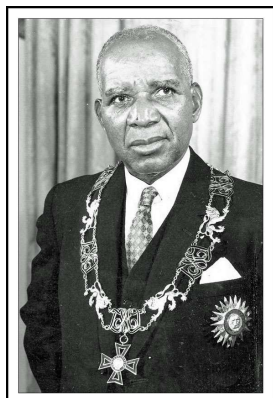


DR. HASTINGS KAMUZU BANDA

(A personal view ~ by Barry Thorne)

(The following account of is based mainly on personal experiences, although it does contain an element of his personal history.)



Hastings Banda started life in a poor village in central Nyasaland a little before the outbreak of the Boer War (the exact date of his birth is not known but it is generally believed to have been around 1896). His given name Kamuzu comes from Chichewa, meaning 'a little root', and he adopted the name Hastings after being baptised into the Church of Scotland. After returning to the country in 1958, he acquired the title of 'Ngwazi' (Chief of Chiefs – or translated from Chichewa, 'great lion'). Banda was variously described as a pragmatist, megalomaniac and even hero of or traitor to African freedom and unity; to some he appeared a maverick, and others as stubborn as a mule. I recall when I first arrived in Nyasaland in 1961,

he was considered by many Europeans in Southern Africa as their pet bête noir, but later was regarded by the apartheid South African Government as the most reasonable of all black African leaders, and even became the recipient of large sums of development aid from that country.

So, the question is - how did this village boy, who became a President, acquire a reputation that aroused so many different opinions, and even passions? He was obviously not an ordinary boy even in his early days, and after learning how to read and write at a Church of Scotland Missionary School, set off one day to walk to South Africa, where he felt his educational possibilities were greater. He continued his education at more Scottish Missions, and his belief in the good work they did in the field of education was so strong that later, when he became President, he swept aside the modern methods of teaching that had been introduced into Malawi following Independence, and re-introduced into the Primary and Secondary Schools what he referred to as the 'old missionary method of the 'three R's'. His links with the Church of Scotland (or Church of Central African Presbyterian as it became in Africa) remained strong throughout his life, and he even became an Elder of the Kirk, and no doubt much of his strict conservatism was founded on these strong links.

Still a young man, he set off once more, leaving Africa for the last time for many years and headed for the United States of America, where he obtained a Doctorate in Medicine. However, having obtained it, he found that such a degree was not recognised by the British in their colonies, so he made his way back to Scotland and obtained a further qualification in Edinburgh – again emphasising his links with that country. Having done so, he moved to London, and it was there that he built up friendship with other African nationalists, who in those days were virtually unknown to the world, but who later were to become heroes of the liberation movement throughout the continent. Nkrumah, Nyere, Kenyatta and Banda were among the founder-members of the Pan-African Movement, an organisation born in the capital of the very empire it wished to see brought to an end. And it was Banda's friendship with Nkrumah which led him to spend many years practising as a doctor in Ghana.

Although he had been away from Nyasaland for many years, Banda maintained a keen and lively interest in the affairs of his home, and political leaders there often corresponded

with him and sought his guidance. The establishment of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was something of a watershed in Banda's life, as his distaste for it led him to become even more actively involved in the politics of Nyasaland, and to his recall by a number of local politicians to lead the country into Independence. However, leaders such as Chipembere, Chisesa, Chiume and others clearly intended to use him as a figurehead, a Gandhi rather than a Nehru, a move they later learned to regret.



By 1959, the political agitation of Banda and the Malawi Congress Party soon led to a State of Emergency being declared, and Federal troops were moved into Nyasaland, and Banda, together with some other prominent members of the Party were soon arrested and imprisoned in Gwelo in Southern Rhodesia. However, it was not long after this that the British Government had a change of mind over the principle of Federation, and the Colonial Secretary at the

time, Ian MacLeod, insisted on Banda being released, allowing him to take up a post in the Nyasaland Government.

In 1961, I was a uniform Police Officer, and attended on duty a number of meetings at which Banda harangued the 'stupid Federation', the 'stupid police, and the 'stupid' almost everything else that he didn't agree with. But his speeches were obviously set into two very different gears, one for mass gatherings of the African 'man in the bush', while the other was aimed at the more educated audiences of African intellectuals, or the 'man in the street'. The former he treated more as 'his children', and although finding the speeches very repetitious, many of the latter nonetheless appeared influenced by them. And after becoming President, Banda missed no opportunity to hammer home the fact that he was the one to break the 'stupid Federation'.

Inevitably, with pressure on it from within and without, the Federation duly came to an end with the granting of Independence to Nyasaland in 1963. This began with internal self-government being given to the country, with the full panoply of the lowering of the flag ceremony following a year later when Malawi was born. (The name 'Malawi' was actually chosen by Banda himself.)



Called back to his country to assume the role of a figurehead, Banda soon proved to be a very different proposition to what the other political leaders had expected. And although not loved by many of the intelligentsia, he soon obtained grass roots support, particularly in the rural areas and among the ordinary party workers. Inevitably, this led to clashes between Banda and other Malawi Congress Party leaders, who wished to guide the country along the more socialist path that they had planned before his arrival in the country.



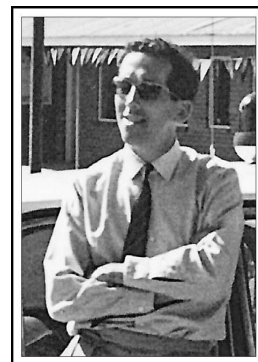
In February 1965, Henry Chipembere attempted to overthrow Banda with a revolution based on his own home area of Fort Johnston, which literally only just 'missed the boat' to success. Chipembere's rag-tag army captured a police station and set off south for the capital Zomba, where he felt, and many later agreed, the majority of senior civil servants and some of the police and army would have supported him. Fortunately for Banda, the Assistant-Superintendent of Fort Johnson

Station (John Burdon), on his way home from a rather late session at a friend's house, bumped into the rebel convoy as it was heading in the opposite direction. The officer

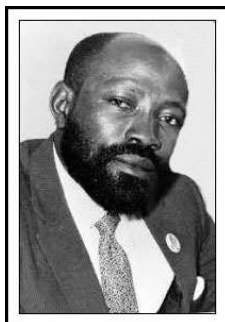
quickly turned his car round, and managed to reach another police station from where he transmitted a warning message to Police Headquarters.

Between the rebel force and the capital lay a river which had to be crossed by a ferry, and it was to this strategic point that a race began, which was narrowly won by a small

contingent of the army. And the soldiers were actually securing the ferry when the rebel army's vehicles pulled up on the opposite side of the river. Again, Banda's own display of bravery (or perhaps bravado) was impressive, when shortly after, I accompanied him (as his personal bodyguard) on a visit to Fort Johnson. There, he addressed a large gathering of many hundreds of people from around the district, and harangued them for 'stupidly following Chipembere', who in the meantime had managed to escape to the USA. Standing on the back of a Land Rover, with only a handful of police nearby, he chided the people as if they were naughty children



But this was not the end of Banda's problems, and some time later another ex-Minister, Yatuta Chisiza (once a trusted colleague and confidant) tried to infiltrate the country with a band of armed rebels. Their defeat almost entered the realms of comic opera, when



following a series of 'accidents', including a violent attack of diarrhoea due to eating raw bananas, their presence in the country was discovered and soldiers of the Malawi Rifles were sent to search for them. Chisiza had actually penetrated the cordon of soldiers when he and his band of rebels stumbled across an army ration truck, which had stopped to allow the cook sergeant to relieve himself. The rebels and the few soldiers soon began a fierce fire fight, expending dozens of rounds without actually hitting anyone. However, the noise was sufficient to allow the main army unit to appear on the scene, which heralded the rebels'

demise. Chisiza himself was shot and killed when he stood up above cover to call on the soldiers to desert Banda and to join him instead.

Banda progressively took on the role of a demagogue, while maintaining the support and hearts of the masses, but without winning the minds of the educated and intelligentsia, particularly the students. He continued to flaunt his association with other African leaders, particularly during their time in London, and being the pragmatist that he was, traded with and to some extent courted a degree of friendship with white-ruled South Africa and Rhodesia. But his policy on these otherwise hated countries (certainly by other black African leaders) was based on simple economics; his communications, by road, rail and air, all pointed south, and his major exports of tea, tobacco, groundnuts and maize had to head that way if he was to earn any foreign exchange. Also, the largest source of foreign exchange earnings at the time of independence, and a substantial source ever since, was the remittances sent home by the many Malawians employed in those countries. This policy also helped in achieving one of his early aims after independence which was to move the capital from Zomba to Lilongwe, situated in the centre of the country, and to change the official name of the language from Chinyanja to Chichewa (as used by his own tribe, the Chewa).

During the early years of independence, Banda encouraged many of the previous colonial civil servants as well as army and police officers, to remain at their posts, but due to his inability to accept anything he regarded as criticism or interference in his basic aims, most found it impossible to continue working there. In time, all the top posts were Africanised,

and even his closest confidant and special advisor, Brian Roberts, who in many ways had acted as a brake on Banda's more impulsive policies, departed. And eventually, Banda's high-handed manner, in dealing with anyone, both Malawian and foreigners, who did not follow his conservative, and as some saw it, stilted way of thinking, caused a decline in his popularity.

On the credit side, his rule saw a steady growth in the economy and foreign investment, and unlike many of the independent countries to the north, the country was kept relatively free from corruption and mismanagement. But there is little doubt that he stayed in power too long and by the time he was overthrown in 1994, he was a very old man (probably nearly one hundred years old) and his departure was both undignified and without honour. But that occurred many years after my departure at the end of 1967, and perhaps in the longer term, and despite his megalomania, his sometimes brutal dealing with opponents, and his need to have everything done 'his way', history will look a little more kindly on Dr. Banda.