

How did they Know?

By Eric Bult

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In the course of my service in the Nyasaland Police during the 1950's and 60's I was involved in many investigations into violent deaths suffered by unfortunate members of the community who, generally, were well behaved and carefree. One, I recall, was a night watchman employed by the Indian owner of a store in a remote part of the Mlanje district on the south-eastern border of the protectorate with Mozambique. A heavy piece of rock had been dropped onto his head whilst he was sleeping in the course of his duty on the veranda of his

employer's store. His head was crushed somewhat in the fashion of a ripe grape. A team of investigators was dispatched immediately, reaching the crime scene late in the afternoon of the day the crime was committed. Their inquiries led them to one of two brothers, both of whom were suspected of being responsible for the crime. He was immediately arrested and brought to the district police station.



Despite intensive enquiries, it was not until two days later that the other brother was traced and arrested. In the interim, the one in police custody maintained innocence of the crime and it was decided to use one of the wonderful machines called tape recorders as an aid to our investigations. Neither brother had seen or spoken to the other since shortly before the arrival of police at the scene of the crime. There was no way in which a message could have been passed between the two of them.

Whilst the first suspect was assisting police in their enquiry in the CID office, a tape recorder was fixed under the roof of the cell, which was a short distance from the station building, in such a way that it was not visible from below. The arrested man was then placed back into the cell, quite alone and out of contact with anyone.

Later, that evening, after accused number two had been further interrogated, he was placed in the cell where his brother was then sleeping.

It should be observed at this point despite the two suspects, blood brothers, had not seen nor spoken to each other for two days. They had been arrested on suspicion of committing a capital crime. They could not have known about the hidden tape-record. Indeed, if told about it today – like most inhabitants of the country at that time - would not have understood what such a thing was or what it did.

In a very small hours of the morning the two men were separately removed from the cell and while they were away from it the tape recorder was removed and played to an expectant group of investigators in the office of the Officer in Charge.

We clearly heard the sound of the door lock and cell door being opened and the voices of the constables escorting the first suspected into the cell. The closing and locking of the cell door and the shuffling of the suspect crawled under his blanket were clearly heard.

Then we heard motor vehicles passing some 120 metres distant from the police station and dogs barking in the vicinity. After the expected time delay, we heard again the sound of the cell, door being opened and we leaned closer to the recorder as we waited for what we thought would be the usual greetings, the normal enquiries as to well-being and what had transpired since last they met, the incident at the store, in fact everything brothers accused of murder could reasonably have been expected to discuss in the circumstances.

Nothing. Nothing whatever was of any of that. Although the other night sounds were clearly heard from the recorder, nothing was revealed , except what – except what?

We strained to listen to what we heard, or imagined we heard - a very low voice, sotto voce 'Osa nena' meaning in Chinyanja, 'don't speak'. We re-round and played the tape many times but could not be certain that is what we heard - or imagined? Once again, we worked a same trick: taking out the suspects one by one to be re-interrogated in separate rooms, whilst the tape recordings replaced in the cell roof.

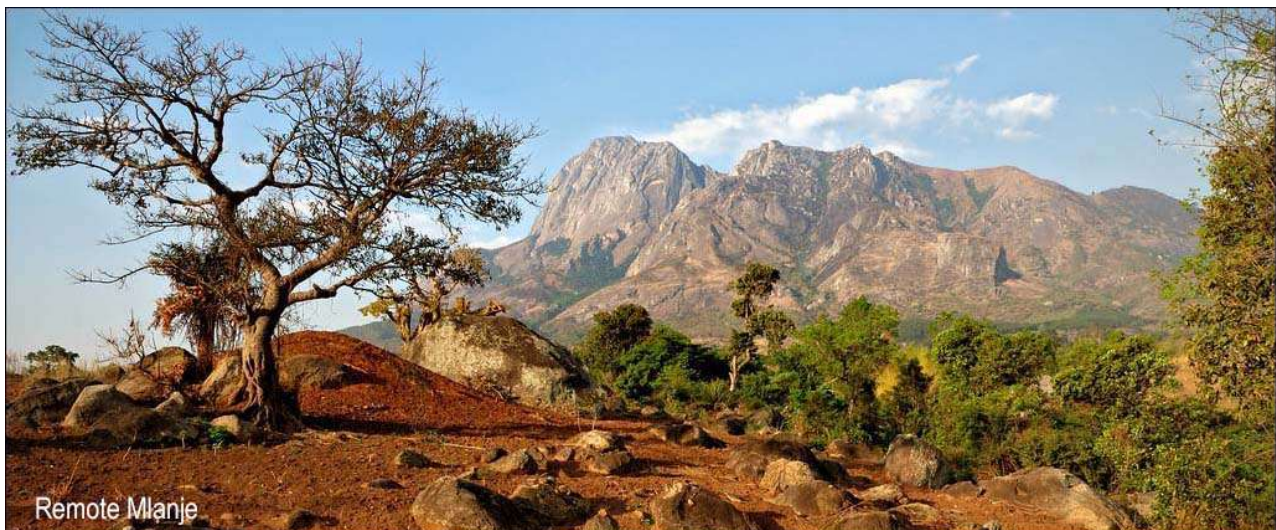


And again the same introduction into the cell. Finally another huddle around the machine later that morning.

We were assured by the sounds of the roosters in the vicinity announcing the break of new day hat the recorder was working perfectly. But still, not one audible word passed between the two men.

More than half a century has passed since that strange experience. Of the many former members of the police, and others to whom I have recounted this tale, not one has been able to offer an explanation of how to brothers, accused of a capital crime, could have remained silent in that manner when seeing each other for the first time since their arrest.

Their subsequent trial in which both men were convicted of murder satisfactorily closed the file, but not the question which has since remained in my head: **HOW DID THEY KNOW?**



Eric Bult