Nyasaland ~ A Bit of Background History

(Part 5)

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Christianity

In 1875 the Foreign Missions Committee of the Free Church of Scotland sent a party out to Nyasaland to set up a mission station on the Lake shore. They were able to arrive in style as they were transported up the Shire River by means of a prefabricated steamer, the Ilala, which was taken apart at the Murchison Falls and carried along a fifty mile stretch of riverbank piecemeal before being put back together and resuming its voyage. (This method was used for a number of vessels that were put into use on the Lake later)

Unfortunately, Cape McClear, where they had planned to settle was terribly malarial and the mission struggled to survive in that location, moving twice before eventually finding a permanent home in 1894. The new site was in a highland area between the Lake and the Nyika Plateau and was given the name of Livingstonia. This new position was very

successful and a small town developed around the mission station. At the same time, the Church of Scotland set up a mission on the Shire Highlands in a place they called Blantyre after the birthplace of Livingstone.

These Presbyterian churches, both determined to honour the memory of the man who had so inspired the very first missionaries, established cordial relations once on African soil, although they had often been strongly opposed to one another's teachings at home. However, they did emphasise different facets of their growing relationship with the local population and the community at Livingstonia concentrated very much on education and evangelising from the beginning. The Blantyre mission, on the other hand, started badly with the Scots taking large swathes of land as their own and operating a judicial system that relied on corporal punishment for several years, until a more enlightened leader was found and under his influence the Blantyre mission eventually became an exemplary model. What they had in common was the training up of Africans to become itinerant priests and as a result of that decision both churches grew in terms of influence and congregation size. They also demonstrated a flexibility of mind that other churches might not have done and allowed a new brand of Christianity to develop, one which suited and appealed to the Africans - for example they preached in local languages and encouraged members to write their own hymns.

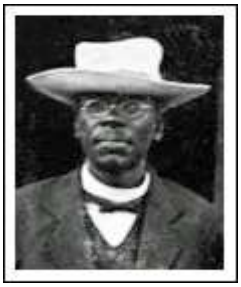
The Universities Mission to Central Africa returned to the Lake in the eighteen eighties, this time taking to the water with two steamers that helped them spread their doctrines around the shore villagers, many of which were predominantly Islamic at the time. Again, they used African teachers and priests (who had been trained at the UMCA college in

Zanzibar), several of whom had been slaves at an earlier time in their lives and been liberated by the British. Hot on their heels came a branch of the Dutch Reform Church which had been prevented from preaching to non-Afrikaner speaking congregations in South Africa; by the end of the nineteenth century they had three mission stations and four hundred converts. The Roman Catholics were late to the party, but when they arrived they were vigorous and by 1905 were represented by five mission stations and twenty priests. A contingent of nuns swelled their ranks further. By the beginning of the first World War there were the same number of European missionaries in Nyasaland as there were European planters and administrators combined, so the influence of Christianity is obvious.

One particularly colourful character was a radical egalitarian, Joseph Booth, whose impact cannot be denied. Somewhat of a religious dilettante, flitting from one church to another

like a bee in search of honey, he was a stone in the shoe of the burgeoning administration. He began by founding the interdenominational Zambezi Industrial Mission near Blantyre but soon fell out with his colleagues so went on to establish several others along the same lines, but typically did not stay long at any of them. He visited the United States where he courted a Seventh Day Baptist Church which gave him the funding to set up the Plainfield Industrial Mission (now known as the Malamulo) in Nyasaland and through this he became more voluble regarding his unwavering belief in 'Africa for the Africans.' Booth's rhetoric was considered seditious and he was threatened with deportation. He agreed to stop stirring things up but was unable to stop himself from trying to influence his colleagues at the mission which had, in the meantime, been taken over by the Seventh Day Adventists, and was edged out. He was finally barred from ever returning to Nyasaland in 1907 by a colonial administration who had had more than enough of him.

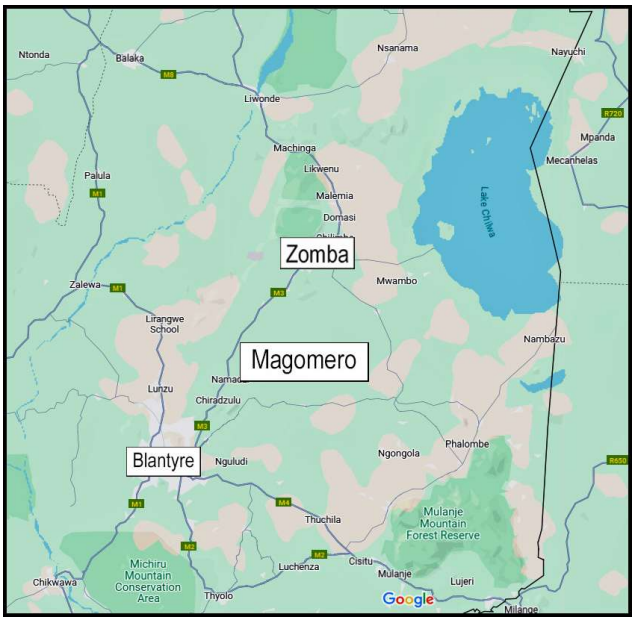
However, Booth bequeathed a far-reaching legacy; his anti-colonialist, anti-racist attitudes ideas touched not only those whom he directly encountered but also the converts of his converts. It was through Booth that the Watch Tower Society - more commonly and colloquially known as the Jehovah's Witnesses - became involved with Nyasaland. Booth encountered this church after he left Nyasaland but he continued to exert an influence from South Africa by training and teaching acolytes who took his ideas (including the concepts of sabbatarianism and millenialism) back home with them. Two of his mentors - Elliot Kamwana and John Chilembwe - developed their own extreme versions of his creed. It was a heady mix that appealed to a growing number of Nyasalanders who felt increasingly alienated in their own land and the pair soon had many, many followers.
In fact, John Chilembwe was behind an uprising that took place on the Shire Highlands in 1915. An acolyte of Booth, Chilembwe, had bought enough land to established the Providence Industrial Mission in 1900 and this had become very successful. Within a dozen years he had almost a thousand converts and a thousand children attending the mission's schools; there were a central brick built church of enormous proportions, four permanent satellite churches and several temporary smaller places of worship. Chilembwe had spent time in the United States, first as an assistant to Booth and then later in Virginia where he



attended a theological college. During this period he became politicised and when he returned to the country of his birth he brought with him his vision for a new Africa - an Africa ruled by and for Africans, a fairer Africa, an Africa where work would be rewarded and profits reaped by the poor, an Africa that was as modern as America or Europe, an Africa that was free from outside interference and was regarded as an equal player on the

world's stage... He also propagated the belief that this change would come with a second resurrection in about October 1914 (as foretold by another of Booth's apostles, Elliott Kamwana, who had delivered this prophecy to huge congregations with the approval of the Watch Tower movement in 1908 - until he was unceremoniously exiled on the grounds of sedition). It is not difficult to see why his rhetoric should be so appealing to the Nyasalanders.

All this helped make him a thorn in the side of his neighbour, a Scot named Bruce who had married David Livingstone's daughter Agnes. Their son, Alexander Bruce and another relative of the explorer, William Livingstone, managed their estate which covered an area of approximately three hundred square miles and encompassed the area of Magomero, once settled by Bishop Mackenzie. On the Bruce estate the treatment of the workers was

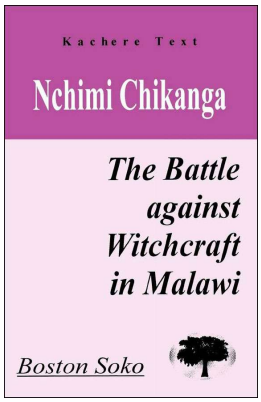


both exploitative and harsh. Seeing this, Chilembwe sought to influence them through his preaching and teaching, and the two men inevitably locked horns. They became obsessed with one another and Chilembwe vowed publicly that he would see his adversary dead. He became fixated on overthrowing the masters of the Bruce estate and, towards the end of January 1915, mounted an ambitious and rebellious attempt to that end. He organised a triple pronged assault - one group of men were sent to the main settlement at Magomero with the instruction that they were to kill the European men living there, a second was sent to Mwanje, another residential area of the estate, with similar instructions while the third went to Blantyre with the intention of liberating arms and ammunition to the cause. It is important to note that Chilembwe was absolutely adamant that no European women or children were to be harmed, and they were not, but his men did kill Livingstone and his assistant at Magomero and a third man at Mwanje. The attack on Blantyre came to nothing. As it happened there was a social function on that night and the marauders mistook the sound of the British at play for preparations to counter-attack and fled before causing any harm, although they created such a disturbance in their flight that they were pursued. When the full horror of what had happened became known the British retaliated and took charge of the situation. Potential supporters of Chilembwe's rebellion were shortly rounded up or melted away across the border leaving their leader isolated but unrepentant. He was finally found at the beginning of February, not far from his beloved mission, and was killed as he attempted to make an escape. Three dozen rebels who were captured alive were hanged as a deterrent to other would-be revolutionaries in the immediate aftermath of the incident.

Of course, the missions were funded by outside sources and did not contribute to the national coffers as such, but they did become the bodies which provided two strands of well-being in Nyasaland - Education and Health Care. Naturally, the basics of reading, writing and 'rithmetic were supplemented by a certain amount of evangelising and not all missions had the same educational aims - for example, not all of them taught both boys and girls and some limited the girls' learning merely to the domestic arena - but others were impressive in what they achieved. Often the mission schools identified young people with potential and sent them on to other educational institutions in neighbouring countries -

many came back as preachers or teachers but a handful found their way to other professions. At Livingstonia the Overtoun Institution offered vocational apprenticeships (e.g. engineering, carpentry), training courses (e.g. nursing, office skills) and academic subjects (e.g. English literature, the sciences). The students from the Overtoun were in great demand and it is sad to say that this excellent facility did not last long owing to a lack of funding. Generally, those Nyasalanders who were part of the mission communities had an advantage in the labour market over those who were not as they usually had a working knowledge of English and had adopted some European habits and standards. They were in demand at home and in other parts of Africa.

Health care was also left largely to the missions, although in this they were much less successful. Part of the reason for this was that the few medics who accompanied the missionaries had their hands full just keeping their own people well and alive since the Europeans did not all thrive in their new environment. Another major factor was that the Africans had their own ways of dealing with physical ailments and that these were rooted in their traditional belief systems - illness either occurred a result of malevolence or because of a failure to perform some necessary custom and required the presence of a witchdoctor to perform a ceremonial ritual or a charm to remove it, or it was caused naturally in which case the medicine man would treat it with locally sourced plants. Even the indigenous churches turned a sort of blind eye to some of these traditional beliefs because to separate the Africans from them proved to be impossible. For example, the Chinyanja word 'mankhwala' can mean either medicine or a magic charm. (In the early nineteen-sixties my Father and his colleagues often came across witchcraft in the course of their duties; it was frequently the reason given for a crime to have been committed both at the scene and, later, in court). Western medical practices were only considered by the locals as an absolute last resort. For example, malnutrition was the cause of many symptoms including open ulcers which would not heal. Simple treatments such as the appropriate cleaning and dressing these sores was effective, when the villagers sought help, but often they did not.



Those early mission doctors were enormously disadvantaged as they knew virtually nothing about tropical diseases, their causes, prevention or treatments. Malaria was one of the most troubling. As advances were made in the understanding of its transmission and spread the use of mosquito nets and quinine were brought into the European communities but not rolled out on a large enough scale to include the native population. The Government did take action against smallpox, bringing in compulsory vaccination in the

early part of the twentieth century and the number of deaths from smallpox fell after the First World War. However, the worldwide influenza epidemic reached Central Africa in 1919 and it is estimated that it killed 50,000 inhabitants. Other worrying epidemics that were at large were sleeping sickness, associated with tse-tse flies and primarily affecting cattle, and bilharzia in areas around the Lake. Tuberculosis was not endemic to the region

but was brought back home by many of the mine workers after several years of working in appalling underground conditions elsewhere in Africa - between the first recorded incidents in 1910 and the nineteen fifties it escalated until it was one of the most common causes of death in the country. Leprosy was another concern. Initially the setting up of leper colonies and the care of these unfortunates was left to the missions but the British Empire Relief Fund did provide some funding for drugs in the inter-war years. However, the treatment was ineffective and it was not until the nineteen fifties when a different type of medication became available that things improved.

Many mission stations had rooms set aside for the critically ill but the first hospital proper was built in Blantyre in 1896. Constructed of brick with cement floors, it became a model for others established later in Zomba and Livingstonia. The Seventh Day Adventists also had very good facilities at their mission at Malamulo - this was opened in 1908 and was still one of the best places to seek medical aid sixty years later as I know from personal experience. All mission surgeries and hospitals were open for the treatment of locals but those at rural stations found themselves underused. In Blantyre most of the patients were porters, estate workers or labourers on the railway line; their living and working conditions were particularly harsh and ironically they were often sent to receive treatment by their employers. The appearance of hospitals created a need for medical assistants who were recruited and trained locally. Colonial medical provision was focussed on staff and the settler population and European-only hospitals were opened in Blantyre, Zomba and Fort Johnston where these populations were in their highest concentrations.

Top hospital Zomba