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THE FORMAL SCHOOL
AS A TRADITIONAL INSTITUTION IN AN
UNDERDEVELOPED SOCIETY :
THE CASE OF NORTHERN MALAWI

by STEPHEN P. HEYNEMAN, Chicago

Mahara mbogha (ndi wogha),
ukwiza sima yamala. (1)

Tumbuka proverb

This paper will discuss in a historical context the cultural milieu surrounding the primary school. The Northern Region of Malawi (2) was selected because of its unusual educational history and its isolation from intervening modernizing variables such as industry or plantation agriculture.

The hypothesis here arrived at is that in certain circumstances, instead of being a « western » institution, foreign to the culture of economically primitive areas, the primary school may have become internalized within the local society. Instead of assuming the existence of a « western » tradition, it may now be necessary to distinguish between levels, types, and the social context of schools when attaching labels. It may, in fact, be more instructive to think of the primary school as a tradition, analogous to apprenticeship and assumed as part of a normal training experience.

One caveat, however, must be made before proceeding any further. Without field research on this question, the hypothesis may well appear unproved. Indeed it is. The purpose here is simply to state it, to reason it out, and to mold it into a plausible framework.

* * *

Contrary to an accepted notion of school diffusion and development according to which high rates of primary education are

(1) « Wisdom is like a mushroom, it comes when porridge (food) is finished ».

(2) Malawi was between 1891 and 1963 known as Nyasaland.

associated with urbanity, population density, or high degrees of economic activity (1), primary education in Malawi concentrated disproportionately in what became the least populated, least developed, most isolated of geographical areas. Following the call of David Livingstone, missionaries of the United Free Church of Scotland established headquarters at Bandawe on the far northwestern shore of Lake Nyasa in 1881. Disease and tribal conflict forced them in 1884 to move to what is now known as Livingstonia, and it was from this settlement, far in the North on the 3,000 foot high Mt. Waller that what has come to be regarded as one of the most extraordinary case examples of social change disseminated.

The missionaries of the United Free Church of course were not the sole organization operating in Nyasaland. Three hundred miles more to the south the Church of Scotland in 1876 established Blantyre mission, named after Livingstone's birthplace. The South African Dutch Reformed Church established a mission at Nkhoma in 1889, the Catholic White Fathers established the Likuni and the Marist Fathers the Nguludi Missions in 1902. In addition, the Zambezi Industrial and the Nyasa Baptist Industrial Missions set up their headquarters at Blantyre in 1892.

The Scottish Free Church, however, differed from the other missionary efforts in two ways. Led by Dr. Robert Laws and a number of unusually progressive personalities, its missionaries seemed more likely to expect African participation and eventual administration of church activities. Secondly, rather than the simple vocational or catechetical courses which other missions considered the limit of « native » capabilities, the curriculum content emphasized highly skilled or academic tasks (2). A summary of these early Scottish attitudes is provided by the Rev. Andrew C. Ross :

(1) See, for example, Don Adams and M. Bjork, *Education in Developing Areas* (New York : David McKay, Inc., 1969), pp. 57, 63, 64.

(2) This difference between the Scottish and the other missionaries was not ignored by the local administration, which was heavily influenced by planters' opinions and was interested in maintaining an orderly, passive population. See, for example, George Shepperson and Thomas Price, *Independent African : John Chilembwe and the Origins, Setting, and Significance of the Nyasaland Native*

They saw African society as something valid, something to be built on and not something to be destroyed. They believed individual Africans to be capable of absorbing western culture which was not something to be left for their far-distant descendants. They did not just speak and write these things, but acted on them. (1)

« We all look forward hopefully », comments James W. Jack in 1900, « to the time when European missionaries will no longer be required, but Central Africa will be evangelized by its own sons and daughters with a self-supporting and self-governing church » (2).

The Scottish Free Church operated under the assumption that to be a Christian one had to become literate. Thus, in contrast to what obtained in sects where mass baptism was resorted to, the number of persons converted by the Scottish Free Church actually depended upon the number and success of their primary school students. It is not surprising, then, that their founding principle became the primary school itself. More than any other effort, it was the primary school that spread the quickest among the peoples of the Northern Region. From an initial figure of 2 in 1881 their number increased to 6 in 1885, 21 in 1889, 40 in 1893 (3), and 123 in 1900. From an initial student number of only 147, enrollment grew to over 11,000 by 1897 and 16,000 by 1900, an increment of 5,000 in three years. The phenomenon was described by James Jack in 1900 :

We referred to the demand for payment which many parents made on sending their children to school to « do the work of the book », regarding this as a great favour conferred on the white men. But this old idea is now rapidly dying through the force of public opinion, and, instead, it has become

Rising of 1915 (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 1958), pp. 363-80, and the Rev. Andrew Ross, « The African — A Child or a Man : The Quarrel Between the Blantyre Mission of the Church of Scotland and the British Central African Administration, 1890-1905 », *Zambesian Past : Studies in Central African History*, eds. E. Stokes and R. Brown (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1966), pp. 332-52.

(1) Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

(2) James W. Jack, *Daybreak in Livingstonia : The Story of the Livingstonia Mission in Central Africa* (New York : Fleming H. Revell Company, [1900 ?]), p. 337.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 317.

the fashion to learn at all costs. Instruction is valued above money, and the desire for literature is remarkable. The children not only flock to school now without payment at the earnest desire of their parents, but eagerly spend their money on books, pencils, and slates, while large numbers of old people — some of them « fighting men » — are exchanging their spears for books and learning to read at home. The teachers began by lending books, but, as a rule, they can now sell them at their proper value, so great is the « book fever ». Hundreds of Bibles, New Testaments, Gospels, hymnbooks, and school-books are thus scattered every year among the villages of Nyasaland, the precursors of a rich harvest in the future. « In this station alone », writes Donald Fraser from Ekwendeni, « quite a thousand volumes have been sold in the past eight months ». (1)

Perhaps the most unique aspect of the United Free Church was the inauguration in 1894 of several post-primary institutions at Livingstonia. A medical-technical school, an industrial school, and an evangelical school were constructed on the relatively unpopulated Mt. Waller plateau four hundred miles away from the burgeoning areas of European plantations and government administration. But unique to that area and to all Central Africa was the construction of a post-primary, four-year « junior school », a three-year (post-junior) normal school, and a theological seminary.

More than forty years before the government or any mission opened a secondary school, three hundred academic, post-primary pupils (2) were learning algebra, geometry, and English skills at the Overtoun Institution. While pupils at mission schools in the South concentrated on the simple vocational skills of gardening, brickmaking, carpentry, smithery, tailoring, and shoe repairing, advanced meteorological instruments were from the beginning used as pedagogical tools on Mt. Waller. Plants were brought from the Royal Botanical Gardens to teach, not vocational gardening, but botany. And even before a telegraph wire had been laid as far north from Blantyre as Florence Bay, Dr.

(1) *Ibid.*, pp. 317-18.

(2) Bridge Pachai, « In the Wake of Livingstone and the British Administration : Some Considerations of Commerce and Christianity in Malawi » (Paper presented at the Malawi Conference on History and Workshop for Secondary Schools, University of Malawi, Chancellor College, Blantyre, Malawi, June 17-19, 1967), p. 7.

Robert Laws had already trained a number of students in telegraphy (1).

The impact actually made by locating the Overtoun Institution on Mt. Waller in 1894 might be likened to what would have happened if an institution such as Harvard had been set up in nineteenth-century Montana. Modelled after a design of the Rev. Alexander M. McKay of Uganda, it was to be a school where no one was to be

... admitted onto the staff who ha[d] not been trained to teach. The pupils were to receive not an elementary, but as high an education as is in the power of their teachers to impart only with the proviso that every pupil is to become a teacher himself. (2)

Jack expressed the hope that this educational system created in the most isolated of areas would produce a maximum of impact. He trusts that these pupils, though hundreds of miles away from any major commercial or industrial activity,

may develop a strength of Christian character and a power for good that has never been surpassed in any country. They may not only become Christian historians, scientists, civilizers and governors, but they may live to turn the multitudinous tribes of Central Africa to righteousness and « shine as the brightness of the firmament, and as the stars for ever and ever ». (3)

The impact of the Free Church, though not as bright as the firmament, was, nevertheless, considerable. In the census of 1911, the government enumerators mention the fact that over 32,000 pupils were receiving secular elementary education in Free Church schools; and though there were eleven other missionary educational programs in Nyasaland, the Free Church in the North accounted for one-third of all primary and for 45 per cent of all post-standard-three pupils enrolled (4). By 1931, it was operating 644 schools, staffed with 1,347 African teachers (5).

(1) Jack, *op. cit.*, p. 341.

(2) The Rev. Alexander M. McKay, in *Church Missionary Intelligences* (January, 1890), as quoted in Jack, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

(3) Jack, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

(4) Nyasaland, *Census of 1911* (Zomba, Government Printer).

(5) Robert Laws, *Reminiscences of Livingstonia* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1934), p. 64, as quoted in A. J. Hanna, *The Beginnings of*

With the census of 1921, the impact had become more pronounced. Though the North Nyasa district accounted for only 13 per cent of the population, and for only 11 per cent of the tax receipts, and though its population density of ten per square mile hardly compared with the ninety per square mile near Blantyre (1), the greater number of civil servants, clerks, translators, teachers, and general « literati » came from the North. The census of 1945 demonstrates that even though the Southern Province had three times the population of the North and was greatly superior as regards communications and industrial, commercial and agricultural development, schools had become such an important part of the life of the Northern Region that it registered over twice the rate of general literacy and over three times the rate of English literacy among the 5-18 age group (2).

The director of the 1945 census gives an indication of the impact of the previous fifty years of primary education when he comments with surprise on the high quality of manpower available in the North. « It is worth placing on record », he writes, that the returns submitted have been exceedingly well compiled : arithmetical errors have been few and far between, and the returns from each sub-division of the district show a remarkable consistency. It is clear that the enumerators with a high standard of education and intelligence have been employed.... (3)

The efforts of the Scottish missionaries provided the primary schools of the Northern Region with high quality content, but it was the post-primary junior school and the (post-junior) teacher training college that provided the region with a steady stream of teachers and administrators who started their own schools all over the North years before Southerners could receive the same training. By 1940, primary education had become a common experience near the bomas of Rumpi, Karonga, and Nkata Bay.

It is likely that those who were trained at the Overtoun Institution came substantially from the Northern Region. Of the student

Nyasaland and North East Rhodesia, 1859-1895 (London : Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 17.

(1) Nyasaland, *Census of 1921* (Zomba, Government Printer).

(2) Nyasaland, *Census of 1945* (Zomba, Government Printer).

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 14.

population in 1897 only 16 out of 158 pupils questioned came from predominantly non-Northern ethnic groups (1). Unknowingly, what Robert Laws had in effect created was an elite training institution of such caliber as to be considered unique in an area stretching from the Lovedale Mission in South Africa to the missions in Kampala, Uganda. Though at an advantage technologically and economically, neither the Rhodesias nor Tanganyika developed any institutions of the same quality until the outbreak of World War II.

As commonly happened wherever western education was introduced, the recipients reaped the advantages of the new occupations associated with colonial administration, plantation agriculture, industrial mining, and retail commerce. However, the lack of any sizable economic activity in the North made only a minimal number of positions available around isolated missionary camps and government outposts. Even before the turn of the century the school system produced a class of literate individuals whose economic future depended on migration to the Shire Highlands, situated at some three hundred miles' distance. As early as 1886 the first group of twenty-five Tonga journeyed south to work in Blantyre for the African Lakes Corporation. Only eight years later, however, almost six thousand people were working in the South, « many in positions of responsibility » (2).

But because even the southern areas of Nyasaland were without sufficient employment opportunity, it quickly became common for Northerners to travel by foot to the mines of the copperbelt, four hundred miles to the west, or southward to the farms of Rhodesia, or to the South African goldfields. Because education was closely associated with migration, the establishment of a sound educational system in an area devoid of opportunity was noted as a mixed blessing. The disproportional location of schools in the North resulted in that region's equally disproportional loss

(1) Pachai, *loc. cit.*

(2) K. J. McCracken, « Livingstonia as an Industrial Mission : 1875-1900 : A Study of Commerce and Christianity in Nyasaland », *Religion in Africa*, ed. Centre for African Studies (Edinburgh : University of Edinburgh Press, 1964), p. 88, as quoted in Pachai, *ibid.*

from migration. In 1935, the Nyasaland governor described the Northern Region as « dead ground » because of the absence of young men (1). « If the migration rate of the 1930's was maintained », the Travers Lacey Committee feared,

home life will cease to exist....Immorality will be the rule....Venereal disease will affect one hundred percent of our native population....Large tracts of land will be rendered unfit for habitation and... the economic life of the whole country will suffer. (2)

By 1945, more than 11 per cent of the male population of the Northern Region were employed outside the Nyasaland Protectorate, a rate which was twice as large as that of the Central or Southern Regions (3), and by 1961 the rate of male external residence had increased to 33 per cent (4).

However, the effect of the school system was felt in still other ways. The Tonga and Tumbuka of the Northern Region who received their training in Livingstonia schools were noted over East, Central, and Southern Africa for their resourcefulness, intelligence, and academic qualities. Often the first to fill clerk, scribe, and « boss-boy » positions in the mines, they were also among the first to organize « native protective associations » (5), to organize mine worker unions and to call for strikes (6). They were heavily represented among the political parties of South Africa, Rhodesia, Zambia, and Malawi. The Overtoun Institution itself was influential in shaping the political attitudes of important

(1) F. E. Sanderson, « The Development of Labour Migration from Nyasaland, 1891-1914 », *Journal of African History*, II (1961), 270.

(2) Report of the Emigrant Labour Committee (Zomba : Government Printer, 1935), p. 19, as quoted in Sanderson, *loc. cit.*

(3) Nyasaland, *Census of 1945*, *op. cit.*

(4) Sanderson, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

(5) Robert I. Rotberg, *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa : The Making of Malawi and Zambia, 1873-1964* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 116.

(6) Clements Kadalie, a Tonga and a Livingstonia graduate, was the organizer of the first powerful South African trade union — the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union —, and in 1927 initiated what as yet has probably come closest to an African general strike in the Republic of South Africa. See Shepperson and Price, *op. cit.*, pp. 155 and 414, and Rotberg, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

religious and anticolonialist leaders such as : Tomo Nyirenda, of the Mwana Lisa Movement; Jordan Msuma, the first important post-World War I separatist; Levi Mumba, the first president of the Nyasaland African Congress; Yesaya Mwasi, correspondent to Marcus Garvey and founder of the « Blackman's Church of God Which Is in Tongaland »; Elliot Kamwana Achira, Nyasaland's first prophet; Charles Domingo, Nyasaland's most influential separatist and first political deportee; and Ngwazi Kamuzu Banda, a graduate of the University of Chicago and president of the Republic of Malawi (1).

Indicative of the impact of the educational system is a comment made in 1931 by a local Karonga district commissioner :

It is a peculiar thing that almost every highly educated native of the Livingstonia Mission is politically minded and race conscious and always on the look out for some stigma. At the back of their minds is an intolerance of the Europeans and their creed is « Africa for the Africans ». (2)

Thus from the very first grass-roofed mission schools in the 1870's a major system of education had been developed in Nyasaland's Northern Region. By Central African standards, sizable portions of the population were attending primary schools. The schools were organized and operated by Africans and it may be instructive to think of the area as an example of successful social change, catalyzed by adaption to, and absorption into, the local culture of an imported, change-orienting, status-producing institution.

It appears that Tonga and Tumbuka societies forged formal education in much the same manner as their forefathers had fashioned a spear. Aggressive, acquisitive, competitive, the previously war-skilled groups seemed to flock to school as though in preparation for battle. Though the curriculum was designed to Christianize, school learning seemed to be utilized more for purposes of economic competition than for reasons of salvation. Like the Ghanaian Akan, the Kenyan Kikuyu, or the Nigerian Ibo, the peoples of the Northern Region seemed to dominate the civil service, private enterprise, the incipient political bourgeoisie

(1) Rotberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-43, 147, 167, 172.

(2) Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 118.

and, with the introduction of secondary education in 1941, the student population of even the southernmost secondary schools.

Even allowing for the fact that the primary school as an institution owed its origin to persons who from a cultural and racial viewpoint were strangers, its diffusion was not symptomatic of an acquiescence to the white man's governmental or cultural domination. It appears as though the primary school was accepted for serving the specific purpose of facilitating geographical mobility and enhancing personal status. It seems as though the school was tolerated for its incursions into traditional customs in deference to its central role in the provision of personal and ethnic potency.

With the advent of majority rule, however, the primary school's major function was suddenly and without warning removed, while new functions, which perhaps had been latent for a considerable period of time, came to the fore and made themselves felt. Demands were placed upon the government to counter-balance the white collar hegemony of the Northern Region. Since that region possessed but 12.5 per cent of the total population (1), little parliamentary resistance could be mounted against these demands. And when in 1964 a coup, which might have benefited Northern interests, failed (2), the region was left to the political mercy of the more numerous Southerners. When the independent government undertook a major secondary school construction project, provision of schools for the North was limited to five, whereas eighteen schools were built in the Central and Southern Regions. Places in Form 1 of the national four-year boarding

(1) Malawi Government, *Compendium of Statistics for Malawi, 1966* (Zomba : Government Printer, 1966), p. 1.

(2) The attempted coup destroyed Malawi's university-educated population, which was of a predominantly Northern extraction. Helen Kitchen mentions that at the time of the introduction of self-government there were approximately thirty-three college graduates. Six of them (M. W. Chiume, H. Chipembere, Orton Chirwa, Augustine Bwanausi, Willie Chokani, and David Rubadiri) were exiled as a result of the coup. See Helen Kitchen, *The Educated African : A Country by Country Survey of Educational Development in Africa* (New York : Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), p. 226, and Rotberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 317-21.

secondary schools, instead of being assigned solely on the basis of ability, were allocated on an ethnic-regional criterion, and regional identity came to play an important role even in the acquisition of civil service posts, admittance to which could previously be gained only on the strength of personal capacity and achievement (1). It was forbidden to use Tumbuka, the language of the North, in the press and in government documents. The Chinyanja language of the Central Region, which was renamed Chichewa after the birthplace of the president, became the only officially recognized language beside English.

Yet, what is noteworthy is the fact that though the primary school in the North can no longer be utilized as the « spearhead » of ethnic occupational prowess, attendance rates have nowhere declined. In the old areas of Livingstonia activity, a full 90 per cent of the six-year-olds begin primary standard one. Tuition is as high as 12.5 per cent of the per capita income (2) and schools take able-bodied children away from the fields during economically crucial times. In contrast to what obtains in more highly developed countries, « school baby-sitting », which frees both parents for employment, is not noted as an advantage of schooling when older siblings fulfill that function at a very early age. Sending a child to school is most likely a distinct and important economic loss. The utilitarian private returns to primary education are, perhaps, dysfunctional and the primary school's function as a monetary investment source most likely has been replaced. What, then, propels children of the Northern Region into classrooms where there is little mandatory, much less enforceable legislation or economic incentive ?

We can only hypothesize as to the present function of the school. Like the traditional Anyão rites which used to initiate adolescents

(1) There are no published data to substantiate this. Evidence here was gathered informally through conversations with a number of headmasters who soon after the initiation of majority rule had been relieved of their control over admission policy.

(2) Tuition in standard one is one pound ten shillings. In standard four it is three pounds ten. In 1968 the per capita income for the country was approximately twenty pounds.

into adult society, the primary school experience may in fact be seen as necessary for normal ethnic and family group membership. The primary school may be viewed as « traditional » by virtue of the fact that it has commanded observance in the past. Its authority may be derived from both its previous performance and its connection with past symbols of authority, such as educated heroes of the past who have had the benefit of an education.

The norm of school attendance is perhaps accepted by the people in consequence of what professor Shils calls a « massive 'presentness' which excludes the perception of alternative norms » (1). Few Northerners, for example, could probably now conceive of an alternative to primary school training. The old initiation rites are gone, no Koranic schools exist as potential rivals, and the majority of the present pupils are second- and perhaps third- or fourth-generation literates. Perhaps the primary school has become sacred. It has its basis in authority — an authority that is subscribed to without exception by elders, parents, pastors and, now, even « ancestors ».

Minor societal reorganization and readjustment has occurred to accommodate the primary school's continuity. As it may be necessary for a suburban housewife to have a car to take her offspring to school, so a family bicycle may have to be loaned to the commuting pupil. Children's household chores have been altered so they now can be done early or late by the light of a lantern.

Primary school characteristics have been incorporated into local value expectations. Respect for the local teacher is positively associated with his pupil's school achievement. Notions to the effect that strict discipline in the classroom and even physical punishment are « good for children's character » are found to be common. Hard study and esoteric subject matter are believed to be normal; protests are raised against the introduction of agricultural, non-academic curriculum reforms.

We can hypothesize from the above that though economic motives have declined, psychic or non-monetary factors are now

(1) Edward Shils, « The Nature, Forms and Functions of Tradition : An Agenda for Discussion » (University of Chicago [Mimeo], n.d.), p. 1.

largely the impetus which leads pupils to attend Northern schools in large numbers.

Three role alterations may here be pointed out by way of a summary. Previously a tool used for the purpose of achieving ethnic migration and mobility, the primary school may now be considered the normal vehicle for providing the necessary qualifications for what in the past had been low-status occupations. Literacy among truck drivers, domestic servants, shop keepers, and waiters is becoming the norm. Literacy among farmers is not at all uncommon.

Secondly, while the primary school used to be a means of achieving personal social status, the expectations of similar success today are considerably lessened. However, primary school attendance may now be considered necessary for normal status maintenance. A child who does not receive any primary schooling in Rumpi or Karonga may now be considered underprivileged. Literacy is in the process of becoming a social norm and a social necessity for cultural reasons.

Lastly, the social dissonance factor has largely disappeared. Previously a « foreign » institution imported by « strangers » and utilized solely by a highly « westernized » segment of the population for specific purposes, the primary school may now have become a factor incorporated into the local concept of maturation. The primary school may already have been adopted into local needs and adapted to local environments. In fact, in an area like Northern Malawi, where high rates of attendance persist despite low measurable economic returns, the primary school may have become a « traditional » institution.