

Nyasaland ~ A Bit of Background History

(Part 7)

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Control

The eighteen eighties marked the beginning of the period that has been dubbed 'the Scramble for Africa,' and it was essential for the British to keep control over the territories it had already established. With the Portuguese constantly attempting to encroach upon the southern part of Nyasaland, the British sent Harry Johnston, their Consul to Portuguese East Africa, to the disputed region in 1889 in order to travel its length and see for himself the metaphorical lie of the land. As he progressed from the south to the north Johnston met with various African chiefs and made treaties with them, agreeing that the British would help to protect them from the advancing Portuguese. He must have felt buoyed by his reception because, at the end of his 'ulendo,' he took the unorthodox decision to declare a Protectorate and presented Parliament with a fait accompli. Fortunately for him, the Foreign Office endorsed his decision. Predictably, the Portuguese refuted this and there was a period of fighting between a force of Arabs acting on their behalf and the British which was resolved in theory in 1891, although in practice intermittent guerrilla attacks and minor skirmishes continued for several years.

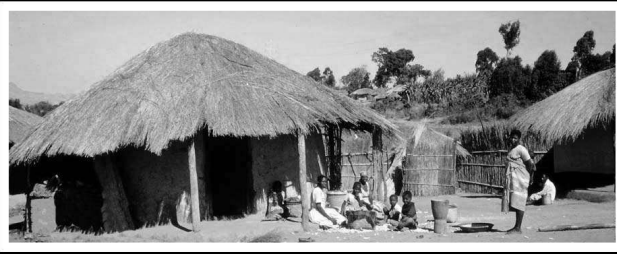


Harry Johnston's reward was to be made the first Commissioner and General Consul of the British Central Africa Protectorate in 1891, a post he held until 1896. He took with him a hand-picked team of experts to help him to set up the new administration. Johnston was very particular about who else should become given positions of authority and always made the selections himself, mainly from the motley crew of Europeans who were already living and working in East Central Africa and had little or no experience of being civil servants. Not all were suited to the work and it was not easy to effect change; the British Central Africa Protectorate was underfunded and many parts of the

country were not connected with each other or to Zomba and Blantyre where most decisions were made. In the absence of a decent network of roads there was a huge reliance on porters, which was slow. Johnston defined the geographical boundaries dividing the country into distinct administrative districts, establishing headquarters in each, and ensured that channels of communications were open between the authorities and the traditional chiefs in each area. Rules and regulations were brought in - for instance, taxes were introduced and restrictions were made about who could carry arms and ammunition. To begin with the British only controlled a small area - part of the Shire Highlands - but an early decision was to establish a protective force, a hybrid of police and military men, and they were slowly able to take over the southern end of the country. They also put patrol boats on the Lake to maintain order and keep a check on the slave trade.

One of Johnston's biggest challenges was the issue of land ownership. In the early days of settlement African Chiefs had been persuaded to exchange rights to huge tracts of land with Europeans for derisory sums or goods of very low value. They had not realised that their 'contracts' conveyed not only permission to cultivate vacant land but also the actual ownership of the villages that were settled there. The new owners made sure that their claims were legally secured as soon as the Protectorate status was conferred and also claimed traditional rights over the people on their land; villagers suddenly had to pay a 'hut

tax'; the equivalent of rent. However, because the estates struggled to find sufficient labour to prepare the land to go into production Johnson suggested that their reluctant tenants



could work on the land in lieu of an actual cash payment. Supposedly this would be for one month each year but in fact many of the Estate owners and managers demanded far more than that. This practice became known as 'thangata' and has come to be synonymous with the concept of forced

labour. Understandably, thangata was, from its very inception, an incredibly unpopular system, and one which continued to cause resentment right up to Independence. Many Nyasalanders voted with their feet on collection days, some just hiding in the bush for a while, others relocating. Many Nyasalanders left their homes altogether. They could always find work in the various mines that were operating all over the continent or in neighbouring countries where they were popular in the service industries. Therefore, it came to pass that Nyasaland's most successful export became its people.

Although Harry Johnston left his mark on the new Protectorate it was not until several years into the new century and well after his time that the British were able to extricate the western region from Rhodes' grip and return it entirely to British rule - at which point the country was officially renamed Nyasaland, as Livingstone had always called it. By this time an administrative structure for the governing of the Protectorate was in place.

At the top of the Colonial tree perched The Governor (answerable to the Monarch) and his Chief Secretary who took their orders from the Colonial Office and Parliament in London. The Governor also reported to HM Treasury as they had to apply for monies and justify their expenditure. Usually these men (and they were all men, in those days) had spent much of their lives climbing up greasy poles in other countries, but their departmental heads had worked mainly in Nyasaland and knew the country well so often found themselves placed on the Legislative Council (advising on legislation) and/or the smaller Executive Council (advising on policy).

Information was disseminated through the three provinces, each led by a Provincial Commissioner who had under him several District Officers. District Officers were expected to have a good knowledge of their area and to be able to communicate in an appropriate local language as a large proportion of their time would be spent on 'ulendo', travelling throughout their allocated area, talking to the local Headmen and listening to complaints and requests as well as sitting in at the Native Courts sessions. Almost all Civil Servants and other Colonial employees (e.g. senior police officers, agricultural advisors, forestry officers, geologists, educators and medics) were recruited from Britain as were most of their support staff, although Nyasaland was unusual among its neighbours in that some lower positions (such as clerks, interpreters, rangers and lower ranking police) could be filled by native Nyasalanders. Africans who showed promise were given opportunities to train to further their advance.

Nyasaland was always a terribly poor country with all the problems associated with that, but during the inter- and post-war years it was developing different policies from its close neighbours. The Native Courts, established in 1934, were integral to the new regime. Cases were brought before the Chief who had the power to impose small fines, short gaol sentences and even some corporal punishments. Generally speaking, fines were meted out with the most frequency as neither flogging nor imprisonment were customary forms of discipline among the locals. The cases brought before the Native Courts were primarily

civil cases whereby compensation was awarded or cases of marital strife such as adultery or cruelty. More serious criminal cases would still be heard in the formal courts in the larger towns. The Native Courts had no authority over the estates and plantations which did not like interference from any quarter and tended towards autonomy.

The British initially intended to follow closely the principles of Indirect Rule which had been successfully implemented in northern Nigeria and Tanganyika. This would have meant giving the power to operate a judicial system based on customary rather than colonial criteria and the collection of local taxes to recognised Native Authorities; a number of Chiefs who were expected to co-operate with the officers of central government while at the same time representing their own people. There were some conscientious criticisms of this regime; for example, in practice many small groups would be further marginalised by not having such a person to speak for them. As usual, the loudest opposition to the model came from the European estate owners who did not want to relinquish control of their potential workforces to their more sympathetic community leaders and other colonials voiced concerns about entrusting the collection of monies to the village headmen. The result was a modified version of Indirect Rule that fell wide of the mark of the original.

To maintain law and order Nyasaland had both a police and military presence. The Nyasaland Police Force came into being during Johnston's time. To begin with the force was made up of ex-soldiers and their main duties pertained to assisting the District Officers in the matters relating to 'thangata;' either the collection of the monies due or the insistence upon the workers labouring in lieu of a cash payment. These men were unfamiliar with police protocol and in the 1920s a more conventional, appropriately trained force was set up in the Shire Highlands. This was led by European (mainly British) police



officers but although it was better organised than its counterparts in other areas it was still too small to be very effective. After the Second World War the Colonial government struggled to maintain control as nationalism began to spread and there was an even greater need for expansion so many more policemen were recruited from within Nyasaland and the UK. In the nineteen-fifties both serving and retired soldiers were seconded to form the para-

military Police Mobile Force in response to this nationwide unrest. Just before the declaration of the State of Emergency there were one hundred and thirty European and two thousand, two hundred African policemen in Nyasaland. Immediately afterwards a further one hundred experienced British officers were recruited and, later, another thirty seven seconded to the force while the number of African rookies swelled the ranks by an additional seven hundred.

The Central African Rifles were another of Johnston's projects and were founded in 1895. Although the idea was met with scepticism the locally recruited soldiers, based at a military camp in Zomba, proved to be so successful that in 1899 a second battalion of a thousand men were trained up and loaned to the War Office for use elsewhere. In 1902, following amalgamation with similar troops in neighbouring countries, they were known as the King's African Rifles. Nyasalanders who joined up could find themselves employed as part of Internal Defence, in para-military roles (known as 'boma askaris') supporting the rural administrators or even dispatched to other British colonies. They also served in both the First and Second World Wars.