

# THE TRAINING OF THE AFRICAN CLERGY IN THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF NYASALAND (MALAWI) 1861-1920s

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## *Abstract*

In this article I outline the development of the training of African clergy during the course of the history of the Anglican Church in the Nyasaland Diocese. The period under review is 1861 to the 1920s. From 1864 up until the 1920s, the training of clergy went through four phases: the experimental stage at Magomero, the foundational phase in Zanzibar, the intermediate stage in the Lake Nyasa Region and, finally, the more permanent stage on Likoma Island. It will be argued that undergirding this process was the Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) and its conservative educational policy that tended to serve not only entirely religious purposes but also social missionary interests of racial superiority.

## 1 THE EXPERIMENTAL STAGE – STAGE 1

### 1.1 Magomero: Early experiments in training African clergy

The Anglican Church in Malawi owes its origins to the work of the English missionaries of the UMCA who started their work in 1861 under Bishop Charles Fredrick Mackenzie.<sup>1</sup> Training was initiated for twenty-five boys, mostly freed slaves; this training essentially entailed the most elementary education in alphabet and drill.<sup>2</sup> Students included Chirumba, who was baptised as Mark Augustine Mackenzie Meller in England and subsequently sent to Mauritius; and Chimwala – described as “most hopeful” and “a bright, energetic lad” – who was taught the art of printing in

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Zululand and who, it was thought, could go to the Shire Highlands if prompted to do so.<sup>3</sup> Other students included Chinsoro and Sambani.<sup>4</sup>

However, after a period of settlement of one year, and the experience of a considerable loss of English missionary life due to malaria and poor living conditions at Magomero during 1861, the missionaries relocated to Zanzibar, East Africa, in August 1863.<sup>5</sup> This is how they expressed their experience:

Bishop Tozer, after prolonged personal survey of the work on the Shire, determined upon a different method of pursuing the work, but it was all one work. He and Dr Steere made up their minds that the best way in the end would not be to attack the interior directly as before, but by a gradual process, slower and more sure.

Native teachers must be trained and educated at some central spot. When this had been accomplished, the work would not have to depend on the lives of a handful of white men to whom the climate had hitherto proved so disastrous.<sup>6</sup>

The tragic consequences of the Magomero experience compelled the UMCA to be more cautious and more patient. More importantly, they had to revise their methodological approach – now they insisted that Africans rather than Europeans accept greater responsibility for the evangelising of the African people.

## 2 FOUNDATION PHASE – PHASE 2

### 2.1 Training of freed slaves in Zanzibar

Zanzibar and inland East Africa, known today as Tanzania, presented the UMCA with different dynamics of mission work. The first school that the UMCA established in 1864 was raised to the status of a theological college. The most striking feature of this training was that the early converts and students were mostly freed slaves. Their experience at Magomero in the preceding years had prompted the UMCA to review its missionary policy and strategy and, by 1869, the college was preparing three freed slaves, namely George Farajallah, John Sedi and Mabaruk, for ministry.<sup>7</sup>

While previously they stressed the use of English missionaries as evangelists, now they began to emphasise that Africans themselves must be evangelists to other Africans.<sup>8</sup> This, however, brought about a reaction that seemed to stem from a general anti-European tendency which, apparently, was largely a result of earlier attempts to transform the material conditions of Africans – an experiment that appeared to have gone wrong at Magomero. Now the missionaries stressed Africanisation as opposed to “wholesale” Europeanisation. This is how the fourth missionary bishop, Charles Smythies, expressed this principle in 1885:

Our desire is to distinguish clearly between Christianity and Europeanising. It is not our business to make Africans bad caricatures of the Englishmen. We want to Christianise them in their own civil and political conditions, to help them to develop a Christian civilisation suited to their own climate and circumstances. For instance, we do not allow in our schools to wear any European clothing. It is not our business to encourage the trade in boots by spoiling the feet of Africans for their climate. That seems to be what caused in the minds of many Englishmen a sort of feeling against missions because they see so many of our poor country whose sole idea of perfection with regard to the things of life in that they must be much European as possible.<sup>9</sup>

More significantly, this general anti-Europeanising attitude adopted by the UMCA also related to their attitude regarding African education. Perhaps because of their largely rural base of operation where the masses were illiterate, the UMCA adopted a very conservative stance towards African education. A third UMCA bishop, Edward Steere, expressed this attitude when he said that “something of English was not a blessing but a curse to an African boy”.<sup>10</sup> Yet Steere’s statement can better be appreciated when read in the light of his speech at Oxford when he said: “But when you come to begin with the actual pupils, you will see that it is not a work of few years, but rather, as life is in Africa, of several lifetimes.”<sup>11</sup>

Education with an emphasis on English competence for an African was regarded as not good for Africans on the grounds that the European form of progress (civilisation) in Africa was seen as moving at a very slow pace. This became a general principle that governed missionary education for Africans. Another early, and important, feature of this

training was that, having considered the social conditions of the Africans, the UMCA decided to experiment first with lower forms of ministry for the Africans as a springboard that could afterwards be used for higher forms of ministry. For instance, the second UMCA bishop, George Tozer, argued that Africans should be placed in a subordinate ministry while “more responsible posts” should be entrusted to English missionaries, since, in his view, the Africans had just broken ties with heathenism.<sup>12</sup> Thus the missionaries defined the social position of Africans in the mission not so much on the basis of their intellectual acumen, but rather on their socio-cultural and religious conditions of “heathenism”.

Consequently Tozer revived the mediaeval office of sub-deacon in 1870.<sup>13</sup> In 1877, Tozer’s successor, Steere, introduced the office of catechist.<sup>14</sup> Effectively, a catechist was a teacher. John Illiffe described the function and the role of the evangelist/teacher/catechist as follows:

His ministry was new, especially developed for the African situation, stressing on rapid evangelisation among the young. His primary role involved being a village school teacher – teaching religion and the three R’s spiced by singing and drill for amusement. The School served as a place for worship as well. The duties of the Catechist included observing the hours of ringing the bell seven times a day, doing pastoral visits and visiting those who missed school and taking the congregation to the mission to receive the sacraments.<sup>15</sup>

A catechist was, in fact, a cornerstone of the missionary priesthood. It would appear that the office of a reader was also introduced during this time; until then, the two offices seemed at times to have been used concurrently. Having been prepared by Kiungani College, John Swedi, George Farajallah and Mbaruku were admitted by Tozer in 1870 to the office of sub-deacon on the Feast of the Purification, with a special service devised “from ancient sources”.<sup>16</sup>

The period between 1870 and 1890 appears to have been a boom period with regard to African training and ministry in the UMCA in Zanzibar. Fully utilising these offices, Africans in Zanzibar like Yohana Abdallah and Augustine Ambali, who were working alongside European superintendents, developed their potential to the degree that they could now work almost with very minimum supervision from whites.<sup>17</sup> Significantly the introduction of lower forms of ministry for Africans must

thus be seen as emanating directly from the realisation of Tozer's vision of initiating African ministry through "a gradual process, slower but more sure".

### 3 INTERMEDIATE PHASE – PHASE 3

#### 3.1 Around Lake Nyasa Region (Malawi)

The arrival of William Percieval Johnson and Chauncy Maples in Zanzibar in 1876 marked an important step with respect to the training and development of the African clergy in the UMCA.<sup>18</sup> In 1885, with African evangelists Yohana Barnaba Abdallah, Augustine Ambali, Eustace Malisawa and others, William Percieval Johnson began laying the foundations of the modern Anglican Church in the region to the east of Lake Malawi and, eventually, on Likoma Island.<sup>19</sup> They had been sent by Charles Smythies, the fourth missionary bishop of the UMCA, operating from Zanzibar, which practically made Likoma a mission station of Zanzibar at this stage. Abdallah was in deacon orders while Ambali and Malisawa were evangelists. Essentially these men had to impart literacy instructions and, as evangelists, they preached so as to convert.

In June Archdeacon Maples and Mr Johnson they asked, who will go to Chia to start work there; and we were four teachers and we all refused to go for we were afraid of the Ngoni, fierce men in those times ... So we were feared and were coward, and for a week we refuse to go with Mr Johnson to mainland and wanted to run away but we could not. But afterwards I considered myself and I went to Archdeacon Maples and told him that I am willing to go to Chia and I consented to go, and he was very glad.<sup>20</sup>

At this stage the theological college had not yet been built in Malawi; instead, training was largely undertaken while on the job. This made training of the African clergy during these early years largely informal in nature, with teacher and students interacting on a more personal level. This is how one of the teachers at this time, Augustine Ambali, narrated the early experience of teaching:

When we started school we had not anything to teach the boys with, no ABC cards, no book of any kind, and we took to writing

ABC cards on the skin of a goat, and we cut out letters in an old paper and pasted them on pieces of a box which we had pulled to pieces and we had some numerals, too; and we had no house to make school in and we taught the boys under the trees.<sup>21</sup>

Owing to the scarcity of teaching aids, innovation was not only a necessity: it was encouraged in the local context. It also effectively illustrates the initiative of the African clergy to teach against great odds.

While on long preaching tours, trudging through the length and breadth of the vast Lake Malawi Region, often in the company of Abdallah, Ambali and Malisawa, Johnson would give his students some elementary lessons on ministry, theology and preaching.<sup>22</sup> It was in this manner that Abdallah learnt his Greek.<sup>23</sup> However, this sort of training was also mutual. On these tours, Johnson took the opportunity to learn about some African dialects from his African students – the knowledge of which subsequently enabled him to translate the New Testament into Cinyanja.<sup>24</sup>

Equally important was Johnson's regular consultations with his students on certain aspects of African culture, and on how some of these elements were in fact incompatible with Christian obligations. As a result of these lessons on African culture and tradition, Johnson developed his concept of the church as a "tribe".<sup>25</sup> UMCA ideals and virtues of simplicity were impressed upon these early African evangelists. They were not encouraged to imitate the European style of life or habits.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps as a way of practising the virtue of simplicity, their wearing of shoes was discouraged.

### 3.2 Training on Lake Malawi

In 1899, largely under the influence of Johnson, the newly established Diocese of Likoma (subsequently called Nyasaland) acquired a steamer. Strategically, Johnson planned the steamer as a multi-purpose facility, with features such as a church and a classroom curtained off from a chapel – a training ground for African clergy.<sup>27</sup> The advantages of this arrangement were obvious: being mobile and out of reach of the most feared Nguni warrior tribe of *Magwangwara*, the boat would be a safer place of refuge than a permanent station on the land and, being self-contained, it acted both as a place of worship and a place of learning. Once again Johnson was almost solely responsible for training the African

clergy. By this time, out of long experience of village ministry with the trainees, Johnson had developed a handbook, or manual, for pastoral work. He called it a “crambook” and it was used as an alternative to the official handbook.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the crambook was widely used by the clergy, in preference to the official manual.<sup>29</sup>

Sallying forth along the shores of Lake Malawi on its itinerate schedule, the steamer would drop off a teacher or a priest to put into practice the lessons learnt on the steamer. This is how Johnson described the character of the steamer:

But the Chauncy Maples – well, you have not lived in her. She is our substitute (1) for railways where there are none; (2) an island in a by no means peaceful country; (3) a bit of England, where we can live as Englishmen, and work as and with natives, and where, with due submission, I hope the English flag will fly; (4) a newspaper, a correspondent, and a printing press in one; (5) last, but not least, a training ground for priests and teachers.<sup>30</sup>

Sentimentally it seems Johnson strongly desired capturing something of the “progressive” spirit of the industrial revolution current in England, where the power of technology and machinery seemed to rule the day. Yet, despite the interesting innovation, the idea of training African clergy on a lake seemed impractical. Again this is how Augustine Ambali described his experience on the steamer:

For eight years I was deacon under Archdeacon Johnson ... I never saw in all my life a man like him. And after eight years Archdeacon asked me to educate on board C.M. for one year ... But we could not educate there well, and the reason is this that we are not seamen: the lake is very rough and there are motions everyday. And there is no private place on the C.M. for our meditations and prayers, and much noise of people and too much waves rolling, rolling always and we were very ill often.<sup>31</sup>

Obviously Ambali’s experience suggests that, as an environment conducive to training, the steamer was not appropriate, as the unstable weather conditions on the lake, exacerbated by the noise of the crew, disturbed the much-sought peace needed for the discipline of prayer. Ambali aptly highlighted the fundamental weakness of ship-board training

on Lake Malawi. Yet, in spite of his criticism, it needs to be recognised that Johnson left an indelible personal mark on his students through his close interaction with them while, at the same time, respecting them highly and being especially fond of Ambali. In his autobiography Ambali refers on several occasions to the close relationship that prevailed, and was enjoyed, between himself and Johnson.<sup>32</sup>

While this single-handed staff approach to the African ministry might have provided a more personal and close interaction between the students and their trainer, it also had inherent weaknesses. The students were deprived, for instance, of the privilege of experiencing the kind of diversity of views associated with being in a multi-staff environment. Students taught without the benefits of diversity could become inflexible and stereotyped in their views. Indeed, in comparison to the Roman Catholic missions, both Sundkler<sup>33</sup> and Hastings<sup>34</sup> noted that single-handed staff colleges in the Protestant missions were one of their weaknesses from the 1960s, and through the decades. Nonetheless, the bad experiences of Ambali and other students on the steamer ended when St Michael's College was established at Khobwe in 1900.

#### **4 LAST PHASE – ST MICHAEL'S AND ST ANDREW'S COLLEGES: LIKOMA ISLAND**

##### **4.1 The theological college as the “bishop’s familia”**

As asserted above, African training for the ministry tended to be undergirded by two factors: the ideological assumptions underlying the missionary policy of the UMCA, and the nature of the evolution of power within the traditional Episcopal form of ministry. As Sundkler noted, the pattern and mode of theological training prevailing in the Anglican Church in the 1960s closely followed ancient lines. In Malawi, so Sundkler asserted, training commenced when the ordinand, or trainee, was received into the “bishop’s family”.<sup>35</sup> In accordance with this arrangement, the bishop took the paternal role of a “father” while the ordinands were regarded as his “sons”. However, this understanding of training was not peculiar to Malawi. Writing from a South African context in 1977, Michael Nuttal also noted that training in the Anglican Church there had been influenced by the principle of “bishop’s familia”.<sup>36</sup> The similarity in their approach to theological training could be explained by the fact that the two missionary agencies, the UMCA working in Malawi and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in South Africa, shared very closely the Anglo-Catholic tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Oxford movement.

Yet it was a conservative attitude to African education and training – to which was also added missionary caution – that characterised missionary education and training. In their perception, Africans needed a longer time to train before they were ordained as clergy. This is how a missionary described the stages of education and training in the UMCA:

After reaching a proper standard in school, a boy must pass to St Michael’s for his teacher’s certificate, taking two years; then, after experience in the village schools, to the Chauncy Maples, and finally at St Andrew’s he may pass stages, leading eventually to the priesthood.<sup>37</sup>

The creation of such a long system tended to be based on the perception that Africans needed a long time to develop as their social conditions tended to hinder their elevation. Implied was the argument that the ministry entailed power that was often associated with white missionaries whose access had to be carefully guarded against Africans. The *Central African Planter* put this view clearly when it wrote: “The fact is no native can, or will for many years to come be able to fulfil even in a moderate degree, the place of a European.”<sup>38</sup>

In *What we do in Nyasaland*, Mills gave insight into some of the characteristic features and life at St Andrew’s College between 1905 and

1910. The students, former graduates of St Michael's, had to spend three years in training before they could be released to do fieldwork, normally under a white priest or other missionaries, as well as African priests, who also kept a close eye over them.<sup>39</sup> If they did well they would then go back to complete another two years before they could be ordained priests. At this stage there were two grades of students.<sup>40</sup> There were those who were approved for the office of reader.<sup>41</sup> These came for a period, more of a retreat than scholastic training.<sup>42</sup> They read a simple course in theology and undertook some New Testament work.<sup>43</sup>

The second category comprised those who had proved themselves useful and trustworthy in the office of reader and who now were being "tested" for the holy order of deacon.<sup>44</sup> Even in these cases no pledge was made to ordain them; the Principal had to report to the Bishop as to whether he considered that they showed real signs of a vocation.<sup>45</sup> The routine was centred very much on a rhythm of prayer – saying daily offices in chapel. Mills noted that the standard was not very high.<sup>46</sup> Notes were given mostly by dictation in the vernacular, which meant that the tutor had to spend longer hours to keep pace with his slow learners.<sup>47</sup> Despite the fact that the English language was the key to Western progress, not very much of it was taught.<sup>48</sup>

Emphasis was laid on the Life of Our Lord Jesus, especially the parables, the major books of the Old Testament and the psalms.<sup>49</sup> Ascetic studies, pastoral work and serving at Mass also constituted an important aspect of the programme. In their tests, the students were expected to reproduce what they had been taught to ensure that they understood the content of the lecturers.<sup>50</sup> The students lived a village lifestyle; they had to grow their own food and were not encouraged to wear shoes.<sup>51</sup> Discipline constituted the core of college life.

The Principal, who was also the tutor, was the priest-in-charge as well. He was responsible for the pastoral care of the students and their families, as the college was his parish.<sup>52</sup> He gave his regular reports to the bishop on the progress and conduct of the students, and the decision on whether or not to ordain them also rested with him. The content of the report ranged from the performance of the student in class, serving the priest in the college chapel and sacristy work, to discipline in the homes and the behaviour and conduct of his wife and children – including whether or not they were noisy in chapel or at Sunday school.<sup>53</sup> It was a rigid system of training where surveillance of students was a characteristic feature.

Again Henry Chipembere recalled that during the time when his father was training at St Andrew's Theological College in the 1930s, the atmosphere of "fear of a bad report" pervaded the college. This is how he put it:

... this fear of a bad report were general throughout the society in and around the mission, it was at its highest among the students of theological college and their families. A "report" could lead to elimination from the course, and such a report could be based on the student's performance and conduct or on the behaviour of his wife and children or his relationship with both his family and his colleagues. Consequently, each student made sure that his wife and children did nothing that would bring him a bad report. Their whole behaviour had to conform to the pattern and standards laid down by the missionaries. They had to be regular and diligent churchgoers, respectful toward authority, and humble in every way.<sup>54</sup>

Thus conformity to a system and subservience to authority became critical elements by which the African clergy earned the approval of the missionaries. Yet, the most fundamental distinguishing factor in missionary education remained the policy on the medium of instruction. Unlike the Scottish mission of Livingstonia that advocated a fairly liberal education with systematic teaching of the English language,<sup>55</sup> the UMCA took a very conservative approach.

Significantly, the rise of John Chilembwe<sup>56</sup> during the War in 1915 demonstrated the conservative character of Anglican missionary education with regard to the Africans. During the enquiry into the rising, A M Jenkins of Likwenu was asked if "[t]hey [UMCA] taught English?" to which he responded, "No, chiefly Cinyanja". When further asked, "So far as you are aware, the natives are perfectly satisfied as to their condition?" he responded saying, "Yes ... I have not heard any complaints." Likewise, writing in the 1970s, Henry Chipembere, the son of a priest by the name of Habil Chipembere, reported that during the days when his father was at school, in the 1920s, "it was punishable misbehaviour to be heard speaking English".<sup>57</sup>

A missionary working in 1919, A B Hand, justified the UMCA position in the following manner: "We are a religious body, not educationalists" and

then went on to declare that "... the UMCA (does) not want to advance the education beyond a certain point generally. Boys are apt to get swollen through over education and were consequently spoilt."<sup>58</sup> In other words, the UMCA missionaries saw themselves as advancing "spiritual" rather than "secular" work. More significantly, the tendency to justify the provision of little English education for the Africans on the pretext that Africans would be too proud implied that the missionaries believed that, if Africans acquired better English knowledge, they would then not respect the white man by treating him almost as if he were his equal. In this respect, education tended to serve the ideological interests of white racial supremacy. Thus the 1920s marked a chapter which would, in 1924, lead to another milestone, the Phelps-Stokes Commission on Education: an issue that demands fuller consideration in another context.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

Several factors determined the process and course of training of the African clergy in the Diocese of Nyasaland from 1861 until the 1920s, namely the experience of disasters and failure at Magomero, the availability of the freed slaves in Zanzibar and Johnson's strategy in Nyasaland. However, the underlying, conservative UMCA policy that discouraged the Europeanisation of African life determined the pace and character of African training. It was a policy loaded with ideological interests that, in effect, served to define the social horizons of the Africans in the missionary social structures for the next decade.

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