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**'REMARKABLE ADAPTABILITY': GENDER, IDENTITY AND SOCIAL
CHANGE AMONG THE CHEWA OF CENTRAL MALAWI, 1870-1945**

by

Hendrina Kachapila

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

at

**Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
November, 2001**

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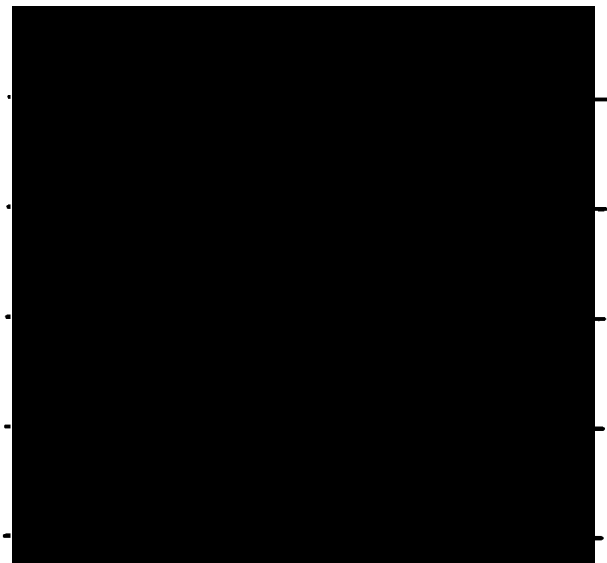
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DEDICATION

Dr. Msosa Mwale, 1960-1999

**I am thankful that I had a chance to know you, love you and experience
my life with you.**

Catherine Mkadalira Mlenga (Kachapila), 1962-1998

**But they that
wait upon the Lord
shall renew
their strength;
they shall
mount up with
wings as eagles.**

--- Isaiah 40:31

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Abstract

Most historians of Malawi portray Chewa institutions and discourses as static cultural givens, incapable of spearheading change within Chewa communities. As such, many analyses of the Chewa encounter with colonial rule and earlier incursions have emphasized the way Chewa institutions resisted structural and discursive domination. The Chewa have been seen as defenders of a static, unchanging “tradition” rather than a flexible social system. Others scholars have located forces of political, economic and social innovations among the Chewa in external factors, such as Christianity and labour migration. Yet the Chewa and their institutions neither held fast nor remained unaffected by alien structures and ideas. Throughout the period under study, 1870-1945, Chewa practices and ideas adapted to developments in their environments. This study examines the ways in which indigenous institutions such as *nyau* (Chewa men’s secret society) and *chinamwali* (female initiation) enabled ordinary Chewa men and women to redefine or remake important Chewa social systems such as matriliney in the face of dramatic changes and challenges. The study has important implications for the way we understand structure and agency in African history, its gendered character and the importance of in-depth case studies for the study of historical change in precolonial and colonial Africa.

Glossary of Chewa Terms

<i>Nyau</i>	Chewa men's secret society
<i>Chinamwali</i>	Female initiation
<i>Chilangizo</i>	Christianized female initiation
<i>Boma</i>	District Administrative center.
<i>Eni dziko</i>	Territorial chiefs
<i>Eni mizinda</i>	Lineage elders or village chiefs with powers to stage <i>nyau</i> and <i>chinamwali</i>
<i>Nkhoswe</i>	Lineage guardians
<i>Mkamwini</i>	Someone who belongs elsewhere – common term for married men in Chewa society.
<i>Nankungwi</i>	Female elders in charge of <i>chinamwali</i>
<i>Mbumba</i>	Chewa matrilineage

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are you going back to school?" until I ran out of excuses. I might never have completed this work otherwise.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To view colonial administration as a force attacking native society has perhaps caused too great a concentration on the disruptive processes and little on the forces of integration, which are also at work.¹

An important side to this orientation has to do with the refusal to admit the duality between tradition and modernity, between local, African knowledge, and Western knowledge, except in terms of political constructions. Social practices draw on composite knowledge which, while being structurally autonomous, combine and transform not only materials but also concepts and paradigms.²

This study is an exploration of how Chewa matrilineal groups in central Malawi responded to the encounter with colonialism and other external forces, such as the Ngoni invasions, in the period 1870-1945. Scholars of Malawi have dealt with the question of African societies' reactions to colonialism, but they have tended to emphasize the resistance of indigenous structures and institutions to colonial forces.³

¹Audrey Richards, cited in M. L. Chanock, "Development and Change in the History of Malawi," in B. Pachai (ed.), *The Early History of Malawi*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 438.

²Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "African Studies in the 1980s: Epistemology and New Approaches," in Toyin Falola (ed.) *African Historiography: Essays in Honour of Jacob Ade Ajayi* (Essex: Longman, 1993), p.222.

³See J.M. Schoffeleers and Ian Linden, "The Resistance of the Nyau Societies to the Roman Catholic Missions in Colonial Malawi," in T.O. Ranger and I. Kimambo (eds.) *The Historical Study of African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1972); Ian Linden, "Chewa Initiation Rites and

Some have dwelt on the transformative role of modernization, spearheaded by the beneficiaries of mission education and the migrant labour system.⁴ It needs to be pointed out that as early as 1972, Robin Palmer and Martin Chanock noted the problems associated with the African resistance and modernization schools and the need to develop approaches that dealt with the complexity of the encounter between African societies and external forces.⁵ Responding to Palmer and Chanock's concerns, this study examines efforts by various elements of Chewa society at redefining or remaking social structures and discourses in the face of dramatic changes.

Nyau Societies: The Use of Religious Institutions in Local Politics at Mua," in T.O. Ranger and J. Weller (eds.), *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa* (Nairobi: EAPH 1975); "The Nyau Societies: Our Present Understanding," *Society of Malawi Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (1976); R.G. Stuart, "Christianity and the Chewa: The Anglican Case, 1885-1950 (PhD Thesis, University of London, 1974); I. Linden and J. Linden, *Catholics, Peasants and Chewa Resistance in Nyasaland, 1889-1939* (London: Richard and Clay LTD, 1974).

⁴For example see J. McCracken, "Livingstonia Mission and the Evolution of Malawi, 1875-1939," (PhD Thesis, Cambridge University, 1967); J. van Velsen, "Labour Migration as a Positive Factor in the Continuity of Tonga Tribal Society" in *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Vol.8 (1960); A.C. Ross, "The Origins and Development of the Church of Scotland Mission, Blantyre, 1875-1900," (PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1968); L. Vail and L. White, "Tribalism in the Political History of Malawi," in Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

⁵Robin Palmer, "Johnston and Jameson: A Comparative Study in the Imposition of Colonial Rule," in Pachai (ed.), *The Early History of Malawi* and M. L. Chanock, "Development and Change in the History of Malawi."

The study argues that the Chewa used both indigenous and foreign ideas and structures to redefine their society so that it could function in periods of intense change. It seeks to demonstrate that indigenous discourses, structures and institutions, such as *nyau* (Chewa men's secret society) and *chinamwali* (female initiation), were as much forces of transformation within Chewa communities as mission education, Christianity, labour migration and cash crop production. It also argues that the agents of change known as the "new" men and women included not only mission-educated Africans, Christians and migrant workers but also lineage elders and ordinary women and men in rural villages.

To appreciate this, it is crucial to understand that although some elements of Chewa society resisted the penetration of alien ideas and structures most had to accept that they could not entirely succeed to stop the imposition of a foreign culture on the Chewa and thus had to adjust as best they could. Others willingly and wittingly moved with the new structures and ideas to reconstruct their lives. Additionally, some of the new ideas and structures that found their way into Chewa areas questioned and undermined the functioning of important Chewa structures like the matrilineal system. As this thesis demonstrates, those who had something to lose if Chewa social systems and structures collapsed were most apt to work at redefining Chewa society rather than simply resisting. Using ideas, values and traditions stemming from

Chewa society, while at the same time incorporating ideas and practices from other locations, such individuals or groups refashioned the matrilineal system, for example, to accommodate the process of change in their environments. This ensured the survival and even dynamism of some Chewa structures and traditions.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that as agents of transformative change, the Chewa did not always possess the freedom to utilize all the ideas and practices available in their environments. Consequently, the account below emphasizes the importance of locating Chewa men and women's agency within the structural and discursive context of colonialism and capitalism that sometimes closed and other times opened spaces in which the Chewa redefined and reconstructed their lives. This was true for the commonality as well as for the more educated elite. Also, it stresses the importance of paying attention to position in society, because one's social position constrained and sometimes enabled people to influence the process of change within Chewa communities.

The present study has drawn useful insights from the "tensions of empire" approach to colonial history. In short, historians who write from this perspective argue that historical moments like the slave trade, immigrant invasions, the spread of Christianity, colonialism and capitalism were fluid and contested processes. As such, African societies

and individuals defined and negotiated the terms of their involvement in these processes.⁶ This revision is an important contribution to African historiography because unlike the nationalist and political economy schools, the tensions approach does not view all external structures, discourses and practices like capitalism and Christian teachings as overpowering evils that were at best accommodated and at worst simply tolerated. For some Africans such foreign institutions and ideas were liberating and welcomed, albeit not necessarily at the expense of all “traditional” assumptions and practices. Moreover, by emphasizing human agency, this approach broadens the cast of African characters to include not only the elite but also ordinary women and men, not simply as “class actors”⁷ but as participants in complex negotiations over daily life in colonial societies.

⁶For details see Frederick Cooper, “Conflict and Tension: Rethinking Colonial African History,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 99, No. 5 (1994), Nancy Hunt, Tessie P Liu and Jean Quataert (eds.), *Gendered Colonialisms in African History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Also see Nicholas Dirks (ed.) *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992).

⁷For details on “class actors” see C.Van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Africa, 1900-1933* (London: Pluto Press, 1976); R. Sandbrook and R. Cohen, *The Development of an African Working Class: Studies in Class Formation and Action* (Toronto: University Press, 1975); R.E.Boyd, R. Cohen and P.C.W. Gutkind, *International Labour and the Third World: The Making of A New Working Class* (Brookfield: Averbury, 1987).

However, some advocates of the tensions school tend to romanticize African experiences by downplaying the power of external forces. In contrast, this study emphasizes that colonialism and its earlier manifestations imposed tremendous structural and discursive limitations on the Chewa. Whatever resistance and redefinition Chewa communities and individuals undertook has to be understood in relation to such limitations.⁸ What is more, it needs to be acknowledged that new ideas and institutions were forced upon Chewa communities. In some cases this influx increased the number of tools the Chewa could access to solve day to day problems and in others the opposite was true. The bottom line, in other words, is that Chewa communities witnessed rapid transformations, which altered familiar relationships, institutions and material practices. Whether or not they were willing and prepared, most colonial Chewa had to operate within a discursive and material setting deeply influenced by foreign structures and discourses. Thus, opportunities for negotiating change had to take these realities into consideration.

1.1: Review of Literature

⁸For a comprehensive critique of the tensions approach see H.A. Whitfield and B. Ibhawoh, "Multiple Tensions and Endless Contradictions: The "New" Colonial Historiography and the Limits of Deconstruction," (Paper presented at the Canadian Association of African Studies Annual Conference, 2000).

The historiography of Malawi has dealt with the role indigenous traditions and practices played when Malawians reacted to and dealt with the spread of Christianity, the imposition of colonial rule, and the introduction of capitalist economies in Chewa areas. Earlier scholars tended to characterize these encounters as antagonistic and confrontational.⁹ For example, R.G. Stuart argues that Anglican missionaries attacked the essence of Chewa identity, which in turn threatened existing social structures. Consequently, lineage guardians, village headmen and those responsible for initiation ceremonies fervently opposed the opening of Chewa areas to Christian missions.¹⁰ Matthew Schoffeleers and Ian Linden describe the conflict between Catholic missions and *nyau* in a similar fashion, especially the way various *nyau*

⁹See footnote 3 above. In the wider African historiography, Ranger's 1968 article started a debate on resistance as the African response to the colonial incursion. For details see T.O. Ranger, "Connections between Primary Resistance Movements and Modern Mass Nationalism in East and Central Africa," *Journal of African History*, *Journal of African History*, Vol. 9, (1968); L. Vail and L. White, "Forms of Resistance, Songs and Perceptions of Power in Colonial Mozambique," in D. Crummey (ed.), *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest In Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1986); A. Isaacman, "Peasants and Rural Social Protest in Africa," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (1990); O. J. Kalinga, "Resistance, Politics of Protest, and Mass Nationalism in Colonial Malawi, 1950-1960," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, Vol. 36, No. 3(1996); T. Thaddeus, "Famine and Wild Pigs: Gender Struggles and the Outbreak of the Maji Maji War in Uzarambo Tanzania," *Journal of African History*, Vol.38 (1997); L. A .B. Malekano, "Peasants, Politics and Survival in Colonial Malawi, 1891-1964," (PhD Thesis, Dalhousie University, 1999).

¹⁰R.G. Stuart, "Christianity and the Chewa: The Anglican Case, 1885-1950 (PhD Thesis, University of London, 1974), pp.26-63, and 167-184.

societies frustrated the efforts of missionaries attempting to proselytize among the Chewa.¹¹

The importance of the work by Stuart, Linden and Schoffeleers and others written from the resistance perspective is that they demonstrate that indigenous structures and institutions had the ability to respond to external forces. However, these scholars' over-emphasis on resistance can be read as an implication that Chewa indigenous institutions like *nyau* had the capacity to keep Chewa village life static thereby maintaining and preserving Chewa social systems and the environments in which they operated. This simply was not the case. For example, although the above scholars demonstrate that many lineage elders and *nyau* adherents resisted the spread of Christian missionary teachings into Chewa communities, their efforts did not prevent the conversion of some Chewa men and women to Christianity nor the spread of Christian ideas into the larger Chewa society.

It is clear from this and similar cases that the resistance paradigm is inadequate for explaining Chewa communities' interaction with external forces. Its assumption that full bodied resistance was the first response of all does not account for individuals who chose not to resist.

¹¹Schoffeleers and Ian Linden, "The Resistance of the Nyau Societies to the Roman Catholic Missions." Also, see I. Linden and J. Linden, *Catholics, Peasants and Chewa Resistance*.

Moreover, other analyses falling within this perspective suffer from structural reductionism because while some Africans tried to resist foreign intrusions, many did not succeed. In addition, the school ignores the dynamism of Chewa communities that allowed others to appropriate foreign forms and combine them with indigenous ones.

Such weaknesses caused some historians to caution scholars pursuing African resistance studies. For example in 1972, when resistance studies were becoming fashionable, Robin Palmer observed that the picture that emerged from most African resistance analyses was one-dimensional. This was because "Africans reactions are all too frequently studied in a vacuum, and very little attempt is made to analyse the structure of colonial societies in which they take place or to enquire how such societies actually functioned."¹² Not unlike Cooper and Stoler's more recent argument in *Tensions of Empire*, Palmer went on to explain:

The swing against colonial history has gone so far that it is often exceedingly difficult to ascertain precisely what Africans were reacting against. The whole concept of the new *African Voice* series is likely to prove somewhat artificial unless African voices are effectively integrated with the frequently very complex nature of local colonial administrations. Such administrations were never monolithic. In the case of Malawi, for example, we should need to know the precise roles of the Scottish missionaries and the Shire Highlands planters in both the formulation of government policies and in frustrating their implementation. For very often official policies bore no relation to reality. One reason for this was the

¹²Robin Palmer, "Johnston and Jameson," p. 293.

existence of competing pressure groups, both black and white; another was lack of unity even within the administration.¹³

While Palmer's critique of the African resistance school emphasized the complexity of colonial structures, in the early 1990s Tony Woods' critique of the same school centered on the dynamism of indigenous structures. He urged historians of the Chewa and of Malawi in general to "focus on the process of change within indigenous society as much as on the resistance of that society to colonial forces."¹⁴ According to Woods, certain creative segments of Chewa society ensured the survival of threatened familiar social structures by using indigenous discourses and institutions to "establish new patterns of authority within those structures."¹⁵ This they did by "by rejecting syncretism in favour of a static discourse."¹⁶

The importance of paying attention to the process of change within Chewa communities cannot be overemphasized. However, Wood's view that the reproduction of Chewa social structures was achieved by keeping indigenous discourses and institutions static is not reflected in

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Tony Woods, "Struggle for the Lineage: Dance, Discourse and Hegemony in Colonial Malawi," (History Seminar Paper, University of Malawi, Chancellor College, 1991/92), p.30.

¹⁵Woods, "Struggle for the Lineage," p.2.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.20.

my evidence, which suggests that the nature of change in Chewa communities was such that indigenous structures could not operate as they had in the past. Additionally, Wood's own analysis of Chewa institutions and similar studies indicate Chewa indigenous discourses and institutions were always changing, at least in protocolonial and colonial times. In fact, some scholars, especially anthropologists, challenge the idea that indigenous traditions such as rituals are "conservative and conservationist."¹⁷ For example, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff in their edited collection, *Modernity and its Malcontents*, view ritual

... as a site of and a means of experimental practice, of subversive poetics, of creative tension and transformative action; that under its authorship and its authority, individual and collective aspirations weave a thread of imaginative possibilities from which may emerge, wittingly or not, new signs and meanings, conventions and intentions. It is in this sense that ritual is always a vehicle of history-in-the-making...¹⁸

While acknowledging that elements of Chewa society used indigenous institutions and discourses to resist external forces, this

¹⁷Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.xxix.

¹⁸Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity and its Malcontents*, p. xxix. This is the perspective that Deborah Kaspin adopts to demonstrate that *nyau* did not maintain a static discourse. For details see Deborah Kaspin, "Chewa Visions and Revisions of Power: Transformations of the Nyau Dance in Central Malawi," in Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and its Malcontents*, pp.34-57.

thesis emphasizes the role such indigenous forms played in reshaping Chewa social systems and structures. Drawing on insights from the above perspectives but emphasizing a gender analysis, the thesis argues that the history of *chinamwali* and *nyau* in Chewa communities from the 1870s onwards was one of constant change and adaptation. As this thesis demonstrates, it was the always-changing nature of the two cultural forms that enabled them to redefine the matrilineal system as practiced by the Chewa. For example, the account below shows how *nyau* ensured that relations between Chewa men and women remained ambivalent and negotiable in the context of labour migration and other forms of capitalist enterprise as well as the spread of Christian teachings. It also shows how *chinamwali* enabled female initiates in particular, and Chewa women in general, to reconcile the central position they occupied in Chewa matrilineages with the marginalisation they suffered with the passage of time in other aspects of their lives.

It is equally important to note that by limiting the role of indigenous institutions and rituals to only preserving Chewa social systems and structures, most of the earlier scholars discussed above, wittingly or not, painted indigenous Chewa traditions and practices as static and therefore incapable of spearheading change. Perhaps this is what led some scholars to locate forces of political, economic and social innovations in external factors such as Christianity, labour migration

and other capitalist pursuits. It is hardly surprising, then, that such scholars expected the agents of change to be mission-educated teachers, pastors and ministers as well as civil servants like government clerks.¹⁹ This emphasis on outside factors allows scholars like John McCracken to assume lack of change among the Chewa.²⁰

However, evidence from Chewa areas indicate that inside factors such as cultural forms also served as forces of change. Moreover, some ordinary Chewa women and men acted as spearheads for change. For example, in 1972 Martin Chanock criticized Malawi historians' tendency to ignore the commonality in discussions of "modernizing transformation" such as political consciousness. As he puts it:

Our understanding of recent Malawian history is out of focus. We focus on the role of the educated elite in a peasant dominated country; on the influence of urbanisation in a country with no cities; on the influence of industrialization in the most rural part of central Africa.²¹

According to Chanock, "the heart of the transformatory process lies elsewhere. It lies in the villages with the gradual change from a

¹⁹For instance see R.I Rotberg, *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa: The Making of Malawi and Zambia, 1873-1964* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); Roger Tangri, "The Rise of Nationalism in Colonial Africa: The Case of Colonial Malawi," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1968); K.J. McCracken, "African Politics in 20th Century Malawi," in T.O. Ranger (ed.) *Aspects of Central African History* (London, 1968).

²⁰McCracken, "African Politics in 20th Century Malawi."

²¹Chanock, "Development and Change in the History of Malawi," p.434.

subsistence to a market oriented peasantry.”²² As such, in order to understand the development of anti-colonial consciousness in central Malawi, for example, Chanock calls on historians to look beyond mission schools to peasant tobacco producers and grocery-store owners.²³

The major contribution of Chanock’s work is that it allows historians to see agents of change not only among mission-educated Africans and migrant workers but also among cash cropping peasants and low level agents of the colonial retail economy. It would seem, however, that even in the late 1980s some historians of Malawi still ignored Chanock’s warning. For example, in his discussion of the development of ethnicity in southern Africa, Leroy Vail argues that ethnic consciousness developed much later among the Chewa than among the Tumbuka and Ngoni of northern Malawi. According to Vail and Landeg White, this was primarily because mission education as it developed in central Malawi was not conducive to the emergence of intellectuals who could act as culture brokers and that the Dutch and Catholic missionaries lacked interest in Chewa history and culture. In addition they maintain that central Malawi was homogenous culturally with static

²²Ibid., p.440.

²³Martin 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: EAPH, 1975).

and resilient cultural forms like *nyau* that stalled the process of change by acting “as powerful curbs on the influence of both missions and chiefs or headmen.”²⁴

Vail and White’s analysis implies that the new structures and discourses of colonial powers overwhelmed Africans. This assumption led Vail and White to conclude that only Africans armed with the weapons of colonial society, such as mission education, could deal with the new challenges of colonialism. Traditional practices and discourses, uneducated people and women in particular were seen as ill-equipped to deal with the dramatic forces of change brought by colonialism. These assumptions led Vail and others to a focus on the African colonial elite and to an underestimation of traditional resilience and capability to initiate and facilitate the development of ethnic consciousness.

The same assumptions that informed Vail and White’s analysis of the development of ethnicity in Malawi have influenced a number of studies on the development of Malawian nationalism. Scholars such as Roger Tangri and Robert Rotberg argue that nationalism in its embryonic stage was the preserve of a small minority of the educated elite males.²⁵

²⁴Vail and White, “Tribalism in the Political History of Malawi,” p.17.

²⁵ For details see Roger K. Tangri, “The Rise of Nationalism in Colonial Africa,” Roger K. 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: EAPH, 1975); R.K. Tangri, “Inter-War Native Associations and the Formation of

However, recent feminist writings on the construction of nationalism and other imagined communities indicate that such analyses are incomplete.²⁵ They demonstrate that while women might have been absent in executive bodies of nationalist groups, the construction and reconstruction of nationalism was a gendered process. By concentrating on the activities of the educated male elite and not on the making of nationalism, analyses such as Tangri's marginalize or exclude the experiences of ordinary women and other groups of Africans. Not only

the Nyasaland African Congress," *Trans African Journal of History*, Vol. 1 No.1 (1971). Also see R.I Rotberg, *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa*; Roger Tangri, *Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa* (London: James Curry, 1985) and Mapopa Chipeta, "Political Process, Civil Society and State," in Guy Mhone (ed.), *Malawi at the Crossroads: The Post-Colonial Political Economy* (Harare: SAPES Books, 1992), pp. 34-49.

²⁵For a comprehensive analysis see Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (eds.), *Woman-Nation-State* (London: Macmillan, 1989); Deniz Kandiyoti, "Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol.20, No.3, (1991), pp. 429-43; Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis (eds.), *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1995); Jan Jindy Pettman, *Worlding Women: A Feminist International Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1996; Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner (eds.), *Women, Citizenship and Difference* (New York: Zed Books, 1999; Sita Ranchod-Nilsson and Mary Ann Tetreault (eds.), *Women States, and Nationalism: At Home in the Nation?* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

were their images exploited by the nationalists, some of them responded to the exploitation by promoting alternative identities.

While Chanock's analysis privileges the experiences of cash cropping peasants and grocery-store owners, this study locates forces of change in both external and internal factors. It challenges Vail and White's observations by demonstrating how various Chewa groups used ethnicity as a means to negotiate the colonial process in the period of indirect rule. Among other things, it demonstrates that far from being homogenous culturally, Chewa society had internal struggles based on factors such as clan distinctions and religious differences. Consequently, certain individuals and groups capitalized on these differences and ideas from Christianity and other locations to arouse feelings of clan or ethnic self-awareness among other members of their clan or group. For instance, Chauwa Banda used her identity as mother of the Banda clan and rain prophetess to arouse a Banda clan consciousness in the 1930s. Also, some lineage elders promoted particular types of Chewaness based on initiation into *nyau* and *chinamwali*. In addition, the account below shows that even if it were true that mission education in central Malawi did not produce "intellectuals" who could formulate Chewa ethnic ideologies, as Vail and

White maintain, mission-educated Africans from other regions acted as culture brokers among the Chewa.

Similarly, this thesis presents a gendered analysis of incipient nationalism in Malawi by the 1940s. It looks at how the economic and educated elite in the Nyasaland African Congress and their allies in the Catholic Church dealt with the issue of women in general and the matrilineal system in particular. It demonstrates, how in the name of nation building, the Congress sought to frame women in matrilineal societies as the social and economic dependents of their husbands in order to suit particular interests. More important, it examines how some Chewa women responded to the reconstruction of women in matrilineal societies by the Congress and other vested interests. For instance, it shows how some ordinary Chewa women and their guardians turned to Chewa values and customs to protect their interests in rural areas.

1.2: Methodology

This study is an examination of events that occurred among the Chewa of central Malawi in the period between 1870 and 1945. These dates were not randomly selected. They mark important developments in the history and historiography of the Chewa in particular and Malawi in general. While it would be wrong to characterize pre-colonial Chewa society as static, it is undeniable that from the middle of the 19th century

Chewa communities and indeed most societies in Malawi witnessed important developments. A number of immigrants, notably the Yao, Swahili-Arabs and the Ngoni invaded Chewa areas. These invasions were accompanied by the slave trade. Also, by the mid - 1870s the first Christian missionary party had established contact with the Chewa. This was followed shortly by the British colonization of Nyasaland in 1891. Not surprisingly, the mid to late 19th century was a turbulent period during which indigenous structures underwent significant transformations. As such, 1870 is a convenient departure for an examination of developments among the Chewa prior to colonialism. In addition, it is easier to access historical sources for this than earlier periods. These are in the form of Christian missionary records, colonial officials' observations, European travelers' accounts and oral traditions.

The date 1945 is also significant because it marks the end of a distinct period in which indigenous institutions and structures had the maximum opportunity to negotiate the colonial process. This is because after a failed initial attempt at direct rule early on in the colonial period, the administration embarked on plans to introduce indirect rule in Nyasaland.²⁶ As the Governor so aptly put it in 1931 "the whole object

²⁶See K.M Phiri, "Disrupted and Marginalised: Nyanja or Maravi Communities at the Southern End of Lake Malawi in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries" (History Seminar Paper, Chancellor College, University of Malawi, 1995/1996) and Barbara Morrow, "Indirect Rule in Nyasaland: Preconceptions and Problems," (MA Thesis, University of Malawi, 1987).

of the scheme is to give the native a share in the management of his own affairs through the development of traditional customs and institutions."²⁷ Consequently, official colonial policy dictated that all social problems relating to Africans, such as divorce and inheritance, would be resolved with recourse to traditional customs and institutions.²⁸ This would explain why the colonial government worked primarily with traditional rulers, especially Native Authorities. As such, the period before 1945 allows a historian to explore the encounter between Chewa indigenous institutions and colonial structures and discourses in considerable detail. This is important, especially when one considers that the period after the Second World War saw a shift in colonial policy. The colonial government played a balancing act between maintaining the integrity of tribal life and addressing the increasing welfare and educational needs of the African elite including African women.²⁹ In addition, the period after 1945 coincided with the rise of

²⁷MNA, NCK/6/1- Correspondence, the Governor to Provincial Commissioners and District Commissioners, January 1931.

²⁸See Joey Power, "Eating the Property": Gender Roles and Economic Change in Urban Malawi, Blantyre-Limbe, 1907-1953," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol.29, No.1(1995); Tangri, "From the Politics of Union to Mass Nationalism: The Nyasaland African Congress, 1944-59," and Tony Woods, " 'Marriage is a Family Affair:' The Politics of Gender in Colonial Malawi," (Social Science Seminar, University of Malawi, 1992).

²⁹For details see Frederick Cooper, "African Society in Colonial Discourse," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (1989).

mass nationalism that awakened a new kind of political consciousness among the various African societies in Malawi. That is, the post-1945 era has distinct characteristics that are different from those of the pre-1945 period. It makes sense therefore to end this study at 1945, particularly since it is an in-depth analysis of indigenous responses and actions to external forces, such as the colonial incursion.

The central region of Malawi comprises Lilongwe, Dedza, Ntchewu, Nkhotakota, Kasungu, Mchinji, Dowa and Ntchisi districts. Despite being Chewa-dominated, the region is home to other social groups like the Ngoni, Yao, Nsenga and Tumbuka which have coexisted with the Chewa for a long time. Many historians have argued that the Chewa had in the past formed part of the Kalonga Empire.³⁰ However, by the 1870s, most of them lived in semi-autonomous village communities presided over by lineage leaders and religious figures. Also, even though Chewa communities in different parts of central Malawi showed some variation, they shared some important common institutions and structures. These included *chinamwali*, *nyau* and the matrilineal system. In addition, by 1910 most Chewa communities had made contact with Christian

³⁰K. M. Phiri, "Chewa History in Central Malawi and the Use of Oral Tradition, 1600 – 1920" (PhD Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1975); H.W. Langworthy, "A History of Undi's Kingdom to 1890: Aspects of Chewa History in East-Central Africa," (PhD Thesis, Boston University, 1969) and W.E. McFarren, "History in the Land of the Flames: The Maravi States of Pre-colonial Malawi," (PhD Thesis, Berkeley, University of California, 1986).

missionaries, especially the Dutch Reformed Church Mission, Roman Catholic and the Universities Mission to Central Africa (Anglican). Consequently, it is possible to generalize, to a considerable extent, the experiences of the Chewa.

This study is based on both oral and archival sources. Oral interviews were conducted in Ntchisi and Lilongwe districts but the thesis has also benefited from oral interviews collected by Kings Phiri between 1971 and 1974 and held at the Memorial Library of the University of Wisconsin, Chancellor College library and National Archives of Malawi. Due to the sensitive nature of some of the issues being dealt with, especially *chinamwali* and *nyau*, Ntchisi, where I come from, was the primary research site because most of the informants interviewed are known to me. Normally, my identity as a woman and Christian would prohibit access to *nyau* discourses and practices. Similarly as a Christian I could not obtain knowledge (*mwambo*) about *chinamwali* (the traditional version of female initiation).³¹ However, my personal network

³¹Kings Phiri faced similar problems when he asked questions concerning *nyau*. Some of Chewa elders maintained that they could not tell him much on the subject because he was not initiated. Similarly, when conducting research in central Malawi, Kaspin was “warned repeatedly to keep... notes and pictures away from young ones lest they discover truths to which they were not yet entitled.” For details see Deborah Kaspin, “Chewa Visions and Revisions of Power,” p. 39-41.

provided introductions to some key informants in the two institutions. Without such networks it would have been difficult to interview *nyau* and *chinamwali* members. It is important to note that most of them willingly shared their life stories, only asking for confidentiality. In addition, other women who underwent the traditional *chinamwali* as young women and converted to Christianity at a later stage discussed their experiences with me.

Interviewing in one's own community had a disadvantage because, apart from limiting the pool of informants, it was difficult to avoid developing emotional ties with interviewees. Yet this did not compromise the data collected. Every effort was made to keep an open mind and get a variety of viewpoints. Also, I took measures to limit over-rapport with informants. The use of anonymity for sources also enhanced objective evaluation of the material.. One advantage of interviewing in one's own community is that it minimizes the problem of selective and regressive memories to a considerable extent. For example, it was interesting in group-interviews to see informants discuss matters some had forgotten or recalled incorrectly until they reached a consensus. The validity of the data collected was tested by checking oral sources from one area against oral sources from another. At times oral sources were checked against archival and other written sources. Additionally, Phiri's interviews also served as a check against my oral sources.

Apart from serving as a check against my oral sources, Phiri's interviews supplement mine in important ways. They were especially useful in reconstructing the changes in Chewa social relations for the earlier period of the study. This is because some of the Chewa elders Phiri interviewed experienced first hand a number of issues dealt with in the present study, such as the introduction of Christianity and the establishment of colonial rule. When I was conducting my own interviews in 1993 and between 1997 and 1999 it was almost impossible to find informants from the age group Kings Phiri spoke with in the early 1970s. Phiri's study is a reconstruction from oral traditions, of the early political history of the Chewa from 1600 to 1920. Adopting a materialist approach, the study situates political changes within the economic transformations Chewa communities experienced. However, it needs to be noted that the interviews cover many themes beyond the issues that then dominated the nationalist model for interpreting the African past. As a result, they have proven useful in understanding matters such as pre-colonial rain cults, the transformation of *nyau* and *chinamwali* as well as the status of elite and ordinary women in pre-colonial Chewa society. I have drawn on them extensively, albeit with a different analytical perspective.

Because the study deals with changing gender relations, I interviewed both men and women. This was done because men and

women inevitably form important dimensions of each other. That is, to understand Chewa women and notions of Chewa femininity we need to understand Chewa men and notions of masculinity as well as the way these assumptions affect relations between women and men. Equally important, I sought to retrieve the voices and experiences of common women and men. When Kings Phiri conducted his interviews in the early 1970s he made the following observations on the problem of interviewing ordinary people in matrilineal societies:

The informants' responses were considerably influenced by matrilineal social relationships and values. Female informants would not talk unless their male guardians, to whose opinion they deferred, backed them. Male informants responded with more confidence when interviewed in the village of their own descent group than when confronted in that of their wife.³²

Phiri's observations point to the difficulty of obtaining commoner voices, especially females. In this study effort was made to record voices of common women and men. This included interviewing informants in a context that excluded hegemonic male voices. For example, all women informants were interviewed in the absence of their male lineage guardians. This was done to make the women comfortable enough to discuss their status and relations with men in their lineage, including the lineage guardians. Moreover, in Chewa society matters concerning

³² Phiri, "Chewa History in Central Malawi and the Use of Oral Tradition," p.236.

chinamwali are the preserve of women and are not supposed to be discussed in the presence of men. Particularly important to note was the fact that none of the women informants asked to be interviewed in the presence of their *ankhoswe* (lineage guardians), perhaps because am a woman. This could also reflect changing times, wherein Chewa women are becoming increasingly independent of lineage guardians.

This study also relies on archival sources. For the colonial period in particular, the National Archives of Malawi in Zomba house many written sources that document the way various segments of Chewa society interacted with various apparatuses of the colonial state and Christian missions. These records are in the form of minutes, correspondence, district notebooks, provincial annual reports, reports of studies, court records and government publications. Data from the archives was useful, especially for issues relating to the development of ethnicity and nationalism as well as Christian missions and colonial state's reactions to *nyau* and *chinamwali*. For example, there is a considerable amount of data dealing with the question of a separate Banda chieftainship in Native Authority Mazengera's area in Lilongwe. What is particularly interesting is the fact that the data include letters from most parties involved in the matter.

With the exception of one letter written by Chauwa Banda, a woman village head and rain prophetess at Chilenje in Native Authority

Mazengera's area in Lilongwe district, I was unable to locate any minutes, letters and reports written by Chewa women. Nonetheless, recorded frustrations, fears and concerns of colonial administrators, Christian missionaries, educated elite men of the Nyasaland African Congress have much to tell us about how Chewa women negotiated various historical phases. For example, I came across reports of a study conducted in the 1930s by colonial administrators on the status of African women in Nyasaland.³³ Reading through such sources, it was possible to discover Chewa women's actions and thoughts, even if refracted through male colonial eyes.

These oral and written sources have provided the basis for rethinking and critically engaging with the literature on social change, and gender, ethnicity and nationalism in late pre-colonial and colonial Malawi. Chapter two examines the transformation that *nyau* underwent at various historical moments. It argues that such transformations enabled the Chewa matrilineal system to survive the effects of the slave trade, Christianity and the imposition of colonialism. Concentrating on *chinamwali*, chapter three emphasizes the creative power of rituals to respond to political, social and economic conditions the Chewa

³³Malawi National Archives (hereinafter MNA) NCE 2/9/1, NS1/23/5; MNA, NS 1/23/5- The Status and Treatment of Native Women.

experienced from the late precolonial period. Chapter four looks at how both elite and non-elite Chewa used ethnicity to negotiate the colonial encounter. It maintains that to understand the development of ethnicity in Malawi we need to go beyond mission education and indirect rule to examine local people's attitudes and practices. Chapter five deals with the embryonic stage in the development of nationalism in Malawi. It looks at how elite men attempted to recast women and their status in society and how ordinary Chewa women responded by constructing other identities. The conclusion drawn from this discussion is that Chewa engagement with colonial rule was not only the story of active involvement, it was the story about the adaptation of indigenous ideas and practices. This adaptation was done not only by the elite, but also by the commonality, including women.

CHAPTER TWO

THE REVIVAL OF NYAU: A RESPONSE TO DEVELOPMENTS IN THE FIRST THREE DECADES OF COLONIAL RULE

Historians have described the mid to late nineteenth century as a period of rapid change during which important Chewa political and socio-economic structures and institutions underwent considerable stress. Kings Phiri, for example, describes the Chewa or the Maravi people in the 19th and early 20th centuries as “a nation in retreat.”

Past was the time Maravi affairs were dominated by the names of Kalonga, Lundu and Undi. In the 19th century, much of the landscape in central and southern Malawi was dominated by chieftainships, great and small, which were typically Chewa or Nyanja or Mang'anja, depending on where they happened to be located.¹

While the political and social marginalisation of the Maravi people such as the Chewa might have started with the fall of the Kalonga Empire in the early 18th century, a number of developments from mid the 19th century intensified this decline. These included the expansion of the slave trade between the east African coast and the central African interior, the immigration and settlement of the Yao and Ngoni in central Malawi as well as the spread of Christian missionary teachings.²

¹ K.M Phiri, “Disrupted and Marginalised: Nyanja or Maravi Communities at the Southern End of Lake Malawi in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries” (History Seminar Paper, Chancellor College, University of Malawi, 1995/1996), p.3. Also, see Harry W. Langworthy, “Central Malawi in the 19th Century,” in R. J. Macdonald (ed.), *From Nyasaland to Malawi: Studies Colonial History* (Nairobi: EAPH, 1975), pp.1-43.

Other scholars have demonstrated that the developments mentioned above put an enormous strain on the Chewa family structure and threatened the survival of the matrilineal system.³ It is hardly surprising, then, that the British colonisation of the Chewa areas that took place between 1893 and 1897 further undermined the operation of the matrilineages. There is certainly no shortage of changes in the political, social and material world of the Chewa during this period that can be cited to explain this. For example, most local rulers lost power under the system of direct rule that was insensitive to African forms of governance. Also, the colonial government's imposition of a hut tax and the white settlers' recruitment of African labour forced some Chewa men to migrate to the Shire highlands and other parts of southern Africa. Thus the late 19th and early 20th century was a time of political, economic and social stress for the Chewa.

However, whenever opportunities arose the Chewa (chiefs, village headmen, women, men and children) fought against the erosion of their

² K. M. Phiri, "Chewa History in Central Malawi."

³ See for example Jean Davison, "Changing Gender Relations of Production in the Banja Household in Malawi", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol.19, No.4 (1993); K.M. Phiri, "Some Changes in the Matrilineal Family System Among the Chewa of Malawi since the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 28 (1983), pp. 257 – 274; Jean Davison, *Gender, Lineage and Ethnicity in Southern Africa* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); Tony Woods, "Marriage is a Family Affair: The Politics of Gender in Colonial Malawi," (Social Science Seminar, University of Malawi, Chancellor College, 1992).

positions. They used practices - indigenous or alien - and ideas - traditional or foreign - to provide solutions, albeit partial ones, to problems that emerged in their changing environment. One such institution among the Chewa was *nyau* secret societies. As Leroy Vail states, "the Chewa were also distinguished by an institution of remarkable resilience and vitality, the *nyau* societies which served to unite the people in times of social stress."⁴ *Nyau* stands for

...secret societies whose members dance at various important Chewa rites of passage, most notably initiations and funerals. These dances often referred to as *gule wankulu* today involve the use of masks by the participants who prepare their paraphernalia at a *dambwe* that only *nyau* members can visit. The dance, or *mzinda*, incorporates many important religious symbols of procreation, and the dancers themselves are said to become spiritual representations of animals represented by their masks, which are typically called *visudzo* and *mikhwala*.⁵

Scholarship on *nyau* has mostly focussed on resistance. Most scholars recognise the important function that the secret societies played to counteract the political and cultural influences of mid 19th century immigrants, the Ngoni and Yao, and to resist the 20th century European intrusion at village level. As such, they have discussed how various *nyau* societies fought against the establishment of Christian missions in Chewa areas. Consequently, in much of the extant literature, remarks such as the following are typical:

⁴ Vail and White, "Tribalism in the Political History of Malawi," p. 174.

⁵ Woods, "Struggle for the Lineage," p. 4.

The 1920s in the Central Province were a period of bitter enmity between pagan and Christian, between the adherents of the Dutch Reformed and Catholic missions and Nyau dancers.⁶

Verbal or armed confrontations between Nyau chauvinists and proteges of mission schools were therefore endemic in the typical Chewa areas of Kasungu, Dowa and Lilongwe.⁷

Others have linked *nyau* to issues of identity. Such scholars demonstrate how *nyau* preserved Chewa ethnicity in the colonial era. In fact, Tony Woods notes that at least one Malawi historian insists that to be Chewa was to be initiated into *nyau*.⁸

Other scholars have moved beyond resistance. For example, Woods demonstrates how lineage elders used *nyau* to establish a new hegemony that enabled them to control the lineage when other indigenous forms of authority nearly collapsed during the colonial era.⁹ While Wood's emphasis on the need to focus on the role of *nyau* in the process of change within Chewa society is an important contribution to the historiography of Malawi, his notion of a static *nyau* discourse is questionable. Other evidence points to an always-changing *nyau*

⁶ Chanock, "The New Men Revisited," p. 243.

⁸ Woods, "Struggle for the Lineage," p. 1.

⁹ Ibid.

discourse. For example, by looking at nyau “as symbolic type and social event, as fixed form and fluid formula, as received culture and revised practice,” Deborah Kaspin demonstrates that *nyau* is both traditional and modern.

Thus Nyau not only conjures up images of the bygone era but also reflects and redesigns the political and economic realities of contemporary circumstances.¹⁰

However, apart from noting that *nyau* was an exclusive society for Chewa males, little effort has been made to incorporate gender into its analysis. This neglect is disturbing because although a male association, *nyau* affected the lives of both Chewa men and women. Consequently, this chapter examines the role *nyau* played in gender relations among the Chewa. It argues that *nyau* not only served as a means by which married Chewa men renegotiated their involvement in the *mbumba* lineage, thereby rendering gender relations more ambivalent and negotiable, but also that its activities mirrored the status of men and women at any given moment in Chewa society. For example, the chapter demonstrates how *nyau* continuously and creatively redefined and reflected relations between Chewa men and women in the context of Christian missionary teaching, labour migration and cash cropping.

The chapter maintains that *nyau* managed to adapt and deal with such modern changes precisely because it was not a static institution. As

¹⁰ Kaspin, “Chewa Visions and Revisions of Power,” p.34.

such, this chapter adopts a historical and gendered perspective to analyse the long-term continuity and transformation of *nyau* among the Chewa. Although the secret societies have been part of the Chewa community for a long time,¹¹ the chapter identifies specific moments when some Chewa individuals creatively used the ritual to solve current problems. At those given moments *nyau* was modern, chosen and relevant.¹² It also shows how the ritual changed in the process. Perhaps A.G.O. Hogson, District Resident at Dowa, best described in 1927 what this chapter seeks to demonstrate:

The *nyau* has become so large and so diverged from its original purpose...[as a result] of the remarkable adaptability with which the native has reacted in the last three decades

¹¹ Nyau is believed to be as old as Chewa society. In fact some historians have traced it back to the food gathering and hunting communities. See for example Woods, "Struggle for the Lineage" and Phiri, "The Historiography of Nyau."

¹²This analysis has been informed by Steven Feierman's study of peasant intellectuals in Tanzania, especially his discussion of long-term continuities in political language as an outcome of radical social change and struggle within peasant society. See S. Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). For a further discussion on how to reconcile the idea of invention with long-standing cultural tradition see T.O. Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa," in T.O. Ranger and O. Vaughan (eds.), *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth Century Africa*, (Oxford: St. Anthony College, 1993). Also, see H.L. Moore and M. Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890 – 1990*, (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994).

to the gigantic upheaval in the very fundamentals of his social and magico-religious life.¹³

This, however, is not to argue that *nyau's* adaptability to political, social and economic change is a development of the late 19th century. Scholars of pre-colonial Chewa communities have traced it from the Kalonga or Maravi kingdom era.¹⁴ They have demonstrated how at specific critical moments of change in Chewa history, *nyau* proved effective at redefining Chewa society.

2.1: Nyau and the Transformation of Precolonial Chewa Society

Historians have demonstrated that far from being homogeneous, the Maravi Empire had internal distinctions based on factors such as clan differentiation and religious affiliation. Of particular interest to this study are the tensions between the Maravi or Phiri state builders and the

¹³ MNA, NSI/23/6 A.G.O. Hogson, District Resident, Dowa to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 15/4/27.

¹⁴For detailed discussions of various aspects of the Maravi states see Phiri, "Chewa History in Central Malawi;" also by the same author, "Pre-colonial States of Central Malawi: Towards a Reconstruction of their History," *Society of Malawi Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1988), pp. 1 – 29; "Notes on Reconstructing the History of the Kalonga's Kingdom from Oral Tradition," (History Seminar, Chancellor College, University of Malawi, 1994/95. Also see Langworthy, "A History of Undi's Kingdom to 1890;" McFarren, "History in the Land of the Flames;" W. L. Dambuleni, "Aspects of Early Chewa history with a Note on the Chieftainship of Chauma" (History Seminar Paper, University of Malawi, 1970/71 and I.J. Mbwana, "The Rise and the Fall of the Chinsamba Chieftainship in the Southern part of Salima District," (University of Malawi, History Seminar Paper, 1989/90.

proto-Chewa or Banda whom they found in occupation of parts of what became the Kalonga Empire. Almost all the scholars who study the Maravi Empire agree that the Phiri were responsible for the earliest process of state formation in central Malawi. Archaeological sources place this landmark in the precolonial history of the Chewa around 1480 AD. While the Phiri managed to create centralised states and rule larger territories than had existed before them, some of the scholars demonstrate that they never completely incorporated the Banda political system into their centralised polities.

For example, Matthew Schoffeleers, who has written extensively on Banda culture, argues that the Banda were absent at the high levels of the Maravi political hierarchy due to their political structure in which village groupings were effective units. As he puts it:

Villages within these groupings appear to have been interconnected by kinship and marriage and by ties of an economic and ritual nature. The number of villages within a grouping must have been limited, since authority at the level of headmen and senior headmen was primarily dependent on the support of kinsmen and affines distributed through these units... In each of these groupings the senior headman held the rights to *mzinda*, which is a combination of rights to Nyau, hunting and female initiation.¹⁵

Thus, the Maravi developed a political system that left the Banda considerable power on the local level. Also, it is important to note that

¹⁵ Schoffeleers, "Towards the Identification," p.55.

the proto-Chewa played a major role in religion. Schoffeleers notes that past literature on the Banda dominance in ritual office tended to focus on rain shrines.¹⁶ However, scholars have since demonstrated that the Banda also dominated *nyau*:

The Nyau are in all probability older than the rain shrines, going back in time to a hunting and food gathering economy. They formed part of the proto-Chewa culture as a means of solemnising female puberty rites and mortuary ceremonies. The institution also fulfilled important social functions in respect of married men living under uxorilocal conditions.¹⁷

However, it would seem that the Maravi rulers were hostile to *nyau*. Phiri argues, for example, that the Maravi paramounts sought to control *nyau* by restricting the right of staging performances to those who received a *mzinda* or a bundle of charms from paramount chiefs. As a result, *nyau* “was not a very prominent feature of the social and political organisation of the Maravi society although it provided a basis of communication for the purely indigenous elements of the Chewa population.”¹⁸ Similarly, Woods maintains that because “paramounts were careful to restrict the *kudzika muzinda* or granting of dance rights... membership remained relatively small.”

¹⁶ See for instance, M.G. Marwick, “History and Tradition in Central Africa,” *Journal of African History*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1969); W.H.J. Rangeley, “Nyau in Nkhotakota District,” *The Nyasaland Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1949), pp. 35-49 and Vol. 3, No. 2 (1950), pp. 19-33.

¹⁷Schoffeleers, “Towards the Identification,” p. 53.

¹⁸Phiri, “The Historiography,” p. 5

Moreover, the Maravi forbade the performance of Nyau at rain shrines that were closely associated with their political authority, thus indicating that the dance was more marginalised religiously than it ultimately became during the colonial period.¹⁹

In addition, Schoffeleers states that the Maravi rulers seem to have been unwilling to grant the right to hold *nyau* in their own clan areas. What is more, he argues that the divorce of *nyau* from the rain shrines “further institutionalised the religious division as the *nyau* came to represent the religious ideas and interests of the commonality.”²⁰

While the authority of the Banda rulers was derived from their dominance of the rain shrines and *nyau*, and that of the Phiri was mainly secular, it would be a misrepresentation to regard this division of power as uncomplicated and given. With the passage of time, as Schoffeleers notes, the Phiri were able to exert some control over the rain shrines. He cites Langworthy who describes an arrangement whereby Maravi rulers gave protection to the rain shrines in exchange for assurance of loyalty and the provision of ritual services.²¹ In a similar manner, Phiri states that the discretion that paramount chiefs held to grant rights to initiation and death rites and *nyau* to village headmen, became a way in

¹⁹ Woods, “Struggle for Lineage,” p. 6.

²⁰ Schoffeleers, “Towards the Identification,” p. 57.

²¹H.W. Langworthy, “The Political and Religious Elite in the History of Undi’s Malawi Kingdom,” East Africa Social Science Council Conference, *History Papers*, 1969, p. 127, cited in Schoffeleers, “Towards the Identification of a Proto-Chewa Culture.”

which a paramount chief could transfer power and wealth to Banda local rulers. This, in turn, assumed an elemental role in creating a “cultural and political alliance” between Maravi central authorities and village leaders.²²

The low profile *nyau* maintained at the peak of the Maravi Empire changed with the empire’s decline from the beginning of the 18th century and final collapse in the 1860s. This is because a number of developments in this period enabled *nyau* to rise to a position of prominence in Chewa communities. First, the period between 1700 and 1850 was one of transformation in central Malawi. For instance, Phiri demonstrates that with the exception of a few small chiefdoms that emerged in the wake of Maravi’s decline the rest of central Malawi was extremely decentralised.

In other words, the prevailing political units there were rarely larger than village communities. The inhabitants of any such community would furthermore have been branches of the same lineage. It would also seem, however that beyond such kin-based units, alliances could be contracted with units of similar size, but not on a permanent basis... Moreover, most of the chiefs in question appeared to have had little control over their subjects.²³

Second, from mid 19th century other groups of people, notably the Ngoni, Yao and Swahili-Arabs, migrated into central Malawi. Their arrival in Chewa areas further undermined the political stability of Chewa

²² Phiri, “Chewa History,” pp. 75 – 76.

²³ Phiri, “Pre-colonial States,” p. 17.

communities. What Kings Phiri observed in Ngoni-conquered areas was typical:

It will be seen that the Chewa had three alternatives in their potentially hostile relationships with the Ngoni. They could resist to the bitter end, as did Mwase at Kasungu, Chinganyama at Chinyimbo and Mambo at Chibanzi. Where this could not be done, they went to join the villages of particular Ngoni chiefs. This arrangement enabled them to survive in exile communities. The third alternative was to scatter in different directions and seek protection where the Ngoni could not attack with impunity.²⁴

There is ample evidence that the Chewa used one or all of these options at one or another time:

Then in the days of Dzoole Tiwopanyanga war came from the Ngoni of Chiwere and Msakambewa. Dzoole and his people resisted the invasion but abdicated after a while. So they took refuge on Nanthundu Mountain but a war party chased them from there as well. After that they ran to Kasungu where they took refuge under Mwase.²⁵

However, as Woods argues, “ironically the decline of Maravi power and the almost collapse of the Chewa-speaking Nyanja and Mang’anja societies caused by Yao and Ngoni invasions not only did not sweep the Nyau away but by removing the restrictions on them also seems to have catalysed their revival.”²⁶

²⁴Phiri, “Chewa History,” p. 161.

²⁵ Interview, Kings Phiri with Andreyia Chinkhombe Banda; Solomon Khwakhwa Banda, Mwancheke Village, T.A. Dzoole, Dowa, 13/4/74.

²⁶ Woods, “Struggle for Lineage,” p. 7.

It is not hard to determine why *nyau* became an important institution following the decline of the Maravi states and the Ngoni, Yao and Swahili- Arab invasions. The fact that this was a period of great upheaval facilitated greatly *nyau's* expansion in Chewa communities. Seizing the opportunity, *nyau* filled a void in Chewa society that was caused by the near collapse of indigenous authority.²⁷

In other words, the dissolution of the Maravi Empire facilitated a revival of the proto-Chewa political structure. With the decline of the paramount chiefs' authority, senior headmen wielded power and took on roles that were significantly different from what they had been at the time of the Kalongas. "Instead of being internally oriented as self-service communities, they had by time acquired a pronounced external orientation as bases of political expansion."²⁸ For example, Phiri states that when David Livingstone passed through Dedza and Lilongwe districts in 1866 he was forced to deal with no less than ten such senior headmen over a distance of 160 kilometres.²⁹

The revival of the Banda political structure worked to the advantage of *nyau* for a number of reasons. First, we noted above that it

²⁷Schoffeleers, "Towards the Identification," pp. 59-60, Woods, "Struggle for Lineage," p.7.

²⁸ Schoffeleers, "Towards the Identification," p. 59.

²⁹ Phiri, "Pre-colonial States," p. 17.

was the paramount chiefs who held authority to grant rights to *mzinda* to village headmen. With the fall of the Maravi paramount chiefs and the proliferation of senior headmen in their place, the power to grant rights to initiation and death rites and to organise *nyau* passed on to countless senior headmen.

Then Chimutu and his *anyakwawa* (elderly advisers) held assembly and decided to go to Chembe at Dziwe to demand their own *mzinda* (a bundle of charms for the performance of rituals). So they tied 30 goats and two virgins (*anamwali*) and used them to purchase *mzinda* from Chembe. So now Chimutu had his own *mzinda*. He could hold his own *chinamwali* ceremonies and perform his own death rituals (*kumeta maliro*). At first Chimutu was the only one in the whole of the Chata area who had a *mzinda*. All minor chiefs brought their *anamwali* here for initiation when they became of age. Then Chimutu started granting *mzinda* to his subordinates. Each chief (*mfumu*) who wanted a *mzinda* tied 3 goats that he brought here, after which Chimutu went to open his *bwalo* (initiation court).³⁰

Second, in addition to the decentralisation that occurred in the aftermath of the fall of the Maravi states, we noted that the village headmen who ruled the Chewa communities had little control over their subjects. With an unstable indigenous central authority it was almost inevitable that *nyau* emerged as an alternative means to organise people as the more familiar way of doing so disappeared. *Nyau* had the potential to satisfy this need. As noted above, at the peak of the Maravi Empire paramount chiefs suppressed *nyau* because of its potential to

³⁰ Interview, Kings Phiri with Josiya Chitseka Phiri; Kazyolika Banda; Amon Chadza Banda; Elias Kapantha Banda, Chiwamba Traditional Court, T.A. Chimutu, Lilongwe, 15/4/74.

provide a counterweight to central authority. Moreover, because of its religious nature *nyau* managed “not only to emerge in place of traditional authorities but also to appeal to people in a discourse compatible with their own cosmology as well as one reinforced by religious moral sanctions.”³¹ That is, *nyau* appealed to ordinary men and women because the gradual divorce of *nyau* from the rain shrines that occurred during the Maravi period meant that *nyau* came to represent more the religious ideas of common people than the Maravi elite. Thus, the revival and expansion of *nyau* in the post Maravi period was as much a result of social and political stress in Chewa society as it was a continuation of a Chewa tradition.

Third, as we noted above, mid 19th century immigrants adversely affected the Chewa and in most communities indigenous authority virtually collapsed as village headmen or women and their subjects deserted villages to seek protection elsewhere. In such instances, *nyau* provided an alternative force that allied people within a specific area and served new needs created by their changing contexts. Evidence from a number of Ngoni conquered areas, especially in Chiwere’s area in Dowa district, indicates that *nyau* fulfilled such a function even in exile communities. No doubt, this process was assisted by a relatively hands-

³¹Woods, “Struggle for the Lineage,” p. 7.

off approach that the Ngoni adopted in regard to the conquered people's rituals and customs.

Although Chiwere's Ngoni state was based upon Ngoni principles, its success in obtaining local Chewa population in the long run led to the Chewaization of much of the culture. The Chewa language is spoken although incorporating specialised Ngoni political terms. The Chewa *nyau* dance and male secret society used at funerals and coming out ceremonies... has been maintained in Chiwere's area.³²

Ngoni tolerance toward the influence of subject peoples lay at the base of many and varied symbiotic relationships that developed between the two groups as time went on. The Chewa in Ngoni dominated parts of Ntchisi, Dowa, Mchinji, and Dedza districts, for example, adopted Ngoni fighting techniques, mode of dress and dances. In turn, the Ngoni adopted the Chewa language, social organisation and rituals... At the religious level, for example, the spirit possession cults of the Chewa and Nsenga gained considerable ground in the Ngoni states.³³

Finally, the post Maravi period witnessed *nyau's* revival as a powerful focus of Chewa identity due to the destruction of the rain cults. We noted above that Banda rulers controlled the important rain shrines. With the passage of time, however, the Maravi paramount chiefs exerted some influence over important Banda-controlled rain cults. The central and most famous of the rain shrines was at Msinja but other parts of the Kalonga empire had their own local rain shrines presided over by women. Oral traditions contain numerous stories of these women:

³² Langworthy, "Central Malawi," p. 21.

³³ Phiri, "Pre-colonial States," p. 21.

Msinja was the headquarters where the Chewa chiefs went to worship. It was the home of Makawana or Mangadzi. All the shrine officials in different parts of the country went to Makewana because she was their “mother.” Sometimes it was Makewana who went out to visit all of them, spending a week here, and a week there, and so on.³⁴

Salima was a woman who called rain whenever there was drought. In times of drought, all Chewa chieftains in this area: Chinsamba, Mseche and Nyambo went to consult Salima who had a shrine near Salima Boma. She was a woman of spirits (*mkazi wa mizimu*) and whatever she said was obeyed and taken to be the law. She never made a mistake. If she said, “This is going to happen!” – then people knew it would really happen.³⁵

The rain shrines provided a religious forum that allied people from different parts of the empire, especially in times of major calamities, such as droughts. For instance, people from the Kalonga and Undi sections of the kingdom interacted with each other through their common allegiance to the main Chewa shrine at Msinja.

What probably did more than anything else to transform the religious organisation of the Chewa centring on the rain cults were two events in the mid and late 19th century: the Ngoni invasions and the spread of Christian missionary teachings. When the Ngoni entered the Chewa-dominated areas of central Malawi from the 1850s onwards, they not only attacked Chewa village communities but targeted a number of

³⁴Interview, Kings Phiri with Group Village Headman, Sambani Mwale; Jairoso Chibwe; Matuta Mduwa Phiri, T.A. Dzoole, Dowa, 24/6/74.

³⁵ Interview, Kings Phiri with Eliazari Msadzu, Msadzu Village, T.A. Kalonga, Salima, 18/2/74.

rain shrines as well, most notably the central shrine at Msinja and Chauwa's shrine at Chilenje:

The Msinja town was completely destroyed in the 1870s by the raid of the Chidyawonga Maseko from Domwe... After a while some of the functionaries came back to Msinja and attempted to rebuild it. However it did not work for a number of reasons. Firstly, the then Makewana completely disappeared... Secondly, the Makumbi village, which was responsible for providing food to the Msinja town so that the functionaries could concentrate on their religious roles, was no longer there... Thirdly, the coming of Christianity which preached a message against traditional religions, made it difficult for an already weakened cult to function with full support from its people...³⁶

It was Rev. Retief who ended Chauwa's ritual powers by converting the last Chauwa and giving her a Christian name, Salome. A Chauwa never shaved her hair. Only once a year at the time of the burning of bush in September did she shave her hair. By then her hair would be thick and dirty. At the time the last Chauwa was converted to Christianity, we decided to shave her hair without waiting for the proper season³⁴

The destruction of the rain cults paved a way for *nyau* to provide an indigenous alternative to Christianity. Perhaps Schoffeleers best describes the situation in the Chewa areas from the destruction of the rain shrines to the eve of colonial occupation when he remarks:

The decline of the Maravi states and chiefdoms deprived the shrines of much of their appeal. At the same time, the village

³⁶Isabel Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious Experience of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*, (Blantyre: CLAIM 1997) p. 31.

³⁴Interview, Kings Phiri with Jacob Mgawi Banda, Chauwa Village, T.A. Mazengera, Lilongwe, 13/5/74.

communities with their Nyau associates re-emerged as independent political bases. With the appearance of the missions and a new centralising effort under the *Pax Brittanica*, the shrines continued to decline but Nyau became once more a potent factor of resistance.³⁵

We have seen above that the history of *nyau* in the Maravi and post Maravi period was one of long-term continuity. This is not to argue that Nyau was a cultural given, a stable constant in Chewa's past. Rather it is to emphasise that its continuity depended on its adaptability to political and religious change. At the height of the Maravi Empire, *nyau* was divorced from the territorial rain cults that were dominated by the Maravi paramount chiefs. Its membership was limited and it largely represented the religious interests of ordinary village elders. By the 1870s, however, following the fall of the Maravi states, *nyau* had expanded into most Chewa village communities. More important perhaps is the fact that *nyau* consolidated its power and used its authority to establish an alternative indigenous hegemony in the village communities.

The British colonised Nyasaland in 1891 and occupied the Chewa country between 1893 and 1897 against such a background. With the *Pax Brittanica*, several Christian parties intensified their activities in central Malawi. Capitalism in the form of labour migration and cash cropping also unfolded among the Chewa. In addition, due to the Ngoni, Yao and Swahili-Arab invasions, militarily and politically the Chewa entered the colonial era with a low profile. All these developments

³⁵Schoffeleers, "Towards the Identification," p. 60.

affected the *mbumba* lineage. As such, it is interesting to investigate whether *nyau* transformed Chewa communities in the colonial era as it did at critical moments in the precolonial era. We now turn to the colonial period.

2.2: Nyau Secret Societies and Gender Relations in Colonial Chewa Society

In order to fully appreciate the role that *nyau* played in redefining gender relations in late precolonial and early colonial Chewa society, it is necessary to understand the position a husband in a matrilineal setting. Among the Chewa a married man was referred to as *mkamwini* (someone who belongs elsewhere).

He suffered from being described as a stranger in his wife's village, where he worked gardens that were not his own, begot children that did not belong to him, and was wedded to a woman who took her orders not from him but from her brother. In brief, he was, in the eyes of his wife's people, 'someone who belonged elsewhere'. To them, he was a *mkamwini* or workhorse. He could not aspire for high status no matter how influential he became in other respects. In particular, he was subject to the overriding authority of his wife's brother (the *mwini mbumba* or owner of the village), who could demand the husband's departure if his continued presence in the village became a liability. ... he was naturally reluctant to invest effort and money towards the improvement of land allocated to his family. He was deterred by the fear that sooner or later he would be called upon to leave the land behind. The problem could also stem from the reluctance of the wife's relatives to accommodate the enterprise of someone who was considered an outsider.³⁶

³⁶ K.M. Phiri, "Some Changes," p. 260.

One result of this was that, as people who belonged elsewhere, most married Chewa men had limited access to networks of support and solidarity in their wives' villages. Most male informants in this study touched on a sense of helplessness and isolation *akamwini* felt when faced with marital problems or disagreements with their parents-in-law.

No matter how good their wives treated them, *akamwini* still did not belong to their wives' lineage. As such, they were not entitled to mechanisms of support the members of the lineage enjoyed. For example, whenever a married woman had problems she could depend on her sisters, brothers, uncles, and mothers. But a *mkamwini* was on his own. The situation was worse for those that married far from their maternal villages.³⁷

The picture painted above is not an exhaustive portrayal of the fortunes of married men in Chewa communities. Without under-rating the negative experiences of matrilocally- married Chewa men it should be noted that alternatives other than uxori-local marriage were available to some of them. These included cross-cousin marriage, marrying within one's neighbourhood and *chitengwa*, an arrangement whereby a man took his wife to his own maternal village. *Chitengwa* enabled village headmen and their advisers as well as lineage guardians to fulfil obligations in their maternal villages without moving back and forth between their villages and their wives' villages. Also, in some rare instances ordinary men were granted permission to *chitengwa* especially

³⁷Interview, Kachapila with Adiel Gidala, Chipokosa Village, Ntchisi, 15/9/97.

if they demonstrated to lineage elders that they could care well for their wives and children.

In addition, for those whom uxori-locality was the only alternative, *nyau* secret societies played an ameliorating role. Although village headmen controlled *nyau*, it was primarily an association of marginal members of the *mbumba* lineage.³⁸ Initially, *nyau* admitted into membership only married Chewa men whom the *mbumba* lineage considered outsiders.

For the Chewa married men they served as a kind of a men's club or pressure group. They enabled the men to band together, to share experiences and reinforce one another psychologically. As members of a *Nyau* society or brotherhood, the men would develop their own communication codes and rules and regulations of conduct. While in session, they were impervious to outside pressures. Their wives were forbidden to approach the *dambwe* or *msitu* (the secret reserve in the bush where communion was held) and they were quite free to insult or beat anyone. Under the circumstances, the uxorically-married husband was above the ordinary law of the community, even in his dealings with his wife's parents or elders of his wife's village. In this way, the *Nyau* societies may have given a sense of solidarity and even considerable influence to married men in a matrilineal context.³⁹

That is, contrary to the dominant Chewa perspective that characterised *akamwini* as marginal members, *nyau* provided spaces in which married

³⁸It is widely accepted in the oral traditions that *nyau* emerged during famines and was performed by marginal characters seeking food from their more affluent neighbours.

³⁹Phiri, "Some Changes," p. 261.

Chewa men could exercise power and experience a sense of belonging to a community. Also, through songs and other actions, *nyau* members as *akamwini* vented the frustrations they encountered in their wives' villages.

In those days, it was not uncommon for members of the *nyau* dance troupe who had grudges against members of their wives' lineage to wait for the *nyau* season to get even or make fun of them and get away with it. Others conveyed messages to their wives, mothers and fathers-in-law that under normal circumstances they would not be able to. These included complaints about being overworked, underfed and general lack of respect for *akamwini* in villages.⁴⁰

By serving as a defensive mechanism, *nyau* played an important role in balancing power between *akamwini* on the one hand and their wives and *mbumba* lineage guardians, on the other. That is, married men made claims to power and solidarity with other *akamwini* in the village without upsetting the dominant wisdom of the Chewa matrilineal society. As the account below shows *nyau* continued to play this role but at the same time changed to accommodate and reflect developments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

2.2.1: Developments in Chewa Matrilineages from the late 19th Century

⁴⁰Interview, Kachapila with Ezekiel Balamu, Kamulanda Village, Ntchisi, 16/9/97; Samuel Sakudula, Chiwaliwali Village, Ntchisi, 11/10/99.

As noted above, the mid 19th century developments such as the Ngoni and Yao invasions as well as the slave trade that accompanied them not only undermined the political stability of Chewa communities but also threatened the survival of the matrilineal system. Consequently, by the time Europeans such as Christian missionaries and colonial administrators made contact with Chewa communities, some principles of the matrilineal system had to a considerable extent already been transformed.

In examining the effects of slave trade on the Chewa family structure Phiri and others have shown how, for much of the 19th century, some Chewa headmen and successful entrepreneurs built up virilocal lineages with female slaves and pawns acquired through slave trading and legal procedures. By marrying female slaves to male members of the matrilineage, Chewa men managed to exert more control over their children and wives and avoid matrilineal marriage. According to Phiri,

So widespread, apparently, was the institution of slave marriage among the Chewa in the 19th century that early in this [20th] century Chewa elders still spoke nostalgically about it. They maintained that women who had been captured in war or purchased from slave caravans made better wives than those married under regular matrilineal custom. They were the property of the husband, tended to abide with him permanently and did their utmost to secure his favour. For this reason, a man who had both free and slave wives often gave greater attention to the latter than the former.⁴¹

⁴¹Phiri, "Some Changes," p.265.

Scholars such as Mary Douglas⁴² and Kings Phiri have argued that the existence of slave marriage and pawnship was essential to the expansion of matrilineages and the smooth running of the matrilineal system. At the same time, it is worthwhile noting that they also threatened the position of free women in Chewa communities. Apart from the fact that most victims of the slave trade in the 19th century were women and children,⁴³ the availability of 'submissive slave wives'⁴⁴ decreased the number of eligible marriage partners for free Chewa women. This posed a problem because the survival of a matrilineage depended on its ability to attract young men to marry its young women and provide labour. However, because free women had primary rights in land, a privilege denied to slaves, pawns and free men, slave marriage existed in Chewa communities without completely unsettling the matrilineal system.

Of the various patrilineal groups that settled among the Chewa in the 19th century, it was the Ngoni who most influenced the matrilineal

⁴²M. Douglas, "Matriliney and Pawnship in Central Africa," *Africa* Vol. 34 (1964).

⁴³Megan Vaughan, "Social and Economic Change in Southern Malawi: A Study of Rural Communities in the Shire highlands and the Upper Shire Valley from 1850 to 1915," (PhD Thesis, University of London, 1981).

⁴⁴It would seem that female slaves were treated with more respect than their male counterparts because it was feared that they had the capacity to poison their owners. This is because it was their duty to fetch water and prepare food. See Phiri, "Chewa History," p. 127, for details.

system. Based on his evaluation of a number of studies, Phiri argues that many writers state that the Ngoni were primarily interested in political control rather than cultural subjugation. The result was that the Chewa family structure gained ground in Ngoni areas as the Ngoni adopted matrilineal descent rules and matrilineal marriage. Phiri further notes that other scholars have been less positive in their assessment of Chewa influence on the Ngoni. According to this view, it was not until the pacification of the Ngoni under the British that aspects of Chewa social system thrived in Ngoni areas. They argue that prior to *Pax Brittanica*, the Ngoni imposed aspects of their culture such as virilocal marriage and patrilineal descent rules on the Chewa.⁴⁵ That the arrival of the Ngoni in Chewa land affected marriage customs is reflected in the following observations:

The Ngoni came as a small group without women. So they raided us, the Chewa, to capture our women whom they took back to their villages as wives.⁴⁶

The Ngoni thought of other people as weak and inferior and as such refused to let their daughters marry the Chewa. Only those who became lieutenants among the Chewa would become privileged to the extent of being allowed to marry Ngoni women.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Phiri, "Some Changes," p.266- 67.

⁴⁶Interview, Kings Phiri with Andreyha Chinkhombe Banda; Solomon Khwakhwa Banda, Mwanchekeka Village, T.A. Dzoole, Dowa, 13/4/74.

⁴⁷Interview, Kings Phiri with T.A Chilooko, Malomo Traditional Court, T.A. Cilooko, Ntchisi, 27/7/74.

The spread of Christian missionary teaching in central Malawi further threatened the survival of the Chewa matrilineal system. Most Chewa communities had by 1910 come into contact with a number of Christian missionaries. These included the Dutch Reformed Church missionaries, who opened their first station in 1889; the Universities Mission to Central Africa (Anglican) in 1895 and finally the Roman Catholics in 1901.⁴⁸ In a number of ways, Christian missionary work had the potential to destroy Chewa matrilineages.

All the missionaries (Dutch Reformed Church, Anglican and Presbyterian) stuck to the Pauline view that the husband is the head of the nuclear family unit and that his authority, therefore, preceded that of the wife and the wife's guardian. They also laid emphasis on parental control of and responsibility for the children. If taken seriously, such teachings would seriously have undermined the avunculate. ... for the Chewa, the acceptance of Christian teachings on marriage would have entailed rejecting certain fundamental matrilineal principles, diminished the status of the *nkhoswe*, and in some respects jeopardised the women's social security.⁴⁹

Woods also argues that Christian teaching on marriage greatly conflicted with traditional Chewa views on inheritance. For instance, he cites Meredith Sanderson, who argued in 1920 that "the law of succession is

⁴⁸Phiri, "Some Changes," p. 267. For a detailed discussion on the introduction of Christianity in Malawi see McCracken, *Politics and Christianity in Malawi*; Stuart, "Christianity and the Chewa"; Linden and Linden, *Catholics, Peasants and Chewa Resistance*, and P. Pretorius, "An Introduction to the History of the Dutch Reformed Church Mission in Malawi 1889-1914," in B. Pachai (ed), *The Early History of Malawi* (London: Longman, 1972).

⁴⁹Phiri, "Some Changes," p. 268.

being avoided... Nowadays the legal heir is never quite sure of his position.”⁵⁰ Hard-pressed, uxori-locally-married husbands in Chewa communities welcomed Christian teaching on marriage because it accorded them more control over their nuclear families than did traditional matrilineal custom. Perhaps this explains why the first group of Africans baptised by the DRCM in 1897 comprised fourteen men and only five women.⁵¹

Second, the uncompromising attitude that the new missionaries adopted towards *chinamwali* (female initiation) and *nyau* secret societies came into direct conflict with certain matrilineal concerns. Both Presbyterians and Catholics condemned *nyau* and *chinamwali* as evil. As such, they embarked on a campaign to suppress *chinamwali* and *nyau* by, among other things, demanding that members of their churches denounce them.⁵² Ironically, it was to these same rituals that Chewa elders turned in an attempt to adapt to the significant changes Chewa

⁵⁰ MNA, S/1/1368/20 – Sanderson to Chief Secretary, 4/4/20.

⁵¹ I.A. Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, p. 45.

⁵² See Linden and Linden, *Catholics, Peasants and Chewa Resistance*; I. Linden, “Chewa Initiation Rites and Nyau Societies; Stuart, “Christianity and the Chewa;” Linden and Schoffeleers, *The Resistance of Nyau Societies to the Roman Catholic Missions* and, I.A. Phiri, “African Women in Religion and Culture, Chewa Women in the Nkhoma Synod of C.C.A.P: A Critical Study from the Women’s Perspective,” (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 1992).

communities witnessed in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The missionaries' attack on *chinamwali* and *nyau* had the effect of frustrating the Chewa elders' efforts. It is hardly surprising, then, that opposition to the missionaries came primarily from men and women who were responsible for initiation rites and *nyau*.

This then was the status of the *mbumba* lineage when Chewa society was incorporated into the colonial process. The political and socio-economic changes in the first decades of colonial rule continued to compromise the position of matriliney in Chewa society by further shifting the balance of power between husbands and wives. Developments such as labour migration, cash crop production, mission education and the resultant employment of some educated Africans meant that matrilineal marriage was no longer the only means through which Chewa men could achieve social status and economic security. To make matters worse for Chewa women, the limited economic opportunities that opened up during the colonial period tended to favour men. For example, almost all the migrant labourers to mines and farms in European colonies of southern Africa were men. Also, employment in government service and mission schools was initially open to men only. In addition, according to Phiri, "although Chewa households appear to have been particularly responsive to the existence of opportunities for growing tobacco... the

production of cash crops as opposed to food crops was entirely in the hands of men.”⁵³

Of course, some Chewa women did pursue new economic opportunities in the colonial era. Chewa women sought economic security by entering the cash economy both individually and in conjunction with their husbands. While evidence indicates that women’s labour was employed at various stages in the production of tobacco,⁵⁴ it was only late in the colonial period that Chewa women emerged as independent peasant-tobacco producers as is reflected in the following statement by the Acting Director of Agriculture in 1948:

Strengthened demand and high prices for tobacco have been responsible for doubling the number of growers in the past six years... many of whose newest recruits are women and children who have come to regard tobacco production as easy money.⁵⁵

⁵³Phiri, “Some Changes,” p. 271.

⁵⁴Apart from helping their husbands in the production of peasant grown tobacco, Chewa women also provided labour to white settler planters as casual workers and as wives of visiting tenants on private estates mainly in Dowa and Lilongwe districts. For details see, Woods, “ ‘Why Not Persuade Them to Grow Tobacco’: Planters, Tenants and the Political Economy of Central Malawi, 1920-1940,” *African Economic History*, Vol. 21(1993). Also, Kachapila, “The Role of Women In Cash Crop Production in Central Malawi,” and Brenda Kacheche, “Child Labour on Tobacco Estates of the Lilongwe Plain, 1920-1964,” (History Seminar Paper No.8, Chancellor College, 1997).

⁵⁵As quoted in J. 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, No. 2 (1983), p. 187.

Apart from tobacco-growing, Chewa women undertook other economic activities such as beer brewing, food-processing and maize and groundnut production. Although at times the shifting priorities of the colonial state enabled Chewa women to accomplish this, women's own initiative for the most part explains their involvement in the colonial economy. However, the bottom line is that Chewa women were not as free as men were to pursue economic activities during the colonial era.

In addition, as noted above, Christian teaching on marriage gave married Chewa men as heads of their nuclear families more authority and power than did the traditional matrilineal system. In the context of the DRCM, Isabel Phiri and J.L. Pretorius observed that most of the first converts to Christianity were men.⁵⁶ If this reflects the general trend in Chewa areas, it is plausible that Chewa men more than women welcomed Christianity precisely because as heads of Christian families they assumed increased authority over their wives and children.

Such developments forced certain segments of Chewa society to question the validity of existing value systems. "As time went on, this undoubtedly created a discrepancy between the self-perception of men and women as well as in the degree of their commitment to matriliney."⁵⁷

⁵⁶See footnote 54 above and J.L. Pretorius, "An Introduction to the History of the Dutch Reformed Church Mission in Malawi," p.368.

⁵⁷Phiri, "Some Changes," p. 270.

Consequently, some scholars conclude that the *mbumba* lineage was completely destroyed as it ceased to function as a viable socio-economic unit.⁵⁸ Others mirror my own position when they maintain that redefinition rather than destruction best explains what happened to the matrilineal system.

It is doubtful that the Chewa in rural parts of central Malawi have experienced such a radical transformation of their social structure. What appears to have happened among them is that certain matrilineal principles that are incompatible with modern changes have simply been waived. ... the changes in the Chewa family system have not brought about a complete transformation of the system.⁵⁹

Going beyond this focus, this chapter submits that *nyau* secret societies played a crucial role in the redefinition rather than transformation of Chewa society.

We noted above that uxori-locally-married husbands used *nyau* to alleviate some of the problems they encountered as marginal members of the *mbumba* lineage. We also noted that alternative options to matrilocal marriage became available to young Chewa men due to the impact of the slave trade, patrilineal groups, Christianity, colonialism and capitalism. This meant that some married Chewa men no longer needed to join *nyau* for amelioration. More important, lineage elders began to lose the control

⁵⁸J.A.K. Kandawire, *Thangata: Forced Labour or Reciprocal Assistance?* (Blantyre, 1979), p.96-7.

⁵⁹ Phiri, "Some Changes," pp. 273–274.

they had over *akamwini*. For obvious reasons this had the potential of unsettling the workings of the *mbumba* lineage. In light of this, lineage elders turned to *nyau* as a potential means of retaining the allegiance of young men influenced by other ideas and tempted by wages in more economically advanced regions of Malawi and beyond. As the account below shows, *nyau* acquired new characteristics in order to fulfil this new function. More specifically, it became a means of giving young men more authority in the *mbumba* lineage without completely unsettling the matrilineal system. What is more, through its extractive features it counteracted to an extent the temptation of earning wages in centres of capitalist development.

To this end, membership in *nyau* was extended to almost every Chewa man by adapting *nyau* into a male initiation. Consequently, *nyau* ceased to be an association of marginal members of the lineage. As Woods so aptly puts it, "by making incorporation into *nyau* a prerequisite for obtaining full adult status, *eni mzinda* could effectively form a male association which allied all males within a specific area."⁶⁰ That *nyau* was transformed into a male initiation only at a later period is made clear in the following observations:

⁶⁰Woods, "Struggle for Lineage," p.10-11.

At first only married men were allowed to join the *nyau* secret society. Then gradually, much younger men began to be accepted into the dance, until today, children are eligible for membership.⁶¹

It originated from *chinamwali*, which was an initiation institution for women. Seeing this, Chief Mkanthama thought it would be a good thing to have another initiation institution for the boys. And so *Nyau* was transformed into an initiation to cater for the men.⁶²

A number of Europeans, more especially colonial administrators and ethnographers, also noted this development of *nyau* into a male initiation in the 1920s. A.G.O. Hodgson wrote in 1927 that “the *Vinyau* was formerly danced in connection with funerals only, but has latterly been introduced into the initiation ceremonies as well.”⁶³ Similarly, Dr. G.M. Sanderson, who was commissioned by the Executive Council to prepare a memorandum on *nyau* in 1927, confirmed Hodgson’s observation that *nyau* had only “recently come to be associated with initiation ceremonies.”⁶⁴ In addition Alpin, then Provincial Commissioner at Zomba, stated in a despatch to Senior Provincial Commissioner,

⁶¹Interview, Kings Phiri with Traditional Authority Chilooko, Malomo Traditional Court, T.A. Chilooko, Ntchisi District, 27/7/74.

⁶²Interview, Kings Phiri with Village Headman Sambani Mwale, Matuta Nduwa Phiri and Jairos Chibwe, Sambani Village, T.A. Dzoole, Dowa District, 24/6/74.

⁶³MNA, NS1/23/6, Correspondence – A.G.O. Hodgson to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 25/4/27.

⁶⁴MNA, S2/23/22, G.M. Sanderson, “Memorandum on the *Vinyau* of Central Angoniland,” July 1927. This memorandum was prepared to “controvert the allegations” made by the Rev. J. Jackson.” For Jackson’s view on *Nyau* see, MNA, NC1/21/2, J. Jackson, “Chinyau.”

Central Province in 1929 that “the *Vinyau* dance is most probably a funeral dance, although it has recently come to be associated with initiation ceremonies. Formerly it was confined to full-grown men, but nowadays boys are allowed, and perhaps *coerced* [emphasis added] to join.”⁶⁵ By the 1920s *nyau* was no longer just a men’s club for hard-pressed matrilocally- married Chewa men but a way in which boys became men. The boys’ initiation covered many areas:

Once the boys became of age they were taken to the *dambwe* where initiation took place. The boys were prepared for the onerous task of getting married. They were told whom to respect among the elders, what to do and what not to do.⁶⁶

It was education concerning good customary behaviour. There was nothing wrong with *nyau*. Children learned how to be clever.⁶⁷

The transformation of *nyau* into a male initiation was not the only way in which lineage leaders gave more power and authority to young men in *mbumba* lineages. By infiltrating *chinamwali*, *nyau* enabled men to ritually subjugate women. Not unlike the development of *nyau* into a male initiation, the penetration of *nyau* into *chinamwali* was a late development as attested in 1927 by the Provincial Commissioner for the

⁶⁵MNA, NS1/23/6, Correspondence – Mr. Alpin, Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province, to Senior Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 7/2/29.

⁶⁶Interview, Kings Phiri with Chintekwe Mkathama Mwale and Kantepa Jere, Mkanthama Village, T.A. Msakambewa, Dowa, 20/3/74.

⁶⁷Interview, Kings Phiri with Sub-chief Chilooko, Malomo Traditional Court, T.A. Chilooko, Ntchisi, 27/7/74.

Central Province. "It is only comparatively recently that it [*nyau*] has been held in conjunction with *chinamwali*."⁶⁸ W.H.J. Rangeley, a colonial administrator who wrote extensively on Chewa culture, also remarked that, "nowadays, *nyau* (the masked mimes) take part in *mkangali* at the request of women, but formerly there is no doubt that *mkangali* was purely a women's affair."⁶⁹ What is perhaps more revealing is that *nyau*'s involvement in *chinamwali* was primarily manifested in its violence against initiates.

Initiation of girls is a very old custom observed far earlier than *nyau*, but many things have been altered from the way they were done long ago. When women saw that men had gained importance with their dance old women instructors (*anankungwi*), asked the leaders of *Nyau* to instruct and frighten the girl initiates by beating or just pinching them. The dancing at girls' initiation ceremonies increased greatly when Europeans entered the country.⁷⁰

In 1927 Hodgson also noted this pattern of debasing women at the hands of *nyau*.

The initiation of boys now takes place at the *dambwe* at the same time as that of the girls. The actual procedure of the *Vinyau* during the ceremonies is complicated. It is true that after dark the

⁶⁸MNA, S2/23/22, Correspondence – R.H. Murray, Provincial Commissioner, Central Province to the Chief Secretary, Zomba, 12/5/27.

⁶⁹ Rangeley, "Notes on Cewa Tribal Law," *The Nyasaland Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1948), p. 42.

⁷⁰MNA, NCK 6/1/1, W.H.J. Rangeley, "Some Notes on Nyau in Kotakota District.

Visudzo dance naked among the women, their faces hidden under masks and improprieties undoubtedly occur.⁷¹

There is certainly enough evidence that *nyau*'s role in *chinamwali* involved the physical intimidation and degradation of Chewa women. It is maintained, for instance, that initiates were humiliated and beaten by *nyau* dancers and in some cases victims suffered permanent damage.⁷² Audrey Richards also noted that, "throughout the ceremony [*chinamwali*] the *vinyao* dancers in masks representing various animals such as the hare, elephant, antelope or vulture, and costumes of wicker and grass, perform after each meal and sometimes tease and beat the girl."⁷³ It was also the cruel treatment that women received from *nyau* dancers at *chinamwali* ceremonies that Christian missionaries capitalised on in their campaign to have *nyau* suppressed by the colonial government.⁷⁴

⁷¹MNA, NSI/23/6, Correspondence – A.G.O. Hodgson to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 25/4/27.

⁷²J.M. Schoffeleers, *The Lower Shire Valley: Its Ecology, Population Distribution, Ethnic Divisions and Systems of Marriage* (Limbe, 1968) p.81.

⁷³See Audrey Richards, *Chisungu: A Girls's Initiation Ceremony among the Bemba of Northern Rhodesia* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1956), p.178.

⁷⁴For a Christian position on the involvement of *nyau* in *chinamwali* ceremonies see, MNA, NC1/21/2, J. Jackson, "Chinyau." Isabel Phiri also argues that the DRCM banned *chinamwali* because of its association with *nyau*. It claimed that "the initiation of a 'pagan girl' was accompanied by cruelty and degradation." See Phiri, *Women Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, p. 55.

Due to the transformation of *nyau* into a male initiation and other developments, “during the early 1920s *nyau* expanded at an unprecedented rate, and membership in various societies increased dramatically.”⁷⁵ However, growth was not the only change that *nyau* witnessed in the early decades of colonial rule.

This so called secret society has now become so large that its members will fairly and readily disclose its procedure and secret words to even a missionary and district resident. ...*even women, although not allowed to dance are now admitted to help in the construction of the figures which was the secret of all its mysteries*[emphasis added].⁷⁶

From this, one would be tempted to conclude that Chewa women were consolidating their power in *mbumba* lineages by gaining some control in the Chewa men’s secret society. It would seem this was not the case. Again, Hodgson reminds us that “the mchewa, although matripotestal is not an ardent feminist and would hardly have taken that step if he had any desire to guard its secrets zealously.”⁷⁷ In fact, Chewa women seem to have lost their social status, and to an extent power, to men through *nyau*’s involvement in *chinamwali*. Perhaps Gerhard Kubik best explains how this was accomplished, when he remarks:

⁷⁵Woods, “Struggle for Lineage,” p. 9.

⁷⁶MNA, NS1/23/6, Correspondence – A.G.O. Hodgson to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 25/4/27.

⁷⁷Ibid.

Women ceased to be honoured as the progenitors of the tribe during the completion of *Chinamwali* and instead had to sit before *Nyau- akapoli* in the typical ritual attitude- hands and legs stretched out horizontally, glances directed downward.⁷⁸

What is striking in this development is that Chewa women allowed men, who were previously regarded as marginal members of the *mbumba* lineage, to invade *chinamwali* and subordinate them. In fact, it was the leaders of *chinamwali*, the *anankungwi*, who invited *nyau* dancers to help with the instruction of the initiates. The question then is why did this happen? When asked this question most informants echoed Rangeley's observation that it was to discipline the initiates. As Felesiya Mayaya remembered:

In those days some girls were not following our customs. They were getting pregnant before their *mkangali* (initiation). Others did not respect their mothers. The *nyau* dancers put fear and respect for elders into the girls.⁷⁹

While this is true we need to understand that as an evolving institution, *nyau* reflected "the political and economic realities of contemporary circumstances."⁸⁰ As such, the degradation of women in *nyau* reflected their changing status in society at large. We noted above that the emerging political economy of the colonial period marginalised Chewa

⁷⁸Gerhard Kubik, *Malawian Music: A Framework for Analysis* (Zomba, 1987) p. 54.

⁷⁹Interview, Kachapila with Felesiya Mayaya, Msumba Village, T.A. Nthondo, Ntchisi, 9/5/97.

⁸⁰Kaspin, "Chewa Visions and Revisions of Power," p.34.

women to a considerable extent. That is, politically and economically Chewa men subjugated Chewa women. Ritually, this was reflected in *nyau*. It is in this context that *nyau*'s debasement of female initiates in particular and Chewa women in general should be understood.

The transformation of *nyau* from an association of outsiders into a male initiation also reveals the changing status of Chewa men. Both Kings Phiri and Isabel Phiri argue that women, as reproducers of the *mbumba* lineage, were given considerable symbolic and social respect in Chewa communities. This was traditionally demonstrated by the celebration of women and not men's transition into adulthood with elaborate rituals.⁸¹ As we saw above, the transformation of *nyau* into a male initiation coincided with married Chewa men's assumption of increased power in the *mbumba* lineage, among other factors. As such, the transformation of *nyau* into an initiation rite was one way of ritually acknowledging change in the status of men in Chewa communities. "*Nyau* thus became as dignified as *chinamwali* and the two institutions operated side by side."⁸²

As noted above, another problem the *mbumba* lineage faced in the early decades of colonial rule was the loss of *akamwini* to centres of

⁸¹K. Phiri, "Some Changes," and I. Phiri, *Women and Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*.

⁸²Interview, Kings Phiri with Chintekwe Mkathama Mwale and Kantepa Jere, Mkanthama Village, T.A. Msakambewa, Dowa, 20/3/74.

capitalist development. The root cause of this problem was the imposition of a hut tax and white settlers' recruitment of African labour. In 1896, Harry Johnston imposed a three shillings per hut tax on the Chewa, which local administrative officers preferred to collect in cash, though money was hardly obtainable beyond the Shire Highlands before 1905. The imposition of hut taxation on Chewa had disastrous effects on family life.

The social consequences of the enforcement measures that would be involved were not foreseen. Men and women were often seized and taken to the *boma* (government central station) as hostages for failing to pay tax, while husbands who could not pay tax for their wives and even for their parents-in-law became objects of ridicule. This sometimes strained their marriages.⁸³

In order to earn money with which to pay taxes Chewa men were coerced to work for Europeans. Hence, some Chewa men were recruited for public works projects like road building, for *mtenga-tenga* (head portering) and for work on European plantations in the Shire Highlands. After 1903, others migrated to capitalist centres in other European colonies in southern Africa to work on plantations and mines. It is also significant to note that it was the policy of the colonial government in Nyasaland that the central region serve as a labour reserve for the farms and mines of Southern and Northern Rhodesia and South Africa,

⁸³Phiri, "Some Changes," p. 270.

especially in the period before the 1920s. This had a negative impact on Chewa families.

This loss of labour had a devastating effect on traditional Chewa lineages. Many women became abandoned ones as their husbands went away never to return.⁸⁴

The problem of the loss of *mkamwini* labour to other centres of capitalist development was compounded by the introduction of tobacco in some parts of central Malawi as a peasant-grown cash crop in the 1920s. Tobacco is a labour intensive cash crop and such communities depended on the labour of *akamwini* in its production.⁸⁵ Tobacco growing caused other problems as well. Some Chewa men were not comfortable growing tobacco in their wives' villages because of the attitude of some in-laws and shortage of land. So they preferred to either work as migrant labourers or ask to take their wives to their own maternal villages. Also, instances of disputes over proceeds from tobacco and in-laws accusing their *akamwini* of laziness were common. One obvious result of this was an increase in 'abandoned' women.⁸⁶

Again, *nyau* came to the rescue of the lineage elders. It became a way of earning money and other forms of wealth to balance the

⁸⁴Woods, "Struggle for Lineage," p. 10.

⁸⁵Kachapila, "The Role of Women in Cash Crop Production in Central Malawi."

⁸⁶ Interview, Hendrina Kachapila with Samuel Sakudula, Chiwaliwali Village, T.A. Kalumo, Ntchisi, 25/7/93.

enticement of wages in more advanced capitalist centres of Malawi and beyond. According to traditions from various parts of central Malawi, *nyau*'s extractive features can be traced back to its origins. It is maintained that the dance emerged during famines and droughts when marginal members of the community performed, seeking food from their wealthier neighbours. Take this tradition from Dowa, for instance.

A long, long time ago, there was a man in Nkanthama's village of Phokela who was a specialist dancer. He used to entertain many people. People followed and gave him gifts so as to induce him to dance again. He made wealth this way. Seeing this, the chiefs became jealous and resolved to control the dance and make it part of their *mizinda*.⁸⁷

It is not hard to imagine how *nyau* became a crucial means of redistributing surplus within the lineage.⁸⁸ While *nyau* had always solicited wealth from other members of Chewa society, there is no question that its extractive element became more pronounced and aggressive with the establishment of colonial rule and the development of capitalism. Rangeley observed this in Nkhotakota.

⁸⁷Interview, Kings Phiri with Chintekwe Nkanthama Mwale and Kantepa Jere, Nkanthama Village, T.A. Msakambewa, Dowa, 20/3/74.

⁸⁸For a discussion on Nyau's economic function see, Schoffeleers, "The Nyau Societies," p.48. Also see MNA, S/23/2 – Correspondence District Commissioner, Fort Manning to Chief Secretary, 10/6/38 and Chief Secretary to All Provincial and District Commissioners, 26/5/38.

Nowadays, in the hills, gangs of *nyau* travel about the countryside openly terrifying people and committing all sorts of excesses, such as demanding food and beer – seizing fowls and goats.⁸⁹

Another colonial official also noted that *nyau* was “ a large revenue producing item, and it is this what makes it difficult to replace.”⁹⁰ In addition, it was the alleged use of force when demanding gifts from people, among other factors, that Rev. Jackson dwelt on in the Christian missionaries’ campaign against *nyau*. Responding to accusations that *nyau* members were terrorising people, Hodgson downplayed the alleged intimidation associated with *nyau*’s extractive activities.

While the majority of the proceedings take place in a private place where only initiated men and any women are present of their own free will, the dancers occasionally come into the village and go round the houses for *masupo* (small presents). On these occasions non-members are approached and generally respond without reluctance, and I have been unable to obtain any evidence of definite extortion or of habitual commission of offences which people are afraid to report. Small fines are inflicted on various offences, such as using the wrong term in the construction of the figures *and these with the masupo are divided among the performers at the conclusion of the ceremonies* [emphasis added].⁹¹

Nyau was an important means of appropriating money and other forms of wealth in an environment where earning cash was becoming more and

⁸⁹MNA, NCK 6/1/1, W.H.J. Rangeley, “Some Notes on Nyau in Kotakota District.

⁹⁰MNA, S2/23/2 – Correspondence - District Commissioner, Cholo, to the Chief Secretary, June 1938.

⁹¹MNA, NS1/23/6, Correspondence – A.G.O. Hodgson to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 25/4/27.

more important. Apart from buying the necessities of life like food and clothing it was important for meeting tax obligations. Men and women interviewed stated that as a growing trend *nyau* demand cash more than any other form of wealth. As Adiel Gidala remembered:

In most villages it was not uncommon for *nyau* dancers to insist that non-members (*osameta*) who violated *nyau* rules settle their fines in cash. Sometimes they held them hostage until their relatives paid the fines. *Nyau* adherents were particularly hard on Christians.⁹²

Nyau played an important role in shifting the balance of power in the *mbumba* lineage as a response to changes wrought by the slave trade, Ngoni invasions, Christian missionary teachings, colonialism and capitalism. However, their efforts did not go unchallenged. The control of the *mbumba* lineage in the Chewa areas of central Malawi was a source of a bitter struggle between *eni mizinda* (lineage or village chiefs) and adherents of *nyau* on the one hand and Christian missionaries and mission converts on the other. It has been demonstrated in much of the literature, for example, how both parties redoubled their efforts at proselytising among the Chewa especially in the period after World War I. In fact, Schoffeleers and Linden note a connection between the expansion of Christian missions and the revival and growth of *nyau* in the 1920s.⁹³

⁹² Interview, Kachapila with Adiel Gidala, Chipokosa Village, Ntchisi, 15/9/97.

⁹³Schoffeleers and Linden, "The Resistance of Nyau Societies," p. 260.

If there is one issue on which all Christian missionary parties in central Malawi agreed on, it was their objection to *nyau*. Both the Presbyterians and Catholics denounced *nyau* chiefly on the following grounds:

That it interferes with the liberty of the subject by forcing people to join; it is blasphemous and sacrilegious; an obstacle to the development of the native by keeping children away from school.⁹⁴

And the missionaries had just the solution to the problem: the suppression of *nyau* by the colonial government. The question was first raised in August 1922 when the White Fathers at Likuni and the DRCM at Nkhoma in Lilongwe complained that *nyau* hindered their work. For instance, a report from Louis Villy of the Likuni Catholic Mission showed the effect of *nyau* on the attendance at their schools.⁹⁵ The missionaries suggested that the government should issue a warning to the chiefs and village headmen. The government approved this and in January 1923 the Provincial Commissioner, Central Province reported that since the headmen had been warned the attendance at many schools had increased.

The question of missionaries' objection to *nyau* resurfaced in January 1927 when a deputation of Christian missionaries informed the

⁹⁴MNA, NS1/23/6, Correspondence – A.G.O. Hodgson to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 25/4/27.

⁹⁵MNA, NC1/21/2, Louis Villy, "The Nyau and Schools of Likuni Mission," 21/8/22.

Governor that they felt strongly that *nyau* formed a grave political danger and suggested that government should obtain a report from the Rev. J. Jackson. The report furnished in March 1927 firmly opposed *nyau*. The government then asked Hodgson to investigate the allegations. His report, received the same month, “controverted the allegations made by Mr. Jackson and the Acting Provincial Commissioner supported Mr. Hodgson.”⁹⁶ The question was discussed in the Executive Council and Dr. Sanderson, an ethnographer, was asked to prepare a memorandum on the subject. Not unlike Hodgson, his July 1927 report opposed the attitude of the missions. In October of the same year a “deputation of native Christians” urged the Acting Provincial Commissioner to suppress *nyau*. As a result the Executive Council instructed the Acting Provincial Commissioner that “the Vinyau was to be watched to see that it did not interfere with those natives who did not wish to attend or that it did not prevent children attending school.”⁹⁷

It would seem that the problem of *nyau* refused to go away because in June 1928, Father Roy of the Likuni Mission raised the question of two assault cases at Lilongwe involving *nyau* adherents. For once, the Senior Provincial Commissioner agreed that “the organisation was getting

⁹⁶MNA, NS1/23/6, Correspondence – A.G.O. Hodgson to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 25/4/27.

⁹⁷ MNA, NS1/23/6, Correspondence – A.G.O. Hodgson to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 25/4/27.

rather out of hand and that a special investigation should be made.”⁹⁸

Similarly, in August 1928 opponents of *nyau* from Dedza alleged that:

Natives were practically compelled to belong to Vinyau and that labour supply suffered owing to prolonged absence at the dances which the missions also objected to on the grounds of immorality. They resolved that the government should point out a Court of Inquiry on the subject.⁹⁹

However, the colonial government decided “ that no useful purpose would be served by a special inquiry and that no drastic interference was necessary or desirable.”¹⁰⁰ Moreover, some administrators such as Hodgson cautioned the government against suppressing *nyau*.

I have no hesitation in saying that complete prohibition now would be as revolutionary in effect as the interdiction of a popular amusement in England. Indeed, a rumour of such a contingency was circulated last year, and the cry might be heard: “Let us go to the *boma* and let the *askaris* [native soldiers] kill us first.”¹⁰¹

Consequently, the colonial government adopted a relatively hands-off approach and sympathised with *nyau*. Responding to the missions’ accusations against *nyau* Hodgson charged as follows:

There is no doubt that the allegations made against the *Chinyau* are exaggerated and the result of a mentality that is incapable of seeing natural things from a native point of view. The Christian missions should rely rather on their teaching and influence for good than on the power of the law to check what they consider to

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

be immorality. As regards the absenteeism of children from school by reason of *Chinyau*, it may be that other causes operate such as dullness of the education offered, seasonal work or leisure, reaction of parents to the antagonism of the Missions, too close a connection between religion and education. If the *Dzinyau* masks are so fashioned to ridicule European institutions it is simply retaliation for the interference and ridicule of their own institutions by the European.¹⁰²

As far as the government was concerned it was not necessary to interfere in *nyau's* activities because transformation from within was already underway. Take Hodgson again:

I am entirely in sympathy with the aspirations of the Missions, but I think that their commendable zeal sometimes inclines them to underrate the remarkable adaptability with which the native has reacted in the last three decades to the gigantic upheaval in the very fundamentals of his social and magico-religious life. In view of the changes achieved in native thought and custom during the last twenty years, I am confident that with the continued spread of education and social amenities engendered by increase of industry, earning facilities and wealth, the practices now objected to will gradually disappear. I do not even think that the proscription of *Vinyau* would accelerate progress. Many tribes which have no *Vinyau* are far more immoral and a substitute would speedily be found if necessary.¹⁰³

To emphasize his position Hodgson reiterated that,

The *Vinyau* and kindred initiations are the roots of a V-shaped genealogical tree, the upper branches of which are wide flung and bear the succulent fruits of our present day education. We wish to produce the same fruit for the native but we shall not do so by

¹⁰²Ibid., In the 1920s Nyau started incorporating masks and characters representing Joseph, the Virgin Mary and even the colonial governor in a satirical manner that clearly expressed the subordination of those influences by Chewa.

¹⁰³MNA, NS1/23/6, Correspondence – A.G.O. Hodgson to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 25/4/27.

excessive pruning of the delicate plant. Its cultivation is not to be left to the unqualified treatment of the missionaries but is the work of expert gardeners, educationalists, doctors and administrators.¹⁰⁴

And it was this principle that the colonialists stuck to throughout much of the colonial period.

This chapter has demonstrated how *nyau* redefined relations in the *mbumba* lineage in accordance with developments the Chewa witnessed from mid 19th century. Thanks to *nyau* and the relatively hands-off approach the colonial state adopted towards its activities, the *mbumba* lineage survived the effects of the slave trade, Ngoni invasions, the spread of Christian missionary teachings, the imposition of colonial rule and the development of capitalism. *Nyau* accomplished this by ensuring that relations between Chewa men and women remained ambivalent and negotiable. Allowing men ritually to gain increased importance in *nyau* and indeed in Chewa communities as a whole not only gave power to men but also ensured their continued involvement in the *mbumba* lineage. So, while female prestige declined as evidenced by the debasement of women by *nyau*, some important aspects of the matrilineal system such as matrilocal marriage were preserved. However, it is interesting that the status of the lineage guardians, *ankhoswe*, did not diminish. As controllers of *mizinda* in their villages, the lineage

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

elders still exercised a lot of authority. It is perhaps best to conclude with the thoughts of a Chewa elder, who, when asked what changes matriliney had experienced in her area simply answered:

We still maintain strong ties with our *mbumba* lineage. Those who work in towns usually retire to their maternal villages, as such most people maintain a house and a garden in their village. Maternal uncles still act as *ankhoswe* for their sisters and their children. In case of death people are still buried in their mothers' villages. Yes, things have changed a lot, but we still belong to our mothers' people.¹⁰⁵

As noted above *nyau* was not the only ritual among the Chewa. Women had their own initiation rites, *chinamwali*, which have been part of Chewa society for even longer than *nyau*. One of the conclusions coming out of this chapter is that the developments in Chewa communities from mid 19th century tended to undermine the position and status of Chewa women in religious, economic, political and social realms. Also, we noted above that *chinamwali* served as a means through which the Chewa accorded symbolic respect to women as progenitors of the lineage. It will be interesting to find out what *chinamwali* meant to Chewa women in the context of the colonialism, capitalism and Christianity. In the next chapter we place *chinamwali* in the wider context of Chewa society.

¹⁰⁵Interview, Kachapila with Mai Lenasi, Chiwaliwali Village, T.A. Kalumo, Ntchisi, 14/5/97.

CHAPTER THREE

CHINAMWALI AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN COLONIAL CENTRAL MALAWI

It is during the initiation rites that women's representations of themselves and of their position in... society are most forcefully and completely expressed. It is thus possible to use women's initiation as a starting-point for a discussion of the female perspective.¹

In *Gender Rituals: Female Initiation in Melanesia* (1995), Nancy Lutkehaus and Paul Roscoe bemoan anthropologists' and indeed other scholars' neglect of female initiation. As they put it:

With few exceptions (e.g., Boddy 1982,1989, Talle 1993), we have failed to provide grounded studies of female circumcision, clitoridectomy, and infibulation in their cultural and normative contexts, we have also signally failed to examine female initiation as a whole. Thirty years ago, Brown (1963:837) characterized Richards's (1956) monograph on Bemba female initiation as still "the most complete and detailed description of a girl's initiation ceremony." The sad fact, as La Fontaine (1985:162) has noted is that the observation remains true today as it was then. When attention is paid to female initiation, moreover, that attention is all too often an analytical afterthought – as though female initiation were merely an appendage to, or an imitation of male initiation.²

Karen and Jeffery Paige voiced similar sentiments in 1981 when they remarked that "menarcheal ceremonies, unlike male circumcision, have

¹Henrietta Moore, *Space, Text and Gender. An Anthropological Study of the Marakwet of Kenya* (London: and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.173.

² Nancy Lutkehaus and Paul Roscoe, *Gender Rituals: Female Initiation in Melanesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp. XIII-XIV.

not produced an abundant theoretical and research literature.”³ As we shall see below, this neglect particularly by historians is disturbing for a number of important reasons. This study of *chinamwali* (female initiation ceremonies) among the Chewa of central Malawi aims to contribute to recent scholarly efforts redressing this lacuna.

Female initiation has a long history in Malawi and is still commonly practiced among most matrilineal societies such as the Nyanja, Mang'anja, Lomwe, Yao and Chewa. However, much of what we know about the history of female initiation ceremonies in Malawi deals with the experiences of Christian missionary groups, especially with how they dealt with various initiation rites in areas where they established their missions. The studies in question adequately demonstrate how most Christian churches initially adopted an uncompromising attitude towards initiation rites. Scholars maintain that measures were taken to accommodate them only after suppressing initiation ceremonies failed.⁴

⁴ For details on how various Christian missionaries dealt with initiation ceremonies see, J.C. Chakanza, “The Unfinished Agenda: Puberty Rites and the Response of the Roman Catholic Church in Southern Malawi, 1901-1994,” *Religion in Malawi*, No. 5 (1995), pp. 3-7; Felix Chingota, “A Historical Account of the Attitude of Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian towards Initiation Rites,” *Religion in Malawi, Malawi*, No. 5 (1995), pp.13-21. See also, Ian Linden and Jane Linden,

Catholics, Peasants and Chewa Resistance; Stuart, “Christianity and the Chewa,” and J.L. Pretorius, “An Attempt at Christian Initiation in Nyasaland,” *The International Review of Missions*, No. 39 (1950).

Consequently, much of the available literature focuses on the missionaries' activities and/or on African societies' reactions to them. In other words, little attention is devoted to the critical analysis of the initiation rites and how they related to the social, economic and political structures of the societies in which they were practiced. It is noteworthy that a number of colonial ethnographers and administrators, based on their observations of female initiation in colonial Malawi, published a number of articles on the subject in anthropological journals.⁵ While such works are valuable sources of historical information, they are more descriptive than analytical.

More recently Wiseman Chirwa has studied the wider context of the *nsondo* rite for Yao girls on the Shire Highlands estates in southern Malawi.⁶ The importance of studying female initiation ceremonies in relation to their contexts can not be over-emphasized. As Lutkehaus reminds us:

To consider female initiation in isolation from its larger cultural and temporal contexts is to obscure the role these rites often play in social processes that intimately connect the creation of

⁵ See for instance, Lucy Mair, "A Yao Girl's Initiation," *Man*, Vol. LI (1951). Also, A.G.O. Hodgson, "Notes on the Achewa and Angoni of Dowa District, Nyasaland," *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. LXIII (1933), and Rangeley, "Notes on Chewa Tribal Law."

⁶ W.C. Chirwa, "Women, Gender and Production on Colonial Malawi's Estates," 1995 (unpublished manuscript).

personhood and gender identity to the political economy and cosmology of society as a whole.⁷

To illustrate the importance of studying initiation rites in this manner let us briefly consider what Chirwa observed in some of the lessons involved in the *nsodo* rites. Chirwa's study reveals that through the performance of dramatized sexual acts and physical punishments, women's private parts and bodies were physically invaded and conquered to serve the desires of men in society. It also notes "frequent reference to the 'satisfaction' of men's desires. [Giving] the impression, albeit a wrong one, that women lived their sexual life and expressed their femininity in relation to the physical and emotional fulfillment of men."⁸ However, when Chirwa placed these observations into a wider context it was evident that:

Given the lack of security on the estates, coupled with the rapid turn over of male wage labourers and tenants, it was imperative for the women to satisfy the emotional and subsistence needs of their men so as to keep them in the family. Emotional satisfaction was also important for the social reproduction of male labour on a daily basis. The male wage labourers and tenants had to be constantly rejuvenated. The women's provision of sexual satisfaction, subsistence, and physical comfort was the basis on which male labour was socially reproduced on the daily basis.⁹

⁷ N.C. Lutkehaus, "Feminist Anthropology and Female Initiation in Melanesia," in Lutkehaus and Roscoe (eds.), *Gender Rituals*, p.13.

⁸ Chirwa, "Women, Gender and Production," p. 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

A number of issues in the available literature emphasize the importance of Chirwa's approach in the study of female initiation. It is a well-documented fact that many *mbumba* lineage leaders, most of whom were men, fervently opposed missionaries' interference in initiation ceremonies.¹⁰ For instance, Kings Phiri argues that the elders acted in this manner because the missionaries attacked the essence of Chewa society. The rites played an important role in "offering sex education, emphasizing the spiritual aspects of fertility, instruction in correct social behaviour, respect for elders and authority, and the need for endurance of physical hardship."¹¹ A look at the political economy of the Chewa reveals that there was more to the elders' attitude. *Chinamwali* and *nyau* initiation rites served a crucial economic function in Chewa society for which the elders had no alternative when the missionaries tried to suppress *chinamwali* and *nyau*.

Similarly, in her examination of *chinamwali* ceremonies among Chewa women of central Malawi, Isabel Phiri observed that female lineage elders who served as initiation instructors (*anankungwi*) oppressed younger women in the lineage. She maintains that the older

¹⁰ See for example, Stuart, "Christianity and the Chewa;" I.A. Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*; Ian and Jane Linden, *Catholics, Peasants and Chewa Resistance*.

¹¹ K.M. Phiri, "Some Change," p.268.

women perpetuated “oppressive customs” that humiliated younger women and denied them their full humanity in society. She also noted:

The girl underwent sex education that emphasized techniques for pleasing her future husband and to treat him like a king. Although the man went through the nyau-initiation ceremony for men, he was not told how to please his wife sexually. *Thus one can argue that this initiation ceremony worked to the advantage of men rather than women* [emphasis added].¹²

From Phiri’s vantage point in the 1990s, the preoccupation of a Chewa woman with “techniques for pleasing her future husband” appeared degrading and oppressive. Yet placing that ritual in the wider context of patrilineal Ngoni invasions, slave trading, Christianity, colonialism and capitalism reveals a different picture.

In light of this, the chapter examines the social, economic and political history of Chewa communities that explain the form female initiation took. It seeks to demonstrate that, like the *nsondo* rite on the Shire Highland estates, *chinamwali* reworked social relations in Chewa society in the context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries’ developments discussed in Chapter two. This is to emphasize the creative power of rituals such as *chinamwali* to not only preserve endangered values but also to respond to and influence political and economic conditions at any given moment in history. More important it

¹² I. Phiri, “The Initiation of Chewa Women of Malawi,” p.14.

challenges the current literature's overemphasis on the evils of female initiation by finding out how Chewa women themselves viewed *chinamwali*. The rites played a crucial role in reconstructing a more representative image of a Chewa woman in a changing colonial environment.

3.1: Female Initiation: An Overview

Female initiation as an area of study has been subjected to a considerable marginalisation because of the tendency to see female rites as poor imitations of male initiation, among other factors.¹³ Nonetheless, some scholars, especially anthropologists, have done a number of important studies on the subject.¹⁴ What these scholars have written on female initiation in other societies is important to this study. Among the questions scholars have dealt with are the following: What are female initiation ceremonies? What purpose do they serve in matrilineal societies? Why do they happen in some societies and not others? Why

¹³ For a comprehensive discussion on why female initiation as an area of study has been marginalized, see Lutkehaus and Roscoe, *Gender Rituals*. Also, Page and Paige, *The Politics of Reproductive Ritual*.

¹⁴ For example see Richards, *Chisungu*; J.K. Brown, "A Cross-cultural Study of Female Initiation Rites," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 65 (1965), pp.837-53; Paige and Paige, *The Politics of Reproductive Ritual*; Moore, *Space, Text and Gender*; Lutkehaus and Roscoe, *Gender Rituals* and Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

is the onset of menstruation usually the focus of the rites? What special purpose do they serve in male-dominated societies?

Of the approaches that have been proposed to explain female initiation ceremonies, the rites of transition perspective is the most widely recognized. In short, this perspective stipulates that female initiation marks initiates' acquisition of new status in society, primarily from childhood to adulthood. The approach proposed by Arnold Van Gennep in 1905 emphasized the distinction between ceremonies associated with biological maturity and the "true female rites of passage," associated with social maturity. Over the years, this distinction has been downplayed because subsequent empirical studies revealed that "most puberty ceremonies for women do coincide with the onset of menstruation."¹⁵

Van Gennep's approach influenced a number of studies on female initiation, including Judith Brown's 1963 cross-cultural survey of female initiation rites. She began with the rites of passage perspective but moved on to explain the absence of female rites in some societies. She argued:

Female initiation rites will occur in those societies in which the young girl continues to reside in the home of her mother after marriage. The purpose of the rites appears to be an announcement of status change both to the initiate and those

¹⁵ Paige and Paige, *The Politics of Reproductive Ritual*, p.21.

around her, made necessary because she spends her adult life in the same setting as her childhood... such rites will not be celebrated in those societies in which the young girl will leave her home and move to that of her husband's family, or to a new home removed from both families. The move itself serves to emphasize the status change to the young girl, and those among whom she will live will think of her as an adult, never having known her as a child.¹⁶

According to Brown female initiation will more likely occur in societies that practice matrilocal/uxorilocal marriage than among those that marry patrilocally. While female initiation has been observed in patrilineal societies, the higher incidence of the rituals in matrilineal societies seems to support the idea that there is a connection between residence patterns and the absence or presence of female initiation. In Malawi, female initiation is primarily practiced in matrilineal societies and this appears to confirm Brown's perspective. Audrey Richards's earlier study in Zambia also falls within this perspective. She reported in the 1930s that female initiation had been observed in most matrilineal societies of central Africa.¹⁷ While some scholars agree with Brown's argument on the connection between matrilocality and female initiation, others challenge her use of the cross-cultural survey method of data collection.¹⁸

¹⁶ Brown, "A Cross-cultural Study," p.841.

¹⁷ For details see Richards, *Chisungu*, p. 172.

¹⁸ There were a series of challenges and rebuttals in the *American Anthropologist* on the issue. For details see for example, Harold Driver,

Using *chisungu*, a female initiation ceremony among the Bemba of Zambia, Audrey Richards draws a connection between the problem of marriage in matrilineal societies and female initiation. Richards states that *chisungu* consists

of a long and rather elaborate succession of ritual acts, which includes miming, singing, dancing and the handling of sacred emblems. In the old days the *chisungu* invariably preceded the marriage of a young girl, and was an integral part of the series of ceremonies by which a bridegroom was united to the family group of his bride, in a tribe in which descent is reckoned through the woman, and in which a man comes to live with his wife's relatives at marriage rather than a woman with her husband's.¹⁹

Of particular interest to this study is Richards' suggestion that there is a connection between matriliney and female initiation. The Bemba of Zambia followed matrilineal descent, practiced uxorilocal marriage and were more agricultural than pastoral. This sort of organization had a number of implications for marriage. Upon marriage a young couple established their household in the wife's village under the authority of her maternal uncles and other elders. Perhaps more important is that the husband had limited rights over his children. As such, parents of the

"Girls Puberty Rites and Matrilocal Residence," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 71(1969), pp. 905-908; J. Brown, "Girls' Puberty Rites: A Reply to Driver," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 72 (1970), pp.1450-1451; H. Driver, "Brown and Driver on Girls' Puberty Rites Again," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 73 (1971), pp. 1261-1262; and J. Brown, "Initiation Rites for Girls: A further Reply," *American Anthropologist*, Vol.73 (1971) pp.1262-1263.

¹⁹ Richards, *Chisungu*, p. 17.

bride were anxious that the husband might take his wife and children to his village since they could not offer large economic incentives to the husband to remain in the wife's village. According to Richards, *chisungu* fulfilled a number of functions. It not only persuaded the husband of the benefits of establishing roots in his wife's village but also ensured that children are affiliated to their mother's lineage.

One of the ways Bemba women persuaded men to establish households in their villages was to feed their son-in-laws for a year or two and provide substantial support for extended periods. In addition,

The honouring of the son-in-law in *chisungu* also enacts the desire of women to attract a young man to make his home in their village. ...women had an unconscious sense of guilt about robbing fathers of their children, children who are so much wanted and which only men can give. The women court men to give them children, but they do not allow them the full rights of a sociological father or *pater*. They deny him ultimate power over his children; perhaps they compensate him by giving him exaggerated respect in the *chisungu* as the procreating male.²⁰

That the bride's parents and other lineage elders were anxious to secure her children's affiliation to their lineage was reflected in the timing of *chisungu*. Marriage was a long process involving various stages, including the betrothal, courtship visits, boy's move to his bride's village, food offerings, handing over of the bride, *chisungu* and finally public consummation of marriage. The husband was given both sexual and domestic rights over his wife during the hand-over of the bride stage.

²⁰ Ibid., p.159.

Having gradually won the right to her domestic services, payment gives him the privilege of taking his young bride to sleep with him. This stage of marriage continues until the young girl is about to reach puberty when her mother will take her away for fear she bears a child before her *chisungu* ceremony.²¹

Marriage was not considered legitimate however until the girl was initiated. Also, once the girl began to prepare for *chisungu*, her husband was denied sexual access to her until the rite was completed. Richards maintains that this was done to ensure that the girl's lineage ritually established their claim to the girl's fertility and her future children. Perhaps this explains why a husband was allowed to have sex with his wife before puberty. There was no danger of pregnancy and ambiguous lineage status.

Richards sees female initiation as a symbolic indicator of structural tensions in society. The tensions have to do with conflicts that marriage produces in a matrilineal setting. Other scholars have modified this view. They maintain that female initiation served more as a means of resolving such conflicts than as a mere indicator of tensions. Consequently, they view female initiation as "an active political tactic by which the rights of the woman's kin group may be protected through a ritual show of force."²²

²¹ Ibid., p.45.

²² Paige and Paige, *The Politics of Reproductive Ritual*, p.120.

Karen and Jeffrey Paige adopt this position in their worldwide study of reproductive rituals. They argue that competition over women's reproductive capacity poses problems in most societies. As such, events in the human reproductive life cycle such as puberty and birth are marked by ritual observances. This is because "at such times the issue of kinship loyalties, especially the loyalties of new or potential members of society, may be subject to transfer, renegotiation or dissolution."²³ Consequently, in societies with inadequate political and economic resources ritual bargaining in the form of female initiation becomes a political necessity. In fact, it remains the only effective means of safeguarding the loyalties of new or potential members of a lineage. Paige and Paige demonstrate that pre-colonial matrilineal societies conform to this pattern because they lacked adequate economic resources since the dominant subsistence activity in most such societies was shifting cultivation, small-scale local industries and hunting.

More recently other scholars have challenged the idea of viewing female initiation as a mark of transition from one state to another. Lutkehaus, Roscoe and others pursue this in *Gender Rituals*, a book that is based on an examination of female initiation in Melanesia. As they put it:

Rather than single threshold events... female initiation rites are part of lengthier temporal processes concerned with the

²³ Ibid., p.43

transformation of females. Female initiation is but one in a series of events that individuals can participate in during their lifetime that contribute toward their achievement of not simply adulthood but "full personhood."...female initiation rituals while theoretically available to all women create differences in status among women as well as between women and men. Thus, initiation does not simply mark the transition from adolescence to adulthood, but contributes to their [women's] potential to become particular kinds of adults.²⁴

To illustrate this point Lutkehaus analyses the *imoaziri*, girl puberty rites in Manam society.²⁵ She argues that while a change of status is reflected in the rituals, there is more to the ritual.

The *imoaziri* can be seen as part of an ongoing process of transition rather than one of complete transformation. It is but one in a series of female rites of passage practiced between childhood and old age that are concerned with aspects of female gender and sexuality and with the transition from the asexuality of childhood to the sexuality of adulthood. In Manam, I would argue that male and female sexuality are not simply natural phenomena but states that must be culturally promoted and controlled.²⁶

Lutkehaus maintains that for a girl to be socially recognized as a sexually active female she has to undergo not only the *imoaziri* but also marriage rites. In fact, this status is not fully achieved until a woman has given birth to at least one child. Moreover, separate terms and rites differentiate women who have given birth to one or two children from

²⁴ Lutkehaus, "Feminist Anthropology and Female Initiation," p. 13.

²⁵ For details see Nancy C. Lutkehaus, "Gender Metaphors: Female Rituals as Cultural Models in Manam," in Lutkehaus and Roscoe (eds.), *Gender Rituals* pp. 183-204.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

those with three or more children. Postmenopausal women have their own term as well.

Implied in this approach is the idea that femininity in societies such as Manam is neither inherent nor stable. It has to be defined and maintained, among other things, through a series of female initiation rites. Among the Chewa of central Malawi, girls and women also go through a number of female initiation rites, at puberty, at marriage and at the birth of the first child. Special respect is also given to postmenopausal women. It is interesting to investigate how Chewa women understood female initiation. Did they view them as a complete transformation or an ongoing process of transition?

In some male-dominated societies female initiation has served to demonstrate a female perspective, reveal the economic and social status of women and mirror the ambivalent nature of gender relations. Henrietta Moore's study of female initiation among the Marakwet of Kenya illustrates this.²⁷ According to Moore, patrilineal, patrilocal Marakwet society accords great importance to men. Ideally, men own all property, make all the important decisions and masculine characteristics define all dominant social values. Also, networks of support and obligation are male because they are based on residence and descent. As a result, the potential of isolation for women is great because the

²⁷ See Moore, *Space, Text and Gender*, pp. 171- 188.

networks exclude them. Perhaps more important is the male view that women are less permanent and less social beings than men are. However, a look at female initiation, claims Moore, reveals that the social ideal of complete male dominance and control is neither a given nor unproblematic.

Female initiation among the Marakwet involves all women in the community in an extended and complex affair that takes place almost every year for a period of two to three months. During the rite women as a group get together and rethink their position as women. Also, a girl's full social and sexual status is recognized because initiation legitimizes women's rights to bear children. The initiation involves many stages that include public circumcision (clitoridectomy), seclusion and the coming out ceremony. Special songs, dances, observances and traditions mark each stage. Many of the themes deal with subordination and power, authority and challenge. The initiates are taught about the difficulties of being a wife, the power of female sexuality, the strength of women as a group and respect for older women and female knowledge in general. The relationship between sexuality, power and men, which reflects the very ambiguous and negotiable nature of gender relations, is emphasized in most of the lessons.

Both the socially dominant male perspective and the somewhat different female point of view are presented to the girls, and this is one of the reasons why the teaching appears contradictory and confusing, not only to the anthropologist, but also to the initiates

themselves. For example, girls are constantly reminded to be faithful and obedient to their husbands while, at the same time, they are enjoined not to agree too quickly to have sexual intercourse on their marriage night. This reinforces the authority of the husband on the one hand, and on the other, makes an explicit link between sexuality and female power, since the girl knows that she will receive stock for consenting to sexual intercourse. On the whole, women view all stock they are promised during early stages of marriage as a kind of payment/reward for their sexual favours and procreative functions. ... women are only too aware that they can use their sexuality as a bargaining power.²⁸

Female initiation also serves as a forum for female solidarity. Although dominant social values in Marakwet society isolate and individualize women, initiation incorporates new wives into a community of women, where long-term networks of support and obligation, separate from those of men are forged. The notion of female impermanence is also challenged because initiation creates ritual connections between successive generations of women. In addition, initiation acknowledges the value of traditional female knowledge that is distinct from male knowledge and from which men are excluded. Related to this is the idea that female initiation among the Marakwet is a long process of transformation because the most secret parts of the rites are known only to old women. In other words, a good portion of what the initiates learn only becomes clear to them when they are old. This also enables older women to exercise power and control over the initiates and younger

²⁸ Moore, *Space, Text and Gender*, p.175.

women. Perhaps Moore best explains what is accomplished through female initiation when she remarks:

The result is a dramaturgical performance of bewildering complexity, where the possible courses of action, the socially approved behaviour and the alternative female perspective are all displayed, almost simultaneously to the initiates. The effect of these performances is to stress that although the female perspective is different from the socially approved male point of view, it is nonetheless of equal status and validity. At the same time, the juxtaposition of male and female perspectives, and the general confusion of competing claims, provides a realistic presentation of the position of women in Endo society and of the negotiable, ambiguous nature of relations between the sexes²⁹

Unlike the Marakwet of Kenya who are patrilineal and practice patrilocal marriage, the Chewa of central Malawi, as mentioned above, are matrilineal and marry matrilocally. However, as we saw in Chapter Two, a number of developments in late 19th and early 20th centuries such as Ngoni invasions, adoption of Christianity and the establishment of colonial rule redefined the Chewa social structure. This in turn affected the way women and men related to each other. In other words, gender relations in Chewa society became more and more ambivalent and negotiable. This was not a new development in Chewa society. For instance, although married men as *akamwini* were viewed as marginal members of *mbumba* lineages they could at times use their status of

²⁹ Moore, *Space, Text and Gender*, p.176.

procreating males as a bargaining power.³⁰ This became more pronounced as other alternatives to uxori-local marriage became available to Chewa men, opening more spaces in which married men could renegotiate their involvement in *mbumba* lineages.³¹ It will be interesting to explore if the changing nature of gender relations in Chewa society was reflected in *chinamwali*.

3.2: Female Initiation among the Chewa

As pointed out above, this is a study of the historical contexts in which *chinamwali* occurred. Consequently, it is important that we briefly look at the history of *chinamwali* in central Malawi. Due to inadequate historical evidence it is very difficult to determine exactly when and why Chewa communities started to initiate girls and women. Nevertheless, it would seem from what historians and other scholars have written that

³⁰ “Both Chewa men and women were aware that women as reproducers of the *mbumba* lineage could not fulfill that function without their input (men’s). As such, it was not uncommon for married men to use this fact to advance their interests. Moreover, despite residing in their wives’ villages most men maintained ties with their maternal lineage. As a result they sometimes used such threats as ‘I can always go back to my village and marry my cousin’ to get their way.” Interview Kachapila with Samuel Sakudula, Chiwalwali Village, T.A. Kalumo, Ntchisi, 11/10/99.

³¹ In Chapter Two, we noted for example, that even prior to the late 19th century alternatives other than uxori-local marriage were available to some Chewa men. It was also noted that *nyau* provided a way for Chewa men as marginal members of *mbumba* lineages to circumvent the lineages’ political authority and acquire some status and wealth.

prior to the late 19th century *chinamwali* had been practiced among the Chewa for a long time.

Using oral traditions and other historical sources, scholars of Chewa history trace *chinamwali* back to the Maravi Empire period. Oral traditions held mostly by the Phiri ruling clan maintain that all territorial chiefs (*eni dziko*) possessed a bundle of charms believed to contain mystical powers (*mzinda*). Kalonga, the paramount chief, granted the charms to the territorial chiefs. Through a process known as *kuzika mzinda* (to transplant a *mzinda*), the territorial chiefs passed on some of the mystical powers to subordinate local rulers. This process empowered the local rulers to hold *chinamwali*, organize *nyau* and conduct death rituals.³³ Using slightly different oral traditions female initiation has also been traced back to the pre-Maravi period, to the time when the Chewa were ruled by female chiefs believed to be descendants of Mangadzi, a Banda ancestress.³⁴ Those who subscribe to these traditions argue that the female chiefs possessed mystical powers, which enabled them to

³³ See for instance, Phiri, "Chewa History in Central Malawi," p.75.

³⁴ Members of the Banda clan insist that their ancestors played influential roles in the performance of ritual functions such as rain cults, *chinamwali* and *nyau*, while those of the Phiri dominated political positions. For details see Phiri, "Chewa History and the Use of Oral Traditions," pp.47-51 and Schoffeleers, "Towards the Identification," pp.47-60.

conduct their subjects through periods of transition, such as from childhood to adulthood.

From this, it can be concluded that *chinamwali* has probably had a long history in central Malawi. In fact, female initiation may be as old as Chewa society. Unfortunately, the scarcity of historical sources for the earlier period makes it difficult to study the historical contexts in which *chinamwali* was practiced. Consequently, it is impossible to establish a baseline from which to assess developments in female initiation. As a result, the chapter starts with mid to late nineteenth century, a period, as we have seen in Chapter two, of violent and rapid change and one that subjected important Chewa political and socio-economic structures and institutions to considerable stress.

We noted that developments in this period negatively affected the *mbumba* lineage and extensively transformed *nyau*. Given that the *mbumba* lineage, *nyau* and *chinamwali* were interrelated, it is likely that changes in the first two institutions affected *chinamwali*. The argument here therefore is that although *chinamwali* had by the late 19th century been part of Chewa society for ages, it is quite likely that the *chinamwali* colonial ethnographers, administrators and Christian missionaries observed in Chewa communities in the first decades of colonial rule was a more recent redefinition.

In the early colonial period female initiation was observed in most parts of central Malawi where the Chewa settled. Although the initiation rites as practiced in various parts of central Malawi during this period showed some variation, they had important common characteristics. First, the right to hold *chinamwali* was highly guarded in most Chewa communities and was normally the privilege of chiefs. Second, a series of initiation rites occurred at various stages in Chewa women's life cycle, especially at puberty, pregnancy and the birth of her first child. Third, *nyau* became increasingly involved in female initiation, especially puberty rites.

According to colonial administrators such as Hodgson and Rangeley as well as Chewa women and men interviewed it was considered a serious offence for unauthorized persons other than chiefs (*eni mizinda*) to hold *chinamwali*. While "not every village had *mzinda*... every village was subordinate to some *mwini mzinda*, since the entire country was divided up among *eni mzinda*."³⁵ As such, chiefs or village headmen who controlled *mizinda* wielded enormous power and zealously guarded their privilege. Consequently, in communities with more than one *mbumba* lineage it was not uncommon for disputes to arise as to which lineage guardian or *mwini mbumba* should conduct initiation ceremonies. The result, according to most male interviewees, was a split

³⁵ Rangeley, "Notes on Cewa Tribal Law," p.21.

of the *mzinda* so that each could have the right to hold his own initiation ceremonies.

It was thus stated that dispute over *mzinda* was one of the commonest causes of a split between *mbumba* lineages and collateral cousins. This is because once the guardian of a lineage (*mwini mbumba*) was armed with a *mzinda* he moved his *mbumba* and established a village in a new place.³⁶ For example, it is maintained that Mkanthama and Dzoole, chiefs in Dowa well known to this day, were sons of sisters born of the same mother who parted after failing to accommodate each other due to disputes over *mizinda*.³⁷

Women and men interviewed emphasized that chiefs or village headmen played a crucial role in *chinamwali*. They all insisted that it was the chief who authorized the performance of female initiation in his *mzinda*. Also, he had to be informed of the first menstruation of all girls in his area. One woman in particular said that, "it was a taboo for the *mwini mzinda* to have sexual intercourse while a girl in his area was

³⁶ Interviews Kachapila with M.C. Chinkhadze and A. Kambale T.A. Chiseka, Lilongwe; and Samuel Sakudula, T.A. Kalumo, Ntchisi. Also see, Hodgson, "Notes on the Chewa and Angoni," p. 131-136; Rangeley, "Notes on Cewa Tribal Law."

³⁷ Interview, Kings Phiri with Chintekwe Mkanthama Mwale and Kamtepa Jere, Mkanthama Village, T.A Msakambewa, Dowa, 20/3/74.

having her first menstruation. That is why he had to be told at once.”³⁸ In addition, the chief also decided when to conduct *mkangali*, the first in a series of female initiation rites. As it will be demonstrated below observation of taboos is not the only factor that explains the chiefs’ involvement in *chinamwali*.

The involvement of chiefs or *mwini mzinda* in *chinamwali* raises a disturbing question. Among the Chewa, *chinamwali* was initially conceived as a purely women’s affair. It was a forum where aspects of the female gender and sexuality were discussed and expressed. Moreover, it enabled older women, notably *anankungwi* (initiation instructors) to exercise power and control over younger women. The requirement of the chiefs’ authorization to conduct what was essentially a women only activity can be read as an invasion of patriarchal power into a women’s world. However, most of the women interviewed insisted that although they sought permission from chiefs to perform *chinamwali*, once that was granted no man interfered in all other aspects of *chinamwali*.³⁹

Chinamwali comprised a number of rites through which Chewa women achieved womanhood. The first, *mkangali*, was for girls who had

³⁸ Interview, Kachapila with Rita Kachigunda, Msumba Village, T.A. Nthondo, Ntchisi, 8/5/97.

³⁹ Interview, Kachapila with Mai Lenasi; Mwasifa Mazoni and Mau Kalimbakantha, Chiwaliwali Village, T.A. Kalumo, Ntchisi 14/5/97.

reached puberty. A point worth noting is that the first stage of *mkangali* occurred at the onset of menstruation. It was a small-scale affair focused on an individual girl. As soon as a girl experienced her first menstruation, commonly referred to as *kugwa pansi* (to fall down) or *kuthyola bano* (to break the reed arrow shaft), she was put in seclusion while the menses lasted. While in confinement, her *phungu* (guardian) and *anankungwi* directed the girl to observe taboos associated with menstruation. For instance, she was instructed not to touch salt.⁴⁰ Also, they showed her how to wear and care for sanitary towels. In addition, the moment the girl completed the first menstruation she was required to have ritual sexual intercourse. It was very rare for a girl to reach puberty without being betrothed. Consequently, it was usually her future husband who performed the ritual sex. After that the husband was not allowed to have sex with the girl again until her *mkagali* was performed. There were occasional cases where a girl experienced her first menstruation before betrothal or when her husband was away. In such instances, the *phungu* or *anankungwi* or *ankhoswe* arranged for another man locally referred to as *fisi* (hyena), to perform the ritual sex.⁴¹

⁴⁰ For a detailed discussion on various taboos associated with menstruation and other aspects of womanhood, see Rangeley, "Notes on Chewa Tribal Law," pp.34-44.

⁴¹ It was the performance of the ritual sexual intercourse by *fisi* that Christian missionaries such the DRCM used, among other factors, to condemn and ban *chinamwali*. For details see Isabel Phiri, *Women*,

The final stage in the *mkangali* rite traditionally took place once a year. It was a large-scale, group-based ritual that included all girls who had experienced their first menstruation in the past year. Initiates then attended the first available *mkangali* after their first menstruation. The girls were rounded up and taken to the initiation hut (*tsimba*) by their *aphungu* (who were usually their female relatives). *Mkangali* lasted for several days during which the initiates lived in seclusion. While in confinement they learned about respect for elders, especially mothers, sexuality and physical endurance, the rights and obligations of maturity and the relationship between wife and husband.⁴² In addition, the initiates learned how to make themselves presentable and attractive.⁴³

Presbyterianism and Patriarchy. Rangeley has argued, however, that it was actually the missionaries who promoted this. As he puts it, "early marriage is frowned upon by the Missions, with the result that many girls are not getting married until long after puberty, but this generally means that a *fisi* has to be called to do the prescribed sexual intercourse and also that the girls have a very considerable sexual license after *chinamwali* before marriage." See Rangeley, "Notes on Chewa Tribal Law," p. 40.

⁴² Interview, Rita Kachigunda, 8/5/97 and Mau Kalimbakantha, 14/6/97. Also see Phiri, "Some Changes," p. 268; and Isabel Phiri, "The Initiation of Chewa Women," p.14.

⁴³ According to most female interviewees it was essential for initiates and indeed women in general to enhance their femininity and meet current standards of beauty. This was achieved in a number of ways. For instance, almost all women had tattoos (*mphini*) on various parts of their bodies. Apart from being beauty marks, the tattoos also conveyed hidden messages to men and other people the women interacted with. Also, special attention was paid to dressing as the District Commissioner for Dowa noted in the early 1930s. "A young woman of marriageable age

On completion of *mkangali* betrothed initiates had ritual sexual intercourse with their husbands and received instructions from *anankungwi* to mark the beginning of their formal married life. For those that were unmarried, the *fisi* performed the ritual sex.

In addition, a special rite marked the first pregnancy of a married Chewa woman. The rite called *chinamwali cha chisamba* (initiation for the first child) lasted for one to three days and was held at a special place called *mtengo wa chisamba*. Among other things, the pregnant woman was instructed on how to take care of her baby and directed to observe the taboos and rituals associated with pregnancy and birth. Among the Chewa it was considered a serious offence and a taboo for a girl to be pregnant or to give birth to a baby before *mkangali*. In such cases, the parents of the girl and of the man responsible paid heavy damages to the *mwini mzinda*. Furthermore, the offending pair underwent a special humiliating initiation ceremony referred to as *chinamwali cha chimbwinda* (to fail or fall miserably). The girl in particular was ridiculed and despised by the whole village.⁴⁴

is regarded as an asset and is particularly well looked after, though she carries out her usual domestic duties. She is dressed with care to such an extent as finances permit, with a view of enhancing her natural charms." See MNA, NCE 2/9/1 – The Status and Treatment of Native Women- (Dowa District).

⁴⁴ As part of their punishment the girl and sometimes the man responsible were paraded around the village with dog intestines draped

3.3: The Wider Context of Chinamwali

In order to understand the resilience of *chinamwali*, rites condemned as offensive from some quarters, it is essential to study the social, economic and political settings in which female initiation was practiced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That is, while *chinamwali* was an inherited cultural form from the Chewa's past, it was creatively adapted as a solution to specific problems that emerged in the economic, social and political history of the Chewa. For example, some lineage elders enhanced the exploitation of *chinamwali* for personal gain as a means of earning money and other forms of wealth. Also, it enabled women to cope in an environment that threatened to erode the economic and social security they enjoyed in Chewa communities. In addition, of all the institutions in the colonial era, it was *chinamwali* that reflected the multiple identities of a Chewa woman.

3.3.1: The Economics of Chinamwali

Nowadays it does occur that a *mwini mzinda* will order *chinamwali* in order to raise funds.⁴⁵

Chewa parents had always been required to pay *nkhuku ya chinamwali* (hoes, local cloth, mats, food) to the *mwini mzinda* before their daughters

around their bodies. For details see J.W. Gwengwe, *Kukula ndi Mwambo* (Blantyre: Dzuka Publishing Company, 1975).

⁴⁵ Rangeley, "Notes on Chewa," p.32.

could participate in *chinamwali*. With the development of the colonial economy, some lineage elders increasingly began to look to the establishment of *mizinda* in general and the performance of *chinamwali* in particular as a means of earning money and other forms of wealth. We noted that when a girl experienced her first menstruation the chief or *mwini mzinda* had to be informed at once. Note that parents had to give the chief a gift when reporting their daughter's maturity. Also, the period between a girl's first period and her *mkangali* was a busy one for her parents and the parents of her husband, in cases where the girl was betrothed. As Rangeley states "the relatives of the boy and girl set about procuring the mats, etc., (nowadays generally cash) for the *nkhuku ya chinamwali* to be given to the *mwini mzinda*."⁴⁶ In addition, we noted that parents of girls who got pregnant before *mkangali* paid hefty fines to the *mwini mzinda*. What is more, in Chapter two, we noted that paramount chiefs granted the right to conduct rituals such as *chinamwali* to minor chiefs in exchange for three to six goats. And in turn the chiefs paid tribute to the paramount chiefs based on the amount of wealth they acquired from holding initiation rites.

It is not difficult to determine that the control of *mzinda* was a profitable means of acquiring wealth. When asked what privileges a chief with *mzinda* enjoyed, elders in Lilongwe simply stated:

⁴⁶ Rangeley, "Notes on Chewa," p.41.

The main privilege was *ulemu* (honour and respect). A chief who did not have a *mzinda* was nothing. To be a real chief you had to procure a *mzinda* for this enabled you to conduct your own initiation ceremonies and to receive initiation fees in form of mats and goats from the parents of those who attended the initiation ceremonies⁴⁷

Moreover, oral testimonies from various parts of central Malawi indicate that chiefs or *eni mzinda* appointed special persons (usually their younger brothers or nephews) to be in charge of *chuma cha chinamwali* (wealth derived from female initiation). They had the responsibility of accepting on behalf of the chiefs all the gifts brought by girls who attended initiation rites.⁴⁸ This also explains why chiefs who controlled *mizinda* safeguarded their positions. This was achieved in a number of ways. First, "any village chief who conducted initiation ceremonies without receiving a *mzinda* was severely punished. He was fined up to thirty goats."⁴⁹ The punishment was worse in cases where minor chiefs did not share wealth derived from initiation ceremonies with *eni dziko*.

In the past, that kind of situation sometimes led to war. The paramount chief felt that a minor chief who behaved in this manner had insulted him. He then mobilized forces with other

⁴⁷ Interview, Kings Phiri with Josiya Chitseka Phiri, Kazyolika Banda, Amon Chadza Banda, Elias Kapantha Banda, Chiwamba Traditional Court, T.A Chadza, Lilongwe, 15/4/74.

⁴⁸ Interview, Kings Phiri with Patisan Ponthoka Kadzamira, Charundu Village, T.A. Chilooko, Ntchisi, 26/3/74.

⁴⁹ Interview, Kings Phiri with Josiya Chitseka Phiri, Kazyolika Banda, Amon Chadza Banda, Elias Kapantha Banda, Chiwamba Traditional Court, T.A Chadza, Lilongwe, 15/4/74.

minor chiefs and raided the insubordinate chief. They looted his village, but more important, the *mwini dziko* withdrew the *mzinda* and gave it to a more congenial subordinate.⁵⁰

Second, “the paramount chiefs shared the wealth that came from *chinamwali* with their councilors as well with *anankungwi* (initiation instructors).”⁵¹

The establishment of colonial rule in Nyasaland and the increased monetization of the economy due to the development of capitalism made earning money and other forms of wealth particularly important. We saw in Chapter Two, for instance how the 1896 imposition of a hut tax on the Chewa, in an environment where earning cash was almost impossible, forced Chewa men to turn to labour migration and head portorage (*mtenga-tenga*), in order to earn the money to pay taxes. Also, we saw how *nyau* became a way of not only earning money and other forms of wealth, but also of curtailing the emigration of young Chewa men enticed by wages in more advanced centers of capitalist development in Nyasaland and beyond. *Nyau* was not the only cultural form that the Chewa used as a money making venture. In fact, the Chewa was not the

⁵⁰ Interview, Kings Phiri with Zephaniya Njawo Banda and Bisayi Kafwafwa Banda, Kafwafwa Village, T.A. Tambala, Dedza, 19/7/74.

⁵¹ Interview Kachapila with Samuel Sakudula, Chiwaliwali Village, T.A. Kalumo, Ntchisi, 11/10/99.

only ethnic group in colonial Malawi that viewed culture as a way of making money.⁵²

Like the case of *nyau*, Chewa lineage elders increasingly exploited *chinamwali* as a means of earning money and wealth in the new monetized environment of colonial Malawi. In other words, while *chinamwali* had served an economic role in pre-colonial Chewa society, this function became even more crucial and prominent during the colonial period. A number of developments in the period after 1850 indicate that this is what happened. As we saw in Chapter Two, colonial central Malawi, especially in the period after 1920, witnessed a rapid spread of *mizinda*. Apart from being a reaction against Christian missionary initiative, the economic aspects associated with *mzinda* account for the expansion.

Eni mizinda 'ate' the wealth that they derived from *chinamwali*. As such many village headmen bought rights to *mzinda* from paramount chiefs. *Chuma cha chinamwali* was wealth from their land and they were entitled to as much of it as possible.⁵³

⁵² The formation of cultural troupes such as Beni among the Yao, Malipenga among the Tonga and Mganda among the Chewa, is a clear indication that the trend of making money from cultural forms was widespread. For instance see, MNA, S2/1/21 Assistant District Commissioner to District Commissioner, Lilongwe, 10/3/22 and MNA, NN1/24/1 District Commissioner, Chintcheche to Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province, 28/2/25.

⁵³ Interview Kachapila with Samuel Sakudula, Chiwaliwali Village, TA Kalumo, Ntchisi, 11/10/99.

Consequently, Rangeley noted that while in the past only chiefs and sub-chiefs could be *eni mzinda*, more and more village headmen were being granted rights to *mzinda*.⁵⁴ Similarly, in 1929 a senior colonial administrator also observed that, “when villages broke up most of the owners of small villages bought the rights [to *mzinda*] from the big landowners. The price was 20 goats. Now almost all the village headmen have the right to hold *chinamwali*, *vinyao* and hunting parties.”⁵⁵

What is perhaps more telling, was the frequency with which *eni mzinda* or chiefs ordered the initiation of girls. We saw above that ordinarily, *mkangali* was an annual affair. That is, all girls who had reached puberty in that year attended a one group-based ceremony. Evidence indicates that this changed with the passage of time and *eni mzinda* ordered *mkangali* at the merest excuse. For instance,

If a *mwini mzinda* dies, his successor may hold a *chinamwali* as soon as he can, so that he can set up with plenty of mats, cash, etc. So also, if a poor *nkhoswe* dies, if he was an important advisor of the chief, the *mwini mzinda* may order a *chinamwali* in order to get goods to give his poor family.⁵⁶

According to some women interviewed the death rituals of any important individual in Chewa villages, such as those responsible for *nyau* and

⁵⁴ Rangeley, “Notes on Cewa Tribal Law,” p.21.

⁵⁵ MNA, NC1/21/2, Correspondence- Chief Secretary to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 23/2/1929.

⁵⁶ Rangeley, “Notes on Cewa Tribal Law,” p.32.

chinamwali, included the performance of *mkangali*. As a result, *mkangali* was more often than not conducted more than once a year.⁵⁷

In addition, the age at which girls could attend *mkangali* also dropped. As noted above, only a girl who had experienced her first period underwent *chinamwali*. However, as Rangeley observed “nowadays she may even attend it before she has menstruated, and girls of nine and ten years of age are some times put through *chinamwali*.”⁵⁸ What is even more significant, girls and boys were enticed and sometimes forced to participate in initiation ceremonies.⁵⁹ Among other factors, this was necessitated by the fact that in order to qualify for *mzinda*, a chief or indeed a village headman had to show that he could usher in many girls for initiation.⁶⁰ Unfortunately, the expansion of *mizinda* and the influence of Christian missions in the colonial era meant that there was competition for eligible initiates. Consequently, some *eni mizinda* resorted to initiating younger girls. The need to earn money and

⁵⁷ Interview, Kachapila with Mai Lenasi; Mwasifa Mazoni; Mau Kalimbakantha, Chiwaliwali Village, TA Kalumo, Ntchisi 14/5/97.

⁵⁸ Rangeley, “Notes on Cewa Tribal Law,” p. 41.

⁵⁹ Interview, Kachapila with Samuel Sakudula; Kings Phiri with Manase Mbobo and Sitima Kavwenje, Mbobo Village, TA Chilooko, Ntchisi, 29/7/74.

⁶⁰ Interview, Kings Phiri with Chapadenga Mwale, Lepiya Kamfuko Banda and Jazeli Fide Mbewe, Chadza Traditional Court, TA Chadza, Lilongwe, 16/4/74.

other forms of wealth would explain such great lengths to which *enimzinda* went to find girls for initiation. And as the account below shows, this also explains why the organisers of *mizinda* particularly resented Christian missionaries' interference in female initiation.

3.3.2: *Chinamwali* and the Changing and Negotiable Nature of Marriage

In Chapter two, we noted that the *mbumba* lineage system as it developed among the Chewa gave considerable social and economic security to women. We also noted that as *akamwini*, Chewa married men had limited rights over their nuclear family. In addition, because women had primary rights in land, men acquired access to it mainly through marriage. At the same time, as we saw in Chapter Two, married men in Chewa society were not entirely powerless and it was not uncommon for them to use their status as procreating male as bargaining power. Nevertheless, it was men, as marginal members of the *mbumba* lineage, rather than women who needed to get married in order to gain economic and social security.

While *chinamwali* in this setting was undoubtedly concerned with the socialization of initiates into womanhood, K. Phiri argues that it was a primarily a way of according symbolic respect to women as reproducers of the *mbumba* lineage evidenced by the fact that initially it was only

women who underwent initiation.⁶¹ Like the Bemba of Zambia, it also seems likely that the Chewa used female initiation, especially *mkangali*, as a means of establishing a ritual affiliation of children to their mother's lineage.⁶² Also, as in *chisungu*, teaching initiates how to satisfy the needs of husbands in *chinamwali* helped to compensate married men for the ambivalent position they occupied in Chewa society.⁶³

We noted in Chapter Two that a number of developments from the middle of the 19th to the early 20th centuries affected the status of married men in Chewa villages. For example, the existence of slave marriage resulting from the slave trade and pawnship enabled some Chewa men to avoid matrilineal marriage. Also, with the settlement of patrilineal groups such as the Ngoni in central Malawi, aspects of Ngoni

⁶¹ Phiri, "Some Changes," p.259.

⁶² Like the Bemba, in Chewa society, marriage was matrilineal and descent followed the female line. In lieu of economic incentives, the Chewa probably used ritual bargaining to safeguard the allegiance of new members to the lineage. This explains why pregnancy before *mkangali* was strongly condemned. Also, it accounts for the fact that a prospective husband was denied sexual access to his bride in the period between her first menstruation and *mkangali* when the girl's kin established the affiliation of future children to her lineage.

⁶³ Interview, Kachapila with Miriam Chibwana, Area 47, Lilongwe, 19/5/97 and Mai Lenasi, Chiwaliwali Village, Ntchisi, 15/5/97. According to most women interviewed, initiates were reminded of the importance of *akamwini* to their village and that it was essential for wives to make it worthwhile for their husbands to remain in the village. It was up to Chewa women to use any means necessary to make their husbands "forget where they came from."

culture like virilocal marriage and patrilineal descent rules were imposed on some Chewa communities. Furthermore, Christian teaching on marriage accorded increased authority and power to Chewa men over their wives and children.

We noted that these changes shifted the balance of power between husbands and wives in Chewa communities. As such, the imposition of colonialism and the development of capitalism further undermined the position of women. The result was that not only did married Chewa men not need to be married in order to prosper, but also Chewa women increasingly became dependent on marriage for economic security. In other words, it was women rather than men who needed to be married.

A lot of changes happened in those days. The government imposed a hut tax on us and some young men went to *wenela* [WNLA]. Some of those who stayed behind asked to take their wives to their own villages. We needed to be married and through *chinamwali* we learned how to please and keep our men.⁶⁴

We also noted that *chinamwali* served as a means of persuading husbands of the benefits of establishing their roots in their wives' villages. This aspect of *chinamwali* became more pronounced in the course of the colonial period. That is, the colonial developments mentioned above intensified the need for Chewa women to make it worthwhile for their husbands to remain in their villages. In this context

⁶⁴ Interview, Kachapila with Felesiya Mayaya, Msumba Village, T.A. Nthondo, Ntchisi, 9/5/97.

chinamwali served as a bargaining tool with which to negotiate the changing nature of marriage in Chewa society. When asked what they learned at *chinamwali*, virtually every woman interviewed mentioned the importance of taking care of the needs of a husband. When asked if they practiced what they learned at *chinamwali*, most answered that they had to do what *anankungwi* instructed them. One woman in particular recalled:

In those days initiates respected their elders. When elders told you something, you did not question them you just did as they said. But today it is not like that. Apart from that, if you did not take care of your husband, you brought problems on yourself. In those days if you had a husband and you did not look after him well, he left and married another woman. If you looked after him well he stayed.⁶⁵

Apparently it was important for women to maintain their marriages even in matrilineal societies where they had the support of other members of the lineage. This was because as Zamwanda Chibisa remarked “there are certain things, such as children that your relatives can not give you.”⁶⁶ In addition:

A woman’s brothers and uncles could only do so much for her. Take my own case as an example, my mother had six children, five girls and one boy. We all got married. Although my brother lived in our village, we did not expect him to provide for all his nieces and nephews. It was my husband who paid for my children’s school fees, clothes and so on. Also, it was naïve to expect your

⁶⁵ Interview, Kachapila with Mupatenji Malenga, Ntchisi, 16/5/97.

⁶⁶ Interview, Kachapila with Zamwanda Chibisa, Ntchisi, 15/5/97.

relatives to help you cultivate your gardens all the time, when they had their own gardens.⁶⁷

Thus, it was important for Chewa women to maintain their marriages.

Most of the women in the study did not draw a direct correlation between *chinamwali's* emphasis on the satisfaction of husbands' desires and Chewa women's increasing dependence on their husbands for economic and social security. However, their testimony points to an emerging trend where husbands fulfilled obligations and responsibilities that *eni mbumba* used to provide in the past. The direct result was that Chewa married men's power and authority over their nuclear families increased.⁶⁸ It is within the context of coping with changes brought about by colonialism and capitalism, among other factors, that Chewa women's preoccupation with "techniques for pleasing their husbands"⁶⁹ needs to be understood.

That many women with the assistance of *chinamwali* lessons were able to maintain the allegiance of their husbands to them and their *mbumba* lineage in an environment where young men had other options

⁶⁷ Interview, Kachapila with Felesiya Mayaya, Msumba Village, T.A. Nthondo, Ntchisi, 9/5/97.

⁶⁸ We saw in Chapter Two that even ritually, married Chewa men acquired considerable power and authority in the *mbumba* lineage as witnessed by *nyau's* infiltration of *chinamwali*.

⁶⁹ Phiri, "The Initiation of Chewa Women of Malawi," p.14.

to matrilineal marriage underscores Chewa women's ability to shape the emerging colonial world. The story of Chewa women's preoccupation with pleasing their husbands stands as a testament, not only to the changing nature of gender relations in colonial society, but also to the success of some Chewa women in negotiating the changing meanings of marriage.

3.3.3: *Chinamwali* and the Remaking of Chewa Women

Apart from teaching Chewa women how to satisfy their husbands, *chinamwali* served a very important function for those who participated in its activities. It celebrated and emphasized the central position that women occupied in Chewa communities. When placed in the context of the marginalization Chewa women were experiencing in most areas of their lives, *chinamwali* played a crucial role in painting a more encompassing image of the position of women in Chewa society. That is, *chinamwali* demonstrated that Chewa women were progenitors of the *mbumba* lineage who were at the same time experiencing an increasing male power in their lives. In order to appreciate this, we need to understand that from mid 19th century the status of Chewa women underwent significant change.

In Chapter Two, we noted that in pre-colonial central Malawi, the main rain cult at Msinja in Lilongwe and other similar cults in various Chewa communities were presided over by women. Because of the

importance the Chewa attached to rain making, women who presided over the cults were respected and revered by other members of the Chewa community. Women who controlled the rain shrines were highly regarded as Kings Phiri's interviews conducted in the 1970s show. Most of the men he interviewed tended to characterize women in pre-colonial Chewa society as subordinate to men. When it came to religion, however, they unanimously conceded that Chewa women wielded a lot of power. The picture that emerges from the interviews is that for a long time, women in Chewa society held the highest religious office in the land.

In addition, the rain prophetesses had political power. Isabel Phiri, who quotes Rangeley, states that it was not uncommon for Makewana, for instance to allot land to chiefs. In fact, in the oral traditions that Rangeley collected it is freely admitted that Makewana gave Chadza Kwenda and Chadza Phiri the bangles of their chiefdoms. The political influence of Makewana is also evident in the fact that she was granted rights to *mzinda*. This gave her the authority to initiate girls. Note that at that time in Chewa society only important chiefs were accorded that right.⁷⁰ Also, there was another side to Makawana's power. She had the ability to unmake chiefs as well. Traditions collected by Kings Phiri

⁷⁰ For details see I. A. Phiri, "African Women in religion and Culture." Also by the same author, *Women, Presybetarianism and Patriarchy* and "African Traditional Women and Ecofeminism: The Role of Women at the Chisumphu Cult in Preserving the Environment," *Religion in Malawi*, No.6 (1996).

maintain that with the help of Undi, a Maravi ruler at Maano, Makewana instigated revolts against Kalonga in the Lilongwe area that probably contributed to the fall of the Maravi Empire. The incident is presented in the traditions as follows:

One day there was a drought at Msinja. Makewana accompanied by her virginal acolytes (amatsano) went to the lake to fetch water for the mgwetsa (rain dance). During their sojourn in Mankhamba, the Kalonga's village, one of the acolytes was raped by the Kalonga. This incensed Makewana; she at once returned to Msinja and began to mobilise an army to go fight the Kalonga. With this end in mind, she convened an assembly of chiefs and elders headed by Undi.⁷¹

It is noteworthy that Makewana was not the only Chewa woman who held political power. We noted above that the Banda had a tradition of female chiefs and in some areas that trend continued even in colonial and postcolonial Malawi. Chauwa Banda in Lilongwe and Kafulama Banda in Mchinji are some Banda female chieftainships that fall into this category. For instance, take Kafulama Banda:

This chieftainship belongs to women. They are the owners. In this setting the only role of men is to help the female chiefs. Every man who marries a Kafulama is expressly told that his job is to procreate and thereby perpetuate the royal lineage. Such a man is expected not to rule.⁷²

⁷¹ Cited in K. Phiri, "Pre-colonial States," p.4.

⁷² Interview, Kings Phiri with Village Headwoman Kafulama Banda, Disimasi Duma and Mavita Mvula (counselors), Kafulama Village, T.A. Mlonyeni, Mchinji, 19/2/74.

In addition, a chief's eldest sister and other older women in the *mbumba* lineage had a very influential voice especially at the installation of a chief. They had the power to reject a candidate. Also, mothers of paramount chiefs played an important advisory role, as was the case with Nyangu, the mother of Kalonga, the ruler of the Maravi Empire.

The fortunes of women in Chewa communities changed with the passage of time. Ngoni invasions, which destroyed most of the rain shrines in the 1870s, the spread of Christianity and the imposition of colonial rule eroded most of the religious and political power that Chewa women had. In more ways than one, Chewa women experienced religious subordination because as we noted in Chapter two, in the aftermath of the Ngoni raids and Christian mission encounter, it was *nyau* and therefore Chewa men who provided an indigenous religious alternative to Christianity. Within Christianity, Isabel Phiri argues that contrary to indigenous Chewa religion where women occupied the highest office, in the DRCM "women were excluded from being evangelists, deacons and elders." This was because based on a specific interpretation of Genesis and the letters of St Paul "the subordination of women was thought to be divinely sanctioned."⁷³

⁷³ I. Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism, and Patriarchy*, p.49.

In addition, many female local rulers lost political power in rural areas as the colonial state introduced a new form of local governance that largely ignored the ritual and religious basis of political power. We shall deal with this issue in the next chapter. Economically, we noted in Chapter Two that despite holding primary rights in land the new agricultural opportunities that opened up in the colonial era such as peasant tobacco production largely viewed Chewa men and not women as the peasants. This was clearly spelt out in the Tobacco Ordinance of the Native Tobacco Board (NTB) that provided for the registration of men only to grow tobacco. "The applicant shall furnish his name and that of his village and state the acreage to be planted..."⁷⁴ Also, we noted that employment opportunities that opened up in various sectors of the colonial political economy tended to favour men.

The result was that the progenitors of the *mbumba* lineage lost considerable power in indigenous religion, Christianity, local politics and the *mbumba* lineage. However, in the midst of all this marginalisation, *chinamwali* created an exclusive women's world and provided a context where Chewa women as a group expressed their identity and femininity and exercised power. As noted above, *chinamwali* operated more or less as a secret society for women. For example, when female initiation was in session men were forbidden to approach the initiation hut (*tsimba*);

⁷⁴ MNA, L3/48/2 – The Tobacco Ordinance of 1926.

rebukes as well as fines were exacted on violators. As such, while in seclusion, the initiates and other women involved in the initiation lived in their own world and temporarily severed ties with society at large. Apart from initiates, instructors (*anankungwi*) and guardians (*aphungu*) were exempted from domestic chores and had to refrain from sexual intercourse.⁷⁵ Rangeley captures the power that women exerted during female initiation despite facing marginalization in other aspects of their life:

A woman has a very servile position. She must kneel when she talks to a man. She must look the other way when men pass. She must carry a load when her husband carries no more than a spear. She may be beaten in moderation by her husband. She must work while her husband goes visiting and drinking. Yet, when women come into their own at female initiation ceremonies, no man dare interfere with them. No one could doubt the power of the women if he witnessed the way they dominate the village.⁷⁶

More important, *chinamwali* gave young Chewa women a means to acquire status and admittance into a group of highly respected women in their vicinity. We noted above that *chinamwali* comprised a series of rites from puberty to the birth of a first child and beyond. At each stage, initiates acquired different secret knowledge (*mwambo*) that entitled them to a specific status. This means that the more stages an initiate went through the more versed she became in *mwambo*. And in turn the

⁷⁵ Interview, Kachapila with Mai Lenasi; Mwasifa Mazoni; Mau Kalimbakantha, Chiwaliwali Village, TA Kalumo, Ntchisi 14/5/97.

⁷⁶ Rangeley, "Notes on Cewa Tribal Law," p.28.

higher the status she acquired and the more authority she commanded in *chinamwali* in particular and the community at large in general.

It was very important for every Chewa woman to go through all the stages in *chinamwali*. In particular, women who did not have their *chisamba* (initiation for the first child) danced for them were regarded as children regardless of how old they were. It was sad for women who could not have children naturally because they too were regarded as children. Consequently, such women could not take part in serious issues that adult women in the village participated in. For instance, they could not bathe a dead body, bury a stillborn, act as a birth attendant and in some villages they were not even allowed to enter a birth hut (*chikuta*). More importantly, they could not serve as *anankungwi*. And in those days *unankungwi* was a very prestigious position. Not only did it command a lot of respect but also economic gains. The *anankungwi* shared the initiation wealth with the *mwini mzinda*.⁷⁷

When other structures and institutions like the Christian church, traditional religion, local politics and economics were curtailing spaces in which women could negotiate their participation in the colonial encounter; *chinamwali* opened up opportunities for Chewa women to exercise power collectively and individually.

What is more, *chinamwali* brought together the conflicting identities of Chewa women. On the one hand, the initiates were made aware that they were the most important players in the *mbumba* lineage. On the other, they were taught to be obedient to their husbands who were viewed as marginal members of the lineage. We noted above that

⁷⁷ Interview, Kachapila with Felesiya Mayaya, 9/5/97; Mupatenji Malenga, 16/5/97; Mai Lenasi, 15/5/97 and Rita Kachigunda, 8/5/97.

the Chewa used *chinamwali* to bestow symbolic and ritual respect to young women who were considered an asset to the lineage. Even when Chewa women lost some of their prestige and power, *chinamwali* still honoured them as the reproducers of the lineage. By repeating acts and performances that generations of women had gone through in the past, the initiates forged a symbolic and ritual link with their ancestors. "It made you feel proud and grown up to know that you are doing what our mothers and their mothers before them did."⁷⁸ The glorification of initiates was also demonstrated at the coming out ceremony. The *anankungwi* and *aphungu* decorated the initiates' bodies and placed animal figurines (*chingondo*) on their heads. And from the *tsimba*, older women carried the girls on their backs to the village and presented them to the community.

The honouring of initiates and women in *chinamwali* in the context of increased marginalisation can be read as the preservation of old traditions that had no relevance to problems that Chewa women faced. However, by celebrating the importance of women to the lineage, *chinamwali* helped Chewa women to face the challenges they encountered in their changing environment from a position of strength. Moreover, as the discussion above demonstrates, by teaching girls to be obedient to their future husbands and to satisfy their physical and

⁷⁸ Interview, Kachapila with Za mwanda Chibisa, Ntchisi, 15/5/97.

emotional needs, *chinamwali* enabled women to deal with some of the problems that characterized matrilineal marriages during the colonial era. The performance of female initiation served important functions in the lives of Chewa women other than the continuance of old traditions and customs – witness the way Christian converts, especially women refused to denounce *chinamwali* leading to the introduction of a Christianized version of female initiation (*chilangizo*). We now turn to *chinamwali*'s encounter with Christianity.

3.3.4: From *Chinamwali* to *Chilangizo*: A Compromise with Sin?

In Chapter two we noted that while many Chewa lineage elders in conjunction with *nyau* secret societies resisted the penetration into Chewa areas of foreign ideas and practices such as Christianity, they did not completely prevent the conversion of some Chewa men and women to Christianity. By 1910 a number of Christian missionary parties, notably the DRCM, UMCA (Anglican) and Roman Catholics had an impact on most Chewa communities. One of the problems the missionaries encountered was how to handle the relationship between Christianity and local customs and rituals. One of the customs that forced missionaries to take a stand was female initiation. According to the

available literature, this is a question that confronted most Christian missions especially in southern and central Malawi.⁷⁹

For example, Isabel Phiri states the Dutch Reformed Church Mission issued a statement as early as 1903 that members of their churches should not participate in *chinamwali*, as the church could not compromise with sin.⁸⁰ This did not sit well with both the Chewa converts and *eni mizinda*. Most Chewa lineage elders saw this as an assault on Chewa culture. In particular, they did not want their children to be influenced by the religiously oriented mission education. Consequently, they promoted *chinamwali* and *nyau* as the only acceptable means of socializing Chewa youth. But perhaps far more important than the threat to the Chewa way of life in explaining lineage elders' reaction to Christian missionaries' ban of *chinamwali*, was the threat that this posed to the economic survival of *eni mizinda*. We saw

⁷⁹ For details see Chakanza, "The Unfinished Agenda: Puberty Rites and the Response of the Roman Catholic Church in Southern Malawi, 1901-1994;" Chingota, "A Historical Account of the Attitude of Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian towards Initiation Rites;" Phiri, "The Initiation of Chewa Women of Malawi: A Presbyterian Woman's Perspective." See also, Stuart, "Christianity and the Chewa: The Anglican Case;" and Linden and Linden, *Catholics, Peasants and Chewa Resistance*.

⁸⁰ Phiri argues that while the missionaries' belief that *chinamwali* was sinful might have influenced the attitude they adopted against female initiation, other factors such as, *chinamwali's* association with low girls' attendance at mission schools and *nyau's* involvement in *chinamwali*, better explain the DRCM's actions. See Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, for details.

above what a moneymaker *chinamwali* was and the extent to which *eni mzinda* went to protect it. Not surprisingly, the missionaries' attitude toward female initiation elicited a very negative response in Chewa communities.⁸¹

Chewa converts and women in particular also resented the missionary rulings on female initiation. As I. Phiri maintains:

The banning of *chinamwali* made it difficult for Chewa women to join the DRCM. Without passing through *chinamwali* it was not possible to be accepted as a fully adult woman in Chewa society. ⁸²

In defiance to the ban most Chewa women continued to secretly participate in initiation ceremonies even after they joined the Church. Evidence also indicates that this caused misunderstandings between parents in some families of converts. For example, A.G.O. Hodgson, District Resident at Dowa, remarked in 1927 that "cases have occurred of girls living in Mission boarding schools by the consent of one parent being persuaded to undergo the ceremony [*chinamwali*] by the other."⁸³

⁸¹ From a slightly different angle, Woods argues that Europeans in general and Christian missionaries in particular posed a serious threat to lineage elders. By providing the youth tools with which they could manipulate the colonial economy to their advantage, mission schools risked making them richer and more powerful than the elders who had traditionally controlled them. Consequently, lineage elders resisted the Christian missionary initiative. For details, see Woods, "Struggle for Lineage," pp.17-19.

⁸² Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*," p.56.

⁸³ MNA, NS1/23/6, Correspondence- A.G.O. Hodgson, District Resident Dowa, to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 15/4/27.

In addition, some women interviewed indicated that it was not uncommon for some Chewa women to send their daughters to *chinamwali* without the knowledge of their husbands, especially in cases where both parents had converted to Christianity.⁸⁴ It would seem that among Christians it was mothers rather than fathers who were anxious to have their daughters initiated.

Consequently, by the 1920s, admitting that their strategy was not working, the DRCM seriously considered plans to introduce a Christian version of female initiation.⁸⁵ Perhaps what is most revealing is that this was done mostly at the urging of Chewa women who were already in the process of Christianizing *chinamwali*.⁸⁶ As a result by the 1930s the DRCM ruled that all children of church members should attend *chilangizo* (Christianized female initiation).⁸⁷ Not surprisingly, many

⁸⁴ Interview, Kachapila with Felesiya Mayaya, Msumba Village, T.A. Nthondo, Ntchisi, 9/5/97; Kachapila with Miriam Chibwana, Area 47, Lilongwe, 19/5/97.

⁸⁵ Nor was the DRCM the only mission in central Malawi that realized that attempting to eradicate *chinamwali* was not an affective means of dealing with the issue of female initiation. For instance, Roman Catholic missionaries at Likuni observed women were reluctant to get involved with missions because of *chinamwali*. Consequently it was decided that *chinamwali* had to be tolerated and modified since it was impossible to suppress. See Linden and Linden, *Catholics, Peasants and Chewa Resistance*, pp.168-169, for details.

⁸⁶ Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, p.57.

⁸⁷ Almost all the women interviewed alluded to the fact that due to its lack of instruction on some intimate sexual matters most people even

lineage guardians bemoaned this evolution in female initiation. “The *mizinda* have been taken away from us by the missionaries who now initiate girls for us. There are some village headmen who still initiate girls in their villages.”⁸⁸

Why then was it still important for women converts to Christianity to undergo female initiation? Why did the DRCM and indeed most Christian parties to central Malawi “compromise with sin?” Chewa women found it difficult to denounce *chinamwali* because it was central to their lives, as it was the means by which girls became women. Women who adopted Christianity faced challenges similar to the ones non-Christian women encountered. As such, Christian or non-Christian, Chewa women looked to *chinamwali* as a forum that reworked relations among women as well as between women and men. This would explain why *chilangizo* was a hybrid of *chinamwali* and notions of Christian respectability. That is, *chilangizo* was *chinamwali* minus the elements considered incompatible with Christianity such as ritual sexual

some Christians considered *chilangizo* a watered-down version of *chinamwali*. In fact, it was not uncommon for some mothers to secretly send their daughters to *anankungwi* so that they could learn what they did not get from *alangizi*, (*chilangizo* instructors). This is a trend that continues among some Christians of central Malawi to this day.

⁸⁸ Interview, Kings Phiri with Chintekwe Mkanthama Mwale and Kantepa Jere, Mkanthama Village, T.A. Msakambewa, Dowa, 20/3/74.

intercourse, observation of taboos, *nyau* mask dancers and initiation songs and dances.

The Christian missions saw Chewa women as Christian wives whose main contribution was “encouragement to their husbands in their Christian lives.”⁸⁹ Likewise, Chewa men also controlled and dominated *nyau*, the indigenous alternative to Christianity. Politically, the colonial administration relegated Chewa women to the domestic domain. As such, they rarely considered them serious candidates for local political leadership. Economically, the colonialists viewed Chewa men as the primary breadwinners. Consequently, they pursued policies that largely construed Chewa women as economic dependants. This was a remarkable departure from the time of Makewana and the other rain prophetesses when women dominated religion, held political power and enjoyed considerable economic and social security in Chewa communities.

This chapter has shown how *chinamwali*, a ritual that has been part of the Chewa society for a long time, became a coping mechanism for Chewa women victimized by the developments of the late pre-colonial and early colonial period. For example, as a forum of female solidarity, *chinamwali* dealt with the conflicting identities of Chewa women in

⁸⁹ M.W. Retief, *William Murray of Nyasaland* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1958), p. 78. Cited in Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*.

changing circumstances and enabled them to express their femininity and exercise power. That is, it became a way to maintain old ways, but in a manner that could adapt to a changing colonial world. This process was no doubt assisted by the fact that most lineage elders supported *chinamwali* because it increasingly became a way of acquiring money and other forms of wealth.

Rituals such as *chinamwali* and *nyau* were not the only means that the Chewa used to negotiate the colonial process. The District Administration Native Ordinance (DANO) of 1912 and the Native Authority Ordinance of 1933 which designed native administration along tribal lines recognized some local rulers as Principal Headmen and Native Authorities respectively. Consequently, some Chewa elders struggled to be considered for the positions and used various means such as ethnicity and clan separatism to achieve their aim. The next chapter looks at how Chauwa Banda, whose house served as rain prophetesses at Chilenje in the pre-colonial era, attempted to use that identity to assume power in colonial society.

CHAPTER FOUR

“WE ABANDA KNOW CHAUWA IS OUR MOTHER:”¹ CHEWA ETHNICITY UNDER INDIRECT RULE

In July 1928 the Provincial Commissioner for the Central Province advised all District Commissioners in his province as follows:

I have the honour to inform you that it has been suggested to me that in some cases mistakes have been made in the selection of chiefs as Principal Headmen. I do not wish the question to be mentioned during the lifetime of any Principal Headman. But in the case of one dying, discreet enquiries should be made in order to ascertain whether it is desirable that his family should continue to hold office or whether there is another family that would be more generally recognised by the headmen in the section. These instructions should be entered in your District Standing Order Book.²

About a year later in August 1929, Mazengera Chikapa, Principal Headman for Section 5 of Lilongwe district, died. On 31 October 1929 the District Commissioner for Lilongwe informed the Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, that there were three contestants to the Mazengera chieftainship. The officer wrote:

... JUSTINO- (late census clerk, Dowa), brother of Mazengera, his appointment would be extremely unpopular with the great majority... the late Mazengera was transferred from the Dowa section of his people some years ago. At a meeting held at Mtengo village in September, 88 headmen voted for him

¹ Hoole Papers, Statement by Mlinga, a Banda elder at Native Authority Mazengera's Headquarters, 23/3/37.

² MNA, NC1/5/15- Chiefs/Headmen – Lilongwe District. Provincial Commissioner to All District Commissioners, Central Province, 4/7/28.

KALUMBU- Nephew of the late Kalumbu whose mother was Mchewa from Dzoole. Kalumbu became a headman by sheer force of character and his influence increased... he was eventually made Principal Headman of the section west of Lilongwe (Chadza), in place of Kalolo who was deposed. I do not believe that anyone could rightly say that the Kalumbus are of loyal blood, but the present applicant possesses ability to rule, he has had considerable influence and is widely respected. As to his character, I consider Kalumbu well above average. At a meeting referred to above, 136 headmen voted for him.

CHAUWA- This woman appears to have some influence in the Chilenje region (Diamphwe). She states that she is a sister of Mazengera. 21 headmen voted for her.

I strongly recommend that Kalumbu be appointed to the position, as I know him to be fearless, level headed and possessing marked ability. I also recommend that Justino be appointed a councillor to Kalumbu.³

Not surprisingly, then, the District Annual Report for Lilongwe in 1930

contained the following entries under Native Administration:

1 – An additional section was formed during the year; the existing section 5 (Mazengera) being split into two in order to allow for the appointment of councillor Kalumbu as Principal Headman. Both the new Mazengera (the old one having died in August of 1929) and Kalumbu are youngish men and have shown intelligence and keenness.

2 – Of course the most notable event in native administration during the year has been the consideration that has been given to the question of Indirect Rule. I have little at present to add...⁴

At a meeting held on the 18th August 1936 at the “headquarters of all Abanda of Nyasaland and outside,” (Chauwa’s Village, Native

³ MNA, NC1/5/15 – Chiefs/Headmen – Lilongwe District. A letter from the District Commissioner, Lilongwe to the Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 31/10/29.

⁴ MNA, NCL4/1/3 District Annual Report, 1930, Lilongwe.

Authority Mazengera in Lilongwe District), it was decided to send a petition to the Nyasaland government. It demanded:

The return of sole ruling of the Abanda clan to her hands [Chauwa's] as it was before the white men came into the country. The Abanda clan does not interfere with any chief, provided he is the chief of that clan and land, the Abanda clan will be pleased to see him rule over his right people.⁵

Consequently, the Provincial Commissioner received the following letter dated 17 September 1936 from the District Commissioner for Lilongwe.

1 – I have the honour to put forward a communication from George Mwase, purporting to be the minutes of a meeting of the Abanda clan held at Chilenje in N.A. Mazengera's area on 18th August 1936.

2 – I received no prior notification of this meeting or I should have forbidden it.

3 – The personal record of G.S. Mwase is too well known, to need comment and I regard the present trouble, as a typical example of the dissension that it seems is the metier of the Mwase family to stir up. ⁶

4 – Mwase himself is an Atonga born at Bandawe in the West Nyasa district and therefore, not a native of this district.

⁵ MNA, NC1/20/2–Native Authorities – Lilongwe District. Minutes of the Abanda Meeting held at the headquarters of Abanda, Chauwa Village, N.A. Mazengera, Lilongwe District, 18/8/36.

⁶ George Mwase had a brother, the Reverend Yesaya Mwasi, head of the Black Man's Church of African Presbyterian. The Mwase brothers were characterised as "clever natives of bad character" by colonial administrators. Among other things, the brothers criticised and lobbied the colonial government on various issues. In addition, they read banned publications such as *The Workers Herald* and *The Negro World*. This convinced the colonial administration that the Mwases were a threat to the stability of the country. At the National Archives of Malawi there are some files on the "seditious" activities of George Simeon Mwase. See for instance, MNA, NC1/23 – Seditious Propaganda and Political Prisoners, 1 – Mwase, G.S. 1926 March - 1940 November.

5 – He claims relationship with the house of Chauwa and I have no doubt that it is at his instigation that the woman Chauwa is now claiming to be recognised as the “Mother of all Abanda.” I feel no altruistic motive is actuating Mwase in this matter but he hopes to raise himself to the position of power and influence through the instrumentality of Chauwa; to whom he appears to have constituted himself adviser in chief.

6 – As a result of these activities of the Abanda in Native Authority Mazengera’s area doubt has been raised in the minds of some as to who is the chief in this area. Dr. Murray of the DRCM at Nkhoma reported to the Assistant District Commissioner in my absence that deputations of natives have been to see him to enquire whether Mazengera was still the chief as it was said that Chauwa had appointed Mdzinga to be chief.

7 – Native Authority Mazengera complained to me about these political activities in his area, and before I received the minutes of this meeting at Chilenje I had arranged to hold a meeting of all headmen in the area... ⁷

What follows is not a comprehensive history of the Mazengera chieftaincy in colonial central Malawi, nor is it an investigation into the nature or evolution of Indirect Rule in Nyasaland. Rather, this chapter analyses the development of clan consciousness among the Banda of N.A Mazengera’s area in the Lilongwe district of Malawi in the 1930s. What ideologies did some Banda individuals or groups use to arouse clan consciousness in other members of their clan? What actions and attitudes did the culture brokers’ constituents (ordinary women and men) display to show that ethnic consciousness had become a reality?

⁷ MNA, NC1/20/2, Native Authorities – Lilongwe District, Correspondence, District Commissioner, Lilongwe, to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province.

In answering the two questions above, this chapter re-examines Leroy Vail's work on ethnicity in southern Africa in relation to what happened in Native Authority Mazengera's area. Vail argues that tribalism in southern Africa is a 20th century development.⁸ According to his model a number of variables were required to arouse ethnic consciousness in southern Africans. Of particular importance however were mission education, European ethnographers and Indirect Rule. When the model was applied to Malawi, Vail and White discovered that the development of ethnicity was stalled in the centre compared to the north. According to them, this is in part because:

Unlike the Northern and Southern Provinces, it [the Central Province] was also remarkably homogeneous culturally, with the Chewa language spoken throughout. The Chewa were also distinguished by an institution of remarkable resilience and vitality, the *nyau* secret societies, which served to unite the people in times of social stress and acted as powerful curbs on the influence of both missions and chiefs or headmen. Many Chewa desired Western education, but they had a well-founded fear that mission teachers would assail Chewa culture in the classroom and consequently hesitated to send their children to the mission schools... Virtually no Chewa intellectuals emerged from this educational milieu to serve as cultural brokers either for a progressive ethnic ideology along the lines of the north or a universalist nationalism like that explored by Chilembwe in the south.⁹

⁸Vail, (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism* .

⁹Vail and L. White, "Tribalism in the Political History of Malawi," p.174.

Contrary to Vail and White's analysis, evidence from central Malawi indicates that, not unlike their counterparts in the other provinces, the Chewa used ethnicity to negotiate their involvement in the colonial process. This chapter argues that by emphasising mission education and language, Vail and White exclude other types of ethnic consciousness from their analysis. Mission education was not the only means through which people articulated and communicated ethnic ideologies. Practices such as *nyau* secret societies are as much evidence of ethnic consciousness as are elite voices and written accounts.

Moreover, by treating social groups such as the Ngoni, Tumbuka and Chewa as remarkably homogeneous Vail and White locate the development of ethnicity in intergroup differences. Without underrating the importance of intergroup distinctions in the development of ethnicity, it should be noted that internal struggles and negotiations within social groups also determine the construction of ethnic identities. The central argument is that in order to understand fully the development of ethnicity in Malawi we need to look beyond mission schools, European ethnographers, mission-educated Africans and the Indirect Rule system to local peoples' practices and attitudes as well as to social groups' internal differences and similarities. Also, we need to look before the 20th century.

Since the publication of Vail and White's book in 1989 a number of studies have either extended Vail's thesis or challenged it. Special attention has been drawn to Vail's emphasis on the historical construction of ethnicity over time. While Vail sees this as a product of the ideas and actions of Europeans and mission-educated Africans and of the impact of colonialism and capitalism, some scholars challenge him because he privileges the colonial process and paints ordinary Africans as passive recipients of the elite's "inventions."¹⁰ Such scholars trace the construction of ethnicity back to the pre-colonial era. Atkinson, for example, has demonstrated that the Acholi was an active ethnic identity that developed from the 17th century.¹¹

Other scholars question the one-time creation of ethnicity implied in Vail's thesis. For instance, Terence Ranger, though he popularized the inventionist approach in African studies with the publication of "The Invention of Tradition in Africa," has since revised his perspective to

¹⁰ See for example, Bill Bravman, *Making Ethnic Ways: Communities and Their Transformations in Taita, Kenya, 1800-1950* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1998) and Ronald Atkinson, "The (Re)Construction of Ethnicity in Africa: Extending the Chronology, Conceptualisation and Discourse," in Paris Yeros (ed.) *Ethnicity and Nationalism in Africa* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), pp.15-44.

¹¹ See R. Atkinson, *The Roots of Ethnicity: The Origins of the Acholi of Uganda before 1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992). See also Thomas Spear and Richard Waller, *Being Masaai: Ethnicity and Identity in East Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1993).

include the agency of other groups of Africans in colonial invention. Also, he has shown that colonial invention was a continually negotiated and contested process.¹² Consequently, according to Ranger, "imagining" rather than "invention" best describes the colonial era construction of ethnicity. In addition, Ranger argues that it is essential not to confuse ethnicity with other forms of pre-colonial identities, such as those based on religion and kinship, as a response to scholars who argue for a pre-colonial construction of ethnicity.¹³

More recently other scholars have criticised the single concept of ethnicity implied in Vail's thesis and indeed in most constructivist approaches to ethnicity. Vail and White identify one Tumbuka and one Ngoni ethnicity in northern Malawi created by elite culture brokers and their sympathisers. Ordinary Tumbuka or Ngoni men and women are seen in this model as either accepting the political agendas of the elite or modifying them to suit their own interests.¹⁴ According to Yeros this is

¹² For details see T.O. Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," in T.O. Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: University Press, 1983), pp.211-262, and "The Invention of Tradition Revisited, pp.66-111. See also his third thoughts on the invention of tradition, "Concluding Remarks," in Paris Yeros (ed.), *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, pp.133-144.

¹³ Ranger, "Concluding Remarks," p.133-144.

¹⁴ Pursuing this idea, Vail and White set out to demonstrate that it was only among the Tumbuka and Ngoni that the commonality identified with ideologies primarily designed to serve the interests and aspirations of the chiefly elite. However, some of the factors they use to justify their position such as the effects of labour migration on Tumbuka and Ngoni

problematic because it does not take into account competing political claims in society.¹⁵ As a step forward Yeros partly embraces the notion of moral ethnicity supported by John Lonsdale and Steven Feierman.¹⁶

This is because:

It conceives of ethnicity as a moral community whose traditions...are subject to ongoing contestation. [Also], it allows the possibility of bringing diverse actors into the analytical foreground, and of not privileging then reifying a singular axis of social relationships along which moral values are generated."¹⁷

Yeros questions, however, the moralists' emphasis on particular historical actors, as Feierman does with the peasant intellectuals. As he puts it, "[a]ssociating these particular actors in an essential way with the construction of ethnicity risks essentializing their particular understanding of ethnicity at the exclusion of competing understandings

communities and the 1931 census results are not conclusive. Part of the problem stems from conceptualising ethnic consciousness as a reality only when most segments of society embrace the ideologies of elite culture brokers. In other words, Vail and White's approach does not cater for an ethnic self-awareness that is confined to a particular group of social actors in society.

¹⁵ For details see Paris Yeros, "Towards a Normative Theory of Ethnicity: Reflection on the Politics of Constructivism," in Yeros (ed.), *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, pp.101-132.

¹⁶For example, see Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals* and John Lonsdale, "The Moral Economy of the Mau Mau: The Problem" and by the same author, "The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought," in B. Berman and J. Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa, Book II: Violence and Ethnicity* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Yeros, "Towards a Normative Theory of Ethnicity," p.123.

of ethnicity held by other social actors.”¹⁸ Instead, he proposes a normative theory of ethnicity. “As long as we acknowledge that our political ends differ our concepts of ethnicity will differ as well. As such, it is impossible to have one concept of ethnicity. We can only have competing ones, reflecting our competing political projects.”¹⁹

In light of this, the chapter starts from the premise that various segments of the Chewa community had their own ideas of what it meant to be Chewa. That is, there was no single concept of Chewa identity subscribed to by all. The account below demonstrates that being Chewa to Salome Chauwa and other members of the Banda clan differed from the way members of the Phiri clan understood being Chewa. And as other studies and preceding chapters demonstrate, members of *nyau* and women who participated in *chinamwali* had their own understanding of Chewa identity.

4.1. The Seeds of Chewa Ethnicity

The District Administration Native Ordinance of 1912 (DANO) and the Native Authority Ordinance of 1933 raised the status of some local rulers and in some cases “commoners” to the positions of Principal Headmen or Headwomen and Native Authorities respectively. Advantages and

¹⁸ Ibid., p.124.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.127.

problems associated with this shifting role of "traditional" rulers have been dealt with elsewhere.²⁰ It needs to be mentioned that indigenous rulers such as Native Authorities held power, albeit in diminished form in colonial society. Bearing in mind that only limited opportunities opened up for indigenous people during this period, it is not surprising that most chiefs and other local rulers struggled to be considered for the positions.

The struggle for colonial government recognition as Native Authorities or Principal Headmen and Headwomen by some Chewa individuals should also be understood in terms of the way the Chewa entered the colonial system. Because of the impact of mid to late 19th century immigrations, the Chewa entered the colonial era militarily and politically weakened. This explains why there was little Chewa military resistance to British occupation of central Malawi. According to Kings Phiri this also affected their advancement in the new environment:

Their ability to advance themselves under the new and alien system was constrained by this fact, as well as by the prejudices

²⁰ For a comprehensive discussion on the evolution of Indirect Rule in Nyasaland see Barbara Morrow, "Indirect Rule in Nyasaland," T.K. Barnekov, "An Inquiry into the Development of Native Administration in Nyasaland, 1888 - 1939," (MA Thesis, San Jose College, California, 1967). Also, see S. W. Speck, "African Local Governance in Malawi: Its Development and Politics under British Rule," (PhD Thesis, Harvard University, 1967) and M. L. Golola, "Traditional Legitimacy and the Ineffectiveness of the Appeal to Primacy: The Example of Chief Mazengera and Kalumbu in the Lilongwe District of Malawi from the Pre-colonial Times to 1937," (History Seminar Paper, University of Malawi, 1974).

that the colonialists themselves evolved and brought to bear on their dealings with the various indigenous groups or "tribes." In the course of their interaction with several African societies in East and Central Africa in the 19th century, the British developed partiality for those tribes which fitted the "noble savage" motif, i.e. those that were politically centralised, militarily strong, and independent minded. In central and southern Malawi, it was a motif that the Yao and Ngoni fitted quite easily, given their earlier commercial and military enterprises. ²¹

Consequently, the DANO of 1912 and the Native Authority Ordinance of 1933 provided an opportunity for the Chewa to finally reassert themselves as a potent political force by having some of their ruling families elevated to the status of Principal Headman and Native Authority respectively. This process was no doubt assisted by the fact that colonial administrators were determined to define native administration in tribal terms.²² As a consequence, a number of Chewa chiefs and individuals used various means such as calls for ethnic consciousness or clan separatism to advance their own interests. Note that this was

²¹ Phiri, "Disrupted and Marginalised," pp. 11-12. For example, Phiri observes that in what became Salima district, the government appointed two Yao Principal headmen, one among the Ngoni and none from the Nyanja (Chewa). Similarly, in 1914 at Dowa *boma*, a primarily Chewa area there were 33 indigenous policemen, eleven Yao, fifteen Ngoni, four Tonga, and only three Chewa.

²² Barbara Morrow argues that even though the colonial administrators were aware of some unresolved issues in the Indirect Rule system, they were determined that supervised African self governance was to remain on tribal lines even in apparently unfruitful contexts. She quotes Kenyon-Slaney, District Commissioner at Lilongwe as an example. He wrote in 1934 that all except one chief in his district had "practically no tradition of greatness behind him largely because of the effects of the Ngoni raids." See Morrow, "Indirect Rule in Nyasaland," pp. 38-39.

happening in most parts of the country. Commenting on the situation in West Nyasa district, Rangeley makes this point particularly clear:

Each small headman or chief tries to make out that he is the local 'Adam' from whom all others sprang... had their own written histories by this stage... With much thought they have concocted stories and covered up loopholes with invention.²³

Moreover, while the Native Authority Ordinance of 1933 emphasised the appointment of chiefs who had "traditional" sources of power, colonial administrators had limited means of denying claims made by some local rulers. As early as 1931 the colonial state knew that it would have limited control over Indirect Rule structures.

This system of native administration is like a log rolling down an incline; we do not know where it will stop; we cannot stop it now if we would; our duty is to keep it on the rails and see it follows the right course. For the rest, we can only abide the result.²⁴

When the Native Authority Ordinance of 1933 that formally introduced Indirect Rule in Nyasaland was applied to Lilongwe District it emphasised the appointment of chiefs who enjoyed traditional support as Native Authorities. However, grievances were aired in some parts of the district that not all the new Native Authorities had "traditional" sources

²³ W. Rangeley, Extract from Annual Report- West Nyasa District, 1932, Cited in Morrow, "Indirect Rule in Nyasaland," p. 39

²⁴ H. D. Aplin, *Report on Native Administration in Tanganyika Territory* (Zomba, 1931), p.12. The colonial government asked Aplin to conduct research on the Indirect Rule system in Tanganyika and report on its applicability to Nyasaland.

of power. In fact, in Lilongwe District this was not a new problem. It went back to the time of the DANO of 1912.

This Ordinance applied to Lilongwe in 1913 divided the district into five sections. Mazengera was Principal Headman for Section 5. The other sections were under Chimdidi, Masula, Masumba, and Matanda. Note Masula, a Chewa fugitive among the Ngoni at Domwe, was appointed Principal Headman for Msinja, an area that was traditionally under the headmanship of Chadza Kwenda. Similarly, the administration appointed Chimdidi, a Ngoni, to administer an area in Section 1 that consisted mainly of Chewa speakers.²⁵

Golola argues that Mazengera's Section Five consisted of a much larger territory than he had traditional claims to. This particularly angered Kalumbu Kwimbaani who claimed that part of Section 5 was "his land" and that he had only been in exile at Dowa as a result of the Ngoni invasions of the previous century. In 1914 Kwimbaani went to the District Resident at Lilongwe, C.O. Ockenden and challenged Mazengera's appointment. He also went to Zomba with the same complaint. Ockenden attempted to explain that he had appointed

²⁵ Golola, "Traditional Legitimacy and the Ineffectiveness of the Appeal to Primacy," p. 8.

Mazengera because many people supported him but Kalumbu continued to make "trouble and requires supervision."²⁶

Luckily for the administration, in 1915 the Principal Headman in Section Three was deposed because of "inefficiency" and this gave an opportunity to Ockenden to silence Kwimbaani by appointing him Principal Headman in that area. Kwimbaani ruled Section Three until 1918 when he died. William succeeded his uncle Kwimbaani. Although he was not appointed Principal Headman, William remained village headman of Nyanja. Like his uncle before him, William had ambitions to be recognised as Principal Headman. That is why there were three contestants to the Mazengera chieftaincy when Mazengera Chikapa died in 1929. The introduction of Indirect Rule in 1933 just worsened the problem.

Writing on the preconceptions and problems of Indirect Rule in Nyasaland, Barbara Morrow comments that Fox-Strangways, District Commissioner for Lilongwe, brought the problem into the open in a letter to the Provincial Commissioner in 1936. Forwarding that correspondence to the Chief Secretary, the Provincial Commissioner remarked that the letter suggested that many Native Authorities in Lilongwe were "not rightful rulers." He even went further to imply that

²⁶ Ibid.

the whole fabric of native administration in Lilongwe was based “upon an insecure and untrustworthy foundation.”²⁷

According to Morrow, these doubts arose in the minds of officials such as Hodgson and Fox-Strangways because of the way “Africans reacted to the new system. The reactions appeared increasingly to manifest themselves as a form of ethnic separatism.” To illustrate this, Morrow cites what happened in Fort Manning (Mchinji):

Although the area had apparently been characterised in the past by harmonious intermixing of those regarding themselves as Chewa or Ngoni, the attempt by the Ngoni leadership to levy contributions for Mpezeni’s grave in Northern Rhodesia gave rise to separatist calls for a Chewa chieftaincy in the area. ²⁸

A similar situation broke out in Chief Chiwere’s area in Dowa district in 1936, where “... Ngoni and Chewa sides of the family insisted that their patterns of inheritance should be used and the District Commissioner was bombarded by correspondence and representations from opposing factions.” ²⁹

Morrow remarks that, in order to rectify situations such as those described above, Hodgson, the Provincial Commissioner, suggested to the Chief Secretary “territory-wide circularisation of District Commissioners

²⁷ Morrow, “Indirect Rule in Nyasaland,” p. 40.

²⁸ Ibid.,

²⁹ Morrow, “Indirect Rule in Nyasaland,” p.40.

to establish the general validity of the system.”³⁰ Hence, Fox-Strangways began research on the history and territorial claims of Chewa chieftainships in the district. M.C. Hoole, who succeeded Fox-Strangways as Lilongwe District Commissioner in May of 1936, completed the research the following year. It was during the course of this research that the Banda of Mazengera’s area asked the administration to recognise Chauwa, “mother of all the Abanda,” as ruler of all the Abanda in Lilongwe and adjacent districts. Unlike the situations described by Morrow above, where the issue was ethnic separatism, the Banda were lobbying for clan separatism. The Banda were but one clan of those who regarded themselves as Chewa. Others included the Phiri, Mwale, Kwenda, Chibwe and Khombe.

4.2. Village Head Woman Chauwa, “Mother of all Abanda”

At the time Chikapa was appointed Principal Headman for Section Five of Lilongwe district in 1913, Chauwa was village head woman at Chilenje, an area that fell under the jurisdiction of P.H. Mazengera. According to oral traditions, in pre-colonial Chewa society the house of Chauwa served as prophetesses for the rain shrine at Chilenje. Chauwa held both religious and political power but delegated most of her political

³⁰ Ibid.

responsibilities to her brother Mdzinga. Members of the Banda clan also referred to Chauwa as “Mother of the Banda.”³¹

The original Chauwa was the mother of the Banda. Her brothers acted as guardians of the Banda and the lands which they controlled. They were Mdzinga and Msako. They came from Msinja near Dzalanyama and Mangadzi was their mother. She was the mother of Chauwa. One day she told Chauwa “Daughter, there is a pool in the thickets east of here, which you must discover.” Mangadzi was never disobeyed because she was a woman in whom God (*Chauta*) dwelt. Chauwa thereby invited her brothers and together they set out for the east to look for the pool. They found it in the closed thickets on the Chilenje River. The pool was named Kanyenyezi... People from different parts of the country brought Chauwa virgins with whom she performed rituals. Whenever there was drought, people came from Lilongwe, Dowa and Malembo to ask for rain.³²

Chauwa’s rain cult was destroyed by the Ngoni invasions of the late 19th century and Christian missionary teachings but she retained her political office. The archival sources consulted for this study do not provide any evidence that Chauwa opposed the 1913 appointment of Mazengera. The first reference to Chauwa in regards to the Mazengera chieftaincy is in 1929, after the death of Mazengera Chikapa. She is one

³¹ Even in the colonial era many of the Banda chiefs in Lilongwe district claimed that they descended from Chauwa and they referred to her as their mother. At one of the meetings that Hoole, District Commissioner for Lilongwe held in 1937, Mlinga, a Banda elder stated “We Abanda know Chauwa is our mother.” MNA, NCI/20/2, Native Authorities-Lilongwe District.

³² Interview, Kings Phiri with Jacob Mgawi Banda, Chauwa Village, T.A. Mazengera, Lilongwe, 13/5/74.

of the contestants to the chieftaincy. The Mazengeras belong to the Phiri clan of the Chewa ethnic group. Apparently in 1929, Chauwa had no problems with the Abanda ruling over the Aphiri and vice versa as she would in 1936.³³

It is noteworthy that to my knowledge Chauwa was the first and only woman in Mazengera's area to take advantage of the fluid nature of Indirect Rule and advance her interests as Principal Headwoman and Native Authority. In 1930, Chauwa must have felt insulted. Of the three contestants to the Mazengera chieftaincy she was the only one who was not appointed Principal Headwoman. To make matters worse, Section Five had to be split into two in order to accommodate the other contestants. Colonial administrators' adoption of western gender stereotypes that assigned women to the domestic domain partly explains what happened in 1930. Though defeated in 1930, Chauwa did not give up. She revised her strategy and made another effort to become a Native Authority in 1936.

When formulating her strategy Chauwa must have been aware of two important points. First, that the colonial government used "history" to verify some Chewa ruling families' territorial claims in Lilongwe district. Second, that the support of ordinary men and women,

³³ MNA, NC1/20/2-Native Authorities – Lilongwe District. Minutes of the Abanda Meeting held at the headquarters of Abanda, Chauwa Village, N.A. Mazengera, Lilongwe District, 18/8/36.

especially voters - village headmen and women - is important if one is to be chosen as Native Authority. Why am I saying this? In 1936 Fox-Strangways and later Hoole invited various groups of clan elders to the *boma* to give an account of their "history," that is, their migration to and settlement in the area, their interaction with other ethnic groups such as the Yao and Ngoni and so on. Chauwa was one of the Banda elders invited to the *boma* to give a Banda version of Chewa history in Lilongwe. Note the timing. Immediately after their consultations with the administrators at the *boma*, Chauwa and her Banda sympathisers called for Zomba's recognition of Chauwa, mother of all the Abanda, as ruler of all the Banda of Nyasaland. By that time they had conceived of her history in terms that would back up their claim. Second, Chauwa did not forget that, in 1929 out of the 257 village headmen and women, only 21 voted for her. She made it a point therefore to appeal to members of her clan for support. On this aspect, she capitalised on specific aspects of Banda culture - in this case, the importance of women, especially mothers in the economic and social organisation of their society.

4.3. George Simeon Mwase: Champion of the Banda Cause

The most prominent of Chauwa's sympathisers was George Simeon Mwase. Because he was born at Chintheche in northern Malawi the colonial administration classified him as a Tonga. However, Mwase claimed relationship to the house of Chauwa and other important Banda

chiefs in Lilongwe because he belonged to the Banda clan. Mwase was educated at the Livingstonia Mission and worked as a government clerk for both the Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia administrations between 1905 and 1924. From the 1920s he operated an independent business in Lilongwe until bankruptcy forced him to return to the civil service in 1930. Unfortunately, in 1931 Mwase was convicted of embezzlement and served 16 months in prison after which he continued to run his business in Lilongwe. In addition, as president of the Central Province (Universal) Native Association (CPUNA) formed in 1927, Mwase was very outspoken on a number of controversial issues. He also read the banned Garveyite paper, *Negro World*, and trade unionist Clement Kadalie's paper, *The Workers' Herald*. This background in prison and politics characterised Mwase as "a clever native of bad character" in the eyes of the colonial administration.

It is noteworthy that Mwase was President and Chairman of CPUNA. In his discussion of the CPUNA, Martin Chanock raises a very important issue of relevance to the present study. He argues that because of the connection that some scholars of Malawi history assume exists between anti-colonial consciousness and Scottish mission education, the study of the development of political consciousness does

not take into account the central region at all.³⁴ Moreover, due to this misrepresentation, the “new men” or emerging elite consisted of pastors, clerks, teachers and other civil servants. Chanock writes:

The elite of Livingstonia and Blantyre with their biblical rhetoric and earnest ambitions were peripheral to the mainstream of life in Malawi and the study of Presbyterianism, millenarianism and migrancy does not provide a sufficient background of the development of Malawian political consciousness.³⁵

Chanock states that apart from placing too much emphasis on outside influences such as Livingstonia, Booth and Garvey, the approach only looks at the responses of particular men to their own situations. That is, there is little connection between the “new men” and the commonality. As far as the Central Province is concerned Chanock argues that the answer does not lie in mission schools. As he puts it:

Yet the economic and political situation in the Central Province in the 1920s shows that we should look beyond the dun brick cloisters of Livingstonia and Blantyre to the rural stores and tobacco gardens if we are to understand fully the development of anti-colonial consciousness.³⁶

³⁴ See for example, Tangri, “Inter-war Native Associations and the Formation of the Nyasaland African Congress, *Transafrican Journal of History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1971); McCracken, “African Politics in 20th Century Malawi;” Jaap Van Velsen, “Some Early Pressure Groups in Malawi,” in Eric Stokes and Richard Brown (eds.) *The Zambesian Past*, (Manchester, 1966).

³⁶ Chanock, “The New Men Revisited,” p. 238.

Unlike the northern associations that were dominated by mission teachers and chiefs and the southern associations that primarily attracted government employees, the CPUNA was largely comprised of peasant tobacco producers and storeowners. In fact, three quarters of its members were tobacco growers. What is interesting in this study is that Chanock has shown how the Association bridged the gap between its leaders and the masses by responding to the aspirations, problems and interests of its constituents. First, it lobbied the colonial government for fair prices and quality supervision of peasant-grown tobacco. Second, the 1920s in central Malawi were an era of confrontations between Christians and Nyau secret societies. The Association distanced itself from the “Ngoni, Mohammedans, Christians, missionaries and planters – the entire vocal community”³⁷ and supported the views of the majority, “the pagans” rather than those of the mission-educated Chewa. In addition, the Association attacked various ordinances that hindered the progress of independent African traders and tobacco growers. These included the Credit Trade with Natives Ordinance, Native Foodstuffs Ordinance and the Forests Ordinance. Finally, not unlike other Native Associations, the CPUNA demanded changes in the education system. At its first meeting the Association criticised Christian missionaries as follows:

³⁷ Chanock, “The New Men Revisited,” p. 243.

Especially they deal with religious matters. No important Industrial subjects of any kind which may possibly make the country develop is [sic] being taught by these missionaries inclusive.³⁸

Chanock concludes that "the Association was more than a bridge; it acted as a spearhead. It reflected not only resented aspects of colonialism on the part of peasants, but the formulation of anti-colonial attitudes among the independent elite."³⁹ On the success of CPUNA in addressing the interests of ordinary people in central Malawi, Vail and White agree with Chanock when they remark:

Thus in a region where there were over 33,000 tobacco growers, the Association was speaking for a substantial constituency best described as peasant producers. Apart from the absence of women from their constituency, it had claims to genuine mass support in the Central Province.⁴⁰

Mwase was very influential in the activities of the Association. In fact, other members of CPUNA referred to him as its leader. The influence of Mwase comes through in the kinds of positions the Association took on a number of issues. He also wrote most of the letters the CPUNA sent to the colonial government. It is interesting to find out how Mwase, coming from this background, fared in making Banda ethnic

³⁸ Ibid., p. 244.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 245.

⁴⁰ Vail and White, "Tribalism in the Political History," p. 176.

ideologies into a popular force, not restricted to Chauwa and Banda elders but to ordinary Banda men and women.

As “adviser in chief” to Chauwa and the Banda cause, Mwase brought with him the following attributes. First, he could speak and write English. Second he possessed knowledge of the operations of colonial administrations, having worked as a government clerk in Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia. Third, he brought with him a mixture of Garveyism and socialism from *The Workers Herald* and *The Negro World*.

4.4. Banda Clan Consciousness

When in 1933 the British recognised Justino Mazengera of the Phiri clan as Native Authority for Section Five, an area settled by various Chewa clans, Chauwa and her Banda sympathisers called for a separate Banda chieftaincy in the area. The Banda made such a separatist call because they claimed that although the area had apparently been characterised in the past by harmonious intermixing of the various clans, they had never ruled each other. Thus, the Banda built their clan consciousness in opposition to the ruling Phiri. It should also be noted that the Banda blamed the colonial administration for making it possible for a Phiri to rule the Banda.

As a first step to lay down the foundation of Banda clan separatism Mwase and Banda elders characterised Chauwa as the greatest and most important ruler of the Banda, not only in Nyasaland but in neighbouring countries as well. This was not unlike the Tumbuka culture-brokers, such as Cullen Young, who painted a glorious past of the Chikulamayembe dynasty in northern Malawi when laying down the foundation of Tumbuka ethnicity. However, it should be noted that some oral traditions collected from various parts of central Malawi freely admitted that Chauwa was a junior to Makewana, who was responsible for the central shrine at Msinja. Nevertheless, Chauwa's greatness as portrayed by the Banda is reflected in the following passage:

Chauwa the great mother of the Abanda clan from the northern to the southern and oriental to occidental of Nyasaland, has been the queen of Abanda clan from the beginning of the Abanda clan, 300 years back... until the Europeans came into the country. She had influence over the Abanda from the four-corners of this country. She appointed important chiefs to rule certain sections and divisions, such as Mdzinga, Chimutu Chitukula, Kalumba, N'gombe and Njewa. There were also several chiefs in far districts such as Dedza, Dowa, Fort Johnston, Port Herald, Zomba, Nkhotakota and Chintheche. Before the white men came these chiefs had to report important matters to their mother Chauwa. The Abanda of far countries such as Chintheche, Fort Johnston, Port Herald and Northern Rhodesia ceased communicating with her after the arrival of the tyrant Ngoni. Not one of the other clans would come forward and say that they had fought Chauwa, annihilate or subdue her ruling power. All the clans lived peacefully with each other and were ruled by chiefs from their clans. Even after the arrival of the Angoni the position remained

unchanged. This mixing of chiefs has been brought by the white-man's government that has altered the existing systems.⁴¹

Apart from portraying Chauwa as the local Eve from whom all the other Banda chiefs sprang, Mwase and his group also sought the solidarity of all the Banda in Native Authority Mazengera's area and beyond. They primarily targeted village headmen/women, precisely because they voted in Native Authority elections. In order to accomplish this, Chauwa sent out an invitation to a number of Banda Native Authorities and village headmen and women in Lilongwe District to the Banda clan meeting held on August 18, 1936. From the invitation letter, it is quite clear that Chauwa wanted all the Banda in Lilongwe to recognise her as their mother and ruler. It is also apparent that Chauwa wanted the Banda elders to see N.A. Mazengera as their enemy.

To Chief:

Kasumbu, Chimutu, Chitukula, Masula, Kamgunda and Njewa

I am inviting you to a meeting on Monday, next week, August 18, 1936. The main agenda of the meeting is to bid farewell to you my children because Native Authority Mazengera is threatening to remove me from this area. He intends to do this because I attended the Abanda meeting at Nathenje though I sent prior notification to both Mazengera and the District Commissioner at the *Boma*. He also says that he does not want my children, other Abanda chiefs to visit me. Furthermore, he informed me that as Native Authority of this area he not I has the right to appoint Mdzinga. This remark puzzled me because even during the time of our ancestors, it was unheard of for a Phiri to get involved in matters concerning a Banda chieftaincy. In addition, Mazengera

⁴¹ MNA, NCI/20/2 Minutes of the Abanda clan meeting held at Chilenje on August 18, 1936.

stated that I should not have gone to the Boma when the DC called Abanda elders to give an account of our history. He feels that I went there to back bite him. That is why he is deporting me from Chilenje, the land of my ancestors. Therefore, make plans to attend this important meeting so that you can appoint a Mdzinga, your uncle, before I leave this area.

Please, if you acknowledge me as your mother, attend the meeting.

Your mother,
Chauwa⁴² (translated)

Among the matrilineal societies of pre-colonial and colonial Malawi such as the Chewa, women, especially mothers, occupied an important position in their lineage. Descent followed the female line. That is, a person was related to his/her mother and her sisters, their grandmother and her sisters. Children belonged to the kinship group of their mother. Property, like land, was passed from mother to her daughters. Consequently, men accessed land primarily through their wives. Moreover, in most cases marriage was matrilocal: a husband left his village and settled in the village of his wife. Though the matrilineal system provided for quite strong economic and social positions of women, politically, leadership positions were usually held by men, the guardians of the lineage, commonly known as *ankhoswe* (plural, *nkhoswe* singular).

⁴² MNA, NCI/20/2, A letter from Chauwa to a number of chiefs and village headmen/women in Lilongwe district, dated August 12, 1936. Note, a copy of the letter was sent to Native Authority Mazengera notifying him of the meeting. There is also a copy of a letter, dated August 12, 1936, in the Archives from N.A. Mazengera authorising Chauwa to hold the meeting.

In cultivating feelings of ethnic self-awareness among the Banda, Mwase utilised the importance of the mother in Chewa society. For example, at the meeting of the Banda referred to above, the main agenda of the meeting was to discuss the alleged ill treatment that Chauwa, “the great mother of all the Abanda,” received at the hands of Mazengera:

The subject to be discussed first is the ill treatment towards the great mother of all Abanda inclusively, namely, Chauwa of Chilenje village by Native Authority Mazengera, a Phiri chief, who at the present moment has obtained power from the European government to rule the Abanda who are the right subjects of the great mother Chauwa of Chilenje.⁴³

In Chewa society it was the responsibility of the lineage guardian (*nkhoswe*) to protect the interests of his *mbumba*. They were expected to settle conflicts within the *mbumba*, represent members of the lineage to the outside, for instance in court cases and so on. This is the theme that some Malawian men have capitalised on even in post-colonial Malawi, in order to gain wide support especially in party politics. The first President of independent Malawi, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, for example, constituted himself “*Nkhoswe Number 1*” for all women in Malawi. He consistently warned that nobody was to mistreat “his women.”

Don't allow anybody to mistreat you... If anybody does this in the name of the Party or my name, report him to the Party. If you

⁴³ MNA, NCI/20/2, Minutes of the Abanda Clan Meeting held at Chauwa village, N.A. Mazengera, Lilongwe district, 18/8/36.

don't get an answer, come and see Kamuzu himself. No one must mistreat my women.⁴⁴

Similarly, Mwase was reminding the Banda elders that it was their duty to protect their women (*mbumba*), in this case their "mother" Chauwa. This protective image also comes through in Mwase's address at a meeting the District Commissioner for Lilongwe held to discuss the political activities of the Banda in N.A. Mazengera's area. In his report to the Provincial Commissioner, quoting Mwase, the District Commissioner wrote, "the matter discussed was the complaint of Chauwa. They did not want to hate anyone but no one liked his 'mother' to be troubled."⁴⁵

In order to persuade the Banda elders to take some action Chauwa addressed "her children" at the 18th August 1936 meeting as follows:

Native Authority Mazengera sent for me on Sunday, the 9th of August 1936. His messenger found me unwell. I was suffering from headache and aching of feet. I told the messenger that I was unfit to travel any distance and asked him to spend a night at my village so that we could set out for Mazengera's the next day. The messenger said, "The order that I have been given by N.A. Mazengera is that it does not matter you are sick, I must take you

⁴⁴ Government of Malawi, *Malawi News*, No.9 (Party Convention, 1969, film) cited in David Hirschmann, "The Malawi Case: Enclave Politics, Core Resistance and Nkhoswe No.1," in K.A. Staudt (ed.) *Women, International Development and Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). Also, I discuss this theme in my MA thesis. See H. Kachapila, "Women's Organisations and the State in Malawi, 1932-1992."

⁴⁵ MNA, NCI/20/2, Correspondence, District Commissioner, Lilongwe to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, dated September 17, 1936. He was reporting on the meeting that he convened after the Abanda clan sent a petition to the government to recognise Chauwa as ruler of all the Abanda.

away from your village.” While discussing this the sun set in and mercilessly the messenger took me away from my village and made me sleep at Kunthole village, a village that is about 800 to 1000 yards from my mine. We arrived there after dark. The next day, Monday, we set out for Mazengera’s. Certain men of my clan followed me, some found me on the way, others just after I arrived at Mazengera’s.

I entered his court where a great number of people were sitting. N.A. Mazengera said, “This is the very woman whom I want to see mostly. She is the woman who intends to take away my *nkhanju* (garment of chieftainship). I warn you that you and your Abanda men should be aware. If you don’t know me, you will know me now. You went to Nathenje and held a meeting of the Abanda, and again you went to the DC when the Abanda were called. What were you telling the DC? I know you meant to hold a secret detraction against me, therefore, prepare, you and your men. I will make you eat hot chillies. I hear that your Abanda men are often visiting your village, such as Chimutu of Chiwamba, Kalumba of Chitsime and many others. I don’t want these men to come to your village at all. If they continue coming, know that I will collect Abanda of all sexes that are in my land and get them exiled to an unknown country.”

I tried to explain the subject of the meeting at Nathenje... My simple explanation was like to kindle a flame of fire in his heart and he scolded me heavily, being woman, I feared greatly because when he was speaking he kept hitting the book on the table. One or two of my men tried to explain in the same manner but in vain... He continued threats of doing away with the Abanda in his country. I am the descendant of Chauwa, the founder of the Abanda clan, and the order of Mazengera is rather hard for one living to observe, unless in a grave where a person is buried alone.⁴⁶

And as Mwase reports:

*After that the great mother of the Abanda clan closed her speech. All the Abanda looked at each other with pale faces and bent down with deep melancholy. At last chiefs, headmen and men decided to send a petition to the Nyasaland government [emphasis added].*⁴⁷

⁴⁶ MNA, NCI/20/2 – Minutes of the Abanda clan meeting held at Chauwa village on August 18, 1836.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

The minutes of the Banda meeting at Chilenje are in Mwase's own handwriting. It would also seem that he played another more important role than recording the minutes. Some colonial administrators believed that Mwase made Chauwa exaggerate the alleged mistreatment at Mazengera's court. They argued that Mwase came up with this plan because he wanted to make the Banda elders angry enough to react. Whether or not Mwase counselled Chauwa to amplify what happened on that Monday morning August 10, 1936, we do not know. What we do know is that Mwase knew the Banda elders would not sit and watch their mother be mistreated and disrespected by N.A. Mazengera. Indeed, the Banda elders did get angry and sent a petition to the government calling for Zomba's recognition of Chauwa as ruler of all the Banda in Nyasaland. One can argue that, at the level of Banda elders such as chiefs and village headmen, the Banda embraced the clan ideologies put forward by Mwase and Chauwa. Unfortunately, colonial officials did not create space for the Banda clan ideologies and aspirations to be accepted or redefined by ordinary Banda men and women. I reached this conclusion because of the way that colonial administrators reacted to the petition that Chauwa and Banda elders sent to the *boma*.

When the Banda sent their petition to the government, Maurice C. Hoole was District Commissioner at Lilongwe. He convened a meeting of all village headmen and women in Section Five at Mazengera's village on

8 September 1936. At the meeting Mazengera made a statement as to how his family came to be established as chiefs of the area.⁴⁸ Also, he stated that the Mazengeras were chiefs when the Ngoni and later on the Europeans arrived in Chewaland. In addition, he denied that he had threatened to send Chauwa or the Banda out of his area. Mwase also spoke at the meeting. He gave an account of the history of the Banda from the time they were living at Choma Mountain with the Phiri until they settled at their present home. He also touched on the Banda

⁴⁸ Members of the Phiri clan in Mazengera's area accept the statement Mazengera made. It is maintained in oral traditions that although the Banda were the original rulers of the Mazengera area, the Phiri took over because of *chisuwani* (cross-cousin marriage). "The Banda used to marry the Phiri and vice versa. At one time Chauwa's brother, Mdzinga married the sister of Chauma Phiri at Chilanga. He brought the woman to Nkhoma where she later died while pregnant (*nthumbwi*). Mdzinga asked Mnduwa to go to Chilanga and convey the message to Chauma but Mnduwa refused. Meanwhile, word reached Chauma that his sister had died at the hands of Mdzinga [among the Chewa it was believed that if a pregnant woman died it was primarily because her husband had committed adultery and that was considered a serious offence]. Chauma summoned his followers and headed for Nkhoma but before he reached Mdzinga's village, Mdzinga fled to Chiphampahle. Chauma reached the village and assembled all the neighbouring chiefs. He addressed them. "What will I do now? I came here to bury my sister and investigate how she died, and yet her husband who should have informed me about her illness has run away. This is a serious crime. Mdzinga has killed my sister and I demand land as compensation!" No one could argue with that, so Chauma seized the Nkhoma area that had once belonged to Mdzinga and appointed his nephew as chief. The nephew came to be known as Mazengera because people said he built a chieftainship from the spoils of a lawsuit (*anazengela ufumu mlandu*). This is how the Phiri seized this area. Interview Kings Phiri with Ndelele Chitsautsa Phiri, Dzuwa Village, T.A. Mazengera, Lilongwe, 14/5/74; Jacob Mgawi Banda, Chauwa Village, T.A. Mazengera, 13/5/74.

meeting at Chilenje especially on Chauwa's complaints and the possibility of appointing Mdzinga to represent her interests.

In his response Hoole stated that the meeting of the Banda clan called by his predecessor Fox-Strangways "was for the purpose of enquiry into the history of the people only." As noted above, this was not entirely true. The main reason the administrators at the *boma* asked clan elders to outline histories of their clans was to provide a trustworthy foundation on which to base native administration in Lilongwe district.

Hoole explained:

The statement of the past history of the Abanda as given by Mwase was interesting but referred to the past, to days that most of the people had forgotten. This was proved by the statement of Mwase himself that at the meeting of the clan at the Boma only he Mwase could give an account of their history. The Abanda and the Aphiri and other clans were now all mixed up under various chiefs and there was no country only of the Abanda or of the Aphiri or of the Amwale. Chief Mazengera has been the chief of this area for many years. His headmen all acknowledge him as their rightful chief and the Governor had recognised him as Native Authority of the area. He therefore was responsible for the government of this area and meetings on political matters must not be held in his area without his knowledge and consent.

If Chauwa had any complaint to make about the way she was treated or if any of the Abanda had any complaints they all know they could go to the Boma and make their complaints to the DC.

There was no necessity to call a meeting of the Abanda clan. The DC warned all present that if any other persons tried to undermine lawful power and authority of the NA they would be punished.

The DC then asked the meeting whether they regarded Mwase as one of them or a stranger. With only four dissents, Chauwa, Mpalapala, Bwakonera and Chitsala, the meeting agreed he was a stranger.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ MNA, NCI/20/2 – Native Authorities – Lilongwe District, A letter from the District Commissioner to the Provincial Commissioner, 17/9/36.

Hoole informed the Provincial Commissioner that after the meeting he interviewed a number of Banda elders who stated that they regarded Chauwa as their mother. And that "the present agitation is due to Chauwa herself who is saying that her children are scattered and now they should know her again."⁵⁰ However, Hoole had his own interpretation of what was happening:

I feel sure that the action of Chauwa in agitating for her children to know her again is largely due to prompting on the part of Mwase who claims to be her relation and sees through her a chance of obtaining a position of power and influence for himself. Chauwa herself when I questioned her at the meeting held on 8/9/36, made no complaint about her personal treatment by Mazengera and the statement of Chitukula who presided at the meeting at Chilenje on the 18th August proves that this meeting was not held for the purpose of considering the ill-treatment of the "great mother of the Abanda clan" but for the purpose of electing a Mdzinga.⁵¹

It would seem that colonial officials had no interest in addressing the concerns of Chauwa, Mwase and the Banda. As far as they were concerned Mazengera was the chief for Section Five and he was apparently doing a good job.⁵² Moreover, we saw above that although the colonial government designed native administration on tribal lines, they were also aware that most chiefs "had no history of greatness behind

⁵⁰ MNA, NC1/20/2-Interview M.C. Hoole with Native Authority Chitukula, 11/8/36.

⁵¹ MNA, NCI/20/2, Correspondence, DC, Lilongwe to PC, Central Province, 17/9/36.

⁵² MNA, NCL4/1/3 District Annual Report, 1930, Lilongwe.

them” and that the government lacked dependable sources to verify traditional claims. This is because, as Rangeley informs us, the chiefs and aspiring chiefs “concocted stories and covered up loopholes with invention.”⁵³ In this context, colonial administrators hesitated to investigate counter-claims to chieftainships because they “felt investigations into pre-European political patterns would simply undermine existing structures and raise false hopes.”⁵⁴

There was another important reason the colonialists did not want to respond to the Banda petition directly. The colonial state was concerned with its inability to maintain order in Nyasaland if indigenous societies were not stable. One policy the colonial government used to maintain stability in the country was ethnicity. Perhaps the Acting Chief Secretary best articulated this policy in 1919 when he remarked, “as far as the internal security and peace of the country is concerned the existing tribal differences are a considerable safeguard.”⁵⁵ However, the *boma* was willing to encourage only those ethnic tendencies that did not threaten its tenuous control of the country. In order to safeguard their

⁵³ W. Rangeley, Extract from Annual Report- West Nyasa District, 1932, Cited in Morrow, “Indirect Rule in Nyasaland,” p. 39

⁵⁴ Eric Smith, Acting Provincial Commissioner, 1936. Cited in Morrow, “Indirect Rule In Nyasaland,” p.45.

⁵⁵ MNA, S 1/1008/19, Correspondence, Acting Chief Secretary to the Resident, Mzimba, dated 9/5/19. Cited in Woods, “Struggle for the Lineage,” p. 22.

position, colonial officials dealt harshly with any person or persons who said or did anything they considered detrimental to the stability of the country and their rule. And that is exactly what happened to the Banda cause. In addition to warning the Banda that they would be punished if they continued to undermine the power and authority of Mazengera, Hoole had a better solution to the problem: the removal of George Mwase from the area on the basis that he was not a native of the district.

After the meeting held on 8/9/36, NA Mazengera informed me that he and his headmen wished Mwase to leave the area. He is not a native of the district, having just settled here of his own will, and now that the Europeans and Indians know him too well he is trying to make trouble amongst his fellow natives.

I agree with NA Mazengera that Mwase should leave the area. Mwase is an Atonga and a native of the West Nyasa District and I consider that the sooner he is back amongst his own people the better it will be for the peace and good order of this district.⁵⁶

While the Provincial Commissioner did not initially agree with the Hoole that “sufficient ground has been disclosed for taking steps to require G.S. Mwase to leave the area under compulsion,” he did regard “the political activities of one George Mwase in the area of NA Mazengera, with grave disfavour.” Forwarding the District Commissioner’s correspondence and the minutes of the Banda meeting to the Chief Secretary in Zomba, the PC echoed Hoole’s sentiments:

⁵⁶ MNA, NCI/20/2, Correspondence, DC, Lilongwe to PC, Central Province, 17/9/36.

The antecedents of G.S. Mwase no doubt are well known to you, if however, you desire more precise information, as to them than is available in your office, I shall be glad to furnish it.

I agree with the opinion expressed by the DC Lilongwe, that the motive prompting the advance in the name of the Abanda clan against the Aphiri clan of the same Achewa people to which the latter clan the present head of the NA Mazengera belongs, is the self glorification and potential material advantage of G.S. Mwase and I consider that his activities are directly subversive of the NA and should be met firmly from the outset with official disfavour.

In this connection I have to refer to your letter No. 123/36 of the 23rd July, 1936 and to submit that even if it be considered that the Abanda have a fair claim to the headship of this NA the proper time for such a claim to be investigated is on change, for example by death of the holder of the title of Mazengera.

You will observe from paragraph 9 of Mr. Hoole's letter that the actual Mazengera makes claims that his clan was in power at the time Europeans came and when Angoni came before them and that the headmen of the area all received their rights of land occupancy from his ancestors and that these claims are generally admitted.⁵⁷

The main issue in the Banda petition was the colonial state's recognition of Chauwa as the ruler of all the Banda in Nyasaland. Colonial administrators chose to interpret it as the overthrow of Mazengera from the Native Authority throne by the Banda in general and Mwase in particular. That the colonial government was not going to address the real issue is made clear in the following two paragraphs of the PC's letter referred to above:

I would not propose myself to reply to G.S. Mwase's letter but I suggest that the DC Lilongwe, might be authorised to inform him that it has been forwarded to me and his action in convening the meeting in question is regarded with grave disfavour as being subversive of the authority of Mazengera and to warn him that any further action of similar nature on his part will render him liable to

⁵⁷ MNA, NCI 20/2, Correspondence, Provincial Commissioner, Central Province to Chief Secretary, Zomba, 26/9/36.

serious consequences and possibly proceedings under the Political Removal and Detention of Natives Ordinance. Disturbing, as may be the situation, I do not consider that sufficient ground has been disclosed for taking steps to require G.S. Mwase to leave the area under compulsion.

I have to suggest furthermore that the NA of Mazengera might make rules under Section 18 Cap.41, to regulate the holding by natives of further meetings in the area of the Native Authority.⁵⁸

Nor was Mwase's the only case in central Malawi in which colonial administrators reacted to the development of ethnic consciousness by threatening the people involved with deportation. Morrow states that in Dowa in the 1930s the District Commissioner insisted that that Kalonga chieftaincy "had been created or revived" in 1933. According to the DC this happened "as a result of agitation or propaganda by a politically minded native named Graham Chirwa, with the Native Authority laying claim to be the heir to the great Kalonga chieftainship."⁵⁹ Note, the rulers of the Maravi Empire were known as the Kalongas. All Graham Chirwa was doing was using history to support the Kalonga's claim to traditional power. Colonial administrators, however, reacted to this use of the past by expelling Chirwa from the area and suspending the Native Authority due to "gross abuse of authority." Morrow argues that colonial officials took a tough stand against "kingmakers" such as Mwase and Chirwa because they "believed that it was essential to eliminate what

⁵⁸ MNA, NCI 20/2, Correspondence, Provincial Commissioner, Central Province to Chief Secretary, Zomba, dated 26/9/36.

⁵⁹ Morrow, "Indirect Rule in Nyasaland," p. 41.

they saw as the tendency of western-educated individuals to interfere with, and possibly destabilise the basic system.”⁶⁰

The Dutch missionaries at Nkhoma also played an important part in stalling the development of clan self-awareness among the Banda. According to Leroy Vail, missionaries played a crucial role in the development of ethnic consciousness in most societies of southern Africa where they established mission schools. This was not the case in Mazengera’s area. The reason was conflict of interest and not as Vail and White would have us believe, lack of interest in Chewa history and culture. That is, the Dutch missionaries, especially Dr. Andrew Murray, knew that the development of Banda ethnicity had the potential of developing into a competition between the missionaries and the rain prophetess Chauwa over the population in NA Mazengera’s area.

That the missionaries feared the revival of Chauwa’s power and authority in Mazengera’s area was made clear by their reaction to calls for clan separatism among the Banda. It is noteworthy, however, that the conflict between the Dutch missionaries and the Banda had had a long history. From its inception, the Dutch mission at Nkhoma sought to destroy Chauwa, and especially what she stood for. For example, it was Rev. Retief who ended Chauwa’s ritual powers by baptising her and giving her a Christian name, Salome. When Banda village headmen

⁶⁰ Ibid.

“insisted that a new Chauwa be appointed and installed in the place of the one who had been converted to Christianity... Dr. Murray gave private counsel to the Mazengera of the time, Chikapa who fined them 6 goats. The idea of installing a new Chauwa was thereafter abandoned.”⁶¹ With the baptism of Chauwa and the frustration of efforts to install a new one, the Dutch missionaries felt confident that their religious rival had been defeated.

Hence, the Dutch missionaries did not welcome the development of Banda ethnicity in Mazengera’s area. Before the Banda petition was sent to the DC at Lilongwe, it was Dr. Murray who informed the Assistant District Commissioner of the political activities of the Abanda in Mazengera’s area. He told the ADC that people from the area had been to see him and “to enquire whether Mazengera was still chief as it was said that Chauwa had appointed Mdzinga to be chief.”⁶² Andrew Murray also constituted himself adviser in chief to Justino Mazengera on the Chauwa case. Like colonial administrators such as Hoole, Murray believed that Mwase was at the root of the problem in NA Mazengera’s

⁶¹ Interview, Kings Phiri with Jacob Mgawi Banda, Chauwa Village, T.A Mazengera, Lilongwe, 13/5/74.

⁶² MNA, NC1/20/2, Native Authorities – Lilongwe District, Correspondence, District Commissioner, Lilongwe, to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province.

area and, not unlike Hoole, his solution to the problem was the removal of Mwase from Lilongwe district.

According to Mwase, the Dutch missionaries suggested on a number of occasions to Chewa elders to have Mwase expelled from Lilongwe. For instance, Mwase wrote the Senior Provincial Commissioner on 6 October 1936 complaining that Dr. Murray advised Chauwa "to deny him (Mwase) as one of her clan." The following excerpts from Mwase's letter to the SPC demonstrate that this was not the first time that the churchman had done this.

Dr. Murray sent one of his evangelists to mother Chauwa to tell her that she must separate from me and not to agree that I am one of her clan because I am Mtonga and Chauwa is Mchewa. If she agrees I am one of her clan she will be imprisoned and afterwards she will be shifted together with me away from the country because I am to be shifted as soon as the Boma knows that I am leading the Achewa into war. When this message was delivered to mother Chauwa, two of her men were present. They advised mother Chauwa not to accept the message. ⁶³

Sometime in 1934 NA Mazengera told me that the leader of the DRCM, Dr. Murray... asked him to suggest something to the government that would have me shifted away from the country because he, Dr. Murray did not like me to be about in the district. In 1935, I visited Mazengera after he came back from the Jeanes School in Zomba. He again told me that Dr. Murray was asking him of me and when Mazengera told him that I was away, Dr. Murray said, "Mwase is not liked." ⁶⁴

⁶³ MNA, NCI/ 20/2, Correspondence, George Simeon Mwase to the Senior Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, dated 6/10/36.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

In addition, the Dutch missionaries claimed that Mwase had no right to speak on behalf of the Banda. This was because Mwase was born in Nkhatabay and the colonial administration classified him as Tonga and not a native of Lilongwe district. Responding to this and to accusations that his aim was to start a war between the Banda and Phiri, Mwase remarked that, as a missionary, Dr. Murray should know that it was sin to separate people from their families.

Is this the work of a missionary? A man whose work is that of Jesus? Whose work is to extend love and unity among people? I don't know if the books I read about Jesus are different from the books that the missionaries have got. Dr. Murray is asking people to commit sin by neglecting their clan mates. I heard this personally from his Royal Highness the Duke of Connaught in 1912, when he visited Southern Rhodesia. I was appointed his interpreter. One day he asked me what my clan was and when I told him he said, "Stick to your clan my son. Any one who neglects his own clan commits sin." I am still keeping his words in my heart.⁶⁵

Dr. Murray suggests that I will lead Achewa into war. On this point I want to know what year Dr. Murray saw my ancestors, Abanda and Aphiri declare war against each other, so that from that he is led to believe that the same war may start again. I shall be pleased to know from Dr. Murray regarding the names of the people of Nyasaland, such as Achewa, Achawa, Atonga, Ahenga, Asiska and Atumbuka. What do these names mean and where did they get them? Also I will be pleased if Dr. Murray will start with what is Ubanda and Uphiri and where they were given these names.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁷ MNA, NCI/ 20/2, Correspondence, District Commissioner, Lilongwe to Provincial Commissioner, 10/10/36.

Commenting on Mwase's complaints against Dr. Murray, the District Commissioner stated that "this letter appears to me somewhat libellous in nature and I have taken no action with regard to it pending receipt of instructions from you."⁶⁷ However, I was unable to locate the Senior Provincial Commissioner's response to Mwase's 6/10/36 letter at the National Archives of Malawi. In fact, government reports for 1937 are silent on the Mwase/Chauwa matter. In 1938 the question of a separate Banda chieftaincy in Mazengera's area resurfaced following the *Baraza* that was held in Lilongwe by the Governor, Sir Harold Kittermaster, on the 30th March. The Banda took advantage of the meeting between the Governor and all the Native Authorities in Lilongwe to put forward their complaint before the *Bwana Mkubwa*. As the following excerpt from the 1938 petition illustrates, there was a remarkable change in the plans for a separate Banda chieftaincy in NA Mazengera's area:

We beg to let you, our Bwana know that we heads of the Abanda clan wish to approach His Excellency regarding our complaint of our chieftainship in our land.

We have chosen George Simeon Mwase to be paramount chief over the whole Abanda clan in Lilongwe.

Do not think we have chosen him because he is educated in the European fashion. He is the real and direct grandson of Mdzinga, the first ancestor of the Abanda. In place of Mdzinga we have found that Mwase is the rightful heir.

We are the people who install all the Abanda chiefs [emphasis added] from old such as the chieftainship of Kalumba, Chitukula, and Chimutu. All these chiefs are "sub" to Mdzinga. Bwana Hoole did not enquire carefully regarding the seniority of all the Abanda

We do not dispute the chieftainship of any other man but ours and of our land because we have lost both on account of your power.⁶⁸

From the archival sources consulted for this study it is not evident why the Banda decided to elect Mwase as paramount chief. In fact, it is rather strange that in the 1938 petition the Banda presented to the Governor, Chauwa's name does not appear at all. As the account below shows, it would seem that there had been a falling out between Chauwa and Mwase. To the colonial administrators, the shift from Chauwa to George Mwase confirmed their initial suspicions that Mwase had ulterior motives and further discredited the Banda cause.

If George Mwase and the Banda hoped for a favourable response from the highest office in the land, they were disappointed. The Governor, in reply to their complaint, simply "informed the meeting of the correct procedure to be followed when any claim to chieftainship was made."⁶⁹ Sir Harold Kittermaster was referring to the procedure outlined by the Provincial Commissioner, Central Province in 1928.⁷⁰ Following

⁶⁸ MNA, NCL 2/5/1 – Baraza held at Lilongwe by His Excellency the Governor on 30th March 1938.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ MNA, NC1/5/15- Chiefs/Headmen – Lilongwe District. Provincial Commissioner to All District Commissioners, Central Province, 4/7/28. See footnote number one for details.

the Baraza, Mwase and some Banda elders attempted unsuccessfully to present their case to both the District and Provincial Commissioners. In the PC's words:

The DC advised the persons connected that the PC could give them no further information than contained in His Excellency's statement at the Lilongwe Baraza. On the last occasion Mwase was informed by the DC that he Mwase, was not to hold any further meetings in connection with this matter.⁷¹

Despite the negative response they received from the DC, the PC and the Governor, George Mwase and the Banda made a last bid on a separate Banda chieftaincy in NA Mazengera's area by attempting to take their case to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. One cannot help but be struck by the persistence with which Mwase pursued the matter. From reading the many letters that he wrote to the government on the subject, one gets the impression that Mwase felt his persistence would finally pay off. Although he was aware of the colonial context of racism and paternalism in which he operated, Mwase believed that as a British subject he was entitled to British justice. This is clearly articulated in the following excerpt from of his 6/10/36 letter to the Senior Provincial Commissioner:

I must say that my voice is small and weak as that of the tickling watch in the pocket while that of Dr. Murray is as big as that of the manufacturing mill whose sound everyone pays attention to and

⁷¹ MNA, NCI/23/1 – Seditious Propaganda and Political Prisoners. A letter from the Acting Provincial Commissioner, Central Province to the Honourable Chief Secretary, Zomba, 19/5/36.

knows that a mill is at work. But a tickling in the pocket no one takes notice of because it is slow and weak. The only thing that makes me pleased is that my tickling noise is in the pocket of His Excellency the Governor and in the pocket of the Right Honourable the Secretary of State for Colonies. It does not matter that the majority do not pay attention to me, but these noble men will certainly hear me because I am in their pockets.

I am proud that I am a British subject and that I am under British law that has no prejudice, although other nations are against it. From reading different papers I am sure England is now full of justice and not bigotries.⁷²

Coming from this perspective, Mwase decided that since he and the Banda did not get justice in Nyasaland, they would seek it in England. In order to do that, they had to get permission from the Governor. Consequently, Mwase wrote the PC informing him that he and some Banda elders were proceeding to Zomba to see the Governor because “as loyal subjects to His Majesty’s government as everybody else in the Protectorate we rely upon the His Excellency’s assistance in every way.” Mwase wanted to, “interview His Excellency, [HE] the Governor personally on the attached grounds.”

1. To seek justice without bigotry.

⁷² For correspondence between George Mwase and various colonial officers see, MNA, NCI/23/1 – Seditious Propaganda and Political Prisoners – 1. G.S. Mwase, 1926 March - 1940 November. See also, MNA, NCI/3/2 – Central Province Native Association – September 1923 to June 1929 and MNA, NCI/20/2 – Native Authorities – Lilongwe District – 1933 – 1939.

2. To get a written permit from the HE for one or two of us to proceed to the Colonial Office in Europe, on our own expenses and interview the Right Honourable, the Secretary of State for Colonies, on this land dispute. We cannot get a satisfactory decision from our local government. It does not matter if we lose entirely our rights to land, but it should be with better understanding and not cruel judgement.
3. To know why Major Nichols, District Commissioner Lilongwe, took the matter as if we used the land dispute against him personally or the government. Instead of hearing from us when we claim the land to be ours and not of the Phiri, he got excited and did not allow us to state how. ⁷³

It is interesting to note that Mwase was aware as early as 1938 that it was the colonial government that was responsible for the mess the native administration was in. He also pointed out that the District Commissioners for Lilongwe, Hoole and Major Nichols had mishandled the situation in NA Mazengera's area.

The land question has been there since 1913, when the government appointed men whom they liked to be Principal headmen. Some of them were the right rulers others were not. The way of selecting a chief by the Abanda, Aphiri and Akwenda or Amwale is totally different from the way the DC tells us to do. We kept silent as we thought that if we raise the question it would look like we were against the government. In early 1936 the question was raised by the government itself, to find out the right owners of each area. We thought the government was after justice. That is why we Abanda rose up to the question of getting back our land from the Phiri fellow who received it as a present from the government in 1913. Yet we are found offenders and about to be exiled extra funny!

⁷³ MNA, NCI/23/1 – Seditious Propaganda and Political Prisoners – 1. G.S. Mwase, 1926 March - 1940 November. Correspondence, George Mwase to Acting Provincial Commissioner, 6/5/38.

The DC said that if we continue putting in claims to our ancestors' land, he will write for a permit to the HE to exile us. So far we know we are the right heirs and have considerable support from a number of chiefs in Lilongwe and adjoined districts. We accept exile, shooting or hanging by our necks. And we think it is too much work for the DC to write to the HE, we should just go there ourselves and receive the banishment and return no more.

The DC (Nichols) said he was sick with our complaint because Mr Hoole handled it well. We object to this. Mr Hoole did not complete this area as he did in other areas. This we wrote to Mr Hoole several times but we got no reply. We thought his successor was going to finally complete the task in this area but alas!

When we said that we were not satisfied with you and we wish to see the PC, the DC said, "the PC is not going to listen to anything from you and if you continue you will be exiled." He said all this in an angry voice. We do not understand why the DC should say this to us, when we are trying to explain to him our complaint.⁷⁴

The colonial government reacted strongly to Mwase's last letter to the Acting Provincial Commissioner. On 19 May 1938, the Acting Provincial Commissioner wrote the Chief Secretary of State outlining the political activities of George Mwase from September 1936. He reached the following conclusions:

There can be no doubt that Mwase's conduct is subversive of the lawful power and authority of the NA in whose area he resides. It should be remembered that the NA has previously requested that Mwase should be removed from his area (paragraph 168 on page 48 of the Lilongwe District Annual Report of 1936).

In the circumstances I would suggest that action be taken in accordance with Chapter 23 Section 4 (1) b of the Laws (Political

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

Removal and Detention of Natives Ordinance) and that His Excellency may be pleased to direct the removal of George S. Mwase from the Lilongwe District to West Nyasa District (Chintheche), to which place Mwase belongs.⁷⁵

Not surprisingly, the Chief Secretary received the following letter from the District Commissioner, Lilongwe in September 1938.

I have the honour to acknowledge receipt of His Excellency the Governor's order under Section 4 of Cap.23 for the removal and detention of politically minded native George Simeone Mwase and to inform you that this native has this day been removed from this district enroute for Chintheche in accordance with His Excellency's order.⁷⁶

Indeed, Mwase was removed from Lilongwe District in September of 1938. At a hearing for his political removal from Lilongwe district convened on 19 July 1938 Chauwa, his "mother" and ally, did not support his claim as heir to Mdzinga:

I have never attended or had anything to do with any meetings called with the object of deposing NA Mazengera and making Mdzinga NA in Mazengera's place. I did not write my name on Exhibit A and I did not authorize anyone to write it for me. I know nothing of Exhibit A.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ MNA, NCI/23/1 – Seditious Propaganda and Political Prisoners – 1. G.S. Mwase, 1926 March - 1940 November – Correspondence, Acting Provincial Commissioner to the Honourable Chief Secretary of State, 19/5/38.

⁷⁶ MNA, NCI/23/1 – Seditious Propaganda and Political Prisoners – 1. G.S. Mwase, 1926 March - 1940 November – Correspondence, District Commissioner to Chief Secretary, September 1938.

⁷⁷ MNA, NCI/23/1 – Exhibit A to which Chauwa is referring in her testimony is a letter that was sent to the Provincial Commissioner dated 6 May 1938 allegedly signed by 50 Banda village headmen and women.

He was detained at Chintcheche for four years. While there, Mwase kept in touch with colonial administrators. Among other things, he demanded that the government provide him with maize (corn) because he was not used to eating cassava, the staple food at Chintcheche. They did. In the 1940s Mwase returned to Lilongwe and continued his political activities in the Nyasaland African Congress. According to interviews Kings Phiri conducted in the early 1970s Chauwa Salome passed away in the 1930s.

For some time there was no Chauwa. It was in 1948 that a group of village headmen: Gwenembe, Mphonde, Ngwanda and Bwakonela decided to install a new Chauwa. They committed the mistake of choosing a man to occupy the position. The Dutch missionaries acquiesced to the appointment because the man who was appointed claimed to be a Christian.⁷⁸

4.5: 1930'S Ethnicity in Nyasaland: Whose Invention?

Vail's view of ethnicity as a response to the political, economic and social change societies experienced in southern African and his emphasis on its historical construction over time are important contributions to the study of ethnicity in southern Africa. However, I am not convinced that Vail and White demonstrate in their book that ethnicity in Nyasaland and indeed in most southern African societies "is very much a new phenomenon, an ideological construct, usually of the 20th century."⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Interview, Kings Phiri with Jacob Mgawi Banda, Chauwa Village, T.A. Mazengela, Lilongwe District, 13/5/74.

⁷⁹ Vail, *Creation of Tribalism*, p. 3.

Without an extended historical analysis of southern African societies prior to the 19th century, Vail has no basis to conclude that ethnicity is a 20th century creation. It is possible that other developments in the past might have brought about similar “pervasive social, economic and political changes”⁸⁰ that capitalism induced in the late 19th and early 20th century. In other words, we need a comparative study of how southern African societies negotiated their way through various historical phases before concluding that southern Africans became ethnically aware only in the 20th century.

Moreover, it is now a well-known idea that ethnic consciousness is not a cultural given that is passively accepted by people from one generation to another. For an ethnic identity to be chosen and relevant over time it has to be redefined and maintained, otherwise it becomes irrelevant when the conditions that triggered it are no longer applicable. That is, when a social group chooses to use ethnicity in order to solve problems in its environment, unless the problems keep resurfacing over long periods of time or unless the created ethnic identity is maintained through symbols, culture and so on, ethnic consciousness becomes irrelevant, until such a time when the society finds itself in a similar

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 8.

situation. It is therefore dangerous to conclude that ethnicity is a 20th century development because Southern Africans might have used ethnicity prior to the 20th century but neglected to sustain it continuously from the precolonial to the colonial period.

Also, the account above shows that the role of the colonial state in the development of tribal consciousness was more complicated than Vail and White would have us believe. According to Vail's model, the colonial state played a pivotal role in the development of ethnic consciousness essentially because the Indirect Rule System, through which culture brokers implemented their ethnic ideologies, was its creation. Moreover, Vail states that colonialists introduced the idea of tribal grouping, foreign to Africans. The Banda case study has shown that the colonial state's position on ethnicity was ambivalent.

Contrary to Vail and White the colonial state did not always support ethnicity, and ethnic consciousness arose against the explicit wishes of the state. While the colonial government in Nyasaland supported and encouraged some ethnic tendencies for a number of reasons, it also played a central role in the suppression of other ethnic tendencies among Africans. This is because, as the account above shows, the colonial state more often than not used its power to dictate when and where social groups developed ethnic self-awareness, depending upon how their actions impacted on the stability of the country. This means

that even in cases where the origins “tribes” fulfilled all the three variables in Vail’s model, namely culture brokers, mission education and the Indirect Rule System, the final requirement in the development of ethnicity rested with the colonial state. That is, the creation and the maintenance of an ethnic identity depended on the ability of the state to provide space for social groups to cultivate their ethnic self-awareness. This was compounded by the fact that in almost all parts of Malawi ethnicity was centred on chieftainships. Unfortunately, colonial officials did not know how to deal with claims and counterclaims to chieftainships other than the use of intimidation in the name of maintaining the stability of Nyasaland.

On the question of mission education, the Banda case study also illustrates that the role of missionaries in the promotion of ethnicity is more complicated than implied in Vail’s model. On the one hand, missionaries, such as the Dutch at Nkhoma, were not prepared to support an ethnic identity that clashed with their own interests. As such Chauwa’s role as a rain prophetess made it impossible for the Dutch missionaries to promote any ethnicity or clan separatism that centred on her identity as “mother of all the Abanda.” On the other, apart from preserving and promoting Chewa language throughout the colonial period, the missionaries, especially Murray, sided with the Phiri clan and

advised Mazengera on a number of occasions on how to deal with the Banda in his area.⁸¹

Moreover, if the type of education the Dutch and French Catholic missionaries in central Malawi offered was not conducive to the emergence of Chewa intellectuals as culture brokers, it also made it possible for members of other ethnic groups to act as culture brokers in central Malawi. This is because the movements of people across regions made it possible for an individual from another ethnic group and educated at another mission to serve as a culture broker for yet another ethnic group. Mwase, a colonial state-classified-Tonga, educated by the Livingstonia missionaries, served a crucial role in forging Banda clan separatism. Also, it was not uncommon for young men from the Central Province to attend mission schools in the other regions. For instance the first President of Malawi, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, a colonial-state-classified Chewa from Kasungu, went to Livingstonia Mission.

More importantly, the Banda case underscores the importance to scholars of ethnicity of paying equal attention to inter and intra social group differences and similarities. Because most social groups in central Nyasaland spoke the Chewa language, Vail and White assumed the Central Province to be homogeneous culturally. According to Vail and

⁸¹Woods, "Struggle for the Lineage, p. 19.

White, the development of ethnic consciousness passed central Nyasaland by because it lacked cultural forms that distinguished one social group from another. Pursuing this model, Vail and White fail to appreciate how ethnicity played out in central Nyasaland. The account above shows that the Chewa, a seemingly homogeneous social group, had important clan differences that Chauwa, Mwase and other Banda elders mobilised to forge a separate Banda identity in the 1930s. The Banda's recognition of Chauwa as their "mother" set them apart from other Chewa clans. The Banda case attracted a considerable amount of attention from various colonial circles, as attested by the many files on the issue in the National Archives of Malawi. If Vail and White had cared to consider internal struggles in social groups as a factor facilitating the shaping of ethnic/clan identities, they could not have missed it.

Clan differences were not the only internal distinctions among the Chewa. Cultural forms such as *nyau* and *chinamwali* were also mobilized by some Chewa lineage elders and accepted by some ordinary Chewa men and women to determine what it meant to be a Chewa during the colonial era. However, Vail and White dismiss *nyau* in the development of ethnicity. They argue that one of the factors that stalled the development of ethnicity among the Chewa was the stability of

Chewa culture, specifically *nyau*, which united the Chewa in times of social stress.⁸² Implied in this is the idea that *nyau* is a cultural given that is accepted by all Chewa. Unfortunately, this is a misreading because not all the Chewa in colonial central Malawi subscribed to *nyau*. Others converted to Christianity and denounced *nyau*. And as we saw in Chapter Two, scholars have demonstrated that colonial central Malawi witnessed a bitter enmity between the two groups.

As a result, during the colonial period “*nyau* and Christianity were conjointly defined as mutually exclusive opposites, two-self enclosed societies from different worlds, wedded to each other as self-defining “others”.”⁸³ What is perhaps striking is that some Chewa lineage elders framed membership in *nyau* as a measure of being Chewa.⁸⁴ Moreover, by the 1920s, *nyau* had begun to affect the selection of headmen/women in Chewa communities, with Christians being passed over in favour of individuals associated with *nyau*. Christians were not considered Chewa

⁸² For details see Vail and White, “Tribalism in the Political History,” pp. 173- 174. In general, Vail and White’s treatment of Nyau is disappointing. It reads like something from a Christian missionary book written in the 1920s. Statements such as, “The transformation of Nyau from the sign of *backwardness* to the symbol of authenticity was achieved with the aid of expatriate Africanist scholars...” gives the impression that Vail and White have little respect for culture in their study of ethnicity. One wonders by whose standards Nyau is backward.

⁸³ Deborah Kaspin, “Chewa Visions and Revisions, p.50.

⁸⁴ Ian Linden, “Chewa Initiation Rites and Nyau Societies, p. 33.

enough to be village headman/women.⁸⁵ In addition, from the 1920s *nyau* started incorporating masks and characters representing Joseph, Simon Peter the Virgin Mary and even the colonial governor in its dance routines. Woods notes that “the *nyau* included these outside influences in a way that clearly expressed the subordination of those influences by the *nyau* and implicitly by the Chewa themselves.”⁸⁶ Deborah Kaspin explains the incorporation of Christian characters such as Virgin Mary and Simon Peter into *nyau* as follows:

“Simoni” and “Maria” [are] well-established members of the Nyau dance troupe... Representing the generic white man and woman their names are taken from scripture, from Simon Peter and the Virgin Mary whom missionaries are fond of evoking as exemplars of Christian virtue. But Simoni and Maria are no paragons of humanity. Simoni is a buffoon in floral pajamas who trips over himself and the spectators whenever he enters the courtyard, while Maria is a whore, whose hip gyrations and pelvic thrusts invite all manner of rude replies from spectators.⁸⁷

This chapter’s emphasis on intra group distinctions among the Chewa is not intended to argue that there were no inter group differences in central Malawi that shaped ethnic identities. As we saw in Chapter two, other groups of people specifically the Ngoni and Yao, settled in

⁸⁵ MNA, NC1/21/2, W.H. Murray to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 26/9/22.

⁸⁶ Woods, “The Struggle for Lineage,” p.21. Also, see MNA, NS1/23/6, Correspondence – A.G.O. Hodgson to Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 25/4/27.

⁸⁷ Kaspin, “Chewa Visions and Revisions of Power,” p.48.

central Malawi from mid 19th century. While Vail and White acknowledge this, they argue that their presence did not influence the formation of ethnic identities because “only in two enclaves did the Ngoni establish their presence, and to a great extent local Chewa culture speedily overwhelmed Ngoni culture.”⁸⁸ Evidence indicates that intergroup differences played a role in 1930s ethnicity in central Malawi. As we noted above, Morrow demonstrates that this happened in the Dowa and Mchinji districts of central Malawi where the Ngoni settled.

The chapter defines ethnicity as Bravman does, that is, the mobilisation of sociocultural and linguistic similarities [we might add differences], “by some people, for some purposes, and as accepted by others in the communities, albeit conditionally.”⁸⁹ The account above demonstrates that this took place among the Chewa of central Malawi in the 1930s. Far from being homogeneous, Chewa communities in the 1930s displayed internal divisions based on such factors as clan differentiation and religious affiliation. At times these internal distinctions translated in different political ends and claims as demonstrated by the Banda and the Phiri case in Mazengera’s area and *nyau* adherents’ and Christian converts’ rivalry throughout much of the

⁸⁸ Vail and White, *Tribalism in the Political History*,” p.173.

⁸⁹ Bravman, *Making Ethnic Ways*, p.12.

colonial era. This in turn resulted in different concepts of what it meant to be Chewa. For the *nyau* members, to be Chewa was to be initiated into *nyau*. For the Banda, it meant being ruled by chiefs from their own clan.

In conclusion, it is very unlikely that the mobilization of intra group distinctions and the use of practices to cultivate feelings of ethnic self-awareness were restricted to the Chewa. Hence, to understand fully the development of ethnicity in Malawi, it is important not only to turn our attention to mission schools and the work of anthropologists and colonial historians, as Vail and White rightly argue, but also to local people's rituals and practices and social groups' internal distinctions. Doing this would in turn provide a more complete picture of the development of ethnicity in Malawi than as yet exists.

Chewaness was not the only identity that various segments of the Chewa society subscribed to. The 1940s saw the development of nationalism in Nyasaland that aimed at constructing a new and inclusive Nyasaland nation. This expanded the possibilities of what it meant to be Chewa. However, the two identities were not always compatible and those who were in a position to define others tended to do so in accordance with their particular interests. In the next chapter we see how this played out especially in reference to the matrilineal system and Chewa women.

CHAPTER FIVE
FROM MKAMWINI TO MWINI BANJA: MATRILINY, NATIONALISM
AND ETHNICITY IN THE EARLY 1940s

The title *mkamwini* [someone who belongs elsewhere] should be abolished. The man has power over his wife and as he is the head of the wife he has the right to take her anywhere he wants. The right name of *mwini banja* [owner of the nuclear family] should be adopted. If trouble arises and the husband obtains a divorce the children should be divided equally as well as properties.¹

If the essential aspects of the matrilineal system survived the first three decades of colonial rule remarkably intact, as we saw in Chapter three, they were to be challenged from a number of quarters in the 1940s. Debate over matriliney and especially matrilineal marriage led to serious conflicts and tensions among various segments of colonial Malawian society. On the one hand, the Nyasaland African Congress, representing the voice of primarily educated and economically successful Africans, denounced matrilineal marriage patterns and inheritance. Concerned with strengthening the position of husbands as heads of family, the Christian missionaries, especially the Roman Catholics, supported the Congress's cause. On the other, the colonial state held ambivalent attitudes towards the matrilineal system. While it questioned unstable marriages and the position of men in the *mbumba* lineage, it romanticized an ideal traditional African society. Consequently its

¹ MNA, NS1/3/10 – B. Namboya and J.A. Pambala, “African Marriages and Customs.” 25/10/44.

official stand was one of non-interference in whatever changes occurred in the *mbumba* lineage.

However, it was at the local level that much of the debate over marriage patterns and inheritance rules took place. For example, Chewa lineage elders lamented the erosion of matrilineal norms such as the avoidance of bride-service by sons-in-law. Some Chewa women also bemoaned deteriorating matrilineal standards. They complained of the difficulties encountered when divorcing an intolerable husband or convincing husbands to settle in their villages. This chapter explores how various segments of society in the late colonial period such as colonial officials, Christian missionaries, the educated and economic elite, Chewa lineage elders and Chewa women dealt with the question of women in matrilineal societies. It argues that various vested interests attempted to redefine women to suit particular interests. As the account below demonstrates, this reconstruction silenced the voices of African women and relegated them to a position of economic and social dependency. Some Chewa women responded to this victimization by constructing alternative identities. For example, the account below examines ways in which Chewa women mobilized matrilineal ideals to facilitate the remaking of Chewa ethnicity in the late colonial period. This was also a Chewa women's means of adapting to a changing political, social and economic environment.

5.1: Women and the Imagination of Communities: An Overview

Nationality and citizenship, like race and ethnicity, are unstable categories, and contested identities. They are all gendered identities, and the constructions of “women”, inside and outside their borders, are part of the processes of identity formation.²

Most scholars of imagined identities such as nationality, ethnicity and citizenship tend to exclude or marginalise women and gender relations from the focus of their studies. However in recent years a number of scholars, especially feminists, have demonstrated that the processes through which nations and ethnic groups are imagined and re-imagined are gendered.³ While some scholars have focused on the objectification of women in the imagination of communities as symbolic reproducers of nations and as markers of an ethnic group’s cultural identity, others have demonstrated that women have used this position to push forward their interests in the imagined identities. Yet others have demonstrated that, as an essential constituent of ethnic groups, women in their own

² Jan Jindy Pettman, *Worlding Women.*, p.62.

³ For details see Anthias and Yuval-Davis (eds.), *Woman-Nation-State* ; Kandyoti, “Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation;” Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis (eds.), *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and*; Yuval-Davis and Werbner (eds.), *Women, Citizenship and Difference*; Pettman, *Worlding Women*; Sandra E. Greene, *Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Change on the Upper Slave Coast: A History of the Anlo-Ewe* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995); Davison, *Gender, Lineage, and Ethnicity*; Catherine Hall, “Gender, Nations and Nationalisms,” in Edward Mortimer and Robert Fine (eds.), *People, Nation and State: The Meaning of Ethnicity and Nationalism* (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1999).

right actively participated in the making and remaking of ethnic identities in twentieth century Africa in order to advance their own interests.

Of particular importance to this chapter are scholarly writings on women's roles and the uses made of these roles by others in the construction of anti-colonial nationalisms and ethnicity. With particular reference to Asia and the Middle East, Pettman illustrates how women's bodies were used in anti-colonial nationalisms to define and create new nations. She observes:

National difference...[is defined]... in cultural terms, against the west. This difference they located in the private, in family and sex roles—the very domains to which both modernising and traditional politics usually relegated women... In this politics, women's bodies, relations and roles became the battleground for different idealised versions of the past, and constructions of nationalist projects for the future.⁴

While acknowledging that women in some countries played active roles in anti-colonial nationalist struggles, Pettman notes that “the woman question” was exploited by various vested interests. For example, Pettman argues that in India *sati* (widow burning) was one of the issues that various parties involved in Indian nationalism -- such as colonial authorities, nationalist and conservative Indian men, Indian women and Western women in India -- used to fit women into their agendas. In most cases debates over the issue did not consider Indian women's resistance

⁴Pettman, *Worlding Women*, pp. 54, 56.

and agency. They were seen not as actors in the construction of Indian nationalism but as the enabling site.

Susan Geiger challenges the tendency of some scholars to focus entirely on the symbolic objectification of women as reproducers and bearers of culture in nationalist projects “and on nationalism as inherently masculine and evil.” She argues that evidence from Tanzania shows that “[s]uch conceptions of nationalism are simultaneously too narrow in their claim to universal truth about nationalisms, too masculinized (even in their feminist renderings), too Eurocentric, and too elite-centered to illuminate the contours of Tanzanian nationalism.”⁵ Using life histories of Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) women activists, Geiger portrays women “not simply as recipients or bearers of nationalism, but as among its major progressive creators.” Also, she observes that “whatever else its characteristics, Tanganyikan nationalism has remained remarkably devoid of the symbolic objectification of women...”⁶

From a slightly different angle Catherine Hall states that it is difficult to determine the relation between women and nationalism. She maintains that while the “woman question” has enabled the creation of

⁵ Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955-1965* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997), p.13.

⁶ Ibid.

new nations such as Egypt, women have also been in the forefront of nationalist struggles. In some instances they have secured their interests in the new nations and in others they have not. According to Hall, to understand fully the relation between women and nationalism we need to consider historical specificity. "There are no givens, only the articulation in particular historical conjunctures of political discourses, movements and peoples."⁷

Like nationalism, ethnicity in southern Africa has been considered in ways that indicate that it was men rather than women who took an active role in the creation of ethnicity. Take for instance, Leroy Vail:

Ethnicity's appeal was strongest for men, then, and the Tswana proverb to the effect that "women have no tribe" had a real – if unintended – element of truth in it...

It was for very real reasons of exercising at least a measure of control over land and women, thereby bringing at least a measure of peace to their minds, that African men welcomed the new ideologies which involved augmenting powers of chiefs in a situation of rapid social decay.⁸

In other words Vail portrays southern African women not as active agents in the creation of ethnicity but as the ground that enabled men to

⁷ Hall, "Gender, Nations and Nationalisms," p.53.

⁸ Vail, *Creation of Tribalism*, p.15. For similar conclusions see Shula Marks, "Patriotism, Patriarchy and Purity: Natal and the Politics of Zulu Ethnic Consciousness," in Vail, *Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*; Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "The Formation of the Political Culture of Ethnicity in Belgian Congo, 1920-1959," in Vail, *Creation of Tribalism*. See also, John Lonsdale, "When did the Gusii (or Any Other Group) Become a 'Tribe'?", *Kenya Historical Review*, 5, 1 (1977).

invent ethnic identities. It would seem that Vail's portrayal of African women as passive recipients of ethnic ideologies stems from his perception of the position of women in patrilineal societies and the effects labour migration had on family life. In northern Malawi, for instance, Vail and White argue that Tumbuka speakers developed a new tribal identity and consciousness because Tumbuka men accepted increased chiefly authority through which they controlled women and land in rural areas. At the center of their argument is the "break down of village life" that they maintain resulted from natural calamities and the imposition of the hut tax. They write:

The impact of all these events resulted in an abrupt emigration of the male population from Northern Nyasaland, with as many as 70% of the male population absent from home at any one time. This absence placed great strains upon village life in general and upon relations between men and women in particular. A crisis within the family resulted, with women whose husbands were absent bearing children conceived in adultery or deciding to seek divorce so as to remarry. As a consequence men sought to assert control over women through recourse to institutions of African customary law.⁹

While I agree with Vail and White that aspects of Indirect Rule enabled members of African communities to articulate ethnic self-awareness, their analysis of the situation in northern Malawi is questionable in some respects. First, Vail and White do not provide adequate evidence that Tumbuka "traditional" society actually broke

⁹Vail and White, "Tribalism in the Political History," p. 158.

down as a consequence of labour migration. They just assume that what Colin Murray observed in Lesotho applied to the situation in northern Malawi because both were sources of migrant labour.¹⁰ Second, recent studies indicate that the breakdown of family life model does not adequately explain changes wrought by labour migration. This is because changes that African societies witnessed as a result of labour migration were far more complex than the breakdown notion accounts for. For example, Megan Vaughan and Henrietta Moore's work among the Bemba of Zambia and Wiseman Chirwa's study of the Tonga of northern Malawi demonstrate that African societies had the capacity to successfully contain the effects of labour migration.¹¹

There was indeed a large number of deserted wives in the Tumbuka and Ngoni areas of northern Malawi. This is evident from the Mombera District Commissioner's statement in 1931. "Again the status of deserted wives (and there were many such) did not appear to be an enviable one."¹² However, it is questionable that "a crisis within the

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 187.

¹¹ For a detailed analysis see Moore and Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees*, pp. 140-177. Also see Wiseman Chijere Chirwa, "Theba is Power: Rural Labour, Migrancy and Fishing in Malawi, 1890s-1985," Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, 1992.

¹² MNA, NCE 2/9/1, The Status and Treatment of Native Women, Correspondence, District Commissioner, Mombera to the Chief Secretary, 1931.

family resulted". In fact, most deserted wives in Tumbuka and Ngoni areas did not resort to adultery and divorce. As the District Commissioner explained:

If they gave way to their natural feelings and consented to adultery, the penalties were great. If they sought divorce before headmen on the grounds of their husbands' desertion, they were penalised in that on being granted divorce the children were awarded and the *lobola* (bride wealth) was generally restored to the husbands' groups. It was generally acceded that a deserted wife had everything to lose by seeking divorce.¹³

If the Indirect Rule System helped migrant labourers to control their women and land, it also provided means by which deserted wives could divorce their husbands on the grounds of desertion without losing their children and returning *lobola* to the husbands' families. Again, take the District Commissioner at Mombera in 1931:

After many meetings with headmen and many talks with natives generally throughout the District extending over a period of two years rules were eventually framed and recorded in District Records, with all members of the District Council concurring, rules which eased in no measure the lot of the deserted wives in the Mombera District.¹⁴

Thus it was not only the migrant labourers who welcomed increased chiefly authority in northern Malawi. Women, at least deserted wives, also benefited from the introduction of the Indirect Rule system. Evidence from the other two regions demonstrates that this was not

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

restricted to the Northern Province; it applied to many parts of Malawi. For instance, women in various parts of Malawi welcomed the introduction of traditional courts.¹⁵

In addition, other studies paint a different picture from the one presented by Vail and others above. Sandra Greene, for example, questions the tendency by historians of Africa to treat gender and ethnic relations as separate studies. Focusing on the Anlo-Ewe of Ghana, Greene demonstrates that “gender and ethnic relations significantly influenced one another from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries... the two were intimately and inextricably connected. Changes in one had a direct impact on the other.”¹⁶ Contrary to Vail’s notion that “women have no tribe,”

Anlo women viewed themselves and were viewed as integral members of their lineages and clans. They identified fully with these groups and it was because of this fact that Anlo women were deeply involved—consciously and explicitly—in supporting both the existing boundaries that defined “we” and “they” in Anlo, and the changes that occurred therein from the late seventeenth century on. When missionaries, colonial officials, a newly emergent educated elite, and average Anlos began to generate a new and larger ethnic identity in the twentieth century, women were not simply victims of this process...¹⁷

¹⁵ MNA, NCE 2/9/1, The Status and Treatment of Native Women. Also, see MNA, NS 1/23/5 Women – Status and Rights, 1931.

¹⁶ Greene, *Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Change*, p.181.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.14.

Greene states that actions by their husbands and families negatively affected Anlo women's chances as commercial farmers in the twentieth century. The women responded by changing the way they viewed themselves and socialised their children. In this redefinition they embraced a broader "we" within Anlo by minimising the importance of clan identity. They also capitalised on the newly developed Ewe identity in women-only co-operatives and unions to protect their economic interests.

Bill Bravman observed a similar pattern in Taita, Kenya. Among the Taita, female initiation marked the boundary between childhood and adulthood. Also, it was through initiation that a girl learnt how to conduct herself as a Taita.¹⁸ In the early twentieth century some girls, members of the Anglican Church, refused to be initiated. Non-Christian members of society viewed the girls as outsiders because they lacked knowledge of Taita life. By developing a Christian female initiation not only did the girls and their parents find a means for the girls to attain adequate acceptance as adults in Taita society, they also renegotiated the norms and terms of Taita ethnicity.

¹⁸ Bill Bravman, *Making Ethnic Ways*, p. 2.

In northern Malawi, Vail based his notion of women and ethnicity primarily on the Ngoni and Tumbuka, who are patrilineal. The Chewa of central Malawi on whom this study focuses are matrilineal. It will be interesting to examine the bearing matrilineality had on the construction of ethnicity. We noted in Chapters three and four that gender relations changed as Chewa men participated in labour migration and cash crops were introduced during the colonial period. Did changes in the political economy and gender relations elicit an ethnic response? What role did Chewa women play?

5.2: The Nationalist Ideals of the Nyasaland African Congress and Matriliney

The nation is an imagined community calling up far too many people to know each other personally... Thus, despite particular nationalisms' claims to primordial beginnings, it is a modern political form. It eclipsed dialects and a range of local and lesser myths and loyalties. These may have been repressed or obscured, rather than destroyed. They may form the place for alternative constructions of identities, for oppositional politics when the centre weakens, or when the contradictions between the nation's claims to represent and the political economy's marginalisation of or discrimination against others becomes intolerable.¹⁹

The late colonial period in Malawi as in most European protectorates and colonies in Africa witnessed the development of anti-colonial nationalist forums aimed at constructing new nations. Note that prior to the 1940s Malawians in various parts of the country established a number of local

¹⁹ Pettman, *Worlding Women*, p. 46.

and regional associations as a response to the colonial system. However, it was only in 1943 that the first territory-wide association, the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC), came into being. Not surprisingly, much of what we know about the history of the nationalist movement in Malawi deals with the activities of the NAC, later the Malawi Congress Party (MCP).

In examining the development of nationalism in colonial Malawi, scholars have covered many areas, including the following. First, the appropriateness of nationalism as a concept describing African responses to colonialism. Second, the role of the educated political elite as the spearhead of the nationalist movement. Third, the problems that plagued the movement in the early days such as lack of a mass following, tribal division and poor organization. Finally, the factors that led to mass mobilization in the period after 1949, notably growing peasant unrest and the imposition in 1953 of the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland.²⁰

More important to the present study is the observation that in its early days the NAC, like most African nationalist associations and

²⁰Tangri, "The Rise of Nationalism in Colonial Africa, pp.142-161; Tangri, "From the Politics of Union to Mass Nationalism; Tangri, "Inter-War Native Associations and the Formation of the Nyasaland African Congress," *Trans African Journal of History*, Vol. 1 No.1 (1971). Also see Rotberg, *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa* and Mapopa Chipeta, "Political Process, Civil Society and State."

parties, did not have women in leadership positions.²¹ And because historians of nationalism concentrated on the activities of the political elite, most African nationalist histories, especially those written in the period before the 1970s, are devoid of women participants and gender relations.²² In the context of the NAC Tangri argues, for instance, that a very small minority of the Malawi population, mostly elite men, participated in politics in the late colonial period.²³ It is true that the NAC at least in the 1940s did not have women in its executive body. In fact at its annual executive committee conference for 1946 Mponda, a Blantyre delegate, commented “if women were adopted in this meeting they would break it altogether for they are breakers of movements.”²⁴ While the NAC in its early years did not welcome the participation of women in the nationalist movement especially in a leadership capacity,

²¹ For example, John Hatch, a Commonwealth Officer of the British Labour Party on his visit to Tanganyika in 1955 apparently asked the TANU’s all-male Central Committee “Where are the women?” and later commented that lack of women was a universal weakness of all African nationalist parties in their early years. Cited in Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture*, p.11.

²² For details see Susan Geiger, “Anti-Colonial Protest in Africa: A Female Strategy Reconsidered,” *Heresies*, Vol.3 (1980). Also, by the same author, “Women and African Nationalism,” *Journal of Women’s History*, Vol.2, No.1 (1990).

²³ Tangri, *Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa*, p.18.

²⁴ MNA, NS1/3/10 – Minutes of the Nyasaland African Congress Third Annual Executive Committee Conference held at the Chiefs’ Chamber, Blantyre from 20th April 1946.

the account below demonstrates that it was nevertheless preoccupied with the “woman question.”

To appreciate NAC’s use of women in the construction of nationalism, we need to understand that as a nationalist organization it “intended to bring the different tribes together, for we think that one of the factors retarding our progress is this lack of unity.”²⁵ Obviously this involved forging a common agenda for the different “tribes.” NAC’s reconstruction of colonial society sought to reform, suppress and oppose some cultural and political forms that it deemed incompatible with its nationalist project. More important, the colonial political economy, Christianity and education enhanced differentiation in African societies by enabling some individuals to accumulate wealth. Most members of the NAC fell into this category and felt that some “native customs” regarding marriage patterns and inheritance were not conducive to capital accumulation and safeguarding the material welfare of their children and wives.²⁶ Consequently, in their quest to create a new nation and to adapt to the new political economy the NAC attempted to recast women and their position in society.

²⁵ MNA, NS1/3/10 – President’s Address, Nyasaland First Annual Conference, 21st October 1944.

²⁶ See, for instance Power, “Eating the Property.”

One of the issues the Congress grappled with was marriage. Perhaps Rev. Chinula best explained at the NAC annual conference in 1945 why this was so. "Marriage," he said, "is the base of a nation."²⁷ According to the Congress, the nation they were in the process of creating was already under threat by marriages and sexual relations between African women and non-African men. At the center of this argument was the idea that the protection of women from interracial sexual relations was crucial to the preservation of any nation. Chinula introduced the subject to the delegates as follows:

There is a law protecting a white woman that she must not be touched by an African man, but the government does not protect our women. Women, whatever they are, white or black, are all the same... The Agricultural Officer warned us to preserve our soil for our children. Our women are by far better than the soil. It is our duty to preserve them. By this I mean that marriages between non-Africans and our women should be discouraged... At the present the law protects a non-African woman but there is no protection afforded to African women. The government should give protection to African women legally.²⁸

Apart from fearing the disappearance of the African race the Congress frowned upon the unlegalised sexual relations between African women and non-African men because of the question of mixed race children. A number of delegates cited cases from different parts of the

²⁷ MNA, NS1/3/10 - Minutes of the Nyasaland African Congress Second Annual Conference held at Lilongwe, 16/10/45-19/10/45.

²⁸ MNA, NS1/3/10 - Minutes of the Nyasaland African Congress Third Annual Executive Committee Conference held at the Chiefs' Chamber, Blantyre from 20th April 1946.

country where non-African men had abandoned such children. What troubled the NAC more than the abandonment of mixed race children by their fathers was the superior status, relative to Africans, that the government accorded Anglo-Africans. As George Mwase, a Lilongwe delegate, noted:

I am surprised to find that the children from these marriages are given such status above Africans but the women who took the trouble to bring them up are neither recognized nor respected. And now not only the missions but the government is trying to disunite them from their African parents. Giving the Euro-African a separate education is an attempt to keep the African down. All these difficulties are arising because these marriages are not legal.²⁹

The NAC was divided on how to deal with the problem. Some delegates argued that the government should legalise marriages between non-African men and African women. Mkandawiri, a Nyasaland Teachers Association representative, began by saying that the subject was the most important on the agenda. "An owner of cattle may own all colours of the beasts, the same as with us black and white as God created us all. If a European wants to marry an African woman he must do so but it must be legal. If we do not think widely upon this subject

²⁹ Ibid.

then I don't know what we are doing."³⁰ Lemison Mpinganjira agreed with Mkandiwiri by reminding the conference:

There is a custom in this country that if you spoil a girl you are brought before a *bwalo* and you are told to pay compensation or to take care of the child. Legal marriages are the only possible tie between an African woman and non-African man. If not, if one is found staying with an African woman he must be brought before the courts and punished as they do with us in our courts.³¹

Other delegates such as the president of the Congress argued that asking the colonial government to recognize marriages between African women and non-African men would not help African women and the nation. He asked the Congress to "look ahead. If we recommend legal marriages, what will be the result? I think the African race will disappear. The Congress should find a way to protect the African woman so as to preserve the race."³² After much deliberation it was agreed by majority vote:

- a. That Congress is deplored to find that marriages between non-African men and African women are going on and ask the government that this practice, if it still continues, be legalized.
- b. That the same law guarding non-African women be applied to African women and that if a non-African man is found staying

³⁰ MNA, NS1/3/10 – Minutes of the Nyasaland African Congress Third Annual Executive Committee Conference held at the Chiefs' Chamber, Blantyre from 20th April 1946.

³¹Ibid.

³² MNA, NS1/3/10 – Minutes of the Nyasaland African Congress Third Annual Executive Committee Conference held at the Chiefs' Chamber, Blantyre from 20th April 1946.

with an African woman he should be punished by law so as to discourage this practice.

- c. That children born from these marriages are our children and they remain with us in this country and that what is really wanted is unity between the two people who have common claim in the country and deplored government attempt to create separate schools instead of improving the African schools through which they have been educated in the past.
- d. That if Euro-Africans still insist that they are Europeans they are creating difficulties upon themselves.³³

The NAC conceived of African women as mothers of the new Nyasaland nation. As such, it did not want members of other nations especially Europeans, against whom their nationalism was conceived, to tamper with the reproductive capacities of African women in Nyasaland. This explains why its members cried out against sexual relations between non-African men and African women. To members of the Congress, the survival of their nation depended on the preservation of African women. And as the preserver of the nation it was the Congress's responsibility to keep non-African men away from its women because "women do not ask European men. European men are the ones who call women to their beds."³⁴

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ MNA, NS1/3/10 – Minutes of the Second Annual Conference of the Nyasaland African Congress held at Lilongwe from 16/10/45 to 19/10/45.

The Anglo-African community did not accept the nationalist vision of the NAC. It utterly repudiated the Congress's resolutions on separate education and the issue of the Anglo- Africans' identity in general.

We strongly protest and resent the Native Congress's selfish, unwarranted and undemocratic attitude, and also for the tirade that Anglo-Africans are natives contrary to all the declarations of the Nyasaland government Penal Code that Anglo-Africans are not natives...

If this kind of mentality does not change for the better, surely it will be harmful for a native just emerging from slavery to be a member of the Legislative Council as he can not cooperate with minorities...except serve his own selfish interests.

We Anglo-Africans and our children maintain that it is possible under the British government for each community to live a reasonably peaceful life, and also possible for all in this country to develop their own culture, and therefore do not like to be hampered by the native as we do not encroach and interfere with their customs.³⁵

Nor was the colonial administration sympathetic to the NAC's cause. Responding to the Anglo-Africans' complaint, the Provincial Commissioner regretted the NAC caused "Euro-Africans unhappiness and annoyance." Agreeing that under the British government "the ideals and ambitions of minorities should be respected," he pacified the Euro-Africans. "It may be of some consolation to you to know that the Legco has recently passed an estimate for 5000 (pounds) for a Euro-African

³⁵ MNA, NS1/3/10 - Correspondence, Messrs. Jameison and Patridge to the Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province, forwarded by the District Commissioner, Fort Johnson, 28/11/44.

school to be built in 1945.”³⁶ Not surprisingly, the President of the Congress remarked in 1947 that although the NAC submitted to the state its resolutions on interracial marriages in 1945 “no reply has been received from the government.”³⁷

It was not only marriages between non-African men and African women that bothered the NAC. The Congress also attacked matrilineal patterns of marriage and inheritance as practiced among the Chewa, Nyanja and Yao that it considered detrimental to the progress of Africans. The issue came up at the very first annual conference of the Congress in 1944. Delegates unanimously opposed matrilineal marriage and matrilineal inheritance and passionately expressed their opinions on the evils of matrilineality:

Marriage without *lobola* (bride wealth) is very much awkward and makes a hopeless family. The man leaves his home to settle at the woman's. There he becomes *mkamwini*, which means a man who has no manhood. The woman has all the influence over the man. She can command a husband to go away from the village at any time she is not satisfied with him. When the man leaves the village he takes nothing with him...³⁸

All our chiefs in this country very well know that when a person borrows a ram for breeding, he does not pay anything to the lender... the borrower has the responsibility for its maintenance.

³⁶ MNA, NS1/3/10 - Correspondence, Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province, to Messrs. Jameison and Patridge through DC Fort Johnson, 13/12/44.

³⁷ MNA, NS1/3/10 - Minutes of the Fourth Annual Conference of the Nyasaland African Congress held at Zomba from 22/9/47 to 26/9/47.

³⁸ MNA, NS1/3/10 - “Natives Marriages,” by George Simeon Mwase.

When giving it back to its owner, the borrower gives two or three young ones in addition to the ram in compensation for its breeding purposes. If it is so with a ram, why should not a person be considered who has laboured for a woman for a long time, and who has his energies exhausted at a woman's village?

When a husband is at a woman's village all the power of the family is in the hands of a woman. The children take and learn the customs of their mother and uncles, they have no contact relationship with the husband's relatives. When the husband is feeble, weak and old, the woman blames the husband for being poor and that he is unable to support his family. When the case is brought to the Native Court, a divorce is obtained and the Native Authority demands only 2.10/- from the woman to be given to the man, and let go away from the village after being confiscated of his house including all of his properties. The woman is given to understand to keep all the children herself. The children also have no remorse for their divorced father as they take him to be total stranger to them.³⁹

In light of the alleged marginal status married men had in matrilineages and problems associated with it, members of the Congress demanded a major overhaul of the system to give complete authority to the husband and father, the head of the family.⁴⁰ According to the Congress, this was only fair because:

A husband sacrifices his life and toils for his children, he knows they are his own children and blood. *A woman is a mere bag in comparison or a bin in which we preserve our maize* and it is the man who protects when anything or red ants intend to destroy the contents of the bag or bin... This is why the husband is reckoned

³⁹ MNA, NS1/3/10 – Correspondence B. Namboya and J. Pambala to Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province, 25/10/44.

⁴⁰ For example, see footnote number 1 above.

to be the owner of the children and family. Any other man should have no power over somebody's children [emphasis added].⁴¹

Consequently, the Congress resolved to contact the colonial administration, requesting it to "investigate the incidence of trouble arising from matrilineal marriages... in order to give the husband, who is head of the family, sole responsibility for, and control over wife and children..."⁴²

The problem of matrilineal marriages remained on the NAC agenda throughout the 1940s. At each annual conference members expounded their views on the urgency to abolish matriliney. They demonstrated how incompatible the system was with the existing social and economic conditions. For example at the 1945 conference, a Dedza delegate maintained that "customs in our marriages require more consideration to fit the present walk of life...*Unkhoswe* [the avunculate] today does not work as it used to."⁴³ At the 1947 annual meeting "Inheritance of Deceased Property: Children to be the Owner" was one of the main items on the agenda and delegates from various parts of the country

⁴¹ MNA, NS1/3/10 – Correspondence B. Namboya and J. Pambala to Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province, 25/10/44.

⁴² MNA, NS1/3/10 – Minutes of the First Annual Conference of the Nyasaland African Congress held in Blantyre, October 1944.

⁴³ MNA, NS1/3/10 – Minutes of the Second Annual Conference of the Nyasaland African Congress held at Lilongwe from 16/10/45 to 19/10/45.

emphasized the importance of children inheriting their deceased fathers' property. Concluding the discussion, the NAC adopted the following resolution.

In view of the changing condition which is taking place at the present stage of development "*Eni mbumba*" [lineage guardians] as they are termed are no longer responsible for the welfare of their *mbumba*, the whole responsibility being shouldered by the father and in view of the absence of a common code of native customs governing the procedure of administering deceased property, Congress recommends that consideration of inheritance of property be given to the children of deceased person who in the face of the civilized races are legitimate heirs of such property. ⁴⁴

According to the Congress, as mothers of the nation, Nyasaland African women had to be preserved and protected from non-African men but as wives they had to be subordinate to their African husbands. In other words, the NAC saw a nation where a husband "has power over his wife and... the right to take her anywhere he wants."⁴⁵ This was a direct assault on matriliney, a system that was practiced in most parts of the Central and Southern Provinces. While most members of the NAC would have benefited from patriliney because it protected their economic interests, it is very unlikely that it would have sat well with ordinary women and lineage elders in rural areas of central and southern Malawi. We saw in Chapters Three and Four, for example, that the Chewa social

⁴⁴ MNA, NS1/3/10 – Minutes of the Fourth Annual Conference of the Nyasaland African Congress held at Zomba from 22/9/47 to 26/9/47.

⁴⁵ MNA, NS1/3/10 – B. Namboya and J.A. Pambala, "African Marriages and Customs," 25/10/44.

structure gave women considerable power on the social and economic levels. However, in order to satisfy the economic interests of its members, the Nyasaland African Congress represented African women as solely depended on their husbands, thus denying them the economic and social networks they had access to in the *mbumba* lineage.

The paternalistic and patronizing attitude the Congress adopted towards African women was not limited to economic matters. In some cases the NAC made decisions on issues that directly affected African women without even consulting them. For example, at the 1946 annual conference the NAC discussed the issue of African girls' education. While many members spoke in support of educating women, others urged the NAC to "set a limit... as to how far a woman should receive education." Moreover, instead of involving African women in the discussion, the NAC decided to consult the Nyasaland Council of Women, an exclusive white women's association.⁴⁶

5.3: Christian Missionaries and Matriliney

⁴⁶ MNA, NS1/3/10 – Minutes of the Nyasaland African Congress Third Annual Executive Committee Conference held at the Chiefs' Chamber, Blantyre from 20th April 1946. Members from Blantyre and Limbe were instructed to ask the Council of Women to discuss the question of African women's education and request the Hon. Mrs. Sharpe, Chairperson of the Council and an unofficial member of the Legislative Council to meet with the Congress on the issue.

In their campaign to abolish matriliney and redefine women, the NAC found willing allies in Christian missionaries, especially the Roman Catholics. Christian teaching in general promoted and defended the position of the husband as head of the Christian family. This conflicted with certain matrilineal norms regarding residence during marriage, responsibility for children and inheritance. Consequently, in the promotion of an ideal Christian marriage, the missionaries encountered resistance from many sides including Christian converts, lineage elders and the colonial state. In this context, it is hardly surprising that they teamed up with the Congress in order to strengthen the position of husbands as heads of family.

The problem of Christian marriage in Malawi dates back to the 1902 Marriage Ordinance. The Christian missionaries, their African converts and the African populace were all uncomfortable with marriages contracted under this ordinance. Among other factors, this was because its rules on bigamy, adultery, divorce and inheritance were harsh and incompatible with certain matrilineal customs. As a result, many African converts, to the disappointment of European Christian missionaries, just disregarded the marriage law. In light of this, some Christian missionary parties lobbied the colonial administration to amend the marriage ordinance. The result was the Christian Native Marriage Ordinance of 1912, which, apart from applying to African Christians only, was not very

differrent from the 1902 Marriage Ordinance. Again missionaries complained that the Ordinance's rules on divorce, bigamy and inheritance were unsuitable to African converts. This led to a series of consultations between the government and Christian missions resulting in the Native Marriage (Christian Rites) Ordinance of 1923.⁴⁷

While the Christian Native Marriage Ordinance of 1912 and the Native Marriage (Christian Rites) Ordinance of 1923 answered some of the concerns raised by the missionaries, it created other problems. As the District Commissioner from Ntcheu observed:

The Nyasaland Christian Native Marriage Registration Ordinance is a nullity in that it has no legal consequences whatsoever, but provides solely for the registration of a marriage celebrated according to the rites of a particular sect of which the participants are members. This means that the Church Marriage of native Christians is celebrated according to the rites of the Church and is binding between the contracting parties and the Church, except under the conditions which that particular sect would recognise as giving grounds for a valid divorce. The state recognises that marriage to the extent of granting facilities for registration but expressly states that such marriage if registered, involves the contracting parties themselves, and the Church, whatever the latter may be.

I was in the Attorney General's office when the legislation was passed, and I remember the surprise of the substantive Attorney General on his return to find the Legislation had passed, that the Hon. and Rev. Dr. Heatherwick had consented to and approved the passing of such a legislation. His comment was then that the Rev.

⁴⁷ For details see Martin Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.145-159, 192-216. Also, see Joey Power, "Church, State and Christian Marriage in Colonial Malawi," (History Seminar Paper, Chancellor College, University of Malawi, 1995).

Doctor had more sense than he (Belcher) gave him credit for in realising the difficulties of the situation created by a monogamous marriage with attendant penalties; and further that in his opinion it would be very many years before natives could be bound by such a contract, and indeed the central government inspite of pressure by missions, ought not to permit them to be bound by legal consequences in marriage. ⁴⁸

Problems arose because individual Church missions determined the grounds on which its members could obtain divorce. The Roman Catholic Church refused to recognize divorce under any circumstance. However, not all missions were as inflexible as the Catholics. While the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM) in its early years did not condone divorce, the problem of deserted wives due to labour migration and other factors forced it to reconsider its position. Under the new ruling, if a Christian failed to support or contact his wife for three years, the DRCM permitted the deserted wife to seek divorce from Native Courts.⁴⁹

It is important to note that under customary law, Chewa women could divorce their husbands on a number of grounds including desertion, sexual incompetence, cruelty, laziness and lack of material support.⁵⁰ However, due to the attitude adopted by some Christian missions, obtaining divorce proved difficult for couples married under the

⁴⁸ MNA, PCC/1/26/1- Native Christian Marriages, Correspondence, District Commissioner, Ntcheu to Provincial Commissioner, 18/8/41.

⁴⁹ For details on how the DRCM dealt with divorce in their churches see Isabel Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*.

⁵⁰ Rangeley, "Notes on Cewa Tribal Law."

Native Marriage (Christian Rites) Ordinance of 1923. The problem was compounded by the 1933 introduction of Native Courts empowered to hear divorce cases from both customary and Christian marriages.

The problem was more pronounced among Roman Catholic Church adherents. Apart from the fact that Christians, especially women, could not get permission from their church elders when they wanted to divorce, the Church accused Native Authorities of granting divorces to its African members on flimsy evidence and against Church teachings. The result was that in some entrenched Roman Catholic areas, even in cases where a Christian disregarded a Church ruling and sought divorce in Native Courts, the Native Authorities refused to grant one on the basis that the Catholic church did not allow divorce.⁵¹

In order to solve problems arising from the 1902, 1912 and 1923 Marriage Ordinances, the Consultative Board of Federated Missions

⁵¹ MNA, PCC/1/26/1- Native Christian Marriages, Correspondence R.H. Keppel-Compton to Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province, 19/6/44 and 28/9/44. On more than one occasion R. H. Keppel-Compton, District Commissioner at Dedza, informed his boss the Provincial Commissioner that the Catholic church's stand on divorce was creating problems for its African members. He cited one case in which a young woman, deserted by her migrant worker husband for more than two years, was denied divorce in a Native Court because the couple had been married in a Catholic Church. In desperation, the young woman bore a child with another man. Her husband's family sued her for adultery. She was ordered to pay one cow in damages because she refused to reveal the identity of her lover in court. When she got pregnant again a couple of years later, she allegedly killed the baby on her way from a mission hospital where she had delivered and was arrested for the murder of her child.

asked the colonial government for new legislation on Native Christian marriages on the following basis:

With regard to the present law that while the penalties imposed under Cap.79 [the 1902 and 1912 Ordinances] are too severe to make it suitable for ordinary use by Christian natives, Cap.82 [the 1923 Ordinance] is unsatisfactory because it entails no legal consequences at all as far as the contracting parties are concerned. The Consultative Board would like to see fresh legislation promulgated giving special legal standing to Christian native marriages, some sort of a compromise in fact between Cap.79 and Cap.82.⁵²

This was a goal Christian missions failed to achieve throughout the colonial era. What the missionaries were asking for went against the colonial state's preconceptions of Africans and colonial rule. According to colonial policy "African law and custom (not forgetting the influence of the ancestral spirits) should prevail against European church law and custom."⁵³ In addition, many colonial administrators believed that Africans could not be bound by the sort of marriage contract missionaries were asking for. As the District Commissioner for Ntcheu stated:

The average villager as distinct from the well educated Christian is not sufficiently advanced to understand the nature of the contract of marriage and I am further of opinion that in their zeal few

⁵² MNA, PCC/1/26/1- Native Christian Marriages, Circular to all District Commissioners, Northern Province from Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province, 19/12/38.

⁵³ MNA, PCC/1/26/1- Native Christian Marriages, Correspondence, Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province to Chief Secretary, 17/12/38.

missions could be trusted to explain fully to intending contractors the implication of their act. ⁵⁴

Nevertheless, the Chief Secretary wrote the Provincial Commissioners for the Northern and Southern Provinces inquiring if they or any of their District Commissioners had received complaints from "natives" in connection with marriage legislation. In his response to the Chief Secretary, the Provincial Commissioner for the Northern Province, which included central Malawi, expressed his complete opposition to the introduction of any further marriage legislation.

Since I wrote my minute in pp. 124/5 nothing has occurred to cause any alteration to my views...and I trust no change from the present happy position will be contemplated as a result of the pertinacious attempts of Dr. Turner and others to invoke the penalties of the law in order to keep their converts true to their voluntarily professed faith.

I have not heard any complaints on the subject from natives. I will circularise DCs as indicated, though I hardly think it likely that any complaints would come from the people themselves without instigation by the Missions. ⁵⁵

That the Provincial Commissioner for the Northern Province did not want to reconsider his position on new legislation on native Christian marriages is evident in the circular that he sent to District Commissioners.

⁵⁴ MNA, PCC/1/26/1- Native Christian Marriages, Correspondence, District Commissioner, Ntcheu to Provincial Commissioner, 18/8/41.

⁵⁵ MNA, PCC/1/26/1- Native Christian Marriages, Correspondence, Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province to Chief Secretary, 17/12/38.

For various reasons Government is extremely diffident about introducing any legislation of this nature. As missionary bodies have, however, made the rather surprising assertion that the native Christian community is demanding such legislation, it is desired to know if in fact natives have actually made any complaint.⁵⁶

Considering their boss's position on the matter, it is hardly surprising that the District Commissioners from Lilongwe, Kasungu, Dedza, Ntcheu, Chintheche, Mzimba, Dowa, Nkhotakota, Fort Manning and Karonga unanimously reported that no complaints against the existing marriage legislation had been made by "natives." One District Commissioner reported that in 1937 a woman complained that the Scottish Mission did not allow her to remarry because her husband was still alive. This was despite her husband's desertion four years before and failure to maintain her in any way during that period. The Provincial Commissioner commented "this is not a complaint of the kind requested; to the contrary it might be taken as an argument against the introduction of any further marriage legislation."⁵⁷

In short, the colonial government did not redress Christian missions' concerns. Through much of the colonial period various

⁵⁶ MNA, PCC/1/26/1- Native Christian Marriages, Circular to all District Commissioners, Northern Province from Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province, 19/12/38.

⁵⁷ MNA, PCC/1/26/1- Native Christian Marriages, Correspondence District Commissioner, Mzimba to Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province, 5/1/39.

committees comprised of Native Authorities, colonial officials, educated Africans and Christian missionaries attempted to come up with legislation all concerned parties could live with. They failed. This frustrated Christian missions, especially the Roman Catholics. In 1946, when various Christian Missions met with the Registrar General to look into the possibility of a new law governing Christian marriages, the Roman Catholic Church opted out because of its stand on divorce. Subsequently, the Catholic Church looked for alternative solutions to the problem of divorce.

Because permitting divorce was not an option the Catholic Church was willing to consider, it decided to prevent divorce among its members. To do this, the Church investigated factors that accounted for broken marriages among its members. They included labour migration, which was at the root of most desertion cases. That the Roman Catholic strongholds of Dedza and Likuni in central Malawi experienced the problem of deserted wives is evident in the following quotation.

At Kasina mission in 1930, it was calculated that forty-six out of 170 heads of Catholic families were absent from their villages, working; five had been away for several years and showed no signs of life. In the eighteen villages around Likuni mission, forty-eight heads of families were away, and thirty-six of these dissolved their marriages and remarried. From a total of sixty-six men away from these eighteen villages, only forty-six pounds was sent back each year.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Linden, Ian and Linden, Jane, *Catholics, Peasants and Chewa Resistance*, p.172.

Another important factor was the position of husbands in families and the *mbumba* lineage. Rev. Father Qullet of the Likuni mission summarized the Church's assessment of the status of husbands in the *mbumba* lineage when he addressed the Nyasaland African Congress meeting in 1945:

Marriages without dowry (Achewa)... It's a pity that a husband can be thrown out of his hut on the slightest pretence of his mother in law. The man does not take interest in his family, does not want to improve his standard of living for fear of being sent away at any moment. When at his own village being unable to leave inheritance to his children and if he is not interested in his sisters' children, he does not care for the future. ⁵⁹

The Church came up with measures to strengthen the bonds of marriage. It planned to counter the effects of labour migration on deserted wives and Catholic families. Also, it was determined to augment the power and authority of a husband in Christian families. We demonstrated above how in the 1940s the NAC called for the abolition of the matrilineal system to give the husband, as head of the family, full responsibility for and control over his wife and children. The Catholic Church had a similar agenda and Father J. De Ponti of the Blantyre Catholic mission articulated it at the 1944 ANC annual conference.

Speaking of family customs, all the 200,000 Catholics and more from Karonga to Port Herald will stand behind this Congress with one and the same voice, in all you say or do with the aim of

⁵⁹ MNA, NS1/3/10 – Minutes of the Second Annual Conference of the Nyasaland African Congress held at Lilongwe from 16/10/45 to 19/10/45.

consolidating the African family, the family being the basis of Church and state, the basis of tribe and race.

For this fundamental reason, when your intention and endeavour is to do away with customs which endanger and curtail the authority of the head of the family, let me tell you that all Catholics are behind you. Remembering their principal, a fundamental one: "respect due to all legitimate authority"- authority of the Church and the government (European and African), *but before all the authority of the head of the family. With you we say there should be no question of UKAMWINI but UMWINI or full authority of the father and husband, the head of the family* [emphasis added].⁶⁰

The following year, the Catholic Church continued its campaign to eradicate customs that diminished the authority of the husband at the NAC's second annual general meeting held in Lilongwe. Father Qullet was the Catholic spokesperson.

I am very pleased to see the members of the African Congress interested in a question, which is so related to the very life of a nation, marriage. Marriage is the base of the family and obstacles to real marriages should be minimized and bonds strengthened... The man should be the real head of the family and be allowed against his brothers, to leave his possessions to his children if he wants to. He should be allowed to take his wife with him after one year.

Adulteries should be severely punished. Be always assured of the support of the mission when it comes to strengthening the bonds of marriage.⁶¹

As pointed out above, during the colonial period labour migration increased the number of deserted wives. Such women experienced

⁶⁰ MNA, NS1/3/10 -Minutes of the First Annual Conference of the Nyasaland African Congress held at Blantyre from 19/10/44 to 22/10/44.

⁶¹ MNA, NS1/3/10 -Minutes of the Second Annual Conference of the Nyasaland African Congress held at Lilongwe from 16/10/45 to 19/10/45.

numerous hardships including shortages of male labour and lack of money with which to sustain their families and meet hut tax obligations. Among the Chewa, one of the alternative solutions was seeking divorce in order to remarry. Native Courts normally granted divorce to such women after two years of desertion. Other women resorted to adultery. To counter the problem, the Catholic Church devised a scheme whereby Catholic migrant workers could send remittances through the Church to sustain their wives and children while away. It also proposed to limit the work contracts of Catholics to two years. Father De Ponti explained.

It is because of the sacred doctrine of family that our Church has started the chaplaincy for our Nyasaland labour in the south... Nevertheless, the real reason for starting such a grand work in difficult wartime was for the sake of the African family. In other words what we want is this, that our nice and healthy races of Nyasalanders shall not be sacrificed to greed and exploitation. What we aim at is this, that fathers and husbands shall come back in due time to their families, say after no longer than an absence of two years; that they shall sustain home families financially when absent. For the purpose of obtaining this last point in a safer way, let me tell you that just now all Catholic mission superiors in Nyasaland have agreed that labourers in the south may send their family remittances through their missions, so that the wives will receive these remittances individually and not through relatives [husband's] for whom the wife is often a stranger during the absence of the husband.⁶²

I was unable to locate any sources at the National Archives indicating that the Roman Catholic Church addressed the possibility of limiting migrant labour contracts to no more than two years. None of the men

⁶² MNA, NS1/3/10 –Minutes of the First Annual Conference of the Nyasaland African Congress held at Blantyre from 19/10/44.

interviewed recalled the Catholic Church interfering with labour migration in any way.

5.4: The Colonial Administration and Matriliney

While the colonial administration shared some of the concerns raised by the Congress and the Catholic Church on matriliney, it had no intention to legislate against matrilocal marriages and matrilineal inheritance. Commenting on the resolutions passed at the first conference of the NAC the Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province observed:

Discontent with the matrilineal marriage and inheritance custom is more pronounced in urbanised Africans and those living near large company estates than in people living in the rural areas of the country, and I personally share the opinion of these people [NAC members] and that of numbers of European planters and missionaries that this system in the present day and more enlightened conditions is interfering with and hampering African progress. *It is impossible that changes could be made by government intervention or legislation, they must be made by people themselves and any changes agreed upon must be generally accepted by the people of the tribes concerned.* In my view the proper way for the people to approach the subject is for them to examine the historic reasons for the system and decide whether or not a change would be generally beneficial [emphasis added].⁶³

The Provincial Commissioner for the Northern Province was right when he stated in 1938 that “for various reasons Government is extremely

⁶³ MNA, NS1/3/10- Nyasaland African Congress, Correspondence, Provincial Commissioner, Southern Province, to Chief Secretary, 21/11/44.

diffident about introducing any legislation of this nature.”⁶⁴ Other than the reason given by the Provincial Commissioner that African law and custom should prevail over English church law, it is not clear why the administration did not want to legislate against matriliney. Without claiming that the colonial administration understood domestic economies in rural area, it is obvious from our vantage point that abolishing matrilineages would have been a dangerous undertaking for most ordinary rural Africans especially women. Due to the level of economic development in the protectorate, what the NAC was asking for - making every husband responsible for the welfare of his wife and children - was only attainable for a small minority of Malawians. Perhaps more important is the fact that the matrilineal system provided networks of survival for economically marginalized women such as deserted wives.⁶⁵ This was crucial especially in an environment where the colonial state due to its “financial and political link with Britain and, by its own lack of

⁶⁴ See footnote number 56 above.

⁶⁵ Interview, Kachapila with Mai Mkwezalamba, Chiwaliwali Village, T.A. Kalumo, Ntchisi, 9/7/97. For instance, she described an arrangement whereby sisters “adopted” each other’s children especially in times of need. As a child, of the five women in her mother’s lineage, she did not know who her birth mother was. Likewise, writing about the matrilineal Bemba of northern Zambia, Megan Vaughan and Henrietta Moore have shown that kinship systems of sharing, cooperation and labour recruitment helped Bemba communities, especially women adapt to changes brought by colonialism and labour migration. For details see Vaughan and Moore, *Cutting down Trees*.

resources” and its perceptions of Africans was ill equipped to provide social services to ordinary Africans.⁶⁶

The colonial administration’s reluctance to legislate against matrilineal marriage and divorce is also related to the way colonial officials perceived African women. European administrators characterized women in a matrilineal setting as both victimized and “uncontrollable”. As Vaughan puts it “women within this society were understood to be oppressed by the men and forced to perform an amount of heavy agricultural labour unfitting to their sex; but they were also regarded as using the matrilineal system to oppress their husbands.”⁶⁷ As a result, on the one hand, colonial administrators appeared concerned with the liberation of oppressed African women from African men and oppressive traditional structures. Elsewhere, it has been demonstrated that “British rule was justified in part in terms of a civilizing mission that cast British colonisers as rescuing or protecting oppressed colonised women.”⁶⁸ In Nyasaland, Chanock has demonstrated how in the early years of colonial rule administrators set

⁶⁷ Megan 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), p.280.

⁶⁸ Pettman, *Worlding Women*, p.57.

out “to improve the position of women without causing social and moral breakdown.”⁶⁹

On the other hand, most colonial officials in Nyasaland were very suspicious of unmarried women in matrilineal societies because they characterized such women as too independent and uncontrollable.⁷⁰ This caused the administration to worry, sometimes unnecessarily, about how women would react to changes in any colonial policy that directly affected them. For example, at a *baraza* held in Lilongwe on 30 March 1938, Native Authority Kalumbu raised the question of hardships caused by the taxing of unmarried women other than widows. The governor, Sir Harold Kittermaster, replied that the matter was already under consideration. However, he was “doubtful whether the release of unmarried women from the liability of tax might not have the effect of greatly increasing the number of divorces.” The idea seems to be that women in matrilineal societies only got married in order to find someone to meet their tax obligations. Kalumbu did not think that the step would

⁶⁹ Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order*, p147.

⁷⁰ MNA, NCE 2/9/1, NS1/23/5 - The Status and Treatment of Native Women. In 1931 District Commissioners were asked to collect information and submit a report on the treatment of African women in all parts of the Protectorate. This was to satisfy a “considerable interest which is still being taken at home concerning the rights of women in Tropical Africa.” Most reports from matrilineal areas portrayed women as free and in some cases uncontrollable.

have such an effect “since marriage ties had proved effective in themselves before the institution of tax by the Europeans.”⁷¹

Similarly, in 1937 Sir Kittermaster pointed out that certain features of the Natives on Private Estates Ordinance of 1928 had to be altered to make it obligatory for landlords to accept husbands of girls who had grown up on the estate. The Governor wanted to avoid the problem of unmarried or divorced and, according to the administration uncontrollable, women.⁷²

Under Section 4, when a family of a resident native reached maturity, the landlord was bound to evict them unless special agreements providing for residence were made to them (that is to say with the sons and daughters)... the case of girls presented a serious problem since they would under this system, marry men from outside the village, and the landlord could refuse the prospective husbands (and in some cases this had already happened) resident rights in the village, so that either the girl, must remain unmarried or must leave her mother’s village to the disorganisation of tribal life.⁷³

Another point also worried Sir Kittermaster. When a landlord evicted a resident native, in most cases his wife insisted on remaining on in her

⁷¹ MNA, NCL 2/5/1, Baraza held at Lilongwe on 30/3/38.

⁷² Section 4 of the Natives on Private Estates Ordinance of 1928 stipulated that “no owner may allow any native to reside on his estate except (i) a resident native and his wives and families (ii) an exempted native; or (iii) a native under special agreement.” In principle, this meant that a man wishing to marry a daughter of a resident native was not automatically accepted on the estate even though matrilineal custom dictated that a man should reside in his wife’s village upon marriage.

⁷³ MNA, PAM 810 Land Commission 1946, Vol. 1, Report by the Rt. Hon. Sir Sidney Abrahams, *Natives on Private Estates*, (Zomba: Government Printer, 1946).

mother's village stating that the hut belonged to her.⁷⁴ While recognizing the need to maintain the integrity of tribal life, his unofficial advisers informed him that changing the law would swamp the estates due to increased native population. This did not satisfy the governor, who insisted that the law needed amending, as it would cause unrest.

Sir Sidney Abrahams, head of the 1946 Land Commission, reasoned that "what appeared to worry Sir Harold most was the difficulty which might arise and which government would be faced, if landlords did exercise their rights of eviction at the end of the quinquennial period."⁷⁵ That is, women on estates would find it increasingly difficult to marry thereby disorganizing tribal life. When his unofficial advisers recommended as an alternative "to do nothing for the next few years in order to see what would happen," the governor considered this "dangerous, as an acute situation might develop in 1938." He further reiterated "if nothing were done he would urge landlords to allow girls the right to get husbands, under the threat that he would if necessary introduce legislation binding on the landlords."⁷⁶ Luckily for the administration "at the end of the quinquennial period so anxiously

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ MNA, PAM 810 Land Commission 1946, Vol. 1, Report by the Rt. Hon. Sir Sidney Abrahams, *Natives on Privates Estates*, (Zomba: Government Printer, 1946).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

awaited no evictions on a large scale actually took place.”⁷⁷ Considering the role “African traditional systems of marriage and residence played in the social and biological reproduction of the plantation labour force,” it is hardly surprising that “white settlers did not abolish the traditional marriage systems and practices on their estates.”⁷⁸

With this kind of mentality it seems that the colonial state, while sympathizing with the affluent men in the Congress and Christian missionaries, could not introduce legislation to abolish the matrilineal system without worrying about the reaction of women. Unmarried women scared colonial administrators because they were thought to be uncontrollable and therefore a threat to the stability of the Protectorate. Giving more power and authority to husbands and making it difficult for women to divorce their husbands was an attractive means of minimizing the number of unmarried women. However, in the colonial administrators’ way of thinking there was no guarantee the opposite would not result. That is, women would decide to stay unmarried to avoid negative effects of the legislation. The government did not want to face that possibility. It chose a safer alternative, allowing indigenous marriage patterns to evolve with minimum government interference.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Chirwa, “Women, Gender and Production on Colonial Malawi Estates,” p.14.

5.5: Chewa Women and Matriliney

From the NAC's discussion of the position of husbands in matrilineal societies one gets the impression that matriliney in 1940s Nyasaland operated in its ideal form. For instance, members of the Congress characterized matrilocal marriage as the only alternative open to married men in matrilineal societies. That is, while admitting that husbands were assuming increased responsibility for their nuclear families, the Congress painted a picture of a system unaffected by changes in its environment. This is a misreading because the matrilineal system was never static. It was always changing. For example, during the colonial period, men employed in various sectors of the colonial economy often took their wives away from their mothers' villages to towns, mission schools, private estates and other centers of capitalist development where they worked. We saw in Chapters two and three that even though the *mbumba* lineage system retained its central features, many changes in gender relations took place from mid 19th century. This gave *akamwini* opportunities to renegotiate their involvement and status in the lineage. To some extent this compromised the political, social and economic security that *eni mbumba* and women enjoyed in matrilineal societies. As the account below shows, this process continued even during the late colonial period.

We noted in Chapter two that the matrilineal system contained a provision known as *chitengwa*, whereby under special circumstances a man could obtain permission to take his wife to his own maternal village. Because of labour migration and the introduction of peasant-grown tobacco, most Chewa men preferred to ask for *chitengwa*.⁷⁹ In general Chewa women did not like the arrangement and did all they could to avoid it.⁸⁰ When denied permission for *chitengwa*, some men just abandoned their wives and children. This in turn created problems in the *mbumba* lineage⁸¹ and lineage guardians were forced to grant permission to most married Chewa men who asked for *chitengwa*.

⁷⁹ Interview, Hendrina Kachapila with Samuel Sakudula, Chiwaliwali Village, T.A. Kalumo, Ntchisi, 25/7/93. Some men preferred to grow tobacco in their mothers' villages because it gave them a measure of control over land and their produce. Similarly, migrant workers asked for *chitengwa* so that their relatives could monitor their wives while they are away.

⁸⁰ According to most informants in this study *chitengwa* had many problems. As Mai Lenasi stated what worried women most is the fact that although they stayed in their husbands' villages their children did not belong to their fathers' lineage. This brought them many hardships. For example, in the event of divorce or the death of their father, regardless of how long they had stayed in their father's/husband's village, most of them were asked to go back to their maternal village. Interview, Kachapila with Mai Lenasi, Chiwaliwali Village, T.A. Kalumo, Ntchisi, 14/5/97.

⁸¹ Deserted mothers who did not have independent economic means faced hardships because they could not entirely depend on their uncles or brothers for sustenance. Interview, Kachapila with Zamwanda Chibisa, Chiwaliwali Village, T.A Kalumo, Ntchisi, 15/5/97.

Native Authority Mwase agreed that many people today marry for a short time, at the time of marriages they make feasts but within a short period they go away leaving the family so that children suffer and remain as slaves. He said that in Kasungu district there is a severe punishment when men try to divorce their wives. "Naturally we allow a new man to remain at the home of the woman for a period of one year and when he is found to be a good man then the following year he is let alone to go with his wife to anywhere he prefers to settle."⁸²

With the passage of time this created a tension in rural areas with women resisting the *chitengwa* arrangement but systemically being forced to accept it primarily because of economic developments. The long-term effect of this was a decrease in the practice of matrilineal marriage, especially in the tobacco-growing areas of central Malawi. In addition the influence of lineage guardians over their *mbumba* diminished with husbands assuming increased power over their wives and children.

Another point worth noting is that matrilineality did not only evolve from within. While the colonial government was unwilling to legislate against the matrilineal system at the national level, at the local level individual colonial administrators played a crucial role in changing particular aspects of the system. For instance, H.C. Foulger, District Commissioner, Fort Manning District, reported to the Provincial Commissioner that Native Authority Mkanda, at the prompting of the

⁸² MNA, NS1/3/10 -Minutes of the Second Annual Conference of the Nyasaland African Congress held at Lilongwe from 16/10/45 to 19/10/45.

Sub-Assistant Surgeon, issued new orders in connection with the Chewa custom of *mtupa*.⁸³ The DC explained the situation that prompted change in the custom as follows:

When a Chewa woman dies the husband has to pay money or hand over, say a goat, to his deceased wife's uncle or brother. The same applies if his child dies. This matrilineal custom demonstrates that wives (and children) are not the slaves of the husband (and father); children are, in fact, looked upon equally as the "children" of the their mother's uncle or brother, as well as children of their parents. It often happened that when a man's wife or child died he had nothing to pay to relatives, and consequently he would run away from the village, and possibly emigrate to another country. It is also noted that a man has to ask permission from his wife's uncle or brother before he can send her or their children to hospital for treatment. In practice this has very bad results, e.g. a woman at Santhe's village died after suffering for five days in confinement and no child was born. Her husband wanted her brought into Fort Manning Hospital, but her uncle was away from the village and only returned after her death. She did not receive any help. The evils of these customs were represented to the Native Authority Mkanda by the Sub-Assistant Surgeon, with the result that the Chief called a meeting of his headmen, including his representatives in Northern Rhodesia, and made the Orders referred to above. ⁸⁴

I was unable to locate the actual new Orders that the Chief issued in regards to the custom of *mtupa* and the misunderstandings it was causing in Fort Manning and indeed in most Chewa areas. However,

⁸³ Among the Chewa it was believed that if a woman had a protracted labour or died during pregnancy or in childbirth it meant that her husband had committed adultery. This was considered a serious offence. In such cases, the woman's family demanded heavy damages from the husband or his family. For details see Rangeley, "Notes on Cewa Tribal Law," pp.34-40.

⁸⁴ Nyasaland Annual Reports- Native Affairs, Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province, 1935, p.56.

based on the extract from the PC's report that follows below it would seem that, under the new orders, husbands were given the authority to procure treatment for their wives and children without asking permission from lineage guardians. Moreover, lineage guardians who fined husbands in the event of *mtupa* were liable to prosecution.

A prosecution and conviction, involving the village headmen and relatives of a woman of Chipume village (who died in confinement, but without giving birth) took place under the new order and fines were inflicted. While the amended custom is being generally observed it is not thought that it commends itself to the old people as a whole.⁸⁵

Nor was this the only instance in Fort Manning where custom was changed or amended at the prompting of a colonial official. In theory a colonial official "in his capacity of guide, mentor and friend can only do a certain amount to overcome the inertia of the chiefs. If his advice and suggestions are pushed too far, they are immediately looked upon as 'Government Orders' and in consequence fail in their object of trying to prompt the chief to act for himself."⁸⁶ In practice this principle was sometimes put aside as the Provincial Commissioner's report for 1935 suggests. "The Orders made by all the Native Authorities with reference

⁸⁵ Nyasaland Annual Reports- Native Affairs, Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province, 1935, p.57.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

to venereal diseases also have their origin in representations made by the Sub-Assistant Surgeon.”⁸⁷

The point to emphasize here is that changes in the matrilineal system, whether as a response to developments in the environment in which it operated or as a consequence of colonial officials' intervention, had profound effects on Chewa women. In short, as we have seen in this and preceding chapters the redefinition of matriliney eroded some privileges and rights Chewa women exercised in the *mbumba* lineage. However, Chewa women did not just sit aside and let others like Christian missionaries, colonial officials, Native Authorities and husbands dictate the terms of their existence. Granted that spaces in which Chewa women could negotiate their involvement in the colonial process were limited, they nevertheless defined themselves by defending their position as members of Chewa matrilineages whenever opportunities arose.

One way Chewa women and lineage guardians asserted their rights in this period was through the reconstruction of a Chewa identity. As the gendered colonial economy and the aspirations and actions of vested interests such as the Catholic Church, colonial state and NAC squeezed Chewa women out of the political and economic realms, some women and their guardians promoted ideals of a Chewa identity to defend their

⁸⁷ Ibid.

interests. The identity was based on idealized notions of the matrilineal system in which women occupied a principal position. Some of the notions were to a great extent incompatible with developments in the colonial period. Nevertheless, Chewa women in various parts of colonial central Malawi actively participated in the remaking of a Chewa identity and Indirect Rule greatly facilitated the process.

Briefing Provincial and District Commissioners on Indirect Rule in 1931 the then Governor stated that “the whole object of the scheme is to give the native a share in the management of his own affairs through the development of traditional customs and institutions.”⁸⁸ Marriage was one institution Indirect Rule placed in the hands of Native Authorities and this empowered Native Courts to hear most African marriage cases. An important point to note is that each marriage was assigned an ethnic identity and this determined in principle the customs to be followed in divorce and other disputes. Evidence from some parts of central Malawi indicates that some Chewa women and lineage guardians capitalized on this.

Vail and White argue that in patrilineal societies such as the Ngoni and Tumbuka of northern Malawi, men involved in labour migration were absent from their villages for long periods of time. Due to economic and

⁸⁸ MNA, NCK/6/1- Correspondence, the Governor to Provincial Commissioners and District Commissioners, January 1931.

other pressures their wives indulged in adultery or sought divorce in order to remarry. Consequently, such men controlled their wives and land in rural areas by accepting increased chiefly authority and other components of Indirect Rule, such as traditional courts.⁸⁹ According to Vail and White this facilitated the remaking of Tumbuka and Ngoni ethnic identities. The matrilineal system had a different effect on the construction of Chewa ethnic identity, as understood by Chewa women and lineage guardians, in that it was primarily women and their guardians who sought Chewa values and customs in order to preserve their particular interests in rural areas.

Due to the marginal position they occupied in the *mbumba* lineage, some married Chewa men saw labour migration and the production of cash crops such as tobacco as a means of gaining economic independence and avoiding the control of their wives' lineage elders.⁹⁰ Others welcomed Christian teaching on marriage because it enabled them to assume increased authority over their wives and children. As we have seen this undermined the basis women and lineage

⁸⁹ Vail and White, "Tribalism in the political History," p. 158. Granted that patrilineal societies accords great importance to men we noted above that it was not only men in *Ngoni* and *Tumbuka* societies who resorted to the ethnic apparatus in rural areas. Also, deserted wives welcomed Indirect Rule because Native Courts gave them better terms to divorce absent husbands on grounds of desertion.

⁹⁰ Interview, Kachapila with Gauzi Sambakusi, T.A. Nthondo, Ntchisi, 10/9/97 and C.S. Kadyakapita, 10/9/97.

elders used to control the productive labour of husbands and sons-in-law and explains why Chewa women and lineage elders complained that matrilineal standards had deteriorated.⁹¹ Consequently, they used Chewa customs and values in an attempt to regain control over *akamwini*. What is interesting is that Chewa women and lineage elders framed bride-service, a woman's right to reside in her mother's village upon marriage, and her right to divorce an undesirable husband in ethnic terms as Chewa traditions and customs (*miyambo ya a Chewa*). This meant, for instance, that a proper Chewa man provided bride-service to his wife's parents and resided in his wife's village.⁹²

Lineage elders and women's assertion of Chewa identity is reflected in the sort of arguments women used in marriage cases and the way individual Chewa women negotiated the colonial process. Many women

⁹¹ Interview, Kachapila with Reginati Gidala, Chipokosa Village, T.A. Kalumo, Ntchisi, 14/9/97. "My first husband was very lazy. During the farming season he left our village pretending to look for work. For more than three seasons my children and I cultivated our gardens alone. This defeated the purpose of marriage. In those days women got married to find a man to help them around the house and in the fields. My husband was not doing that so my *nkhoswe* contacted his *nkhoswe* and the marriage was dissolved."

⁹² Interview, Kachapila with Sekerani Chimdima, 12/9/97. "It was our custom. All Chewas knew that proper *akamwini* worked for their wives' parents especially in the early years of marriage. It was a must. Those who did not help their parents-in-law knew they were violating our custom." Virtually all women interviewed made similar comments in reference to residence patterns upon marriage and the right to divorce unwanted husbands.

supported by their lineage guardians in Chewa areas of central Malawi brought marriage cases to Native Courts.⁹³ Using Chewa traditions and customs most of them were able, among other things, to defend their right to reside in their mothers' villages and to divorce unsuitable and absent husbands. For example, in Lilongwe district the courts of Native Authorities Mazengera and Kalumbu had a lot of fanfare and heard many divorce and adultery cases brought by Chewa women. That women successfully used Chewa tradition to win marriage cases was no doubt assisted by the fact that Native Courts as defenders of customs and traditions had limited grounds for denying matrilineal claims made by Chewa women and their guardians.⁹⁴

What is most significant is that Chewa women used the past to support claims about what marriage law should be in the present. This is particularly evident in the economic claims they made on their

⁹³ Interview, Kachapila with Zamwanda Chibisa, Chiwaliali Village, T.A Kalumo, Ntchisi, 15/5/97. She alluded to the fact that most women who sought to divorce absent husbands did so because they needed to remarry. "If you could not keep your husband in your village you divorced him and looked for another one."

⁹⁴ It would seem that both the Native Authorities and Chewa men and women who brought marriage cases to native courts knew what "Chewa native law" said on the various issues. As such they knew when a chief changed the law to serve the interests of particular parties. Interview Kachapila with Eniya Bisitoni and Naduuli Jostino, Ng'ombe Village, Ntchisi, 11/10/99.

husbands, especially in relation to earnings from labour migration and cash crop production. Both men and women interviewed, indicated that it was expected of a husband in Chewa communities to provide for his wife and children. This included building a house in his wife's village, providing food and clothing for his wife and children, as well as working for his father and mother -in-law, especially in the first years of marriage. At the same time, matrilineal inheritance rules stipulated that a man's matrikin, particularly his sister's children, were the beneficiaries of whatever property he accumulated.

The introduction of cash crops and labour migration changed this picture in important ways. Some men were unable to provide bride-service to their parents-in-law because they worked away from home. Others did not build houses for their wives because the family did not reside in the wife's village. In addition, some women could not claim the cash their husbands earned through labour migration and tobacco-production as it was seen as the husband's property.⁹⁵ Many oral accounts attest to the fact that both parents-in-law and married Chewa women used the husband's obligations to his wife and parents-in-law to get access to Chewa men's proceeds from labour migration and other economic pursuits. It was not uncommon for parents-in-laws to demand

⁹⁵Interview Kachapila with with Eniya Bisitoni and Naduuli Jostino, Ng'ombe Village, Ntchisi, 11/10/99.

cash in place of bride-service. This was true especially in cases where the son-in-law was a migrant worker.⁹⁶ What Chewa women and their guardians exploited was the fact that there was no clear cut demarcation between the husband's property and what his nuclear family was entitled to. Consequently, women seized the opportunity to make increased economic demands on their husbands in both traditional and magistrate courts.

This is not to argue that Native Courts in Chewa areas were always sympathetic to women. Adultery cases illustrate this. Some Chewa women used desertion to justify adultery. However, in keeping with Chewa "tradition," some courts tended to take the side of husbands in cases where wives had committed adultery.⁹⁷ As the Provincial Commissioner reported in 1938 "in some districts there is a growing

⁹⁶ Interview, Hendrina Kachapila with Samuel Sakudula, Chiwaliwali Village, T.A. Kalumo, Ntchisi, 25/7/93. He also stated that even in cases where a husband resided in his village with his wife, it was not uncommon for the wife and her guardians to demand that the husband should build a house in the wife's village.

⁹⁷ Interview, Kachapila with Samuel Sakudula, Chiwaliwali Village, T.A. Kalumo, Ntchisi, 9/10/99. Adultery was considered a serious offence and some Chewa communities believed that it was responsible for calamities such as small pox or attacks from wild animals that befell the communities from time to time. In serious cases chiefs imposed a death sentence. Perhaps what is interesting as Rangeley argues is that "in all cases of adultery, the husband, or in his absence his relatives or *ankhoswe*, is the aggrieved person and the adulterer will have to pay heavy damages. The woman will also have to pay damages, to her husband unless she can show that she had in some way that she resisted the adultery." Rangeley, "Cewa Tribal Law," p.30.

tendency to treat adultery as a criminal offence, and there is a definite increase in the number of cases in which fine and compensation were ordered.”⁹⁸ Also, quoting from the 1945 annual report of the District Commissioner for Dowa, the Provincial Commissioner stated:

The courts in both (the Dowa and Kasungu) districts continue to be very lenient except in adultery cases, in which the maximum fine is nearly always ordered, often, it would seem, with scant regard to mitigating circumstances such as neglect or absence of husbands. ⁹⁹

Because of the Native Courts’ stand on adultery, some Chewa women refused to either testify or reveal the identity of their lovers. In such cases the accused man was let off and the woman’s family was ordered to pay compensation to the husband. This caused serious problems in some Chewa areas.

On or about 12/4/36 the tobacco in two gardens belonging to Million and Botoman both of Matanda’s village was slashed to ribbons with a knife. On investigation it appears the reason for the damage is as follows. Botoman committed adultery with the wife of Matanda’s young brother Kachitseko. The case was brought up in Matanda’s court. The woman would not testify to the adultery and so the accused was let off. Matanda was annoyed at this and sent Kachitseko and Damalankhunda to destroy the tobacco gardens of Botoman and the latter’s uncle Million. When Botoman and Million went to complain to Matanda they were driven away. ¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸Nyasaland Annual Reports- Native Affairs, Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province, 1938, p.63.

⁹⁹ Nyasaland Annual Reports- Native Affairs, Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province, 1945, p.17.

¹⁰⁰ MNA, NC1/20/2- Native Authorities- Lilongwe District, Correspondence District Commissioner, Lilongwe to Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province, 1/5/36.

In instances where women and their guardians felt that a sentence was unjust they simply refused to pay the compensation ordered and/ or took their cases to superior Native Courts and District Commissioners for appeal as evidenced by the following case brought to the District Commissioner in Lilongwe.

Long ago my sister Mudazichinga was married to Bvunguti. Later she divorced him and was married to Samuti. Bvunguti asked me to pay the value of what he had spent on my sister during the marriage. He said it was three cattle. I refused, as I was not responsible in native law. So Bvunguti reported to NA Matanda. NA Matanda shut me in his "guardroom." He told me to pay the three cattle. I refused. The case was heard in Matanda's Court last Monday week. Matanda again said I should pay three cattle. I refused again. I slept at Chisamuti village. Next day I went to report to NA Matanda. I found Kanseza, Phute, Madika, Tsindo and the Court Clerk. Then Matanda came with a messenger. He said I was to be beaten. The messenger caught me and put me on the ground. Madika beat me three strokes. Then the messenger handcuffed me with my hands around a post in the house. I slept there all night. Next morning I was made to sweep for NA Matanda. Matanda said, "you did wrong, you walked past close to my door. You had better pay me a goat."¹⁰¹

The problems of the incompatibility of matriliney with individual economic accumulation and children's inheritance of their father's property raised by the Nyasaland African Congress were real problems facing some segments of the Chewa community on a daily basis. Similarly, most Chewa women did endure economic and political marginalization as a consequence of colonialism and capitalism.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Case 1/35 Katherenje of Masula Village, N. A. Matanda Vs Native Authority Matanda.

Unfortunately, the colonial administration's insistence on use of African customs and traditions to solve such problems proved ineffective to a great extent. Among other factors as we noted above, this is because some of the customs were incompatible with the realities of the colonial period. In the final analysis it all came down to how individual Chewa women negotiated the details of everyday life. These two cases illustrate my point.

Miriam Chibwana¹⁰²

My father was born at Msumba in Ntchisi in the early 1900s. My mother came from Benga in Nkhotakota. My father was a schoolteacher with the Dutch Reformed Church Mission. Since both my father and mother were Chewa, our family was by tradition expected to reside in my mother's village. In our case, this did not happen because of my father's occupation. We moved from one place to another depending on where my father was sent to teach. He taught at many mission schools in central Malawi. Chinthembwe, Mayani, Chitundu, Kalulu, Mpamira and Nkhoma are some of the areas where my father worked.

My mother had 12 children. I remember one time we went to Msumba to visit my paternal grandparents. I do not remember the exact year but I was still a young girl. While on that visit two of my siblings suddenly passed away. Immediately after the funeral I was sent to Benga to stay with my grandmother on my mother's side. At that moment I did not understand why I was sent away. It was only later that my mother told me she did it to protect me from the witchcraft that was responsible for my sister and brother's deaths. I stayed with my grandmother for some years and attended a school near the village. I left Benga to live with my parents because I developed a boil on my leg that took a long time to heal. After my leg healed my parents sent me to a DRCM girls' boarding school at Dzenza in Lilongwe. I passed Standard Six Examinations at Dzenza and went to Nkhoma where I trained as a teacher.

¹⁰² Interview, Miriam Chibwana, Area 47, Lilongwe, 21/5/97.

It was while I was at Nkhoma that my father retired from his teaching job. My mother wanted them to settle at Benga because of what had happened to my two siblings at Msumba. My father could not do that because he had succeeded his uncle as village headman. Consequently, my father asked for *chitengwa* and settled at Msumba where he built a large brick and tin-roofed house. By colonial standards my father was comfortable economically because he owned two maize mills and later on he even bought a car. Most of my siblings were independent economically and lived in other parts of the country. Unfortunately, two of my brothers did not go far with school and my father brought them into his maize mill business.

Within three years both my brothers died in mysterious circumstances. Rumour had it that it was my cousins (my father's sister's sons) who had bewitched them because by tradition they, my cousins, were the rightful beneficiaries of my father's wealth. One of my cousins even got my sister pregnant and ended up marrying her. My mother opposed the marriage, as she strongly believed that he married my sister in order to gain access to my father's business. Until the day my mother died she blamed herself for what happened to my siblings. She always told me that if tradition had been followed all her children would have been alive. In order to help us avoid the problems she faced in my father's village, my mother reminded my sister and I to make sure that we followed Chewa traditions in our marriages.

Mwasifa Saka¹⁰³

I was born sometime after the First World War. My mother was born in this village (Chipokosa) but my father came from Ngala in Dowa. My parents were farmers and produced tobacco in addition to the food crops they grew. As a child I did not go to school. After my *chinamwali* I married a man from my father's village in Ngala. Actually it was my cousin, my father's sister's son. We settled in my mother's village. I had four children with my husband, three girls and a boy. We generally had a good marriage. My husband worked very hard and cared for my children and I.

¹⁰³ Interview, Mwasifa Saka, Chipokosa Village, Ntchisi, 14/9/97.

The situation changed when my husband quarreled with my father. I do not remember what the quarrel was all about. As a result, however, my husband decided to go back to Dowa. He asked my children and I to accompany him to his home. My uncle did not have problems with the move because my husband had proved that he was capable of providing for us. I was uncomfortable with the idea because I knew of some women who had moved to their husbands' villages and experienced problems. I did not want to put my children through such an ordeal. So I decided to stay behind.

The years following my husband's move were not easy. I single handedly cared for all my children. My uncle only provided limited support as he strongly felt that I should have moved to my husband's village. It was not difficult for me to feed my children. However, paying school fees and buying clothes and other necessities was another issue. Luckily, with the passage of time the demand for maize and groundnuts in produce markets improved. Consequently, I was able to care for my children as a farmer. I guess the economic security I was able to achieve made it possible for me to opt for single motherhood.

It would seem from these narratives, and similar cases from central Malawi, that stories of people who had experienced problems after abandoning matrilineal practices reinforced the importance of following matrilocal marriage and matrilineal rules of inheritance. We see Mwasifa refusing to go her husband's village because of such stories. Similarly, Mirriam's mother is convinced that if matrilineal rules had been followed she would not have lost four children. Moreover, accusations of witchcraft intensified the power of discourses about matrilineality. Although this is an area that needs further research, stories of witchcraft seem to have become more common as the Chewa accumulated wealth in the late colonial period. For example, stories of

“traditional” heirs, who in extreme cases went as far as eliminating the children of their uncles through witchcraft, frightened some lineage elders and Chewa women into insisting that their children follow Chewa traditions in their marriages.

It is noteworthy that while Chewa women were trying to protect their interests by manipulating Chewa practices and discourses, the beneficiaries of married Chewa men’s property, their sisters’ children, also used the Chewa past to gain access to their inheritance. We noted in Chapter Two that some men in Chewa communities used cross-cousin marriage to avoid matrilineal residence. However, with the economic elite determined to make their children heirs, “traditional” heirs increasingly used cross-cousin marriage to protect their positions. Thus we see Mirriam’s cousin marrying one of his cousins (Mirriam’s sister), which reinforced his claim to his uncle’s property. In addition, as pointed out above, stories of witchcraft also worked to the advantage of “traditional” heirs.

Finally, the economic status of husbands determined to some extent the ability of Chewa women to enforce matrilineal practices. Chewa men who had accumulated wealth were, in most cases, granted permission to take their wives wherever they wanted to settle. This would explain why Mirriam’s mother and not Mwasifa Saka was forced to move to her husband’s village against her wishes. The process was

greatly facilitated by the willingness of most lineage guardians to push the responsibility for their sisters and their children on to the *akamwini*. Mwasifa Saka's uncle is an example of this tendency. Some *ankhoswe* adopted this attitude because they could not afford to cater for the growing needs of their nephews and nieces, which included paying school fees and other expenses. However, the fact that Mwasifa did not go suggests that the economic position of the husband was more important than the desires of the lineage guardians.

In conclusion, the various vested interests that engaged the woman question during the late colonial period did not speak with a single voice. Unlike Martin Chanock's assertion of a patriarchal conspiracy, particular interests dictated the way the NAC, Christian missionaries, colonial officials, Native Authorities and lineage elders constructed women in a matrilineal setting such as among the Chewa. For example, this chapter has shown how the colonial state's preoccupation with the stability of Nyasaland prevented it from supporting the NAC's cause. Moreover, the NAC as an elite nationalist association had little support from the rank and file in Chewa areas that were for the most part committed to the fundamentals of the matrilineal system. Similarly, Native Authorities in Chewa areas, in their capacity as guardians of Chewa traditions and customs, had limited means of openly

challenging romanticized notions of matriliney no matter how strongly they disagreed with them.

As we saw above, the actions and aspirations of these conflicting interests compromised the position of Chewa women. What is interesting is that in the face of such economic and political marginalization some Chewa women played a key role in challenges to the attack on the matrilineal system. This was not an attempt to hold fast to all elements of “traditional” matrilineality, but rather an adaptable, realistic engagement with men’s and institutions’ changing demands. It was an engagement that offered some advantages to Chewa men without abandoning the core elements of Chewa matrilineality.

CONCLUSION

In examining the responses of Chewa indigenous practices and ideas to the colonial encounter and earlier incursions, historians of Malawi have either emphasized the way Chewa institutions resisted external forces or painted them as static cultural givens incapable of spearheading change within Chewa communities. Such analyses have influenced historians of the Chewa to look for forces and agents of change outside the Chewa polity or for total resistance to these forces. Yet the discussion above has demonstrated that Chewa indigenous institutions and ideas neither held fast nor remained unaffected by the colonial as well as earlier incursions. Rather the Chewa and their institutions proved flexible and resilient. Throughout the period under study, Chewa indigenous practices and ideas adapted to developments in their environments. As a result this study has argued that the engagement of Chewa culture with colonialism, Christianity, the slave trade and Ngoni invasions was not only one of resistance and collaboration but also one of adaptation of indigenous ideas and practices. And as we have seen, both the mission-educated elite and ordinary women and men took part in this process.

The study has demonstrated that inherited cultural forms from Chewa's past, *chinamwali* and *nyau*, became means by which some ordinary Chewa women and men adapted to a changing colonial world.

Some Chewa men influenced by economic opportunities and Christian and colonial rhetoric against matrilineality, questioned some matrilineal practices. Through *nyau*, married Chewa men increasingly assumed power that enabled them to renegotiate the terms of their involvement in Chewa matrilineages. In the process *nyau* acquired new meanings and practices. For example, not only did it function as a matrilocally married men's pressure group, it also became the way Chewa boys became men. Thus, *nyau* contained male discontent and protected the core of the matrilineal system. Likewise, the study has shown that *chinamwali*, which served primarily to accord respect to Chewa women as the progenitors of the lineage, increasingly became a site for reworking relations among women as well as between women and men. That is, it was an important bargaining tool, especially when placed in the context of the marginalization Chewa women were experiencing from colonial and capitalist forces. This explains why even after converting to Christianity, most Chewa women refused to denounce *chinamwali* and instead, created a Christianized version, *chilangizo*, which maintained most traditional elements while adding notions of Christian respectability.

The adaptability of Chewa practices and ideas has also been demonstrated in chapters on the development of ethnicity and nationalism. As we have seen, various groups and individuals capitalised on Chewa traditions and values to reconstruct particular concepts of

Chewaness. Some of these culture brokers were mission-educated and others were not. For instance, Chapter four demonstrated that although mothers had always occupied important positions in Chewa matrilineages, Chauwa Banda and other Banda elders used Chauwa's identity as "Mother of the Banda" to cultivate feelings of Banda clan separatism in Lilongwe District and in turn attempted to accumulate power in colonial society. Vail and White's analysis fails to capture such developments because of their exclusive focus on inter group differences and their over-emphasis on the mission-educated male elite and other external factors.

The study has also demonstrated that whenever possible ordinary Chewa women and their lineage guardians manipulated Chewa practices and discourses to counteract the attacks on matrilineality by nationalists and other groups. For example, we argued that for varied reasons both the NAC and the Catholic Church wanted to strengthen the position of husbands in matrilineal societies by construing women as the economic and social dependents of their husbands. Additionally, some colonial policies and capitalist developments sought to erode the security that women in matrilineal societies enjoyed. However, some Chewa women challenged these pressures by using past values and practices in an attempt to influence current marriage laws. In particular, some Chewa women and their relatives were able to enforce the "traditional"

obligations of sons-in-law, through recourse to native and magistrate courts as well as general social pressure. What is more, some older Chewa women and lineage guardians capitalized on stories of women who had experienced problems because of *chitengwa*, to emphasize and reinforce the dire consequences of abandoning matrilineal practices and locales. This influenced some younger Chewa women to appreciate the security a matrilineal base provided, and reinforced their determination to maintain matrilocal practices.

In addition, the colonial state also helped to maintain the viability of matrilineality despite widespread doubt about its utility. We have seen that colonial officials viewed unmarried and divorced women in matrilineal societies as uncontrollable and therefore a threat to law and order as well as the integrity of tribal life. Preoccupied with the maintenance of the stability of Nyasaland, the colonial administration hesitated to legislate against the matrilineal system for fear of women's wrath. It adopted this stand despite the fact that, like the NAC and the Roman Catholic Church missionaries, many colonial administrators believed that matrilineality was incompatible with the economic conditions of the colonial period.

By looking at the long term continuity and change of Chewa practices and ideas and focussing on the experiences of ordinary Chewa women and men we begin to understand how far reaching the colonial

process was and the way it affected the daily lives of ordinary people. We also appreciate the flexibility and adaptability of indigenous structures like the matrilineal system, which though grounded in Chewa's past, drew on ideas from other locations.

This study has broader implications for the analysis of matrilineality and social change in Africa. Recently, some scholars have questioned early analyses that predicted the inevitable disappearance of matrilineality under pressure from modern developments and patrilineal practices. They challenge assumptions like those of A. J Kandawire, who argued that Malawian matrilineal systems were destroyed by colonial development.¹ For example, Jean Allman and Victoria Tashjian argue that "a society like Asante could be tenaciously matrilineal and at the same time experience an increasing degree of patriarchal power."² They highlight the fundamental transformations Asante women of Ghana experienced, even while the essential elements of the system remained intact. Similarly, Megan Vaughan and Henrietta Moore demonstrate that emphasizing the social breakdown of relations of kinship "obscures rather than illuminates the changing nature of social relations."

¹ J.A.K. Kandawire, *Thangata: Forced Labour or Reciprocal Assistance?*, (Blantyre, 1979), p.96-7.

² Allman, J. and Tashjian, V. *"I Will Not Eat Stone": A Women's History of Colonial Asante* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000). p.124.

According to Vaughan and Moore, among the matrilineal Bemba of Zambia,

kinship relations, as they affect strategies of diversification, household composition, labor recruitment, and systems of sharing, remain important and necessary to the people of this area in the context of a modern, if failing, economy and a postcolonial state.³

This study of the Chewa contributes to and supports these analyses. That Chewa matrilineages survived the slave trade, Ngoni invasions, the introduction of Christianity, the imposition of colonialism and the development of capitalism is a testament to their adaptability and tenacity. It emphasizes the creativity of ordinary Chewa women and men as they have reworked their relations in the face of tremendous transformations in their lives. They accomplished this by adapting their ideas and practices without losing sight of the need to retain fundamental matrilineal practices.

These findings have wider implications for African history. They suggest a need to understand the way ordinary women and men interpreted and dealt with both internal and external challenges to “traditional” systems. They raise questions about the nature of “traditional” institutions and belief systems, suggesting that these

³ Moore, H.L. and Vaughan, M. *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890 – 1990*, (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994), pp. 232-233.

supposedly static, “backward” systems were highly flexible and resilient. The study also raises important questions about the role of ordinary women and men in the process of social change. The elite did not play the only role in African responses to foreign incursions. Moreover, the study demonstrates the need for a broad canvas for understanding the agency of African women and men of all backgrounds and the need to place this broader analysis of agency in historically specific structural and discursive contexts.

These cautions have much to tell us about the post 1945 period. This study is confined to the period before 1945 in order to facilitate an indepth analysis of Chewa institutions and discourses in a period when colonial policy favoured traditional practices. Indeed, these institutions have proven pivotal to understanding social change in this period. However, while it is true that shifts in colonial policy towards African elite and the urban working class heightened the importance of these groups in the post 1945 period, this study suggests that we should not ignore the influence of indigenous institutions and practices in the post 1945 era. A detailed analysis of indigenous structures and discourses may reveal that they played a more pivotal role in developments of the late colonial period for both the commonality and the educated elite.

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