Map of the Shire Highlands of Malawi	23
Figure 4: Map of Southern Nyasaland	24
Figure 5: Map of Chiradzulu District	25
Figure 6: Map of Mulanje District	26
Figure 7: Map of Thyolo District	27
Figure 8: Map of Zomba District	28
Table 5.1: Tobacco Production, 1899-1930	167
Table 5.2: Average Surplus of Produce Offered for Sale in Mlanje District	174
Table 5.3: Peasant Production: Maize Sales in Mlanje District, 1950-1952	176
Table 5.4: African and European Owned Livestock Population	197
Table 5.5: Nyasaland African Loans Board	204
Table 6.1: Yearly Peak Levels of Employment, 1950-1960	229
Table 6.2: Composition of Regular Employees by Sex and Age	230
Table 6.3: Average Wages for Tea Workers, 1930s-1940s	240
Table 6.4: Yearly Cycle of Farm Activities	247

Abstract

The advent of colonial rule had a profound impact on peasant communities in the Shire Highlands of Malawi (colonial Nyasaland). The massive alienation of land and the creation of plantations radically changed the bases of rural subsistence, and undermined the peasants' ability to meet their basic needs. Colonial penetration and capitalist development also ushered in new sets of social, economic, political and legal structures designed mainly to meet the needs of the colonizers and limit the options of the colonized. These new demands and barriers provoked a wide range of responses from peasants within the limited choices now available to them. Refashioning their activities within and outside the household, peasants devised strategies that not only lessened the levels of colonial exploitation and ensured their survival, but also opened up avenues for social and economic advancement. For all its power, the colonial state still needed peasant labour and taxation to function. Realising the potential of this fact, peasants responded to colonial demands in complex ways that undercut the state's interests and enabled them to reassert some measure of autonomy within the boundaries of capitalist economy. This study explores the ways in which peasants' diverse responses to colonialism helped shape rural life and social transformation in Malawi during the colonial period (1891-1964), and offers a new appreciation of the significance of peasants' everyday actions in shaping Malawi's history.

Abbreviations

AFISO	African Farming Improvement Scheme
ALBT	Alexander Low Bruce Trust Limited
ALC	African Lakes Cooperation
BCAC	British Central Africa Company
BCGA	British Cotton Growers Associations
BEAC	British and East Africa Company
BSA	British South Africa Company
CO	Colonial Office
DC	District Commissioner
ITC	Imperial Tobacco Company
KAR	Kings African Rifles
MNA	Malawi National Archives
NAC	Nyasaland African Congress
NCAC	Nyasaland Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce
NTA	Nyasaland Tea Association
NTB	Native Tobacco Board
PC	Provincial Commissioner
PEA	Portuguese East Africa
PIM	Providence Industrial Mission
RNLB	Rhodesia Native Labour Bureau
SHRC	Shire Highlands railway Company
WNLA	Witwatersrand Native Labour Bureau
ZIM	Zambezi Industrial Mission

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Over recent years, social history as a genre in African studies has received a remarkable boost and has become a rich terrain of scholarly attraction.¹ What were once neglected themes--gender and women's issues, household dynamics, sharecroppers, *etc.*--have taken centre-stage as subjects for book-length studies.² In no uncertain terms, this represents a fundamental paradigmatic shift by historians from their pre-occupation with histories of local and national political elites that dominated the historiography of early post-colonial Africa.

This study of the Malawian peasantry is a contribution to the burgeoning literature on agrarian debates in Africa, especially on African peasantries--a category that belongs squarely to the social history genre. It deals with questions of peasants' political thought and action, survival strategies, resistances and innovations, by examining the interplay that existed between these factors in the material world of colonial Malawi. Placing human agency at the centre of the analysis, the thesis strives to uncover the hidden political

¹This is clearly evident in the preponderance of titles in the social history of Africa series edited by Allen Isaacman and Jean Hay. See for example, A. Isaacman and R. Roberts (eds.), *Cotton, Colonialism and Social History in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1995); A. Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work, and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1938-1961*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996); A. Jeeves and J. Crush (eds.) *White Farms, Black Labour: The State and Agrarian Change in Southern Africa, 1910-1950*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1997); P. Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Labourers in Mozambique and South Africa*, (1992); H.L. Moore and M. Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition, and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890-1990* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1994).

²See for example E. Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1992); T. Keegan, *Facing the Storm: Portraits of Black Lives in Rural South Africa*, (London: Zed Books Ltd.,

consciousness that guided everyday forms of resistance, and the survival options which peasants in colonial Africa in general, and Malawi in particular, explored in shaping and sustaining the social and material world in which they lived. The study takes its cue from the perspective that modern Africans make their own history, but not necessarily, in fact rarely, under conditions of their own choosing.³

Malawi (colonial Nyasaland) is a natural subject for the study of the peasantry in Africa. It is first and foremost an agriculture-based economy, where agriculture continues to account for about 90 percent of total earnings, 75 percent of total employment and 35 percent of Gross Domestic Product. Above all, peasants are the mainstay of the rural economy accounting for an estimated 88 percent of the total population.⁴ Second, as discussed below, Malawian historians have for long preserved a stunted historiography that has, wittingly or unwittingly, avoided the questions with which the present study deals.

While peasants have been vital to African development from the precolonial period to the present day, it is worth noting that in general African historiography has until recently ignored them as political actors.⁵ The grand paradigms that have dominated African studies since colonial times have paid little attention to peasants, invariably portraying them as a

1988); C. Van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).

³Isaacman and Roberts, *Cotton Colonialism and Social History*, p. 2. I have found this text very useful for my own analysis.

⁴Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC), *The Statement of Development Policies, 1987-1996* (Malawi, 1983). United Nations and Government of Malawi (UN & GOM), *Situation Analysis of Poverty in Malawi*, (Lilongwe, 1993). UNDP, *Human Development Report, 1994*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁵Isaacman, "Peasants and Rural Social Protest in Africa," in F. Cooper et.al. *Confronting Historical Paradigms: Peasants, Labor and the Capitalist World System in Africa and Latin America*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 1-120.

fragmented social category that has little self-consciousness and is victimised by outside forces.⁶ Indeed, the term peasant itself in African studies is of recent origin. Up to the 1960s scholars wondered whether African commodity producers could be properly described as peasants.⁷ In the 1970s, the problem of defining peasants in Africa based on conventional definitions derived from the experiences of pre-Industrial Europe persisted,⁸ a problem whose roots lay in the lack of proper understanding of the realities in Africa. This focus on Eurocentric definitions precluded and restricted the terms upon which African peasantries could be critically analyzed from the grassroots. Thus, it comes as no surprise that for decades peasant politics have been largely ignored in African historiography. A series of theories that have emerged from as early as the turn of the century have all played a part in marginalizing peasants as political actors. More recently, however, Isaacman has attempted to reconcile the analytical hurdles confronting peasant studies. He describes peasants as an ambiguous social category, difficult to define, whose political behaviour defies most generalizations. His survey is an important call at constructing an analytical

⁶O.E Hansen, "Peasants and Rural Organizations in African Development: A Review of Some Experiences," (unpublished manuscript, 1996), pp. 1-21.

⁷L.A. Fallers, "Are African Cultivators to be called Peasants?" *Current Anthropology*, 2(1961), pp. 73-94.

⁸T. Shanin (ed.), *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1971). These Euro-centred definitions delimited the application of the term peasant to societies in Latin America, Middle East, Asia and Eastern Europe. Perhaps nothing would be more relieving than the fact that the term peasant has over the years come to acquire widespread acceptability in the African context. See R. Cohen, "From Peasants to Workers," in P. Gutkind and I. Wallerstein (eds.), *Political Economy of Contemporary Africa* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1985), pp. 181-197.

framework that moves far beyond the insistence, by earlier studies, on the notion of a homogenous peasantry.⁹

The concept of a peasantry in Africa has generally been used to refer to rural producers.¹⁰ These are people who reside in rural areas, but produce for themselves as well as participate in the cash-based market economy. This participation could be either through their sale of agricultural produce or their own labour. By and large, peasants are seen as a relative term, standing somewhere between what would be described as "primitive agriculturists" and capitalist farmers, to the extent that a purely peasant society can never exist.¹¹

While commitment to theory is appreciated as essential to scholarship, the present study does not intend to dwell on the detailed theoretical debates on African peasants. Rather, it seeks to privilege empiricism over theoretical rigour by dealing with the life experiences of peasants in rural communities of southern Malawi. To this end, nonetheless, the study provides a fresh perspective that is analytically useful for explaining some of the major themes in Malawi's socio-economic history. It also sheds some theoretical light on the on-going debates in the region's social history. Foremost, this study adds new insights to

⁹Isaacman, "Peasants and Rural Social protest in Africa." And commenting on the analytical utility of the term peasant, Feierman argues that the term would have no use in historical description or analysis if it specified a static mode of subsistence and a static form of consciousness. Thus, to come to grips with the term peasant, the scholar must explore the dynamics of a particular historical process. See S. Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

¹⁰G. Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa: Underdevelopment and the Uncaptured Peasantry*, (London: Heinemann, 1980), p11.

¹¹M. Klein (ed.), *Peasants in Africa: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, p.9-43; J. Saul and R. Woods, "African Peasantries," in T. Shanin (ed.), *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1971).

resistance theories that emphasize an oppositional and dichotomous perspective of resistance and collaboration when examining almost every peasant reaction to colonial rule. Since the 1970s, argue Vail and White, resistance studies have viewed as “resistance” any activity that helps to frustrate the operations of capitalism or of capitalism’s creations. The “naivete of so much resistance psychology” which, for instance, describes such things as desertion and emigration as “resistance,” Vail and White maintain, does violence to language and blurs analysis.¹² Other studies have developed a framework that describes resistance on the basis of the resistor’s intent,¹³ while yet others advocate limiting the term “resistance” to collective actions and choosing a different word for individual acts in order to avoid making large claims for small acts.¹⁴ Isaacman and Roberts, however, conclude

¹² L. Vail and L. White, “Forms of Resistance, Songs and Perception of Power in Colonial Mozambique,” in D. Crummey (ed.), *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa*, (London & Portsmouth: James Currey and Heinemann, 1986), p. 195. Similarly, the Subaltern Studies Group have attempted to illuminate the wider historical context of the once-colonized peoples. As Cooper argues, “the binaries of colonizer/colonized, Western/non-Western, and domination/resistance begin as useful devices for opening up questions of power but end up constraining the search for precise ways in which power is deployed and the ways in which power is engaged, contested, deflected, and appropriated.” F. Cooper, “Conflicting and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History,” *American Historical Review*, (December 1994), p. 1517. Also *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 9-11. For subaltern studies, see R. Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (Delhi: 1982), pp. 1-8; and V. Das, Subaltern as Perspective, in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (Delhi: 1989), pp. 310-324.

¹³ Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty*, especially chapters 9 and 10. Also “Peasants and Rural Social Protest,” (1990), pp. 31-33: Among other things, Isaacman cautions against the simplicity and dangers of lumping together many actions with different intentions and outcomes.

¹⁴ J.W. Rubin, “Defining Resistance: Contested Interpretations of Everyday Acts,” *Studies in Law, Politics and Society*, Vol. 15, (1996), pp. 237-260.

that rural women and men helped make their own history through such action as “the sum total of these otherwise inconsequential acts.”¹⁵

In developing this theme, the study does not necessarily look for collective action of farmers, nor posit individual acts in their own right as resistance. It attempts to problematize varied peasants’ responses beyond the notion of opposition, thereby offering another dimension to the idea of resistance. Peasants did not only oppose; they also had the ability to negotiate the terms under which they subsisted. For example, the refusal by Africans to labour in menial jobs after World War I, and their choices to produce more maize than the official “maize policy” of the day during the post-World War II period, must be seen as part of a complex set of responses to a complex social and material world created by colonialism. These themes are developed in chapters four and five.¹⁶

As this thesis demonstrates, when farming proved unfulfilling, peasant families sought other strategies to survive. Survival, however, simply requires that peasant families meet their immediate food needs and basic obligations, such as tax money. Yet some peasants harboured high ambitions in life. They succeeded beyond mere survival—to own cattle, better houses, maize mills and other businesses—to become “progressive” and rich in relative terms. To call some of the non-farm activities in which they participated merely “survival,” or “coping” strategies, is to say the least, a bit hollow. Clearly, this group of peasants moved from resistance and survival to advancement strategies, but still within the limits set by the ideology of the colonial state’s paternalism. In other words, in resisting or

¹⁵ Isaacman and Roberts (eds.), *Cotton, Colonialism and Social History*, p. 37.

¹⁶ For similar interpretations on peasants’ choices in cash or food cropping activities, see J. Monson, “Rice, Cotton, Ritual and Resistance: Cash Cropping in Colonial Tanganyika, 1920-1940,” in Isaacman and Roberts, *Cotton, Colonialism and Social History*, pp. 268-284.

coping, peasants were not backward looking. They became proactive enough to adapt both to the constraining demands of the state and to earn from opportunities of the cash economy that benefited them.¹⁷ As one would expect in any social milieu, some peasants still had trouble just surviving while others were more successful. The latter seized the opportunity provided by the expansion of markets to become self-employed businessmen, even if such businessmen, fish traders for example, did not completely withdraw from farming. Thus during the colonial period, resistance, negotiation, survival and advancement strategies were all threads of the material that shaped peasant politics, that is peasants' relations "with the larger societies of which they formed a part."¹⁸

The study is confined to the Shire Highlands of Malawi that comprise the districts of Blantyre, Chiradzulu, Thyolo (Cholo), Mulanje (Mlanje) and Zomba in southern Malawi.¹⁹ A point worth bearing in mind is that there were local variations in the penetration of colonialism and capitalism, and that due to these variations, "individuals in different parts of

¹⁷ Perhaps as Van Onselen would broadly put it, such were the limited options that Africans like Kas Maine could exercise when forced to choice between "right" and "wrong", "good" and "evil." Van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine*, Introduction.

¹⁸ E.J Hobsbawn, "Peasants and Politics," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 1, 1(1973), p. 3.

¹⁹ See Country and District Maps on pp. 21-28. At independence in 1964, some districts in the country assumed new names, for example Port Herald changed to Nsanje, and Fort Johnstone to Mangochi. The least affected in the line of changes were Mlanje, which changed to Mulanje, and Cholo to Thyolo. For the sake of consistency, I maintain Cholo and Mlanje in the text. Thyolo and Mulanje appear mainly where reference is made to interview data in the notes, or where such specific reference to post-colonial nomenclature is desirable. The names Malawi and Nyasaland, however, are used interchangeably without qualification.

the country experienced colonialism in different ways.²⁰ The local economies of the districts of Chiradzulu, Thyolo and Mulanje were invariably influenced by, and resonated with the growth and development of the estate sector in what became the centre of the colonial economy in Nyasaland: the Shire Highlands. The growth and expansion of Blantyre (the commercial capital) and Zomba (the administrative colonial capital) into urban centres was equally significant. For example, working on the tea and tobacco estates, and selling foodstuffs to the urban communities provided important occupations for the men and women living in the Shire Highlands during the colonial period.

The experiences of these men and women compare favourably with those of other people elsewhere who have been called peasants in the historiography. Therefore, this study defines peasants not only as rural dwellers who depended on farming for both subsistence and cash purposes, but also all those who from time to time worked for wages on the white estates, in addition to cultivating their own gardens. In other words, many peasants engaged in a process best described as "straddling." Straddlers share characteristics of both peasant and worker, and it is conceptually difficult to classify them as either one of the two. As Robin Cohen observed, "it is now possible to accept the existence of a large group of individuals who are both peasants and proletarians."²¹ With this insight, the argument that under colonial structures, the processes of peasantisation and proletarianisation were mutually reinforcing becomes a useful backdrop for this kind of study.

²⁰See B. Fetter, "Malawi: Everybody's Hinterland," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 25, 2/3(1982), p. 89; J. McCracken, "Central African History", A Review article, *Journal of African History*, Vol. 26, (1985).

²¹R. Cohen, "From Peasants to Workers in Africa," in P. Gutkind and I. Wallerstein (eds.), *Political Economy of Contemporary Africa*, 2nd edition, (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1985), p.182.

Farming and working the estates were the main occupations of the Malawian peasant but by no means the only ones. Peasants participated in a wide-range of other trades and activities to supplement their income. These included beer-brewing and selling, sale of *Kachasu* (an illicit locally distilled alcoholic beverage), *Ganyu* labour, black-smithing, hawking, weaving items for sale and other petty forms of trading. These are some of the issues described under the rubric of survival strategies in the study. As reviewed in subsequent chapters, some of these activities had contradictory, if not negative, effects on the communities that adopted them.

As a primary source for recovering past life experiences of Malawian peasants, the study relies on oral interviews conducted in the three districts of Chiradzulu, Mulanje and Thyolo. These testimonies focused on issues relating to family history and size, economic activities, farm or agricultural information, land accessibility and usage, resistance and coping strategies, family labour, and migration (for work in employment centres in so far as it affected household income and the cycle of agricultural activities).

Social history and historical sociology have evolved a conceptual approach that emphasizes human agency as the determining factor of social life. This approach is utilised in this study. The methodology involved combining questionnaire-based interviews and the personal narrative technique²². Questionnaires were used in order to achieve some uniformity in the data collected, whereas the personal narrative technique gave the informants more latitude to describe their life stories in any way they saw fit and in as detailed a manner as they could. The functional legitimacy of this technique among

²²This technique is also known as the *life-history technique*. See J. Crush and M. Miles, "Personal Narratives as Interactive Texts: Collecting and Interpreting Migrant Life-Histories," *Professional Geographer*, Vol. 45, 1(1993).

historians is beyond dispute, although there are debates about how best to do it.²³ It is generally accepted that the methodology has enormous potential as a way, not only to recapture the everyday experiences of workers and peasants, but also to reinstate the marginalized and dispossessed as makers of their own past. It is to this methodology that our understanding of agrarian transformation and rural life in the southern African region owes a great deal.²⁴

In all, a total of 60 informants were interviewed for the study and 46 of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.²⁵ In spite of the efforts made at achieving a certain degree of commonality in the testimonies collected through use of a questionnaire, personal accounts, as one would expect, varied from one informant to the other. For example, informants often applied different names to describe the same estates, estates owners, places or particular individuals in positions of leadership in both public and private

²³To historians of Africa oral testimonies or life histories, have since the 1960's at least, come to occupy a position of almost equal importance to that of written records, as a source of historical information. See, J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1985); D. Henige, *Oral Historiography*, (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1982). J. Van Onselen, "The Reconstruction of a Rural Life from Oral Testimony: Critical Notes on the Methodology Employed in the Study of a Black South African Sharecropper," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 20, 3(1993). Debates over the uses and abuses of oral testimony continue. See D.W. Cohen, *The Combing of History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994).

²⁴See Crush and Miles, "Personal Narratives as Interactive Texts;" T. Keegan, *Rural Transformation in Industrializing South Africa*, (Houndmills: MacMillan Press, 1987); T. Keegan, *Facing the Storm: Portraits of Black Lives in Rural South Africa*, (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1988).

²⁵The underlying proposition when this investigation began was to interview as many as 100 people, at least an average of 20 per district. Unfortunately, the difficulties that usually bedevil fieldwork did not allow that to happen. For instance, the unusually long rainy season Malawi experienced in 1997, the period when fieldwork was conducted, made travelling in rural areas difficult and at times virtually impossible, in a country where road transportation remains highly underdeveloped.

spheres of the colonial set-up. Such anomalies could only be cross-checked through corroboration of the oral testimonies with evidence from archival and secondary sources.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty handling oral evidence was the lack of knowledgeable informants themselves, especially for the earlier colonial period. Few informants who lived in the country prior to the 1930s could be found. And if found, they were over 70 years of age at the time of the interview and could not remember vividly much of what had happened in their childhood days. However, these informants provided a means for exploring how people remembered the past.

The selection of informants relied on pre-existing networks of friendship, peer-group identification, kinship and community - to guide choice.²⁶ Although age was the main criterion in the selection process, anyone who was deemed knowledgeable by the locals upon being briefed about the subject of investigation was also interviewed.

When supplemented with and cross-checked against data from archival and secondary sources, the value of oral data in this kind of study cannot be overemphasized. Oral accounts are a corrective to the silences of the written sources. Through their use "new perspectives emerge that challenge the 'truths' of official accounts and cast doubt upon established theories."²⁷ It is all too easy to discern qualitative changes through the oral

²⁶See Crush & Miles, "Personal Narratives as Interactive Texts," pp. 84-94. This method is referred to as snowball sampling. In collecting the oral data for this study, a research assistant who has lived all his life in the local communities of Chiradzulu and Thyolo was hired. In Mulanje, three personal guides, a local school principal, a teacher and a government-employed community development assistant resident in the area, helped to identify informants. This approach also reduced the artificiality of the interview process, and the outsider - insider separation of the researcher and informant. Preference was directed at informants above 55 years of age.

²⁷Cited in O.W. Ogbomo, "Oral Field Techniques and Women's History: The Case of Owan, Nigeria," *UFAHAMU*, XXII, 3(1994), p. 9.

traditions collected from Malawian peasants. Both historical awareness and political consciousness are manifestly present in their stories. The traditions reveal some of the popular themes in studies of the African peasantry, such as the exploitation of peasants by colonial regimes, their limited access to resources, their resilience, as well as the hidden forms of resistance in which they engaged, in their daily struggles. Most striking, however, is the way in which peasants' consciousness of the wider world around them is captured by observing their body language,²⁸ but also through the pride, fear, desperation, and anguish with which they graphically described their life experiences. Many willingly described, in critical and pejorative fashion, what they termed *ukapolo wa atsamunda* (colonial slavery) in reference to labour tenancy (*thangata*) and *malimidwe* (conservation) policies, among other things.

In short, oral evidence reveals Malawian peasants' on-going awareness of their deprivation and exploitation, and the strategies they devised to work out the lot of their plight to their minimum disadvantage.²⁹ Furthermore, they clearly harboured politically charged sentiments. That these were seldom expressed, either collectively or individually, only suggests that mental resistance was an inescapable aspect of their everyday lives. For the point has often been emphasized that formal organized political activity is a preserve of the intelligentsia, and to look for peasant politics in terms of revolutionary activity is largely

²⁸ While the reliability of this method remains questionable in the on-going debate on the interpretation of life-histories, studies however suggest that the silences are as significant as the spoken in the construction of oral texts. Hawthorn, for example, points out the need to "dance critically on the edge of every narrative... pointing out the silences, the unspoken, undescribed others." Cited in Miles and Crush, "Methods and Techniques," p. 87.

to look in vain.³⁰ The study seeks not to write about peasant political rebellions in colonial Malawi. The focus is rather on the more mundane forms of peasant resistance characteristic of their constant struggle against the other "orders" and the "powerful." Such resistances, the thesis argues, developed beyond mere opposition to proactive and advancement strategies.

Despite their own limitations, archival sources form the bulk of the material upon which this study is built. The material was drawn from the Malawi National Archives, in the country's former capital of Zomba. The sources consulted included secretariat and provincial files of the Nyasaland government, commission reports, district books, annual and quarterly reports for the Highlands districts, minutes and correspondence left behind by officials of the colonial regime. Also consulted were official documents published by the Malawi government and its colonial predecessor, the Nyasaland Government.

Except for the period 1891 to about 1920, the first three decades of colonial rule, where there is virtual absence of secretariat records,³¹ the archival material dealing with agrarian issues is strikingly voluminous, although much of it focuses on crop and rainfall patterns. Read between the lines, archival material has been known to be indispensable in writing both official and local histories. For instance, we are able to gauge peasants' responses to colonial acts of subjugation such as land alienation, their opposition to

²⁹Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics," p.13. While this analysis is based on oral sources, there are more than adequate corroborative accounts from archival sources as will be seen in the chapters that follow.

³⁰J. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. xv. For concept of mental resistance, see also Isaacman and Roberts, *Cotton, Colonialism and Social History*; Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty*.

proposed "modern or developmental schemes," but also specific strategies of resistance and coping such as use of aliases, or multiple names.³² This is discussed in chapter four. Data from the archives also enrich our understanding of peasant survival strategies such as "catch cropping" to avert drought-risks. It also tells us much about limitations the colonial state confronted in enforcing certain policies and policing activities of the rural population. More often than not, official insecurity and fear of (potential) rural/peasant unrest acted as brakes on oppressive tendencies. Finally, archival sources also enable us to ascertain the extent to which changes in the wider colonial macro-economic environment had a bearing on the livelihood of the peasant farmer at a local level.

The secondary literature on Malawi's rural and agricultural history is of recent origin. It owes much to the efforts of historians working at the University of Malawi in the early 1970s³³. Much of the literature produced by this generation of scholars focuses on the development of commercial farming in the early stages of colonialism, along with the economic performance of Malawi since independence. The earlier works centred on debates about the conflict between white settlers and African farming interests for markets and other resources, and how the colonial state mediated between these competing interests.³⁴ Questions of land, labour and the production and marketing of crops featured

³¹The scarcity of records for this earlier period is attributed to a fire in the Government Secretariat in 1919 that destroyed all secretariat files to that date.

³²Malawi National Archives (hereinafter MNA) PCS 2/3/1 Africans on Private Estates: Records of Proceedings, 1954-55.

³³Among the earliest of these academics were Professors Bridglal Pachai, Martin Chanock, B.S. Khrishnamurthy and Leroy Vail.

³⁴This is the subject of J. Lonsdale & B. Berman's, "Coping with the Contradictions: the Development of the Colonial State in Kenya, 1895-1914," *Journal of African History*,

highly in these debates. The challenge for the student of the Malawian peasantry therefore is to understand all the dynamics of the country's agricultural history. This, according to Martin Chanock, involves illuminating rural activity on the local level and illustrating the way this activity was influenced by the impact of outside forces upon farmers.³⁵ By outside factors Chanock has in mind the role of European settlers in their demand for labour, land alienation and the introduction of exportable crops.

The most crucial elements of colonial Malawi's political economy, namely land and labour, have been widely addressed in the works of both Pachai and Khrishnamurthy. In *Land and Politics*, Pachai chronicles the evolution of land policies in Malawi from the colonial period to the first decade of independence -- highlighting the tenurial and labour arrangements that resulted from land alienation.³⁶ He takes pains to demonstrate how under the traditional land tenure system, land was communally owned, and how chiefs, village headmen and elders held authority in matters of land and labour. This would however change with the dawn of colonialism. The belief among colonial officials in the supremacy of European agriculture led to massive land alienation in order to provide a basis for a European dominated plantation economy. However, Pachai cautiously argues that there was no clear-cut policy framework in matters of land and labour at the inception of colonial rule. For example, Sir Harry Johnston, the first commissioner and consul-general of the Nyasaland protectorate, favoured European settlement when he began his administration in

Vol. 20, 4(1979). Also Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The Dialectic of Domination*, (London: James Currey, 1990).

³⁵M. Chanock, "Notes for an Agricultural History of Malawi," *Rural Africana*, Vol. 20 (1973), p. 27.

1891, but became more ambivalent over time. As a result, his agricultural policy kept the options open whilst giving the edge to Europeans.³⁷

Adopting a similar approach, Khrishnamurthy reviewed the economic policy of the early colonial period from the perspective of land and labour issues. He argues that whether the government intended to encourage European or African production depended on its land and labour policies. Even where the government's declared intent was to support both European and African interests, reality defied these good intentions as policy makers vacillated between the two interests throughout the period before the First World War.³⁸ Using a regional economic system approach, Khrishnamurthy further argues that the economic policy of Nyasaland cannot be understood without reference to the forces that acted upon the government during this period. He identifies these forces as missionaries, who were interested in the development of African commercial farming, the settlers, and big business interests from South Africa and Southern Rhodesia who wanted an ample supply of cheap labour. It is in this vein that he ventures into explaining how Nyasaland was incorporated into the southern African regional economic system, playing the role of labour exporter and deriving its revenue from its exports of labour.

This kind of analysis is misleading in some respects. First, it categorically portrays labour migration as a rewarding enterprise in real terms to the protectorate's economy.

³⁶B. Pachai, *Land and Politics in Malawi, 1875-1975* (Kingston: Limestone Press, 1978); see also "The Issue of Thangata in the History of Nyasaland," *Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 3, (1974).

³⁷Pachai, *Land and Politics*.

³⁸B.S. Khrishnamurthy, "Economic Policy: Land and Labour in Nyasaland, 1890-1914," in B. Pachai (ed.), *The Early History of Malawi*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp.385-386.

However, this was not such a simple and foregone reality. Second, it fails to adequately explain factors that in every day life induced people to leave their homes and sell their labour power abroad. Consequently, the fundamental questions of patterns of behaviour, rural struggle and accumulation, and the way in which these were intrinsically linked to the labour industry are ignored. However, it is encouraging to note that some recent work by Chijere Chirwa has begun to correct these deficiencies.³⁹ His study points to the fact that some peasants in colonial Malawi perceived migration as a survival mechanism and a means to accumulation in the face of the exploitative tendencies of colonial capitalist forces.

Extending Khrishnamurthy's argument, Martin Chanock and Leroy Vail explored other dimensions of the labour question. Writing at the same time as Khrishnamurthy, Chanock argued that massive male labour migration to employment centres of the South led to rural decay and poverty, the benefits of migrant labour notwithstanding. According to Chanock and others in this school, the loss of large numbers of productive males deprived households of important services for the completion of the production cycle. This undermined peasant production, transformed the gender division of labour and brought miseries to rural families.⁴⁰ The validity of this view has come into question in the more recent literature. Writing about the Bemba of northern Zambia, Moore and Vaughan have pointed out that the emphasis on male migration as an explanatory factor for the alleged breakdown of "traditional" Bemba society partly reflected the male bias of colonial

³⁹ See W.C. Chirwa, "'Theba' is Power: Rural Labour, Migrancy and Fishing in Malawi, 1890s-1985," Ph.D Thesis, Queens University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, 1992.

⁴⁰ M. Chanock, "Notes for an Agricultural History"; E. Makambe, "The Nyasaland African Labour Ulendos to Southern Rhodesia and the Problem of the African Highway Men, 1903-1923: A Study on the Limitation of Early Independent Labour Migration," *African Affairs*, Vol.79, 379(1980); R. Mkandawire, "The Land Question and Agrarian

discourse, in which the role of women as farmers and innovators was conveniently forgotten.⁴¹ The issue of women farmers in Malawi is reviewed in chapter six, which demonstrates that this was not unique to the Bemba or Zambian society. It applied to many of the colonial economies in the region.

On his part Vail posits international labour migration as the third sector of Nyasaland's trisectoral economy. He then explains the massive exodus of labour to the South as a result of Nyasaland's state of underdevelopment caused by the railways.⁴² He demonstrates how the government's preoccupation with railway development deprived the colonial state of resources for investment in other sectors of the economy. This led to the stagnation of settler and peasant agriculture. In the same breath, Vail attributes the underdevelopment of peasant agriculture to the colonial state's bias towards settler agriculture, particularly in terms of resource allocation:

there was great inhibition about the development of a 'peasant alternative' in Nyasaland. The state was willing to aid settlers with legislative concessions, but refused to protect African planters.⁴³

Change in Malawi," in G. Mhone (ed.), *Malawi at the Crossroads*, (Harare: SAPES, 1992); See also Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives*.

⁴¹Moore and Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees*; Chijere Chirwa has also shown that among the Lakeshore communities of Malawi, labour migration did not trigger rural poverty and economic degeneration. "'Theba' is Power."

⁴²The other two sectors in Vail's formulation of colonial Malawi's economy are settler and peasant agriculture. See L. Vail, "Peasants, Migrants and Plantations: A Study of Malawi's Economy," *Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 11, 1(1984); also by the same author, "The State and the Creation of Colonial Malawi's Agricultural Economy," in R.I. Rotberg (ed.), *Imperialism, Colonialism and Hunger: East and Central Africa*, (Boston: Lexington Books, 1983); "Railway Development and Colonial Underdevelopment: The Nyasaland Case," in R. Palmer and N. Parsons (eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty*, (London: Heinemann Ltd., 1977).

⁴³Vail, "The Political Economy of East-Central Africa," in D. Birmingham & P. Martin (eds.) *History of Central Africa*, Vol.2 (Essex: Longman, 1983). This view has been contested elsewhere. See L. Malekano, "The State and the Economy: A Study of

From this vantage point, Vail goes on to attribute the agrarian and food problems of the 1940s to the colonial state's neglect of peasant agriculture and to Nyasaland's role as a labour exporter in the Southern Africa regional economic system.

Vail's analysis of the agrarian crisis brings to light a major weakness in Malawi's historiography: the neglect of food production and peasant survival options. The few works that focus on food production concentrate extensively on the crisis years of the 1940s.⁴⁴ This leads to misplaced conclusions that, except in years of ecological disorders, the welfare of peasants was and has always been a smooth-sailing affair. The experiences of the peasantry in colonial Malawi described in the chapters that follow paint a different picture. For many of them, as one informant suggested, "it makes no sense to describe a part of our life as a 'crisis period,' for our whole life was a crisis. Whatever happened in the so called crisis periods was simply a low or high point in a continuum of the crisis that was our life."⁴⁵ The story that follows, thus, depicts various facets of this crisis.

Chapter two examines the state of the local communities and the operations of their economies on the eve of colonial penetration. Questions of land alienation and the development of estate agriculture, which arguably disrupted the basis of rural subsistence, are raised to situate the making of the colonial peasantry in Malawi in a broader historical

Colonial Policy and its Impact on the Agricultural Economy of Malawi, 1929-1980s," M.A. Thesis, Dalhousie University, 1995, especially chapter two.

⁴⁴See M. Vaughan, *The Story of an African Famine: Gender and Famine in the 20th Century Malawi*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and by the same author "The Politics of Food Supply: Colonial Malawi in the 1940s," in Centre of African Studies (ed.), *Malawi: an Alternative Pattern of Development*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985).

⁴⁵Interview with B. Majiya and M. Subili, Mangunda Estates, Thyolo District, 15.05.97. Many other informants echoed these sentiments.

context. Chapter three takes on the evolution of colonial land and labour policies, focusing on the tensions generated by these two crucial factors of production between the European dominated plantation agriculture and peasant production. Drawing on the resilience of the Malawian peasantry during the colonial period, the chapter lays the framework that helps explain peasants' varied responses discussed in chapters four, five and six. In particular, chapter four discusses the theme of African resistance. It argues that the hostility and oppressive nature of colonialism left peasants with the options of covert resistance and negotiation. With the passage of time, and moving beyond resisting, peasants embarked on strategies designed both for survival and upward mobility within the bounds of the colonial structures. These strategies are subjects of chapters five and six, which also reflect the existence of social and economic differentiation among the peasantry. Bearing in mind the centrality of gender to the culture, history, and social transformation of African societies, gender questions are incorporated throughout the analysis, while chapter six brings home the point that women in colonial Malawi were central actors in the world peasants made for themselves.

Fig. 2: Map of Colonial Malawi (Nyasaland)

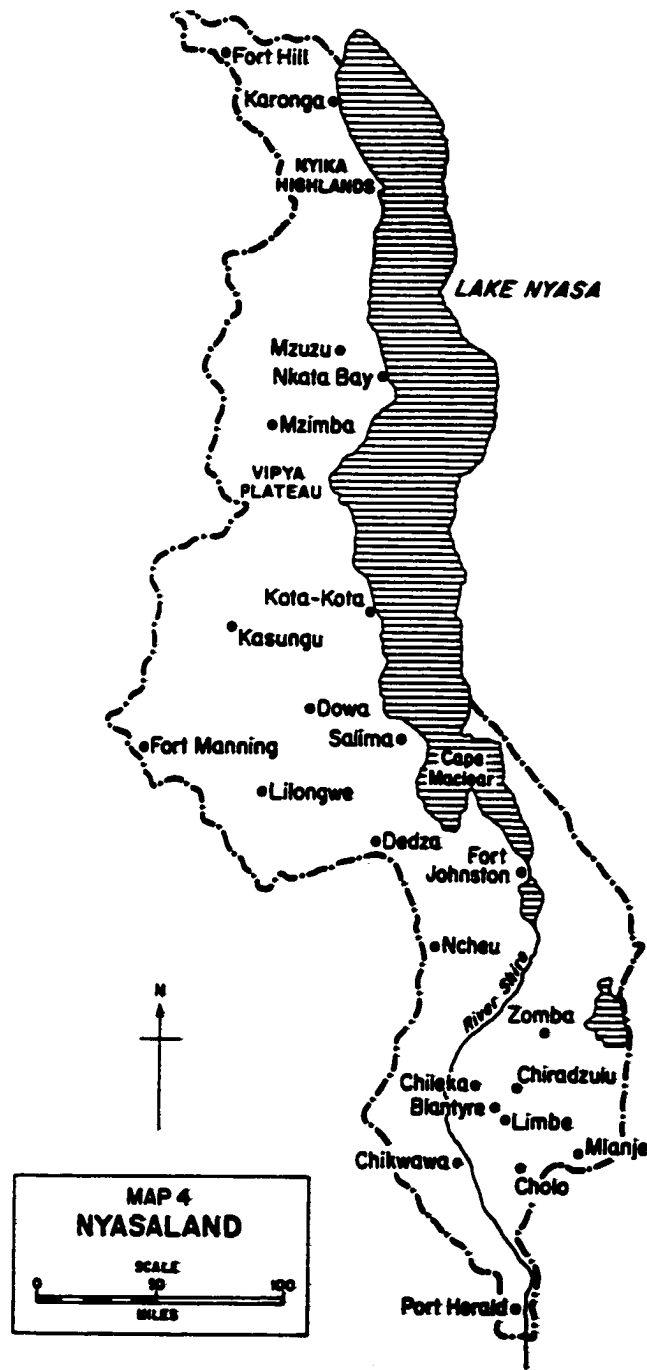
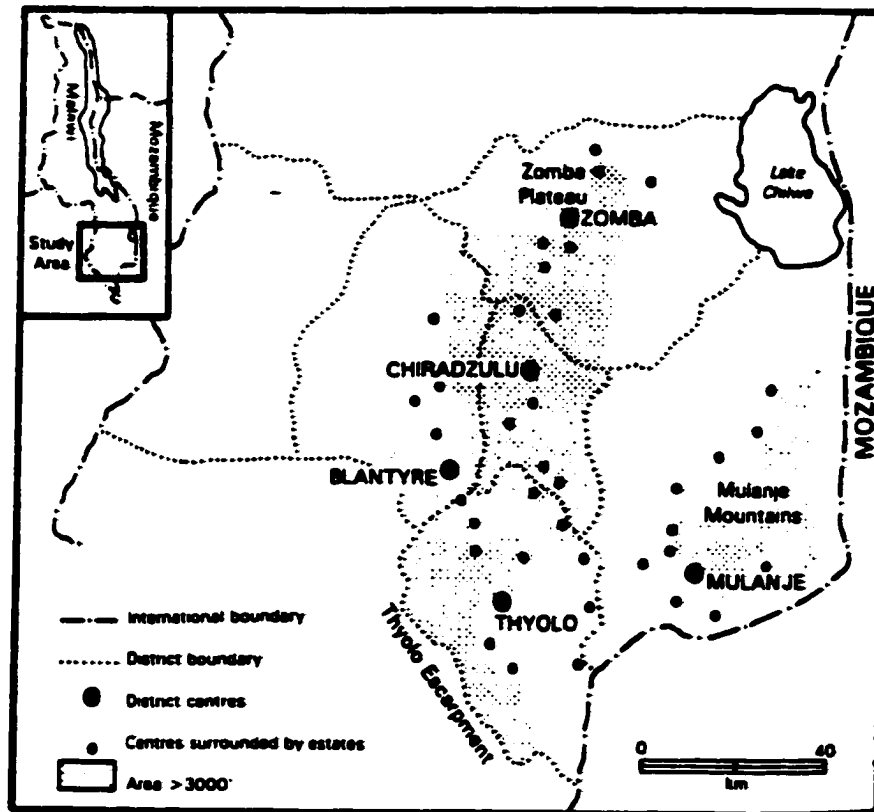
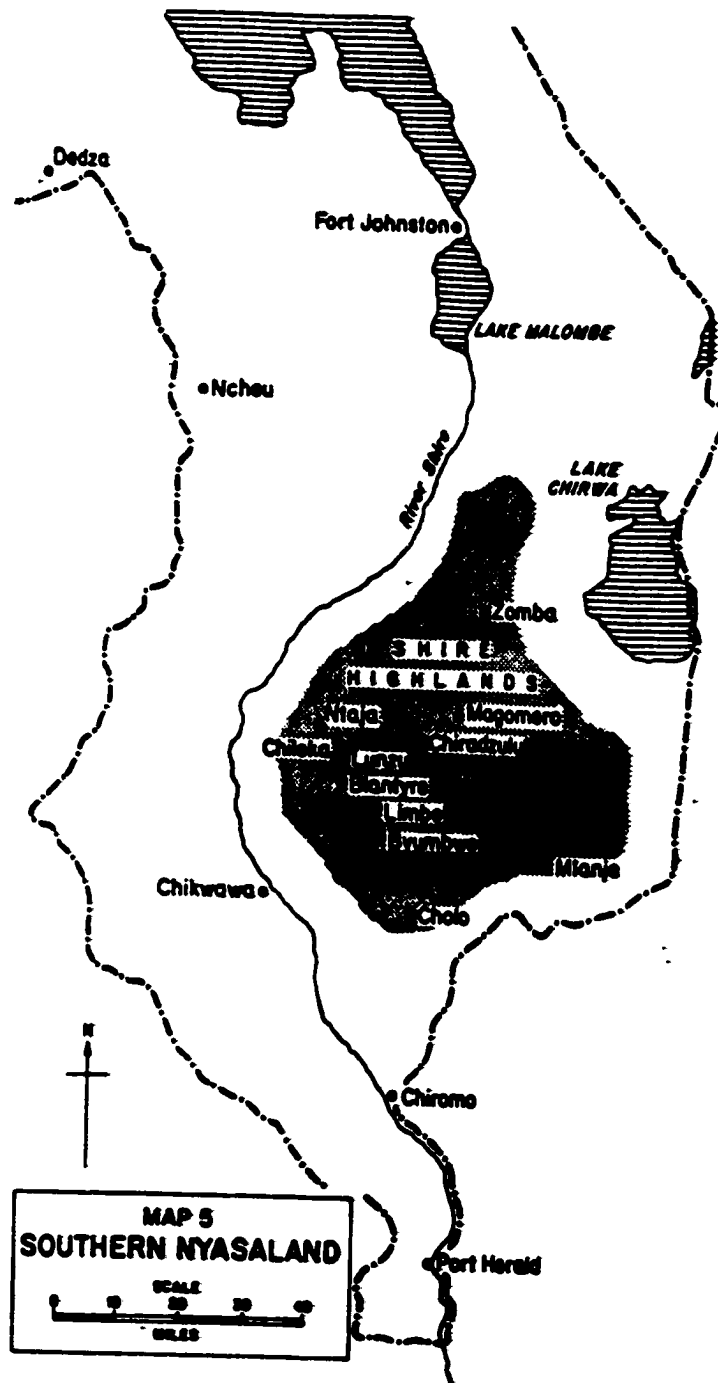


Fig.3: The Shire Highlands of Malawi



The Shire Highlands, Nyasaland

Fig.4 Map of Southern Nyasaland



Source: C. Baker, Development Governor (London: British Academic Press, 1994)

Fig. 5: Map of Chiradzulu District

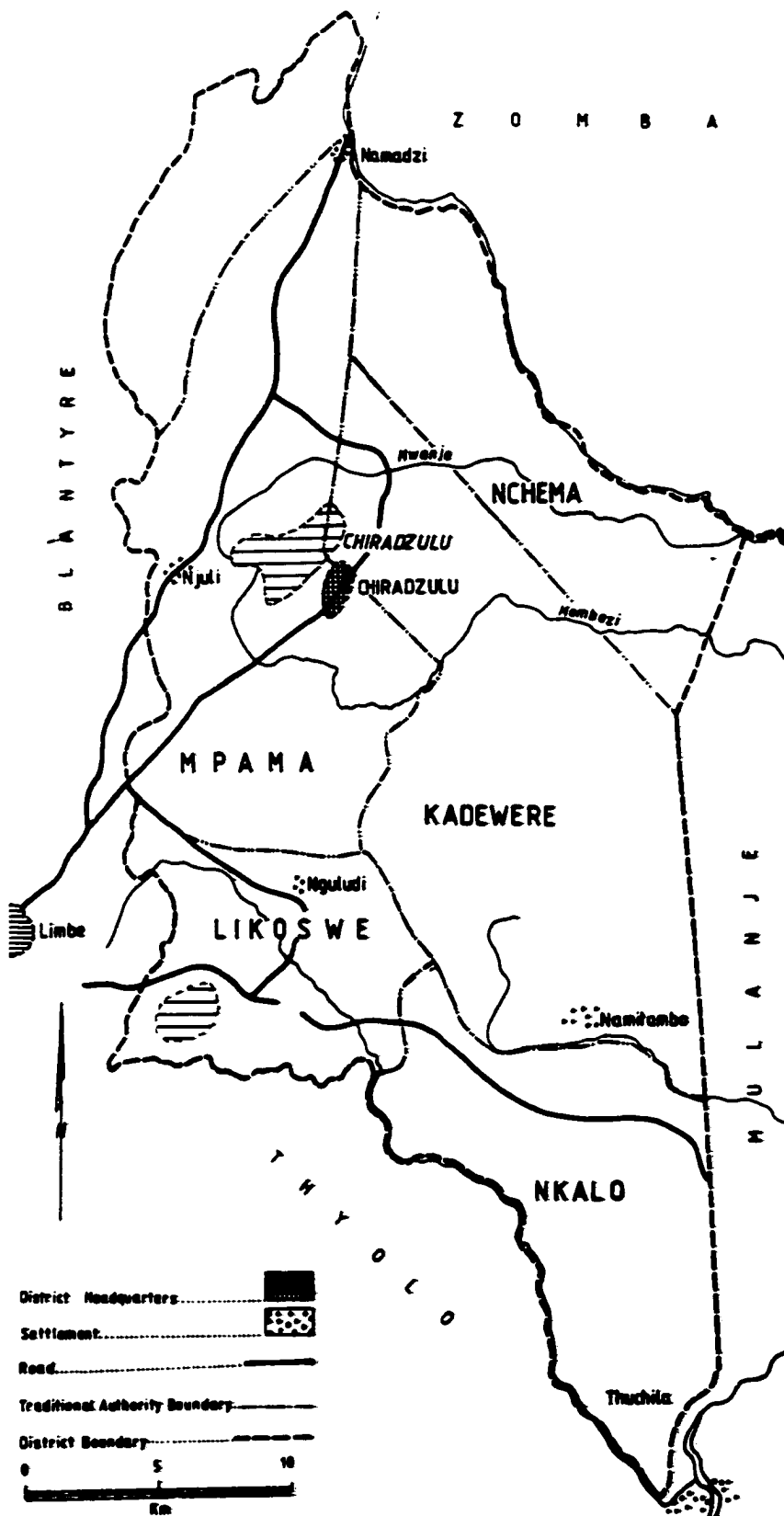


Fig. 6: Map of Mulanje District

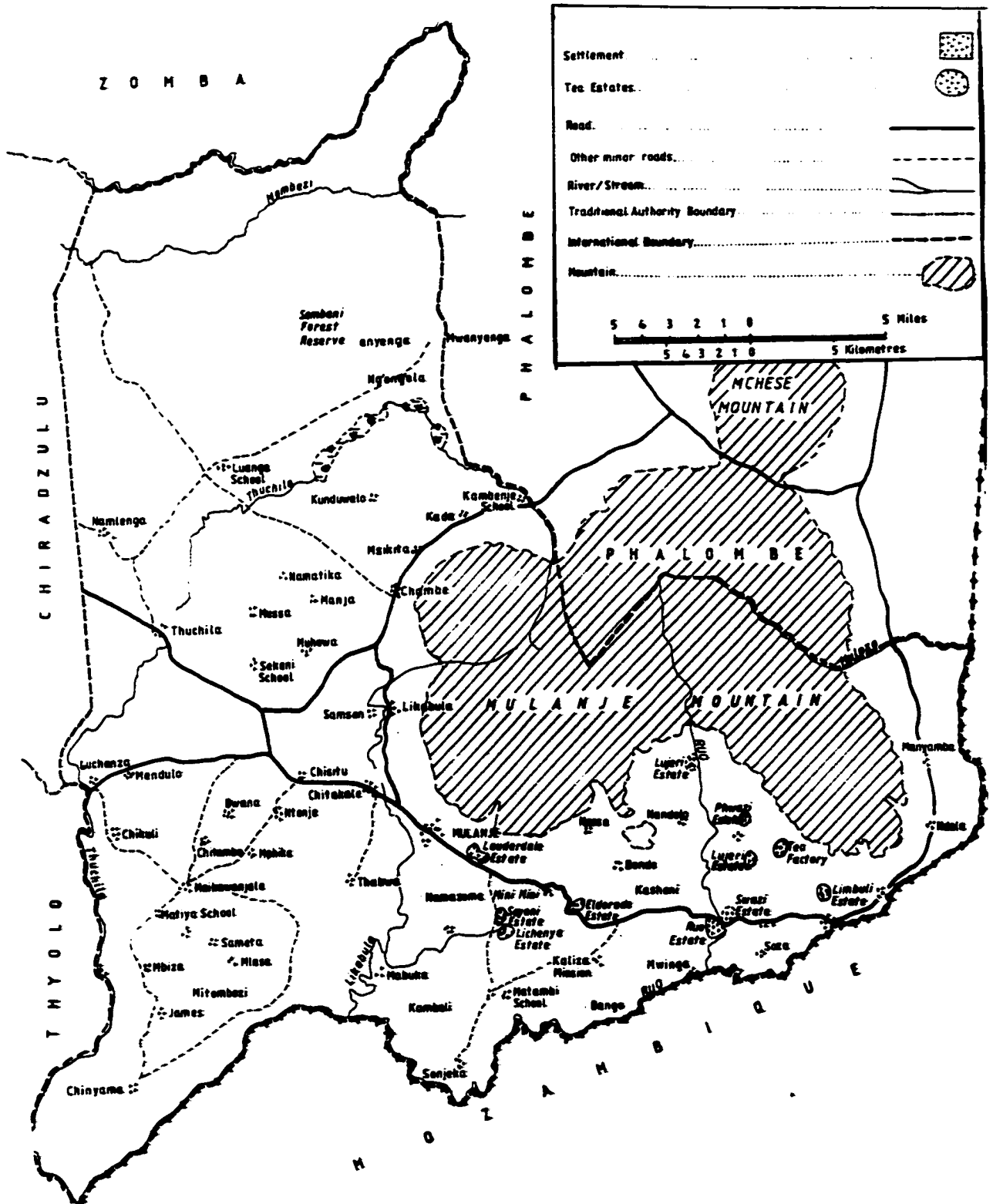


Fig. 7: Map of Thyolo District

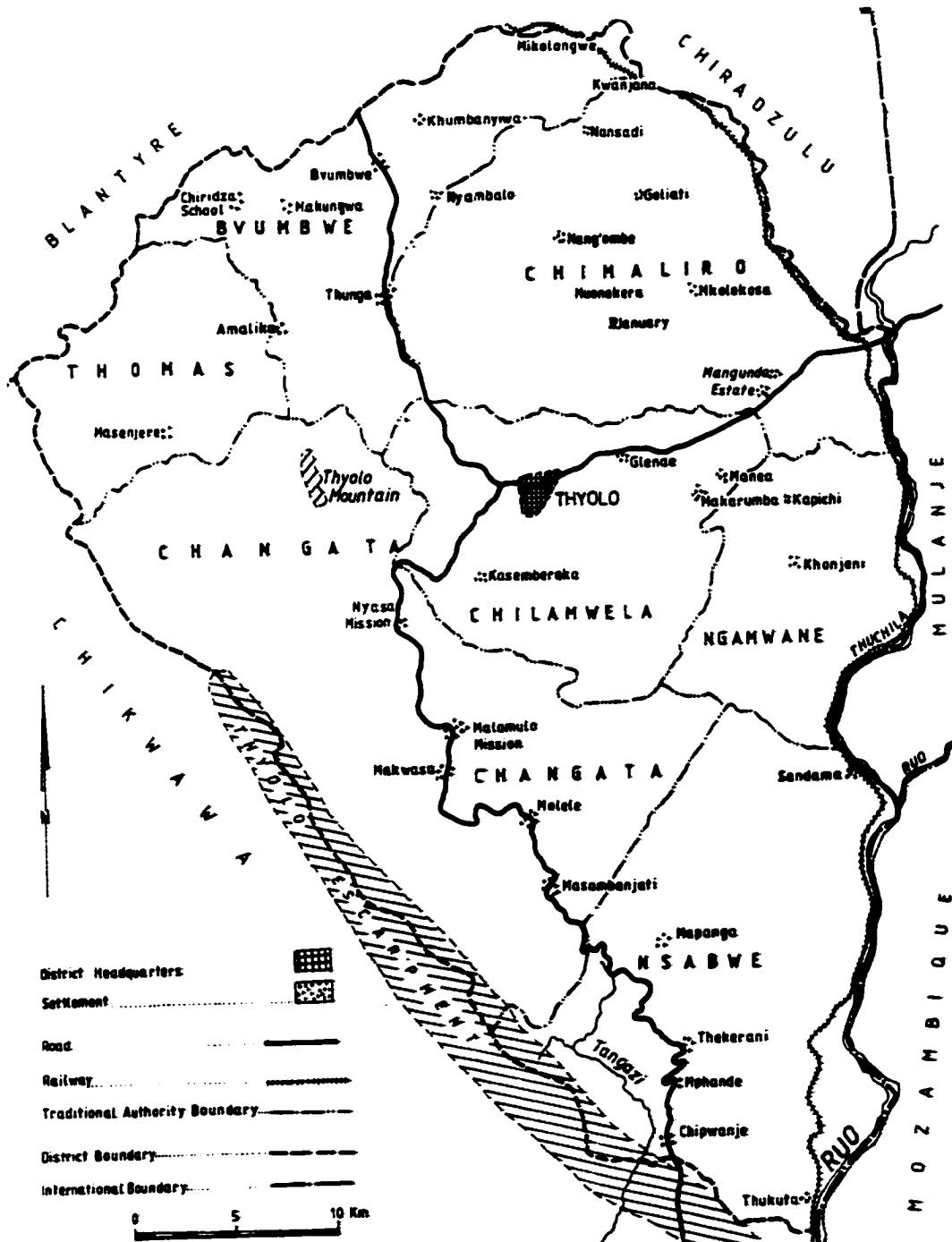
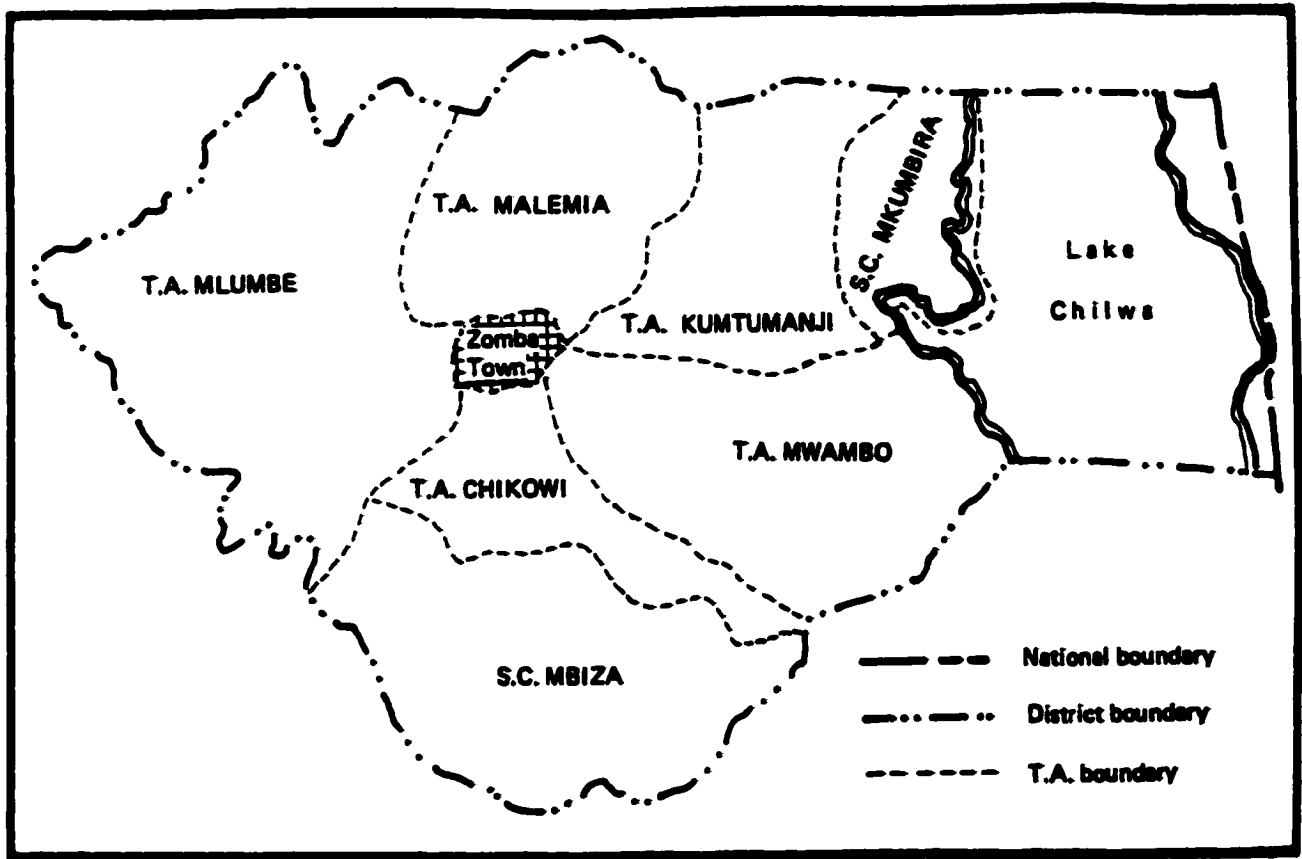


Fig. 8: Map of Zomba District



ZOMBA DISTRICT

CHAPTER TWO

Colonial Penetration and Patterns of Change in the Rural Economy

Long before the dawn of colonial rule, rural communities in Nyasaland had been developing vibrant economies based on a mixture of agriculture, pastoralism, hunting and regional trade. During the colonial era, pre-capitalist social and economic institutions in Nyasaland (now Malawi) underwent profound changes as the result of its incorporation into the world capitalist economy.

This chapter examines the nature of the local economies in Malawi on the eve of colonial occupation. It focuses on the ways these economies were incorporated into the colonial system and the patterns of change at the local level once the colonial structure was in place. Though not entirely restricted to one region of the country, the chapter concentrates on the economies of the Shire Highlands societies. By focusing on this region, we can understand better the survival initiatives of these communities raised in subsequent chapters and their abilities to contain and deal with the crisis created by their incorporation into the capitalist system.

The Shire Highlands comprise five of the country's twenty-six districts, namely Blantyre, Chiradzulu, Cholo, Mlanje and Zomba, in southern Malawi. Situated between Lake Malombe to the north-east, the Lake Chilwa-Phalombe plain to the east, the Shire Valley to the west and the Ruo valley on the south-east, the Highlands stand out as one of the country's distinctive physiological regions.¹ Covering a surface of some 2,800 square

¹ J.G. Pike and G.T. Rimmington, *Malawi: A Geographical Survey*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 21-52. Pike & Rimmington classify Malawi's landscape into three main characteristic physiological regions namely, the Shire Valley, the Lake Littoral, and the Plateaux (which includes the Shire Highlands). For more on Malawi's

miles in extent, ranging in elevation from 2,000 to 4,000 feet, the Highlands are surmounted by the Mulanje mountains and the Zomba plateau, which attain elevations of nearly 10,000 and 6,500 feet respectively.² This was the region where European settlement and large-scale land alienation took place from the late nineteenth century.

2.1 Rural Economies and Communities Before 1891

Kings Phiri has suggested that a proper historical understanding of the economy of what is now Malawi needs, among other things, to take into account the industrial habits of its peoples, the natural resource endowment of the country and the external commercial environment.³ The same approach might be useful in examining pre-colonial Malawi. Like many pre-colonial societies in Africa, Malawi's pre-colonial economy was characterised by subsistence agriculture. Studies have shown, however, that there was also considerable production for the market rather than for direct consumption during this period.⁴ The tendency in much of the extant literature has been to romanticise precolonial societies as having been self-sufficient in food: they had the ability to feed themselves except in times of

physiology see also F. Dixey, "The Distribution of population in Nyasaland," *The Geographical Review*, Vol. 28, (1928), pp. 274-290.

² Pike & Rimmington, *Malawi: a geographical Survey*.

³ K.M. Phiri, "Production and Exchange in Pre-Colonial Malawi," in Centre of African Studies (ed.), *Malawi: An Alternative Pattern of Development*, (Edinburgh: African Studies Centre, 1985), p.5

⁴ R. Gray and D. Birmingham (eds.), *Pre-colonial African Trade: Essays on Trade in Central and Eastern Africa Before 1900*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 1-23; B. Rau, *From Feast to famine: Official Cures and Grassroots Remedies to Africa's Food Crisis*, (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1991), especially chapter 3.

extreme natural or political disaster.⁵ Such is the picture Duff Macdonald painted of the Shire Highlands prior to colonial rule. "Nature is here so bountiful that in ordinary circumstances food is no object,"⁶ Macdonald argued. While the veracity of his observation is questionable, Macdonald's remarks reflect the rich agricultural potential of the Highlands, which attracted both early European settlers and African peoples who migrated into the region before and during the nineteenth century. The rich fertile soils and precolonial farming systems enabled people in the area meet their subsistence requirements as long as population remained low.⁷

The Highlands have been home to three "tribal" groupings: the Nyanja or Mang'anja, the Yao and the Lomwe.⁸ The Nyanja were the original inhabitants, where as the Yao and the Lomwe immigrated from Mozambique, the former in the last years of the eighteenth century and most of the nineteenth, and the latter in the early twentieth. All three groups are matrilineal, practice uxorilocal/matrilocal marriage (whereby the husband goes to live in his wife's village at marriage) and follow the matrilineage pattern of descent.

Among the original settlers, the Nyanja, villages were formed on the basis of kinship ties, though with increased immigration, it was possible to find "newcomers" who had no kinship ties to members of the village. At the village level, the Nyanja were loosely organized in matrilineage units called *mbumba*, and the guardian of the *mbumba* was known

⁵ Rau, *From Feast to famine*, p.22; D. Macdonald, *Africana or the Heart of Heathen Africa*, Vol. 1, (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969), p. 26.

⁶ Macdonald, *Africana*, p. 26

⁷ Phiri, "Production and Exchange," p. 7.

⁸ I use the term "tribal" in a limited sense to denote that these groups had presumably different cultural roots prior to their migrations into Nyasaland territory.

as the *mwini dziko* or *mwini mbumba*, the "owner" of the land. Usually, the *mwini dziko* was a maternal uncle or the senior brother in the family who ordinarily was also a "marriage guardian" or *ankhoswe*. He was the wife's "guardian, helper and defender in all matters social and juridical."⁹ He was, for example, responsible for the allocation of land, a task that was usually delegated to the chief, also known as *mwini dziko* at a territorial level.¹⁰ In essence, neither the *mwini dziko* nor the chief "owned" the land in the western usage of the word, which confers absolute ownership. He was merely "the guardian or trustee answerable to the ancestral spirits, provider for the present inhabitants and custodian for the coming generations."¹¹ Under such terms, land could neither be bought nor sold nor alienated from its holders by any means. It was by virtue of this authority that chiefs and guardians allocated land to European settlers in the late nineteenth century.

A fundamental cornerstone of matrilineal society was the apparent "powerful" position of the woman (the wife) in the family. The husband, known as the *mkamwini* ("son-in-law") took residence in the village of his wife and had virtually no rights on any of the property in that village including land:

...In his wife's village a husband is not a man of consequence, he remains *mkamwini*, a member of another lineage; as such he has no authority over his children. The man's village is that of his sister, he is the *dejure* owner of his sister's lands and is responsible for the welfare of his sister's children. It is in

⁹ J.P. Bruwer, "The Composition of Chewa village, *African Studies*, Vol. 8, (1949), p.119.

¹⁰ Phiri, "Production and Exchange," p.20; B. Pachai, *Land and Politics in Malawi, 1875-1975* (Kingston: Limestone Press, 1978).

¹¹ Pachai, *Land and Politics*, p.8

his sister's village that he invests without fearing loss of property because he can never be dismissed from his sister's village.¹²

In a typical matrilineal arrangement the *mkamwini* was also obliged to provide bridal services to his "parents-in-law" to maintain his marriage and residence in his wife's village. This would include, for example, working in his in-law's garden especially in peak periods of fieldwork.

While the *mbumba* was an important unit for the exercise of land rights in the Nyanja social order, the *banja*, (household or simple family) was the main unit of production. The *banja* in Malawi history has always been an extended one. It has not been one of a simple unit involving just parents and children but has also included kin of wider genealogical connection who provide labour to the household head in return for their support and maintenance.¹³

The Nyanja political and social dominance in the Shire Highlands remained fairly stable until the middle and late nineteenth century when it was overshadowed by the Yao immigration from Mozambique, triggered by a combination of political and economic forces.¹⁴ Famine was one factor, but the role of raids against the Yao homeland by

¹² C. Khanje, "Matrilineal System of Marriage in the Face of Development," unpublished seminar paper, Chancellor College, Zomba.

¹³ According to the oral data collected for this study, the average number of persons per *banja* was around five.

¹⁴ In his account of the Yao in Malawi, Edward Alpers states that little is known about the Yao-Maravi relations before the great Yao invasion of 1855-63, except that their relations were peaceable. E.A. Alpers, "The Yao in Malawi," in B. Pachai (ed.), *The Early History of Malawi* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 169. For a monumental study of the Yao in Malawi, see J.C. Mitchell, *The Yao Village: A Study in the Social Structure of a Nyasaland Tribe*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966).

Lolo/Makua peoples living to their south was remembered as pivotal.¹⁵ The great Yao invasion of southern Malawi is recorded as having taken place between 1855 and 1863, during which four separate groups moved into the southern part of Malawi. Prior to the invasion, the Yao exchanged trade goods from the coast, mainly cloth and beads, for cattle and salt with the Nyanja. In the Shire Highlands, the Nyanja population was partially displaced by the Yao intruders, but gradually the two peoples settled down side by side. A good deal of intermarriage occurred between them.¹⁶ By the 1880s the chiefs of the Blantyre and Zomba villages were all Yaos and the whole area between the south-end of Lake Malawi and Blantyre on the Shire Highlands was politically dominated by the Yao. (See Fig.2)

Our knowledge of the social and economic organization of the Lomwe prior to European penetration is, however, limited. What is known is that, like the Yao, their homeland was in Mozambique and that many of them migrated into the Mlanje district of southern Malawi, especially after 1900. Many of them migrated into other districts in the Shire Highlands. Figures for Cholo district indicate that by the 1930s, approximately two-thirds of the population in the district comprised these Anguru (Alomwe) from Portuguese

¹⁵ N. Northrup, "The Migrations of Yao and Kololo into Southern Malawi: Aspects of Migrations in Nineteenth Century Africa," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 19,1(1986), p.60; J. McCracken, "The Nineteenth Century in Malawi," in T.O. Ranger (ed.) *Aspects of Central African History*, (London: Heinemann, 1968), p. 99; Alpers, "The Yao in Malawi," pp. 169-170.

¹⁶ A. Werner, *The Natives of British Central Africa* (London: Archibald Constable and Company, 1906), p. 31; Alpers, "The Yao in Malawi." Werner argues that the tribal organization of the two groups, the Yao and the Nyanja, was not dissimilar (p.257). They had a lot in common. Both groups were matrilineal and lacked strong central power, their main political unit being that of the village. McCracken, "The Nineteenth Century in Malawi," pp. 99-100. See also Macdonald, *Africana or the Heart of Heathen Africa*, for further details on the Yao.

East Africa (now Mozambique).¹⁷ Politically, they were decentralised, and occupationally described as “agriculturalists with no experience and understanding of cattle.”¹⁸

The economies forged by the Nyanja and the Yao had a lot more in common as both “tribal” groupings participated in agriculture, hunting, fishing, trade, salt making, iron smelting and craft-making industries. Both peoples were also involved in raising livestock. There are, nonetheless, conflicting historical accounts of the Yao as agriculturalists. Havilland, for example, cites the Yao (and the Angoni) as the only tribes who did not show knowledge of agriculture prior to European intrusion.¹⁹ Similarly, early missionary and travellers' records, like those of Dr. Livingstone, depict the Yao as a warlike and plundering tribe:

"the ajawa [Yao] were the slaving tribe in league with the Portuguese, who provided them with guns in order that they might attack and destroy villages, capture the women and children, and what men they could lay their hands upon. They were not a pleasant looking set of men certainly."²⁰

Apparently, the Yao benefited from trading contacts with the Arabs, their contacts dating back at least to the seventeenth century. Their long involvement in the East Coast trade, argues McCracken, “gave them an advantage in terms of arms and provided the opportunity

¹⁷ Malawi National Archives (MNA), PCS1/2/22 "Report on Increased Production. Cholo District, 1950."

¹⁸ S. Agnew, Environment and History: The Malawian Setting," in B. Pachai (ed.), *The Early History of Malawi*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 43.

¹⁹ Report by the Commissioner on Trade and General Conditions of British Central Africa Protectorate, 1800-1900, cited in W.E. Havilland, "The Rise of the African Tobacco Industry in Nyasaland and its Production Problems," *The South African Journal of Economics*, Vol. 23, 2(1955).

²⁰ H. Rowley, *The Story of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1867), p.83. See also Macdonald, *Africana or the Heart of Heathen Africa* Vol. 2, for details on Yao's slave-raiding activities.

for the rise of military and commercial leaders who became rich through the sale of slaves and ivory, and who could for a time unite a number of villages under them. The Yao were, therefore, generally successful in the fighting and succeeded in either subduing the Nyanja or in driving them down to the Shire valley."²¹ Oral accounts, it has been argued, emphasize that male disdain for agricultural activities was a crucial feature of Yao culture.²² This feature was aptly captured by early colonial administrators, one of whom had this to say:

The WaYao here do not interest themselves much in Agriculture, as do most Central African Natives. They prefer rather to hire people of Angoniland, to cultivate their land.²³

Other nineteenth century observers, however, proffered a broader and different perspective on the Yao, portraying them not as an aggressive tribe organized for conquest, but as "both a pastoral and an industrial people."²⁴ In a similar vein, Edward Alpers, while acknowledging the agricultural habits of the Yao, downplays their agriculture as neither highly intensive nor productive.²⁵ Both these views describe part of what Yao culture and society was all about, but differing accounts demonstrate the difficulties encountered in reconstructing the agricultural and economic activities of pre-colonial peoples. For the

²¹ McCracken, "The Nineteenth Century in Malawi," p. 99.

²² M. Vaughan, "Food Production and Family Labour in Southern Malawi: the Shire Highlands and Upper Shire Valley in the Early Colonial Period," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 24, 3(1982), p.356.

²³ John Nicoll, in *The British Central Africa Gazette*, June 28, 1894 cited in Terry, "African Agriculture in Nyasaland," pp. 33-34.

²⁴ Werner, *The Natives of British Central Africa*, p.257.

²⁵E.A. Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves in East Central Africa*, (London, 1975), pp. 250-51. S.S. Murray, described the Yao as "poor cultivators of the soil," which implies they had a stake in agricultural activities. Cited in L. Vail and L. White, "Tribalism in the Political

historian has to rely largely upon *ad hoc* observations of European missionary explorers, traders, travellers and administrators, many of whom generalized widely from superficial impressions.²⁶ When all is said and done, however, the Yao clearly participated in agriculture. Indeed, they are credited for having introduced the maize crop to the Nyanja in Malawi, having themselves obtained it from the coast in Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique).²⁷

With access to adequate amounts of land, the communities in the Shire Highlands districts, notably the Nyanja and the Yao, were seriously engaged in agricultural production by the middle of the nineteenth century, when Europeans began to have sustained contacts with the country. From the expeditions of Dr. David Livingstone, the celebrated missionary turned explorer who travelled through the Malawi region between 1858 and 1860, we discover that many of the peoples in the southern province of the country were cultivating crops of different varieties. In his journals, Livingstone mentions a good crop of cotton being grown by many tribes around Blantyre district. Tobacco production was noted in the Lower Shire districts; maize, bananas and sweet potatoes in the Shire Highlands districts; sorghum and millet in Zomba, while groundnuts and cassava were grown in the Lake shore districts.²⁸ For the Central Province districts evidence of early agriculture comes from the

History of Malawi," in L. Vail (ed.) *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), p. 170.

²⁶ M.L. Chanock, "Notes for an Agricultural History of Malawi," *Rural Africana* 20(1973), p.28.

²⁷ Werner, *The Natives of British Central Africa*, p.177.

²⁸ From Livingstone's Journals, cited in P. Terry, "African Agriculture in Nyasaland," *The Nyasaland Journal* Vol. 14, 2(1961), pp. 27-28; David and Charles Livingstone, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi and its Tributaries, 1858-1864*, (London: John

Scottish missionaries who came after Dr. Livingstone. They recorded details about the agriculture of the peoples around the district of Kota-kota (Nkhota kota), noting in particular their involvement in the production of peas, cassava and finger millet.²⁹

These farming communities most commonly practised two systems of cultivation, with the family (*banja*) unit as the basis of agricultural production. One was a combination of bush fallow and shifting cultivation,³⁰ and the other was intercropping. It is worth noting that several factors influenced methods of cultivation. These would include the farming tools available, the range and nature of crops grown, the society's political and economic structures, such as the rules governing land tenure, and also the division of labour.³¹ Shifting cultivation, for instance, was predicated on land being in abundance and on availability and use of simple tools such as hoes and axes. The following description is instructive on the operations of shifting cultivation:

the gardens proper may be a short distance from the villages, or they may be three or four miles away. The people begin by hoeing the land close to their dwellings; when the soil is exhausted, they move farther out, and so on, from year to year. When the gardens come to be inconveniently far away, the village is moved; and thus the population is continually shifting from place to place, and one sometimes finds sites of old gardens in what one had thought was untouched bush.³²

Murray, Albemale Street, 1865), pp. 111, 373; Werner, *The Natives of British Central*, p.176.

²⁹ Terry, "African Agriculture," pp. 28-29.

³⁰ For details on this method, see H.H. Johnston, *British Central Africa*, (London: Methuen & Company, 1897); Terry, "African Agriculture."

³¹ T. Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History of Africa*, Vol. 1, (Dakar: Codesria Book Series, 1993), especially Part II.

³² Werner, *The Natives of British Central Africa*, p.179

Later, as Europeans assumed control of the country and land matters became contentious, the system attracted the wrath of colonial administrators who condemned it as a "ruinous, vicious and wanton policy" detrimental to the future interests of the country.³³ This attitude, as some have argued, was simply a product of nineteenth century racial and class arrogance of British administrators, which predisposed them to view African agricultural practices with contempt.³⁴

The other method, intercropping, involves planting different species, and different varieties of the same species, on the same farm. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, it has been a common method of cultivation whose many advantages have been documented. Two of these are worthy of note. First, intercropping is good for soil conservation. The mixture of crops on one plot of land provides a cover of plants for the soil, thereby protecting it from erosion due to excessive rainfall and wind. Second, it is a reliable safeguard for high crop yields. The risks of crop failure due to drought, for example, are lessened because different crop varieties and species grow and mature at different speeds and they have different moisture requirements.³⁵ With the wider selection of crops at their disposal as noted earlier, it is quite natural that intercropping was a common practice among the people of southern

³³ Johnston, *British Central Africa*; H.L. Duff, *Nyasaland Under the Foreign Office*, (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1903).

³⁴ L. Vail, "Peasants, Migrants, and Plantations: A Study of the growth of Malawi's Economy," *Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 11, (1984), pp. 1-36. This colonial dismissal is revealed more clearly for what it was when we consider that some methods that were once condemned by colonial officials have in more recent times proved successful. Such was the case with intercropping which "was once viewed by self-righteous but ignorant colonial officials as a sign of Africa's agricultural backwardness. Now agronomists have discovered the advantages of intercropping." Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History of Africa*, p.87.

³⁵ Zeleza, *ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

Malawi. Among the Mang'anja in the Shire Highlands, John Buchanan noted that maize was interplanted with pumpkins which spread themselves among the mounds on which the maize was planted, and that the natives buried the weeds to prevent them sprouting again. In addition, Mandala observed that besides pumpkins (*maungu*), maize (*chimanga*) was intercropped with a variety of other crops including beans (*nyemba*), tobacco (*fodya*), sugarcane (*mzimbe*), and many kinds of vegetables and legumes.³⁶

Complementary to agricultural production was involvement in specialized industries such as iron smelting, salt distilling and the making of crafts.³⁷ Out of several minerals that existed in the country, iron was most extensively worked, partly because iron ore deposits were widely distributed, but also due to its relative importance to other branches of production: farming, hunting and fishing. Hoes and axes for farming, spears for hunting, hooks for fishing, and knives of different shapes were all made from hammered iron.³⁸ From Livingstone's first impressions in visiting the Shire Highlands, it is clear that iron was an item of high commercial value. Livingstone found that:

iron ore [was] dug out of the hills, and its manufacture [was] the staple trade of the southern highlands. Each village [had] its smelting-house, its charcoal-burners and blacksmiths. They [made] good axes, spears, needles,

³⁶ E.C. Mandala, *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy: The Lower Tchiri Valley of Malawi, 1859-1960*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), p.58. J. Buchanan, *The Shire Highlands*, cited in Terry, "African Agriculture in Nyasaland" p.29.

³⁷ Elias Mandala identifies six branches of activities within the nonagricultural sector of nineteenth century Mang'anja economy, namely: food collecting, fishing, hunting, cloth making, salt distilling, and iron producing. Mandala, however, cautions that the distinction between agriculture and non-agricultural can be misleading because some branches, like food collecting, fishing, and hunting, were closer to agriculture than the classification implies. Mandala, *Work and Control*, p.36.

³⁸ Phiri, "Production and Exchange" pp. 11-12; Duff, *Nyasaland Under the Foreign Office*, pp. 307-310. See also Macdonald, *Africana or the Heathen of Africa*, pp. 28-29; 36-37.

arrow-heads, bracelets, and anklets, which [were] sold at surprisingly low rates; a hoe over two pounds in weight [was] exchanged for calico of about the value of fourpence.³⁹

Iron products were also exchanged for salt, foodstuffs and livestock, with the commercial zone transcending present international boundaries to as far east as the Mozambique territory.

Salt making among the Nyanja and Yao of the Shire Highlands was mainly in the hands of elderly women, while men produced much of the craftwork, spinning, weaving and sewing. The area around Lake Chilwa was the principal salt-producing centre. Products from these local industries were marketed through the regional trade caravans (*ulendos*) organized from time to time by family heads and professional traders. As Werner notes, salt was packed in matting bags holding about twenty pounds' weight apiece, and carried down to Blantyre and elsewhere for sale. A 'salt *ulendo*,' Werner argued, "was always sure of a speedy sale for its wares."⁴⁰ The division of labour reflected in these activities calls for some discussion.

As implicitly discussed above, for both the Mang'anja and the Yao, the system of production and exchange was based on a sexual division of labour. Ordinarily, in the fields men and women performed similar tasks, except for the strenuous exercise of opening a new farm, which was done by men.⁴¹ Women, nonetheless, performed most of the agricultural labour. Likewise, other tasks associated with physical danger, such as hunting and the

³⁹ Werner, *The Natives of British Central Africa*, pp. 201-202.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.207.

⁴¹ Mandala, *Work and Control*, p. 51. For another critical view, see Macdonald, *Africana or the Heathen of Africa*. According to his account, the natives of Nyasaland had little notion of the division of labour, though throughout his book he clearly subscribes to the notion of men and women performing different tasks.

manufacture of iron implements, were considered as "men's jobs." Most of all, the division of labour between husband and wife varied a good deal according to local circumstances. For example, in cases where men went on trading caravans, hunting expeditions, or worked as *tenga-tenga* men (carriers),⁴² they would stay away for weeks, whereupon fieldwork fell on women.⁴³ The women also performed all other household tasks: cutting firewood, fetching water, pounding corn, cooking and many more. Only when the husband was around would he assist in the gardens and any other household duties. Similarly,

in districts abounding with game [or near a lake abounding with fishes], the men as a rule hand[ed] over all agricultural work to their wives and slaves. Fishing and hunting [were] looked on as being more dignified occupations than hoeing.⁴⁴

In all these chores, the labour of other household members, children especially, was also fully utilised. For example, under the *chikamwini* system at the heart of matrilineal marriages, the labour of young males was invariably exploited by their prospective parents-in-laws.

The foregoing account has attempted to capture the complexity and diversity of the Malawian social formation before colonial intrusion. This has been done in order to put into context claims of the so-called "self-sufficiency" scenario universally made of pre-colonial

⁴² *Tenga-tenga* refers to a mode of transportation done by human head portage. At the time when internal communications were difficult, almost all transport work was done by *tenga-tenga*.

⁴³ Werner, *The Natives of British Central Africa*, pp. 134-135. A detailed discussion of women's activities in the Shire Highlands during the colonial period is offered in chapter 6.

⁴⁴ Macdonald, *Africana or the Heathen of Africa*, p.36

African economies. It may therefore be argued that for Malawi, this “self-sufficiency,”⁴⁵ when and wherever it existed, must be understood against various factors and a combination of circumstances that constituted the local economy of the day. These would include first, availability of land resources in abundance and unfettered access to land use. Second, the extraordinary range of crops that were grown and cultivated, and systems of land use, such as intercropping, which among other things lessened the risks of crop failure. Third, upkeep of livestock, hunting and fishing, which not only made more food available but also enriched the local diet. These assumed new agency as survival and advancement strategies as land became increasingly scarce during the colonial period. Fourth, production in specialised industries, such as iron smelting, cloth and salt making. The significance of these local industries seems to have waned and waxed with the colonial intrusion. According to one account, after the First World War I, headmen in the Protectorate agreed unanimously that “it would be impossible to revive the industry of making their own clothing as they had been dependent on Indian traders for cloth since the regime of the European in the country.”⁴⁶ And finally, a sustainable system of exchange based on barter. When taken together, these factors, needless to say, provided a strong bulwark against hunger and famine. Any significant twist in the organization of these forces of production was bound to engender important changes in the ‘self-sufficient’ base, changes whose

⁴⁵ In the absence of absolute evidence supporting claims of a precolonial “self-sufficient,” economy, the term is used in relative terms for analytical purposes. For example, more land available for African use in the precolonial than the colonial era, etc.

⁴⁶ MNA S1/1077/19 District Annual report, Lower Shire, 1919-1920. The extent to which local industries declined or survived after the colonial encounter, and for whatever reasons, is a bit difficult to determine and beyond the immediate focus of this study. The assumption by neo-classical and dependency scholars that local industries collapsed the moment they faced European imports has largely been challenged and discredited as too simplistic. See Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History*, pp. 14, 199-200.

repercussions could be far-reaching. Arguably, this happened with the inception of colonialism, which in many cases involved the dispossession of indigenous populations by European settler planters.

While arguing that colonial capitalism destroyed the existing pre-colonial economic structures may be an exaggeration, it is equally a misrepresentation to deny that a great deal of disruption in the pre-existing structures occurred. The massive alienation of land and introduction of cash crop production that came with the colonial order fostered this disruption. As the local economy became integrated into the world economy, it became more vulnerable to unpredictable price fluctuations on the world market.⁴⁷ Therefore, an examination of changes in land and cropping patterns spearheaded by colonial intrusion is important for an understanding of the material world the Malawian peasantry made for themselves, either in collusion or in conflict with the colonial forces throughout the colonial period.

2.2. Land Alienation and Peasant Options in the Rural Economy

The formal declaration of protectorate rule over Nyasaland on May 14, 1891 has come to represent a major turning point in Malawi's political history. The colonization of Malawi, however, came at a time of political and socio-economic turbulence. As briefly noted, slave trading had been a factor in Malawi's precolonial society. Another factor towards the end of the nineteenth was an on going Anglo-Portuguese conflict in the quest for territorial expansion over the Malawi region. These elements posed a potential threat to the Scottish missionaries who had established themselves in the country from the mid-1860s, about the

⁴⁷ Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History of Africa*, Vol. 1, p. 116.

same time the slave-raiding Yao invasions occurred. Uncertain of their position, the British in Nyasaland desired protection from their home government. They continually petitioned for their mother country to assume a more active role.⁴⁸

Though initially hesitant, the British finally took over full control of Nyasaland in 1891, with the Foreign Office as administering agent while government was left in the hands of the officials on the spot. The official view within the British political establishment at the time assumed that colonies and protectorates should be self-sustaining economies rather than dependent on the British taxpayers' money.⁴⁹ This, it was hoped, could be achieved through the exploitation of whatever local resources were available and through the imposition of taxes.

Like all British colonies at the time, the Nyasaland protectorate had to find sources of revenue to pay for its administration. Deficient in natural resource endowment, with virtually no commercially exploitable minerals of its own, the options were restricted to the pursuit of an agricultural-based economy. The choice was therefore between a plantation-oriented agricultural economy and a peasant-based one. Both the imperial government and the local administration viewed the Shire Highlands as the most important area in the Protectorate, as it was considered eminently suitable for European settlement and plantation agriculture. Sir Harry Johnston, the first commissioner and consul-general for the

⁴⁸ A.K. Smith, "The Anglo-Portuguese Conflict over the Shire Highlands, 1875-1891," in R. Macdonald (ed.), *From Nyasaland to Malawi: Studies in Colonial History*, (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1975), pp.48-49. B. Pachai, "Aspects of Colonial Rule in Malawi," (unpublished Seminar paper), University of Malawi, 1974.

⁴⁹ See R. Robinson and J. Gallagher, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," in H.M. Wright (ed.), *The "New Imperialism": Analysis of Late-Nineteenth Century Expansion* (Lexington: D.C. Heath & Co., 1976), pp. 134-158; H. Johnston, *British Central Africa*, chapter 4.

Protectorate, did not mince words. He strongly believed that "economic prosperity depended upon the development of European-run plantations on the fertile Shire Highlands."⁵⁰ In spite of stiff opposition from some missionaries, who contended that economic prosperity lay in African peasant production, the colonial administration, particularly Johnston, viewed European interests as superior. The aura of scepticism and arrogance displayed by Johnston about peasant productive capacities underwrote this assumption and provided legitimation for policy making during much of Malawi's colonial period.

It was in the spirit of creating a self-sustaining colonial economy that transformations in land use patterns ensued soon after the establishment of colonial rule in Malawi. As already noted, in the pre-colonial era authority in matters of land was vested in elders and chiefs, and such authority did not allow for the sale or alienation of land from its holders by any means. However, by virtue of that authority, chiefs and elders could allocate land to newcomers. In this manner land was ceded to European settlers at the beginning of colonial rule as the first plantations in the country were opened.

Plantation agriculture in Malawi dates back to the 1880s when pioneer European settlers, particularly those under the aegis of the Scottish missionaries, introduced coffee cultivation on a large scale. As Landeg White notes, John Buchanan of the Blantyre Mission owned three estates by 1884:

he was experimenting with coffee, rubber, and indigo, and he had begun to develop his vision of a Shire Highlands dominated by a plantation economy:

⁵⁰ Johnston, *British Central Africa*, p.111

'I can see no reason', he wrote, 'why an estate of 200 acres under coffee in the Shire Highlands should not yield a clear profit of £2000 yearly.'⁵¹

Needless to say, such plantations could not be established without affecting the traditional concept of land use.

By the time colonial rule was established in 1891, large tracts of land had already been alienated from the African community through dubious and unscrupulous treaties. The pioneer settlers—missionaries, traders, planters and other fortune seekers—claimed to have legally acquired and/or purchased significant proportions of land from African chiefs and headmen. The land so "purchased" was held in freehold. Later it was discovered that most of these chiefs never really understood the legalities and terms of the land deals by which they ceded their land rights to the newcomers. The Commissioner's own words are credible testimony to this contention:

As regards the treaties which the African Lakes Company obtained in 1885, Sir. H. Johnston reported that he came to the conclusion during his journeys through Nyasaland in 1889-90 that they had been signed by chiefs in total ignorance of their meaning as they thought they were dealing with an emissary of the Queen, and were placing themselves merely under Her Majesty's protection.⁵²

The transactions for the most part involved a mere exchange of gifts and information between the chiefs and the intending settlers. What constituted a deed of sale was essentially a form of barter whereby a chief provided a settler with a small plot of ground for a house or a store and received in turn a few items of trade, such as cloth, coloured stuff, beads, guns,

⁵¹ L. White, *Magomero: Portrait of an African Village*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 77. More details of the pioneering stages of plantation agriculture in Nyasaland are provided later in this chapter.

⁵² MNA S1/492/34 "Sir Harry Johnston's Policy on Land Settlement in Nyasaland".

and other things. Ultimately, information of this kind was exploited and used to lay claim to larger areas than those actually demarcated.⁵³

It should therefore evoke no surprise that, at the beginning of the Protectorate administration in 1891, some of the chiefs and headmen were unwilling to concede that they "sold" the land to the settlers.⁵⁴ By this date, disputes over land claims in the country had become common. Hence, Sir Harry Johnston's first major task, as commissioner in 1891, was to investigate and possibly resolve the controversy surrounding the land question. Within two days of his arrival in the administrative centre of Zomba, he launched an inquest into land deals and asked for all land claims to be sent to him for consideration.

Five guiding principles influenced Johnston's land settlement plan. These were: first, the rights of Africans had to be protected; second, existing villages and plantations were not to be disturbed; third, sufficient land was to be available for future expansion; fourth, land speculation was to be discouraged; and finally, the rights of the Crown had to be secured in the interest of national development.⁵⁵ After reviewing all the claims, Johnston approved most of them, rejecting those that clearly indicated some act of bad faith on the part of the claimants. This settlement led to the creation of a dual land policy in the Protectorate. Between 1891 and 1895 land was divided into "private estates" and Crown

⁵³ See Pachai, "Land Policies in Malawi: An Examination of the Colonial Legacy," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 14, (1973), p.682; also White, *Magomero*, p.78.

⁵⁴ See Clement Ng'ong'ola, "The State, Settlers, and Indigens in the Evolution of Land Law and Policy in Colonial Malawi," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 23, 2(1990), pp. 27-58. Also A.C. Ross, "The Blantyre Mission and Problems of Land and Labour," in R.J. Macdonald (ed.), *From Nyasaland to Malawi: Studies in Colonial History*, (Nairobi: The East African Publishing House, 1975), pp. 86-107.

⁵⁵ See, Pachai, *Land and Politics*, pp. 34-35; MNA S1/492/32 "Sir Harry Johnston's Policy on Native Land Settlement in Nyasaland."

Land.⁵⁶ The former was land alienated by settlers whose titles were confirmed by Certificates of Claim and the latter was land to be used by the African population. The fundamental difference the settlement made to earlier "land speculation" was that this time Certificates of Claim were issued to successful land owners, giving settlers legal freehold rights to land. As we shall see, Africans resident on "private estates" experienced colonialism in ways markedly different from those on Crown Land.

One of the stated motives of Johnston's land settlement was to safeguard native interests. To that end, a "non-disturbance" clause was endorsed in the Certificate of Claim.

In crude terms, the clause stipulated:

That no native village or plantation existing at the date of this Certificate on the said estate shall be disturbed or removed without the consent in writing of Her Majesty's Commissioner and Consul-General, but when such consent shall have been given the sites of such villages or plantations shall revert to the proprietor of the said Estate. No natives can make other and new villages nor plantations on the said Estate without prior consent of the proprietor.⁵⁷

The intentions of the clause were quite clear, at least in principle. On the Africans' side, it was meant to protect village communities (residents) already settled on the private estates at the time of alienation from any abuses from landowners, i.e. demands for rent or labour. But as scholars have pointed out, the stated aims and the actual consequences were far apart. The "non-disturbance" clause especially was bitterly criticized, mainly due to its "vagueness". In the eyes of Johnston's critics it created more problems for native residents than it actually

⁵⁶ Pachai, *Land and Politics*; Ng'ong'ola, "The State, Settlers and Indigens"; In 1936 by the Native Trust Land Order in Council, land of the protectorate was divided into three classes, Crown Lands, Reserved Lands and Native Trust Land. See R.D. Bell, *Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire and Report on the Financial Position and Further Development of Nyasaland*, [hereafter *The Bell Commission*] (London: Colonial Office 1938), p.23.

solved, and it became a rallying point for later generations of leaders and African politicians. The fundamental flaw in the clause, according to Pachai, was the failure to provide practical safeguards to match its good intentions. "Where as the rights of the estate holders were legally defined to the point of surveyed boundaries, no such exercise was undertaken in respect of existing villages and plantations."⁵⁸ In other words, the clause did not specify who exactly it was meant to protect - the individual native, the village community or the ethnic group.⁵⁹ Besides, there was no mechanism to distinguish the original occupants from newcomers. Indeed, these unsettled questions gave rise to a number of problems at the turn of the century when large numbers of Anguru (Lomwe) migrated from Mozambique into southern Nyasaland where many of them settled either on Crown Land or on "private estates".

With the passage of time, realizing the practical difficulties in differentiating between original occupants and newcomers, the settlers were bent on defying the non-disturbance clause protection and even sought its renunciation. In 1900, when it came to the attention of the government that estate owners were overlooking the non-disturbance clause, the government issued a notice drawing their attention to the terms of the clause. In 1903, a commission of inquiry was appointed to investigate and report on the conditions of Africans on the "private estates". It noted with concern that:

⁵⁷ Colonial Office, *The Bell Commission*, p. 34. Also cited in Pachai, "The issue of Thangata in the History of Nyasaland," *Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 3, (1974), p.26.

⁵⁸ Pachai, "The Issue of Thangata," p.26.

⁵⁹ Cited in Pachai, "Issue of Thangata," p.27. The Hon. Judge Nunan of the High Court in Blantyre raised the questions in his judgement of the celebrated case of the Supervisor of Native Affairs versus the Blantyre and East Africa Company. The Supervisor, on behalf of the natives, sued the Company for the indiscriminate exaction of *thangata* in violation of the "non-disturbance" clause.

The landlords 'have already assumed the role and privileges of the feudal seigneuries of the native occupier', with tenants being frequently subjected to the arbitrary demands of an often autocratic and sometimes uneducated master.⁶⁰

Furthermore, the commission made a number of recommendations pointing to ways that would improve conditions of tenants on the estates.⁶¹ Responding to these suggestions, the government passed the Lands Ordinance (Native Locations) of 1904, which, among other things, required every landowner to set aside an area not exceeding one-tenth of his undeveloped land for African occupation. Viewing the ordinance as a direct threat to their economic interests in terms of labour needs, settlers never adhered to its provisions. The government unfortunately failed to enforce the law, which in effect remained a dead letter until 1928.⁶²

All in all, by 1894, two years after the settlement had been put in force, the land deals of the early 1880s had been confirmed, at least officially. To that extent John Buchanan's dream of a Shire Highlands dominated by a plantation economy had become a visible reality. An estimated 3.7 million acres of land had been alienated in the country. This figure represented 14.6 percent of the territory's land-holding potential estimated at about 25.2 million acres.⁶³ With the exception of 2.7 million acres claimed by the British South Africa Company (BSA) for mineral speculation in parts of the central and northern regions, much of the alienated land was in the Shire Highlands. In the latter, the largest landowners

⁶⁰ Cited in R.H. Palmer, "White Farmers in Malawi: Before and After the Depression," *African Affairs*, Vol. 84, (1986), p. 217.

⁶¹ These recommendations are outlined in Pachai, *Land and Politics*, pp. 89-90.

⁶² See Pachai, "Issue of Thangata", p.28.

⁶³ *The Bell Commission; Pachai, Land and Politics*, chapter 5.

were: the Blantyre and East Africa Company (B. & EA), the British Central Africa Company (BCA), the African Lakes Company (ALC), and the Alexander Low Bruce Trust Ltd. (ALBT). The four giants had one thing in common: they were highly undercapitalized and understaffed, and had little if any experience in tropical agriculture.⁶⁴ They were further burdened by transport difficulties, which compelled the government into an expensive railway project,⁶⁵ and labour problems, which led to the institutionalization of *thangata* as labour tenancy.⁶⁶ These undercapitalized capitalists would attempt to develop Malawi's plantation economy, and through them international capital would penetrate the local economy. The newly created plantation environment left African peasants with makeshift options to meet their social, economic and financial obligations. Either they had to seek wage employment on the estates, migrate to employment centres in South Africa and the Rhodesias or grow crops for which they received very little encouragement. None of these could guarantee them social or economic security. The one possible option left for African peasants was to find ways to negotiate the terms of their existence within the boundaries of the colonial political economy.

⁶⁴ White, *Magomero*, pp. 77-78.

⁶⁵ L. Vail, "The Making of an Imperial Slum: Nyasaland and its Railways, 1895-1935" *Journal of African History* Vol. 16, 1(1975), pp. 39-87. Vail, "Railway Development and Colonial Underdevelopment: The Nyasaland Case," in R.H. Palmer and N.Q. Parsons (eds.), *Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*, (London: Heinemann, 1977), pp. 365-395.

⁶⁶ Pachai, "The Issue of Thangata." W.C. Chirwa, "'The Garden of Eden': Sharecropping on the Shire Highlands Estates, 1920-1945," in A. Jeeves and J. Crush (eds.) *White Farms, Black Labor: The State and Agrarian Change in Southern Africa, 1910-1950*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1997).

The official confirmation of the initial land alienation laid down the basis of a plantation or estate economy. However, establishment of a plantation agricultural economy could not occur spontaneously. For the most part, one may argue that the whole process was a trial and error affair as various crops—coffee, cotton, tobacco and tea—were experimented with, one after another, while strategies to maintain the labour pool were at the same time being mapped out.

To be sure, plantation agriculture in Nyasaland was an invention of missionaries in the early 1880s. The man credited as the first planter in the country was John Buchanan. Originally a lay member of the Blantyre Mission, Buchanan resigned from the mission when it reorganized and became a coffee planter. He experimented with coffee at Blantyre from 1878 and by the time the British declared a protectorate rule over Nyasaland in 1891, the coffee culture had gathered momentum and spread to other districts such as Mlanje, Cholo and Zomba in the Shire Highlands. By the mid-1890s over 100 plantations were growing coffee in the country, which was fetching premium prices in London and had an output of greater value than the settler farms of Kenya or Southern Rhodesia.⁶⁷ After 1900, however, the industry rapidly collapsed, largely as a consequence of poor prices due to Brazilian competition, impoverished soils, and the effects of pests and diseases.

The collapse of coffee pushed planters to experiment with cotton, which was quickly abandoned in favour of tobacco and tea. Like coffee, John Buchanan, who in association with his two brothers later owned and managed the B. & E.A Company (also known as the

⁶⁷ H.D. Nelson, *An Area Handbook of Malawi*, (Washington: D.C: American University Press, 1975), p.23; Colin Baker, "Malawi's Exports: An Economic History," in C. Smith, B. Pachai and R. Tangri (eds.), *Malawi: Past and Present*, (Blantyre: C.L.A.I.M., 1971), p.92.

Buchanan Brothers) introduced the first seed of tobacco into Nyasaland.⁶⁸ The Buchanan brothers began cultivating tobacco in 1889. In 1893 they despatched the first tobacco export of barely forty pounds to Britain.⁶⁹ European tobacco cultivation, however, expanded rapidly from 1900/02 following the failure of coffee. The principal planters were: B. & E.A. Co. Ltd., Henry Brown of Thornwood Estate - Mlanje, Messrs. Cox Brothers - Nyamitete Estate, A.L.C. Ltd. of Mlanje, W.F. James of Blantyre, John Sinclair of Blantyre and the B.C.A Co. Ltd.⁷⁰ Until the early 1920s, production remained almost wholly confined to the southern region in Shire Highlands districts of Blantyre, Chiradzulo, Mlanje, Cholo and Zomba.

Tea was another of the export crops introduced in Malawi towards the end of the nineteenth century. In all of Africa the oldest records of tea come from the Durban Botanical gardens in Natal where it was introduced around 1850. Malawi, however, was the first country in Africa to grow tea on a commercial scale. This was after the early planters of coffee, tobacco and cotton had been alarmed by the damage caused in their coffee plantations by pests and diseases, and they began to seek an alternative crop.⁷¹

Unlike tobacco and cotton, which could be cultivated in most parts of the Protectorate, tea grew successfully only in two districts, Mlanje and Cholo, largely due to

⁶⁸ W. Rangeley, "A Brief History of Tobacco Industry," *The Nyasaland Journal* Vol. 10, 1(1957), p. 63.

⁶⁹ Havilland, "The Rise of the African Tobacco Industry," p.140.

⁷⁰ W.H.J. Rangeley, "A Brief History of the Tobacco Industry," p.72.

⁷¹ The Tea Association (Central Africa) Ltd., *Tea in Malawi*, (Nairobi: University Press of Africa, 1968), p.13; See also G. Hadlow, "The History of Tea in Nyasaland," *The Nyasaland Journal*, Vol. 13, 1(1960), pp. 21-31.

the rainfall and favourable climatic conditions of these districts.⁷² Even today, Mulanje and Thyolo maintain their dominance as the major tea-producing areas, the country's second leading export crop after tobacco.

Although tea had already made its appearance on Malawi's soil by the turn of the century, the tobacco collapse of the late 1920s provided the impetus for the growth of the tea industry in the Mulanje and Thyolo districts. The industry was further bolstered by the establishment of the Nyasaland Tea Research Association in 1929, followed five years later by the launching of the Tea Association to represent the industry on national and international matters concerning the interests of tea growers and producers.⁷³

Unquestionably, the development and growth of the plantation economy radically changed the basis of the rural economy in the Shire Highlands, as well as elsewhere in Malawi. With large-scale expropriation, the communal land pool, hitherto the backbone of rural subsistence, was drastically reduced in favour of estate farming. As new crops were introduced, so were new legislative measures, and new sets of economic, social and moral values to deal with. The time had come when African peasants "were told not only what they should produce, but where they should live, how they should organize their day, with whom they should trade, and how to behave as 'rational economic beings'."⁷⁴ It is therefore tempting to conclude that the relative independence that African communities in the Shire Highlands enjoyed during the pre-colonial period was gradually fading away just as their

⁷² One exception to the rule is Nkhata Bay district in northern Malawi where tea growing has also been established. Blantyre and East Africa Limited and I. Conforzi (Tea & Tobacco) Limited are the oldest and largest tea growers in the country.

⁷³ The Tea Association, *passim*.

⁷⁴ A. Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work, and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1938-1961*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996), p.1.

“self-sufficiency” was being destroyed. However, this did not render them completely hapless and submissive to the demands of the colonial economy. Instead, it forced them largely into strategies designed for survival and advancement. As the colonial state became increasingly dominant, it provided the rational basis for protest and triggered the creative spirit among the peasantry to resort to all the “weapons the weak could utilize” to avoid wholesale subordination.

CHAPTER THREE

Colonialism, Peasants and the Making of Rural Protest and Negotiation

Colin Baker described the land settlements of the late nineteenth century in Malawi as seeds of many forms of trouble.¹ Baker was probably thinking about the relationship between problems of land tenure and political, economic and social development since the turn of the century. Historians have argued that conflict over the occupation, use, exploitation and disposal of land has been endemic throughout human history.² Suffice it to say that the land settlements in question opened up a range of new opportunities and possibilities for both the indigenous Africans and the new white settlers. Essentially, a new dispensation with different social, economic and moral values had been ushered in. Not surprisingly, the half-century following the beginning of colonial rule in 1891 was marked by intense competition for resources between a growing but struggling European-dominated plantation agricultural industry and a resilient African peasantry. This struggle not only exhibited the relentless attempts by planters to exploit the peasantry, arguably in collusion with the colonial state, but also revealed the effects of capitalist penetration on peasant households and the innovative responses of the peasantry to the new order.

The chapter analyses the roots of the effects of colonial rule on African peasants in the Shire Highlands between 1891 and the Second World War, and the attempts in turn by

¹C. Baker, *Development Governor: A Biography of Sir Geoffrey Colby*, (London: British Academic Press, 1994), chapter 11; and by the same author *Seeds of Trouble: Government Policy and Land Rights in Nyasaland, 1946-1964*, (London: British Academic Press, 1993).

²B. Pachai, "The Issue of Thangata in the History of Nyasaland," *Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 3, (1974), p.20.

Africans to resist complete subordination to the colonial capitalist mode of production. It examines the extent to which Africans' political, economic and land rights were largely eroded by the new colonial legal framework and demonstrates how, in spite of colonial subjugation, the African peasantry remained resilient, entering the Depression of the 1930s in a relatively stronger position than the white farmers. The argument revolves around two issues: land and labour. Among the themes explored are the politics of land alienation in the light of a growing African population, labour tenancy and Mozambican immigrant labour, the growth of African discontent on private estates, and the way these aspects culminated in an atmosphere conducive to full-scale peasant rebellion, although nothing of the kind ever occurred.

It must be pointed out that relations between peasants, planters and the colonial state were not static. As colonial policy and the state's priorities shifted from time to time, so did the actions and responses of peasants as well as planters. Both land and labour policies, through the formulation of legislation, evolved through various phases in the course of the colonial period. To fully appreciate the dynamics of colonial rule in Malawi, an understanding of the organization and control of *thangata* labour on private estates, the evolution of the Crown lands policy, and the regulation of African land use is essential.³ Throughout the colonial period, *thangata* remained the main bone of contention between settlers and Africans on the private estates, despite some fundamental legal changes in its

³ For a detailed discussion of these aspects, see C. Ngong'ola, "The State, Settlers, and Indigenes in the Evolution of Land Law and Policy in Colonial Malawi," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 23, 2(1990), pp. 27-58; Pachai, "The Issue of Thangata,"; *Land and Politics in Malawi, 1875-1975*, (Kingston: Limestone Press, 1978). A detailed description of *thangata* is provided later in this chapter.

operation.⁴ In practice, however, Africans had wider choices during the later phases of colonial rule to act against *thangata* in ways previously inconceivable partly due to such legal niceties.

Similarly, until the 1930s, the Nyasaland government was primarily concerned with the alienation of Crown lands to European settlers. This, as Ngong'ola argues, was the period when the assumption that agricultural development in the Protectorate depended on European estate enterprise was never seriously questioned. From the mid-1930s, land policy began to reflect the wider concerns of the imperial government in the administration of its African territories, which advocated greater respect for and protection of African land rights, recognition of the importance of African producers and intensive regulation of African land use.⁵ This was given more impetus from the Second World War to the time of independence as governments, in almost all of sub-Saharan Africa, embarked on what were popularly called colonial welfare and development programmes.⁶ In Malawi, these shifts

⁴ At least three phases can be identified in the evolution of this labour tenancy, the first lasting between 1903 and 1928; the second between 1928 and 1952 and the third from 1952 to 1962. In the initial phase, *thangata* was strictly enforced as labour in lieu of rent. The 1928 Natives on Private Estates Ordinance, not only gave tenants the option of electing to pay rent in cash or work in lieu thereof, but also obliged the landlord to provide suitable employment or facilities for growing economic crops. In the third phase, the 1952 Ordinance removed the landlord's obligation to provide the resident with facilities for growing crops in the absence of employment opportunities. MNA S1/411/33 Natives on Private Estates; Nyasaland Protectorate, *Proceedings of the Legislative Council, 1956*.

⁵ Ngong'ola, "The State, Settlers and Indigens," pp. 44-45. As reflected in chapter two, a 1936 Order in Council reclassified land into three categories that included the Native Trust Lands. Among its provisions, the Order recognized the right of Africans to occupy and use Native Trust Land as a matter of right, a right to which no other racial category in the Protectorate was entitled.

⁶ This is the period that some scholars have described as the "second colonial occupation." W. Beinart, "Agricultural Planning and the Late Colonial Technical Imagination: The Lower Shire Valley in Malawi, 1940-1960," in African Studies Centre

were reflected, first in intensive agricultural propaganda beginning in the 1930s and later the use of compulsion in soil conservation and land improvement schemes. The use of force, however, played into the hands of African nationalist politicians who based their anti-colonial campaign upon opposition to compulsory agricultural methods. During the same period, government attempted to use persuasion through the so-called "Master Farmers Scheme." The scheme concentrated financial and other incentives on a few compliant farmers in the hope that their success would encourage others to emulate their crop and animal husbandry practices. Though beneficial to the few who entered the programme, as a national policy, the scheme was a failure.⁷

I

The Issues of Contention

Land and labour are crucial factors in the decision-making processes of both peasant and capitalist farmers. Any analysis of the political economy of Nyasaland, which was based largely on agriculture, cannot therefore afford to ignore these two factors. The failure or success of the Nyasaland plantations depended on the availability of both land and labour supply. To understand the nature of tensions and conflicts between African peasants and European planters, an examination of land and labour issues is a convenient point of departure.

(ed.), *Malawi: an Alternative Pattern of Development* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1985); R.D. Pearce, *The Turning Point in Africa: British Colonial Policy, 1938-1948*, (London: Frank Cass, 1982), pp. 185-202; E. Nwaubani, "The British Labour Party, the 'Dual Mandate' and Africa, 1945-1951," *Transafrican Journal of History*, Vol. 21, (1992), pp. 93-110.

From the inception of colonial rule in the 1890s, European settlers and planters received considerable support from the colonial administration for their pioneering efforts to establish a plantation industry in the Protectorate. To a large extent, it was a matter of political and, presumably, economic expedience for the government to back up settler schemes. As Pachai has argued, the strongest reason advanced by the government for land alienation was the assumption that it would lead to agricultural development and thereby offer employment opportunities and export possibilities which directly and indirectly would add to the new administration's meagre resources.⁸ The confirmation of land claims by the first administration of Sir Harry Johnston, for example, revealed an informal alliance between European settlers and the colonial state, an alliance that would be crucial for the development, growth and consolidation of the plantation economy in the Protectorate.

Despite official support for capitalized plantation agriculture, peasant producers managed to put up a fair struggle with the plantation sector over resources--land, labour markets and transport facilities. With regard to land, it has been noted that the establishment of capitalist agriculture depended on the appropriation of African land on a massive scale, especially in the Shire Highlands. It is difficult to ascertain the extent of damage land alienation inflicted on African communities in the Shire Highlands. One interpretation would suggest that the exclusive granting of rights to settlers revealed a colonial state, which was an agent of accumulation on behalf of settler capital. This accumulation, it may be argued, proceeded at the expense of the African population,

⁷ See R. W. Kettlewell, *Agricultural Change in Malawi, 1945-1960*, Food Research Institute Studies, Vol. 5, (1965), pp. 275-278. These issues are discussed more extensively in chapters four and five.

which was forced to shift to poorer soils, leading to a decline in crop production, and a general reduction in material and nutritional welfare. The impact of the development of capitalist agriculture on the peasantry can thus be fairly understood by drawing particular attention to the relations of production between the two sectors, the peasantry and plantation agriculture. This would also help unravel the basis of peasants' resistance to capitalist penetration, the seeds of trouble mentioned by Baker.

Cotton and tobacco dominated both peasant and estate commercial production in the Shire Highlands districts between the 1890s and 1930s. From the 1930s, tea assumed a position of prominence in Cholo and Mlanje districts but was produced only as a plantation crop by the estates. Cotton was more encouraged as a cash crop for peasant households, both on Crown Land and the private estates, while estate holders preferred tobacco to cotton.

Africans on Crown Land began to grow cotton, and to a lesser extent tobacco, in 1903. In that year the colonial administration began encouraging peasant cash-cropping activities, particularly in those areas where peasant production was not perceived as a direct or potential threat to settler enterprises.⁹ A related development worth noting is that in the same year, Britain's imperial trade policy shifted towards the so-called "constructive imperialism" initiated by Joseph Chamberlain.¹⁰ In recognition of the value of colonial resources to the British economy, the colonial office had embraced the

⁸Pachai, *Land and Politics in Malawi*, p.83.

⁹L. Vail, "Peasants, Migrants and Plantations: A Study of the Growth of Malawi's Economy," *Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 11, 1(1984), pp. 1-36.

¹⁰See S. Constantine, *The Making of British Colonial Policy 1914-1940* (London: Frank Cass, 1984), ch. 1. Joseph Chamberlain was colonial secretary between 1895 and 1903.

responsibility for stimulating production of raw materials in its tropical dependencies. In that regard, the Colonial Office took the position that the Nyasaland Protectorate, like other colonies, had a role to play in the sphere of imperial trade. The Protectorate was therefore earmarked as an experimental area for cotton cultivation.¹¹

Cotton was promoted by the British Cotton Growers' Association (BCGA) which looked to empire production as a substitute for the American market.¹² Established by British manufacturers, the BCGA was a quasi-governmental body with the political backing of the colonial office. With the passage of time, it became deeply involved in Nyasaland's cotton economy, even exercising a monopoly over the operations of cotton ginneries and the marketing system. As a promotional strategy, the colonial administration in Nyasaland distributed cotton seeds to peasant growers on Crown Land between 1903 and 1905. It also hired cotton experts to work in cotton growing areas. In 1909 a Department of Agriculture was established to help foster African commodity production. Between 1909 and 1923 cotton production on Crown Land increased steadily, attaining a five-fold increase between 1909 and 1917. By the beginning of the 1920s, therefore, a prosperous cotton-based peasantry had emerged on Crown Land and

During his term of office, he proposed a number of programmes aimed at promoting development in the colonies with the lowest possible costs to the Imperial government.

¹¹Throughout the nineteenth century, Britain relied on the American market for her cotton. It was not until 1900 that British manufacturers decided to turn to the Empire for their cotton. See Vail, "Peasants, Migrants and Plantations" p.6; and by the same author "The State and the Creation of Colonial Malawi's Agricultural Economy," in R.I. Rotberg, *Imperialism, Colonialism and Hunger: East and Central Africa*, (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1983), pp. 46-50.

¹²See E. Mandala, *Work and Control in A Peasant Economy: A History of the Lower Tchiri Valley in Malawi, 1859-1960*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 127; 140-45; Vail, "The State and the Creation of Colonial Malawi's Agricultural Economy," pp. 46-47.

signs of at least potential social differentiation could be seen as some Africans turned to growing cotton with the aim of accumulating wealth.¹³ A similar pattern was discernible among Crown Land tobacco growers by the end of the 1920s when tobacco planters were badly hit by the economic recession.¹⁴

Estate production of tobacco in Malawi started towards the end of the 19th century and, until the 1920s, its production was limited to the Shire Highlands districts in the Southern region. In the initial stages, flue-cured and fire-cured tobacco was experimented with. European planters preferred flue-cured tobacco, and when Africans were later permitted to participate in tobacco cultivation, they were restricted to the fire-cured industry.¹⁵ Within the first few years of estate tobacco cultivation, the industry made great strides, creating the impression that in a matter of time the plantations would be a source of great prosperity and would fulfill expectations of the colonial administration about a successful and self-sustaining plantation based-economy. Two factors lay behind this initial impressive take-off. One was the setting up of a factory in Limbe, Blantyre, by the Imperial Tobacco Company (ITC) in 1908.¹⁶ Until the opening of the ITC factory, European tobacco growers were forced to export and usually to sell through brokers. This procedure often necessitated a long wait before a cash return was received for the crop, and not all planters had the capital to afford such a wait. The company then

¹³Vail, "The State and the Creation of Colonial Malawi's Agricultural Economy," pp. 46-47.

¹⁴See pages 92-94 below.

¹⁵ This was part of the strategy to undercut African competition as flue-cured tobacco was more lucrative.

provided a cash market for the crop. That factor alone greatly stimulated flue-cured tobacco production, even at the low cash price at the time of about three pence per pound.¹⁷

The other factor was the formation of the Nyasaland Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce (NCAC) in 1907. It merged two organizations formed in the 1890s by European settlers, the Shire Highlands Planters' Association and the Nyasa Planters' Association. The Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce became one of the most important channels through which settlers advanced their interests and views in the country, especially during the first four decades of the 20th century. The settlers used the Chamber to gain sympathy from the colonial government through petitions, protests, as well as through their unofficial representatives in the Legislative Council. In addition, settler demands could also be conveyed to the colonial office through the Chamber's representatives in the United Kingdom.¹⁸ For example, the Chamber played a major role in petitioning the colonial government to construct a railway line in the Protectorate to ease transportation problems. This organization helped safeguard settler interests in relation to African growers. Its powers and political influence, however, as we shall see, were not unlimited. The problem of labour supply was one knotty question, which even the NCAC could not easily overcome.

¹⁶Malawi National Archives (hereafter MNA) A3/2/271 "History and Development of the Tobacco Industry in Nyasaland."

¹⁷W.H. Rangeley, "A Brief History of the Tobacco Industry in Nyasaland," *The Nyasaland Journal*, Vol. 10, 1(1957), p.75. Production rose from 897,120 lb. in 1908 to 1,233,680 lb. in 1909. In 1910, annual reports for the Department of Agriculture noted that the industry was thoroughly established and capable of enormous expansion. During the First World War, production remained fairly static, declining in 1918, but shot up in the immediate post-war years.

In order to succeed economically, planters required large supplies of cheap labour that they hoped to recruit primarily from the local population. As is presently shown, planters throughout the colonial period had a difficult time meeting their labour requirements. In an apparent effort to help the white farmers secure labour, the government imposed high taxes and institutionalized a regime known as *thangata*.¹⁹ *Thangata* was a system of labour coercion or “forced labour” that became widespread in Malawi during the colonial period, particularly on the Shire Highlands plantations. It was a form of labour rent by which squatters, or Africans resident on European-owned land, were forced to work for the owner in lieu of cash rent. In exchange for a piece of land and access to building materials and water resources, every family head on an estate was required to work for one month a year in lieu of rent and an additional month to meet the hut tax obligations. In practice, the period over which this labour service was required varied from estate to estate, but could be anything up to six months. For the planters, the real attractions of the system

¹⁸M. Chipeta, “Labour in Colonial Malawi: A Study of the Growth and Development of the Malawian Working Class, 1891-1961,” Ph.D. Thesis, Dalhousie University, 1986, pp. 29-30; Rangeley, “A Brief History of the Tobacco Industry,” p.78.

¹⁹A hut tax of six shillings per year was introduced in the Protectorate from as early as 1892. *Thangata* was traditionally a reciprocal system of communal labour services rendered to chiefs. The concept came from the Chinyanja or Chichewa word *kuthangata* meaning “to help” or “to assist”. Under colonialism, what was once a respectable social institution in African society was transformed into an oppressive institution of forced labour that was open to many abuses on the estates. See B. Pachai, “The Issue of *Thangata* in Malawi,” pp. 20-34; Pachai, *Land and Politics*, pp. 101-103; J. Kandawire, *Thangata: Forced Labour or Reciprocal Assistance?* (Zomba: Centre for Social Research, 1978); L. White, *Magomero: Portrait of an African Village*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 89-91. Oral traditions are unanimous in the definition of *thangata* as forced labour during the colonial period, and some accounts equated its attendant violence and brutality to slavery. See oral interviews with K. Muyaya, V.H. Ndanga and Mrs. Sulembeje Richard, Chiradzulu district; Agness Ambulera and V.H. Kumadzi, Thyolo district; Messrs. Lipenga and Jeremiah, Mulanje district. Over time, however, *thangata* terms were modified. Such was the case with the

lay in its hidden advantages, in so far as the informal verbal *thangata* agreement was not subject to government approval.²⁰ For instance, under the hut tax mechanism, the landlord paid the tax to government on behalf of his tenants, obtained receipts, signed and issued them to the owners upon finishing their two months' work. A month was reckoned at twenty-eight days actual work.²¹ But through various devices, Africans were compelled to work considerably longer. By simply withholding his signature from the tax receipt, for example, the landlord could forcibly get more than the two months' work requirement and,

if a native did not complete his day's task, no credit was given to him for the time he had worked, and occasionally he had to work several days extra to make up for the day lost.²²

Notwithstanding its oppressive nature, *thangata* fell short of providing the required labour supply to the planters. As Chijere Chirwa argues, the tax requirement, if carried out without abuse, "could give the landowner only one month labour per tenant per year and another one month for the tax. That was not enough labour for the successful operation of an estate."²³ Besides, tenants sometimes moved back and forth

enactment of the 1928 Natives on Private Estates Ordinance, details of which are discussed later in this chapter.

²⁰L. Vail and L. White, "Tribalism in the Political History of Malawi", as cited in W. Chirwa, "'The Garden of Eden': Sharecropping on the Shire Highlands Estates, 1920-1945" in A. Jeeves and J. Crush (eds.), *White Farms, Black Labour: The State and Agrarian Change in Southern Africa, 1910-1950* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1997), p.267.

²¹See Nyasaland Protectorate, *Report of the Commission Appointed by His Excellency the Governor to Inquire into various Matters and Questions concerned with The Native Rising within the Nyasaland Protectorate*, (Zomba, 1916), p.5.

²²*ibid.*

between private estates and Crown Land and engaged in cash cropping on the latter, which offered an easy way of paying tax directly to the government. Such strategies imposed limitations on the effectiveness of *thangata* and made it a rather transient and irregular source of labour.

Furthermore, the planters could not withstand unregulated competition from both internal and external recruiters of labour. The major competitors for labour in the country were the commercial and transport companies which paid better wages than the estates, a factor which placed the undercapitalized planters in a very precarious and disadvantaged position where they could hardly attract any labour. In essence, many Malawians opted to migrate for work in the more lucrative employment centres in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia. The major relief for the Nyasaland planters then came from the Alomwe labourers from Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) who migrated into the Malawi region, of which more later.

As discussed above, the performance of peasant agriculture in the face of European competition was nothing short of remarkable during the first half of the colonial period. The performance record becomes even more impressive when viewed against several impediments. Land *per se* was probably the gravest problem of all, but it was compounded by a host of other related problems such as, congestion, taxation, labour tenancy issues and some government legislative measures. The impact of these problems was felt differently by Africans on private estates as opposed to those on Crown Land.

It has been argued that land transfers of the late nineteenth century in Nyasaland proceeded through disreputable and dubious methods -- typical of the time.²⁴ European

²³Chirwa, "Garden of Eden."

speculators claimed to have purchased land from African chiefs, yet many African chiefs complained later about cheating, fraud and sheer ignorance of those land treaties. As a matter of fact, the myth of land purchase has no place in the pre-colonial history of Malawi. Chiefs were not owners of land but rather agents who supervised its distribution and redistribution in accordance with accepted principles.²⁵ The sense of loss and frustration expressed by these chiefs was only the genesis of African grievances against colonial rule about which later generations of chiefs and elders would reminisce, especially as African population grew and the effects of land alienation became increasingly felt.

In oral tradition, successive chiefs, elders, men and women, share a common view that the changes in land tenure patterns ushered in by the colonial system disrupted the traditional subsistence base their ancestors thrived on. It is hardly surprising that in oral testimonies today, elders do not mince words in drawing the connection between problems of food scarcity and land hunger, and the existence of estates in their midst. Even after so many players in the estate business have changed over the years, this discourse reveals the depth of awareness among the peasantry of the roots of their social and economic deprivation. As a woman from Thyolo district passionately observed:

...because the estate is right on our verandah, it has eaten up all the good fertile land and people do not have much to fall back on. People in my village have no land to cultivate. Even for me, the *mfumu* (village head), you cannot believe your eyes if you saw my own small patch of land--that

²⁴R.H. Palmer, "Johnston and Jameson: a Comparative Study in the Imposition of Colonial Rule," in B. Pachai (ed.), *The Early History of Malawi*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972): a classic case of the existence, or at least appearance of fraud in the early land deals is that of Fred Moir of the African Lakes Company. Fred Moir once claimed to have bought some ten million acres from a Yao chief Makandanji for the incredible sum of six pounds, p.311.

²⁵Pachai, *Land and Politics*, p.8

it belongs to the *mfumu*--it is too small. You see, people were forced out of this fertile land so that they--the *azungu* (Europeans/whitemen)--could grow their tea. Yes, the estate is the root of the problem of land shortage and the reason for hunger and starvation today.²⁶

Similarly, an elder from Chikumbu area in Mulanje reminisced about how Europeans in the beginning bribed local chiefs and how people were mercilessly evicted without any compensation.²⁷ For much of the twentieth century, patches of land available for African use have averaged 1 to 2 acres per household, for households averaging no less than five people.²⁸

As a clear reflection of the hard realities of the time, colonial office dispatches for much of the colonial period are replete with complaints by Africans about "agriculture becoming increasingly difficult."²⁹ During the precolonial period, Africans had been accustomed to the system of shifting cultivation, combined with intercropping, to raise different crops. Massive land alienation restricted shifting cultivation and intercropping.

Although shifting cultivation was condemned by colonial officials as a "wanton and heedless method" that damaged soil fertility, the marginalization of African peasants accomplished by land appropriation had even more destructive effects on conservation and the environment. Due to their inability to shift about sufficiently, African peasants were, on many occasions, compelled to encroach on reserved forest areas to open up new

²⁶Interview with Village Headman Kumadzi (a woman), Kumadzi Village, Kumadzi Estate, T.A. Kapichi, Thyolo district, 30.07.97.

²⁷Interview with John Jeremiah, Musisi Village, T.A. Chikumbu, Mulanje, 18.07.97.

²⁸Based on oral interviews conducted as part of the research for this study and reports of The Nyasaland Department of Agriculture, Malawi National Archives, Zomba.

gardens. However, this was not quite a solution because the practice was prohibited by the forest ordinances. Government forestry policy issued several restrictions in relation to reserved forest areas. According to agricultural rules published in 1931, the forest ordinance prohibited clearing, cultivating or breaking of land in specified areas.³⁰ These included all land within forest reserves; land within 30 yards of the upper edge of a bank of any river or stream; land on the tops and slopes of specific hills and mountains, whose clearing was considered to be harmful to the interests of the general public.

These rules, needless to say, created intense dissatisfaction among African communities in the vicinity of forest reserves who, quite naturally, did not take kindly to the idea of not being allowed to make gardens within them. To express their resentment and resistance against the measures, many Africans deliberately violated the forest laws. A report at the end of 1929, for example, described the effect of the bank law as “very unsatisfactory.”³¹ Among other things, the report noted that, although people did not readily cut or destroy large trees along the riverbanks, cultivation within the 30 yards strip was prevalent throughout all districts. In other words, the law had in effect become a dead letter. Cases of this nature, where behaviour of peasants rendered the law of the land almost ineffective, were quite common throughout the colonial period and sometimes led to policy changes and/or reforms. In the period after the Second World

²⁹See MNA A3/2/156 Department of Agriculture: Native Agriculture - General; also MNA S1/60B/32 District Annual Report, Cholo, 1931/32.

³⁰MNA A3/2/156 Department of Agriculture: Native Agriculture, 1931-1939.

³¹MNA A3/2/156; Also MNA S1/1040/19 “From the District Resident, Mlanje to the Acting Director of Agriculture, Zomba” District Annual Report, Mlanje 1919-20. The resident found the cutting down of trees by natives in the Luchenza area of the district deplorable and placed the blame squarely on the Forest *Capitao* for the area who, apparently “did not report these matters.”

War, as colonial development policy sought to transform peasant agriculture, peasants' encroachment on forestry and hill areas was part and parcel of their opposition to the new agricultural *malimidwe* policies.³² The hallmarks of peasant politics during the colonial period thus lay in such acts of defiance and calculated violations of colonial laws.

The bank law, discussed above illustrates how defiance could in practice lead to policy reform. With respect to this law, there was a growing sense of apathy even among government administrative officers who, though sympathetic to the principle and objects of the law, conceded that fertile soil was probably too scarce to allow for enforcement of the law.³³ The result was an abiding consensus that the law must be changed. Indeed, questions of amending the law were raised and pursued by the relevant officers.

Further to concerns of land scarcity, African peasants both on Crown Land and the private estates complained of congestion. After the initial land alienation of the 1890s, incidence of congestion, it may be argued, was to be expected sooner or later. Factors likely to cause congestion were natural population increase and the large influx of newcomers from outside the Protectorate especially, as we shall see, from Mozambican immigrants. Evictions of Africans from private estates to Crown Land (and conversely the mobility of peasants from Crown Land to private estates), and further alienation of land during the first half of the twentieth century, also increased congestion.³⁴

³² Interview with D.C. Mathewe, T.A. Nthiramanja, Mulanje District, July 1997. See chapter four for details.

³³ MNA A3/2/156 Native Agriculture, 1931.

³⁴ More land was alienated between 1912 and 1913, and at the end of the First World War, 1919-20. See MNA S1/403/20 Correspondences From Secretary of State to His Excellency, the Governor of Nyasaland Regarding Particulars of Land available for alienation, 1920.

The pressure on land available for African use became more and more unbearable with each successive decade. Between 1905 and 1913, the total population of the Shire Highlands increased from 168,584 to 275, 738, a total rise of 64 percent. The population of Blantyre district alone rose from 87,000 to 156,000 between 1904 and 1920, giving a rise in the density from 53.35 per square mile to 95.53; whilst in Zomba district during the same period the increase was from 46,000 to 102,000, and the density rose from 24.53 to 51.93.³⁵ By the 1930s, 50% of the Africans in Blantyre and Chiradzulu lived on the private estates and in Zomba an estimated 25% resided on the estates.³⁶ In Thyolo district slightly under 65% of the land was in private ownership by the 1930s and 57% of the gross population lived on that private land. More than half the adult males in the district were tenants on private estates, the majority of whom had settled as newcomers after the initial European occupation.³⁷ During the First World War the estate population increased considerably, largely because it was easier to avoid military carrier service there than on Crown Land.³⁸ This population growth created a scramble for the already inadequate land. The situation was further aggravated as more Crown Land was leased to Europeans between 1912 and 1914, and immediately after the War between 1919 and 1920, raising the number of Europeans engaged in agriculture in the country from 124 to 372.³⁹ Although the number of

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ MNA S1/411/33 From D.C. Blantyre to The Hon. Chief Secretary, Zomba 05/10/36

³⁷ MNA S1/411/33 Extract From the Cholo District Annual Report 1935

³⁸ MNA S1/403/20 Particulars of Land available for Alienation, 1920; MNA S11/1040/19 District Annual Report Mlanje, 1919-1920.

³⁹ *ibid*; R. Gray, *The Two Nations: Aspects of the Development of Race Relations in the Rhodesias and Nyasaland*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p.73.

European planters declined at the height of the Depression, the growth of the tea industry in the 1930s and 1940s meant that the contest over land and labour was far from over.

II

The Labour Question

In view of the demographic impact alluded to above, the immigration of alien natives into the Protectorate came to be construed, at least in some quarters, as a threat to the welfare and livelihood of already congested native settlements in the Shire Highlands.⁴⁰

Administration officials who looked at the immigrant factor from the labour supply point of view, however, did not share this view. The latter saw alien immigration as a panacea to the critical problem of labour supply in the Protectorate, a view that is also propounded by some Malawian labour historians.⁴¹

The immigration of alien natives, notably Alomwe or Anguru,⁴² from Portuguese East Africa (P.E.A.), present day Mozambique, into the Nyasaland Protectorate dates

⁴⁰MNA S1/60B/32 Cholo District Report.

⁴¹See for example, W.C. Chirwa, "Alomwe and Mozambican Immigrant Labor in Colonial Malawi, 1890s-1945," *The International Journal African Historical Studies*, Vol. 27, 3(1994), pp. 525-550.

⁴²People of various nationalities such as Alomwe, Asena, Ayao and Anyanja, emigrated from Mozambique into Malawi. However, the majority of those who settled in the Shire Highlands region were Alomwe or Anguru. It is believed that the name "Anguru" was given to them by the indigenous Amang'anja and Ayao communities, colonial officials, missionaries and settlers. With the passage of time, the term "Anguru" became coterminous with "native colonists" and "alien labour" or immigrants and had no direct relationship with ethnicity. The term "Anguru" therefore is used in this context to refer to alien labour. See W.C. Chirwa, "Alomwe and Mozambican Immigrant Labor," pp. 526-527; T. Galligan, "The Nguru Penetration into Nyasaland," in R.J. Macdonald (ed.), *From Nyasaland to Malawi: Studies in Colonial History*, (Nairobi: East African

back to the late nineteenth century. They came for two basic reasons. The first emanated from the demands and abuses of the semi-feudal systems imposed and administered by the chartered companies of P.E.A. The second was the comparatively attractive and more progressive economic and political systems found in Nyasaland.⁴³ At the same time, ecological factors, such as the famine of 1900/01 in P.E.A., played an important role in the Anguru immigration after 1900.⁴⁴

A point worth bearing in mind is that Anguru immigrated at different times and for different reasons. During the 1890s, for example, many of the Anguru immigrated as individual seasonal migrant labourers but, by the turn of the century, the pattern had changed as families left P.E.A. *en masse* for Nyasaland in order to find more congenial surroundings. Immigration levels intensified between 1900 and 1945.

The Anguru began to work on a regular basis in Nyasaland in 1892. It has been estimated that at least 100,000 Anguru entered Nyasaland in the first twenty years of the twentieth century.⁴⁵ The numbers of Anguru entering Nyasaland after 1920 are no less staggering. The official counts conducted in 1921, 1931 and 1945 placed the Anguru population in the Shire Highlands at 120,776, 235,616 and 479,678 respectively.⁴⁶ It is

Publishing House, 1975), pp. 108-111; T. Price, "The Name 'Anguru'" *The Nyasaland Journal*, Vol. 5, 1(1962), pp. 23-25.

⁴³G. Shepperson and T. Price, *Independent African*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press, 1958), p.192

⁴⁴Chirwa, "Alomwe and Mozambican Immigrant Labor," pp. 527-528; R.R. Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey of the British Colonial Empire*, Vol. II, (London: 1949), p.540.

⁴⁵Shepperson and Price, *Independent African*, p. 192.

⁴⁶Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey*, p.537; *Census Report*, 1931, p. 15.

further estimated that 46,209 people immigrated into Nyasaland in a three-year span, between 1922 and 1925.⁴⁷

Owing to their perceived importance to the Protectorate's economy, the Anguru were zealously welcomed and accommodated on both the private estates and the Crown Land, where they took up employment and other opportunities for earning cash. Mention has been made of the Protectorate's labour problems particularly on the Shire Highlands plantations. The Anguru benefited the Protectorate by increasing labour supply, but also by increasing the revenue collected through the hut tax.⁴⁸ The extent to which employers appreciated the beneficial effect of alien labour and its significance to the economy is reflected in the trend of events during the first three decades of the century. This is particularly true of the attitude of both employers and the administration towards the settlement of alien labour in the Protectorate. Various reports from this early period show that planters preferred Anguru labour to indigenous labour for a variety of reasons.

First, the supply of local labour was usually intermittent and, as such, unreliable for the labour-intensive plantation industry. Supply fluctuated with the yearly cycle of wet and dry seasons. Thus, there was a large surplus of labour available to Europeans during the dry season from March to November, but not during the wet season between December and February when Africans were busy tending their own gardens. The wet

⁴⁷*ibid.*

⁴⁸Galligan, "The Nguru Penetration," p.116; MNA S1/945/29 Report of the Select Committee; Hut tax figures for the whole Protectorate were as follows: 700 pounds in 1892; 16,756 pounds 4 shillings in 1900/01; 35,619 pounds in 1906/07; 36,605 pounds 17 shillings in 1907/08; 38,388 pounds 15 shillings in 1908/09; and 41,530 pounds in 1909/10: source: R. Boeder, *Alfred Sharpe of Nyasaland: Builder of Empire*, (Zomba, 1980), p. 125.

season was, of course, the time of the year when estates needed the most labour. Some settlers attested to the seriousness of the situation:

With agriculture, not only in Nyasaland but all over the world, at certain times of the year you must have an efficient force of labour you can call out at any moment... a serious loss of labour, especially during the wet season, would be fatal to the tea estates.⁴⁹

Mr. Conforzi stressed the point further by referring to his twenty-seven years of practical experience with labour in the country. He stated in 1934 "that the planting industry in Cholo and Mlanje [is] completely dependent on alien labour, and that any drastic measure taken against that will mean the closing down of all tea estates."⁵⁰

The settlers, thus, had every reason to encourage incoming Anguru to settle and pick up jobs on the estates particularly during peak periods. This was especially true because the Anguru, as a captive labour force running away from P.E.A. and seeking a right of residence in Nyasaland, were willing to accept and work for a low wage which indigenous natives ordinarily deemed unacceptable.⁵¹

Quite apart from cost-effectiveness, the Anguru became increasingly attractive based on the widespread belief among the plantation community that the Anguru labourer was more efficient and hardworking than local labour.⁵² As K.L. Hall, acting Governor of Nyasaland in the early 1930s put it,

⁴⁹Messrs. I. Conforzi and G.V. Thorneycroft of the Nyasaland Tea Association and the Zomba Planters' Association, respectively, MNA S1/945/29 Minutes of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council, 1934.

⁵⁰*ibid.*

⁵¹Baker, *Seeds of Trouble*, p.12

⁵²Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey*, pp. 540-545; MNA S1/945/29.

there seems to be nobody who disputes the point that a native works better outside his own country, and presumably away from home associations.⁵³

Furthermore, Anguru labourers were prepared to do most of the rough work that no Nyasaland labourer would do. This was first observed shortly after the First World War when many local natives refused to accept employment except as *Capitao*.⁵⁴ The trend seems to have persisted to the 1930s as one settler in the Protectorate at the time observed:

At the present time the Anguru labour on tea estates are only doing the very rough work--work which no Nyasaland labourer will do. There is plenty of Nyasaland labour for soft jobs or skilled work, but there are no Nyasaland natives, to speak about, who will do the rough work, and 75%, or probably 80% of the work on tea estates is represented by rough work.⁵⁵

During the peak period the Anguru constituted 80 percent of the labour on the estates, while local labour went down as far as 20 percent, of which only 10 percent did field

⁵³MNA S1/945/29 Alien Labour. During the 1950s planters still complained about lack of enthusiasm and unwillingness of the African working longer hours when employed in his own country than was the case when employed elsewhere: PCS 1/2/22 Mlanje District Production Plan, 1951. Whatever truth lies in these claims may be difficult to ascertain. It is worth noting, however, that this wave of opinion was not just unique to Nyasaland. A report from Southern Rhodesia during the same period had this to say: "Employers show a marked preference for non-indigenous natives. These natives work for longer periods and are considered more reliable. This has given rise to the erroneous idea that the natives of Southern Rhodesia are constitutionally lazy and unreliable, as compared to those who come from the north. That is not so. All there is in it is that so long as a native is working near his home, its attractions prove too strong for him and he usually undertakes short periods of work only. So when our natives wonder far afield to Johannesburg and other places, they remain at work for protracted periods and are just as popular as labourers in adjoining states, as non-indigenous natives are in this colony." S1/945/29.

⁵⁴MNA S1/1040/19 District Annual Report, Mlanje 1919/20. A *capitao* performs clerical or supervisory duties.

⁵⁵MNA S1/945/29

work and the other 10% skilled labour.⁵⁶ Mr. Carnie King, a tea planter in Cholo during the 1930s, conducted a simple survey on his estate and reported that only 11% of Anguru labour were engaged in specialist work and 89% in manual labour; while 58% of Nyasaland labour did specialist work as compared to 42% in manual labour.⁵⁷

In the light of the increasing importance attached to Anguru labour, it seems plausible to argue that the ever-pressing labour-supply needs, coupled with the revenue returns associated with the Anguru, overshadowed the obvious dangers uncontrolled immigration might have on land and hence on the welfare of local African peasants. The impact of Anguru immigration on land in the Shire Highlands was bound to remain neglected for as long as the labour situation remained precarious. One may thus subscribe to Galligan's theory that these motives led to the suppression and denial of the effects of unregulated Anguru immigration on land by colonial authorities.⁵⁸ The government had been aware of the dangers of overcrowding and congestion posed by increasing levels of immigration. That no serious attempt was taken, until the late 1920s, to avoid the potential hazards of immigration is remarkable testament to the government's hidden agenda in its handling of the labour situation.

Up to 1912, the colonial administration in Nyasaland pursued something of a *laissez-faire* policy in allowing immigrants to settle as they wished either on Crown Land or on private estates. By 1912, when the Crown Lands Ordinance was passed, the administration, apparently aware of the diminishing Crown Land area and the threat of

⁵⁶Nyasaland Protectorate, *Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly*, (Zomba, 1934).

⁵⁷Evidence given by Mr. Carnie King, a planter in Cholo, *ibid.* p. 5.

⁵⁸Galligan, "The Nguru Penetration."

congestion owing to Anguru settlement, began to favour the settlement of Anguru on private estates and discouraged them from entering Crown Land. Since the government did not wish to interfere with the flow of labour so essential to the plantation community, these measures were, to say the least, piecemeal and largely ineffective. For example, the government proposed the creation of “native reserves” in the Central and Northern Provinces away from the Shire Highlands.⁵⁹ It was hoped that the creation of reserves would limit the amount of land available for the immigrants and would consequently force them into the private estates or back to Portuguese East Africa. In this also lurked the motivation that the measure would drive the Anguru immigrant to accept any terms from private estates as long as he was free of the possibility of return to the “barbaric ferocity” of Portuguese administration. In that case, the labour needs of the planters would be duly served.

Unfortunately, the proposal was turned down by the Secretary of State for the colonies who feared that it would only increase immigration:

In stating in my dispatch... that I was in favour of the most ample provision for Native Reserves and in approving of the policy suggested by you with a view to securing such Reserves, I had in mind the needs of the natives of Nyasaland only, and by no means contemplated the provision of land for immigrant natives from foreign territories.⁶⁰

The local administration in Nyasaland then deferred to the Colonial Office’s decision and prohibited the Anguru from settling on Crown Lands. The decision was further used as a pretext to encourage the immigrants to settle on the white estates, with the helping hand

⁵⁹“Crown Land Reserves,” *The Nyasaland Times*, April/May 1912.

⁶⁰Galligan, “The Nguru Penetration,” p.122; “Crown Lands Ordinance,” *The Nyasaland Times*, April 12, 1912.

of chiefs in border districts who were duly instructed not to allocate parts of Crown Land under their control to new immigrants, and to cooperate with district commissioners in repatriating “undesired aliens.”⁶¹

These measures did not help ease the problem of congestion much as immigration, according to reported figures, was by no means retarded.⁶² No proper mechanism existed to identify a local from an immigrant and, above all, the immigrants developed various ways of circumventing repatriation. It was all too easy for some immigrants after being repatriated to re-enter the Protectorate without being detected. Single males and young boys resorted to marrying local women in order to acquire land and became residents. Others bribed local headmen to register them as indigenous taxpayers or bought tax certificates from friends and relatives to prove their domicile status.⁶³

Immigration therefore continued unabated, especially with the outbreak of the First World War which imposed conditions that created a serious labour shortage in Nyasaland. Thousands of Africans were employed on carrier transport work for the war effort or as support workers for the East African campaign. As a result, the employment of immigrants spread rapidly in the Protectorate. After the war new settlers took up more land and the consequent labour shortage did nothing to discourage the employment of

⁶¹Chirwa, “Alomwe and Mozambican Labor,” p.539; Galligan, “The Nguru Penetration,” p. 122.

⁶²Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey*, pp. 538-543.

⁶³Nyasaland Government, *Reports of Provincial Commissioners 1937*; Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey*, pp. 541-42; according to the 1937 Commissioners’ report, three people were convicted and fined in Mlanje district for selling their tax receipts to natives of Portuguese East Africa anxious to acquire a Nyasaland domicile.

Anguru immigrants. Moreover the production of tobacco by Africans in the Central Province absorbed much of the labour which formerly came from there to work in the Southern Province, on the Shire Highlands estates in particular.⁶⁴ Within the Southern Province, there was a growing sense of resistance to wage labour and proletarianization after the First World War. The District Commissioner for Mlanje had this to report in 1920:

The natives, at any rate a large proportion of them, have learnt many things from contact with Europeans during the war and these, more or less educated natives are not satisfied with the small advance in wages when they see the enormous increase in price of clothes and other native goods at the stores.... As a result of wages, pensions and gratuities paid for war work there is plenty - money in the villages and more natives than ever before find themselves under no necessity to work for Europeans.

On the labour situation on the estates, the commissioner further stated:

During this last year nearly every planter in the district complained of shortage of labour, in most cases not having more than half the number they required, and as during this ensuing year the number of planters will probably be increased by about 25%, the question of labour will become a very serious problem.⁶⁵

⁶⁴MNA S1/945/29 Proceedings of the Legislative Council. For details on the development of African cash cropping in the Central Province, see K.J. McCracken, "Peasants, Planters and the Colonial State: The Case of Malawi, 1905-1940," *Journal of East African Research and Development*, Vol. 12, (1982), pp. 21-35; also by the same author, "Planters, Peasants and the Colonial State: The Impact of the Native Tobacco Board in the Central Province of Malawi," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 9, 2(1983); and "Share-cropping in Malawi: The Visiting Tenant System in the Central Province, 1920-1968," in African Studies Centre (ed.), *Malawi: An Alternative Pattern of Development*, (Edinburgh: African Studies Centre, 1985).

⁶⁵ MNA S1/1040/19 District Annual Report, Mlanje 1919-20. For local Africans' attitudes towards wage employment, see chapter four. The white population in Nyasaland was usually small, but increased enormously during the inter-war period: 314 in 1901; 766 in 1911; 1,486 in 1921; 1,656 in 1926; 1,975 in 1931; and 1,948 in 1945.

This meant the Anguru immigrants became the most valuable and important source of labour in Nyasaland. As their numbers increased in the post-War period, so did the threat to the country's natural resources and hence to the welfare of indigenous African peasants. However, in the interest of satisfying the labour needs of the plantation community, officials continued to deny the existence of any threat to the land posed by the increased influx of Anguru. In 1920, for example, a land commission made a very thorough study of future African land needs in the Protectorate. The study based its population forecast entirely on natural increase but emphatically concluded that the effect of immigration or emigration on the total population over the whole Protectorate was not great.⁶⁶

On a different but related scale, in the census of 1921 the effect of immigration on the total population count was revealed and properly acknowledged in the final report, but like other public documents in circulation at the time, the impact of immigration on the carrying capacity of the land was ignored. The Superintendent of the census argued that he saw no danger of overcrowding:

... in a country like Nyasaland there is no possibility of nature failing to supply food for an almost illimitable population.⁶⁷

Three years later, another commission spoke of "the numerous immigrants from Portuguese East Africa, mostly Anguru but did not mention the effects of immigration in

See R. Palmer, "White Farmers in Malawi: Before and After the Depression," *African Affairs*, Vol. 85, (1986), p. 215.

⁶⁶Nyasaland Protectorate, *Report of a Commission Appointed by His Excellency the Governor to Enquire into and Report upon certain Matters connected with the Occupation of Land in the Nyasaland Protectorate*, (Zomba, 1921), p. 3.

its extensive analysis of the native land problem.”⁶⁸ It was only after 1925, nearly three decades since the beginning of the Anguru immigration, that officials began publicly calling attention to the dangers of immigration. The advantages and disadvantages of immigration were summarized as follows:

In many parts of the Southern Province the chief source of labour is Portuguese East Africa, whence many natives immigrate yearly to work on the various plantations in Nyasaland, and many of these natives remain permanently either as settlers on private land or, with the permission of the authorities, on Crown land. This process of permanent and semi-permanent infiltration of alien natives has a beneficial effect on the labour supply. Indeed, without this source of supply in some districts, the labour problem would become extremely acute. But on the other hand, the settlement of thousands of natives in the very areas where Crown land is least plentiful is creating a serious state of congestion in many places, and a position has arisen which is receiving the closest attention of the Government.⁶⁹

These observations signaled a clear shift in government’s immigration policy, which began to encourage the Anguru to enter the Protectorate as labourers but not settlers. By the terms of the District Administration (Native) Ordinance of 1924, District Commissioners were instructed to make fuller use of their powers than they had been doing, to control settlement and in particular to take disciplinary action against village headmen who permitted unauthorized settlement and failed to report new-comers.⁷⁰ It

⁶⁷Nyasaland Protectorate, Excerpts from a Census Report of 1921; Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey*, pp. 538-539.

⁶⁸Cited in Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey*, p. 539.

⁶⁹Nyasaland Protectorate, *Nyasaland Colonial Report, 1924* p.9; Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey*, p.539.

⁷⁰In border districts, notably Mlanje and Cholo, some chiefs, village headmen and many of their people had themselves hailed from Portuguese territory. As a result there was a growing proclivity among them to shield immigrants, mostly their own relatives from Portuguese territory. See MNA S1/411^{II}/33 Reports of District Commissioners, 1933.

appears that these new measures were simply too little and too late to significantly affect the land situation as so much damage had already occurred. The Anguru, moreover, were not content with entering the Protectorate for the purpose of seeking temporary employment; largely, they wanted permanent settlement and as we have seen, had developed effective ways of evading repatriation. Their numbers therefore continued to rise such that between 1926 and 1931, immigration became so great that it depleted the area available for the needs of the indigenous population, resulting in further deforestation, the cultivation of hills and slopes, and soil erosion.⁷¹ For example, by 1936 the Anguru in the Mlanje district numbered about 100,000 or 75 percent of the total population.⁷²

Part of the problem for continued rapid immigration lay in government's commitment to an ideal of regulating alien immigration without interfering with the labour supply of the planting community. The planting community defended alien labour, without which many estates would close down. When government, for instance, proposed in 1934 mandatory taxation on all Anguru upon their entry into the Protectorate,⁷³ the planters vehemently opposed the proposal on the grounds that it would

⁷¹The majority of those cultivating hilltops were the Anguru new comers. See Nyasaland Protectorate, Report on Population Census, 1931; Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey*, p. 537.

⁷²Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey*, p. 541.

⁷³The 1921 Hut Tax Ordinance allowed six months' residence in the Protectorate, before an alien native became liable to pay poll tax (which was understood to have been a longer period than given in other Eastern African dependencies). The period was extended to 12 months in 1926, and to 12 consecutive months in 1933. Under the 1934 proposals, an alien native would be liable to pay the six shillings hut tax, which every Nyasaland native were subjected to, the moment he entered the Protectorate. See MNA S1/945/29 Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, 1934.

upset the labour situation. By the beginning of the Second World War, the question of the control of alien labour coming into the Protectorate was still unresolved.⁷⁴ To all intents and purposes, then, the need to secure regular labour supply to the planting community took precedence over matters of peasants' land requirements, the very basis of their subsistence. This laid the groundwork for crises which will be explored in subsequent chapters.

III

The Resilience of the Peasantry

Needless to say, land shortage and congestion had constrained foodstuff production. Evidently, government had been aware of the adverse effects of land alienation, land shortage and uncontrolled immigration on peasants' livelihood, particularly in ways production of native foodstuffs was affected. However, the government tacitly avoided the issue by identifying factors other than land shortage as the likely threats to peasants' food security. Four bills passed by the legislature between 1910 and 1930 suggest that an atmosphere of panic and caution about a serious shortage in native foodstuffs loomed large in government cycles during this period. Government's considered view was that food security in the Protectorate had to be guaranteed by legislation. The Intoxicating Liquor Ordinance 1911, The Native Foodstuffs Ordinance 1912, The Native Foodstuff (Amendment) Ordinance 1920, and The District Administration (Native) Ordinance 1924, shared one fundamental principle in common: preservation of native foodstuffs to

⁷⁴Proceedings of the Legislative Council, 1938: Governor's address.

avoid a food shortage at all costs.⁷⁵ A food shortage was bound to occur as a result of land shortage and congestion aggravated by the influx of alien labour. However, the Nyasaland government did not see the imminence of food shortage in terms of the effects of land alienation or immigration. Rather, it pointed to three factors which, it was felt, were having a negative impact on the supply of native foodstuffs.

First, government officials blamed food shortages on native preference for growing cash crops, such as cotton and tobacco, over growing food crops, especially maize. Cotton and tobacco were preferred for being more lucrative than the latter, although there is evidence suggesting that some natives preferred maize because it was both money and food. This was particularly the case during the post-War II period, to which we shall return in another chapter. Second, government asserted that wasteful use of food supplies by natives through the brewing of native beer or other intoxicating native liquor threatened food security.⁷⁶ Finally, unregulated sale of foodstuffs to Indian traders/middlemen and other employers of labour such as the planting community, who needed large supplies of foodstuffs to feed their labourers, was seen as another possible cause of food shortage. On the basis of these prescriptions, the government developed measures to “protect” the native community in times of abnormal scarcity, without harming plantation labour supplies.

⁷⁵MNA S1/1474/19 Foodstuffs Production 1919-20; S1/545/28 Foodstuffs Supplies, 1928-1930; *The Nyasaland Times* “The Foodstuffs Ordinance”, 04/03/20 and 18/03/20.

⁷⁶I argue in chapters five and six that from the point of view of African women, native beer brewing was the basic source of income and a major strategy for survival. For others, it was even the springboard to success and advancement. Interview with C. Mukhuma and D. Nambazo, Mulanje District, July 1997.

The 1911 Intoxicating Liquor Ordinance, for example, provided that “where in any district a shortage of native foodstuffs is threatened the District Commissioner may by order prohibit the sale or manufacture of native beer or other native intoxicating liquor made of or derived from such native foodstuffs.” In the same spirit, the 1912 Native Foodstuffs Ordinance stipulated, in part, that:

where it has been made to appear to the Governor in Council that any district or area is suffering from or threatened with a shortage of native foodstuffs he may by Proclamation in the Gazette prohibit the purchase or barter of such foodstuffs from natives for the purpose of resale in or export from the district or area in such Proclamation specified unless the written permission of the District Resident be first had and obtained.⁷⁷

The aim of the 1912 Foodstuffs Ordinance was to secure the control of the sale and distribution of native foodstuffs in times of shortage. The Native Foodstuffs Ordinance 1920 aimed to control the sale and distribution of surplus crops.⁷⁸ “Surplus crop” meant the amount over and above what was required by the growers for their domestic necessities and those of their dependents. The bill sought to restrict the marketing of foodstuffs and its provisions deprived Africans of freedom of choice in disposing of their surplus foodstuffs. Natives could only sell their surplus foodstuffs to authorized agencies at a price fixed by a Board appointed by the Governor.

Although the Bill was passed into law in 1920, members of the public and the planting community vehemently opposed it. The NCAC issued the most ardent criticism. In the language of the Chamber’s petition,

The Bill constituted an unwarrantable interference with the right of the native producer to sell his produce in the best market and is therefore

⁷⁷MNA S1/545/28 Nyasaland Protectorate, The Native Foodstuffs Ordinance, 1912.

⁷⁸MNA S1/1474/19 Attorney-General’s Report, 1920.

unjust to the native grower. Considering the high prices he has to pay for all European goods and the probability of increased taxation, your Petitioners are of opinion that the native producer is entitled to reap the full benefit of a free and unrestricted market for his produce.⁷⁹

The Chamber further observed that the powers conferred on Government under the Native Foodstuffs Ordinance (1912) were sufficient to protect the native community in times of abnormal scarcity and that the amended Ordinance (1920) would interfere with the right of every section of the community to purchase any surplus maize (foodstuffs) at the ordinary market price. Most likely, the Chamber's position under normal circumstances would have found favour with members of the general public and the native community whose interests it was representing in this particular instance. But its own history as the mouthpiece of the European planters gave rise to a climate of skepticism in believing its arguments as being entirely sincere. First, planters were an interested party in the foodstuffs sale for the sake of their labourers. Second, not long before the Foodstuffs (Amendment) Bill was tabled, the Chamber was on record, lobbying for the restrictions on the cultivation of tobacco by natives.⁸⁰

Essentially, the Chamber wanted to protect European tobacco production from African competition as more and more African growers on Crown Land were turning to tobacco. By lobbying for a free market in foodstuffs, the Chamber hoped to encourage native foodstuffs production, and to thereby deflect them from tobacco production. Labour imperative also existed in the Chamber's position. If Africans were permitted to

⁷⁹MNA S1/1474/19 Petition: From the Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce to His Excellency, the Governor and Members of the Legislative Council.

⁸⁰S1/1474/19 Memorandum: From the Secretariat - Nyasaland Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce to the Acting Chief Secretary to the Government, 29/10/19.

grow tobacco for cash they would be less willing to work for wages on the estates.

Against this background, it seems fair to conclude that the Chamber's opposition to the Bill was mainly to enlist outside sympathy against a measure that the planters disliked for purely private reasons.⁸¹

Ideally, perhaps by default, the Government and the Chamber shared a common purpose--to protect the interests of the planting community--but pursued different strategies. The government protected the labour needs of planters by suppressing the adverse effects of land alienation and alien immigration on indigenous natives. This was done by tacitly shifting the blame to other factors as the real threats to the welfare of natives. The Chamber, on the other hand, fought for a European monopoly in tobacco production. Both the Liquor and the Foodstuffs Ordinances were invoked and applied at the end of the 1920s in Blantyre, Chiradzulu, Cholo and Mlanje districts. There were indications of a possible food shortage in the Protectorate at the end of the 1927/28 season, partly due to successive poor rainfall seasons, although the official forecast of the food shortage gave much credence to factors that justified the application of ordinances. For example, the production of tobacco by African growers was blamed for the impending food shortage.

⁸¹See Attorney-General's Report MNA S1/1474/19. The Nyasaland Tobacco Association adopted a similar approach to enlist financial support from government for the flue-cured tobacco industry in the wake of production problems. Among other things, the association contended that the industry deserved enormous governmental support because it was not only instrumental in the economic development of Nyasaland but also, and more significantly, crucial to the material welfare of the native. It attracted revenue in respect to imports and provided livelihood for "thousands" of natives who "sojourned" as labourers on the estates. Its expansion would therefore boost the natives' material welfare. MNA L2/48/8 The Nyasaland Tobacco Association, Annual general Meeting, June 1944; Minutes of the Nyasaland Tobacco Association, August 1944, *The Nyasaland Times*, 11/09/44.

Officials of the Department of Agriculture acknowledged in the 1927/28 season that there had been an apparent apathy among African peasants towards maize growing. Appeals by the Department to plant more maize went unheeded. Most Africans who had planted tobacco the year before, wanted to continue doing so. African growers, it was observed, firmly held to the idea that “their tobacco patch will bring in the money for their hut tax, and bring it earlier than maize does, which comes into the market later than tobacco.”⁸² According to the Director of Agriculture’s report, tobacco was also preferred by old men, cripples and the infirm, who said they were able to look after their small patch of tobacco more easily than a bigger field of maize, and that it brought in the money for their hut tax.⁸³ This behaviour demonstrates the innovative response of Africans to the complexities of colonialism and as a part of the broad process of negotiation for a better livelihood.

Indeed, the African tobacco industry had reached unprecedented heights by the beginning of the Great Depression when many European tobacco estates were actually closing down. European flue-cured tobacco production ran into difficulties from the early 1920s. Due to post-war inflation, prices of agricultural inputs soared, particularly artificial fertilizers, which had to be imported into the country. This, coupled with the exceptionally high freight charges levied by the Nyasaland railways, made it hard for

⁸²MNA S1/1022/27 From the Agricultural Supervisor, Mlanje, to the Director of Agriculture, Zomba, 28/07/27.

⁸³Nyasaland Protectorate, *Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture, 1927*. A reverse situation occurred in the period after the Second World War when peasants clung more to maize production than the official maize policy allowed for at the time. See chapters four and five.

white farmers in Nyasaland to stay in production.⁸⁴ As production costs made the flue-cured tobacco industry less competitive, big landowners resorted to encouraging cultivation of fire-cured tobacco by their African tenants, which they purchased and re-sold at a profit. This practice provided direct incentives to the local industry and accounted for its remarkable growth between 1924 and 1927, during which African tobacco production rose from 1,176,000 to 7,805,000 pounds.⁸⁵

The emergence of tobacco cultivation on a sharecropping basis in the 1920s also played a catalytic role in the growth of the African tobacco industry. Many white farmers moved out of direct production, becoming “middlemen” between African growers and the market. The capricious nature of direct production steered the settler planters towards inviting their tenants to grow tobacco under a sharecropping agreement. The system developed first in the Central Province of the Protectorate but later spread to the Southern Province. Those who have explored the dynamics of sharecropping arrangements in Africa generally agree that the system could be advantageous to both landlord and

⁸⁴MNA A3/2/271 “History and Development of the Tobacco Industry in Nyasaland,” p.3; Palmer, “White Farmers in Malawi,” pp. 235-237. By 1922, it was noted that used lands on the European estates had become deficient in plant nutrients and organic matter. For the first time in the history of the tobacco industry, expensive fertilizers, rated at £25-30 per ton, had to be used. Interestingly, peasant growers were not affected in the same way, for they found it easier to rotate tobacco with their food crops, with the startling result that their fire-cured tobacco industry expanded rapidly after 1924.

⁸⁵J.C. Mills and D.B. Gupta, “The Economic History of Malawi: Selected Topics,” (unpublished manuscript), Chancellor College, 1977, p.30. There were some planters, however, who still feared expanding African cultivation of tobacco as a competitor for estate labour. They argued that the sheer necessity of maximizing production would lead to inferior quality tobacco being produced and in effect injure the reputation of all Nyasaland tobacco abroad. They recommended to the government that African production be controlled by some legislative restriction on the productive levels of individual smallholders. See Havilland, “The Rise of the African Tobacco Industry,” p.145 and Rangeley, “A Brief History of the Tobacco Industry,” p.78.

tenant.⁸⁶ As Keegan has argued for South Africa, the system was essentially a halfway house for the undercapitalized landholder and the dispossessed tenant:

sharecropping was a compromise between whites who lacked sufficient capital to acquire equipment and to secure an adequate labour force and blacks with the labour, resources and skills to take advantage of the abundance of land which whites controlled.⁸⁷

In Malawi in the 1920s, sharecropping became the best way for many landlords to make their estates pay. The benefits of the system to the tenant were realized right from its inception in the 1920s. Enterprising tenants could earn up to £7 annually, about twice the annual wage of an ordinary plantation labourer at the time.⁸⁸ In the 1950s, enterprise assumed new dimensions for some Africans who moved beyond sharecropping to individual enterprise under the Master Farmers' Scheme, which though productive was a tension-ridden enterprise.

IV

The Case of Africans on Private Estates

*... a tenant on a private estate is not a free agent...*⁸⁹

The private estates were one easily identifiable arena where tensions and conflicts generated by land alienation and its attendant labour bottlenecks played out quite

⁸⁶See for example, K.J. McCracken, "Share-cropping in Malawi: the Visiting Tenant System in the Central Province, 1920-1968"; Chirwa, "'The Garden of Eden'."

⁸⁷ T. Keegan, *Rural Transformation in Industrializing South Africa*, (Houndmills: MacMillan Press, 1987), p. 198.

⁸⁸Chirwa, "'The Garden of Eden'," p.273.

⁸⁹ MNA S1/60E/32 Cholo District Annual Report, 1935.

significantly. The feelings of dissatisfaction and resentment expressed by Africans on the private estates provide a useful benchmark for examining the effects and disruption caused by colonial policies. As tenants, Africans on private estates resented the social and economic restrictions placed upon them, the insecurity of their tenure, and the obligation to pay annual rent, either in cash or labour.

As we have seen, once the Protectorate had been demarcated into Crown Land and private estates, estate owners became passionately interested in the labour supply of Africans resident on their estates. This quickly saw the conversion of Africans into squatters or tenants and the evolution of *thangata* labour-rent tenancy. In the period before the outbreak of the Second World War, a series of bills were enacted and passed into law to regulate the position of Africans on private estates. These included the Lands (Native Locations) Ordinance of 1904, the Native Tenants (Agreement) Ordinance of 1914, the Native Rents (Private Estates) Ordinance of 1917 and the Natives on Private estates Ordinance of 1928.⁹⁰ The latter two are particularly instructive on the question of natives on private estates and therefore necessitate further elaboration.

The 1917 Native Rents (Private Estates) Ordinance came in the wake of a report on the 1915 Chilembwe (Native) Uprising in Chiradzulu district, which disapproved of the agreements to provide labour in return for residential rights.⁹¹ The report recommended, *inter alia*, that work in lieu of money be abolished except at the tenant's

⁹⁰MNA S2/12/31 Natives: Evolution of Tenure, 1931; S1/596/26 Natives on Private Estates, 1926-1932; S1/385/23 Security of Tenure, 1923-1924; S1/411^{II}/33 Natives on Private estates.

⁹¹Nyasaland Government, *The Nyasaland Native Rising Commission*, (Zomba: The Government Printer, 1916). For details on the uprising, see also Shepperson and Price, *Independent African*.

choice, that fair rents be established, and that eviction from estates should only be by order of a court after reasonable notice to quit had been given. Consequently, the major elements of the 1917 Ordinance were, first, the banning of compulsory labour in lieu of rent. In theory, the Ordinance made *thangata* illegal, separating the concept of landlord and tenant from that of employer and employee. Second, it empowered landlords to charge rent within limits set by government. Third, it provided for six months' notice to quit, with summary eviction by the Resident (District Commissioner) thereafter. Under the terms of the Ordinance every tenant would, as well, be entitled to a site, building materials for a hut and sufficient cultivable land for the tenant and his family's sustenance.⁹²

Through the Nyasaland Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce, planters rejected all provisions in the Ordinance aimed at abolishing labour tenancy and delayed the implementation of a watered-down version of the Ordinance for over a year.⁹³ By the beginning of the 1920s, it was clear that the Ordinance had failed to achieve its objectives. Most Africans on private estates still lived as *thangata* tenants and eviction orders had caused "a good deal of bad feeling and friction existing between natives and Europeans."⁹⁴ The Jackson Commission of 1920 similarly concluded that the Ordinance of 1917 had failed to introduce tenancy by rent only, because landowners wanted labour

⁹²MNA S1/596/26 Native Tenants on Private Estates; S1/411/33 Treatment of Tenants on Private Estates; S1/172/19 Native Rents (Private Estates) Ordinance 1917.

⁹³MNA S1/172/19 Correspondence Between Secretary, NCAC and Chief Secretary to the Government, Zomba, 1916. See also Palmer, "White Farmers in Malawi," p.219.

⁹⁴MNA S1/1231/23 Eviction of Natives from Privately owned Land -- Extract from the Cholo District, 1923; Nyasaland Government, *Report of a Land Commission, 1921*.

not rent: "we must accept the fact that for the time being labour is the only return for which the owners of agricultural estates will accept native tenants."⁹⁵

The 1928 Ordinance was therefore enacted as a corrective measure to the unsettling question of the position of Africans on alienated land. It was meant to strike a compromise settlement between interests of the landowners on the one hand and those of Government and natives on the other. Both the Jackson Commission (1920) and the East African Commission (1924) had made recommendations aimed at redressing the uneasy relationships between European landlords and African labourers (tenants) on private estates. One of their recommendations was that lands already alienated should be re-acquired by purchase. Even before the latter commission was convened, Sir Charles Bowring, governor of Nyasaland in 1924, had proposed introduction of interim legislation to amend the Native Rents (Private Estates) Ordinance of 1917 aimed at preventing eviction of Africans from private estates until accommodation was available elsewhere.⁹⁶

Differences in opinion on the matter among different interest groups delayed implementation of the recommendations. The colonial office intervened in 1926, instructing the local administration in Nyasaland to introduce an ordinance, regulating the position of Africans residing on private estates. Aware of the impending legislation, which would be based on the Commissions' recommendations and the Governor's proposals, the Nyasaland Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce proposed various alternative solutions which were ultimately accommodated in the draft Ordinance of

⁹⁵Cited in Pachai, *Land and Politics*, p.109.

1928.⁹⁷ It suggested, among other things, that all freeholders be prepared to house a definite number of Africans on their estates. This number was to be arrived at by taking one-tenth of their acreage and dividing it into 8 acre-plots. These plots would then be allotted to hut holders. For example, a thousand-acre estate would guarantee to house a minimum of 12 huts. In return, the Government would allow the landowner to have a definite *thangata* arrangement with these hut owners, or where desired it could be commuted for a money payment. The Chamber further resolved that the Government had to agree that if any of these natives defaulted, either as regards their work or their payment, they should be held to have broken their agreement and be liable to be removed from the estate. Government would also have a say in the amount of labour to be exacted and as regards the amount of cash rental.

After lengthy negotiations with the Colonial Office, the Natives on Private Estates Ordinance of 1928 was introduced. In effect, it repealed the Native Lands Ordinance of 1904 and the Native Rents (Private Estates) Ordinance of 1917. Furthermore, it provided for three categories of African occupancy of private estates. The first category was “exempted natives”--domestic and temporary labourers who lived in huts erected solely for use of temporary labour. The second encompassed those whose residence was regulated by a “special agreement,” a written contract to work for a definite period (a period of no more than six months in every year). The third was “resident natives,” those

⁹⁶ *ibid.* p.112. The Governor’s proposal and the Commission’s recommendations met stiff opposition from the planting community.

⁹⁷MNA S1/596/26 Memorandum of the Committee of the Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce meeting, March 20, 1926.

who lived permanently on the estates. In short, these were referred to as Class A tenants, while those under “special agreement” were called Class B tenants.⁹⁸

Under the 1928 Ordinance, resident Africans were liable to pay rent for the equivalent of between two and three months’ average agricultural worker’s pay. Besides their entitlement to a site, building materials, cultivable land sufficient for sustenance, and compensation for disturbance, residents could also ask for work or facilities for growing economic crops, the sale of which entitled them to a partial or complete rebate of their rent. If the landowner refused labour or facilities for growing economic crops, his rent claim disappeared.⁹⁹ The Ordinance also obliged the government to find land for evicted Africans.

The 1928 Ordinance was, by and large, a major improvement on anything that existed before it. It nevertheless fell short of solving the problem of Africans on private estates. Its weaknesses were exposed in the 1930s as African discontent grew on private estates. From the preponderance of grievances and a litany of complaints by tenants recorded by District Commissioners in the Shire Highlands districts during the 1930s, clearly the problems were far from resolved. The complaints raised by tenants were too numerous to be recounted here case by case, but they can be catalogued as falling into four patterns. The first strand involved the application of clauses relating to provision of gardens or building materials, and the growing of economic crops or foodstuffs for sale. The second concerned residential rights of young men raised on the estates and the prohibition of marriages between girls born on the estates and intending bridegrooms

⁹⁸S1/596/26 Natives on Private Estates: Extract from Proceedings of the Legislative Council, 1927.

from outside the estate. The third category concerned employment and rental obligations and finally, the fourth, were complaints about harsh treatment meted out by estate managers on their tenants.¹⁰⁰

With regard to the first, tenants lamented about their soils being exhausted and the denial by landowners to provide new lands for their gardens. This, at the time when “plenty of good land” was lying fallow, amounted to a system of resource abuse which tenants thought intolerable. Worse still, whenever they took it upon themselves and planted in good places of their choice, the estate agent uprooted their crops. “We do not think this is just,” was the refrain characteristic of tenants’ responses.¹⁰¹ Perhaps what tenants resented most was the restriction placed on what crops they could grow and the total prohibition of some economic crops. The BCA Company and the A.J. Tennett Estates, for example, objected to the growing of maize and other foodstuffs for profit. Tenants were only permitted to grow foodstuffs sufficient for their consumption and rarely some cash crops specified by landowners were permitted, varying from season to season.¹⁰²

⁹⁹Abrahams Land Commission Report, 1946, cited in Pachai, *Land and Politics*, p.119.

¹⁰⁰The complaints in question were common on both tobacco and tea estates in all five districts in the Shire Highlands, Blantyre, Chiradzulu, Cholo, Mlanje and Zomba. See MNA S1/411^{II}/33 *Natives on Private Estates: Summary of Reports by District Commissioners of the Southern Province, 1936.*

¹⁰¹BCA Company’s tenants at Ndata and Makande estates, Cholo. MNA S1/411/33 *Memorandum: From the District Commissioner, Cholo to the Honourable the Chief Secretary, Zomba, June 1936.*

¹⁰²In the 1935/36 season, for example, tenants on the BCA Company estates were permitted to grow Soya beans as a cash crop. The company, then, had just introduced a co-operative scheme for the production of Soya bean for export on a large scale. It must also be borne in mind that at this time, in the 1930s, the Nyasaland Government was pursuing a “Grow More Crops” campaign that had an emphasis on production of

District Commissioners investigated most of these complaints, but quite often the investigations provided no remedies. It was discovered, for instance, that those clamouring for new lands to make gardens did so for the sake of their growing sons and daughters on the estates. Estate owners had initially accepted homes on their estates as assets--considered in terms of the labour requirements--than as the liabilities which they seemed to have become with the demands for more lands.¹⁰³ In so far as their own survival as tobacco planters was concerned, estate owners found it necessary to restrict their tenants' activities in the matter of new gardens, cutting of timber for new huts and firewood, and other demands. However, tenants were usually keen to resist such restrictions. Since many of them had been accustomed to raise large gardens of foodstuffs over and above their domestic requirements, they resisted the orders by trespassing on preserved lands that had been denied them. It was this kind of action by tenants that occasionally invited the wrath of the Estate/Company Agent to uproot their crops. And in cases where it appeared that the enforcement of orders by the estates was consistent with the provisions of the Ordinance, there was not much the District Commissioners could do to remedy the situation.

foodstuffs by natives. See MNA S1/411c/33 Production of Native Economic Crops, 1934/35.

¹⁰³Tenants had not always been a liability to their landlords. In fact cases abound in which tenants on an estate were the most vital asset a landowner cherished. Landowners had been known to maximize the exploitation of the labour of their tenants and those of their families, including women and children. As others have argued, child labour was easily accessible on the Nyasaland plantations during the colonial period. Between 1926 and 1953, about one-fifth or one-quarter of the Protectorate's labour force were "young persons", that is, boys and girls below 16 years of age. For details, see W.C. Chirwa, "Child and Youth Labour on the Nyasaland Plantations, 1890-1953," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 19, 4(1993), pp. 662-680.

As to complaints concerning estate marriages, colonial officers appreciated their social effects on “tribal” life. One District Commissioner described the issue as “perhaps the most knotty problem that had to be faced.”¹⁰⁴ We return to this issue in chapter six. For the moment, suffice it to point out that estate owners did not accept potential bridegrooms as “resident natives.” In exceptional cases, they would allow their entry under “special agreement” (Class B) terms, clearly stipulating that “should the prospective swain fail to perform the work required of him regularly,” all rights to stay on the estate with his bride would be forfeited. This irritated those directly affected. In consequence, it militated against young men coming on to the estates in a straightforward manner and sadly assailed the peace and happiness of the old folk with marriageable daughters.¹⁰⁵

Africans who worked off the estates and periodically returned to their homes on the estates constituted the major source of the third pattern of grievances--regarding rental and residential rights or obligations. Those who engaged in this kind of “straddling” mainly comprised artisans, performing skilled (or semi-skilled) work, for example, teachers or clerks at the missions. The grievances by this group demonstrate how Africans on private estates experienced the ravages of colonial laws in ways markedly different from their kin and folk on Crown Land. The Ordinance of 1928 required a “resident native” to work for wages for the landowner either in lieu of or in abatement of any rent payable, in which event the landowner had to offer him land within

¹⁰⁴MNA S1/411/33 Natives on Private Estates, Comments by D.C., Cholo.

¹⁰⁵Natives at the Nchefu and Mangunda estates in Cholo district raised the issue, but it was a common grievance throughout the district. MNA S1/411/33 Natives on Private Estates.

a reasonable distance of his hut. Thus, tenants who worked away from the estates (where their homes were located) found the rental demand by the landowner both unfair and deplorable. A tenant who worked as a cook away from his village provides a classic case of ill-feelings and resentment generated by the estate ordinances:

I am a cook employed by an European at Blantyre and return to my home periodically. I have a hut in the village; that is all; I farm no land here; yet I am called upon to pay £1 a year rent as well as 6 shillings tax for my hut, because I do not work in the fields for the *Bwana* [landowner/boss]. I have to pay because it is the law and I like to come back to my home, but were my home on Crown Land or on an unoccupied estate I would need to pay no rent, only hut tax, and my movements would be free.¹⁰⁶

This practice caused much friction as Africans found it most puzzling that a tenant on an occupied estate should have to pay a pound or work for 3 or 4 months for remission while his brother who happened to live on Crown Land or on an unoccupied estate paid no rent.¹⁰⁷

In the case of artisans employed elsewhere, the situation was more complex. Even if they elected to work off their rent obligations for the landlord, the pressing issue was what kind of work they would do, as the landlord often could not offer work befitting their various skills. As one District Commissioner observed, the 1928 Ordinance was rather ambiguous because it was silent about the type of work to be offered; it merely said "work." Of which, he rhetorically quizzed: "can an owner be said to have offered

¹⁰⁶MNA S1/60E/35 Annual Report for Cholo District, 1935.

¹⁰⁷As far as tenants were concerned then, private estates could be divided into four classes as follows: (a) those farmed regularly and offering employment (occupied estates); (b) those on which economic crops were permitted to be grown; (c) those that were not "farmed" by the resident owner and on which raising of economic crops was prohibited; (d) the estates of absentee owners that were only under casual supervision

work [in the legal sense] to an artisan, if all he can offer him is field or semi-skilled work at the prevailing rates paid to ordinary labourers?"¹⁰⁸

On this aspect, one may argue, the actions of both landowners and tenants were guided by the survival imperative. Given the increasing prosperity in the tea industry from the 1930s, planters had to insist on rent as a lever to bring their tenants out to work. Tenants on the other hand needed all the money they earned off the estates to fend for themselves and their families and were therefore unwilling to pay the rent. Threatening rent defaulters with eviction notices only heightened the animosity between tenants and landowners.

Charges of ill-treatment constituted the fourth and final pattern of complaints. Grievances by Africans against poor living conditions and harsh treatment by Europeans on the Nyasaland plantations have been documented.¹⁰⁹ The A.L. Bruce estates, at the helm of the Native Uprising of 1915 at Magomero, Chiradzulu, provide a classic example of African resistance provoked by poor living and working conditions.¹¹⁰ Such cases, it

(unoccupied estates). See MNA S1/411/33 Extract From the Cholo District Annual Report, 1935.

¹⁰⁸MNA S1/411/33 From the D.C. Mlanje to The Chief Secretary, Zomba, 1936.

¹⁰⁹See for example, Shepperson and Price, *Independent African*, R. Rotberg, *Rebellion in Africa*, (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); R. Rotberg and A. Mazrui (eds.), *Protest and Power in Black Africa*, (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); G. S. Mwase, *Strike A Blow and Die: A Narrative of Race Relations in Colonial Africa*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

¹¹⁰According to the findings of a commission of inquiry that looked into the causes of the uprising, several factors were at play. One prominent factor, however, was the character and behaviour W.J. Livingstone, manager of the Bruce estates, who had the notorious distinction of ruthlessness in his treatment of workers on the estates. Thus wrote the Commissioners: "while the native evidence must be received with caution, the commissioners are of opinion that the treatment of labour and the system of tenancy on the Bruce estates (labourers and tenants being practically interchangeable terms) were in

must be pointed out, were not just unique to the Bruce estates in Chiradzulu. A tenant at Makwasa estate in Cholo district during the 1930s complained thus:

Our people are worked too hard by the estate owner. They are not allowed sufficient time for their own affairs or gardens. They must always be away from the village at work in *Bwana's* fields or there is difficulty.¹¹¹

However, charges of mistreatment of their tenants were categorically denied by landowners. Many landowners claimed that they were only fulfilling their obligations within the provisions and bounds of the law of the land, which tenants, apparently, had a hard time understanding. An elderly man from Chiradzulu retorted, rather sarcastically, that those tenants who pleaded mistreatment were the lazy type who could not do their job. "It was their laziness that in effect provoked the brutality and hostility of the white man that we quite often hear about today."¹¹² This informant, as was the case with many others, seemed to equate the regime of *thangata*, dating back several years, to the *malimidwe* policies of the 1940s and 1950s. Both *thangata* and *malimidwe* emerge from oral accounts as symbols of colonial oppression.

These accounts suggest that the effects of colonial penetration as experienced by those living on alienated land did set the stage for rural protest of various kinds.

several respects illegal and oppressive and that the conditions on the estates more especially in the Magomero estate directly conducted to the rising. See *Report of the Native Rising Commission*, pp. 5-6; see also White, *Magomero*, pp. 110-120, 127-138.

¹¹¹MNA NSE 1/8/26 Makwasa: Cholo Highlands Tea Estates, 1936-1939.

¹¹²Interview with K. Muyaya, T.A. Kadewere, Chiradzulu. The old man recounted some of the brutalities associated with *thangata*, long working hours, harsh treatment that included flogging, but qualified his sentiments by pointing out that "that's the way things were, those who were lazy and unwilling to do the job, got the ugly face of the master. As for me, I always did my job and evaded some of those hardships." The informant also described those who opposed *malimidwe* policies as "idiots—the uneducated type," who had no appreciation of modernity.

Although no violent rebellion occurred after the Chilembwe Rising of 1915, there is little doubt that a potentially explosive political culture was developing at the grass roots in the Malawian countryside. The mere fact that Africans ably expressed their feelings of discontent with the colonial system reveals the development of a new political environment. Some district administrators recognized this shift in native opinion, as one of them aptly observed:

From inquiries and observations made since I have been here I can say quite definitely that the idea exists in the native mind, especially among the more sophisticated, that a tenant on a private estate is not a free agent. The feeling exists that he is tied unreasonably to his landlord and that his movements and social activities are unduly restricted.¹¹³

Tenants generally resented paying tax to Government and rent to the landowner. Most rent-paying tenants were of a higher standard of education--clerks, *capitaos* and skilled workmen--than the farming community. Even where the provisions of the ordinances were generally carried out satisfactorily, a growing number of the educated natives questioned the alienation of land in their districts.¹¹⁴ In turn, their ideas easily diffused among their non-educated kin and folk, the masses, and had lasting political ramifications.¹¹⁵

¹¹³MNA S1/60E/32 Cholo District Annual Report, 1935.

¹¹⁴MNA S1/411/33 From the D.C. Zomba to The Hon. The Chief Secretary, 11 June 1936. This, however, is the very category of Africans who in the 1950s aspired to the ranks of "progressive" farmers within the very colonial capitalist system they had questioned relentlessly.

¹¹⁵Such was the case because the educated class of natives, the *'petit bourgeois'*, freely and openly discussed their views among the farming community, *ibid.* The 1915 Commission of Inquiry drew a similar inference, on how ideas could easily infiltrate various sections of rural society, in its analysis of the causes of the Native Rising. Among the causes, the Commission cited "the political notions imbibed by Chilembwe

It is against such a background that acts of peasant resistance, even if passive or hidden, as discussed in chapter four, must be understood. It is in the same light too that their creative and adaptive responses in forging both survival and advancement strategies, the subject of chapters five and six, must be seen as one among many ways in which peasants had been both constrained and empowered by the very experience of living under an oppressive administrative system of colonialism.

from Joseph Booth and the fact that there were in his immediate neighbourhood a number of discontented educated natives who imbibed his ideas and acted as his assistants. See Nyasaland Protectorate, *Report of the Commission*; White, *Magomero: Portrait of an African Village*, pp. 130-145.

CHAPTER FOUR

Peasant Politics and Resistance to Colonial Domination

Chapter three traced the roots of rural protest to the controversial questions of land and labour in the evolution and consolidation of colonial policy in Malawi during the colonial period. It has been noted that the social and economic deprivations Malawian peasants suffered after the turn of the century created an environment conducive to peasant resistance, social protest and rebellions.¹ With the exceptions of the Chilembwe Uprising of 1915 and the rural unrest of the 1950s, Malawi's colonial history records no major forms of collective protest or rebellion by the peasantry. It is therefore tempting to suggest that the absence of overt rebellion reflect peasants' incapacity to challenge the structures of domination.² Such a conclusion ignores important factors, however. Studies of colonial history in general, and colonial social history in particular, have shown that peasants were not passive recipients of the colonial mandate; they schemed and devised coping strategies to minimize the adverse effects of colonialism, as much as they relied on hidden forms of resistance to work the system to their minimum

¹The terms resistance, protest and rebellion are themselves subjects of scholarly debate as they are purported to convey different meanings. Protest is, for example, seen to entail a higher degree of vocalization while resistance may appear mute, and stealth may be one of its essential features. See D. Crummey (ed.), *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa*, (Portsmouth: 1986). However, the debate on meanings is beyond the scope of this chapter. Here the terms are interchangeably used to mean simply the capacity by a subordinated people to withstand, negotiate or oppose the structures of domination, although the term resistance is prominently used.

²At least that is the image generally portrayed by most studies of the rural sector that concentrate on large-scale, organized protest movements at the expense of the rather mundane hidden forms of resistance. For a critique of this approach, see James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

disadvantage.³ Indeed, the dividing-line between acts seen to constitute resistance and those described as coping, or survival strategies, may be difficult to draw. Some scholars have attempted to distinguish coping from resisting based on intent.⁴ Focusing on resistance Jeffrey Rubin attempts to define the term on the scale of collective action as against individual acts. He argues that the term resistance could be limited to actions that have some degree of consciousness and collectivity about them, while a different word may be chosen for other sorts of actions that oppose power.⁵ As operative terms, resistance strategies form the subject of this chapter; survival strategies of the next, their similarity notwithstanding. The focus in this chapter is on hidden rather than overt forms of peasant resistance in Southern Malawi during the colonial period. It is argued that hidden forms of resistance provided peasants with a powerful political voice that helped shape the political environment within which they operated.

³See E.J. Hobsbawn, "Peasants and Politics," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 1, 1(1973), pp. 3-22; see also A. Isaacman and R. Roberts (eds.), *Cotton, Colonialism and Social History in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1995), Introduction.

⁴A. Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1938-1961*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996), especially chapters nine and ten. In this formulation, the growers' intent in devising coping strategies was to minimize the adverse effects of the cotton regime and to help them and their families survive. By contrast, "the resisters' intent was not only to improve their daily lives but to undercut the claims of the colonial regime and the textile interests." Isaacman further suggests that this analytical distinction is somewhat spurious. Among other things, goes the contention, definitions based on the intention of the principal actor tend to ignore the agency of the oppressor who may define the act differently (p. 206). For this reason, this study will attempt to look at both the intent and the effects. Those acts that had the effect of shaking the colonial system and the plantation industry will be regarded more as resistance than as coping.

⁵J. Rubin, "Defining Resistance: Contested Interpretations of Everyday Acts," *Studies in Law, Politics and Society*, Vol. 15, (1995), pp. 237-260.

I

4.1: Overt Resistance in Malawi's Colonial History

The historiography of resistance has traditionally tended to privilege large-scale, highly visible social movements, at the expense of less visible ones, sometimes with ideological overtones that risk distorting the historical record. This tendency has generally led to the generous literature on larger social movements such as the Shona-Ndebele rising in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) in 1896-7, the Herero and Nama revolts in South West Africa (Namibia) in 1904, the Maji Maji rebellion in German East Africa (Tanzania) in 1905, the Bambata rebellion in Zululand (South Africa) in 1906 and the 1912 Nyabingi revolt in Rwanda. With this background in mind, it is perhaps fitting to preface a discussion of peasant resistance in Malawi with an account of known "peasant uprisings" in that country, about which there is little controversy. Two separate events occurred in Malawi on a scale proximating the upheavals outlined above. A brief re-evaluation of these events is useful, for the purposes of this analysis, because the discussion of hidden resistance that follows unmask what is usually concealed by analyses of large-scale social movements.

The first of these, the 1915 uprising, popularly known as the Chilembwe rising, has been a subject of considerable political and scholarly interest, and also occupied a prominent place in Malawi's history and legend. Instigated by the Rev. John Chilembwe of the Providence Industrial Mission (P.I.M.), it was broadly connected with the brutal treatment of African tenant-labourers on white estates, and the alienation of land to Europeans. In addition, it was a protest against forced African participation in the First

World War. But establishing causation to the finest detail has been, for scholars, a difficult task. At the same time, the role the peasantry played in the rising has remained relatively obscure. While acknowledging the deteriorating socio-economic conditions of Africans prior to the rising, most analyses have emphasized Chilembwe's own motivations and frustrations with the colonial system—which discriminated against African advancement socially, politically and commercially—as the primary causes.⁶ Others have simply classified the rising as a localized “tribal” movement. In the end, multi-faceted interpretations of the events have been associated with the rising, ranging from its characterization as a *petit*-bourgeois struggle with feudalism to a peasant uprising against oppression.⁷ According to a commission of inquiry into matters concerned with the Native Rising in 1916, at least, five factors were key. First were the political notions imbibed by Chilembwe from Joseph Booth, and during his education in the United States of America in a Negro Baptist mission. Second were the discontented educated natives who imbibed Chilembwe's ideas and acted as his assistants. Third was the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. This fact is reflected in Chilembwe's letter to the *Nyasaland Times* in which he lamented:

But in time of peace the Government failed to help the underdog. In time of peace everything for Europeans only... But in time of war it has been found that we are needed to share hardships and shed our blood in

⁶See for example, L. White, *Magomero: Portrait of an African Village*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); R.I. Rotberg, *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa: The Making of Malawi and Zambia, 1873-1964*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 76-92; G. Shepperson and T. Price, *Independent African: John Chilembwe and the Origins, Setting and Significance of the Nyasaland Native Rising of 1915*, (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1958).

⁷White, *Magomero*, p. 127.

equality... Let the rich men, bankers, titled men, storekeepers, farmers and landlords go to war and get shot. Instead the poor Africans who have nothing in this present world, who in death, leave only a long line of widows and orphans in utter want and dire stress are invited to die for a cause which is not theirs.⁸

Fourth was the establishment of certain European and American missions in the Protectorate from whom John Chilembwe drew a considerable section of his followers over and above those in his own P.I.M. station. Fifth was the proximity of Chilembwe's headquarters to the A.L. Bruce Estates, his unfriendly relations with the management of these estates and the unsatisfactory conditions prevailing on the estates.⁹

A cursory look at the causes of the rising as presented by the commission, with the probable exception of the fifth, suggest that the insurrection was entirely of Chilembwe's own making. John Chilembwe, born sometime around 1870, came under the influence of the Rev. Joseph Booth, a radical Baptist missionary known for championing the cause of 'Africa for the Africans.' He arrived in Nyasaland in 1892 to establish the Zambezi Industrial Mission. In 1897, Booth took Chilembwe to the United States for further education and training. After two years of training at the Virginia Theological Seminary and College at Lynchburg, where the influence of Booth's radicalism was reinforced by arguments in America about Negro advancement, Chilembwe returned to Nyasaland in 1900 and founded the P.I.M. at Mbombwe in Chiradzulu district. Within a short time, Chilembwe quickly established churches and schools in and around his headquarters, and like many Christian missionaries in the country at the time, he made great efforts to invest

⁸Shepperson and Price, *Independent African*, pp. 234-235.

⁹Nyasaland Government, *The Nyasaland Native Rising Commission*, (Zomba: The Government Printer, 1916), pp. 4-6

in agricultural production and commerce. Thus, by the time of the rising in 1915, Chilembwe was a man of both affluence and influence among his African countrymen. He owned, among other things, a 93-acre estate and a brick house, which, by the standards of the time, made him one of the most substantial African property owners.

If Chilembwe, with his limited stock of property and western education, belonged to the propertied African elite, the same can be said of his lieutenants who played leading roles during the uprising. These included John Gray Kufa, who received his education under the Scottish missionaries at Blantyre but also trained and worked as a dispenser. He farmed 140 acres, owned cattle, sheep and goats and employed twenty-seven people. Then there was Duncan Njilima, another mission-educated man of no small substance who owned an estate with sheep, cattle, and fowls in the European manner, and had taught for sometime at the Blantyre Mission, besides having been to Rhodesia and South Africa.¹⁰ Another was Hugh Mataka and his brother Gordon who, together, operated several trading stores and owned an estate employing fifty workers. The presence and active participation of such men in the rising, men who aspired to higher forms of production and trade but were frustrated by circumstances which did not operate in their favour, gave the rising the character, as described above, of a "*petit bourgeois* struggle with feudalism."

On the other hand, there is no denying the fact that a number of chiefs, headmen and various groups of Africans—the rank and file of the movement—supported Chilembwe's plans. This would give the rising the character of a large-scale peasant

¹⁰*ibid.* p. 246

rebellion. Two factors lend credence to this assertion. One was the existence of long-standing grievances and complaints about general labour conditions lodged by Africans on the A.L. Bruce (Magomero) Estates against the Estate's management, particularly its manager W.J. Livingstone. According to the report of the commission of inquiry, "the treatment of labour and the system of tenancy on the Bruce Estates (labourers and tenants being practically interchangeable terms) were in several respects illegal and oppressive and the conditions on the estates more especially in the Magomero area directly conduced the rising."¹¹ The vast number of ordinary folk prosecuted after the leaders of the rising had been tried is another factor suggesting that Chilembwe might have had a larger following beyond the educated, property-owning class.¹² It is estimated that Chilembwe had enough popular support to form a fair-sized battalion of perhaps eight or nine hundred troops.¹³ This evidence notwithstanding, there still exists a difficulty locating a common and unified peasant voice in the rising, owing to the apparent divisions along religious and ethnic lines among chiefs and headmen in the vicinity of Chilembwe's headquarters at Mbombwe.

The district was, and still is, predominantly inhabited by the Ayao and Alomwe (Anguru) peoples. As we have seen, most of the Alomwe had migrated into the area

¹¹Nyasaland Government, *The Nyasaland Native Rising Commission* (Zomba: The Government Printer, 1916), p.6; See also Shepperson and Price, *Independent African*; Rotberg, *Rebellion in Africa*, (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

¹²L. White, "'Tribes' and the Aftermath of the Chilembwe Rising," *African Affairs*, 83 (1984), p. 521.

¹³Shepperson and Price, *Independent African*, pp. 248-9.

from Mozambique from as early as 1900. Chilembwe's major support, so it is alleged, came from these Alomwe, most of whom were Christian and members of Chilembwe's churches. By contrast, most of the Ayao were Muslims. Consequently, Magomero was a site of rivalry between Christians and Moslems in the years before and after the rising. Much of the damning evidence against Chilembwe and his followers in the aftermath of the rising came from the Ayao chiefs and headmen in the area—seen by some analysts as the beneficiaries of the rising—who disassociated themselves from the rising and had enjoyed an informal alliance with the white planters since the earliest days of colonial rule. It had become standard practice for European planters to appoint Ayao chiefs and headmen over Anguru immigrants. As Landeg White has shown, the vast majority of those found guilty and sentenced to death or long terms of imprisonment were not only members of Chilembwe's church but also Anguru. By contrast, no declared Muslim was found guilty, although several Ayao Christians were also sentenced.¹⁴ To this end, the evidence of non-involvement given by the Ayao chiefs and some of their followers before the commission created the impression that the rising was probably not a "Native rising" but "a rising of John Chilembwe."¹⁵

Furthermore, the short-lived nature of the rising raises another question about its general legitimacy. The rising was officially launched on the evening of Saturday, January 23, 1915 and its high point was the killing of three Europeans in the Magomero area and the raid for ammunition on the arsenal of the African Lakes Company

¹⁴White, "Tribes," pp. 522-23.

¹⁵*ibid.* p. 524.

headquarters at Mandala in Blantyre. Among those killed at Magomero was the infamous W.J. Livingstone. Two other Europeans were also severely wounded at Magomero. Government forces launched a counter-insurgency and within a short time apprehended all the ring leaders. By Wednesday January 27, the uprising was virtually over. It was brutally suppressed and many of the conspirators were executed in firing squads.

What all this suggests is that while the African peasants constituted a significant force and contributed in no small measure to the outbreak of the rising, their role has been overshadowed by the elitist approach of most analyses of the event, which have gone overboard in idealizing the heroic roles of the leadership. Today in Malawi, Chilembwe is remembered as the nation's greatest martyr, a symbol of national glory, whose death is celebrated with a national holiday. The national currency and postage stamps bear his portrait, and the very memory of his person remains a distinct part of the nation's heritage. Yet little is known of the hundreds of poor Africans who were sentenced to the gallows in the aftermath of the rising.

A similar case can be made for the riots and disturbances that took place in different parts of Malawi during the 1950s. As chapter three has demonstrated, for a long time Africans on the Shire Highlands had felt a strong feeling of injustice with regard to land and living conditions on the white estates. Friction between European landholders and their tenants, as reported by District Commissioners especially during the 1930s, had been the order of the day. These long-standing tensions were intensified by three different but closely related factors, namely, the growth of the African nationalist movement, the imposition of the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland, and the

introduction and enforcement of new agricultural and conservation methods during the 1950s.

It was in this climate of growing African discontent and uneasiness that civil disturbances took place, particularly in the districts of Cholo, Mlanje, Chiradzulu, Port Herald (Nsanje) and Domasi (Zomba) in the Southern Province, and in Ntcheu in the Central Province. The unrest which took place in Cholo in the last week of August 1953 was probably the bloodiest of its kind in the history of the Protectorate, resulting in the death of eleven people and injury of seventy-two.¹⁶ The riots were sparked by a rather frivolous incident on a European estate. Two European planters caught two Africans stealing oranges on one of the Tennett estates at Luchenza. Apparently, Tennett was intensely disliked by many of his tenants on the grounds of his harshness and eviction of long-standing tenants from his estates. Rumour then spread that the two thieves had been caught, killed and taken away for European consumption.¹⁷ The following morning a large crowd of Africans gathered on the Tennett estate rioting and demanding that bodies of the dead persons be released. They also damaged property belonging to government

¹⁶For details, see O.J. Kalinga, "Resistance, Politics of Protest, and Mass Nationalism in Colonial Malawi, 1950-1960," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 36, 3(1996), pp. 443-454; R. Palmer, "Working Conditions and Worker Responses on Nyasaland tea Estates, 1930-1953," *Journal of African History*, 27, (1986), pp. 105-126; R. Tangri, "From the Politics of Union to Mass Nationalism: The Nyasaland African Congress, 1944-59," in R.J. Macdonald (ed.), *From Nyasaland to Malawi: Studies in Colonial History*, (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1975), pp. 254-281.

¹⁷This idea easily gained ground and was readily accepted by Africans because of the prevailing African notion of *Chifwamba* or man-stealing in Nyasaland (more mythical than real). The author is fully aware of the concept of *Chifwamba*, from an experiential base, having been brought up in a society where these man-stealing stories were told from time to time. For a fuller account of *Chifwamba* and cannibalism in Nyasaland, see Shepperson and Price, *Independent African*, pp. 9-11.

and European planters.¹⁸ Riot police eventually dispersed the crowd. A month of sporadic violence followed this minor incident in different parts of the district as well as in other districts in the Southern Province, notably Mulanje, Chiradzulu, Chikwawa, and Port Herald.

What is striking about this wave of rural unrest was that chiefs became the main targets of the violence wherever they were perceived to be supporters of government and the new federal regime. In Cholo, for example, amidst the disturbances, people in some areas demanded that their traditional rulers be deposed for supporting the Federation. Likewise, chiefs and headmen who were seen to be keen at enforcing agricultural rules became unpopular while those opposing the rules earned themselves the respect and confidence of their people. The incidents at Domasi and in the Ntcheu district of the Central Province in 1953 were a marked manifestation of the broad undercurrent of African discontent at the time. At Domasi, a band of about two hundred armed Africans attempted to prevent the District Commissioner from taking a village headman to court for disobeying agricultural laws. In the clash that ensued, two people were shot dead by the police.¹⁹ In Ntcheu, as a demonstration of his rejection of the bitterly despised Federation, the Ngoni chief Inkosi Gomani championed a campaign of civil disobedience instructing his people to disregard all agricultural laws and to disobey payment of taxes.

¹⁸Nyasaland Protectorate, *Report of a Commission of Inquiry Appointed by the Governor on the 20th August 1953*, (Zomba: 1953), pp. 3-6.

¹⁹Tangri, "From Politics of Union," p. 271.

Gomani was subsequently arrested and deposed, an action which provoked a series of riots at his headquarters.

Unlike the Chilembwe uprising which, though poorly executed, had the appearance of a systematically planned protest led by *petit* bourgeois Africans, the violent unrest of the 1950s was not planned by the emerging African nationalist leaders.²⁰ However, though not directly involved in organizing the disturbances, it would be a little too presumptuous to suggest that the upheavals of the 1950s did not receive the blessing of the educated elite. As the torch-bearers of African nationalism, leaders of the Nyasaland African Congress (N.A.C.), formed in 1944, had by 1953 been involved in a campaign of civil disobedience and non-cooperation with the Federal regime. Between 1954 and 1959 events within and organized by the N.A.C. took on a more articulate and vibrant character. This was after a new breed of young western-educated leaders, namely Masauko Chipembere, Kanyama Chiume and Dunduzu Chisiza, had been injected into national politics.²¹ Little doubt exists that these African nationalists exploited the tension generated by the masses to give the N.A.C. the status of a mass nationalist movement seeking political control and national independence.

Clearly embarrassed by the disturbances, particularly the initial ones in Cholo, the colonial government purposely chose to place the blame for the riots on the weakness of the local Native Administration in the district thereby denying the agency of the masses in confronting or challenging the colonial structures of power. The result has been the

²⁰J.G. Pike, *Malawi: A Political and Economic History*, (New York: 1968), p. 129.

²¹See Kalinga, "Resistance, Politics of Protest"; Tangri, "From Politics of Union."

production of an elitist historiography—one that concentrates on the national leadership to the exclusion of the masses. Thus, the history of the turbulent 1950s in Malawi has focussed on the few radical African elite who provided the leadership that steered the masses into national independence in the early 1960s. The historical record, and indeed all posterity, is left with such heroic names as Chipembere, Chiume, Chisiza and of course Hastings Kamuzu Banda, Malawi's first president, in quite a striking resemblance to the heroism that surrounds Chilembwe and his earlier movement.

In short, the events of 1915 and the 1950s reflect three factors that need to be cautiously considered in the study of peasant resistance, especially of the hidden kind. The first factor derives from the fact that although African peasants participated actively in these "revolts," little is known of their exploits if only because the historiography tends to give prominence exclusively to heroic figures—"a few good men"—to borrow Susan Geiger's phraseology.²² Studying peasant politics in terms of silent struggles in everyday life as opposed to large-scale violent rebellions is thus essential to uncover the political consciousness of the subaltern. Second, the brutality with which the revolts were suppressed—all the killings and executions, detentions and deposition of chiefs—instilled an element of fear in the minds of peasants. Over time, this fear of reprisals no doubt weakened their determination to come out in open rebellion. For nearly a decade after the Chilembwe rising, suspected followers of his movement continued to suffer persecution, as depicted in this episode:

²²S. Geiger, "Tanganyikan Nationalism as 'Women's Work': Life Histories, Collective Biography and Changing Historiography," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 27 (1996) pp. 465-478.

In January (1925) agents of the C.I.D. reported that large congregations were attending services conducted by John Lulanga and Isaac Chambo, Providence Industrial Mission (followers of late John Chilembwe) at the same site of Chilembwe's operations, this matter was investigated and the leaders warned of the consequences of holding services, since when, as far as I am aware, they have been discontinued.²³

Actions of this kind had the potential to perpetuate fear among would-be protesters.²⁴

Oral testimony accounts reveal that fear of reprisals if caught or seen as rebellious depoliticized peasants, at least to a certain extent. Informants cited slightly different reasons for their fears, but fear did prevail. Asked to account for why peasants did not rebel given the scale of grievances against colonial rule, one informant stated that fear of *atsamunda achizungu* (European colonialists) dominated their minds and it was simply difficult to oppose the laws of Welensky. "There was little we could do about our grievances in the absence of proper channels to reach out to the *Bwanas* and we did not wish to risk imprisonment."²⁵ Evans Malenga, arguing on similar lines, observed that, "after John Chilembwe, nobody but Dr. Banda had the courage to challenge the status

²³ MNA NSD 2/1/1 Annual Report, Chiradzulu District, 1924/25.

²⁴ Another possible source of fear or its perpetuation may have been the torture and harsh treatment of suspected criminals in colonial jails by the police. A 1925 judicial case records of a man who was alleged to have been murdered and his body thrown into a flooded river; the body was never recovered. In due course four Africans were arrested as having been the cause of the man's death, and all made statements admitting having killed the alleged victim, and having thrown the body in the river. Before their trial, however, the alleged victim was brought to the office and denied ever having been in the river. The explanation of the accused was that they made their statements of guilt under pain of brutal torture by the native police investigating the matter. NSD 2/1/1 *Annual Report, Chiradzulu District, 1924/25*.

²⁵ Interview with F. Ndasauka. Roy Welensky was governor of Nyasaland between 1944 and 1948. Some informants drew comparisons between experiences of the later and early colonial periods.

quo. Only Dr. Banda could bring the war of *thangata* and Welensky to an end.”²⁶ More dramatic in his description, John Jeremiya explained that:

When it is an order from the *boma*, I mean when the *boma* commands, you can not openly oppose... How do you oppose anyway? Where do you begin from and who would lead? Who wants to be sacrificial lamb for nothing? It was forbidden to rebel; haven't you heard of John Chilembwe? There was war there... one simply had to learn to disobey without being caught. And when you know the dos and don'ts, everything else falls in place.²⁷

Some informants felt it was pointless to rebel or take matters into their own hands because it would not change a thing but lead to bloodshed.²⁸ Others simply stated that they feared the government and wished they had some organized leadership to champion their cause.²⁹ A letter published in the *Bantu Mirror* written by a Nyasaland reader expressed similar fears of reprisals. The writer, W.L. Zalengera of Ntcheu district, Nyasaland, used the aftermath of the Gomani insurrection to warn fellow countrymen and chiefs in the Protectorate never to be deceived and lured into protest and suffer bitter consequences as had Gomani:

Treaties and conspiracies of the African people can not be trusted. They are always empty and unfulfilling. A few days ago, as you may have heard, the people of Ntcheu agreed to refuse honoring tax obligations. This happened out of deceit and ignorance. Today I want to warn you friends that should you hear someone canvassing for meetings to rise against government policies, tell them no. Do not attend their meetings.

²⁶ Interview with E. Malenga, Chiradzulu, March, 1997.

²⁷ Interview with John Jeremiya, Mlanje, July, 1997.

²⁸ Interview with A. Robert, P. Kapanda, R. Kasalika and P. Kamoto. These informants made specific reference to bloodshed of the 1953 demonstrations and the violent crackdown of the 1959 state of emergency.

²⁹ Interview with Mr. Somanje, March 1997 and C. Mathewe, July 1997.

Here in Ntcheu, such meetings that we should not pay taxes or obey government policies to demonstrate our opposition to the Federation misled Inkosi Gomani. Gomani's decision to proceed in that course has today led both himself and all of us, his people, to untold suffering. Today Ntcheu district faces a great deal of trouble and misery. Yet other chiefs involved in the conspiracy have been restored to their titles and continue to cooperate with the government. This suggests that Gomani was deceived and dethroned for nothing.

We, the people of Ntcheu toiled for nothing, contributed our finances for a lost cause organizing these useless meetings. Here we are today mourning terribly.

I appeal to you friends and all, if you see someone deceiving you today to plot against the Europeans or the government, reject their call. They will just get you into trouble. They will lead you to incarceration. And to all of you travelling across the country, do not listen to anyone who goes about soliciting financial contributions to protest against the government; beware of their deception. Today people in Ntcheu can not walk tall due to deception orchestrated by some misguided people. But if someone says let us raise funds to build a new school block, take the liberty to assist. Not to conspire against the government, no. We are mourning the deposition of our chief here in Ntcheu simply because he was misled. Let us cooperate and do the will of our government rather than wasting our precious resources because of some misguided people in our midst whose sole purpose is to cheat and cause us trouble.³⁰

Fears of this nature inhibited open resistance but left open the option to engage in hidden forms of resistance.

Finally, the differential roles played by various personalities or segments of African society in these activities—chiefs, businessmen, preachers etc.—reinforce the argument that in the study of peasant protest care must be taken to appreciate two other crucial factors. First, the possibility of the existence of two sets of oppressors, foreign and local; and second, the existence of differentiation among peasants as well as their multiple identities based on, for example, class and gender.³¹ Only then shall we be able to

³⁰ *The Bantu Mirror*, Saturday, October 31, 1953.

differentiate anti-colonial protest from conflicts within communities and rural households.

II

4.2: Everyday Forms of Resistance and Negotiation

Despite the analytical ambiguities involved, the concepts of “hidden” or “everyday” forms of resistance have been widely used by both agrarian and labour scholars.³² These concepts find their origins in American slave and European agrarian historiography and help explain the less visible ways in which workers or peasants make their own histories. At the level of generalization, for workers in mining compounds and peasants on farms, “hidden” resistance surfaced as work slowdowns, absenteeism, sabotage, flight, pilfering, feigned illness, intercropping, and tax evasion.³³ In his analysis of Mozambican cotton-raising peasants, Allen Isaacman concluded that the nature of the labour process itself opened up spaces that accommodated hidden forms of protest and that these acts—the weapons of the weak—were the peasants’ principal arsenal in the Mozambican countryside. As an analytical tool, examining the labour process is useful in understanding the struggles of Malawian peasants as they too resorted to hidden ways to

³¹A. Isaacman, “Peasant and Social Protest in Africa,” *African Studies Review*, Vol. 33, 2(1990), pp. 50-55.

³²See for example, Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty*; I.R. Phimister and C. Van Onselen, *Studies in the History of African Labour in Colonial Zimbabwe*, (Salisbury: Mambo Press, 1978); Van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1933*, (London: Pluto Press, 1976).

³³*ibid.* See also Rubin, “Defining Resistance,” pp. 237-260.

“minimize the risks and maximize control over resources most valuable to them.”³⁴

Evidently, policies such as *thangata* and *malimidwe*, which generated bitter opposition and resistance, were intricately connected with the organization of labour, and so were the infamous hut taxes. It is also through the labour process that we can elucidate the nature of internal struggles within households and communities and the whole concept of ‘survival’ as expounded in chapter five.

Beyond the labour process, the market is another arena where acts of resistance and negotiation took place.³⁵ For example, when peasants withheld their produce, i.e. refused to sell to government-gazetted markets due to the unsatisfactory prices offered, it is theoretically and conceptually easy to call that a form of resistance. Empirically, however, it is not easy to argue, let alone establish, that peasants resisted or rejected the market outright. Without doubt, peasants needed the market. Their rejection or resistance to it was an attempt to bargain for a fair deal, a process of negotiation that provided them with access to avenues of accumulation and allowed them to exercise partial autonomy within the capitalist system.

The *thangata* system clearly emerged as one of the earliest coercive policies by the Protectorate government for the control and exploitation of African labour. As we have seen, the Chilembwe uprising of 1915 was, among other things, a campaign against the brutalities of *thangata* and other settler practices in Chiradzulu district. While this is a classic example of open resistance to an oppressive system, *thangata* was also undercut,

³⁴ Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty*, p. 208.

³⁵ Jeffrey Rubin suggested the need for a different word for individual acts other than resistance. Negotiation is one fitting term for such actions.

perhaps more effectively, by such subtle and rather mundane acts as tenants' withdrawal of their labour. Behind *thangata*, as practiced by planters, was the desire to obtain the maximum amount of work for a minimal wage. Interestingly however, as District Commissioners reported, Africans were determined to do as little work as possible for the small amount of remuneration they received.³⁶ Hence, the prevalence of absenteeism, desertions or frequent withdrawals from estate employment.

From its inception as early as 1900 as a "forced labour regime," the operations of *thangata* were interspersed with random coercion and violence, in spite of the fact that the system was enforced by local village chiefs and estate rangers. Many a time, as at the Magomero estates,³⁷ *thangata* was enforced in glaring contravention of the ordinance that had legalized it.³⁸ Some of the violations, for example, were the extension of *thangata* to three or four months instead of the legal two months provision. Enforcement of *thangata* against children was another, and so was the payment of labourers in kind (tobacco) rather than hard cash. The ordinance fixed a minimum monthly wage to correspond with current rates of tax, yet *thangata* enforcers levied hut tax in labour at a rate of 1/6d (one shilling and six pence) per month, when the rate of taxation had fluctuated between 3 and 6 shillings per year. One other unsettling facet of the system was the rangers'

³⁶MNA S1/1040/19 *District Annual Report, Mlanje, 1919-1920*.

³⁷It should be noted that the Magomero estates, the headquarters of which were in Chiradzulu district, extended into parts of Blantyre, Zomba and Mulanje districts as well.

³⁸The provisions of the *thangata* ordinance are discussed in chapter three. See also, B. Pachai, "The Issue of Thangata in the History of Nyasaland," *Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 3, (1974), pp. 20-34.

enforcement methods which included the flogging of defaulters and the burning of their huts. As one female informant noted:

With *thangata*'s ruthlessness, consequences for non-compliance were unpredictable. Even a single day's absence could cost you your own house. I am telling you when one failed to report for work just for a day rangers would come down with all kinds of implements and they would without remorse destroy your house. I am telling you they would completely rub it off with impunity.³⁹

With the passage of time, however, violence and coercion proved to be one of the major weaknesses of *thangata*. The whole strategy backfired sometimes as excessive force triggered massive withdrawal of tenants from the estates who moved to other employers or concentrated on working in their own gardens.⁴⁰ There is little doubt that voluntary withdrawal of labour was a powerful method of protest because it led to labour shortages, which in turn pressured the estate owners to relent on the use of force and improve the treatment of African labour. When asked to assist with the labour situation, the Acting D.C. for Mlanje once declared that "he could not act as a recruiter of labour nor could he force natives against their will to work on plantations."⁴¹ At the same time, estate owners were trying to be careful not to ruin their reputation. They often feared acquiring a bad name among Africans, because once an estate was "labeled" for its mistreatment of labour, it became even more difficult to attract labour. The D.C. for

³⁹Interview with Agness Ambulera, Kumadzi Village, T.A. Kapichi, Thyolo. The term "single day" was certainly used figuratively to refer to a short period of absence which for those concerned did not really warrant the severe punishments meted out.

⁴⁰Only the Anguru immigrants did not have the option of moving about because doing so forfeited their right of residence in Nyasaland. See White, *Magomero*, pp. 89-90.

⁴¹MNA S1/1040/19 *District Annual Report, Mlanje, 1919-1920*.

Zomba reported at the end of 1919 that Africans in the district were working well and that very few cases of ill-treatment of African workers were received in that year. In his opinion, “planters had no doubt learnt that it pays to treat their workers well.”⁴² Perhaps these planters got a spell of the wisdom which once prompted Ian Phimister to argue, with reference to the Southern Rhodesian mines, that “one willing labourer is worth half a dozen forced ones.”⁴³

Nonetheless, immediately after the First World War, an unusual phenomenon took centre stage on the Shire Highlands leading to acute labour shortages on many estates. During this period resistance to wage labour and *thangata* manifested itself in the tendency by Africans to refuse employment outright. This was common among the more or less educated class of Africans or those who had served in the Kings African Rifles (KAR) for a few months during the war.⁴⁴ They would accept work only as clerks or *capitaos*.

By the late 1920s and 1930s both government (as employers) and settlers had come to terms with the sobering reality that Africans could no longer be pushed around against their will to do dirty work on estates. Thus, one planter unreservedly stated in 1934: “there is plenty of labour for soft jobs or skilled work, but there is no Nyasaland native, to speak about, who will do the rough work.” This was a sharp reversal of the early years of Protectorate rule. In 1928, the Director of Agriculture had also observed

⁴²MNA S1/1128/19 *Zomba Districts Reports, 1919-1920*.

⁴³Phimister, “Origins and Aspects of Worker Consciousness in Rhodesia,” p. 54.

⁴⁴*District Annual Reports for Mlanje, Zomba and the Lower Shire Districts, 1919-1920*.

that it was regrettable to see that “native races tended to shirk the harder side of agricultural work more and more as they came under the influence of civilization.”⁴⁵

What is even more striking is the fact that many Africans preferred unemployment to manual labour for a minimum wage that had a negligible net value to them. This sentiment was shared and expressed by many informants, one of whom apparently in an attempt to drive home his point, likened this attitude to the wisdom enshrined in an old Chichewa song sung from the perspective of a woman: *kulibwino kukhala mbeta kusiyana nkugona ndi njala aamuna alimomuno*. (It is better to remain in spinsterhood than stay in a marriage where hunger and starvation are the order of the day because the man/husband is incapable of feeding the household.)⁴⁶ Any employment that fell short of providing for the basic necessities of life was likened to the man/husband in the song. Clearly, one should stay away from such employment. Likewise, Ron Mchenga stated that “when employers did not seem to care about our welfare or value our labour, the best thing to do was leave them with their estates and get oneself better alternatives to earn your bread and butter.”⁴⁷ Leroy Vail once described Nyasaland as “an island of atrocious working conditions and wretched wages in a region characterized by poor working

⁴⁵MNA S1/333/27 Foodstuffs: Reserve - Native Food Crops, June 1928; S1/945/29 Proceedings of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council, 31 May 1934.

⁴⁶Interview with L. Supuni, T.A. Kapichi, Thyolo district. There is no rigid consensus on this issue among oral informants. Some indeed argued that working for the estates was a waste of time while others, especially women informants, praised the little benefits that accrued from working on the estates. Interview with Agness Ambulera and V.H. Kumadzi, Thyolo District.

⁴⁷ Interview with R. Mchenga, Thyolo District.

conditions and low pay.”⁴⁸ Vail’s description augments these local voices. The efficacy of voluntary unemployment as a strategy of resistance manifested at two levels. One, and of course more obvious, was the resultant labour shortages that negatively affected estate production. At the other level was the substantial loss of revenue by the government if only because the majority of tax defaulters were usually those without employment. The Governor of Nyasaland reported in 1933 that the total loss to revenue through tax default in that year alone was £16,548 out of an estimated total of £125,000, and that had been an on-going trend for some years.⁴⁹ Tax evasion or failure to pay taxes on time were indeed among the most effective weapons in the “hidden struggles” of the Malawian peasantry which usually put the government on the defensive.

Along with voluntary unemployment, the employed often deserted and absented themselves from work. In a bid to keep a check and reduce the rate of tax default, the government took the initiative, through District Commissioners, to deploy tax defaulters to potential employers for work which would help in meeting their tax obligations, but would at the same time help planters with recruitment. The initiative was however frustrated by peasants’ recourse to resistance through absenteeism and desertions. In 1933, for example, a tea planter in Cholo requested the service of four District Commissioners--commissioners for Zomba, Blantyre, Chikwawa and Cholo--for the recruitment of tax defaulters. In all he received a total of 314 labourers. Out of the 172 boys he received from Zomba, 39 worked for one month, 132 deserted and one died.

⁴⁸ L. Vail, “The State and the Creation of Malawi’s Agricultural Economy,” in R. Rotberg (ed.), *Imperialism, Colonialism and Hunger: East and Central Africa*, (Massachusetts, 1983).

From Cholo he received 45, of whom 35 deserted, 9 worked for one month and 1 worked for more than one month. From Blantyre he received 42, of whom 17 worked for one month and 25 deserted. And from Chikwawa came 55 boys, all of whom deserted. Practically, only 21 percent of hut tax defaulters worked one month or more, while 79 percent deserted.⁵⁰ In no small measure this undermined the motivations of both government and the planters. Planters in Zomba and Blantyre districts also complained of desertions.⁵¹ One possible reason for desertions could have been what the Acting Provincial Commissioner reported in 1936 that “wages which were forced down to a low level in the slump years show no sign of rising with returning prosperity, and provide little temptation to local natives to become regular labourers.”⁵²

During the 1940s and 1950s attempts to recruit more labour never paid off. Some tea planters tried to launch recruiting campaigns far away from the estates and managed to attract some workers, “but after enjoying the lorry rides to the estates and after sampling the food the estates provided for about a week or so they slowly disappeared and walked back home.”⁵³ This, according to one planter, was a disappointing practice which natives carried on with impunity. Against this background planters attempted to

⁴⁹MNA S1/945/29 Alien Labour; *Nyasaland Blue Book, 1929*.

⁵⁰MNA S1/945/29 Proceedings of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council, 31 May, 1934.

⁵¹*ibid.*

⁵²MNA S1/411^{II}/33 From the Acting Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province, to the Hon. The Chief Secretary, Zomba, 29th June, 1936.

lobby for ways “to have a local native punished if he absents himself without any rhyme or reason and clears off.” The problem with such a proposition, however, was that most planters themselves were unwilling to prosecute defaulters for fear of earning a “bad name among the natives and thus being worse off than before.”⁵⁴ Such was the fate of the Nchefu and Mangunda estates of A.J. Tennett in the 1930s. The manager complained of labour drifting away from his estates, according to him, for no reasons at all. Apparently, word had been rife of the manager’s harsh treatment of tenant labour,⁵⁵ which must have resulted in his unpopularity with African labour in general.

Even where efforts were made to punish natives for either having absented themselves from their work without permission or for desertion, the nominal punishments inflicted failed to break the line of resistance mounted by the local labourers. The fines imposed in the latter case varied according to circumstance between 1 and 3 shillings for default. But employers soon found out that when the local labourer signed on for a month

⁵³P.D. Lindeirey, “The Tea Industry in Southern Malawi: Its Introduction, Growth and Contribution to the Exports of the Country up to Independence in 1964,” History Seminar Paper, University of Malawi, Chancellor College, 1985, p. 18.

⁵⁴MNA S1/1040/19 *Mlanje District Annual Reports, 1919-1920*. S1/411/33 From the Chief Secretary to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 23rd January 1937. It seems likely that an intelligence system concerning labour conditions, along the lines of that developed by mineworkers on Rhodesian mines, also developed on the Nyasaland plantations. For the intelligence system, see Phimister, *Studies in the History of African Labour*.

⁵⁵ Complaints by tenants are cited in the Cholo District Commissioner’s Report of 1936, MNA S1/411/33 “Tenants on Private Estates.”

and did not finish his contract thereby attracting the 1 shilling fine, he would rather pay the fine than do any more work.⁵⁶

What is perhaps more intriguing is that the success of such mundane acts of resistance was not merely a fluke but a product of carefully calculated strategies carried out with much resolve and a certain degree of political sophistication. For example, to avoid payment of taxes, tenants resorted to the widespread use of aliases. They engaged themselves to work in one name and paid tax in another, with perhaps another tax name in a second village.⁵⁷ Consequently, it became quite impossible for district officials to keep a systematic check on taxation or to trace deserters. Apparently frustrated by this experience, the D.C. for Chiradzulu district was compelled to recommend the strict application of the District Administration (Native) Ordinance in order to control the district. Precisely, this would entail headmen reporting arrivals, departures, deaths and marriages in their villages and, above all, the prohibition of changes of name by natives.⁵⁸

Similarly both district officers and planters in Cholo and Mulanje deferred to the growing consciousness among indigenous Africans, conceding that use of wrong names by natives had become one of the most intractable problems they faced.⁵⁹ They noted,

⁵⁶MNA NSD 2/1/1 *Chiradzulu District Annual Reports, 1923-1927.*

⁵⁷MNA NSD 2/1/1 *Chiradzulu District Annual Report, 1923/24.* NSE 5/1/5 *Cholo District Report, 1938;* S1/411/33 *Summary of Reports by District Commissioners, Southern Province, 1931-1936.*

⁵⁸Chiradzulu District Annual Report, 1925.

⁵⁹ Chiradzulu District Annual Report, 1924/25; S1/60A/32 Mulanje District Report, 1932; S1/60B/32 Cholo District Report, 1931/32. Even as early as 1900, employers had complained about African workers' abuse of the Labour Certificate. Under the tax rebate system at that time, labourers who took wage employment with Europeans for at least a

undoubtedly with much regret, that the crux of the matter lay in the fact that natives had come to realize fully their value as labourers to the plantation economy and realized how desperate planters were to keep tenant labour on their estates. Such knowledge gave labourers the leverage to take full advantage of the situation.

The withdrawal of labour as a weapon of resistance had profoundly affected the direction of public policy during the late 1920s and 1930s as well as during the 1950s. As wage labour became increasingly unattractive at the end of the 1920s, the majority of those who withdrew their labour from estate employment resorted to the growing of tobacco despite appeals by the Department of Agriculture for Africans to grow more maize than tobacco.⁶⁰ As more and more people moved out of wage labour the number of tax defaulters increased correspondingly. This nearly brought the government into a financial crisis by 1933 at the height of the Great Depression. As a result, the government was compelled to change its agricultural policy. It became so desperate to increase revenue that the expansion of peasant cash crop production was seen as a viable option to increase tax revenue.⁶¹ A government circular issued in 1934 made this new policy direction clear:

month in a year paid a Hut Tax of 3 shillings and those who did not paid six shillings. African workers obtained several labour certificates for their relatives by changing their employers in a given year. See S. Myambo. "The Shire Highlands Plantations: A Socio-economic History of the Plantation System of Production in Malawi, 1891-1938," M.A. Thesis, University of Malawi, 1973, pp. 26-58.

⁶⁰This was a time when government discouraged African grown tobacco as it was felt that it was tobacco production that made Africans less willing to work for wages on the estates.

⁶¹District Commissioners had reported that the shortfall in hut tax was a result of peasant resistance to wage labour. In addition, the increase in the number of tax defaulters in

The need for increasing production of economic crops by natives is a matter to which government has for some time been giving the most serious consideration, with the object of providing them with a means of paying their taxes, meeting their obligations and augmenting their purchasing power.⁶²

This concern by government was clearly manifest in the intensive propaganda campaigns launched in the 1930s to stimulate production. Most notable was the 'Grow More Crops' campaign launched from 1934 in which several out-of-work European farmers were enlisted as field agents to help achieve this goal.⁶³ District Commissioners were also encouraged to make frequent visits to various villages to ensure progress. It should be noted, however, that in its bid to increase production the government remained cautious on the issue of produce prices. As the Acting Secretary of State declared in 1934:

It may be suggested that the present time, when prices are low, is not opportune to stimulate production and that the native cannot be expected to plant for a return, which, in his opinion, is inadequate. But when prices have fallen, it is essential that the native, if he is to maintain his income at the level prevailing before the depression, should double or treble his output and that he should learn, as others, both native and non-native have had to, to adjust his outlook to the changed conditions which exist to-day.... the question of price should not weigh too heavily in the considerations.⁶⁴

These campaigns focused primarily on a few selected crops: cotton, groundnuts and maize.

This orientation was explained in a number of ways. First, due regard was given to global economic conditions and local demand. It was generally felt that a market existed for all the

1932-33 was seen as a result of the fall in produce prices that year. MNA S1/411c/33 Circular No. 15 of 1934: Production of Native Economic Crops.

⁶²MNA S1/411c/33 "Production of Native Economic Crops."

⁶³Cited in McCracken, "Peasants, Planters and the Colonial State: The Case of Malawi, 1905-1940," *Journal of Eastern African Research and Development*, Vol. 12, (1982), p.30.

⁶⁴MNA S1/411c/33 "Production of Native Economic Crops," Paragraphs 4 and 8, 1934.

cotton the country could produce, and the same was most likely true for groundnuts.⁶⁵ The approach was based on the results of a survey conducted in various districts in the 1930s. The survey, so the administration claimed, established what crops could be grown, where, and why. For example, evidence obtained on the Shire Highlands districts of Blantyre, Chiradzulo, Zomba, Cholo and Mlanje, which had grown tobacco ever since its introduction, suggested that these areas were no longer amenable to tobacco expansion but were suitable for cotton, groundnuts and maize. This necessitated the encouragement of these crops with a view to replacing a certain amount of tobacco. The same applied to several districts in the Central Province, with the exception of Lilongwe that was earmarked as the main dark tobacco area.

These prescriptions, much as they could be valid geographically, raise some doubts about the state's professed commitment to increasing native cash crop production, especially if read in relation to the Secretary of State's position on tobacco: "that the production of tobacco was subject to special control and should therefore be an exception in the agricultural campaigns."⁶⁶ From this one may infer that there was probably some deliberate attempt or a hidden motivation to limit the production of tobacco by Africans. In sum, the campaigns did not pay off as intended; they failed to record any significant increases in sales of targeted crops.⁶⁷ And apart from the guidance provided in cultivation methods,

⁶⁵MNA "Production of Native Economic Crops," Acting Chief Secretary to Government, No. 17 of 1934 (07/02/34).

⁶⁶MNA S1/411/33 "Production of Native Economic Crops," Circular No. 15 of 1934.

⁶⁷C. Baker, "Depression and Development in Nyasaland, 1929-1939," *Society of Malawi Journal*, Vol. 20, (1967), pp. 7-23.

there is no evidence of any substantial financial or other assistance being rendered to African production in this undertaking, which would suggest serious commitment to this policy. It is for this reason that this policy shift must be seen essentially as government's reaction to peasant resistance. Short of a public declaration, the government capitulated to the dictates of the subalterns.

III

4.3: Post-War Policies and Peasant Resistance

The experiences of the later colonial period, the 1950s and 1960s, are equally revealing of the contest over labour and peasants' hidden struggles. Of particular interest are the ways that peasants resisted government intervention in crop production, especially maize, and how the wholesale imposition of the so-called modern farming and conservation rules, popularly known as *malimidwe*, were received with much disgust. Let us begin with the maize issue.

One of the central issues behind the maize policy advanced during the 1950s was the continued need to secure labour for the plantations. The policy was directed at discouraging the "excess" production and marketing of maize in certain areas of the Protectorate. In announcing the policy to the provincial commissioners and district commissioners for the Southern Province, the Director of Agriculture summarised the new policy as follows:

Maize is to be discouraged as a cash crop and no markets will be provided for buying it in areas which for reasons of unsuitable soil or unsuitable

topography are incapable of producing it efficiently, or where it is desired to give the fullest encouragement to some other cash crop.⁶⁸

This was a rather sudden policy twist because since the 1930s government had been advocating the growing of more foodstuffs (“the grow more food campaign”).

Furthermore, the policy statement cited the following major reasons for deeming areas unsuitable:

- A. Need to stimulate other economic crops, notably cotton and groundnuts.
- B. Soil conditions or topography.
- C. High population density.
- D. Availability of alternative local markets such as townships.
- E. Need for estate labour
- F. Fear of encouraging pests or diseases.

It is hardly surprising that reason (E) –the need for estate labour-- was exclusively cited with regard to the districts of Blantyre, Chiradzulu, Cholo, Mlanje and Zomba, these being the centre of the colonial estate economy. Cholo was the most affected as the whole district was declared unsuitable, and in Mlanje the whole southern section was deemed unsuitable while the northern part was suitable.⁶⁹

In his reply to this dramatic shift in maize production policy, the D.C. for Mlanje unequivocally argued that one of the major reasons for discouraging maize in south Mlanje was:

⁶⁸MNA PCS 1/2/18 “Maize Production Policy, 1952-1959 - From the Director of Agriculture, Zomba, 13 September, 1952.

an endeavour to withdraw facilities for earning a supplementary income in order that the potential labour force should become more dependent on the tea industry.... My personal view is that maize is not the crop taking up the largest acreage in South Mlanje. Apart from tea, cassava could appear to occupy the greatest area. I am therefore not particularly impressed with the theory that the area is unsuited to maize.⁷⁰

This evidence by a District Officer, eloquent as it is in its reservations about the maize policy, and coming as it does from the colonial representative on the ground, exposes the extent to which a resilient peasantry could push the colonial state into policy contradictions. Indeed, the observations of this District Officer bear a lot of merit when the background to the maize policy is carefully and critically examined. First, there was the 'grow more food' campaign from the 1930s. Then came the post-war development policies the aims of which included the "need to grow improved food crops and a transition from subsistence to an agricultural cash economy."⁷¹ Maize production was thus encouraged during the late 1940s as part of the post-war strategy, but the famine of 1949 also gave the matter an element of urgency.⁷² To stimulate the production of maize government made assurances of better prices and a ready market to purchase all available surpluses, first in 1946 and again in

⁶⁹Cholo district had the greatest number of tea estates during the colonial period and South Mlanje fell in the region of the district referred to as the tea belt.

⁷⁰MNA PCS 1/2/18 From the D.C. Mlanje to the Provincial Commission, Southern Province, Blantyre, 18 October 1952.

⁷¹For a detailed account of the post-war policy in Malawi, see R. W. Kettlewell, *Agricultural Change in Malawi: 1945-1960*, (Food Research Institute Studies, Vol. 5, 1965).

⁷²For an account of the 1949 famine in Malawi, See M. Vaughan, *The Story of an African Famine: Gender and Famine in Twentieth-Century Malawi*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

1949/50 following the famine.⁷³ At the beginning of the 1950s maize had attained a high export value and squarely secured a place on the export market. By the end of the season in 1951, however, it was clear that maize was being “over-produced” and that the Maize Control Board “was unable to handle more than a certain quantity.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, concerns had arisen that excessive production of maize accelerated soil erosion. Undoubtedly, the Director of Agriculture observed rightly that over-production resulted from the assurances made, just as genuine fears that this threatened soil conservation may have been. What was not articulated, even if implied in some circles, was the possibility that this was resistance to forced proletarianization, i.e. that Africans resorted to excessive production of maize as a safeguard against the exploitation of their labour.

For more than one reason, this, it would appear, was more of a fact than a mere possibility. We have already noted that African cultivators before the Second World War had relied on tobacco proceeds for the payment of their taxes, with the result that African tobacco production was discouraged in order to boost the labour supply for the estates. In the late 1940s, the post-war move into a cash economy notwithstanding, African tobacco production continued to be restricted on similar grounds, and at times radical measures were undertaken against growers, such as the destruction of tobacco nurseries in the Mlanje district in 1950/51.⁷⁵ But peasant cultivators were quick to realise that maize, having been

⁷³MNA PCS 1/2/18 Correspondence between the Secretary for African Affairs, Zomba and the Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province, Blantyre: 12th and 19th September 1952.

⁷⁴MNA PCS 1/2/18 Maize Production Policy, Ref.. 5/22/105 18th October 1952.

⁷⁵MNA PCS 1/2/18 From the D.C. Mlanje to the Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province, Blantyre, 23rd September 1952.

placed on the export market, could give them the same leverage tobacco once had and would enable them to pay their taxes without having to work on the estates. It was for this reason that African cultivators “planted maize to a much greater extent than usual to make up for the losses”⁷⁶ after their tobacco nurseries were destroyed. Government, officials admitted, suffered considerable embarrassment for failure to take up all the surpluses produced by African growers.⁷⁷ Usually, growers worked on the estates either for cash or food. Maize production provided both. This seriously undercut the motivations behind the tobacco policy and necessitated the new policy to withdraw market facilities and discourage maize such that “potential labour could become more dependent on the estate industry.” Furthermore, the fact that one of the stipulated aims of the maize policy --to stimulate other economic crops-- did not apply to all parts of the Shire Highlands districts suggests that the need to harness the labour potential guided policy.⁷⁸ In sum, the point to be emphasised is that the insistence to produce more maize than the official “maize policy” of the day allowed for during the post-World War II period was part of a broad strategy of resistance by the peasantry against forced proletarianization. They were able to mount this form of

⁷⁶*ibid.* This action by peasants may have been more of a survival strategy than an act of resistance, although it was clear that it caused government considerable uneasiness.

⁷⁷MNA Annual Reports for Blantyre and Chikwawa districts, 1951.

⁷⁸In the circular on Maize Production Policy, released by the Provincial Agricultural officer for Southern Region, in which various reasons were cited for unsuitability of maize cultivation in certain areas of the Protectorate, only small sections of the Zomba district were cited on the basis of the suitability to stimulate other economic crops (reason A) i.e. the Kawinga area in Zomba was singled out for groundnuts production while Chingale was cited for cotton growing. As for the rest of the Shire Highlands no attempt was made to stimulate other economic crops for the obvious reason of pushing growers

“less visible” resistance without the risk of facing brutal reprisals which open defiance invited. Not surprisingly, District Commissioners were still reporting serious labour shortages on the estates during the 1950/51 season.⁷⁹ That the strategy paid off is also eloquently evident in its effects on government policy, as seen in subsequent policy reversals. Apparently, fears arose that frequent and contradictory changes of policy, as had recently been witnessed, could only make the average African lose more faith in Government and its officers. The government was therefore willing to backslide on its marketing policy. The statement from the Chief Secretary in 1953 indicated that:

In regard to markets it is proposed that the Board should confine its purchases to gazetted markets in the first instance, but if such markets are insufficient to extract as much maize from growers as is desirable on *political grounds*, consideration will be given either to gazetting further markets or to allowing the Board to buy freely at any place.⁸⁰

This was a major concession, even though it was followed by what can only be described as a semantic justification that “the present decision to buy maize in marginal areas should be regarded as an expedient and that it represents a postponement and not a reversal of declared agricultural policy.”⁸¹

The maize policy was, by and large, an aspect of the post-war policy of *malimidwe*, modern farming methods, incorporating soil management and conservation rules. The

into the labour market on the estates. MNA PCS 1/2/18 Department of Agriculture, September 1952.

⁷⁹MNA PCS 1/2/22 Provincial and District Production Plans, 1950-1957, Mlanje Report, 1951.

⁸⁰MNA PCS 1/2/18 From the Chief Secretary, Zomba to the Chairman, Produce Marketing Board, Cholo, 2nd July 1953.

⁸¹*ibid.*

overall aims of post-war agricultural policy in Malawi were described under four inter-related areas: soil conservation, production of improved food crops, transition from subsistence farming to an agricultural cash economy and a combination of all these into sound farming systems.⁸² It is beyond the scope of this study to provide an exhaustive analysis of this policy package. What is of interest, however, is the bitter resentment and disaffection *malimidwe* caused among African cultivators and the pattern of resistance to this policy initiative. Generally speaking, *malimidwe* is one subject that has received considerable attention in colonial Malawi's historiography⁸³ and one about which every informant interviewed for this study had something, mostly anecdotal, to say.⁸⁴ For the most part, the period is remembered for the coercion and compulsion associated with the enforcement of the new agricultural rules, but also for the fact that cultivators had the nerve to openly defy these rules.⁸⁵ Most observers have thus limited their analyses to the apparent

⁸²Kettlewell, *Agricultural Change in Malawi*.

⁸³See for example, Kettlewell, *Agricultural Change in Malawi*; Tangri, "From Politics of Union," Kalinga, "Resistance, Politics of Protest," and E.C. Mandala, *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy: A History of the Lower Tchiri Valley in Malawi, 1859-1960*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

⁸⁴Part of the reason for this could be that opposition to *malimidwe* was merged with the nationalist movement for political independence from the late 1940s. In order to win the support of the peasantry, nationalist leaders presented the nationalist struggle as a movement against *malimidwe* and the Federal regime. Once independence was achieved, the new leadership of Malawi's first republic, in the name of Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda, continued to denounce *malimidwe* in public speeches for another 30 years as part of a strategy to consolidate its own legitimacy. This form of political rhetoric, most certainly, must have a strong influence one way or the other in the way oral informants today reconstruct the experiences of the *malimidwe* era.

⁸⁵Again the prevalence of open defiance to the rules must be understood in terms of the nationalist fervour typical of the time.

“harshness” of and open resistance to *malimidwe* and have failed to capture some of the silent struggles against the system.⁸⁶

Government intervention in soil management and conservation in Malawi reached its zenith in the 1950s. The scheme involved, among other things, the digging of ridges and construction of contour bands. In addition to making ridge cultivation and erosion bunding compulsory, the National Resources Ordinance also set planting and uprooting dates. The methods used entailed great physical effort. This was burdensome “for the small African farmer equipped only with hand tools,” more so because most of the work had to be done during the dry season when the ground was hard.⁸⁷ For all the coercion and hardwork involved, ordinary African peasants saw no immediate tangible rewards in the new farming methods more than the verbal assurance that they would pay. For these reasons the methods were openly opposed. To their deepest disenchantment, open opposition attracted fines and imprisonment. But once the regime’s ruthlessness against offenders intensified, cultivators once again resorted to hidden forms of opposition which went undetected most of the time. Oral sources tell of how farmers opted to open up gardens in distant places away from home and out of reach of the *malimidwe* agents and messengers:

Ridge cultivation *per se* was not bad. It was good for the preservation of soil fertility. The trouble, however, was that people were harshly instructed. For the most part, demonstrators lacked skills to persuade growers to follow their methods. Growers could not understand why they had to be fined or face imprisonment for not farming their gardens properly; it did not make

⁸⁶One exception which provides some salutary hints to forms of silent opposition to *malimidwe*, is Mandala, *Work and Control*, pp. 234-235.

⁸⁷Kettlewell, *Agricultural Change in Malawi*, p. 240; S. Thomas, “Economic Developments in Malawi Since Independence,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 2, 1(1974), p. 36.

sense. These led many to abandon their plots to encroach on forest and hilltop areas unsupervised by demonstrators. Others permanently relocated to areas deemed free of *malimidwe* agents. If only people were properly instructed, I have no doubt they would have responded more positively.⁸⁸

This was especially the case with those in border districts who could maintain farms across the border in Portuguese East Africa while retaining their residence on Nyasaland territory. These tactics were most effective largely due to a very thin human resource base on the ground. The disproportionately small number of government-appointed capitaos and field assistants charged with the enforcement of rules compromised efficiency, as depicted in this account by the Director of Agriculture:

Some people may say that the peasants should be dragooned and compelled to produce more: they may be right but we must be realistic and recognize that a handful of Europeans cannot compel hundreds of thousands of farmers; it just isn't possible, as there is no effective machinery through which orders on such a vast scale can be enforced.⁸⁹

A district officer in the Lower Shire district in 1951 acknowledged the limited abilities and lack of persuasive skills by demonstrators, although he seemed convinced too that the problem lay in the conservative attitude of the African farmer:

The African is not responsive to the agency of these problems (soil conservation) and to go faster than he can be pushed, is merely to bite off more than one can chew, and so achieve nothing... The introduction of composting and organic manure, involving as it does much additional heavy work, is not one to catch the imagination of the African; similarly crop rotation and fallow is completely illogical to the African, for how can one possibly hope to obtain more from less... Always at the centre of the problem is the African with his apathy for harder work and his completely unpredictable reaction to any fresh idea; the most that can be hoped is to press on slowly exploiting and consolidating any gains that might be made,

⁸⁸Interview with D.C. Mathewe, T.A. Nthiramanja, Mulanje District.

⁸⁹MNA PCS 1/2/22 Government House, 1950.

and patiently and painstakingly overcoming opposition where and when it is met.⁹⁰

A female informant emphatically asserted that as far as she was concerned, *mailimidwe* was simply unacceptable and people could elude the *malimidwe* agents without being caught:

Malimidwe was not convenient for a person of my age, and this was when I lost all hope and interest in farming. I grew up all those years tilling my land the way I knew best and harvested good crops. And then these demonstrators said they came to teach us, teach us what? Do you mean we didn't know farming? Like me, many people did not fully comply. We could barely pretend to be following orders for as long as the demonstrator was around, once they got out of sight, we reverted to our old ways. Another way to evade them was to do *mpandira*, that is, putting up ridges only in sections of the field bordering the main pathways used by instructors. Instructors would then be deceived that the whole farm is ridged, when in fact the inner sections were not and they (the instructors) did not have the luxury of the time to inspect whole farms.⁹¹

Our farming methods worked very well; why change them for nothing but extra labour for the same results.⁹²

The intensification of maize production to unprecedented levels by peasants on their own accord, thereby accelerating soil erosion against which colonial officials were fighting, was itself a form of silent opposition that has escaped the attention of scholars.

Agricultural extension provided for, among other things, the free distribution of seeds and advice on good crop husbandry. However, because of their overall contempt and resentment to *malimidwe*, farmers were generally apathetic and unwilling to take the free

⁹⁰ MNA PCS 1/2/22 District Production Plan, Port Herald, 1950-1957. During the 1930s, the Governor of Nyasaland described the Nyasaland native as "conservative by nature" for failure to adjust his outlook to the changed economic conditions which were the consequences of the world-wide Depression. African growers at the time had refused to accept cotton prices lower than those of the pre-Depression era.

⁹¹ Interview with A. Kazembe, Chiradzulu district.

seed. Some took up the seed just to throw it away into the bush.⁹³ In all probability, *malimidwe* policy only served to raise the political consciousness of the peasantry as it brought them into the fringes of nationalist politics for the first time.

IV

4.4: Other Arenas of Rural Struggle and Resistance

In so far as no single activity, no lone strategy could satisfy the needs of all rural households (as chapters five and six) demonstrate, patterns of resistance also exhibited the scale of social and economic differentiation within the peasantry. As we have argued above, a large scale of silent peasant wars took place within the agricultural sector. By way of classification, it makes some sense to label such peasant activities as anti-colonial, if only for the reason that they were targeted against declared colonial agricultural policies. These actions had “some degree of consciousness and collectivity about them, as well as some explicit attention to broad structures of domination.”⁹⁴ However, other actions both in the agricultural and non-agricultural sector do not necessarily fit into this classification at face value. For example, when villagers turn against the dictates of their headmen or chiefs, who were, on the one hand trusted custodians of the community resources and, on the other, paid

⁹² Interview with M. Nkomaula, Chiradzulu district.

⁹³MNA A3/2/190 Department of Agriculture Reports 1945-1951. Most affected was the cotton seed as declining prices since the 1930s had made cotton unpopular. This is reminiscent of what Allen Isaacman saw of Mozambican peasants who, as a form of protest to the cotton regime, boiled the cotton seed before planting. Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty*.

⁹⁴This is Jeffrey Rubin’s view of the meaning of resistance. “Defining Resistance,” p. 239.

functionaries of the state, do we consider such opposition to chiefs as anti-colonial? Or do we seek alternative explanations for this kind of internal dissent? Similar questions can be raised with regard to conflicts between different chiefs, individual acts of men/women (such as pilfering) and many more that were driven primarily by economic circumstances at the domestic level, which when considered in their own right hardly measure up to the character of “collectivity, intent or consciousness,” to borrow Rubin’s formulation. The examples discussed below attempt to extend the notion of peasant resistance to include such acts in so far as they had an influence, even if indirect, on the policy options of the state.

Within their communities, African chiefs were enormously influential and powerful stakeholders whose authority or social status guaranteed them control over resources and an easy way to material accumulation. In hunting and fishing communities, for example, chiefs and headmen had free access to the fortunes of hunters and fishermen as the latter had a cultural obligation to pay tribute by way of sharing a portion of all their proceeds to the village chief.⁹⁵ Prior to European occupation, chiefs also enjoyed the privilege of appropriating the labour of their subjects through *thangata* labour parties. This was before colonial rule corrupted *thangata* into “forced labour.” When asked about the origins and operation of *thangata* informants described it in these terms:

Any member of the village could call for *thangata* although it was chiefs who usually organized *thangata*. It was up to the family or household that needed additional labour to go around in the village inviting people to come on a given day to assist in a task. It could be clearing new gardens, harvesting or construction of huts. The household calling for *thangata*

⁹⁵This view is adopted from oral interviews conducted in 1990/91 in what were once predominantly fishing and hunting communities in the Lower Shire Districts of Southern Malawi. See L. Malekano, “Colonial Urbanization: The Case of Chiromo in Nsanje District, 1902-1945,” History Seminar Paper, Chancellor College, 1991.

prepared food and beer in advance to be served to those partaking in the task. When the day came, people would converge at the place where labour was required in their numbers. Once the task was accomplished, it was celebration time. They would eat, drink and dance the day out.⁹⁶

In another account, *thangata* is described as reciprocal labour:

In the old days it was a good thing. The chief would kill fowls and goats and make a lot of food, and prepare everything ready. And then he would take a small boy and tell him to beat the drum and tell him to say that the chief wants *thangata* tomorrow. And everyone would turn out to *thangata*. And when they came the chief would offer them beer and say, “now come to the garden and so give me your labour.” And... they went to the garden and started hoeing ... till midday. Then food and beer came. And after that they marched to the chief’s village in peace and with no sign of grief... and they all sat down around the chief’s courtyard. And after feasting away, they began to dance. And the chief said; “now you have done very well and helped me -- go in peace.” And that is what the natives know as *thangata*.⁹⁷

When European colonialists assumed power over the Protectorate, the powers of chiefs were either threatened, in cases where they were seen to be disloyal, or reinforced, where they pledged allegiance to the colonial masters. As we have seen, chiefs and headmen could be deposed and replaced for disobedience to the colonial mandate. In broad terms, we may regard them as power brokers vacillating between the positions of resistance and compliance depending on what served their self-interest best. However, as oral accounts suggest, chiefs sometimes reaped the benefits of their co-operation with the colonial masters at the expense of their subjects. For example, they were charged with the enforcement of *thangata* as “forced labour” and the *malimidwe* rules of the 1950s. They were also

⁹⁶Interview with Mrs. Somanje and Mr. Malenga, Chiradzulu District, March 1997.

⁹⁷An African witness to the Commission of Inquiry into the 1915 Rising, cited in White, *Magomero*, p. 89.

instrumental in the tracking down of tax defaulters in their areas, a situation that for some of their subjects amounted to betrayal:

We trusted our headmen; we paid tribute and always remained loyal to them. But most often, our headmen betrayed us... it was very easy to evade estate rangers enforcing *thangata* or the *boma* tax collectors. It was difficult to escape from headmen because we lived with them every day, we respected them and they knew us... Sometimes we had to go along with the abuses of *thangata* because we did not want to disrespect our chiefs. They [the headmen] were the worst kind of *capitaos*.⁹⁸

Chiefs were also known to have entered into informal alliances with planters to help supply labour to the estates:

The fact is simply that these headmen were bought [bribed] by *azungu*; that is the reason they encouraged us to go to the estates for work. Europeans would come down from as far as Makwasa, Satemwa and Naming'omba to solicit labourers. The headman would draw up a list of potential labourers in his village who, when the recruiting planters arrived, would be directly summoned by the headman and signed out for work. He, the headman, was paid for the service.⁹⁹

On their part, headmen argued that to be seen as good leaders they had to be accountable and exemplary. This they could do by giving their co-operation to the *boma* agents. Besides, it was the only way by which they could preserve and protect their territorial integrity.¹⁰⁰ Thus contended one headman:

⁹⁸Interview with Ronald Mchenga, T.A. Kapichi, Thyolo District, July 1997.

⁹⁹*ibid.* Makwasa, Naming'omba and Satemwa are all names of tea growing areas in Thyolo far away from the places of residence of these informants. Also interviews with W. Chiyembekezo and L. Kajombo, Chiradzulu District, March 1997.

¹⁰⁰Interview with village headmen Musisi and Kuluwira in Mulanje District, and Kumadzi in Thyolo. Examples of chiefs rejecting colonial orders have been noted already, therefore it was not always the case that they betrayed their subjects.

They say 'pride goes before the fall.' As the village chief I had an enormous responsibility. I was in-charge. I was the government's eyes on the ground, and had a duty to maintain law and order, not an easy thing for the size of my village. That made me the first target of any reprisals arising from the break down of order. I had to take my job and my orders seriously... nonetheless, my people and my village came first.¹⁰¹

On private estates, where Africans loathed living under "controlled" conditions, headmen's roles were no less complicated. Individuality in a headman, reported a D.C., was regarded with suspicion. "He must be tactful and pander to the whims of the landlord the whole time, otherwise he is more often than not, dubbed a bad headman."¹⁰² However, villagers did not always comply with the directives of their chiefs and headmen. Resistance and disobedience to traditional authority was very much a part of colonial politics. Cases of flight or desertion, of families relocating from one village to another to protest the dictates of chiefs, were not uncommon: "I had good land and a good life there at Sandama, but I thought my headman was after something, I don't know what. Things were no longer the same between us; twice he apportioned my land for some loyalists without my consent. I had to leave... that is how I came to this village."¹⁰³ Indeed, a lot of this friction amounted to localised internal dissent quite removed from the central structures of control and political power: the colonial state. However, it demonstrates the prevalence of certain political discourses within the grassroots of a peasant society. Such discourses sometimes permeated the higher structures of power and guided policy direction.

¹⁰¹ Interview with J. Jeremiya, Village Headman, Musisi village, T.A. Chikumbu, Mlanje.

¹⁰² MNA S1/411/33 Extract From the Cholo Report, 1935.

¹⁰³ Interview with Lipenga Msikiti. Also interview with Ronald Mchenga: the latter added that sometimes mere suspicions and accusations of witchcraft, or petty jealousies could trigger family migrations.

A report for Mlanje district in the 1920s sheds some light on how village politics could threaten central authority and capture its attention. According to the D.C., a local headman with the backing of his followers decided to break away from his Traditional Authority and demanded that he be recognized as an independent chief by his own people. Initially, the D.C. dismissed his claim, but when he threatened to march out with his whole village to his own country in Mozambique, the D.C. compromised.¹⁰⁴ It was doubtless a local conflict, but its repercussions could have been far-reaching, nonetheless.

Colonial administrators at times expressed misgivings with the structure of Native Administration. On the ability of headmen, for example, a District Resident for Chiradzulu reported that:

he regretted at being unable in any way to applaud their virtues and efficiency. With the exception of perhaps Kadewere and Mpama, the others were entirely without character or influence among their people, and for this reason more effective control and administration was handicapped.¹⁰⁵

Just as the villagers were convinced that their chiefs were usually “bought” or paid off by Europeans, colonial administrators, though from a different perspective, did not rule out the existence of corruption among chiefs and headmen as well:

So many of the natives have become used to ways very different from their own customs and the so called chiefs are for the most part of so debased a type that I very much doubt whether giving them judicial powers would not lead to abuse. I cannot but think that the material advantages of “gain” have become so much a part of their outlook that it would inevitably enter into

¹⁰⁴MNA S1/1040^{A-C}/19 *Annual Reports of the Mlanje District, 1920-1924*. This dispute involved principal headman Ntepa and Chief Nazombe. If Ntepa carried out his threat, it would mean a huge loss to the Protectorate of potential labourers and tax revenue. And that was the last thing the D.C. wished to happen. He had no choice but bow down.

¹⁰⁵MNA *Chiradzulu District Annual Report, 1924/25*.

their judicial relations with their people and result in their courts being very corrupt.¹⁰⁶

If native administration was, as it seems, anything but the fairy tale of a regimented law and order regime, it would be plausible to argue that there was a lot more to village politics than is accorded in peasant studies.

On another level, peasant farmers in colonial Malawi, it must be re-stated, were not a homogenous group, but consisted of a cross-section of rich and poor, “big” and “small” farmers. The rich peasants commanded relatively larger tracts of land and would usually have other peasants in their employment, raising the spectre of one peasant group exploiting another.¹⁰⁷ Yet, when compared with the European planters or the state, these rich peasants, like their poor counterparts, were themselves a subservient group. Also, as much as peasant labourers found ways to rebel against their European masters, nothing other than the racial factor, perhaps, could practically stop them reacting the same way to their African masters. Whether fighting against rich African peasants or European masters, the common denominator was the element of agency among the poor peasants. We do know, however, that rich peasants were not part of the colonial ruling elite or paid functionaries on the colonial payroll like the African chiefs. It is therefore tempting to suggest that peasants’ actions against other rich peasants were driven more by economic than political considerations. Eric Hobsbawn has argued that politically, the village poor may defer to

¹⁰⁶MNA *Chiradzulu District Annual Report, 1923/24.*

¹⁰⁷Examples of small African landowners were noted above. Landeg White writes of Chilembwe who, as a landowner, was ‘not a very trustworthy person’ as there was some evidence of resentment among his workers. White, *Magomero*, p. 124.

their richer brethren and that the more important question is whether the solidarity of all peasants against third parties may outweigh the internal conflicts between them.¹⁰⁸

A good example of peasant differentiation and internal disunity in colonial Malawi may be found in the operation of peasant co-operative societies in the 1940s and 1950s, the composition of which reflected a clear bias, in terms of representation, in favour of the rich peasants.¹⁰⁹ The African Foodstuffs Growers Association of Cholo and the Native Foodstuffs Growers Association of Mlanje are specific cases in point. These societies, whose representation included Native Authorities and “big” farmers, vigorously fought to have government fix better prices for native grown foodstuffs. In some seasons, when their calls for better prices went unheeded, they organized all peasant growers to boycott and picket the produce markets. However, impelled by immediate demands for cash returns, some small peasants did not always honour the picket lines. They found ways to circumvent the picket and dispose of their produce, a situation that led colonial administrators to conclude that most peasants did not entirely support the co-operatives which, in the eyes of administrators, were nothing more than rich farmers’ clubs.¹¹⁰ Given their contradictory roles, chiefs sitting on these committees issued any dissenting orders regarding boycotts in a guarded manner to avoid responsibility. My informants maintained that market decisions during the colonial period were entirely their personal responsibility:

¹⁰⁸Hobsbawn, “Peasants and Politics,” pp. 7 & 19.

¹⁰⁹MNA NS 1/3/9 From the Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province, Blantyre to the Hon. The Chief Secretary, Zomba, 5th May 1944.

¹¹⁰MNA NS 1/3/9 From the P.C. Blantyre to the C.S. Zomba, 12th July 1944.

It was entirely our business to decide where to sell our produce... to sell or not to sell our crops was a decision we had to make. We had the freedom to do as we pleased with our produce and nobody could force us otherwise... we could decide to sell it right here at P.I.M. or carry it to Chitembere or all the way to the Limbe market if we thought that is where we could get good sales.¹¹¹

Differences of opinion in market considerations, however, did not undermine the solidarity between various factions of the peasantry, nor did the poorer peasants defer their political decisions to their richer counterparts, to paraphrase Hobsbawn. Their solidarity remained intact. When the government introduced the Master Farmers' Scheme in the 1950s,¹¹² for example, among its principal aims was political stability at a volatile time of nationalist and anti-colonial propaganda. Government had hoped to find allies in master farmers, assuming their elevated socio-economic status would bring them closer to government. That did not happen. When the nationalist campaign intensified, master farmers could not continue collaborating with colonial field officers, for doing so earned them labels such as "stooges" or "sell outs," especially among their cronies who perceived them with both suspicion and jealousy.

Other peasant actions that may have been primarily motivated by economic circumstances, also carried a strong sense of political collectivity and intent. We have noted that in the 1950s peasants threw away free cotton seed to protest *malimidwe*. Earlier in the late 1920s and early '30s at the height of the Depression, peasants, rich or poor, showed their solidarity when they refused to plant or to sell their cotton and groundnuts at

¹¹¹Interview with F. Libanga and J. Masauli, Chiradzulu District.

government markets for a price they considered inadequate. Their actions sent shock waves through a government fearful of a financial collapse. These officials seemed caught unawares in a situation for which they had no immediate solution:

It seems intolerable that, at a time in the world's history when millions are working for less pay or longer hours for the same pay, natives decline to plant groundnuts unless they can get a penny for three pounds. They have received high prices in the past and must adjust themselves to changed conditions... open compulsion, of course cannot be resorted to, but considerable moral suasion can be used.¹¹³

Officials thus realized that use of force could backfire and decided to proceed cautiously when dealing with peasants' disaffection.

¹¹² See details of the scheme in the next chapter. For a detailed study, see O.J. Kalinga, "The Master Farmers' Scheme in Nyasaland, 1950-1962: A Study of a Failed Attempt to Create a 'Yeoman' Class," *African Affairs*, Vol. 92, 368(1993).

¹¹³ MNA SI/411/33 Development of Native Agriculture.

Conclusion:

The foregoing discussion presents peasants as political actors who were able to reform and remake the political environment in which they lived, in a way, making their own histories, if rarely under conditions of their own choosing. The discussion is premised on the oppressive nature of the colonial regime in Malawi. To undercut this oppression and make life more bearable, peasants resorted to subtle and mundane forms of opposition, which, indeed, expanded the boundaries of confrontation and negotiation with the system. These included the withholding of their labour, tax evasion, flight, use of false names, rejecting poor market prices and defiance of agricultural rules. While these acts failed to bring the colonial capitalist system to its knees, they did reduce the levels of exploitation and pushed the colonial state to relent on certain policies. The resultant policy contradictions depict the significance of resistance and peasant politics at work. The discussion also demonstrates that however oppressive the colonial regime in Malawi might have been, its powers were limited by its own fears of rural disorder and the fact that its very existence and success depended quite considerably on peasants' labour and revenue. To effectively tap these resources, the state had to exercise a great deal of caution in enforcing its mandate. Finally, the chapter points to the fact that internal struggles within African communities could set limits to anti-colonial struggles but could not fundamentally halt peasant resistance. Over time, and within the terrain of rural struggle, a repertoire of other survival and advancement strategies evolved, to which we shall turn our attention in chapters five and six.

CHAPTER FIVE

Peasants' Survival and Advancement Strategies during the Colonial Period

Nyasaland Africans were created with loving kindness, generous and modest hearts. Since the advent of the Whiteman they had and are still showing their obedience and help the masters in many different ways and also loyal to the Government. When they are employed the wages they get [are] insufficient -- it could only be counted as *posho*. They have big families to support and the wages they earn [are] very low for buying clothes, paying taxes, school fees and many more requirements. Things to support themselves mainly derived from their produce etc... This is a hard time, things are too dear in stores which a man cannot afford to buy unless he works for many months for a poor quality cloth and yet the masters do not mind about the [poorness] of their servants.¹

Diagnosing ills and prescribing possible cures for African economies has been standard practice for many commentators preoccupied with the continent's colonial past as well as its present political and socio-economic environment. Perhaps the text quoted above is a fair description of the ills of the peasantry in Malawi during the colonial period. As preceding chapters have shown, peasant communities in colonial Malawi's Shire Highlands had very limited access to land, and the land they had was overworked and often infertile. Men worked for low wages on the estates or in agricultural related industries. Alternatively, they migrated to work for higher wages in South Africa or Southern Rhodesia -- an option which, if beneficial, had its own tradeoffs. Gone were the days when Africans could make their own clothing, land was plentiful, the population small and shifting cultivation could fulfill the simple needs of rural families by relatively

¹MNA NS 1/3/9 "Views of the Native Foodstuffs Growers' Association" - Minutes of Meeting, 20th April 1944, Mlanje.

shorter periods of work a year.² In short, the colonial order was a world of communities struggling by various means to support themselves, a world struggling to come to terms with the transition from pre-capitalist to colonial capitalist social and economic institutions. This chapter looks at some of the strategies peasants utilized in order to manage this crisis of transition and how they attempted to re-assume control over their livelihoods. The battle of survival was doubtless the work of both men and women, sometimes playing divergent but complementary roles, although much of the literature on rural Africa upholds women as constituting the backbone of rural subsistence.³ It is for this reason that the theme of survival with which this chapter deals, is continued in the next chapter on women to strike a gender-balanced perspective on colonial peasant struggles.

An important qualification worth making at the outset is that the profound economic and social differentiation between poor and “better off” peasants meant that no single strategy was followed by all families. Differences in terms of household assets, land and labour, and opportunities to earn income from some non-farm sources, accounted for the diverse activities peasants experimented with to survive. This chapter presents a narrative of these initiatives and examines some problems and limitations attendant to them. This approach is both necessary and useful, as it reveals how certain strategies reinforced and complemented each other, while others had potentially predatory

²MNA PCS 1/2/22 Government House - Zomba, January 18, 1950; S1/1077/19 District Annual Reports, Lower Shire, 1919-1920. See also B. Rau, *From Feast to Famine*, especially chapters one and two.

³See chapter six.

effects, which though sound in the short term, could have long-term negative ramifications, leading for example to the vicious cycle of food deficits. The strategies discussed include casual or seasonal employment, foodstuff sales, beer brewing, fish trading, livestock raising, retail trading and other forms of cash-earning.

5.1: Casual or Seasonal Employment as a Survival Strategy

Much as peasants detested working for wages on Shire Highlands estates, a significant fraction of the population could not help entering wage employment in order to satisfy the basic survival needs. In areas with acute land hunger, the bulk of the population existed partly on the produce of their small plots and partly by working on the tea and tobacco estates. Beyond that, they could also engage in trade or seek employment outside their districts of origin.⁴

Regular employment, however, was rarely available on the estates. Most of the work peasants contracted was seasonal—mostly available in the wet season and peak seasons of harvesting and processing of tea and tobacco. The other type of work was *ganyu* (daily casual labour) available from time to time throughout the year.⁵ Others worked on government public works facilities or as store-boys in Asian/Indian-owned shops. Perhaps the greatest constraint for those who sought sanctuary in wage employment was the inadequacy of wages. As repeatedly reported by District Officers,

⁴ MNA S1/411/33 Extract from the Cholo District Annual Report, 1935; PCS 1/2/22 Provincial and District Production Plans, 1950-1957.

⁵ See chapter six for tables and figures for various kinds of wage employment, number of men and women employees, and average earnings. The chapter also provides details on *ganyu* labour, which was mostly done by women.

Africans often complained of unsatisfactory working conditions and, in the words of one administrator:

The tea industry does not offer assured full time employment, nor are the wages, etc. offered sufficient to permit of a man maintaining his wife, family and dependents on the money earned by him in the short peak season. He must find an alternate source of income.⁶

In the 1930s and 1940s most employers of temporary labour paid an average wage of between 6 to 8 shillings per month including food or food allowance.

During the 1940s, a Labour Commission, a Sub-committee of the Native Welfare Committee and the Central Labour Advisory Board, investigated conditions under which Africans in the Protectorate were employed. Family budgets were analyzed and “the conclusion reached was that the adult male employee in the Protectorate of tax-paying age could not maintain a minimum subsistence economy, without hardship under a wage of 12 shillings per month, including food or food allowance.”⁷ The Commission, having discovered that both Government and other employers were in many cases paying less than a living wage, recommended the introduction of a Minimum Wage of 12 shillings per month for all kinds of work in the Protectorate.⁸ This proposal was followed by a series of meetings and debates on the subject involving representatives of government

⁶ MNA PCS 1/2/22 From the D.C. Mlanje to the P.C. Blantyre, 18th October 1952. For general complaints of unsatisfactory conditions: MNA S1/411^{II}/33 Summary of Reports by District Commissioners, 1933-1936.

⁷ MNA S12/1/16/1 The Nyasaland Tea Association: Minutes of an Extraordinary General meeting held at the Cholo Sports Club on Wednesday, 17th September 1941 at 10 a.m.

⁸ *ibid.*; and Memorandum on the Minimum Wage, 1941. The work load was calculated on the basis of government employment conditions at a minimum of a 44 hour week or 192 hours a month of 22 full working days and four half-days' work.

and industry, to discuss views on whether the principles of the proposal were practical. The general consensus among industrialists was that the proposal could be accepted in principle, assuming the native would give an economic return for the wages paid. In essence, the idea was shelved on the grounds that it provided no assurance that the African would provide labour commensurate with the minimum wage. Employers had for a long time noted the tendency by Africans to drift away from work as they pleased. Not many were willing to spend more than 3 to 4 hours of work a day on an estate.⁹ They were thus convinced that Africans were not prepared to give a quid pro quo for higher wages and better living conditions. The disloyalty of African labour was, perhaps by default, a tactical or bargaining strategy of survival. It led, in some cases, to employers backing down on their conditions not by paying higher wages but reducing the tasks performed to 3-4 hours a day, which was what "an African labourer considered a day's work."¹⁰

The worst problem Africans who worked for individuals, such as Asian store-owners, faced was the withholding of wages by their employers, sometimes for several months. District reports for the 1920s record of judicial and legal cases brought against

⁹ MNA S12/1/16/1 The Nyasaland Tea Association Limited, 1941; PCS 1/2/22 Provincial And District Production Plans, 1951. Other estate employers complained that African squatters, who had an obligation to work on their estates, exhibited little loyalty to the estate, more often than not, actually working on another estate. The long-standing myth that Africans worked longer hours in return for higher wages when employed outside the Protectorate (Rhodesia or South Africa) but were not prepared to do the same in their own country, was also invoked. See chapter three.

¹⁰ MNA PCS 1/2/22 Mlanje District Production Plan, 1951, p. 6.

Indian employers for withholding wages.¹¹ Some Africans who found themselves in such situations resorted to pilfering as this account demonstrates:

It is custom for these traders not to pay their store capitaos, or visit them for sometimes as long as five or six months... It is not unknown for a Banian who has not paid his capitao for say five or six months to find when he proceeds to the store to pay him, that the shortage of stock is approximately the amount of the capitao's wages.¹²

In general terms therefore, wage employment could constitute an important contribution to a peasant family's survival requirements, but by no means a satisfactory one. To make ends meet, most peasants had to find alternative means of subsistence either within or outside the agricultural sector.

5.2: Subsistence and Survival: Agricultural Production

As we know, agricultural production predated colonial rule in Malawi. Colonial rule only introduced new varieties of crops, created new demands and problems, and a system of agricultural rules and controls. From the inception of colonial rule Africans on the Shire Highlands grew crops such as tobacco, cotton, maize, groundnuts, cassava and sweet potatoes. In theory, maize was the main food crop whereas tobacco was the major cash crop.¹³ Cotton was another cash crop, while cassava, potatoes and groundnuts, along

¹¹ MNA NSD 2/1/1 Chiradzulu District Annual Reports, 1922-1927; 1 DCMJ 1/1/3 Complaints and Queries; S1/1040/19 Mlanje District Annual Report, 1920.

¹² MNA S1/1040/19 Monthly Report – Mlanje District, November 1919.

¹³ P.T. Terry, "African Agriculture in Nyasaland, 1858-1894," *The Nyasaland Journal*, Vol. 14, 2(1962). Also by the same author, "The Rise of the African Cotton Industry in Nyasaland, 1902-1918," *The Nyasaland Journal*, Vol. 15, (1962).

with a wide selection of other pulses and vegetables all served as supplementary food crops.

Agriculture was peasants' bedrock for survival. What should perhaps be appraised about it are the farming practices, combining the cultivation of food and cash crops, in the face of growing land hunger, discriminatory agricultural legislation, erratic and unpredictable climatic conditions and marketing problems. The way peasants worked through these impediments clearly demonstrates agriculture's role as a survival strategy.

By the turn of the century, Africans on the Shire Highlands, both on Crown Land and the private estates, had fully embraced the growing of cotton and tobacco as cash-crops. This was a time when European settlers were themselves consolidating plantations with these crops, leading to a competition over resources between the two sectors.¹⁴ The expansion of the estate sector during this period provided a new market for agricultural produce with the result that a variety of food crops were grown for sale. However, whenever settler farmers felt threatened with the expansion of peasant production in Crown Land areas, the colonial government was forced to take measures to control peasant production either through monopolistic control of commodity purchasing or by creating credit facilities that favoured Europeans.

¹⁴ See chapter three.

Through the Department of Agriculture, for instance, settlers tried to prevent African production of lucrative crops, notably cotton and flue-cured tobacco.¹⁵ During the entire colonial period African production of flue-cured tobacco, tea, sisal and tung was not allowed.¹⁶ In 1910, an ordinance was enacted to control African cotton production on Crown Land. The cotton ordinance empowered the Department of Agriculture to determine when and where, on Crown Land, cotton should be produced. Strict cultivation by-laws were enacted which specified cotton cultivation time and in some cases the sizes of fields on Crown Land.¹⁷ Between 1910 and 1923, as the ordinance was put into effect, cotton production on Crown Land was disallowed in many parts of the Shire Highlands.

Similarly, the Native Tobacco Ordinance of 1926, which created the Native Tobacco Board (N.T.B.), regulated African production of tobacco on Crown Land.¹⁸ Until 1946, the Board's membership was exclusively European. The policies the board

¹⁵ This was quite a paradox as one of the founding objectives of the department was to encourage African cotton production. See B. Pachai, *Malawi: The History of the Nation*, (London: Longman Ltd., 1973).

¹⁶ R.W. Kettlewell, *Agricultural Change in Malawi, 1945-1960*, (Food Research Institute Studies, 1965); M.L. Chanock, "Agricultural Change and Continuity in Malawi," in R.H. Palmer and N. Parsons (eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty*, (London: Heinemann Ltd., 1977).

¹⁷ Terry, "The Rise of the African cotton Industry."

¹⁸ Initially the work of the Board was restricted to the Central Province but later extended to the Southern Province as well. In its pioneering days, the N.T.B. was, in the short term, a blessing for Crown Land growers. It supervised the planting, harvesting and curing of the crop, leading to a remarkable increase in the amount of African grown tobacco on Crown Land from 2,636,00 lbs. the year before to 4,531,396 lbs. in 1926. M.L. Golola, "The Introduction of Tobacco as a Cash Crop in the Central Region of Malawi, 1919-1939," *Makerere Historical Journal*, Vol. 2, (1976).

pursued between 1926 and the 1940s highlight the settlers' agenda, at times with government support, to protect their own interests by inhibiting the development of African agriculture. The Board was chaired by the Nyasaland Director of Agriculture and had both official and unofficial representatives, most of whom were European planters. It was financed by a special tax levied on African producers depending on the amount of tobacco sold. The tax itself was aimed at preventing African producers on Crown Land from undercutting estate growers. Three prominent settlers were appointed to the Board from the outset. One was William Tait Bowie, manager of the Blantyre and East Africa Company, a firm well-reputed then for its considerable experience with tenant production in the Shire Highlands. The second was A.F. Barron, the largest employer of tenants in the Central Province, and the third was I. Conforzi, an Italian planter based in the Southern district of Cholo and the second largest buyer of peasant-produced tobacco in the country. From the 1930s, Conforzi became one of the largest producers of tea.

Given their strategic portfolios, these planters "constituted a powerful pressure group whose interests sometimes ran counter to the best interests of the independent African tobacco growers on Crown Land."¹⁹ For example, in order to reduce competition between the estates and independent growers, the N.T.B. not only restricted the numbers of registered growers, and limited the amount of acreage per grower, but also regulated the market by closing some markets periodically.

¹⁹J. McCracken, "Planters, Peasants and the Colonial State: The Impact of the Native Tobacco Board in the Central Province of Malawi," *Journal of Southern African Studies* Vol. 9, 2(1983), pp. 177-178; also McCracken, "Share-cropping in Malawi: The Visiting Tenant System in the Central Province, 1920-1968" in African Studies Centre (ed.), *Malawi: An Alternative Pattern of Development*, (Edinburgh: African Studies Centre, 1985), pp. 45-46

Despite land limitations and the restrictive state policies toward African agriculture, peasant production showed remarkable resilience during much of the colonial period. By the end of 1929, peasant production of tobacco surpassed plantation production in importance as 63 percent of all Nyasaland tobacco was produced by peasant farmers -- a sharp contrast to 1920 when peasant-produced tobacco accounted for only 11 percent share of total production (see Table 5.1). However, as the population increased and more land came under cultivation by settlers and corporate enterprise, land shortages were exacerbated thereby imposing limitations on the future expansion of African agriculture particularly in the Shire Highlands.

Table 5.1

TOBACCO PRODUCTION 1899-1930

YEAR	EUROPEAN PRODUCTION (000 LBS.)	AFRICAN PRODUCTION (000 LBS.)	TOTAL PRODUCTION (000 LBS.)	AFRICAN PRODUCTION AS % OF TOTAL
1899	-	-	-	-
1900	-	-	-	-
1901	-	-	-	-
1902	-	-	-	-
1903	-	-	-	-
1904	60	-	-	-
1905	-	-	-	-
1906	-	-	-	-
1907	585	-	-	-
1908	897	-	-	-
1909	1,234	-	-	-
1910	-	-	-	-
1911	-	-	-	-
1912	-	-	-	-
1913	3,842	-	-	-
1914	3,371	-	-	-
1915	3,382	-	-	-
1916	4,384	-	-	-
1917	4,777	-	-	-
1918	2,594	-	-	-
1919	3,997	-	-	-
1920	3,844	472	4,317	10.9
1921	6,737	448	7,185	6.2
1922	6,511	448	6,959	6.4
1923	3,919	672	4,591	14.6
1924	7,312	1,176	8,484	13.9
1925	5,361	2,636	7,997	33
1926	6,447	4,531	10,978	41.3
1927	10,448	7,805	18,253	42.8
1928	9,111	5,408	14,519	37.2
1929	5,128	8,694	13,822	62.9
1930	6,509	9,482	15,991	59.3

Source: Gupta and Mills, "Economic History of Malawi" p.30

The evidence also seems to suggest that the colonial government was only willing to stimulate peasant production during times of economic or financial crises. For example, when commodity prices collapsed in 1921/1922 and many planters had difficulty staying in production, the colonial government found it expedient to encourage peasant cash crop production. This would subsidize the settler sector while at the same time providing the government with revenue.²⁰ A similar trend obtained in the wake of the Great Depression of 1929 when tobacco prices collapsed and many settler farmers went bankrupt. Thus the beginning of the 1930s saw an expansion in peasant production through the "grow more crops campaign." At the same time the weakness in the estate tobacco industry revealed by the financial collapse enabled foreign capital, particularly British companies, to penetrate the colonial economy. Most settler-owned estates began selling-out to the large British companies many of which, in turn, began to invest considerably in tea plantations in the Shire Highlands. This further expanded the market for foodstuffs and provided new opportunities for wage employment. Finally, during the post-World War II period, again due to financial imbalances brought about by the war, peasant production underwent a series of changes. New farming techniques, the *malimidwe* programmes, were introduced as was the Master Farmers' scheme. However, legislative restrictions continued to be enforced to discourage African tobacco production throughout the 1950s and when peasants turned maize production into a more lucrative enterprise, restrictive measures were extended to control maize production as well.

²⁰ W.E. Havilland, "The Rise of the African Tobacco Industry in Nyasaland and its Production Problems," *The South African Journal of Economics*, Vol. 23, 2(1955).

In addition to regulating peasant agricultural production, the colonial government from its earliest days also attempted to stifle African entrepreneurship while buttressing settler production. Both the 1903 Credit Ordinance and 1912 Credit with Natives Trade Ordinances imposed severe limitations on African retail business.²¹ It was illegal, under the ordinances, for commercial banks, Asians and Europeans to provide credit facilities above £1 to Africans. The 1912 Township Ordinance prohibited business partnerships between Europeans, Asians and Africans. Both Asians and Africans were barred from owning businesses in European designated areas:

No Asiatic or Native shall acquire property either leasehold or freehold or settle or carry on trade of his own account, either directly or indirectly or jointly or in partnership with an European in the Township except in the Asiatic Ward.²²

Furthermore, during the 1910s and 1920s government licensing gave exclusive rights to Europeans and Asians to purchase cash crops and foodstuffs from Crown Land, which in effect “deprived African storekeepers of the opportunity to purchase African food crops for resale in ‘urban’ markets to Europeans and Asians. This would have given them a welcome opportunity for extra profit.”²³ Peasants’ survival strategies therefore must be understood against such discriminatory legislative mechanisms, European competition in

²¹ S.S. Myambo, “The Shire Highlands Plantations: A Socio-economic History of the Plantation System of Production in Malawi, 1891-1938,” M.A. Thesis, University of Malawi, 1973, pp. 26-58.

²² MNA A2/1/7 Out Letters: Governor’s Office to Colonial Office, 1912. Myambo, “The Shire Highlands Plantations,” p. 54.

²³ M.L. Chanock, “The New Men Revisited: An Essay on the Development of Political Consciousness in Colonial Malawi,” in R.J. Macdonald (ed.), *From Nyasaland to Malawi: Studies in Colonial History*, (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1975), p. 246.

crop production, and both Asiatic and European monopoly in commercial activities.

Where acts of resistance were hardly the solution to peasants' miseries, strategies for survival as discussed in this chapter carried the day for the subalterns.

5.2.1: Production and Sale of Foodstuffs as a Survival Strategy

Maize is our life and no one can do without cultivating maize. It has always been our ideal, more or less our custom, to see to it that as far as possible we are able to move from one harvest season to the next without having to go elsewhere for the family's maize needs. But that is not always attainable due to inadequate land and other financial needs which force us to dispose of some of our maize for cash.²⁴

For all peasant households, producing all the food they could possibly want was the defining goal in every growing season and perhaps a reliable antidote against starvation and poverty. While food maize, millet, sorghum, cassava and other food crops were cultivated, growing enough food was equated with growing enough maize, the staple crop. From both oral and official reports for the early as well as late colonial periods, the prominence of maize in household food security is undisputed.²⁵ District and provincial reports from as early as the 1920s suggest that "the average native produced in his garden each year enough maize for himself, his wife and at least three children for the full year."²⁶ This ability notwithstanding, District Commissioners observed that the food security of natives was threatened almost every year however well the native gardens

²⁴ Interview with Emmie Mapira and V.H. Kuluwira, July 1997.

²⁵ *Ibid.*; MNA S1/1022/27 Maize Growing Industry, 1927 and 1938; PCS 1/2/18 Maize Production Policy, 1952 to 1957.

²⁶ MNA S1/43./83 Foodstuffs Supplies: Summary of Reports by District Commissioners, 1927.

yielded. In a normal year, maize would be harvested between the months of April and June. Yet in such normal years, serious food shortages occurred during the months of December and January, either because the bulk of the maize was sold or, in the language of colonial officials, “wasted.” And in years when owing to an unfavourable season, or insect and fungus attack, or the gardens simply yielded poorly, the period of food shortage could begin as early as October. These imbalances were largely overcome by peasants’ own initiatives in diversifying their farming activities or by exploiting other avenues for income outside agriculture.

Probably the most common and reliable initiative peasants undertook as a food security safeguard was the planting of crops that came to be known as “catch crops,” notably cassava and sweet potatoes. Catch-cropping was a hunger risk-averting strategy because, among other things, such crops, unlike maize or sorghum, have the capacity to yield well in low fertility soils. In addition, cassava is resistant to drought conditions that adversely affect other crops. The extent to which this strategy was embraced and appreciated by peasant households is unmistakably clear from oral sources:

Yes we all love to plant maize in abundance. It is customary. But we have not been too foolish to realize that seasons differ; there are years of good rains and those of drought; there is no way we can live on maize alone when a drought occurs; we therefore try cassava, sweet potatoes, which do a lot better even under drought conditions...²⁷

Even colonial administrators applauded the efficacy of “catch-cropping” and encouraged it. In debating famine relief measures in the 1920s, colonial officers concluded that the best approach would be to take advantage of the local knowledge of natives of suitable

crops and seasons for planting. The Department of Agriculture, it was further resolved, had to fully utilize local knowledge in all its policy measures that sought to encourage or discourage the growing of certain crops in particular areas.²⁸ With the passage of time, it became clear that colonial administrators took the “catch-cropping” initiative seriously. For example, unpredictable climatic conditions between 1920 and 1923 prompted the D.C. in Mlanje to admonish chiefs in the district to appeal to their people to plant more cassava and sweet-potatoes and that “if any villagers neglected to do so, you must report to me at once and I will send police to insist on those gardens being made.”²⁹ Similar calls were made in Blantyre, Cholo and Zomba districts in the post-1949 famine period.³⁰ In Blantyre, “catch-cropping” was not only noted for being very common in the district but also for its added advantage in keeping some cover on land during the dry season, which was vital for soil conservation. What is more, beans, wheat and chick peas were grown as “catch-crops” in addition to cassava and potatoes. In many parts of the district, “catch-cropping” went hand in hand with intercropping.³¹ In 1952, the Provincial Commissioner for the Southern Province endorsed the practice when he singled out

²⁷ Interview with Falesi Bisayi, Thyolo, July 1997.

²⁸MNA Circular Letter No. 1425/23, Zomba, 1928. In practice, however, directives from the Agriculture Department were issued without such consideration of local knowledge. Rather, it appears that they were based on purely economic or political necessity as deemed by the colonial government. See chapter 4.

²⁹MNA SI/1040/22 Mlanje District Annual Report, 1923.

³⁰MNA PCS 1/2/22 Measures to Secure Increased Production in the Blantyre District, 1950; PCS 1/2/22 Production Plan: Southern Province, 1950-1957.

³¹PCS 1/2/22 Blantyre, 1950. Details of intercropping and its advantages are discussed in chapter 6.

cassava and sweet potatoes as valuable reserve food crops which had to be encouraged in areas where they were not widely grown.³² It seems likely then that this practice, developed in the earliest days of colonial rule, had with time become institutionalized as a strategy during years of need.

The vitality of “catch-cropping” was also attested to in areas where the growing of foodstuffs, particularly maize, was itself an income-generating activity. The sale of foodstuffs for household income dates back to the turn of the century with the establishment of plantations and the expansion of urban centres of Blantyre and Zomba. Most household heads interviewed for this study testified that maize, more than being a staple food crop, was an important source of income for many rural families. This was particularly the case in the late colonial period in Malawi. Between 1950 and 1952, for example, many parts of the Zomba district, traditionally regarded as low-yielding maize growing areas, sold larger quantities of maize than never before. The impressive sales output was attributed to “catch-cropping.” People in the district, officials observed, grew much cassava which they kept for food and thus dispensed with their maize for cash.³³ In Mlanje district, between 1942 and 1946 maize offered for sale increased by an annual average rate of 9.2% while tobacco sales declined at an average rate of 25% during the same period. In terms of quantity output, more maize than tobacco was offered for sale between 1942 and 1952, except for 1948, as table 5.2 shows:

³²MNA PCS 1/2/22 Production Plan, Southern Province, 1952.

³³MNA PCS 1/2/18 Correspondence: From the Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province to the District Commissioner, Zomba, 6th October 1952.

Table 5.2

Average Surplus of African Produce Offered for Sale in Mlanje District

Year	Tobacco	Groundnuts	Maize
1942	984	3	2550
1943	884	15	3762
1944	740	56	3365
1945	505	176	3022
1946	295	196	3325
1947	753	208	2224
1948	1129	109	869
1949	140	-	-
1950	229	-	1716
1951	540	-	2735
1952	65	(incomplete) 94	(incomplete) 3000

(All figures in Tonnes)

Source: MNA PCS 1/2/18 Maize Production Policy, 1952-1959

The figures in table 5.2 disclose two important points. One is that in 1948 when tobacco sales hit their highest, maize sales decreased considerably to their lowest in ten years. Conversely, low tobacco sales in 1952 were pitted against higher sales for maize. This shows that peasants had the ability and flexibility to switch to a crop which was in high demand from the survival or the economic viewpoint. That is, maize, the staple food crop, was re-oriented from time to time to serve as a cash crop. The second point is that following the famine of 1949, the maize offered for sale in 1950 almost doubled pre-famine surplus offered for sales in 1948. The surplus even increased quite considerably in 1951 and 1952. It will be recalled that at the end of the 1940s, the colonial government had stepped up its campaign at discouraging African tobacco production, which saw

tobacco nurseries being uprooted in 1949 and 1950. Thus, the resurgence of maize sales to higher levels after the famine was as much a survival strategy for peasants as it was a strategy of resistance against government attempts to turn them into a labour force more dependent on the estate industry.³⁴

Chapter four also argued that during the 1950s government officials discouraged maize production as a cash crop in many areas of the country. The Maize Control Board that regulated the marketing of maize could only buy a specified quota of total surplus production every year. The Board also enforced the order by closing down some maize markets. African growers, however, bypassed the intended effects of the maize policy by turning to markets in neighbouring Portuguese East Africa (P.E.A.), present-day Mozambique. The D.C. for Mlanje acknowledged this marketing survival strategy when he asserted in 1952:

what is not bought at local markets is sold across the border in P.E.A. and probably more is exported than is purchased locally. It is almost impossible to prevent the export of produce.³⁵

His counterpart in Cholo reported in the same year a considerable traffic of maize from Cholo to P.E.A.³⁶ In addition to maize sales, the D.C. also reported increased production and sale of cassava, beans, groundnuts and wheat. African growers contended that maize was sold across the border partly because it fetched better prices there.³⁷ Thus, there was

³⁴See chapter four.

³⁵MNA PCS 1/2/18 From the D.C. Mlanje to the P.C., Southern Province, Blantyre, 8 October 1952.

³⁶MNA PCS 1/2/22 Report on Production: Cholo District, 1952.

³⁷ Interview with Messrs. F. Ndasauka, P. Chiwaya and Lipenga, March and July 1997.

a clear attitude towards making more money to prosper than merely satisfy survival requirements.

A breakdown of maize sales by actual quantities of surplus sold at various markets depict how peasants from different areas responded differently to market forces and the fact that peasant families pursued different survival strategies depending on their circumstances. Table 5.3 shows maize sales in Mlanje between 1950 and 1952 in five regions of the district: South, South West, North, East and Central.

Table 5.3

Peasant Production: Maize Sales in Mlanje District, 1950-1952

South Mlanje

Market	1950	1951	1952
Ndala	149	97	122
Malosa	45	-	26
Namasalima	48	64	142
Mambulu	30	97	26
Naluso	326	311	195
Mathambi	927	631	206
Likabula	1275	1924	1161
Total	2770	3124	1878
Annual Growth (%)		12.8	-39.9

South West Mlanje

Market	1950	1951	1952
Chinyama	548	864	202
Mlemba	478	852	334
Nachimango	914	1024	440
Fundi	568	804	623
Tuchila	726	1319	1033
Total	3234	4863	2632
Annual Growth (%)		50.4	-45.9

Central Mlanje

Market	1950	1951	1952
Chimwamezi	773	1115	701
Mlomba	1326	875	876
Kwalala	-	-	772
Total	3508	3309	3285
Annual Growth (%)		-5.7	-0.7

North Mlanje

Market	1950	1951	1952
Palombe	532	1907	1236
Mpasa	2150	3580	3090
Chisugulu	-	880	936
Mbona	173	-	870
Migowi	2501	2833	4760
Phalloni	-	1560	1760
Total	5376	10756	12652
Annual Growth (%)		100.1	18

East Mlanje

Market	1950	1951	1952
Nkhulambe	294	1052	1306
Likangaria	241	2147	1882
Total	1535	3199	3188
Annual Growth (%)		108	-0.3
Total Sales for all five regions	16423	25351	23635
Annual Growth (%)		53.8	-6.4

(Figures represent number of bags sold weighing approx. 220 lbs. each)

Sources: MNA PCS 1/2/18 Maize Production Policy, 1952-1959.

Mlanje district was one of the districts in which the Director of Agriculture, in 1952, decried excessive maize production as an unsound policy.³⁸ While the trend was one of increased production in nearly all parts of the district, table 5.3 shows steady increases in the surplus sold in some areas and fluctuating increases in others, with 1952 showing the lowest total quantities offered for sale, except for North Mlanje. This can be explained from the survival point of view. The markets in South Mlanje, to begin with, were located adjacent to the tea belt where people could earn wages. However, as noted earlier, the tea industry did not usually offer full-time employment; nor were the wages sufficient to enable those who were employed seasonally to survive on the wages earned for the whole year.³⁹ For this reason people had to explore other options for their subsistence.

³⁸MNA PCS 1/2/18 Maize Production Policy, June 10, 1952. Also condemned were the other Shire Highlands districts, Blantyre, Chiradzulu, Cholo and Zomba. See chapter four.

³⁹MNA PCS 1/2/18 Circular no. 22/52/96 Maize Production, Mlanje, 1952.

For example, they had to subsist on their own garden lands either growing their own food or, where possible, grow a saleable surplus such as maize, cassava or beans. Yet this region, the tea belt, was one of the most affected by the 1952 directive to limit maize production. Thus, the lower figures of maize sales in 1952 do not necessarily reflect a reduction in the quantity produced. Rather they suggest that the maize policy pushed growers not to sell locally (as prohibited by legislation) but to export to P.E.A. This strategy gave peasants the opportunity to meet their basic needs, including tax, without having to labour on the estates.

North Mlanje, on the other hand, was an area of greatest peasant agricultural productivity. Maize was the main crop but tobacco and groundnuts did extremely well too. There were few opportunities for wage earning in this region; therefore agriculture was the basis of survival in the area. Legislation against excessive maize production did not apply to this area, a factor that accounts for the highest figures for maize purchased at local markets in this section of the district (table 5.3). This contrast between South and North Mlanje further illustrates the point that what worked rather effectively as a survival strategy in one area of the country or district did not always work in another.

As for the other regions of the district, the table shows that both East and Central Mlanje grew a fair quantity of maize for sale, but according to oral sources the people of the area also grew tobacco, cotton (especially in Nkanda area), groundnuts and some pulses.⁴⁰ South-West Mlanje, like the South region, was an area of high population

⁴⁰Interview with Messrs. Mulomba Mbewe and Pitani, T.A. Chikumbu, Mlanje. See also G. Chikwakwa "Cotton Growing in Nkanda Area of Mlanje District, 1902-1930," History Seminar Paper, Chancellor College, University of Malawi, 1995.

density and constituted the main labour pool for the estates in both Mlanje and Cholo (see district maps for Thyolo and Mulanje fig. 6 and 7). Here, maize as a cash crop was also discouraged but the people of the area were renowned for their trading activities in maize and other commodities with the urban areas of Blantyre and Limbe, as well as P.E.A. This means that, for their livelihood, people of South West Mlanje could either work, grow crops or trade. A combination of these engagements gave the people of this area the armory they needed to survive and to counter government's restrictive legislation in trading and agricultural activities.⁴¹

Undoubtedly, foodstuffs such as maize, which doubled as cash crops, were vital instruments in the peasants' repertoire of survival strategies. The downside, however, according to some colonial authorities, was the vicious cycle of food deficit in peasants' families that resulted from over-selling the food crop, among other causes.⁴² Over-selling was exacerbated by the entry of Asian/Indian traders into the maize trade particularly during the 1920s and 1930s. This was before the Maize Control Board was established. The role Indians played in African colonial economies has been appraised, among others, by Dotson and Dotson.⁴³ They have argued that Indians dominated, survived and succeeded in the economic sphere because, in contrast with other competing groups, they were preadapted to the socio-cultural prerequisites of the African trade to an extraordinary degree.

⁴¹ This trading took place in informal markets.

⁴² MNA S1/1022/27 Memorandum on the Maize Growing Industry, 1938. Other reasons cited for food deficit were beer brewing and poor storage facilities.

Equipped with such business skills, Indians had an upper hand in the trade -- buying the maize partly for cash and partly for cloth.⁴⁴ Unlike aspiring African traders, Indians had the means to obtain licences as required by the Foodstuffs Ordinance and the law did not limit their doing so. The worst years for the Africans were those of falling prices for designated cash crops, notably cotton and tobacco. Such was the case between 1927 and 1933, and 1937 and 1939. In 1927, for example, when the tobacco crop was short and poor prices obtained at markets, a number of peasants in the Blantyre and Chiradzulu districts found themselves with no other choice but to sell their maize to European and other buyers to find money for their tax and personal needs.⁴⁵ District Commissioners received numerous complaints that certain buyers knew that growers had become desperate for cash and took advantage of the position to pay them unfair prices. This meant that African growers disposed of large quantities of produce for a lower cash return than might have been the case if marketing was fairly conducted. Between 1927 and 1928 maize prices in Mlanje district stood at 4 to 6 lbs. per 1*d.* Ten years later, in 1938, it was noted that despite the rise in demand and production of maize, prices had fallen to as low as 10 or even 12 lbs. per 1*d.* This fall, observers contended, had little

⁴³F. Dotson and L.O. Dotson, *The Indian Minority of Zambia, Rhodesia, and Malawi*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968).

⁴⁴MNA S1/1022/27 *The Maize Growing Industry, 1927*. Women traders were the most attracted by the exchange of new clothing with maize.

⁴⁵MNA A3/2/204 *Quarterly Reports for the Southern Province, 1925-1929*. S1/1022/27 *Memorandum of the Proposal by the Nyasaland Railways Ltd. to Purchase 600 tons of Maize Annually in the Chiradzulu District*.

relation to the law of supply and demand.⁴⁶ Rather, it was occasioned by the incursion into the maize business of middlemen, mostly Indians. The Indian middlemen had secured contracts with the tea estates that needed the maize to feed their labourers: “it might have been expected that the estates paid a little more for their maize in return for the services of the middleman; in fact they came to pay less and it was the native grower from whom the middlemen reaped their profits.”⁴⁷ The middlemen bought the maize in small quantities direct from growers and then resold to the estates at a profit. This practice, at times, threatened the food security of peasants many of whom ran out of food early in the new season because they over-sold in the preceding harvest season. Parts of Blantyre and Neno (Mwanza) districts, for example, experienced a famine in 1926 as a result of over-selling.⁴⁸

With the passage of time, Native Authorities came to loathe Asian business dealings in the maize trade. They complained to government and requested that Indians be stopped. Their common plea was summarized in these words: “the Indians have their stores; let them keep to them and not interfere with our maize.”⁴⁹

Several District Commissioners in the Southern Province concurred that “natives were being unmercifully robbed by the Indians, and wondered at the possibility to

⁴⁶MNA S1/1022/27 Memorandum on the Maize Growing Industry in the Mlanje District, May 1938.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸MNA A3/2/204 Extract from the Report of the Southern Province, 1926.

⁴⁹Cited in MNA S1/1022/27 Maize Growing Industry, Mlanje, 1938.

legislate against such ruthless profiteering.” Others, however, placed the blame for food shortages on improvidence and carelessness on the part of the African grower:

The native is by nature improvident, living happily enough from day to day, putting nothing by for the bad time ahead. He is an easy prey for the food speculator and until he is helped, often against his will, to look after his food supplies he will yearly spend his cotton money buying back his own food.⁵⁰

Native Authorities then requested that the time had come when the Indian middleman had to make way for the native middleman. They strongly felt that the maize belonged to the African producers and that they should be assisted by government to sell it directly to the consumer for a reasonable price without the intervention of European or Indian middlemen and their agents.⁵¹ Government functionaries had a difficult time dealing with this situation. Most officials failed to find enough reason to condemn the Indian middlemen or the estates. Instead, they even found the practice justified on the grounds that the native maize bought by the Indians/estates went back to feed the native, often at a period in the wet season when food became scarce in the village. This was the basis of the vicious cycle that worried colonial officers. Food shortages in one year caused food shortages in the next and so on. When peasants ran out of food before the harvest season they were compelled to sell early in the harvest before regular markets were officially opened and before completion of harvest. This made it difficult to estimate how much of the produce they could offer for sale or spare for food. For some, the situation was

⁵⁰MNA S1/483/31 Foodstuffs: supplies and shortage, 1931-1936: summary of Reports by District Commissioners.

⁵¹MNA S1/1022/27 Maize Growing Industry.

worsened by their tendency to sell green or wet maize in large quantities long before complete maturity of the crop. It would appear that peasants, more often than not, entered the market at the most disadvantageous times. As sellers, they sold early in the season when prices were at their lowest, and as buyers they bought in the deficit season where the prices were at their highest.

The fact that maize sales resulted in food deficits constitutes a major negative tradeoff for this income-generating activity. This raises the conceptual question of whether the sale of foodstuffs befits the description "survival strategy," as it may have actually reduced peasants' overall ability to feed themselves. Not all households, however, experienced these yearly food deficits, and the intensity of food scarcity varied from place to place. For instance, in January 1935 Africans in Mlanje, around Phalombe and Nkanda area had, according to reports, plenty of food to carry them over until the next crop, while those in the area towards the Zomba border expected shortages before the next crop.⁵² In general, the most vulnerable were "poor" households with more than five people trying to subsist on less than a hectare of garden land.⁵³ Oral accounts suggest that most families maintained a good balance between the grain they offered for sale and that stored for home consumption. They also indicate having developed reliable storage and food conservation methods. Even if the grain was oversold, they always put aside other food items such as sweet-potatoes, beans and cassava, upon which they

⁵² MNA A3/2/191 Department of Agriculture: Monthly Reports by Agricultural Supervisors, Mlanje, January 25, 1935.

⁵³ MNA S1/483/31: The average size of grain garden was approximately 2 acres (1 ha.), from which a family of man, wife and three children received an average daily allowance through the year of 9 lbs. of maize.

subsisted when a maize deficiency occurred.⁵⁴ However, these did not preclude famine occurrences in absolute terms. Oral accounts speak of worst scenarios of food shortages when families relied on makeshift food strategies, such as “consumption of wild fruits or ‘specially’ treated shrubs and roots of certain plants.”⁵⁵

A close look at the storage methods, indeed, reveals that peasants were not necessarily improvident, as colonial reports would have us believe. Grain crops –maize, millet and sorghum—as well as groundnuts, were usually stored in granaries locally known as *nkhokwe*. Cassava was processed into *makaka*⁵⁶ and stored on rooftops during the dry season or placed in special baskets and sacks during the wet season. Sweet potatoes were first sun-dried for a day or two to let go of the moisture to prevent rotting. They were then stored in pits carefully dug for this purpose. Imaginative and inventive as these communities were, even leaf vegetables were processed and preserved as *mfutso* and could be stored for months for future use.⁵⁷ Calabashes and clay-pots were used to store beans, pigeon peas and other pulses. From these oral accounts, it is reasonably clear that a wide range of products that rarely made it to official government markets, and were

⁵⁴ Interviews with Mr. Ndanga, Mrs. Robert, Mr. Mathewe and Ms. A. Kazembe.

⁵⁵ Interview with Agness Ambulera. The informant described different types of plants, untouched under normal circumstances, which were converted to food in years of shortages. Unfortunately, I am unable to provide a better description or translation for these plants rather than the simple “‘specially’ treated roots and shrubs.”

⁵⁶ A detailed account of this method is offered in chapter six.

⁵⁷ Interview with V.H. Kumadzi and Agnes Ambulera, T.A. Kapichi, Thyolo. *Mfutso* refers to dried leaf vegetables. To make *mfutso* or *kufutsa*, as the process is known, fresh leaf vegetables are boiled for some time, with a little salt added, and then left in the sun to dry. Once dry, the vegetables could stay for months and could be prepared (cooked) for consumption at any time without any other special treatment.

therefore considered inconsequential, found their way into peasants' storage rooms and in no small way accounted for peasants' survival from one season to the next.

Other informants indicated in relative rather than absolute terms that they did suffer periodic food shortages. Further investigation, however, revealed that the said food shortages actually referred to maize shortages. In the words of one informant:

It was not unusual to run out of maize, but I can not think of a particular year when I was completely without food... You see, among our people, maize is equated to food. People will tell you they have no food to mean they have no maize... Similarly, it is not uncommon for people to say we did not eat or we slept on empty stomachs to mean they ate something else other than *nsima*.⁵⁸

Another informant added some interesting insights on the issue. He argued that the temptation to sell as much maize as possible was most of the time irresistible, especially when cotton could not fetch good enough prices to enable them acquire new clothes at the end of the season.⁵⁹ Maize was usually in higher demand. It could be directly exchanged for clothing in the Indian shops. But the sale of maize, he further asserted, did not automatically translate to hunger and starvation as there were a number of other things one could do in between seasons to survive. Among many things, one could engage in piece work (*ganyu*), or convert the little stored grain into more cash by making and selling beer, or engage in small-scale trading, such as fish trading, all of which contributed to the household income. Therefore, in the opinion of this informant, buying "back" maize during deficit season (because more was sold at harvest time) was

⁵⁸ Interview with J. Jeremiya, T.A. Chikumbu, Mlanje. *Nsima* is the actual staple porridge made from the maize flour.

“normal.” That is what life was all about.⁶⁰ It is to these other strategies, which in varying degrees supplemented foodstuff supplies and household incomes, that we must now turn. Such strategies were also central to the pattern of social and economic differentiation in the rural economies.

5.3: Beer and Liquor Production as a Survival Strategy

The trade in African beer and illicit liquor (*kachasu*) in Malawi was usually the work of women. Production of beer and *kachasu* was a simple and readily available source of income for women generally unable to find other sources.⁶¹ While women were the principal producers, men were the principal customers. In a number of households for which beer production was a significant cash-earner, both men and women actively participated in the planning, preparation and sale of African beer and liquor.⁶² According to a Mr. Mukhuna, a seasoned brewer, the African beer industry was one fast method of converting grain to “big” money particularly during times of unfavourable market prices for grain. The market for beer has always been readily available and steady all year

⁵⁹ Clothing was one of the most important consumer goods that had to be satisfied at least once a year, and that was during the main harvest season.

⁶⁰ Interview with E. Malenga, Chiradzulu District, March 1997.

⁶¹ This theme is further developed in the next chapter. Here a generalized discussion of beer and liquor is attempted.

⁶² Oral testimonies in general support the view that women controlled the trade. Yet for some male-headed households, this was almost like a full-time occupation such that the head of the household, the man, took an active role. See Interview with D. Nambazo. Over 40% of respondents in this study mentioned beer or liquor production as a significant source of income.

round.⁶³ Only two essential ingredients, large quantities of grain (maize or millet) and sugar, were required for production of beer.

The use of grain in beer making gave the colonial government an ideal excuse to intervene and police the African, or in the dry language of colonialists, the Native beer industry. The government's position was that Africans squandered enormous quantities of food supplies through excessive beer brewing and that the practice had to stop.⁶⁴ The production and trade in *kachasu* was conducted illegally whereas various laws were enacted to prohibit beer production, ostensibly as a measure to conserve foodstuffs thereby averting the risks of hunger.⁶⁵ From the 1920s, brewers had to purchase brewing permits, violation of which carried prison sentences or fines. These measures became unpopular with Native Authorities.

The colonial claim that Africans brewed beer excessively and wasted too much grain in the process must have been based on the assumption that a lot of the brewing was done for ceremonial rather than commercial purposes. Ceremonial brewing prevailed in precolonial times when beer parties were organized as a labour mobilization strategy or just as a celebration of the end of harvest season.⁶⁶ The thinking by colonialists that

⁶³ Interview with C.H. Mukhuna, Nakutho Village, Mlanje.

⁶⁴ MNA S1/333/27 Foodstuffs – Reserve, 1927; S1/545/28 Foodstuffs: Supplies, 1928-1930.

⁶⁵ Measures taken came under The Liquor Intoxicating Ordinance of 1911, The Native Liquor Rules (No.2) of 1922 and The Native Liquor Rules of 1928. MNA S1/528/45 Circular No. 1485/23 of 1928; NS 1/22/1 Beer Control Rules, 1928.

⁶⁶ Werner, *The Natives of British Central Africa*. This is further discussed in chapter six. Oral sources indicate that even this ceremonial brewing, which indeed continued in the colonial period, did not amount to wastage. Various families would pull their resources

foodstuffs were wasted through ceremonial beer brewing is reflected in a 1927 report from the Chikwawa district, south of Blantyre:

101 lbs. of grain makes 6 pots of beer (approximately 12-14 gallons) enough for 20 men. Finished in one day. This once a month is probably good for the natives but when 300 to 400 lbs. of grain are used for the 20 men and they are all drunk for 2-3 days and this happens two or three times a month it is very wasteful of grain.⁶⁷

The available evidence suggests that ceremonial brewing and drinking did not occur at a scale described above during the colonial period.⁶⁸ Peasants for whom beer and liquor production was an important income-generating activity admitted that the trade did take away a considerable portion of the maize produce from the family *nkhokwe* but emphasized at the same time that the benefits from the industry far outweighed the initial investment. Moreover, not only maize was good for beer brewing. Cassava flour could be substituted for maize, and some families cultivated finger millet for the special purpose of beer brewing.⁶⁹

That the beer trade benefited some peasants and therefore the rural economy was substantiated by official government reports. In 1923, Chiradzulu district recorded

together, contributing to this ceremonial brew and this would happen once or twice a year. A family's grain contribution was thus small, as little as 4 or 3 lb., and could hardly be described as wastage. Interview with B. Masautso and M. Mandanda, Chiradzulu District, March 1997.

⁶⁷ MNA S1/483/31 Appendix to: Foodstuffs: Storage and Conservation, 1927.

⁶⁸ Interviews with Ndanga, Robert and Kazembe. Ceremonial brewing was also associated with rain-making rituals when whole villages would convene to offer sacrifices to ancestral spirits to bring them rain amid signs of an impending drought. This was not an annual event, but only done when the need arose.

⁶⁹ Interview with B. Masautso and C. Mukhuna. Finger-millet gardens could be made around living premises in villages or could be interplanted with maize or other crops.

satisfactory revenue collected from taxes. The commissioner for the district attributed this to the fact that natives had found an easy way of making the tax money, namely beer-selling: "they were too satisfied with the easy method of producing the six shillings and fostered by them as an excuse for beer-selling."⁷⁰ In 1928 when legislation was proposed to prohibit the trade, the Provincial Commissioner for the southern province took a firm stand in his support of the African beer industry:

In my opinion, unless the famine is very serious, and even then I have misgivings, the brewing of beer should not altogether be forbidden but controlled. I believe that sometimes old people, sick people and children during famine, are served by drinking native beer in moderation. At all events, I think it is unfair, except in an extreme measure, to forbid the brewing of beer throughout a district and that the extremity should first be presented to the D.C. for his approval of any measure that the D.C. desires to enforce.⁷¹

A better case could not be made for *kachasu* distilling which remained illegal throughout the colonial period. Despite frequent police raids in *kachasu*-distilling villages, distillers could not be persuaded to stop.⁷² They carried on the practice compelled by its avowed economic advantages over beer production. Informants argued that trade in *kachasu* was more lucrative, in terms of capital outlay, than African beer. Beer took more time, more

⁷⁰ MNA NSD 2/1/1 Annual Report for Chiradzulu District 1922/23.

⁷¹ MNA NS1/22/1 From the Provincial Commissioner, Blantyre to the Hon. The Chief Secretary, Zomba, 29 September 1928. The extent to which children and the old consumed beer, as implied in the P.C.'s remarks, is difficult to substantiate. My personal observation of something akin to this phenomenon over the more recent years is that there is a stage in the fermentation process when the 'brew', if taken as a beverage tastes really sweet and is still non-alcoholic/ non-intoxicating at this stage. It is this sweet drink that is served to children and non-alcoholic drinkers. Children would help collecting wood for beer preparation and got a share of this drink as reward for their help.

⁷² J. McCracken, "Coercion and Control in Nyasaland: Aspects of the History of a Colonial Police force," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 27, (1986).

money for ingredients, and a larger amount of wood for fire to prepare than did *kachasu*, yet the profit margin was usually higher in the latter than the former. And from the point of view of consumers, *kachasu* is considered to be more potent than beer and to get drunk one usually spent a lot less on *kachasu* than on beer. Thus, from the economic viewpoint, *kachasu* was more advantageous for both the producer and the customer.⁷³

From the foregoing, it appears that peasants' attitude to beer and liquor production contradicted claims that the practice was a waste of valuable food resources. Rather, they found in beer an income-generating opportunity, a strategy for survival for some brewers, and advancement for others, at a time when colonial legal and economic framework thwarted, more than it buttressed, peasant agricultural production. Brewers made fortunes (relatively speaking) from the industry, earning more than the average peasant.

5.4: Fish Trading and Livestock Development

Relish is abundant owing to the number of goats and sheep brought in from other districts. The native trade in fish is in a flourishing state and a large class of middlemen has arisen who reap a lucrative harvest without doing any actual real work.⁷⁴

Involvement by African peasants in both fish trading and livestock raising further illustrates their ability to gain control of their livelihoods and mitigate the suffocating pressures of colonialism. In southern Malawi, fishing has always been a major occupation for communities in the Lakeside district of Mangochi, the Lower Shire Valley,

⁷³ My attention has been drawn to a study conducted more than thirty years ago in a Blantyre/Limbe village which supposedly examined in detail the economics of *kachasu* distilling and the brewing of African beer: H. Ngwane, cited in McCracken, "Coercion and Control." I do not have immediate access to that study.

and the Lake Chilwa and Lake Chiuta regions in the Shire Highlands districts of Zomba and Mlanje.⁷⁵ This discussion is specifically limited to the Chilwa and Chiuta trade in dried fish, although the traders did not limit themselves to the Lake Chilwa and Chiuta regions in obtaining their fish. They imported fish from the Lower Shire region and the Lake Malawi (Nyasa)/ Malombe region as well. Some in these communities doubled as both fishermen and fish traders, while others partook in the middleman role, between the fishing areas and urban market in Blantyre and Zomba, as well as the rest of the Highlands. As far back as the 1930s, approximately 10,000 people in the country were employed in fishing and in the marketing of fish, suggesting that the industry had considerable importance to the economy of the Protectorate.⁷⁶ The growth in fishing and fish trading during the 1930s took a lead first in the Lake Nyasa and Malombe regions where European and Indian middlemen began purchasing fresh fish at the shore for sale in Blantyre and Zomba.⁷⁷ This was not the case yet in the Highlands region.

For the Shire Highlands districts, although the earliest record of a flourishing trade in fish dates back to the 1920s, both oral and documentary evidence indicate that it was not until the 1940s and 1950s that fish trading had become a viable strategy for survival

⁷⁴ MNA S1/521/20 Annual Report for the Zomba District for the Year 1920/21.

⁷⁵ J. McCracken, "Fishing and the Colonial Economy: The case of Malawi," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 28, (1987); E.C. Mandala, *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy: A History of the Lower Tchiri Valley in Malawi, 1859-1960*, especially chapter 7. Other major fishing areas in the country are the Lakeside districts of Salima and Nkhota-kota in the Central region and Nkhata-Bay in Northern Malawi. See Map of Malawi, Fig. 1 and 2..

⁷⁶ MNA A3/2/162 Economic Aspect of Native Policy, 1935-1938. Comparable figures for various districts are not available.

⁷⁷ McCracken "Fishing and the Colonial Economy," p. 421.

and advancement. During the 1930s, for example, the operations of the trade in Cholo and Mlanje districts were negligible. Few people within the districts had yet embraced the mechanics of fishing, with the result that those interested in the trade obtained the fish from the other side of the border, Portuguese East Africa.⁷⁸ This changed from the 1940s when markets in the same districts “were flooded with smoked fish from Chilwa and the Lower River.”⁷⁹ For some Africans, fish trading was like a heaven-sent opportunity for earning or supplementing their income largely because it was the one industry in the Protectorate that, for a long time, had been permitted to develop undirected and almost without control.⁸⁰ The down side, according to informants, was the problem of transporting fish over long distances either on foot or by bicycles at a time when road-motor transportation, let alone public transportation, was still underdeveloped.⁸¹ The other problem was the extended period of absence from their families as traders would

⁷⁸ MNA S1/60A/32 Annual on the Mlanje District for the Year Ending 31st December 1931; S1/60B/ Cholo District Report for the Year Ending 31st December 1931.

⁷⁹ MNA S47/2/1/16 Report of the Native Welfare Committee, 1944.

⁸⁰ MNA A3/2/162 Minutes of the Native Welfare Committee, 1945-1948.

⁸¹ Interview with with Mr. Piyani, Thyolo District. The informant told of how he and two colleagues imported fish from the Lake Chilwa and Malombe regions to markets in Luchenza (Cholo) and Limbe/ Blantyre, often travelling as a team. One of the colleagues became a successful businessman operating a store at Chitakale in Mlanje. Unfortunately, I was unable to locate this person to get his testimony as well. Those who traveled to the Lower Shire for their fish had at least the benefit of railway transport, on the Nsanje-Blantyre railway. For the Lake Nyasa region, other studies have shown that the most successful fish mongers were those (migrants) who invested their earnings into fishing and made good fortunes. See for example, W.C. Chirwa, “‘Theba’ is Power: Rural Labour, Migrancy and Fishing in Malawi.”

sometimes spend weeks in the fishing regions buying and curing the fish before heading off to marketplaces:

Fish trading, lucrative as it used to be, could be taxing on family life. It was hard-earned cash travelling to as far away places as Marka in Nsanje or Kachulu in Zomba to buy fish. It was not always the case that one got all the fish they needed in one day or one week. We could spend several weeks on the shores, living in temporary grass tents, buying and curing fish until we had collected enough worth a trip to central marketplaces. It was a trade that thrived on endurance, risk-taking, patience and perseverance, but a worthwhile investment nonetheless.⁸²

Locally devised methods were used in fishing and curing of fish. Fishermen employed methods such as fish traps (*mono*), gill nets (*matchera* or *ukonde*), and seine nets (*khoka*). For the middlemen, smoking was the most common method of curing fish.

Fish was also one of the major commodities exchanged in the flourishing inter-district trade in foodstuffs dating back to the 1930s. The main players in this trade were villagers living in the vicinity of larger centres who disposed of their surplus food crops to employed Africans, some of whom had no gardens of their own. The trade occasionally involved the exchange of commodities by barter between individuals, for example, maize and millet being bartered for fish. Fish trading therefore provided peasants turned middlemen with direct access to both food and cash, the basics of survival in a colonial environment. It also contributed to the social and economic disparities between peasant traders and non-traders.

By the mid-1940s, the native fish industry had gradually become too vital to peasants' livelihood to escape the attention of colonial authorities. One administrator appreciated the vitality of the industry in keeping native labour productive particularly

during the dry season when there was less demand for labour on the estates. However, he expressed fears and worried that “sooner or later some European will realize that there is a fortune to be made by distributing dried fish to the inhabitants of the Highlands at a reasonable price by motor transport and the native industry will then cease to exist.”⁸³

Another administrator indicated in 1951 that:

The Lake Chilwa and Chiuta fish trades are already thriving businesses organized by the Africans themselves on effective lines. In planning increased production, attention must be given to the quantity of fish available from these lakes... the trade must therefore remain in African hands.⁸⁴

During the post-war II period the colonial government began to move decisively in the direction of regulating the fishing industry. Non-natives had to acquire special permits to fish for trade.⁸⁵ The entry into the industry by Europeans resulted in the use of nets of a much more efficient type than those used by Africans in the past. The government moved further to launch investigations to ascertain the relation between the existing scale of exploitation and the potential of the lakes for fish production. Also envisaged were investigations to identify necessary measures to conserve natural resources so that sustained supplies of fish may be available for consumption.⁸⁶ It was considered

⁸² Interview with R. Mchenga, Thyolo District, July 1997.

⁸³ A3/2/209 Report for the Southern Province for the Quarter Ending 31st March 1946.

⁸⁴ PCS 1/2/22 Zomba District Production Plan, 1951.

⁸⁵ The measure to control European fishing had been tried earlier in the 1930 in the Lake Nyasa fishing region but was only implemented for a brief period of time. See J. McCracken, “Fishing and the Colonial Economy,” p. 421.

⁸⁶ MNA Report of the Post-War Development Committee, 1947; A2/3/162 Report of the Native Welfare Committee, 1945-1948.

necessary to open up communications to the lakes to facilitate transportation of the fish to markets and to encourage the formation of a co-operative marketing organization of fishermen to sell and export such fish. Like maize, fish had the advantage of being both edible and saleable and thus provided a bulwark against hunger and a source of income at the same time. Obviously, then, fish trading was one reliable strategy outside farm work that greatly contributed to the sustainability and betterment of rural life for the Highlands communities in colonial Malawi.

Another sector crucial to peasant survival in the colonial economy was livestock raising. Cattle, goats, sheep, pigs and poultry were common animals domesticated in the region since precolonial times but assumed new agency during the colonial era. Table 5.4 shows African livestock in Chiradzulu district during the 1920s and a comparison between African and European livestock in Mlanje in 1950:

Table 5.4

Chiradzulu District: Native Livestock, 1923-1927

<u>Year</u>	<u>Cattle</u>	<u>Goats</u>	<u>Sheep</u>	<u>Pigs</u>
1923/24	1088	7260	1224	1954
1924/25	1144	6952	1669	3302
1925/26	918	8318	1164	3557
1926/27	1063	6581	1345	5677

Mlanje District: African and European Livestock, 1950*

	<u>Cows/ Heifers</u>	<u>Bulls</u>	<u>Bullocks</u>	<u>Calves</u>	<u>Sheep</u>	<u>Goats</u>	<u>Pigs</u>
European	659	21	308	309	36	-	8
African	3,134	450	49	485	3,460	18,595	10,212
Total	3,793	471	357	794	3,496	18,595	10,220

Sources: (i) MNA NSD 2/1/1 *Chiradzulu District Annual Reports, 1923-1927*

(ii) MNA PCS 1/2/22 *Mlanje District, Production Plan, 1951*

*There is a paucity of statistical data for this period. District Reports are largely inconsistent, reporting cattle population alone in one year and goat population in the next and so on. This makes it difficult to draw comparisons on yearly basis.

Colonial sources suggest that prior to the 1930s few owners recognized the potentialities of their herds and many neglected their stock. Stock was rarely traded or killed for consumption and milk was not generally used other than by children. A possible explanation is that the occasional animal disease outbreaks, notably sleeping sickness and the East Coast fever in the 1920s, may have been a deterrent that caused people to perceive livestock keeping as a very risky investment.⁸⁷ This view contrasts sharply with oral evidence which does not reflect apathy towards livestock. As one informant

⁸⁷ MNA A2/2/205 Quarterly Report for the Southern Province, 1936.

reported: “it was a joy and indeed vital to have goats, pigs and chickens, yet those of us who had these things had always coveted those with herds of cattle in their stock for that was a symbol of great wealth.”⁸⁸

The figures for the animal population in Chiradzulu between 1923 and 1927 show that more goats and sheep were raised than cattle. Figures from the stock census of 1950 in Mlanje reveal more goats than sheep, which may suggest a continuing trend. The main reason seems to have been that, unlike ownership of goats, sheep, pigs and chicken, which was fairly widespread, cattle keeping was beyond the means of the average cultivator in the Highlands region before the 1950s.⁸⁹ An estimated 90 percent or more of the cattle in the country by the 1940s were located in the Northern Province, thus the low figures for the Highlands region only represent a small percentage of the colony’s cattle economy.⁹⁰ That aside, the available evidence indicates that livestock production was valued and regarded more seriously by Africans than Europeans (see data from Mlanje, table 5.4). Needless to say, Africans embraced stocking as a source of protein—meat and milk—and a source of income. A booming local trade in meat, poultry and eggs

⁸⁸ Interview with A. Sulaimana, March, 1997: This informant and others only spoke of the ‘glories’ of keeping animals in addition to growing crops, although collectively their sense of chronology may still be suspect. The only negative reports concerned those who stayed away from pigs due to religious beliefs or health-allergies.

⁸⁹ MNA PCS 1/2/22 Report on Increased Production: Cholo District; PCS 1/2/22 From the District Commissioner, Domasi (Zomba) to the Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province, Blantyre, 2nd October 1951. By 1950 in Domasi, there was one head of cattle to every 1,000 people; in 1951 there was one to every 350, while in the same year there was roughly one sheep to every 50 people, one goat to every 17, and one and a half head of poultry per head of population.

reportedly took place in the Domasi area of Zomba district in 1951. For “progressive” peasants, cattle were essential for the use of ox-driven carts and ploughs on the farm. Goat, pig and chicken meat were all commodities for the thriving inter-district trade even before the 1950s. During times of food scarcity, notably the 1949 famine, men travelling to distant places in search of food carried smoked goat or pig meat with them, which was bartered for foodstuffs, cassava, sweet potatoes or maize.⁹¹

As with other sectors of the peasant economy, the government made policy overtures to help farmers with better animal husbandry during the post-war period. Measures included providing instructions on proper stock housing, dipping tanks, educating farmers in correct methods of drying hides and skins, and efforts to improve the market for animal products. However, these were merely policy objectives. They rarely translated into reality, at least for most Africans in the colony. Informants maintain that they received no education or advice on livestock development and dipping facilities only proliferated rural areas in the 1970s and 1980s.⁹² Consequently, by the end of colonial rule, livestock production was still underdeveloped, although judging from increasing figures there is little doubt that peasants’ survival depended on it to a growing degree. With the exception of a few master farmers, who may have benefited from loans to

⁹⁰ MNA A2/3/162 Report of the Native Welfare Committee, 1945-1948. This may be attributed to the cultural practice of *lobola*, bride price that was paid in cattle.

⁹¹ Interview with E. Malenga, Chiradzulu District and H.L. Lipenga, Mulanje District, March 1997.

⁹² Interview with Messrs. Mathewe and Jeremiya. The D.C. for Mlanje reported in 1951 that there was only one Veterinary Department dipping tank in the district and this was not even centrally situated, as it was located at Luchenza on the Cholo boundary. This

improve the quality of their stock, the government had little, if anything, to do with the remarkable tenacity with which the average peasant managed to survive. Fishing, crops and animal husbandry were carried out largely despite colonial policies, rather than as a result of colonial “assistance.”

5.5: Retailing and Enterprising Peasants

Retailing and other forms of micro-trading (hawking), was another area in which peasants sought refuge when frustrated by poor results from their garden work. As we have noted, retailing was mainly a monopoly of the Indian minority in colonial Malawi. Retail licensing policy had, at least up to the 1920s, favoured Indian traders over their indigenous counterparts.⁹³ In the 1930s, it was being reported that Africans had not yet acquired sufficient business ability to become successful traders, much less competitors to Indians, as many of those who previously attempted to run stores had gone bankrupt. This provided government with the pretext to protect Indian trading interests:

implies that not many people had access to such facilities even in the post-war period contrary to government’s popular policy rhetoric.

⁹³ Cases in point being the applications of The Foodstuffs Ordinance and the Credit ordinances discussed above. During the 1920s annual reports for Blantyre and Chiradzulu districts indicate an increase in the number of hawking licenses issued but it is difficult to tell from these sources to whom these licences were issued, African or Indian. MNA NS 1/1/2 Summary of Reports by District Commissioners, 1922-1928; NSD 2/1/1 Chiradzulu District Annual Reports, 1923-1927. From the 1930s, it appears that licensing policy had somewhat shifted as, the Provincial Commissioner for the Southern Province noted in 1932 that “a native may trade in his village or hawk goods, or he may trade in a village other than his own without being required, in any of these cases, to take out any trading licence.” It is not clear when this became official policy, although it is likely that lobbying of the Native Associations may have influenced this change. See MNA NS 1/3/5 “Chiradzulu District Native Association,” From the P.C. Blantyre to the D.C. Chiradzulu, 6th July, 1932.

It must be realized that the Indian traders perform a very useful service to the native communities particularly to those far distant from the towns and that there can be no question of limiting their activities below the level of that warranted by the volume of trade. When the African has acquired business ability he will take his place automatically as a competitor to the Indian trader... it is merely a question of initiative, enterprise and industry, and where there is opportunity for trade those who are alert enough to appreciate that fact and who have these qualities will prove more successful than those who have not.⁹⁴

The experiences of the 1940s and 1950s suggest that Africans had come to appreciate this question of “initiative, enterprise and industry,” to borrow the expression of the Provincial Commissioner. Many attempted and some started small businesses such as store-owning, timber sawing, maize mills, brick-making and tailoring, to name a few. As we have seen, peasants’ worst problem during most of the colonial period was marketing their crops. With their informal monopoly, Indian store-owners who bought maize were perceived to be deceptive, keeping prices low but also preferring to pay in trade goods rather than cash, regardless of what the seller desired.⁹⁵ To address this problem, Africans first took the initiative to bargain for fair prices through the Foodstuffs Growers Associations formed in the 1940s. Representatives of these associations, which included “well-to-do” peasants and headmen, argued that people had found it hard to pay taxes and have enough food to survive because they could not get enough cash for their crops.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ MNA NS 1/3/5 From P.C., Blantyre to D.C. Chiradzulu, 6th July, 1932.

⁹⁵ Interview with R. Kapanda, Chonde Village, on the Cholo-Mlanje boundary. Also MNA S1/1022/27 Maize Growing Industry, 1938: Indians were reported to manipulate scales in ways that gave them more maize than they paid for.

⁹⁶ MNA NS 1/3/9 The African Food Growers’ Association, Molele, Cholo, 1945; The Native Foodstuffs Growers’ Association, Mlanje District, 1943.

When these attempts failed to bring about significant improvements, peasants then took the initiative to establish small businesses. These included those who aspired to buy maize mills or establish retail stores, thereby giving themselves a foothold in the foodstuffs trade.⁹⁷

Not all of these aspiring African capitalists, however, succeeded. Due to insufficiency of capital, they needed government assistance in the form of loans to consolidate their enterprises, and only a handful were fortunate enough to secure “development” loans (see table 5.5). Loans to Africans were first extended from the Native Treasuries established under the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund as part of the post-war development policy. They were initially intended to be used strictly for agricultural purposes, such as purchase of equipment (farm carts, ploughs, etc.) or other capital expenditure, or purchase of livestock when satisfactory management was assured.⁹⁸ For most peasant farmers, the criteria for eligibility for agricultural or business loans were prohibitive and their disbursement was also marred by the assumption that Africans still lacked business skills. Three officers, the Native Authority for the area, the District Commissioner, and the Provincial Agricultural Officer (or other appropriate

⁹⁷ Interview with B. Masauko and “anonymous”. These oral accounts paint a success picture for those who entered store businesses, adding that African store-owners treated Africans more fairly than Indians. Colonial reports for the 1950s also point to attempts by Africans to establish stores on cooperative basis. MNA 1DC CZ 1/2/2 Development Loans, 1949-1957.

⁹⁸ 1 DC CZ 1/2/2 Agriculture: Development Loans, 1949-1957. Later on, three classes of loans, agricultural, businessmen’s and housing loans, were available from the Nyasaland African Loans Board. The Board was established in 1958. Nyasaland Protectorate, *Report on Loans to Africans*, (Zomba: Government Printer, 1957); See also *The First*,

departmental officer) acting in unanimity, were the sole arbiters of eligibility for grant of loan from the Native Treasury. The amount of loan to any African would not normally exceed £25; cases where a sum of more than £25 was involved required the approval of the Provincial Commissioner on recommendation of the three officers named above.⁹⁹

Third and Fourth Reports of the Nyasaland Africans Loans Board, (Zomba: Government Printer, 1959 and 1962).

⁹⁹ MNA 1 DC CZ 1/2/2 Schedule of Conditions Governing the Grant of Development Loans to Africans, 1949-1957. With the approval of the Provincial Commissioner, loans could be increased up to £100 in case of "Master Farmers" or up to £400 for the special object of buying maize mills and essential subsidiary machinery. Under the new scheme of the Nyasaland African Loans Board, the maximum limit for Farming Loans was £250, same amount for Business Men's Loans and £350 for Housing Loans.

Table 5.5

NYASALAND AFRICAN LOANS BOARD

Categories and Number of Loans Approved, 1959-1961

Types of Loans Approved as at 31st December, 1959

District	Agricultural	Business	Total
Blantyre Urban	-	3	3
Blantyre District	22	9	31
Cholo	5	13	18
Mlanje	7	2	9
Zomba	11	6	17
Total	45	33	78

Numbers and Categories of Loans Approved during 1961

District	Agricultural	Business	Housing	Total
Blantyre District	8	7	-	15
Blantyre Urban	-	-	5	5
Cholo	-	6	-	6
Mlanje	10	8	-	18
Zomba District	4	6	-	10
Total	22	27	5	54

Numbers and Categories of Loans Approved during 1962

District	Agricultural	Business	Housing	Total
Blantyre District	2	-	-	2
Blantyre Urban	-	2	2	4
Cholo	28	2	-	30
Mlanje	2	2	-	4
Zomba District	10	14	1	25
Zomba Urban	-	2	2	2
Chiradzulu	2	5	-	7
Total	42	25	5	74

Sources: Nyasaland Protectorate, *First, Third, and Fourth Reports of the Nyasaland African Loans Board* (Zomba: Government Printer, 1959 and 1962).

The most constraining mechanism was the security required to qualify for a loan: the holding by the borrower of either freehold or leasehold of land, or other personal property deemed valuable to provide similar security.¹⁰⁰ These requirements favoured those who already had material possessions to their credit, such as the so-called “progressive” or “master” farmers, although the criteria to become a master farmer were themselves prohibitive, which will be discussed later.

The cases of Fabiano Limbani and Issa Mwato of Chiradzulu district illustrate the stringent nature of the loan scheme.¹⁰¹ Both submitted applications for £25 loans for the purchase of ox-plough teams. Fabiano was a master farmer in his second year having incorporated a further four acres into his original four. His standard of cultivation was considered well above average and his understanding of agricultural problems was outstanding. His dream was to have a “master farmer” holding of between 20 and 30 acres in a few years. Issa, on the other hand, just wanted to become a master farmer with

¹⁰⁰ The majority of Africans, who lived on African Trust Land did not hold such title deeds. During the 1950s, the Committee appointed to formulate a plan for making loans to African business men and farmers (which led to the formation of the Loans Board) realized from the outset that ‘the security for loans in the forms usually required by banks and commercial agencies, would not be procurable for the great majority of loans it desired to make.’ (p.1) Attention was therefore focused on the measure of surveillance to be provided as an alternative and the recommendation made was that the loan scheme more correctly ‘be regarded as a form of Supervised Credit than as a Loan Scheme in the usually accepted sense’ (p.2). Nyasaland Protectorate, *Report on Loans to Africans*, 1957.

¹⁰¹ The account that follows is based on correspondence between the Assistant District Commissioner, Chiradzulu, The District Commissioner, Blantyre, the Agricultural Supervisor, Blantyre and the Provincial Agricultural Officer, Blantyre, between December 1954 and January, 1955. MNA 1 DC CZ Development Loans: Letters dated 28th and 31st December 1954, 4th, 17th and 26th January 1955.

a six acre holding within the same year the application was made. His standard of cultivation augured well for his future prospects. Both applications were strongly recommended by Native Authorities, but the other two guarantors, the District Commissioner and Agricultural Officer (A.O) had misgivings, especially as regards Issa. The A.O. indicated that he was not in favour of advancing loans to Master farmers, but resolved to recommend a loan to Fabiano on the grounds that he had enough land to support a pair of oxen. He rejected Issa's application because he did not have sufficient land yet to do so. In a final decision on the matter, the D.C. approved a loan to Fabiano Limbani and advised Issa Mwato "to wait until he has qualified as a master farmer." Perhaps a little digression is necessary here to put the master farmer question into proper context.

One of the aims of post-war agricultural policy was to introduce an efficient system of land use management. As part of the broad strategy to achieve this objective, an attempt was made in the 1950s to foster a class of progressive (rural) farmers under what became known as the Master Farmers' Scheme. The literature touching on this subject in Malawi is still scanty and perhaps the only detailed study of this group is that by Owen Kalinga.¹⁰² In his wide-ranging article, Kalinga demonstrates that the nurturing of "progressive" farmers was not unique to Malawi. It had become official policy in almost all British colonies in East and Central Africa during the 1940s and 1950s, examples of which include: the Kenyan Land Consolidation Programme of 1953 and the Swynnerton Plan of

¹⁰²See O.J. Kalinga, "The Master Farmers' Scheme in Nyasaland, 1950-1962: A Study of a Failed Attempt to Create a 'Yeoman' Class," *African Affairs*, Vol. 92, (1993), pp. 368-387.

1954, and the Zambian African Farming Improvement Scheme (A.F.I.S.O.).¹⁰³ Beyond their primary motive of improving African agriculture, the schemes in question were also directed at political stability. Obviously, it was hoped that the new class of farmers could be relied upon to support colonial governments, especially in the light of the rising tide of African nationalism.¹⁰⁴ In this regard, the Nyasaland government opted for the Master Farmers' Scheme, introduced in 1950.

The scheme was premised on the belief by colonial officials that a few individuals who, with government support, would be the vanguard of local production could manage proper agriculture and conservation. It encouraged the use of improved methods of production and provided input and loan facilities to a selected group of African farmers in rural communities (i.e. those identified as progressive farmers with the potential to become master farmers). The package also included bonus payments as an incentive to attract more farmers into the scheme. Through this approach, it was hoped that the rest of the rural farmers would learn better methods of farm management by observing the example of the "progressive" farmers in their areas.¹⁰⁵ The scheme took effect in 1950 and came to an end in 1962.

During the entire period of the scheme's operation, its successes were not far-reaching except for the fact that, over this period, the average gross income of the Master

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.368

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Kettlewell, *Agricultural Change*, pp.275-278.

Farmers by far exceeded that of the average farmer.¹⁰⁶ To begin with, the criteria followed and qualifications required for entering the scheme were both discriminatory and stringent.¹⁰⁷ In essence, those who made it into the programme were people who had a good command of some material wealth. They already had the means (i.e. capital of their own) to engage in such ventures while those without capital could not easily join the scheme. In other words, the policy assumed the existence of social differentiation in rural communities, which indeed was the case. As Kalinga puts it, "the government did not necessarily create a class, it consolidated one."¹⁰⁸

It is however interesting to note that some peasants, who were neither "progressive farmers," in the official sense, nor acquired government loan assistance, still achieved remarkable success and prosperity. Such was the case with Harry Kaphombe who operated a successful general dealer's store, and Damiano Nambazo, another successful peasant entrepreneur.¹⁰⁹ Kaphombe opened up a store in 1951, having worked various jobs on the tea estates and tea factories, including work as a truck driver. He had also farmed cotton, maize, groundnuts and soya beans and was able from the proceeds to

¹⁰⁶ This was so because Master Farmers had easier access to scarce resources such as loans, agricultural implements and chemical fertilizers. See Keetlewell, *Agricultural Change*, p.276; also Kalinga, "The Master Farmers' Scheme in Nyasaland," p.377.

¹⁰⁷ There were two categories of Master Farmer, first and second class. Both classes were required to have their land holdings consolidated into a single unit of not less than eight acres; follow strict conservation rules and adopt high standards of management. In addition, first class farmers had to keep livestock and integrate them in their crop husbandry. For a detailed account of the conditions required for one to enter the scheme, see Keetlewell, *Agricultural Change*; and also Kalinga, "The Master Farmers' Scheme in Nyasaland," pp.371-371.

¹⁰⁸ Kalinga, "The Master Farmers' Scheme in Nyasaland," p.385.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with D. Nambazo and H. Kaphombe, July, 1997.

acquire some cattle, goats and chicken. From these resources he managed to save enough funds to invest in store trading and was able, more than two decades later, to purchase a maize mill.

Nambazo's case also makes interesting reading, as an example of a man who made every possible effort not just to survive but to open up a window of success for himself and his family. From humble beginnings, having only completed primary school education by 1940, he unsuccessfully tried tobacco production but also trained and worked as a tailor, before he went into timber sawing and carpentry in the 1950s. With the help of funds borrowed from a relative who was a migrant labourer in South Africa, he was able to establish a local carpentry & joinery shop in 1953, which gradually placed him high on the pedestal of success. With the help of his two wives, he also took the production of beer and liquor seriously and became one of the chief traders and brewers of African beer. The measure of his success is in his two brick-houses and an ox-cart, which he is proud to say, are products of his own initiative and enterprise. He has always grown various kinds of food as well as cash crops. Nambazo's story, and others mentioned above, demonstrate that African peasants did not just survive. Some managed to advance, both with and without government assistance.

5.6: Conclusion

The chapter has demonstrated that colonial rule imposed several barriers that made it nearly impossible for peasants to subsist and survive only on their traditional resource base: land. Worse still most of their fields were too small and poor to yield more than subsistence. With the passage of time, most peasants had to face the grim reality that farming could not get them the security they desired. However, they did not abandon their farms or put down their hoes. Rather, they diversified their farm activities to make a living. When farming for the market was not working, they were always willing to try other ways of earning money to meet their immediate goal: getting enough cash to pay taxes and enough food to survive. Indeed, a purely peasant society hardly existed. Some of their strategies ran counter to the machinations of the colonial regime. Other strategies were seen to have the potential danger of subjecting them to food deficits, but through a combination of different strategies most managed to meet their immediate challenges. By the closing decades of colonialism, there had even emerged a group of peasants who had advanced beyond mere survival, although for other groups of peasants, survival more than success, was the soul of agency. As one “rich” peasant put it: “we farmed to survive not to get rich,”¹¹⁰ but survival could include notions of advancement. Peasants had the initiative and resolve to make their own world, of course not under conditions of their own choosing.

¹¹⁰ Interview with H. Kaphombe, July 1997.

CHAPTER SIX

The Politics of Survival: Gender and Production in Colonial Malawi

Women's vital contributions to agricultural production in various parts of the world has been widely acknowledged in the growing body of literature--both theoretical and empirical--that has appeared on the topic of women and development in Africa, Asia and Latin America since the 1970s.¹ Not too long ago, Elizabeth Schmidt demonstrated that the thriving peasant agriculture that threatened the profitability of the settler economy in colonial Zimbabwe was, for the most part, the work of African women.² In the writing on women in rural Africa, a fairly consistent story emerges that women, and to some extent children, have always been the backbone of the rural subsistence economy. Equally consistent in most historical analyses is the notion that "in precolonial and precapitalist societies of Africa women were usually subordinate to men in terms of status and influence, domestic and communal, but that there were particular structures, understandings and relationships which assured women a certain degree of prestige, power and autonomy."³ Building on the historical discussion of gender and the social relations of production and reproduction, this chapter explores women's activities on colonial Malawi's Shire Highlands plantations, both in subsistence farms and as

¹D. Hirschmann and M. Vaughan, *Women Farmers of Malawi: Food Production in the Zomba District*, (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1984), p. 1

²E. Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1992).

³Hirschmann and Vaughan, *Women Farmers of Malawi*, p.1

plantation labour. As a sequel to the themes advanced in chapter five, it seeks to unravel the centrality of gender roles to questions of peasants' "hidden struggles," survival strategies and even advancement during the colonial period. The chapter augments and extends some of the major themes in gender relations in the development of the colonial economy scholars have developed elsewhere, which reflect women's innovative responses to the colonial order.

I

6.1: Historical Background: Women's Experiences in Africa

In a recent book on society and politics in Malawi, John Lwanda draws on historical antecedents to explain current trends of gender balance and role assignments in Malawi. He questions the prevalence of what he calls the "traditional" excuse that inevitably rears its head each time the subject of the role of women is raised.⁴ This "traditional" or "cultural" explanation sees the devalued roles of women in Malawi society as a reincarnation of gender roles that prevailed during the colonial and precolonial times. Lwanda argues that conceptualizing gender differentials on the scale of this "traditional" explanation usually amounts to a justification of the status quo in a historical context. In yet another recent publication, Semu and Binauli examine the persistent trend of inequality between men and women in contemporary Malawi which, they forcefully

⁴J. Lwanda, *Promise, Power, Politics and Poverty: Democratic Transition in Malawi, 1960-1999*, (Glasgow: Dudu Nsomba Publications, 1997), pp. 200-205.

argue, was initiated during the colonial period.⁵ They argue that both colonial European administrators and independent African governments assigned secondary importance to women's issues and created an environment in which women have been denied the opportunity to determine their own destinies.

Evidently, the "traditional" explanation of gender roles, which basically holds that women in precolonial African societies occupied a position subordinate to that of men (though often with their own institutions and power base), has permeated the literature. This can be seen in the way the universality of women's subordination has been consciously acknowledged in much of the gender-related literature on sub-Saharan Africa and the rest of the developing world.⁶ The subordination of women, which generally proceeded in tandem with the division of labour by sex, has been seen in many societies as a "given" or a "natural" phenomenon mainly due to women's physiology and role in

⁵Linda Semu and Lucy Chande-Binauli, "Women's Status in Malawi: a Case for Gendered Development," *Bwalo*, Issue, 1(1997), pp. 85-103. For their line of argument, see also J.L. Parpart and K. Staudt, *Women and the State in Africa*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1989).

⁶See for example, B. Moss, "To Determine the Scale of Wants of the Community: Gender and African Consumption" in M. Grosz-Ngate and O. Kakole, *Gendered Encounters: Challenging Cultural Boundaries and Social Hierarchies in Africa*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1997); Lourdes Beneria, "Reproduction, Production and the Sexual Division of Labour," *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol. 3, 3(1979); Gita Sen, "The Sexual Division of Labour and the Working-Class Family: Towards a Conceptual Synthesis of Class Relations and the Subordination of Women," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, Vol. 12, 2(1980); Semu and Chande-Binauli, "Women's Status in Malawi;" N. Nelson, *Why Has Development Neglected Rural Women? A Review of South Asian Literature*, (Oxford: Pergamon, 1979).

reproduction.⁷ Both men and women in many parts of Africa claim that the sexual division of labour and women's subordination have always been like that. Among them it is understood as something natural, uncontested and unchanging.⁸ Undoubtedly, it was in recognition of this trend that Maureen Mackintosh observed that gender studies have increasingly become interested in the sexual division of labour in society because "it appears to express, embody, and to perpetuate female subordination."⁹ Most gender analyses also maintain that the division of labour by sex often works to the detriment of women, and that since the precolonial times women's subordination has been reinforced by the ideology and tradition of patriarchy. Loosely defined, the concept of patriarchy refers to a system of political, social and economic activity in which males predominate in the decision-making processes. Stichter and Parpart note that patriarchy itself takes "specific forms, bounded in space and time, but subject to change."¹⁰ This suggests the need for specific historical studies sensitive to the fact that the subordination of women took a variety of forms and assumed different levels of intensity.¹¹ Whether a society

⁷Beneria, "Reproduction, Production and the Sexual Division of Labour," p. 204.

⁸This is a view that prevails to this day among the men and women in the areas where research for this study was conducted.

⁹M. Mackintosh, "Gender economics: The Sexual Division of Labour and the Subordination of Women," in K. Young et.al (eds.), *Of Marriage and the Market: Women's Subordination in International Perspective*, (London: CSE Books, 1981), p.2.

¹⁰S. Stichter and J. Parpart (eds.), *Patriarchy and Class: African Women in the Home and the Workforce* (Boulder & London: Westview Press, 1988), Introduction.

¹¹Beneria, "Reproduction, Production and the Sexual Division of Labour."

followed a patrilineal or matrilineal mode of lineage, for example, factored in quite significantly in the interactions and relations between men and women.

Writing about the patrilineal Shona of Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, Schmidt has demonstrated that women occupied structurally subordinate positions both in the household and society. While a young woman's social status was enhanced upon marriage, the payment of *lobola* (bride wealth) made most women subscribe to the social norms without question and accept the preeminence of their husbands in the domestic and public domains.¹² But far from being the "downtrodden timid individual the [Shona] woman is often supposed to be," Schmidt indicates that Shona women could often possess "influence" although more rarely could they exercise authority. As a mode of resistance, women could confront their husbands/men either privately or through other culturally accepted means such as child naming and women's songs that directly ridiculed their menfolk. In matrilineal societies, on the other hand, such as among the Chewa of Central Malawi, the Tonga and the Lenje of Southern and Central Zambia respectively, women exercised influence through access to land in their own matrikin villages which allowed them some measure of economic independence.¹³ This status notwithstanding, the woman was not a matriarch in the real sense and did not have ultimate power over

¹²Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives*, pp. 15-19.

¹³K.M. Phiri, "Some Changes in the Matrilineal Family System Among the Chewa of Malawi Since the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 24, (1983); M. Muntemba, "Women and Agricultural Change in the Railway Region of Zambia: Dispossession and Counterstrategies, 1930-1970," in E. Bay (ed.), *Women and Work in Africa*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982).

productive and reproductive domains because the parental power was, and still is, exercised through the male uncles, cousins or brothers. It may therefore be argued that, within patriarchal hierarchies mechanisms existed which either mitigated women's subordination or undermined their independence. This would also suggest that gender relations were hardly ever static and must be studied in specific contexts and periods.

A common feature for both patrilineal and matrilineal precolonial African societies is the belief that female participation and productivity in agriculture was usually higher than that of men. Women have been upheld to have performed nearly all tasks pertaining to food production in rural subsistence economies, prompting some analysts to describe Africa as the "region of female farming *par excellence*."¹⁴ During the colonial period, women's tasks expanded as a result of cash cropping and male migration from the rural areas to settler farms and emerging urban employment centres, which forced women to combine some of the roles previously performed by men with their own traditional roles.

Colonialism thus imposed new complications on gender role differentiation. The position of women during the colonial period must therefore be seen within the framework of capitalist penetration and its operations. As other scholars have noted, colonial rule complicated the nature of patriarchy by introducing two new forms, namely: the European patriarchal system of colonial officials, and those of its Christian missionary allies. These "systems" often colluded with the African patriarchal system of the African

ruling elite in their subordination of African women.¹⁵ There is little doubt that colonial rule was predominantly male. For a very long time, almost all officials in the colonies were white males, who brought with them to the colonies a paternalistic approach, rooted in nineteenth century European racial and gender stereotypes which predisposed them to see African women as inferior to their men.¹⁶ Women were, for instance, denied leadership roles in both social and political settings, although they still exerted considerable influence. As Barbara Moss has argued, “politically women lost significant leverage. Given the European bias for male leadership, officials removed women from future leadership positions in colonial society with the stroke of the pen.”¹⁷ Ironically, for all its professed emphasis on such values as “hardwork, discipline and obedience to authority” Christian missionary education provided a gendered education curriculum that taught boys alone to be breadwinners, household heads and figures of authority, while girls were taught to stay at home, cook, clean and raise Christian children.¹⁸ Gender

¹⁴E. Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), p. 16.

¹⁵Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives*; R. Nasimiyu, “Women and Children’s Labour in Rural Economy: A Case Study of Western Province, Kenya, 1902-1985,” unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, 1991; P. Okeke, “Patriarchal Continuities and Contradictions in Women’s Education and Socio-Economic Status: an Ethnographic Study of Currently Employed, University Educated Igbo Women in Nigeria,” Ph.D. Thesis, School of Education, Dalhousie University, 1994.

¹⁶Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives*, especially chapter 4. In fact, they also saw European women as inferior.

¹⁷Moss, “To Determine the Scale of Wants,” p. 89.

¹⁸Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives*, p.122

struggle was, nonetheless, a central feature of the development of capitalism. Parpart and Staudt in their collection of essays describe gender struggles as being “at the heart of state origins, access to the state and state resource allocations.”¹⁹ States, they argue, are shaped by gender struggle. Through their ideological, legal, and material efforts, states foster the mobilization of certain groups and issues. This mobilization, the two authors observe, benefits men rather than women. One of the many things the colonial state accomplished in resource mobilization was the way in which women and women’s issues were “depoliticized” as part of the strategy to create conditions deemed necessary for capitalist transformation in Africa.²⁰ Furthermore, a patriarchal coalition of African chiefs and colonial officials invented traditions or reinterpreted customs to assert their control over women. Such was the case with the creation of “urban African courts and new ‘customary’ laws which redefined sexuality in terms of patriarchal power.”²¹ Consequently, the creation of “customary” law turned flexible custom into inflexible, often male-biased, law.²²

¹⁹Parpart and Staudt, *Women and the State in Africa*, p. 6.

²⁰K. Staudt, “Women’s Politics, the State, and Capitalist Transformation in Africa,” in I.L. Markovitz (ed.), *Studies in Power and Class in Africa*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 193-208.

²¹J.L. Parpart, “Sexuality and Power on the Zambian Copperbelt: 1926-1964,” in Stichter and Parpart (eds.), *Patriarchy and Class*; Moss, “To Determine the Scale of Wants”; M. Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

²²Tiyambe Zeleza, “Gendering African History,” a Review Article, *Africa Development*, Vol. XVIII, 1(1993), p.104.

In her contribution to the debate on the relevance of gender struggles within the household or, as it were, “domestic struggles,” to the development of the twin processes of colonialism and capitalism, Belinda Bozzoli argues that the concept of “domestic struggle”, if historically constructed, offers the most effective way to illuminate the meaning of colonialism and capitalism for people’s lives.²³ The very form taken by capitalism in a particular society, Bozzoli affirms, may be shaped and conditioned by struggles in the domestic sphere. Most certainly, it is what happened in the domestic arena, the less visible, day to day struggles, rather than overt coercion and resistance, that is crucial in determining the ways Africans reacted to colonial rule.²⁴ Forms of negotiation within the domestic sphere in which women were prominent players are central to the argument of this thesis.

Studies of gender struggles have also explored women’s subordination and the control of their sexuality by paying particular attention to the role played by the development of the migrant labour system in Southern Africa and the functions it supposedly served for colonial capital. Cheryl Walker, for example, has argued that gender relations in precolonial society and their subsequent restructuring by the colonial state, played a key role in shaping the migrant labour system. She contends that “the impact of the (migrant) system on the role and status of women was extremely complex,

²³B. Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1980*, (New York: Heinemann, 1991).

²⁴B. Bozzoli, “Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 9, 2(1983), pp. 139-170.

opening up opportunities for increased personal autonomy and mobility at an individual level while radically undermining the security previously accorded women in precolonial society.”²⁵ Her argument echoes some of the earlier studies, especially those dating back to the 1970s which concentrated on the destructive effects of the migrant labour system.²⁶ It was argued that, despite all the benefits of migrancy, male labour migration to urban employment centres led to rural decay and poverty. From a moral standpoint, the migrant system was arguably responsible for marital breakdown, rising illegitimacy rates and a loss of respect for their elders among the youth.²⁷ Beyond the moralist argument, the loss of large numbers of productive males deprived households of important services for the completion of the production cycle. Not only did this transform the gender division of labour, but it also undermined peasant production and was therefore a source of food shortages. However, Walker, like much recent scholarship, has gone beyond the examination of the destructive impact of male migration alone by looking at women themselves as migrants. In this approach, the movement of African women away from

²⁵C. Walker, “Gender and the Development of the Migrant Labour System,” in C. Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1990), p. 192.

²⁶See for example R.H Palmer and N. Parsons (eds.) *The Roots of Rural Poverty*, (London: Heinemann Ltd., 1977); R.B. Boeder, “The effects of Labor Emigration on Rural Life in Malawi,” *Rural Africana*, 20(1972).

²⁷See C. Murray, “Migrant Labour and Changing Family Structure in the Rural Periphery of Southern Africa,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 6 No. 2 (1980); also by the same author *Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981); I. Schapela, “Premarital Pregnancy and Native Opinion: a Note on Social Change,” *Africa*, Vol. 6 No. 1 (1933).

rural areas is seen as having been “both an outcome of and a challenge to the hold the migrant labour system had developed on the rural periphery.”²⁸ It was at the same time a way of liberating themselves from rural patriarchs. The phenomenon of “runaway daughters” or “runaway wives” was not unfamiliar on the mines, towns and mission stations in South Africa and the Rhodesias during the colonial period. When their domestic situations in rural areas became intolerable, African women in increasing numbers moved to urban areas in search of a living. They engaged in various forms of trades, including beer-brewing and trading, and some forms of “misemployment,” such as prostitution, to make a living. Others took refuge at mission stations, engaging in Christian work as nuns or “brides of Christ.” Unfortunately, for many women, mission life generally did not bring about female emancipation. Rather, it only amounted to the exchange of African for European patriarchal authority.²⁹

Indeed, the flight to missions, mines, farms and towns may be construed as a classic example of how women responded to the adversities of rural life brought about by the development of colonial capitalism in general, and the migrant labour system in particular. Furthermore, it must be reckoned that even those who opted to remain in the rural areas did not fail to show their ingenuity in dealing and coping with the effects of

²⁸Walker, “Gender and the Development of the Migrant Labour System”; Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives*; Parpart, “Sexuality and Power.”

²⁹Schmidt argues that missionaries intervened in the most intimate aspects of women’s daily lives, monitoring their sexual and marital practices, and even forcing them to leave the missions if they failed to comply with regulations. See Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives*, pp. 94-95.

the market economy. As we have seen, occurrences of food shortages in rural areas were often attributed to male absenteeism due to the migrant labour system. This argument made sense in view of the prevailing division of labour where agricultural tasks associated with physical strength and danger, such as the cutting down of trees when opening up new gardens, were the work of men. The *citemene* system of cultivation practiced in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) is a good illustrative case in point. *Citemene*, a “slash-and-burn” system of agriculture involved the cutting down of trees and burning of the branches into ashes, leaving ash-conditioned soils on which millet could be grown.³⁰ The cutting down of trees on *citemene* gardens was men’s responsibility. When male labour migration intensified from the 1930s, it was believed that the *citemene* system was breaking down. Audrey Richards, for example, posited that since *citemene* was centrally dependent on male labour for the cutting of new gardens, the development of male labour migration would thus be a death knell of the system, which would consequently undermine food sufficiency.³¹ But as Moore and Vaughan have shown, a close attention to women’s labour and other *non-citemene* aspects of the agricultural system clearly undermine the “breaking down” thesis. Women adopted a multiple of agricultural strategies. For example, rather than clinging to millet cultivation, women could grow some crops that carried a high exchange value, such as beans, on

³⁰H.L. Moore and M. Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition, and Agricultural Change in Northern Province of Zambia, 1890-1990*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1994).

³¹A. Richards, *Land, Labour and Diet: An Economic Study of the Bemba Tribe*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1939).

semi-permanent gardens without male labour. Besides, it was not necessary to cut a new field every year. In addition, households had a variety of ways of gaining access to food other than growing it themselves.³² Not surprisingly, evidence from the *citemene* districts contradicted the fundamentals of colonial discourse. Statistical data from one district in the 1930s indicated that 66 *per cent* of taxable males were absent in villages but the supply of food was good. In another district the male absentee rate was only 39 *per cent* but food supply was very low. This undermined explanations based on the availability or absence of male labour. One possible explanation could be found in women's innovative responses to the disruptions caused by the migrant labour system. Essentially, this lends credence to the view that the emphasis on male migration as an explanatory factor for food insecurity and the alleged breakdown of "traditional" society partly reflected the male bias of colonial discourse in which the role of women as farmers and innovators was conveniently disregarded. It is to these issues, women's roles in rural subsistence, the extent to which they could be great innovators and negotiators, and the impact of the colonial system for women of the Shire Highlands, that we must now turn.

³²Moore and Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees*, Ch. 3.

II

6.2: Women on the Shire Highlands Estates: An Overview

As in many parts of Africa, women in Malawi have always been the backbone of the rural subsistence economy. During the precolonial period some existing kinship structures, such as matriliney, which gave women rights and access to land, buttressed women's enormous responsibility in the subsistence economy. The people of the Shire Highlands districts, and almost all of southern Malawi, are traditionally matrilineal. Upon marriage, the great majority of women in these districts live matrilocally.³³ Traditionally, as chapter two has shown, within these societies land was controlled by the *mbumba* -- "sororate" unit based on matrilineal descent and uxorilocal residence.³⁴ Land rights passed down from mother to her female children or grandchildren. For grown up men, access to land and family labour was through *chikamwini*, a system of "marriage and uxorilocal residence." In retrospect, it seems the practice of *chikamwini* might have been borne out of the need for a mechanism to introduce a dependent male labourer into the family unit. Typically, a prospective suitor moves to the village of his bride where he builds a house for his wife and is known as *mkamwini*. In the case of marital breakdown

³³Vaughan, "Food Production and Family Labour in Southern Malawi: The Shire Highlands and Upper Shire Valley in the Early Colonial period," *Journal of African History* Vol. 23, 3(1982), pp. 351-365. There are twelve districts in the Southern Province of Malawi. Of these, only one district, namely Nsanje, has a tradition of patrilineal descent among its Asena population.

³⁴Vaughan, "Which Family?: Problems in the Reconstruction of the History of Family as an Economic and Cultural Unit," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 24, (1983); Phiri, "Some Changes in the Matrilineal Family System."

he returns to the village of his kinfolk.³⁵ The primary rights in land, and the greater control over family labour inherent in the *chikamwini* system provided women with much better social and economic security and support systems. Martin Chanock has shown that many changes occurred in “tradition” during the colonial period.³⁶ It appears, however, that although these security and support systems were disrupted by the coming of the colonial plantation economy, the traditional marriage systems and practices on the estates were not abolished.³⁷ At the very least, the African traditional systems of marriage and residence played a vital role in the social and biological reproduction of the plantation labour force. The settlers needed the labour provided by the African families on the alienated land such that they had to maintain some of their traditional social structures and customs.

However, the penetration of colonial capital caused two significant modifications to the fabric of Malawi’s precolonial structures. First, the introduction of the cash economy contributed to the differentiation of rural labour into commercial (social) and food (domestic) production. African men were needed to labour in colonial enterprises thereby shifting the burden of food production more squarely on women. Second,

³⁵Most of the terms being used here--uxorilocal, matrilocal, *etc.*--are anthropological and I make no pretensions to define them. See D. Miller, “Women, Development and Social Change: The Women of Rural Malawi - A Case Study,” M.A. Thesis, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, 1998.

³⁶ Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social order*.

although matrilineal marriage structures continued, the European land holding practices challenged women's rights to land as provided in matriliney. When the Nyasaland territory was demarcated into Crown Land and private estates, Africans were allowed to reside as tenants in existing villages on private estates. Once privatized, land was deeded to male title holders following European practice. According to the 1904 Lands Ordinance, for example, the tenant was the male head of a family resident on a private estate. Within the scope of the operations of *thangata* labour tenancy during its formative phases, the tenant was required to work for the landlord in return for residence on the private estate. This provision, however, did not necessarily absolve women of all *thangata* responsibilities or estate work. On the contrary, when necessary, wives of tenants, and to some extent their children, worked for their landlords and other employers for wages as well. For instance, whenever men were busy with other tasks, or were unable to fulfill their *thangata* obligations due to other incidental circumstances, their women often substituted for them in performing *thangata* for the landlords. In short, notwithstanding the prevailing sexual division of labour during the colonial period, women performed multiple and diverse roles in Malawi's colonial economy. Their productive and reproductive capacities enabled them to contribute either directly or indirectly to the estate labour force.

Women's direct contribution to the plantation workforce can be conceptualized at two levels: first, through their participation in estate labour as part of the broad category

³⁷MNA S1/411/33 Complaints by Natives on Private Estates, 1936. See also W.C. Chirwa, "Women, Gender and Production on Colonial Malawi's Estates: A Social Study

of the “tenant-family’s” labour obligations to the landlords i.e. participation in *thangata* and other forms of casual labour; and second, by working as wage labourers themselves. This was common on the tea plantations of the Shire Highlands especially from the 1930s. Even in the early 1920s, the Nyasaland Department of labour had noted an increase in the number of Africans from up-country districts, from as far as Lilongwe in the Central Province, settling with their wives on local estates in the Shire Highlands to work.³⁸ Mention has been made that the Shire Highlands estates utilized various categories of labour, which included alien or Anguru labour from Portuguese East Africa and local labour from neighbouring villages and other districts in the Protectorate.³⁹ The tenant families on private estates gave the plantation owners access to a variety of cheap categories of labour which included that of women and children.⁴⁰ Not only did women perform *thangata* services in support of their tenant husbands, but they also turned out to be an important source of casual wage labour to the plantations, popularly known as *ganyu*—(temporary piece work). This kind of casual daily labour was generally resorted

of the Shire Highlands,” (unpub. manuscript).

³⁸MNA S1/521/20 *Annual Report for the Zomba District for the Year 1920/21*.

³⁹R.H. Palmer, “Working Conditions and Worker Responses on Nyasaland Tea Estates, 1930-1953,” *Journal of African History*, Vol. 27, 1(1986), pp. 105-126; W.C. Chirwa, “Alomwe and Mozambican Immigrant Labor, 1890s-1945,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 27, 3(1994).

⁴⁰J. McCracken, “Share-cropping in Malawi: The Visiting Tenant System in the Central Province c. 1920-1968,” in African Studies Centre (ed.), *Malawi: An Alternative Pattern of Development*, (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1985); W. Chirwa, “Child and Youth Labour on the Nyasaland Plantations, 1890-1953,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol.19, 4(1993).

to “when work urgently required to be done got beyond the capacity of normal labour force and was often done by women.”⁴¹

Ganyu labour was widely employed on the plantations during the peak periods of harvesting and processing of tea and tobacco.⁴² For women, *ganyu* was an important mechanism for securing supplementary family income particularly during the dry season when most of them were less busy in their own family gardens. A sizable proportion of *ganyu* labour was also employed in the non-agricultural sector, such as assisting in repairing a house or in food processing tasks if undertaken by women, for example, pounding maize for others. Tables 6.1 and 6.2 show that *ganyu* labour formed a significant proportion of the wage labour force during the period 1950 to 1960 and that in regular employment women were soundly out-numbered by men. In 1956, for example, only about 2,159 adult females were engaged in regular paid jobs as compared to 84,321 adult males and 15,963 young persons (juveniles and children). Yet, in the same year about 13,779 adult females were employed as casual workers as compared to 6,031 adult males and 2,314 young persons.⁴³ These numbers seem to suggest that throughout the

⁴¹*Annual Report of the Labour Department for the Year Ended 31st December, 1949* (Zomba, 1950).

⁴²Apart from tea and tobacco, tung and sisal were other plantation crops which also survived on the use of *ganyu* labour.

⁴³*Annual Reports of the Department of Labour, 1950-1960*. The number of women in regular wage employment at any one time is difficult to determine and figures for the 1930s and 1940s are hard to find in labour department sources for the same period. Moreover, not all casual labourers were registered on the weekly or monthly pay rolls of the estates.

colonial period women in Malawi continued to bear the burden of peasant production and the reproduction and maintenance of labour in the countryside. Labour department reports also suggest that employers preferred female to male casual wage labourers on the grounds that the former were cheap and easily accessible. Generally, *ganyu* labour on the plantations was deemed to be cheaper than *chitando* or compound labour, largely because employers did not have to provide their *ganyu* labourers with accommodation and daily rations as was the case with compound labourers.

Table 6.1

Yearly Peak Levels of Employment 1950-1960

(as of 31st March each year)

Year	African	Non-African	Total Regular	Casual Labour	Total All Employees
1950	102,760	n/a		n/a	n/a
1951	119,449	n/a		12,634	n/a
1952	102,449	n/a		15,972	n/a
1953	86,693	n/a		20,972	n/a
1954	134,000	4,330	138,330	21,316	159,646
1955	146,000	4,650	150,650	22,234	172,884
1956	164,300	5,030	169,330	21,469	190,799
1957	174,900	5,610	180,510	21,234	201,744
1958	177,600	6,610	184,210	36,915	221,125
1959	179,200	6,300	185,500	26,005	211,505
1960	182,800	6,460	189,260	31,900	221,160

Source: Department of Labour Annual Reports, 1950-1960

Table 6.2
Composition of Regular Employees by Sex and Age

	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956
Adult Males	82,479	92,189	82,400	70,639	63,641	89,243	84,321
Adult females	5,428	6,182	1,635	1,007	1,272	1,371	2,259
Young Persons	14,853	20,651	18,300	15,047	13,978	17,623	15,963
Total	102,760	119,022	102,335	86,693	78,891	108,237	102,543

Source: Department of Labour Annual Reports, 1950-1956

Women casual labourers increased in importance as competition for the local labour supply intensified between external recruiters and local employers, and among local employers. Major external recruiters were the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) for the South African gold mines and the Rhodesian Native Labour Bureau (RNLB) for the Rhodesian farms and mines. Internal employers included the planters, the Shire Highlands Railway Company and other commercial and transport companies. With the passage of time, the massive exodus of male workers to the South African mines and internal competition for the local labour had a profound effect on women both as tenants and as casual labourers in so far as planters were forced "to turn to cheap and vulnerable categories of workers among which were women." Female labour, it has been observed, was easy to control because it was enticed with food which

the women needed for the support of their families.⁴⁴ It is therefore difficult to escape the conclusion that increased male emigration to Southern Africa intensified the exploitation of women in the colonial economy.

The extent of women's participation in the estate economy on a casual labour basis also varied with the changing nature of colonialism itself and the shifting priorities of colonial and settler capital. As chapter three has shown, settler agriculture in Nyasaland experienced a number of crises during the 1920s which only worsened with the coming of the Great Depression of the early 1930s. This was the period when settler planters increasingly turned to sharecropping arrangements with their tenants in the production of tobacco. The emergence of sharecropping necessitated some changes in the organization of production, as well as in the position and status of African tenants on the estates. With the introduction of the 1928 Natives on Private Estates Ordinance, for example, the terms of *thangata* had changed.⁴⁵ It was no longer mandatory for tenants to provide their labour to estate owners in exchange for residence on the estates. Rather, tenants had the option to grow economic crops, part of which when sold to the landowners entitled them to a partial or complete rebate of their rent. Furthermore, the legal definition of the tenant had changed. Women could now become tenants and register as tobacco growers in their own right. This development ushered in a further complication for the status of women in the colonial economy. The involvement of the

⁴⁴Chirwa, "Theba' is Power."

⁴⁵See chapter three for details on the terms and provisions of the Ordinance

tenant family in cash cropping meant greater demand for female labour in domestic production. Women's workload increased as they had to take on cash cropping and food production atop their normal domestic roles.

Another significant change came with the "exempted natives" clause in the 1928 Natives on Private Estates Ordinance, by which certain categories of Africans were exempted from any forms of rent. Included in the exempted category were elderly women and widows whose husbands had died while living on the estates or who came from outside to live with their relatives. A lot of single women took advantage of this legal provision by declaring themselves widows in order to escape tenancy obligations. Even married women whose husbands were away for some reasons declared themselves widows and got away with it, largely because landowners could not easily curb the practice due to the absence of up-to-date records on the families resident on their land.⁴⁶ It is thus tempting to conclude that false widowhood was one of the strategies women used to either evade or renegotiate their tenancy obligations. In 1939, the women's burden was further lessened when the colonial state abolished taxation on women, thereby liberating them from abuses associated with tax default.⁴⁷

Marriage was one of the most powerful social institutions to which women on the estates attached a special significance, especially before the 1928 legal transformations in the tenancy arrangements. Unlike on Crown Land where matrilineal marriage determined

⁴⁶Chirwa, "Women, Gender and Production."

men's access to land (and women's access to male labour), the rules of engagement were different on the private estates. With the male heads as official tenants on the estates, marriage remained an important vehicle through which women gained access to both land and male labour. In spite of the matrilineal heritage, legally land still belonged to the landlords. Not surprisingly, then, family units on the estates valued their daughters more than their sons, because daughters gave them access to the labour of sons-in-law, *akamwini*. This, however, became a bone of contention between landowners and tenants. In pursuit of their own economic goals, landowners were firmly opposed to young men coming to settle and take up brides on the estates. In effect, if estate girls wished to marry, they had to leave their homes to do so. Since the locals on the estates were matrilineal people, it was against custom for "their" girls to go out to marry.⁴⁸ To that end, the practice sparked bitter resentment among the African residents. In exceptional circumstances, potential bridegrooms were allowed to enter the estates as natives on "special agreement" as provided for in the 1928 Ordinance. In general, the new legal framework militated against young men coming on to the estates in a straightforward manner. Usually, young men would enter an estate to marry and settle at a village but not with the idea of working or paying rent to the owner. African residents also detested the fact that whenever a woman married a native other than one with "resident" rights, she relinquished any of the resident rights she might have had before. For young women,

⁴⁷C.A. Baker, "Tax Collection in Malawi: An Administrative History, 1891-1972," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 8, 1(1975), pp. 56-57.

⁴⁸MNA S1/411^{II}/33 Natives on Private Estates.

therefore, commitment to a marital relationship was preceded by a painful period of soul-searching as they had to make a choice between acquiring a husband and losing all resident rights or remaining single with all resident rights. However, should a woman's husband desert her (as often happened) she had the liberty to return to her family who were by custom obliged to take her in, whether against the law or otherwise.⁴⁹

The hold imposed on marital relations by the relations of production on the estates had profound social consequences on both family and "tribal" life. It left most women socially and economically vulnerable. As the above account implies, it contributed greatly to the phenomenon of abandoned women on the estates which had become too common (and was on the rise) from the 1930s. Women abandoned by their husbands were the most vulnerable social and economic category of residents on the estates. Estates' owners were not prepared to shoulder the responsibility of assisting abandoned families indefinitely. One planter, for example, expressed regret over the situation which he thought unbecoming:

During the past eighteen months I have had some unfortunate experience with the abandoned families of men who have left without leaving a trace of their whereabouts. I have had to buy feeding bottles for infants, supply milk and look after the old women, and I do not propose, nor do I admit any obligation to continue to assist the families whose menfolk chose to abandon them. The houses of the abandoned families must be pulled down and the women and children go elsewhere.⁵⁰

⁴⁹MNA S1/411^{II}/33 Natives on Private Estates - Report of the District Commissioner, Mlanje, 1936.

⁵⁰MNA NSE 1/8/3 European Estates and Native Labour and Tenants, 1941-1950.

The social chaos created by the prevailing conditions on the estates did not escape the attention of colonial officials. In his remarks, the District Commissioner for Cholo in 1935 vividly captured the plight of estate women. The D.C. observed that the result of restrictions placed on marriages was:

an unduly large number of girls of marriageable age, particularly on the well-supervised estates, who are either doomed to spinsterhood or to contract marriage, [with the connivance of their parents and/or Village Headmen] in a clandestine manner, so that their altered status is kept from the knowledge of the owner as long as possible.⁵¹

In essence, contract marriage became a useful strategy for some tenants to circumvent some restrictions being imposed on their social life.

Estate owners also objected to the giving of “resident rights” to male children born and raised on the estates upon their attaining the age of 16. Tenants on various estates felt betrayed on being served notices that their sons born on the estates “and now grown up to manhood and wanted huts and gardens” had to leave as they did not have “resident” privileges. Interestingly, this was an issue on which even European administrators and settlers/estate owners disagreed among themselves on the interpretation of the law. A situation that had developed at the Tennett Estates in Cholo during the 1930s is, for illustrative purposes, worth noting. At the end of 1935, Mr. J. Tennett, manager, elected to evict a total of 145 natives whom he regarded as trespassers from his Mangunda Estates. When the matter was investigated, it was found that 91 of them were mostly youths who had been born on the estates, their parents being “resident

⁵¹MNA S1/411/33 Extract From Cholo District Annual Report, 1935.

natives” within the meaning of the law. From the perspective of the D.C., these youths having been born on the estates and having owned huts on the estates for more than three years automatically became resident natives after attaining the age of 16. The owner, however, took the opposite view that none of the sons had assumed “resident” rights and that the position had been explained to their parents long ago. They would be denied resident status on attaining the age of 16. In his understanding and interpretation of the law, therefore, they were all trespassers. In part, the Ordinance provided the definition of Resident Native to mean:

any male or unmarried female over the apparent age of 16 who owns or resides in a hut on an estate *with the knowledge of the owner*, provided that where any male native or unmarried female over the apparent age of 16 owns or resides in a hut on an estate for a period of three years, such male native or unmarried female shall be deemed to be a resident native.⁵²

On the basis of this provision, the estate owner in question, no doubt many in his position, could not be persuaded to “allow these squatters to remain the three years with [his] knowledge,” and they were therefore subject to eviction unless permitted as tenants on Special Agreement.⁵³ For landowners, this was an important strategy for ensuring the flow and availability of male labour on their estates. Indeed, it was a measure which deprived tenant households of considerable male labour. It was against a backdrop of

⁵²MNA SI/411/33 The Natives on Private Estates Ordinance, 1928.

⁵³Mention was made in chapter three that the 1928 Ordinance provided for three categories of African occupancy of private estates, namely, “exempted natives”, “resident natives” and “natives on special agreement” who were required to enter into a written contract to work for the estate owner for a period of no more than six months in any one year. They were not required to pay any cash rent or to work in lieu of it.

such self-serving schemes by planters, that African families, parents and elders, endorsed contract marriages on the estates to avoid wholesale exploitation of male labour power by settler capital.

The issues of gender and marital relations on the estates raised in the foregoing account lead to one important conclusion. It may be argued, without equivocation, that if the legal niceties of the late 1920s and 1930s, including the development of sharecropping, provided opportunities for female emancipation from the African patriarchal system of controls, African communities in general paid too high a price for that liberation. Clearly, the liberation of women into the status of tenants, growers or sharecroppers, was a positive factor only in so far as it served the interests of settler capital through the growing and selling of crops at the behest of the landowner. Beyond that commercial relationship, women remained marginalized and vulnerable, especially because they were denied the luxury of gaining access to male labour through the institution of marriage.⁵⁴ The attempt to eliminate young men over the age of 16 also sought to deprive tenants of the desired family/household labour that could have ensured the emergence of an independent peasantry on the estates. The last thing settlers desired was an independent peasantry that could dispense with wage earning on estates. Nevertheless, it is the contention of this study that African peasants, both women and men, were determined to use their ingenuity to overcome every attempt by settler and

⁵⁴ On the other hand, since some women welcomed the idea, they may have seen it as a positive choice for advancement in admittedly difficult circumstances. After all, other

colonial capital to frustrate their autonomous livelihood. Nothing could prevent them from exploring any spaces in the capitalist landscape which might improve their social and economic survival. Women, for example, demonstrated their wit by reorienting their energies increasingly into food production and non-farm activities -- petty commodity trading, beer brewing, etc.-- in which their performance in providing the needs of the household, and asserting their own autonomy, was astounding.

III

6.3: Women in Wage Employment

Female wage employment in Nyasaland reached its zenith with the growth and rapid development of tea plantations from the 1930s. Tea became the main European crop on the Shire Highlands, particularly in Cholo and Mlanje districts, following the declining importance of tobacco due to the crises of the late 1920s.⁵⁵ By the early 1930s several British companies moved into Malawi and began to invest considerably in tea plantations. Such companies primarily sought to diversify beyond their Far Eastern interests at a time “tea companies in South East Asia were faced with strong competition from other plantation crops, with an absence of suitable areas in which to expand, and with a growing shortage and increasing costs of labour.”⁵⁶ As this would suggest, one of the

studies suggest that absence of male labour was not automatically a problem. See for example, Moore and Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees*.

⁵⁵Palmer, “Working Conditions”

main attractions to investors was the low wage structure of the industry in Malawi, which relied heavily on vulnerable and cheap categories of women and child labour.⁵⁷

According to Chipande and Vaughan, wages in the tea industry were not exceptionally low compared with other wages offered in the colonial Malawian economy, but they were low indeed by world standards and even by the standards of the rest of Central and Southern Africa. For example, labour in Malawi was rated to be cheaper than in Kenya and Tanzania, the other tea producing countries in the region. The planting community was highly undercapitalized and tobacco, the major export commodity, was in recession. For international companies, therefore, Malawi was much easier to penetrate mainly because settler capital was very weak unlike in Kenya where they had to face a formidable settler community.

As the tea industry expanded in the 1930s, employment opportunities for women and children correspondingly increased. Various categories of workers were employed in the industry and wages mostly varied with the type of work performed, although the standard wage-criteria broke down when applied to women and children. According to official colonial reports, children's wages varied in accordance with their age and ability,

⁵⁶Palmer, "The Nyasaland Tea Industry in the Era of International Tea Restrictions, 1933-1950," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 26, (1985), p.220.

⁵⁷Chipande and Vaughan, "Women in the Estate Sector of Malawi: The Tea and Tobacco Industries." Chirwa has also shown that women, children and immigrants from Mozambique were the most socially vulnerable categories of workers on Malawi's plantations. See W.C. Chirwa, "Alomwe and Mozambican Immigrant Labor in Colonial Malawi, 1890s to 1945," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 27, 3(1994); and by the same author, "Child and Youth Labour on the Nyasaland Plantations, 1890-1953," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 19, 4(1993).

while women were paid at children's rates according to their ability.⁵⁸ The wages were paid both in cash and food or food money, known as *posho*. (See Table 6.3)

Table 6.3 Average Wages for Tea Workers 1930s-1940s

Type of work	Average wage/month	No. Hours/week	Posho/week
Cultivators	7 shillings (<i>s</i>)	6	6 pence (<i>d</i>)
Pluckers	7 <i>s</i>	10	6 <i>d</i>
Factory workers:	7-10 <i>s</i>		
Skilled	10 <i>s</i>	9 to 12	6 <i>d</i>
Unskilled	7 <i>s</i>	9 to 12	6 <i>d</i>
Masons	up to £4	9 to 12	6 <i>d</i>
Carpenters	up to 30 <i>s</i>	9 to 12	6 <i>d</i>
Clerks	up to 80 <i>s</i>	9 to 12	6 <i>d</i>
Casual/ Ganyu Workers' Daily Wages			
Type of Work	Daily Wage	No. of Hours	
Cultivators	4 <i>d</i> to 6 <i>d</i>	6	
Pluckers	6 <i>d</i> to 1 <i>s</i>	9	
Factory Workers	6 <i>d</i> to 9 <i>d</i>	9 to 12	

Source: Annual Reports for the Mlanje District, 1932-1940

Food money or *posho* was the cash allowance workers received if they did not take the food rations. Usually a worker received 6 pence(*d*) per week food money or 1*d* per day. The food was considered to be very good and well over the official scale laid down for it. The cost of the food to the employer was between 1.25 to 1.5 *d* per man per day.

On most estates cooked food was provided for the labour employed in the factory and on plucking at midday in addition to the daily ration of raw food. It was noted in the 1920s that a number of planters had come to realize that it was in their own interest to provide their labour with generous food rations, the result of which was quite an immigration of up-country natives to the local estates.⁵⁹ The midday meal was one of the major attractions for the women and children especially during times of food scarcity.⁶⁰ This evidence suggests that the number of women/children in wage employment at times fluctuated with seasonal food shortages and periods of bumper harvests, with the former recording higher employment rates.

Ganyu workers received neither food rations nor *posho*. Children's wages varied from 2 shillings(*s*) to 6*s* per month according to age and ability plus half rations or 3*d* per week *posho*. Women workers received the same. Oral testimony reveals more variation, however. Some women stated that they received a wage of 2*s* per month plus 6*d* per week *posho*, others reported their wages as having been 2*s* per month plus 1*d* (presumably per day) *posho*, yet others claimed to have at some point received 4*s* per month plus 6*d* per week *posho*.⁶¹ Considering that these informants rarely pin-pointed

⁵⁸MNA NSE 1/13/1 From D.C., Mlanje to P.C., Southern Province, 28 February, 1930.

⁵⁹The food rations may not have been as generous as these reports seem to suggest, but it appears, even from oral accounts, that they did make a difference as regards workers' morale. MNA S1/521/20 *Annual Report for the Zomba District, 1920/21*; NSE 1/13/1 *Mlanje District Reports, 1930-1935*.

⁶⁰Chirwa, "Theba' is Power" p. 322.

specific time-periods when such wage-structures existed, their testimonies can be regarded as fairly consistent with the official view, given the possibility that they spoke of different time periods. Besides, it is only natural, almost in any industry, for wages to fluctuate with time. Colonial officialdom made every effort to justify the lower wages offered to women and children workers in particular, and the entire low wage-structure in general. It was largely assumed that most workers had their food gardens and wives to work them, and that under those circumstances it need not pay a wage which would provide the needs of both the worker and his family. Another explanation offered for women and children's low pay was because many of the tasks they performed constituted what was, by plantation standards, "light work." Arthur Westrop described women's tasks and the sexual division of labour on the tea estates in the 1940s as follows:

To supplement any shortfall in the turn-out of labour most estates also employ women, the wives or elder daughters of the men, but very few of these are prepared to sign on for regular work, preferring to be classified as *ganyu* labour. In practice they are generally paid once a week for work done during the previous six days. The women are naturally even more prone to absenteeism than the men, since they buy and sell in the weekly market, but except at the beginning of the rainy season, when the women are busy weeding their own gardens, and labour is generally scarcest, more than required often seek work ... The men do the clearing of the land, digging of dams, tree-felling, cutting firewood, road-making, bunding, the preparation of nurseries, holing, planting, pruning, tipping, most of the plucking and the heavier work in brick, block or pot-making. The women do most of the weeding and hoeing of fire-breaks, the cutting and collection of grass, and do most of the carrying of water, earth or bricks. Many estates do not use them for plucking.⁶²

⁶¹Sixteen of the women interviewed worked on the tea estates at one point or another between the 1930s and 1970s.

⁶²A. Westrop, n.d., cited in Chipande and Vaughan, "Women in the Estate Sector," pp. 13-14.

In general, much as the wages were relatively low, the colonial officials in Nyasaland believed and maintained that they were adequate. In the opinion of one official, “wages may seem small to any person not accustomed to conditions in the protectorate,” but they were adequate for the labourer. It was felt that the industry could not afford to pay higher wages unless costs of production and marketing were reduced in other ways:

Tea must be landed in London at not more than 9*d* per lb. if an estate is to pay its wing. Landed at Luchenza [the local railhead] it costs about 6*d* per lb., of which about 3*d* is native wages; it is therefore obvious that any increase in wages would be a matter of great concern to managers and owners of estates.⁶³

These considerations spawned a debate in the 1940s on the suitability, or otherwise, of implementing a minimum wage policy for native labour in all sectors in the Protectorate.⁶⁴ Worth noting is that the debates on minimum wage were unabashedly gendered and showed that employers naturally devalued women’s labour. All the deliberations by the Labour Commission and employers of labour only took into consideration the minimum wage for the average male labourer to survive without hardship.

Apart from factory work, plucking was the most lucrative job on the tea estates. In addition to their normal wage, pluckers could earn a bonus for leaf picked above the standard daily weight for a wage of up to 7*s*. The average bonus so earned was 2*s* per

⁶³MNA NS 1/13/1 From D.C., Mlanje to the P.C. Blantyre, 28 Feb. 1930.

month but “an exceptionally good man working under exceptionally good conditions,” could earn as much as 8s. For a period of about three months in a year, pluckers were also employed on pruning, during which they worked a daily task of 6 hours and received 7s per month wages. Women, however, only reluctantly worked as pluckers. As late as 1968, the Tea Association acknowledged that: “usually only men have been employed in plucking tea in Malawi but recently women have been tried successfully, in some areas, and are likely to become a permanency.”⁶⁵ The reluctance of women to undertake plucking amazed planters who came from India where women formed the majority of tea pluckers.⁶⁶ By avoiding plucking, women avoided the better-paid work on the estate in favour of casual labour as Westrop’s account cited above suggests. Causes of this pattern are unclear, although it may have been a result of their reproductive and child care roles being in conflict with the demands of plucking.⁶⁷ By participating directly in casual wage employment in spite of the gendered wage structure and the extra labour demands on their person, women demonstrated their initiative to explore avenues beyond their assumed roles in the home and diversify their labour power in ways vital to their material welfare.

⁶⁴MNA S12/1/16/1 Minutes of an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Nyasaland Tea Association Ltd., Wednesday 17th September, 1941; S12/1/16/2 Memorandum on the Minimum Wage.

⁶⁵The Tea Association (Central Africa Ltd., Tea in Malawi (The University Press of Africa, 1968), p.24.

⁶⁶Chipande and Vaughan, “Women in the Estate Sector,” p.13.

⁶⁷The fact that post-colonial trends reveal women’s full participation in tea plucking obscures rather than clarify the issue. At the time of fieldwork for the present study, this

IV

6.4: “Invisible Workers”: Women in Food Production and Non-Farm Sector Enterprises

By looking at women’s direct roles only in the estate economy, it is tempting to conclude that their role in production was indeed peripheral and therefore insignificant to the operations of the capitalist economy. Such a conclusion would be misleading because women did contribute to the colonial economy in several indirect ways. Food production, a predominantly female occupation by all accounts, was one of the major important roles of women in the colonial and estate economy. Practically, food production supported the male-dominated cash-crop sector. Owing to their indirect participation in the structure of the estate economy, women have been described as “invisible workers”, their role being one of producing and processing food, and performing all the domestic labour which “freed” their husbands to work on the estates for low wages.⁶⁸ Theoretically, as wives, mothers and food producers, the labour of women has always been crucial in lowering the real cost of the male labour to the employer.⁶⁹ Therefore, food production and processing, and other “support systems” carried out by women, such as beer brewing, petty commodity trading, were crucial to the functioning of the rural economy and their

question did not arise. Rather unwittingly, my investigation missed the opportunity to explore the veracity of the situation during the colonial period.

⁶⁸MNA PCS 1/2/22 Agriculture: Provincial and District Plans, 1950-1957. See also Chipande and Vaughan, “Women in the Estate Sector.”

⁶⁹Beneria, “Reproduction, Production and the Sexual Division of Labour.”

importance has to be understood within the purview of the operations of the capitalist economy during the colonial era.

Table 6.4 shows a yearly cycle of various farm activities and the division of labour among men, women and children in agricultural production for rural households. As may be extrapolated from the table, Africans in the Highlands, especially women, experimented with several different types of crops, most of which were food crops: maize, millet, sorghum, cassava, potatoes, groundnuts, bananas, pumpkins, cucumbers, sugarcanes and beans, to name but a few. Given that African communities had limited access to land, much of which had been alienated to European commercial agriculture, it would appear paradoxical that such a wide range of crops were being cultivated. One plausible explanation would be to applaud peasants' agricultural methods or their firm grasp of the elements of agricultural science as reflected in their use of mixed farming, intercropping and interplanting techniques. For example, maize, the main staple crop could be intercropped with cotton, pumpkins, beans or peas, and a wide selection of other vegetables and legumes.

Table 6. Yearly Cycle of Farm Activities

Month	Dec/Jan/Feb.	Mar/Apr/May	Jun/Jul/Aug.	Sep/Oct/Nov.
Meteorology	Generally long rains & stormy winds	Periods of short rains	Cold winter temperatures & isolated showers	Dry spells, very hot & dry weather, local showers
Activities				
Men's tasks	Planting, especially tobacco	Curing & grading; scaring birds in millet gardens	Marketing; making stores/ granaries	Opening new gardens; repairing huts
Women & Children	Hoeing, planting & weeding; various crops; transplanting millet and potatoes	Harvesting green maize; cultivating gardens for other crops; scaring birds	Harvesting & transporting; storing: maize, millet, sorghum, cassava, potatoes etc.	Harvesting; threshing & winnowing; land preparation; sowing; early plantings
All groups	Clearing gardens for cotton planting	Cotton picking begins	Picking cotton	Harvesting and land preparation
Food Situation	Few households with food supplies from last harvest to last to the next harvest; many households relying on <i>makaka</i> and mangoes for food	Many households relying on green maize, <i>makaka</i> , mangoes and wild fruits	Harvest season, abundant food supplies for most households	Harvest season, abundant food supplies for most households
Crops Grown	Maize, tobacco, cotton, potatoes, cassava, nzama, nkunguzu, nseula, khobwe, finger millet, millet, sorghum, bananas, groundnuts			nardolo, mbwanda,

Sorghum and millet were usually intercropped and were in addition mixed with cucumbers and melons, cassava and cow peas would usually go together with the perennial bananas and sugarcanes.⁷⁰ Several advantages accrue from mixed farming practices, some of which are as follows. Intercropping lessens the spread of pests and diseases because neighbouring plants are less likely to be of the same species. It also benefits the soil by preventing erosion in so far as the mixture of crops on one plot of land provides a cover of plants for the soil. Furthermore, it also lessens the growth of weeds thereby reducing the amount of labour required for weeding in the later stages of the crops' growth. From a "food security" point of view, or as a survival strategy, intercropping lessens the risks of crop failure due to, for example, drought, because different crop varieties and species grow at different speeds and they have different moisture requirements.⁷¹ As one observer puts it, "intercropping is one of the glories of African science. It is to African agriculture as poly-rhythmic drumming is to African music and carving to art."⁷²

Intercropping was, by and large, a way of life among the Shire Highlands peasant communities. During the 1930s, an agricultural officer, though with a tinge of disapproval, reported that "quite a number of natives [had] planted maize between their

⁷⁰This account is reconstructed from oral testimony of various informants interviewed for this study in Chiradzulu, Mulanje and Thyolo districts between March and August, 1997, and from archival records MNA PCS 1/2/22 Provincial and District Plans, 1950-1957.

⁷¹Tiyambe Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History of Africa*, Vol. 1, p.88

⁷²*ibid.*

cotton and in several instances much too thick. The only other crop interplanted with cotton... was *Nzama* (butter beans). Their only reason for doing so being that it does not interfere with the cotton and is planted between the ridges.” As to mixed cropping in general, he observed, “I have asked hundreds of natives their reason for doing so, the only answer I can get is ‘because we have no room to plant our different crops and it means only one hoeing.’ They have no reason for mixing their crops with the idea of benefiting the soil or stopping erosion. Their one idea is to grow their food with the least possible trouble.”⁷³ According to this official and many others like him, Africans did not practice mixed farming out of their informed appreciation of its advantages. Rather, they did so out of sheer laziness, as the occasional reference to some Africans as “lazy devils who will not start preparing their gardens until rains makes the ground soft”⁷⁴ would suggest. However, the same official records indicate that Africans themselves resorted to mixed farming due to land scarcity. In that case, even if we were to adopt the latter interpretation, there is much for which peasant cultivators may be commended in their use of these farming techniques. Their behavioural practices represented a proactive way to yield more for their socio-economic survival in the face of declining land resources. Lucrative as maize had become in the late colonial period, some families’ advancement depended on it. Women were the major architects of mixed farming strategies due to

⁷³MNA A3/2/191 Department of Agriculture Reports: Monthly Reports by Agricultural Supervisors, 1934-1935.

⁷⁴MNA A3/2/192 From the Agricultural Supervisor, Mlanje to the Agricultural Officer, Zomba, December 22, 1936.

their predominant role in food production. A typical day for the woman during a growing season, for example, began with the onerous task of weeding the gardens, followed by the fetching of *ndiwo* (vegetables), and the gathering of firewood, which she would carry on her head to her village homestead, and would then proceed to fetch water from the spring, wrapping up her itinerary with the preparation of the midday meal (usually taken late in the afternoon) for her husband and family.⁷⁵

Table 6.4 also indicates that women (and children) did the bulk of the work involved in food crop production while men, for the most part, took care of cash crops, notably tobacco and cotton, although they usually assisted in back-breaking tasks such as the opening up of new gardens, making ridges, and contour bunding. Women took care of almost all the planting, sowing, weeding and harvesting. These tasks kept them busy all year round in the fields, although the busiest season was between the months of December and May, roughly the period between planting and harvesting. Much as there was a division of labour by sex in agricultural work, traditionally, there also seemed to be a well understood divide between what were considered as “men’s” or “women’s” crops. The evidence suggests that men’s participation in household agricultural production varied with the market value attached to particular crops. Crops that were potentially

⁷⁵Interview with Village Head(woman) Kuluwira and Emmie Mapira, Kuluwira Village, Mulanje District; Dofe Alik, Kumadzi Village, Thyolo District. *Ndiwo* is a generic name for any dish of relish (vegetable, legume or meat) that goes along with the main course of maize meal (*nsima*). For women who spent much of the time in the fields, fetching *ndiwo* in the gardens was [and still is] literally understood to mean picking up the (vegetable) leaves *kuthyola ndiwo*. Vegetables, particularly okra, pumpkin and bean

more rewarding in monetary terms were the designated men's crops. It must be noted that a number of food crops, designated as women's crops, were also exchanged for a cash income. Cotton and tobacco, in theory, generated most of the income over the year. As main breadwinners and heads of households, it was quite natural for men to concentrate their energies in these relatively more lucrative crops in addition to their active participation in wage labour on the estates.

There were, nonetheless, circumstances which at times blurred the male-female crop distinction. In other words, the distinction was neither inflexible nor uncontested. From time to time, seasonal variations (and at times policy decisions) had a bearing on the market value of certain crops. Chapter five has shown that maize, the principal food crop whose production, like most food crops was dominated by women, usually served a dual purpose as both food and cash crop. By the 1950s maize grain had become highly commercialized. This development forced more men than ever before to cross over the traditional divide to take charge of maize production and became the main players in the grain trade.⁷⁶ Clearly, they had seen the higher income earning potential in maize necessary for a better livelihood. Men rather than women featured prominently in co-operative societies and committees whose mandate included the bargaining for fair market prices for maize and other native-grown crops. Likewise, women defied the traditional divide when they were officially sanctioned to register as tobacco producers

leaves made some of the best *ndiwo*, and easy cook too, after a typical long day in the fields.

⁷⁶MNA PCS 1/2/18 Maize Production Policy, 1950-1959.

during the 1930s or to grow tobacco as sharecroppers. Therefore, it seems safe to conclude that aspirations to upward social mobility determined what crops to grow much more than the assumed static male-female divide.

On another scale, the male-female division of crops worked to the advantage of women in their contribution to the social reproduction of the estate labour force, and their socio-economic survival. First and foremost, it gave women some autonomy in exercising control over a sizable proportion of the household income. Oral testimony accounts maintain that, as care-takers of the families' subsistence needs, women had almost full control of all proceeds from sales of subsistence crops: bananas, maize, groundnuts, beans and other fruits and vegetables.⁷⁷ Men had relatively little control over women's trading activities, largely because markets for these food commodities were, until the late 1950s, unregulated.⁷⁸ No formal channels or centralized market outlets existed for trading purposes, hence no fixed pricing for any given item or quantity of commodity. This gave husbands little chance to predict how much income "their" women would make at the market. Women sold their food products either from the verandahs of their homes to passers-by, or carried them to Indian stores, or to neighbouring estates and sold to estate wage and tenant labourers. Agricultural reports for the 1930s in the Mlanje district showed that the development of the tea industry was

⁷⁷Interview with Agness Ambulera, Kumadzi Village, Thyolo District; Apatseyawo Kazembe, Mchiliko Village, Chiradzulu; Femia Libanga, Chiradzulu District.

⁷⁸MNA S1/1022/27 Memorandum on the Maize Growing Industry in Mlanje District; PCS 1/2/18 Maize Production Policy, 1950-1959.

accompanied by an increase in maize production. The tea industry increased the demand for maize by the estates which began to feed not only their *Chitando* (compound) labour but also their labour from villages on Native Trust Land.⁷⁹ For those living in the vicinity of the Blantyre-Nsanje railway line, the railway stations constituted the best market outlets for their food commodities. This was particularly the case for women in the Thyolo and Chiradzulu areas around Thekerani, Sandama, Khonjeni, Luchenza, Makande and Nansadi railway sites (see fig.7). As some women observed, “when green maize, bananas, cassava, sweet potatoes and groundnuts were in season, women would once or twice a day carry a variety of these commodities in baskets on their heads to Luchenza and Khonjeni [train stations] where passengers from town [Blantyre-Limbe] were ready customers and the best for that matter... During harvest time, estate workers usually scrambled for our maize.”⁸⁰ However, because of their overzealousness in the grain trade, women sometimes carried the blame for occurrences of food shortages that were seen as resulting from over-selling:

it is the native house-wife and not the husband who generally sells the family's maize and a most important factor in the present situation is her unfortunately weak reaction to the temptation of immediately obtaining a few coppers for her maize from the buyer or his agent, who, as a result of the uncontrolled buying often comes and buys close to her village. The preference of the native woman for the basin or the plate as a measure and her dislike of the scales should also be mentioned in this connection. When she sells at the store of an Indian buyer, as she often does, the

⁷⁹MNA S1/1022/27 Memorandum on Maize Growing Industry.

⁸⁰Interview with Village Head (woman) Kumadzi, Kumadzi Estate, Thyolo; Agness Ambulera, Kumadzi Village, Thyolo District; Elina Bowa and Esinala Makuluni, Thyolo District.

inducement of a new cloth or some desired article causes her to sell more maize from the family *nkhokwe* [granary] than she can really spare.⁸¹

The range of activities carried out by women, as table 6.4 illustrates, also lends credence to the description some scholars have used for women as the “beasts of burden.”⁸² In the absence of cars, trucks and ox-drawn carts, one of the major contributions women made to household survival was the task of transporting agricultural produce, on their heads, during harvest time from farms to the homes, and subsequently to market centres. For much of the colonial period, transport facilities were largely underdeveloped to the extent that even for commercial companies, human head portage, *mtenga-tenga*, persisted as the most reliable form of commodity transportation. Thus, while men would undertake paid employment as head porters for the transport companies, women performed the unpaid service of transporting family produce to market places. A district official clearly acknowledged this factor in proposing buying legislation: “as the individual producer has no means of transporting his maize to market except on the head (generally his wife’s) and the ratio of value to weight is low, central buying stations must be numerous enough to cover reasonably the areas of production. About 18 stations will be required in the Mlanje district [alone].”⁸³

⁸¹S1/1022/27 Memorandum on Maize Growing Industry.

⁸²Walker, *Women and Development to 1945*.

⁸³MNA S1/1022/27 Memorandum on the Maize Growing Industry, 1938.

However, cases abound where women's increased control over some household income became cause for domestic turmoil and tension. This was largely due to the die-hard attitudes of some husbands who firmly held to and lived by the cultural principle that "the man is the natural head of the family and was supposed to provide for his wife's and children's needs." Such husbands saw themselves as both owners and managers of the household or farm, on the basis of which they expected to control all earnings, whether from the crop or from *kachasu*. Women would sometimes acquiesce to surrender their earnings on threat of divorce.⁸⁴ Not all women who faced male oppression were prepared to give in, some of whom feared that surrendering earnings to the husband threatened their marital security: "the more money these men have under their control the more inclined they become towards polygamy."⁸⁵ Tensions of this kind, however, do not minimize the significance of women as innovators, although it would be interesting to investigate how such conflicts were adjudicated.

Women's involvement in petty trading activities combined well with their ever-increasing preoccupation with food processing strategies designed to ensure household self-sufficiency at all times. The making of *makaka*, dried (processed) cassava, was one of such strategies. In table 6.4, the section on the food situation shows that families relied on *makaka* and mangoes during the period between the wet season and the next harvest (January and April). This suggests a failure by some households to feed themselves for

⁸⁴ Interview with Agness Ambulera, Thyolo district.

⁸⁵ Interview with Dofe Alik, Thyolo district.

more than seven or eight months of the year.⁸⁶ Once cassava was harvested from the fields, women spent much of their time making *makaka*. Cassava being a highly perishable product could not be stored for more than a few days without turning bad. The solution therefore was to store it in its *makaka* (dried) form. This involved, first, scraping peelings off the fresh cassava. The scrapped cassava was then left in the sun for days or weeks to dry thoroughly. The end product, a hard-dried white substance that could be stored for months, even years, is what is called *makaka* (plural, singular *khaka*). *Makaka* were eaten either in their raw form, the same way fresh cassava was eaten, or could be ground or powdered into flour (*ntandaza*) that was used in making porridge, or the traditional *nsima*.⁸⁷ Areas and districts which were endowed to growing more cassava usually had an edge over those that grew less cassava or none at all in matters of food security requirements and during the “hungry months.”⁸⁸ During seasonal food shortages

⁸⁶Oral testimony suggests that this only applied to poorer households. The more prosperous ones were able to sustain themselves from one harvest season into the next. This further illustrates the existence of economic differentiation among the peasantry. Interview with C.H. Mukhuna, Nakutho Village, Mulanje District; C. Mathewe, Chonde Village, Mulanje; E. Malenga, Mkolimbo Village, Chiradzulu District.

⁸⁷Flour from the staple maize (or millet and sorghum) used in making *nsima* is locally known as *ufa*. While the flour made from *makaka* is generically referred to as *ufa* as well, specifically the term *ntandaza* is used to distinguish it from the staple meal.

⁸⁸The expression “hungry months” is from Moore and Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees*, pp. 54, 64. The authors refer to the months of January, February and March in the Northern Province of colonial Zambia when supplies of millet grew short and were sometimes exhausted. Gathered foods and bush meat became important elements of the diet during these hungry months. In the Shire Highlands of colonial Malawi, as table 6.4 illustrates, the period from January to March fits the description “hungry months” as used by Moore and Vaughan.

and in years of bad harvests generally, when famine threatened, inhabitants from non-cassava growing areas traveled long distances in search of food or engaged in what is locally known as *msuma*. This was a practice by which one worked for whomever had surplus food and received food for work. These *msuma* trips more often led them to places where *makaka* were obtainable. Oral testimony accounts from a non-cassava growing area in Chiradzulu as well as those from a cassava-rich area in Mlanje help explain how cassava was incorporated as a central element in the food system:

I still remember when I was a little boy staying at Nkaro (Chiradzulu), long before I got married and moved to this place, when a great famine occurred my parents would leave us alone and go to distant places in the Mlanje area. There, I understand, they worked other people's gardens and were given *makaka* as payment which they would bring home. I still vividly remember how sometimes I would quietly sneak into the house, snatched a few pieces of *makaka* and ate them just like that. However, when discovered that I was naively 'stealing' from the family's food bank, my brother and mother usually reprimanded me for my selfish acts which only served to reduce the amount of food available for all....

I recall how, for example, during the famine of 1949 men and women from as far as Chiradzulu, some of them travelling on bicycles, others on foot, made their appearance in this district fetching our *makaka*. They would bring with them some bush meat or goat meat which was exchanged for *makaka*. There was no grain available anywhere in this land and the only item people relied on for their flour and *nsima* was *makaka*.⁸⁹

In normal times, *makaka* are just one of the many food commodities traded in the open markets to supplement household income. Market women would sell *makaka* the same way they sold the maize flour, *ufā* for money. Women informants testified to the fact that sale of maize flour was even more lucrative than the grain trade, except that processing

⁸⁹Interview with E. Malenga, Chiradzulu District, and H.L. Lipenga, Mlanje District.

the flour meant an extra demand on the labour of women; for it entailed long hours of pounding and grinding the maize grain into powder at a time when mechanical power-driven maize mills had not yet made significant inroads into the Malawian countryside.⁹⁰ This “cassava economy,” which women dominated, seems to have been a significant aspect of the rural economy established scholarship has ignored.

The practice of exchanging *makaka* for meat and other food items represents one of several locally established networks by which households could gain access to food grown by others than themselves. Networking of this sort, which was common in many parts of rural Africa, has been appraised in much of the African social history literature as having been an important feature of the rural economies in colonial Africa. Even in the 1930s, argue Moore and Vaughan, households had their ways of obtaining food without having to grow it themselves.⁹¹ This body of literature demonstrates that women’s access to food for themselves and their children depends not only on their abilities as agricultural producers, but also depends on their capacity to build networks of exchange that enable

⁹⁰Interviews with Malita Mathiya and Asuwema Kutema. Archival evidence suggests that it was only during the late 1950s that maize mills were being established in the rural areas of Malawi. See MNA 1DCCZ 1/2/2 “Development Loans to Master Farmers.” With the proliferation of mills to every corner of the country, today the story is different as this development has led to the freeing of some of the female labour from the onerous domestic task of manually grinding grain into flour.

⁹¹Moore and Vaughan, *Cutting Down Tress*, especially chapter 2; see also Vaughan, “Which Family?: Problems in the Reconstruction of the History of the Family as an Economic and Cultural Unit,” *Journal of African History*, Vol. 24, (1983), pp. 275-283. Vaughan presents an account of how women from estate compounds took small manufactured goods purchased from local shops as presents for their fellow women in

them to call on the assistance of others, especially other women. The operations of *chinjira* relationships in colonial Malawi depict a good example of such redistributive exchange networks of support and control. *Chinjira* is a relationship between two women formed independently of their respective families. It involves the kinds of social, economic and ritual obligations often associated with kinship ties. Women in *chinjira* count on their partnership to give each other material, emotional and ritual support at times of crisis in each woman's life.⁹² Thus *chinjira* was a common phenomenon between women on the plantations and those on Crown Land. In seasons when food became scarce and more expensive, women on estate compounds used their *chinjira* partners on Crown Land to gain access to foodstuffs through a process of gift exchange. In her research, Megan Vaughan found out that almost in all cases, partners in *chinjira* came from households with complementary economic resources. Undoubtedly, therefore, *chinjira* developed as a strategy for supplementing plantation workers' household income

nearby villages. In return, those in the villages would provide foodstuffs from their gardens as presents to the estate women.

⁹²Vaughan, "Which family?" pp. 282-283; for a detailed account of this social institution, see also P. Ligoya, "*Chinjira* between Women in Thyolo District," Department of Sociology, Chancellor College - University of Malawi, Student Seminar Paper, 1981. Today *chinjira* relationships are still forged by women in many parts of Malawi, and even in some cases where the material and economic aspects of the relationship are considered less important, most women cherish the idea of having an *anjira* (one of the partners in a *chinjira* relationship) merely as a confidant. Interview with V.H. Kuluwira and Emmie Mpira, Mulanje District. In one exceptional case, a male informant, obviously in disapproval, described *chinjira* as one network through which women taught each other such unsettling practices as witchcraft. This is one interesting finding of the study which, unfortunately, was not pursued further in the research process. However, future research into these women's networks shall have to address this aspect more vigorously.

in accordance with their changing economic conditions. Since African women on private estates were highly restricted on the range of domestic activities they could perform, much less engage in commercial endeavors such as the petty trading typical of those on Crown Land, they were a largely proletarianized group as they had to depend almost entirely on their husbands' wages. Given the low wages obtaining on the plantations, it was impossible for families to survive on the income provided by a single male breadwinner. *Chinjira* partnerships therefore gave women the extra space they needed to supplement the household income. Through *chinjira* estate women were able to engage in income-generating activities typical of their compatriots on Crown Land which, among other things, included the brewing and selling of beer as well as the distilling and selling of *kachasu*.

Indeed, beer brewing and selling was an important cash-earning activity for families on the Shire Highlands of colonial Malawi. It was also crucial to the social reproduction of the estate labour force. As was the case with most women who migrated to the mining centres of the Rand in South Africa, or to the growing urban areas of Blantyre in Malawi, for whom the beer industry was an important source of income, those in the countryside did not fail to appreciate the benefits associated with beer brewing either. As various studies have shown, the brewing of beer was vital to family survival in the first four decades of the twentieth century.⁹³ In Malawi, the brewing of local beer

⁹³See for example, P.L. Bonner, "Desirable or Undesirable Basotho Women?": Liquor, Prostitution and the Migration of Basotho Women to the Rand, 1920-1945," in C. Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*; also J. McCracken, "Coercion and

dates back to the precolonial days, although then, much of the brewing was done for ceremonial purposes: as a form of entertainment, relaxation, but also for religious functions. In addition, beer parties served as a labour mobilization strategy whenever households needed extra labour for specific tasks. Werner described certain functions of beer during the precolonial period as follows:

Hoeing and weeding are sometimes got through more quickly, when time is pressing [as when the first rains have fallen] by means of a 'bee.' The owner invites all his neighbours, men and women, and prepares large quantities of beer, with which they regale themselves after a hard morning's work. Sometimes the pots are carried out to the garden, and the party consume the refreshment there. Each person has a certain piece of ground allotted to him or her -- a 'row to hoe,' and the work is got through with singing and mirth. When the chief sends for a number of villagers to hoe his gardens, he entertains them royally with meat and beer.... After the harvest is gathered in comes the *mpakasa* season, which might be rendered 'autumn'... after this comes the real winter [*malimwe*], when people walk abroad and sit and drink beer, saying, 'at present there is no hoeing to do, only odds and ends of work about the house.'⁹⁴

Werner also describes how beer was used at the mourning dances after funerals, and how it was used both for divination or as an offering to appease some ancestral spirits whenever the community was afflicted by a calamity believed to have been caused by acts of wrong doing that displeased the spirits.⁹⁵ It was therefore with the advent of colonialism that beer-brewing and the production of liquor assumed a commercial dimension. Some settlers during the early days of colonialism even used liquor as a form

Control in Nyasaland: Aspects of the History of a Colonial Police Force," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 27, (1986), pp. 135-136.

⁹⁴A. Werner, *The Natives of British Central Africa*, (1906; reprint New York: Negro University Press, 1906), pp. 184-185.

of payment to their workers.⁹⁶ The practice was, however, discouraged and condemned first, by Christian missionaries on moral grounds. Also condemning the practice were colonial administrators who made a number of legal attempts to control the brewing of beer and production of *kachasu*.⁹⁷ They argued that Africans wasted large amounts of foodstuffs in the making and consumption of beer. In their opinion, beer brewing was responsible for periodic food shortages and hunger in villages: "it is believed that one of the chief ways in which the grain is wasted or lost completely is through excessive beer-drinking for as long as the grain lasts."⁹⁸ Besides the illicit liquor, *kachasu*, was discouraged because it was known to be a hazard to the health of its consumers. Furthermore, it was believed that beer-drinking had some negative implications on labour performance. Cases of worker absenteeism, for example, were attributed to excessive beer-drinking. This prompted efforts by the colonial administration to extend control over African labour to beyond the confines of the work place. As McCracken argues, from 1935 the police regularly raided distillers of *kachasu* in the Blantyre area,

⁹⁵Werner, *The Natives of British Central Africa*, pp. 47, 52-53, 166.

⁹⁶F.L. Moir, *After Livingstone: An African Trade Romance*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924), pp. 41-43.

⁹⁷MNA NS1/22/1 Beer Control Rules ; S1/483/31 From the Chief Secretary to Provincial Commissioners: Conservation and Storage of Native Foodstuffs, December 1930 (extracted from the Central African Archives); S1/545/28 Foodstuffs Supplies and the Intoxicating Liquor Ordinance, 1928-1930.

⁹⁸MNA S1/483/31 From the Chief Secretary, Zomba. to the Provincial Commissioner, Blantyre, December 31, 1930.

prosecuting over 100 individuals per year.⁹⁹ Similarly, chiefs were ordered to pass by-laws prohibiting the brewing of beer during the planting season when food items were in short supply, and to control the consumption of beer throughout the year.¹⁰⁰ The campaigns against beer were, however, ineffectual, largely due to the lack of personnel and financial resources to enforce the laws. In addition, the profits made from the trade by local entrepreneurs, many of whom were women, were so good that it was extremely difficult for them to give up the trade. This was particularly the case for women who had migrated to the emerging townships in the Blantyre area who lacked alternative sources of income to sustain themselves. Essentially, then, between the 1940s and 1950s, right up to the time of independence in the 1960s, beer brewing was an important economic as well as social activity to the colonial estate economy. For most women, it was an effective way of raising income to supplement their households' food requirements. An added advantage of brewing was that it did not interfere much with the daily workload and was easily incorporated into the labour cycle (i.e. as brewing usually took place in the homes women could easily switch between brewing and other household chores). Oral data suggest that most women brewers, whose husbands had migrated for work abroad, depended for their livelihoods more on the proceeds from beer than on the remittances provided by their menfolk from time to time.¹⁰¹ At the same time, the beer industry

⁹⁹McCracken, "Coercion and Control in Nyasaland," p. 135.

¹⁰⁰MNA NSE 2/1/9 BCA Estates Ltd., 1937-1938.

provided an ideal environment where men and women on the estates socialized. It gave male workers an opportunity to iron out their emotional troughs. As studies of other colonial systems have shown, alcoholism was for men a far more common coping mechanism with the brutalities of the colonial regime.¹⁰² Thus, through the brewing and selling of beer women of the Highlands indirectly contributed to the social reproduction of the estate labour force.

¹⁰¹Interview with A. Robert, Chiradzulu District; Dofe Alike Thyolo District. This view came exclusively from women informants; male informants and long-term migrants tended to disagree. Instead, they praised the benefits associated with labour migration and argued that the remittances they offered their wives from their wages abroad made a significant impact on the household resources. Interview with J. Jeremiya, Mulanje District; E. Malenga and L. Somanje, Chiradzulu District.

¹⁰²M. Kesby, "Arenas for Control, Terrains of Gender Contestation: Guerrilla Struggle and Counter-Insurgency Warfare in Zimbabwe, 1972-1980," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 22, 4(1996), p. 577.

Conclusion

The ways in which women of the Shire Highlands of Malawi were subordinated by both the colonial system and the rural patriarchy bear a lot of similarities with experiences of women elsewhere on the continent. Although such was the case, women made relentless efforts to limit the extent of their social and economic deprivation. Rather than “run away” from the “social evils” of the material world in which they lived, they liberated themselves by engaging in activities over which there was little male control and through which they exercised some economic autonomy. These included beer brewing and petty commodity trading, and at certain times, casual wage labour. Women’s participation in these activities meant that they had to stretch their efforts over a number of responsibilities other than domestic chores alone, which had a contradictory effect of increasing their labour demands. However, casual wage labour, beer brewing and commodity trading, complemented at times by some redistributive networks of support and exchange among women such as *chinjira*, were all forms of household survival strategies. These strategies helped reinforce the capacity of the household to sustain itself within the colonial capitalist system, although women did not always remain loyal to the dictates of the household. Their reluctance to surrender their earnings to husbands, for example, would suggest that they had their own complicated senses of social and economic advancement. However, their contributions in the home made it easier for both

men and women, the domestic sphere, to confront or resist the wider capitalist society.¹⁰³ Therefore, although women were supposedly excluded from active participation in nationalist politics and in some development schemes conceived in the last few years of colonial rule,¹⁰⁴ their roles in the domestic sphere and all other support systems suggest that women, like men, confronted the colonial system head-on. They were players, rather than spectators, in the eventual downfall of the colonial regime in the 1960s.

¹⁰³For this interpretation on the conflicts and compromises between the domestic sphere and the wider capitalist society see Bozzoli, "Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies."

¹⁰⁴This is not to suggest that women did not participate in the nationalist struggle, but to point out that their roles have oftentimes been peripheralized. See S. Geiger, "Tanganyikan Nationalism as 'Women's Work': Life Histories, Collective Biography and Changing Historiography," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 37, (1996), pp. 465-478. Likewise, there is a lacunae in our knowledge of women's participation in late colonial development schemes such as the Master Farmers' Scheme.

CONCLUSION

This study was inspired by the growing literature on the social history of Africa that strives to re-examine the complexity of the colonial encounter by reconstructing the historical experiences of ordinary people—such as peasants, sharecroppers or workers. Crucial to the challenge has been the need to explore and explain the meanings of various African responses to colonialism, and their significance in shaping rural life. For colonized societies, these responses varied in both time and space. This study contributes to the challenge by examining historically the lived experiences of peasant communities in the Shire Highlands of southern Malawi. The study argues that Africans in Malawi reacted and adapted to the colonial experience in ways that have not been fully appreciated by previous scholarship. It therefore offers new interpretations of every day life experiences and demonstrates how African initiatives shaped rural life and social transformation during the colonial period.

Earlier historical studies on colonial Malawi paid too much attention to the plantation industry. Broad themes of land and labour and the development of cash cropping were examined—Robin Palmer, for example, focussed on white farmers and tea production; John McCracken on tobacco; Bridglal Pachai, Leroy Vail, and Krishnamurthy on land and labour.¹ In these analyses peasant production was examined only at the level of comparison with the plantation agriculture. In some comparisons, such as Vail's "creation of the colonial economy," the impact of the colonial state's

¹ See Palmer, "White Farmers in Malawi," McCracken, "Planters, Peasants and the Colonial State"; Pachai, *Land and Politics in Malawi*; Krishnamurthy, "Economic Policy: Land and Labour in Nyasaland"; Vail, "The State and the Creation of Colonial Malawi's Agricultural Economy."

plantation policies was presented as an unmitigated disaster for the hapless peasants. This concentration on cash cropping has resulted in a stunted historiography that has neglected important arenas of peasant agriculture, such as food production, which were fundamental to peasants' abilities to renegotiate the terms and conditions of their existence under colonialism.²

This study has shown that for peasants, maize production was as important as cotton and tobacco. Yet no major scholarly attempt has been made to explore the dynamics of maize production and its relative significance to the colonial economy. On the positive side, however, the pioneering studies of colonial Malawi have been useful in demonstrating the weaknesses of settler agriculture. More recently, both Chirwa's and McCracken's studies of sharecropping,³ which examine the resiliency of the peasantry, offer insights into the renewed interest in the agency of colonized peoples that inform this study.

The study raises issues of African agency in terms of peasants' strategies of resistance, survival and advancement. It has attempted to demonstrate that daily lives of the ordinary peasants of the Highlands were bound up in larger processes and policies, which could limit, but not prevent their initiatives, aspirations and enterprise. While peasants' strategies shifted as much as colonial policies did over time, it has so far proved difficult to locate exactly how trends and patterns of strategies shifted from period to period, from area to area, let alone from household to household. These are issues future research must address.

² Megan Vaughan analyses of food supplies and the African famine in the 1940s are excepted from this critique. See Vaughan, "The Politics of Food Supply: Colonial Malawi in the 1940s," and *The Story of an African Famine*.

Within the broad framework of “Africa’s incorporation into the world system,” the thesis reveals the social and economic deprivation of peasant communities as a result of colonial capitalist penetration. For example, peasants’ restricted access to land limited their autonomy and choices. Colonial policies, for all their alterations, were always guided by the desire to create a situation where peasant families would have no choice but to farm and live according to the usually concordant needs of white farmers, and the state.

The study then moves on to demonstrate that the erosion of peasant autonomy by capitalist forces, rather than subduing the peasantry had, perhaps, the positive effect of empowering the dispossessed. Peasants resorted to their creative potential, and devised diverse strategies to accommodate the crisis created by the colonial encounter. The peasants’ reaction to colonialism has, until fairly recently, been couched in the language of resistance and collaboration. Chapter four highlighted some contested meanings of resistance. While subscribing to the notion of covert resistance as characteristic of peasant actions in Malawi, this study argues that peasants had more complicated notions of resistance than oppositional theories suggest. Resistance surfaced in ways not merely confined to narrow anti-colonial activism, but assumed diverse dimensions of consciousness that allowed peasants to negotiate, rather than reject or simply accept, the colonial mandate. Simple actions, such as reorienting their production choices between tobacco and maize, contrary to government declared policies, enabled them to turn adversity to advantage. In addition, mundane acts of opposition—tax evasion, defiance of agricultural rules, adoption of aliases—expanded the boundaries of negotiation and reduced levels of colonial exploitation

³ Chirwa, “The Garden of Eden”; McCracken, “Share-cropping in Malawi.”

The study demonstrates that peasants looked to their farms, first and foremost, for survival. Most peasant households combined farming with wage labour where women predominated in the former and men in the latter. Thus, the tenacity of the domestic sphere in which men and women's roles complemented each other was instrumental to peasants' survival in the colonial system, domestic conflicts notwithstanding. The study has also demonstrated that some peasants were more inclined to succeed and to attain some measure of security than mere survival. However, they could not live up to their aspirations by farming alone. They tried many different ways some of which--for instance, investments in cattle, maize mills or store businesses--clearly reflected their ambitions to social and economic advancement. In fact, some succeeded fairly well so that by the 1950s and 1960s successful peasants had become a kind of "middle class" with greater security than the average peasant family. Peasants' multiple strategies thus deepened economic and social differentiation among them.

Surely, Africans of Malawi's Shire Highlands made their own histories within the confines of colonial capitalism. Without a shadow of doubt, by the 1960s, the peasant economy had developed in ways that indeed defy most scholarly generalizations. To this end, the study offers ample evidence of the importance of social history, especially the role of peasant agency when analyzing social transformations in colonial societies.

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