

Nyasaland ~ A Bit of Background History

(Part 9)

Compiled by Vanessa Farmery

Counter Culture; the Rise of Nationalism

Naturally, there was resistance to the British from the beginning; even the small parties of



people who arrived with or not long after David Livingstone himself and, arguably, 'put Nyasaland on the map' encountered it. Later, many of the Africans who were educated through the various different missions became politically curious, informed and active. Those devotees of Joseph Booth, Elliott Kamwana and John Chilembwe (*left*), had found an appetite for the concept of 'Africa for the Africans' among their congregations by 1915 and their ideas continued to spread as the century progressed, sowing early

seeds of Nationalism.

Some of the Chiefs who were part of the Native Authorities were very engaged in the movement towards Nationalism while others supported the Colonial regime, but the majority walked a tightrope, trying to find a balance between the two opposing sides. The implementation of Indirect Rule - already weak - was further eroded because it was seen as being divisive; it identified the population by tribal groups rather than as a whole nation and the term 'Local Government' replaced its use during the nineteen forties.

A huge influence over African political thinking were the Native Associations which grew up both at home and among the migrant communities of Nyasalanders working in other African countries. Usually set up and run by former students of mission schools who had become teachers, ministers and clerks, they may have started as social groups, workers' syndicates or as a way for minorities to band together - whatever the reason, they became a platform for Nationalism and were very popular. They were energetic, too, and would regularly send in complaints or demands to Central Government regarding issues of concern. In 1938 it was proposed that the Central African States (North and South Rhodesia and Nyasaland) be amalgamated to form a Federation and both the European and African populations of these countries were consulted. An extremely well organised response from the Native Associations across Nyasaland delivered unanimous objections to any such union being made. As it happened, the plans were shelved at that point and for the duration of the Second World War, leaving Nyasaland under Colonial Rule which the population preferred to Settler Control, as seen in the Rhodesias.

James Sangala (right) was a mission boy with potential who was educated in Blantyre before becoming, first, a teacher and, later, a civil servant. With a strong sense of public spirit he was involved with a number of organisations in his home town including the local Native Association. In October 1943 he wrote an open letter to his countrymen telling them that he and his colleagues felt that it was time to form an Association which would represent them all; in essence to present a united front to effect change. Predictably, this was not welcomed by the Colonial authorities but Sangala backed his arguments up by quoting the many ways in which he felt that the Nyasalanders were discriminated



against and recruited fellow activist Levi Mumba to write a constitution. In December 1944, the Government agreed to recognise the Nyasaland African Congress as a national body. The NAC grew quickly, with branches all over the country and beyond; many of the members were migrant workers and based temporarily elsewhere, but their subscriptions kept the party afloat. From the start it was primarily concerned with larger issues that concerned the Protectorate as a whole rather than localised affairs and appealed to young

intellectuals, but it was open to any Nyasalanders of age to join, man or woman, who could pay their dues of five shillings a year.

In the early nineteen fifties there were changes within the NAC which was responding to a burgeoning feeling of dissatisfaction and two separate incidents of revolt. The first of these took place in 1948 and concerned the conservation of land ('malimidwe'). Essentially, in an effort to increase productivity new measures were brought in by the Agricultural department, vigorously backed by the Governor at the time. These meant a change in the way the people physically farmed (from flat and mound cultivation to contoured and boxed ridging) and what they grew (a move towards crop rotation). The African farmers were very resistant to these modifications and the NAC encouraged their members to go against these policies, and as it did so state intervention increased. Rangers were appointed to oversee the areas where the new system was supposedly in place and to assist the District Officers in ensuring obedience. Punishments for those who refused to comply were harsh and ranged from fines to prison sentences.

Alongside these agricultural reforms, the perennial problem of 'thangata' again reared its head. In the nineteen twenties there had been such an increased demand for unskilled workers in the Shire Highlands that forced labour was promoted in the other regions of the country. Deeply unpopular, eventually London intervened and a change of Governor brought an end to the practice. Then, when many estates suspended their own activities because of the effects of the depression, the collection of rents also fell by the wayside and the peasant economy grew in strength. However, during the Second World War the estate managers began to return and went back to making their previous demands. Finding that an increased population was putting a strain on their land, particularly with respect to the collection of firewood, they sought to reduce the number of people living in the estate villages - for example if a girl married she would not be allowed to bring her new husband to live with her (as was the custom) but was obliged to leave. The Africans became desperate, they had nowhere to go, particularly as Nyasaland's population was still rising. A wave of immigration, particularly from Portuguese East Africa, almost doubled the number of Africans living there from the beginning of the First World War to the end of the second.

These demands of the people led to unrest and in 1946 a senior Colonial Official, Sidney Abrahams (*below*), visited Nyasaland with a view finding some sort of resolution. He



recommended a system of land reform whereby the government would purchase all unused or under-used land from the estates which would then become available to African farmers as Crown land. The results of this Commission divided opinion; the Africans and the Government were in favour of it while the planters and settlers were not. Although Abrahams had suggested that the government should make compulsory purchases of land from any estates reluctant to comply, the estate owners

and their agents found ways of wriggling out of their obligations. Some simply went against their orders for as long as they could while others found it more lucrative to sell privately than to the Government. Not even the loss of workers bothered them, their places were soon filled by migrants from Mozambique, but the indigenous Nyasalanders were left with little choice. Those estates with tracts of land that was not productive moved the villagers to areas where they could barely eke out a living but those which only had expanses of rich land objected to its loss and insisted that large communities be resettled in less fertile areas far away. However, most land that had not been already appropriated by the estates was mainly poor; any that was not was overcrowded and unable to support larger communities.

Then, in 1952, rents were put up for those African tenants still living on the estates. They resisted, quietly and politely at first with letters informing their landlords of their intention not to pay the increased sum, but then they became bolder until by early 1953 there were several thousand people on a number of estates defaulting on their rent. The situation was tipped from 'a little local trouble' into a proper peasant uprising after reports of incidents between the estate authorities and tenants reached the protesters who began to mass in and around the tea plantation area of Cholo. Roads were blocked, telephone wires were cut, other workers came out on strike in sympathy and locals seen as supporting the Government were threatened. The Nyasaland Police - a very small force - were unable to manage the situation and reinforcements were sent for from the Rhodesias, Tanganyika and South Africa. It took several weeks for the authorities to regain control; a number of Nyasalanders died and many more were injured during the conflict.

Another cause of grass roots discontent was the constant pressure put on Nyasaland to form the Central African Federation; a thorny problem that just would not go away. This idea of formally joining together the three countries known as North and South Rhodesia and Nyasaland had arisen from the desire of the European settler populations of those territories to unite under one government - which they intended to be dominated by them. By the time it was being reconsidered, having been interrupted by the Second World War, the political landscape in Africa had changed and the settlers and other Europeans in were becoming very nervous. The move to majority rule was rife across the continent and this was something they did not want to see in the Rhodesias. However, in Nyasaland the Federation was certainly not a prospect that everyone relished; it was supported by neither



the various missions and churches active there nor several successive British Governors of the Protectorate. The locals did not want it and many migrant workers had seen, first-hand, the way things were going elsewhere. In North and South Rhodesia the decision making, power and land lay in the hands of the white settler communities while in South Africa the all-white government had brought in the policy of apartheid. Returning Nyasalanders did not want that at home. The NAC opposed even benevolent white rule and they found a lot more people were prepared to agree with them when they reduced the annual

membership fees to threepence in the early nineteen fifties. Their numbers rose dramatically and there were branches in even the most rural areas. In Blantyre, Rose Chibambo set up the NAC Women's League, a hugely popular extension to the party.

Meanwhile, in London two men presented different sides of the argument. Andrew Cohen at the Colonial Office was in charge of Africa and was keeping one eye on South Africa. He was concerned that this powerful neighbour might seek to suck South Rhodesia into its sphere of influence and felt that to unite the three territories under one umbrella would strengthen resistance to any possible expansion from the south. From a practical point of view, too, unity made sense, although he recognised that the interests of the Africans must be protected in a society ruled by a minority of white settlers. On the other side sat Creech Jones, a Labour MP who had been made Colonial Secretary in 1948. He was influenced by a close friend from Nyasaland, a medical doctor who was politically active and passionately against the creation of a Federation. He argued that it was the path to long-term European settler control at a time when the British should be helping the countries it governed to become independent.

It was this threat of the Federation that had finally thrust this man who had not been in Nyasaland for decades, to centre stage. Exiled in practical rather than legal terms (because the British would not allow him to practise medicine in his own country) Hastings Kamuzu Banda had little interest in 'malimidwe', 'thangata' or the land reforms from which

he was geographically distanced. However, he loathed the idea of the Federation as much as his countrymen did and did his best to raise opposition to it in the UK through his friendship with Jones and his contacts in the Fabian Society and the Church of Scotland. It must have been devastating to him when the Labour Party lost the next election and the victorious Conservatives, who were all for the idea, came back into power. At Banda's



instigation three prominent Chiefs and two members of the NAC went to London in February 1953 to voice their objections. Unfortunately they were seen by the new Conservative Colonial Secretary who pooh-poohed their concerns. It could be speculated that had the Labour Party been in Parliament a more sympathetic encounter might have taken place, but as it was a month later the proposals for the merger were approved in the House of Commons and in August the

Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland officially came into being. Slowly the population of Nyasaland accepted the fait accompli. The Government took advantage of the subdued mood and began to take back the control it had lost, fining those who were not complying with the agricultural measures, collecting tax arrears and imprisoning a large number of Jehovah's Witnesses who had not answered previous summonses to appear in court. The Governor at the time, Colby, aware of how finely the country was balanced, was reluctant to do anything to provoke a resurgence of the violence he had witnessed earlier in the year and so chose to dampen down reports of the recent troubles. He was also mindful of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya which was ongoing, and pre-emptively implemented a programme of Police expansion. Between 1953 and 1959 the number of policemen trebled. A new sector, the Police Mobile Force, a paramilitary group designed to deal with massing crowds, rioting and civil disobedience was created at the height of the Cholo disturbances and remarks were made that the country was becoming a Police State.

In the meantime the NAC had lost credibility and membership numbers fell, there were squabbles between the main protagonists and several long-standing leaders joined forces with alternative political movements. Dr Banda turned his back in disgust and severed ties with them, relocating from the UK to the Gold Coast for personal reasons.

TO BE CONTINUED