

RESISTANCE TO ANGLICAN MISSIONARY CHRISTIANITY ON LIKOMA ISLAND, MALAWI: 1885-1961

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Abstract

In this article, I will highlight the response of the African people of Likoma Island in Malawi to the work carried out by English missionaries from 1885 to 1961. The Anglican Church in Malawi originated from the work of the English missionaries from the Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) at Magomero in Southern Malawi in 1861. The arrival of the missionaries on Likoma Island in 1885 led to changes in the way the local population started to define themselves. By using conceptual themes from James C. Scott and Jean and John Comaroff, I shall highlight the resistance and symbolic interaction between the local communities and the Christian missionaries. On the basis of archival and secondary sources, I shall analyse this interaction critically. In the late 1950s, African opposition to the amalgamation of Southern Rhodesia and Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland intensified. In Malawi, on Likoma Island, resistance to European rule in general tended to coincide with some incipient resistance to the authority of the UMCA, in particular to that of the authority of Bishop Frank Thorne.

1 INTRODUCTION

In this article, I will highlight the response of the African people of Likoma Island in Malawi to the work of English missionaries from

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1885 to 1961. In particular, I will outline briefly some of the hostile aspects of their response to missionary Christianity and how, in turn, the missionaries tried to respond to this hostility. The underlying argument in this essay, therefore, is that the process of planting Christianity was not always a success story; it provoked some resistance. Probing beneath the history of missionary Christianity on Likoma Island uncovers some salient characteristics of the resistance to missionary Christianity. In this respect, and more significantly, I will argue that resistance or protest to Christianity on the Island took many forms, and included coded and symbolic resistance. As will be discussed below, more importantly these acts of protest illustrate not only the character of missionary Christianity, but also the power relations between African traditional religious institutions and practices, and missionary Christianity.

2 TRANSITIONAL PERIOD: MAGOMERO 1861-1884

The Anglican Church in Malawi originated from the work of the English missionaries from the Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) at Magomero in Southern Malawi in 1861. Following the loss of a considerable number of missionaries as a result of poor living conditions and Malaria at Magomero between 1861 and 1862, the mission returned to Malawi, and this time worked on Likoma Island (having left the Island of Zanziabar in 1885).¹

3 EARLY MISSIONARY DAYS ON LIKOMO ISLAND

The arrival of the missionaries on Likoma Island in 1885 led to changes in the way the local population started to define themselves. The missionaries introduced a new and significant dimension to the socio-economic and political life of the local people.² Likewise, in their encounter with the local population, the missionaries found

themselves in a unique role; they had to interact with Africans in many ways and on many levels, notably in the areas of culture, tradition and politics.

When the early English missionaries arrived at Likoma Island they found that the local people held very strong beliefs, regarding witchcraft and sorcery. For instance, there was an established practice of burning those accused of witchcraft at a place called Chiphyela, which literally means the “the burning place”.³ Claiming superiority to African “forces of evil or darkness”, early on during their settlement the missionaries built the first church on the very spot where those accused of witchcraft were burnt.⁴ However, after a short while, sensitive to the fears of the “local people, that the place was haunted by the spirits of *affiti* (witches), the missionaries moved the church to another site”.⁵ Pressure from the local people convinced the missionaries that a change of place was reasonable and indeed practical. This suggests that African people’s fears, or perhaps their respect for the living dead, tended to command more respect than Christianity.

Nor was the process of evangelising the local people itself an easy task. Soon after their arrival, the early evangelists, who were freed slaves (such as Augustine Ambali and Eustace Malisawa) went out into the villages where they preached on the evils of drink and witchcraft.⁶ There was no immediate response to this message.⁷ Except for the most vulnerable members of the society – children, who responded – there was wide indifference; the UMCA then realised it had a long battle ahead; belief in witchcraft continued as it always had done, as did drunkenness.⁸

Yet as James Scott (1994) asserts in his book, *Domination and the arts of resistance: Public and hidden transcripts*,⁹ resistance can be very subtle, and not at all obvious. Its perpetrators will always wish to maintain anonymity for fear of retribution from those in power; sometimes resistance can appear in the form of a symbolic gesture.¹⁰ In this case it becomes difficult to decipher its message.¹¹ During the early years of missionary settlement on Likoma Island, Africans’ reaction to missionary Christianity took various forms and degrees. For instance, on one occasion (in 1898), the missionary, William

Percieval Johnson, is said to have noticed a mother carrying a child on her back using a church liturgical garment, a chasuble,¹² as a tying cloth. The garment had certainly been taken from the mission and was being used for a purpose for which it was not intended.

Taking a missionary object may simply indicate that the woman had certain material needs but similarly may also signify her desperate attempt, symbolically, to assert her identity and new freedom. It may even have been a way of seeking affirmation. Surely the woman must have been aware of the significance of the garment. A chasuble stood for the priest's authority to offer mass. Symbolically, it represented the missionaries' priestly role: the priest "mediates" on behalf of the people of God before God. As Scott notes, embracing anonymity becomes a way of avoiding reprisal. The subjects often assume a conduct or kind of behaviour that is surreptitious, cryptic, encoded in symbols and gestures.¹³ Taking a church garment and using it for a purpose for which it was not intended, was certainly a gesture that would not have met the missionaries' expectations or their approval. These kinds of apparently "trivial" but symbolically significant incidents may well have been numerous during the early days of the missionary settlement.

However, the response of Africans to some aspects of missionary Christianity was not always covert. The reaction of the paramount chief of Likoma, Mataka in 1895, to the subjugation of the Islanders to British colonial power seemingly represented by the missionary settlement, was highly significant. Mataka demanded an explanation from the British governor, Sir Harry Johnston:

Please explain to me in simple terms by what process this island which was mine became yours and these people who are all mine became yours and these people who are all my slaves have now become yours.¹⁴

It is believed that a missionary William Percieval Johnson diplomatically rephrased this for the Colonial British Governor Harry Johnston who merely promised the people that there would be no hut tax if they listened to the advice of the missionaries.¹⁵ Mataka's protest was based on the perception that the missionaries, in

collusion with the colonials, had now taken over power from him and were ruling the Island.

4 IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR: MALIPENGA – A DANCE OF RESISTANCE

The outbreak of the First World War provoked different responses from various quarters in Malawi. While the principal event in Malawi was the rebellion launched by the nationalist and pastor of the Providence Industrial Mission, John Chilembwe in 1915,¹⁶ on Likoma Island the reaction took on a very different character – assertion of local pride and identity over missionary rule and authority.

In 1914 the menfolk of the Island adopted the Malipenga dance. Modelled on the British military brass band,¹⁷ Malipenga was a dance through which the local people sought to assert their pride and identity through songs, one of which ran:

... 1891 tichipangana ndi a Zungo, a Nkhwemba wangako
... meaning: ... when (they) were making negotiations with
Europeans in 1891, V H Nkhwemba was already there.¹⁸

The people saw themselves almost on the same par as the Europeans. By adopting the European dance, the dance was a tool by which they could enhance their pride. They used European symbols to assert their identity; the new symbols gave them a sense of power through which they could claim some sort of social identity equal to that of the Europeans. Through Malipenga they had found a new way of claiming their identity over and above that of the European.

In their work, *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonisation and consciousness in Southern Africa*,¹⁹ the Comaroffs (1995) observed similar patterns of behaviour amongst the Southern African Tswana community in their interaction with the British nonconformist missionaries in South Africa. To assert their identity over the missionaries, the Tswanas borrowed salient European missionary symbols of cultural identity and used them to define their own role.²⁰ Just as the locals at Likoma used Malipenga, a dance modelled on the British

brass military band, to assert their identity, so the Southern Tswana borrowed symbols and signs from the nonconformist missionaries, not only to affirm their identity but also to oppose the missionaries.

However, the immediate context of this development on Likoma Island was the longstanding effect of the usurping of the civil authority of traditional leadership on the African tribal authorities by a missionary, A B Glossop. Since 1896, Glossop had ruled Likoma Island as a quasi-colonial state on behalf of the colonial seat situated 500 miles away in Zomba.²¹ Needless to say, not all chiefs were happy to lose their civil power. Indeed there were a number who resented Glossop's activities of interfering in the civil rule of the Island's traditional leaders.²²

There were other aspects of African religious cultural belief and tradition that were to pose a sustained challenge to missionary Christianity on Likoma Island. They subverted the European symbol of military triumph, refashioned it and gave it their own meaning and, more importantly, used it for the purpose of asserting their identity over that of the Europeans. This was a novel form of resistance at a time when the Europeans were entrenching their power.

5 THE THREAT OF THE *MCHAPE* MEDICINE SELLERS

Between 1932 and 1933 young men dressed in white were selling a liquid medicine, which they claimed would cure diseases and not only protect people against sorcery, but also "cleanse" (kuchapa, hence *Mchape*) the country of witchcraft.²³ The medicine sellers achieved remarkable success amongst the non-Christian communities and managed to spread their influence in some Christian communities as well, notably Likoma Island.²⁴ One of the agents of *Mchape* operated on Likoma Island, the very centre of Anglicanism in Malawi. About half of the population acquired the medicine, and were consequently subjected to church discipline.²⁵ In an effort to combat the *Mchape* Movement, the ministry of the African clergy proved very effective. Deacon Crispo Machili was sent to preach against *Mchape*, after an

attempt by the missionary priest, Father Arthur Douglas provoked angry muttering from the congregation.²⁶

In his sermon, Machili charged that to drink *Mchape* medicine involved two fundamental errors: disobeying the church's commands to give up *ufiti* and confessing to *Mchape* rather than a priest.²⁷ The strong opposition of Archdeacon Glossop led to the stoning of his house and police were summoned from Nkhotakota.²⁸ *Mchape* sellers confronted missionary Christians on the whole issue of spiritual power. At Unangu, the battle between the local priest, Yohana Abdallah and Chief Kalanje for spiritual allegiance, lasted for ten years until the priest's death.²⁹ At Khobwe, where Father Leonard Kangati was priest-in-charge, two men who were disillusioned by sorcery and the claims of sorcerers subsequently turned to Christianity.³⁰

However, the positive response of African Anglicans to *Mchape* on the Island suggests that missionary Christianity simply could not provide solutions for the problems of witchcraft and sorcery. For instance, it was the assistant priest, Lawrence Chisui, who had to exhort the people to remember their Baptism and Confirmation vows, which obliged them not to participate in anything associated with sorcery.³¹ As Stuart says, Christianity succeeded in suppressing some of the external manifestations of Chewa sorcery, but it did not have the same success in ending the material causes of *ufiti* (witchcraft). Many felt it necessary to continue in the old manner.³² As Stuart concludes: "Like boils on the skin, the *Mchape* and *Chikanga* (Movements) during their short life spans gave notice of invisible flaws beneath the superficial calm of the Anglican corpus."³³

6 THE IMPACT OF THE SOCIO-POLITICAL TRANSITIONAL PERIOD OF AFRICA 1950s-1960s

By the early 1950s it still seemed that the stability created by decades of Anglican missionary work on Likoma Island was invincible. Yet by the mid-1950s this no longer seemed to be the case. From 1950 African resistance to missionary Christianity

focused on the structures of the UMCA. On 12 January 1951, a riot broke out (over food) at St Andrew's Theological College on Likoma Island.³⁴ The students called for the resignation of the warden, Fr Edward Maycock.³⁵ Negotiations led to granting the students leave in June of that year.³⁶ The students were scheduled to be back in February the following year.³⁷ Yet this was a mere undercurrent in the steadily mounting waves of resistance. Scott claims that underlying symbolic statements such as, in this case, dissatisfaction with meals, point to a deeper issue of discontent. In short, it was a challenge to authority.

7 THE ROLE OF LIKOMA CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION

During the late 1950s, African opposition to the amalgamation of Southern Rhodesia and Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland intensified in those territories.³⁸ In Malawi, on Likoma Island, resistance to European rule in general tended to coincide with some incipient resistance to the authority of the UMCA, in particular to the authority of Bishop Frank Thorne. Initially, this resistance appeared in the activities of the committee called the Likoma Christian Association, which was responsible for the renovation of St Peter's Cathedral. Under the chairmanship of N Kayawa, the Likoma Christian Association had connections with Likomans working as far away as the Zambian Copper mines in Ndola.³⁹

The association, which was covertly influenced by the nationalist movement of the Malawi Congress Party, became a strong force on Likoma Island.⁴⁰ Against these developments, Bishop Thorne took the position that a Christian must not engage in activities of a political nature.⁴¹ Against the advice of their bishop, the leaders of the movement used boycotting as a tool to resist the authority of Bishop Thorne, especially when they felt that their requests, sometimes their ultimatums, to the bishop or his representative, Father Gerard Hadow on Likoma Island, were simply ignored.⁴² No doubt the impulse arising from the opposition to the Federation enhanced the activities of the Likoma Christian Association. In 1959, two Anglican

clergymen, Fathers Oswald D Chisa and Habil M Chipembere, were arrested for their opposition to the Federation.⁴³

Despite his speeches, which gave the impression that he supported the political aspirations of the Africans, the Africans did not spare Thorne from criticism – that he was on the side of the “oppressor”.⁴⁴ Moreover, despite the perception that the white Anglican clergy and lay mission workers were on the side of the Federation, the Anglican Church in the eyes of the emerging nationalist movement, was seen as a legacy of colonial rule.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s visit to Likoma Island in 1955 provided an occasion for the Africans to criticise certain aspects of Thorne’s administration. Following the Archbishop’s speech, the leaders of the Likoma Christian Association presented him with a petition.⁴⁶ The petition was in the form of a memorandum, a litany of grievances against Bishop Thorne and the UMCA as an institution. These included an indictment that Bishop Thorne allowed the cathedral, the hospital and other mission institutions to become rundown and that he had sold the church-owned steamer, the Chauncy Maples. Thus they asserted:

Mindful of financial poverty of his Diocese, but having a strong desire to run headquarters – Likoma, he transferred Saint Michael’s College from Likoma to Malosa, thence to Malindi. Once again St Andrew’s College from Nkhwazi in Likoma to Makulawe thence to Lusaka in Northern Rhodesia, while at the same time demolishing the fine buildings of these colleges. The people of the Islands – Likoma and Chizumulu – are medically neglected. The hospital which was well equipped in everything is now bare. All medicines, equipment, etc, have been transferred to Malindi, his potential headquarters, leaving Likoma Hospital with just a few medicines, and people are paying an exorbitant fee for the attendances.⁴⁷

The nature of the criticisms suggests that by this time the Africans had come to regard missionary institutions as an integral part of their life on the Island to the extent that they could not do without them.

However, in a more personal attack, they claimed that Bishop Thorne “brooks no opposition, nor advice”. They then went on to object to the formation of the Province of Central Africa on the basis that they had not been consulted as had been the case with the political Federation of Northern and Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland.⁴⁸ They feared that if the Province of Central Africa went ahead the African clergy and laity would further be discriminated against.

More seriously, they went on to threaten secession if their grievances were not addressed. Thus they asserted, “We should not be held responsible for chaos which may lead to schism within Nyasaland Diocese because we cannot cooperate with the leaders whose aims are destructive.”⁴⁹ They then went on to highlight the plight of the laity and African clergy. Perhaps in the most scathing attack on the leadership of the local church the leaders of the association charged:

Nyasaland Diocese in its constitution does not permit laity to attend Diocesan Synod, whereas the other three sister dioceses do allow ... as in Nyasaland diocese the African clergy earn a smallest money that is hardly earned by any of the clergy in the other three diocese.⁵⁰

There are a few interesting observations to be made here. The decline of Likoma as the headquarters of Anglicanism in Malawi was attributed to Bishop Thorne personally. The seat of once unrivalled missionary colonial rule and religious pride had seen the gradual shifting of power. More significantly, the tone and nature of the grievances seemed to have been calculated to influence the “dismissal” of Frank Thorne. It seemed that, in their minds, the people associated the decline of the mission with Thorne’s administration. No decision was taken for Thorne’s immediate “firing” but indirect pressure put on him from the UMCA office in London made him resign from his post six years later.

By the late 1960s the activities of the Likoma Christian Association had gathered such drive that it seemed to be obstructing the normal operation of the church on the island. Significantly, it seemed some clergy were using it to attain their goals in the church. For instance, on 9 December 1960, the leaders of the Association wrote a letter

reminding the bishop of the promise to send three priests to Likoma. They went on to say:

We have waited for too long since you promised to consider making arrangements for the priests... although some think that boycotting the church is not a weapon to be used by Christians but we still feel that it is right weapon to use wherever negotiations fail.⁵¹

Unfortunately, towards the end of Thorne's episcopate exchanges like this became more personal in nature and had less to do with official business. For instance, the Likoma Christian Association from the Island of Chizumulu petitioned the bishop, complaining that the priest-in-charge, Father Hadow, had forced them to go for confessions. Briefly, the case of Father John Bai (an assistant priest who was forced to go for confession) and the Likoma Christian Association on the one hand, and Bishop Thorne and Father Hadow on the other, illustrates the internal tension prevailing in the church at this stage. Father John Bai clandestinely used the Likoma Association to attain his personal ambitions in the church.⁵² On the other hand, Father Hadow, scared of upsetting both parties, perceived Father Bai as a bad influence on the Likoma Christians, and asked the bishop to use his authority to threaten Father Bai with a transfer.⁵³

During his very last years in office Thorne's ministry faced one challenge after another. The politicised Likoma Christian Association hatched a plan to boycott Thorne's last ordination ceremony before he retired in 1961.⁵⁴ Despite the fact that the plan was botched, the action reflected the changing times.⁵⁵ Such a bold action could never have been conceived in the previous years. It signified the shift in power from the missionaries to the Africans. This development was encouraged by certain changes in the political arena, which spilled over into religion.

Finally, the period between the aftermath of Thorne's retirement and the time of preparing for the election of Thorne's successor faced another challenge. Claiming to represent the majority of the African Anglicans, on 4 May 1961, Father Mattiya Msekawanthu of Soche

Parish in Blantyre wrote a letter to all the bishops of the Central African Province protesting against the bishops' tendency to elect a bishop on behalf of the diocese.⁵⁶ Father Msekwanthu continued to argue that:

Reverend Fathers as you perfectly know that this time we are living is a very difficult time. Our Christians are broad-minded and have the right to speak ... [I] have heard of my fellow African Christians saying they would like Michael Scott to be their new bishop because they saw him and studied his heart as if to follow the sacred heart of Our Lord who died on the cross to serve sinners and outcasted creatures.⁵⁷

Apparently the majority of African Anglicans, through Msekwanthu, were protesting against not being consulted in matters pertaining to the candidate for the position of a bishop. The sentiments in the letter illustrate a measure of maturity and therefore responsibility on the part of the Africans in such a very important matter, a matter that directly affected their welfare. The Africans now felt that they were almost on a par with their European counterparts and were therefore able to debate with them on the same footing.

8 CONCLUSION

In this discussion, I have highlighted the response of the African people to certain aspects of missionary Christianity on Likoma Island from 1885 to 1961. What has become clear is that missionary Christianity contained certain weaknesses to which the Africans responded with both passive resistance and active protest. In particular, the pretensions of Christianity to spiritual superiority were challenged by the claims of the *Mchape* movement, thereby exposing the vulnerability of missionary Christianity. Chief Mataka's direct protest to the colonial governor's speech would suggest that missionary Christianity could not stand alone and had to operate in close alliance with a colonial power. The adoption of the Malipenga dance as a tool of self-assertion, like the woman's "stealing" of the chasuble, suggests not only the complex nature of missionary

domination, but also the subtlety of African resistance. On the other hand, the fact that active resistance to the UMCA occurred at the same time as political resistance to the colonial regime (in the 1950s and 1960s) suggests that the mission was closely allied, in the minds of the local people, with the colonial government.

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ENDNOTES

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- 2 The missionaries introduced a rudimentary economic system; a currency and a bank system run by the African Lakes Corporation. The mission also operated as the centre of some business. See Hine, J, *Days gone by*, London: John Murray, 1924.
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- 6 Ambali, A, *Thirty years in Nyasaland*, London: UMCA, 1931, 9; Stuart, R.G., "Mchape and the UMCA 1933", A Paper presented to the Conference on The Religious Systems, Lusaka, Zambia, August 30 to 8 September, 1972, 6. National Archives, Zomba.
- 7 Ambali, op cit, 9.
- 8 "Mchape and the UMCA 1933", 6.
- 9 Scott, J, *Domination and the arts of resistance: Public and hidden transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.
- 10 Ibid, 19.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Johnson, W P, *My African reminiscences, 1875-1895*, London: UMCA, 1924, 102; A chasuble is a liturgical garment worn by priests in the Anglican or Roman Catholic Church when they celebrate mass or Holy Communion.
- 13 Scott, op cit, 19.
- 14 *Days Gone By*, 99.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 For further details on this episode, see *Report of the Commission to inquire into the Native rising within the Nyasaland Protectorate*, 6819. National Archives of Malawi, Zomba; Shepperson, G & Price, T, *Independent African, John Chilembwe and the origins, and setting and significance of the Nyasaland native rising of 1915*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1958, 46-47. See also Mwase, G S., *Strike a blow and die*, Harvard: University Press, 1967, 12.
- 17 Linyama, S, Perceptions of Identity See Linyama, S W C "Perceptions of Identity: The Case of Likoma Island 1885-1955." History Seminar Paper presented at Chancellor College, Zomba (1885), Malawiana Collection, Chancellor College, Library.
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- 44 File L-II/1/4/1 UMCA 1950. National Archives, Zomba, Malawi.
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- 51 A letter written by S.N. Kayawa, President of the Likoma Christian Association to the Right Reverend Lord Bishop of Nyasaland, Frank Thorne, 9/12/60. Archives of the Anglican Diocese of Southern Malawi, Malosa, Zomba; File A/L-1.
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- 53 Ibid.
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