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A F R I C A N S T U D I E D I N S T I T U T E

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PEASANTS AND PLANTATIONS IN THE MULANJE AND THYOLO DISTRICTS OF SOUTHERN MALAWI, 1891-1951.*

R. B Boeder

INTRODUCTION

Although land and labour have been major themes in Malawi's colonial history, class formation and the development of the tea industry in the country's Southern Region have received very little attention. This paper is a first attempt to begin a discussion of these issues by focussing on the Lomwe people who immigrated into Malwi from Mozambique after 1890. Entering the country as refugees, most Lomwe had to accept servility under Yao and Mang'anja headmen or as tenants on estates. As their numbers grew they formed their own villages on Crown Land and became a peasantry producing cotton and tobacco as cash crops and maize for sale to Lomwe migrants employed as seasonal labourers on the estates. The tea plantations themselves were inefficient and poorly managed, depending largely on the exploitation of their workers for profits.

MULANJE DISTRICT

Mulanje District, the first new home for many immigrant Lomwe, is roughly rectangular in shape with its 1,510 square miles occupying the southeastern corner of the country. Geographically, the district can be divided in two with the northern two-thirds being hot, dry and low lying and the southern third, dominated by Mulanje Mountain being cooler and very wet. The twenty mile long Mulanje Massif was formed of granite, quartz and volcanic lava. Its eastern side is less steep than the rugged western slope with its sheer scarps, magnificent peaks and buttresses, especially the great naked precipice of Chambe. The mountain is the source of nearly every river and stream in the district. The Malosa River forms part of Malawi's eastern border with Mozambique before joining the southward flowing Ruo River.

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156 29.

The Thuchila River skirts the western side of the massif before it too meets the Ruo. The heaviest rains in the country fall on the southern and southwestern slopes of Mulanje; this became the "tea-belt". Every year from November through April eighty to one hundred inches of moisture is carried to the mountain on prevailing winds which came up from the Mozambique Channel. Its summit is covered with undulating grassy meadows broken by ravines and crowned by stony peaks. Before the colonial period the mountainside was covered with thick forest - cedar, mohogany and ebony.

Fort Lister Gap divides Mulanje from the detached cone of Mchesa Mountain to the north. A number of isolated smaller peaks stretch across flat country to the low-lying stagnant Lake Chilwa. The rich fish life of the lake attracts an enormous variety of birds - ducks, geese, cranes, flamingoes, pelicans, heron, gulls, ibis, sandpipers, curlew. During the early days there was an abundance of wild game in Mulanje District - leopard, klipsringer and thick tailed hare on the mountain; hippo and crocodile in the Ruo River pools; monkey, baboon, zebra, wild pig, hartebeest, reedbuck, gnu, kudu, lion and elephant on the plain.

During the nineteenth century Mulanje was inhabited by the Anyanja people. In the 1880's the Angoni drove the Yao of Mtiramanje, Matapwiri and Nkanda out of Zamba and Chiradzulu Districts south into Mulanje where they proceeded to enslave the Anyanja while harrassing the Church of Scotland Mission and the handful of European planters who had obtained freehold land in the tea belt. To control these depredations and to discourage any Portuguese attempts to extend their frontier westward the British Central Africa administration constructed three forts around Mulanje Mountain: Fort Lister in the gap on the northern side, Fort Anderson on the west, and Fort Mulanje on the southern side.

By the mid-1890's peace had broken out and Lomwe families were coming across the border to settle in the relatively empty Mulanje District where tax was lower then in Portuguese territory. There was freedom from sepoy brutality plus the opportunity to earn money by growing their own cotton, maize or tobacco or by working as transport carriers ("tenga-tenga") for the government or on European-owned estates.

John amd Fred Moir, co-founders of the African Lakes Corporation, were the first Europeans to obtain land at Mulanje. In 1891, they hired Henry Brown to come from Ceylon to plant coffee on their Lauderdale Estate.[1] Soon Brown purchased his own Thornwood Estate and he and the Moirs were joined by George Garden and A.C. Simpson who opened Eldorado and Esperanca Estates to coffee, cotton, chillies and tobacco. These original four estates were located on the wet south and west sides of the mountain. On the drier northern side the African Lakes Company planted tobacco on Chitakali Estate while on Lukulesi Estate the

A.L. Bruce Trust was growing cotton, coffee, rubber, sisal and chillies. As it turned out coffee was as unsuitable for Mulanje as it was for Ceylon so Brown planted some tea seeds at Lauderdale and Thornwood and by 1904 the bushes were producing tea for export.

In the same year a total of 10,408 people were employed on the six Mulanje estates while another 879 worked for the administration at Forts Lister and Anderson.[2] Nearly all of these labourers were Lomwe who had entered the district from Mozambique and attached themselves to Yao and Anyanja chiefs living on government owned Crown Land. Unlike the situation in neighbouring Thyolo and Chiradzulu Districts where many thousands of Lomwe eventually settled on private estates, in Mulanje District the newcomers took up residence primarily on Crown Land. No more than seven or eight thousand people ever became tenants in Mulanje so there was less chance of trouble with estate owners there and as we shall see, more opportunity to become peasant farmers than elsewhere in southern Malawi.

Africans first began growing cotton in Mulanje in 1904 using seed distributed free of charge by the energetic Collector, H.L. Duff. Results for the initial season were poor - just seven hundred pounds were produced but investigation showed this was because the chiefs to whom cotton seed was given did not spread it around. The next year Duff saw to it that seed plus instructions on planting and picking cotton were widely distributed and the result was production of 35,000 lbs. sold to the African Lakes Corporation. In 1906, Duff left the district and nothing was done about growing cotton, but thereafter African grown cotton showed steady if unspectacular improvement. (See figure 1)

Figure 1

Year	Cotton Produced (Tons) in Mulanje District, 1908-1914
1908-09	18
1909-10	54 1/3
1910-11	193
1911-12	267
1912-13	280
1913-14	127 (abnormal rain at a critical time accounts for decrease)

(Source: MNA. *Mulanje District Notebooks*)

In 1912, two cotton markets opened north of Mulanje Mountain and a number of ginneries were in operation. First grade cotton was purchased at 1 1/8d. per lb.; second grade cotton went for 1d. per lb.; and third grade cotton sold for 3/4d. per lb. Sales at these prices did not amount to vast amounts of money but the Lomwe were the keenest growers of cotton in Mulanje showing the same preference for peasant

production and sale of produce on the open market that Vail and White have noted of them in Mozambique.[3]

In 1907, the estimated maize crop grown in Mulanje was 13,000 tons; Africans harvested 5,000 tons of millet plus quantities of cassava, beans and pumpkins. By 1911 rice was being grown by Lomwe. It was purchased by government at ½d per lb. and used to feed prisoners and the army.[4] At the same time people were planting tobacco in their gardens. Thus in Mulanje District although commodity prices were low there was available land and the opportunity for new Lomwe immigrants to earn money without working on European estates or for the government.

Government employed the Lomwe to carry sawn timber down from the mountain and then overland to Blantyre and Zomba This was hard work, very poorly paid and resorted to only in desperation. By 1912, there were eighteen estates in Mulanje District including Mini Mini opened in 1911 by W.A. Grenenger who later moved into Portuguese territory to pioneer tea estates there and Sayama Estate, owned by the Blantyre and East Africa Company (the successor to African Lakes Corporation) but leased by J.S. Millar and J. Tennett. Both Mini Mini and Sayama were located in the heavily forested tea belt. The difficult task of clearing the huge trees and opening these estates required a considerable work force and up to 1911 the settlement of Lomwe in Mulanje District was actively encouraged by both the planters and by government which exempted the Lomwe from paying hut tax for their first year in the Protectorate.[5]

As H.L. Duff wrote, "Moreover it has been the policy of this district for several years to directly encourage the immigration of Anguru, and to endeavour by fair treatment to induce them to settle permanently in British Mlanji ..."[6] At that time there were only an estimated 20,000 Lomwe in a total Mulanje District population of 60,000. Fifteen years later, following a dramatic increase in the numbers of Lomwe in the district, the government did a complete about face in its policy on Lomwe immigration.

RIPPLE EFFECT ON SOUTHERN AFRICAN LABOUR MARKET

The movement of Lomwe from Mozambique into Malawi was part of the "ripple effect" characteristic of the Southern African labour market. Immigrant workers tended to move into poorly paid jobs in neighbouring countries which the local men refused preferring instead to seek better paid employment elsewhere. Thus while a few Yao and Ngoni worked as capitaos on Malawi plantations the vast majority of their fellow tribesmen went off to Rhodesia or South Africa leaving local jobs to the Lomwe. In Rhodesia, Malawians worked on maize farm jobs shunned by the Shona and Ndebele while in South Africa they laboured on underground mine tasks rejected by local blacks.[7]

In Southern Africa the "ripple effect" has been encouraged by employers who always preferred hiring migrant workers unencumbered by family or social obligations rather than locally based labour. Migrants were willing to work for less because they did not have their traditional economy to fall back on and being strangers in a foreign land made them psychologically more malleable than local workers. African migrant labourers tended to look to their employers for protection and job security and thus were less likely to rebel than locals.

Malawians rarely took their womenfolk abroad with them. Although there was always a lot of seasonal migration of young Lomwe men moving back and forth between their Mozambiquan villages and Malawian plantation employment many Lomwe eventually brought their families with them making their shift in location permanent.

It was worthwhile for Malawians to look for jobs elsewhere. Whereas the minimum Protectorate wage in 1903 was three or four shillings per month an individual could earn 15/- to 30/- on a Rhodesian mine or over £2 per month on a South African mine. But once firmly ensconced in their new home the Lomwe tended to stay put. It was always the northern districts of Malawi where wage employment was non-existent that provided the bulk of migrant labourers. The southern districts where jobs or peasant agricultural possibilities were available usually accounted for one-third of the men leaving the country. Labour recruiters were not allowed to work in the main plantation districts and if a tenant was not present to do his "thangata" then his family could be evicted from home and garden.

Early Protectorate fiscal policy encouraged Africans to work. The 6/- hut tax first introduced by Sir H.H. Johnston in 1892 was virtually uncollectable in a country with such a small cash economy, but by 1901 the rebate system had begun which made the tax easier to collect. Hut tax remained at 6/- but if an African could produce a labour certificate signifying that he had worked for a European employer during the year he only had to pay 3/-. This was a government compromise to mollify local planters who protested constantly that allowing people to migrate southwards was strangling the labour market in Malawi. Government always responded by suggesting that higher wages and improved food and housing facilities might bring out more workers.[8] Actually the Lomwe solved the perennial Protectorate labour shortage but most of the planters argued that more pay meant less work so they never took advantage of what amounted to a labour glut.

TEA IN MALAWI

Mulanje is an excellent tea growing area, free from pests and diseases. The plant itself flourishes best in a forcing climate where sunshine and showers alternate. This condition prevails during the rainy season at Mulanje. Until the

mid-1960's, Malawi had the most extensive area of tea under cultivation anywhere in Africa. As part of world production it was only a drop in the bucket (3% during the 1940's), but it was an important part of Malawi's colonial economy, especially after 1933 when Thyolo District began producing. (See Figure 2 for comparative values of tobacco and tea exports from 1924 to 1937.)

Figure 2

Comparative Value of Malawi tobacco and tea exports, 1924-1937 (£)

Year	Tobacco	Tea
1924	352,348	57,046
1925	345,872	64,242
1926	457,122	62,675
1927	780,964	56,640
1928	496,561	73,599
1929	403,678	74,383
1930	484,739	56,543
1931	400,897	49,129
1932	565,576	42,898
1933	389,794	59,656
1934	470,405	171,470
1935	296,932	223,876
1936	390,587	256,870
1937	423,994	326,038

Sources: *Nyasaland Protectorate Blue Books for 1928, 1932 and 1937.*

A major problem with Malawi tea on the international market has been its low quality. In the early days this was due mainly to the fact that the men who founded the industry had had no experience in tea planting elsewhere so Malawi could not take advantage of the failures and success in India and Ceylon in particular. Methods of cultivation, manufacturing and labour practices all fell far behind the major tea producers and local teamen seemed unwilling or unable to take advantage of expert advice when it was offered.

Tea was first planted at Mulanje in 1891. Thirty years later, Captain R. Noble, an experienced Assam planter, visited the district and reported on what be found there. He wrote, "I am convinced that this is a wonderful tea district ... but due to present methods of pruning, plucking and manufacturing all that is produced is 'muck'."[9] The tea plots were not hoed frequently or deep enough and the implements used were too small. Annual forking around the stems of bushes to prevent them from being earthed up by white ants was entirely neglected. Pruning which was supposed to build up a large framework for the tea bush to

make plucking more efficient was badly done. Plucking, the most important job was also poorly done. The preliminary and vital operation of "tipping", i.e. taking the young leaves above a certain height at the beginning of the plucking season was practically non-existent. In the case of mature bushes, the leaf was allowed to grow to far too great a height before plucking commenced. Eventually, when the leaves were plucked they were frequently hard and unsuitable for tea making. Thus, half the possible crop was lost. When new areas were cleared for tea the stumps were not sufficiently removed. In later years this resulted in stump rot and the entire field had to be cleared and replanted. Manuring was insufficient. No one seemed to know what ph factor meant. Noble reported that the Mulanje tea factories were very dirty and there seemed to be no care taken in any of the factory processes of withering (drying the tea), rolling, fermenting, firing, sorting or packing. Even factory buildings were badly designed. The estates did not seem concerned about organising a regular and trained labour force which would be available the year round. He recommended wage incentives or some form of compulsion to produce better workers.[10]

THYOLO DISTRICT

Thyolo District is bounded on the north by Blantyre District; on the east by Chiradzulu and Mulanje Districts and the Ruo River; and on the south by Nsanje (formerly Lower Shire) and Chikwawa Districts. Its outstanding geographical feature is Thyolo Mountain, 5,304 feet (1,462 meters) - which extends north and south in long ridges which drop sharply along the Thyolo Escarpment to the Shire River in the west. The mountain's eastern slopes form the greatest part of the district, undulating down to the Thuchila and Ruo Rivers in the east. With a land area of 625 square miles, Thyolo is one of Malawi's smaller districts, but on the whole it is the best watered and has the richest soil in the country.

Thyolo's first inhabitants were the Mang'anja people of Chewa origin, many of whom were driven into the district during Yao slave wars of the 1850's and '60's. In 1893, they were joined by a small group of Ngoni brought down from Ntcheu District to work on tobacco estates in the northern part of Thyolo owned by Mr. E.C.A. Sharrer. In 1902, Mr. Sharrer's personal land holdings in Thyolo district amounting to 152,658 acres were sold to the British Central Africa Company. The other major land holder in the district was the Blantyre and East Africa Company with 59,429 acres.[11]

For the first two decades of the 20th century Thyolo remained undeveloped, heavily wooded and relatively underpopulated. Cotton, sisal and tobacco were grown on a few estates with mixed results; disease struck at tobacco, the

sisal market was weak, and the weather too wet and cold for cotton. Construction of the Shire Highlands Railroad from Nsanje to Limbe between 1903 and 1908 was the outstanding economic event of the pre-World War I period. Passing as it did along the boundary between Thyolo, Mulanje and Chiradzulu Districts it was natural for Lomwe men to form the majority of railroad construction workers. They were paid 6/- or 7/- per month and were given food posho of maize flour, rice or beans, salted fish and vegetables.[12] When the railway was completed the Lomwe workers tended to settle on undeveloped land in Thyolo District, much of it British Central Africa Company property.

In 1919, the company decided to develop its Thyolo property by inducing forty or fifty ex-British Army officers to come to Malawi on a settlement scheme. The "B.C.A. Settlers" came out on three year contracts; they received £12.10.0 per month the first year and slight increases over the next two years. At the end of their contracts the company undertook to sell them each one thousand acres on which they could begin their own planting operations. Prices for this land ranged from 30/- to £3 per acre which was way beyond the means of most of the settlers. Housed in wattle and daub huts, reliant on Africans for what they could learn about planting, they were left to sink or swim. Most of them went under. It was during this same period from 1920 to 1924 that the company allowed onto its land uncontrolled numbers of Lomwe immigrants from Mozambique.[13]

This flood of people produced two problems which caused a great deal of trouble in the future. First, because of their large numbers and the limited amount of land available for settlement the Lomwe could no longer practice their usual form of shifting cultivation and making small irregularly shaped gardens surrounded on all sides by thick undergrowth which prevented erosion. Every square centimeter of land was utilised resulting in extensive erosion and soil exhaustion. Not being a cattle keeping people, the Lomwe did not realise the value of cow manure as fertiliser and there was no room for animals anyway. Second, the hard-nosed highly disciplined approach of the ex-army officers towards their Lomwe tenant workers resulted in the very bad reputation Thyolo planters have had ever since with Africans which contrasts with the more amiable landlord-tenant relationship in Mulanje District.[14]

Thyolo District Annual reports are full of comments on poor landlord-tenant relations. In 1938, the District Commissioner wrote "... that Cholo planters, speaking generally, have a bad name with labour ..."[15] Fifteen years earlier the report for 1923 remarked on the "constant friction between some of the European Estate owners and their tenants" and the need for tact in calling tenants for work and giving consideration to the African point of view. In 1923, four European planters in the district were fined for assaulting Africans and that must have been merely the tip of the iceberg.[16]

Usually the assaults arose over disputes involving "thangata" or non-payment of wages. Under terms of the Native Rents (Private Estates) Ordinance of 1917, a tenant who refused to work or pay rent could be evicted. In practice, tenants were rarely given the option of paying rent in cash. Instead they were required to work for six months of the year; if they balked they were evicted. Withholding of wages was a common practice designed to keep people at work. Anyone who slacked off during one month was not paid for the previous month.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

If a European planter in Malawi was inefficient or under-capitalized as most were he was wiped out by the Great Depression and forced to move on, often to Southern Rhodesia. For Africans not so dependent on cash for bare survival the effects of the world-wide economic slump were mixed but tended to be negative. Skilled workers - carpenters, brick makers, brick layers, tailors, sawyers and clerks - had a harder time than the unskilled. Migration southwards was not the answer to unemployment in Malawi because jobs were also scarce in Salisbury and Johannesburg. Since many European land owners and leasers simply walked away from their estates Africans were free to occupy the abandoned lands and their gardens could be as large as they wanted. Larger gardens meant an increase in maize production which resulted in lower prices in an already cash-short economy. In 1930, Thyolo District Commissioner, Eric Smith, commented that he did not like to see the price of maize drop below 1d. for three lbs. because the returns for the labour which went into growing the maize were so pitifully small at that price. As it turned out 1d. for three lbs. was a relatively high price for maize in depression Malawi. In 1931, there was a very large maize harvest of 14,461 tons in Thyolo. Asian middle men offered only 1d. for six lbs. for the crop.[18]

Trade stagnation and the lack of cash money in circulation meant not only a low price for garden produce but fewer jobs, more crime, and it made paying taxes more difficult. During 1930, Smith carried out an assessment of African wealth in Thyolo District. He found the incidence per adult male to be 5/1½d. whereas the tax was 6/- up to 31 October. Thereafter a penalty was imposed for late payment of one extra shilling in November and two extra shillings in December.[19]

Hut tax fell from £12,426-18 collected in 1932 to £11,162,14 for 1933. Pay on the tea estates for the simplest job of hoeing was as low as 5/- per month plus 6d. per week posho. To add to the general difficulties Lake Chirwa dried up in 1932-33 and the fish industry collapsed thereby throwing many people - fishermen, canoe makers, fish carriers, fish sellers, net makers - out of work and

depriving Africans of an important source of protein in their diets.[20]

KULULILA VILLAGE

In good times many people in Mulanje District made a living growing tobacco but poor prices during the depression forced them into low wage employment on the tea estates. A case in point is what happened to the people of Kululila Village, located along the main road from Thyolo to Mulanje just a few miles from Luchenza. The people of Kululila were all Lomwe who came from Quelimane District to Mozambique to Chiradzulu District in 1896. After quarrelling with the Ngoni there they moved to Chief Matapwiri's area on the northern side of Mulanje Mountain. They were satisfied there but crop failure and famine in 1904 forced them to move ten miles east to Likabula. In 1915, land shortage caused them to move again to Chande, the area where the first huts of Kululila were constructed in 1922.

The village was in an excellent location near both a macadamized road and the Shire Highlands Railway with good soil and water supplies. Initially, the people planted tobacco which did very well during the 1920's. For a while I. Conforzi and Company purchased tobacco for 8d. per lb. and the Lomwe prospered but when tobacco prices fell to 4d. per lb. then 2d. and lower in the early 1930's the people abandoned the crop. The villagers then turned to furniture building for the new estates opening up in Thyolo District but transportation was not available so the carpentry phase ended as well. Mats, pots and cooking sticks were manufactured during the depression but most people turned to labouring on the estates or tobacco handling in Limbe for cash. They would have been far happier as peasant farmers producing cash crops, but were defeated by economic events in distant countries far beyond their control.[21]

In addition, as occupiers of a kind of economic growth point the people of Kululila Village had come to expect a higher standard or living than those living in more remote parts of Mulanje District. When the tobacco price declined they were forced to seek better paid employment elsewhere in order to maintain their living standard. In effect they were peasants who became proletarianized by the temptations of material progress. As we shall see other villagers were content to receive 2d. per lb. for their tobacco and remain peasant producers rather than accept the lure of estate or town wages which inevitably brought about important changes in the way people lived.

Just as there was a ripple effect in Southern African labour migration in general so there developed a similar phenomena on a local basis in Southern Malawi and Mozambique. This situation is related to dependency theory and is also a variation on the core-periphery concept

whereby white settler islands pumped a certain amount of cash into black areas while draining them of their labour. In the Thyolo/Mulanje case four ripples or concentric circles can be identified. At the center were the estates. Surrounding them was a peri-estate sector (Kululila Village being the example) in which in classic under-development fashion the peasant sector was first built up with good prices for cash crops then brought down by an economic depression in the capitalist countries. The Africans who were affected by this boom-bust syndrome were unwilling to abandon their higher standards of living by accepting lower prices for their produce so they had no choice but to become a proletariat on the estates and in the towns. A third circle was formed by Thyolo/Mulanje Crown Landers whose economic expectations were not as well developed as those of the peri-estate people and who were willing to accept low cash crop prices and remain peasants rather than seeking employment on the estates. The fourth circle was inhabited by Lomwe villagers in Mozambique who preferred emigrating to Malawi to work for low wages in unskilled estate jobs to the forced labour situation which was such a common feature of life in their country of birth.

MULANJE DISTRICT

By 1935, the depression in Mulanje District was abating, tea production was on the increase, and many locally-based Lomwe were becoming peasant farmers growing tobacco. The poorly paid tea estate hoeing jobs were taken by young unmarried Lomwe coming over from Mozambique to work for six or nine months at a time on a contract basis. These men were charged with an Immigrant Native Poll Tax of 6d. per month which was usually paid by the estates themselves then deducted from wages. In 1935, there was a labour surplus in Mulanje and many of the estimated 6,000 Lomwe immigrants took employment with Lomwe tobacco growers. (See Figure 3 for Mulanje District Tobacco Production figures from 1930 to 1945).

To begin with licensed buyers purchased the African grown tobacco, most of which was produced on Crown Land. Both quality and prices were low but buyer competition was keen. Since there was no grading of the leaf before sale there was no real incentive to improve quality with the entire lot being bought up.

Figure 3

Mulanje District African Grown Tobacco Production, 1930-45

Year	Tons
1930	213
1931	218
1932	351
1933	391
1934	582
1935	300
1936	545
1937	698
1938	497
1939	417
1940	471
1941	762
1942	1,148
1943	970
1944	813
1945	599

Source: Mulanje District Commissioner Annual Reports.[22]

together. By 1936 there were 5,344 Africans to Mulanje District registered with the Native Tobacco Board, all but 401 on Crown Land. Although prices averaged only 2d. per lb. thousands more applied but were refused when the board initiated a quota on growers. Firewood was used to cure the tobacco so one unfortunate result of the industry was the deforestation of the northern portion of the district. Proceeds from tobacco sales were often reinvested in cloth and salt which were retailed in villages for profit.

In 1938, a new government-controlled tobacco marketing system was introduced whereby growers had no choice but to sell to government buyers. In the past they could shop around for the best deal. The new system worked only as long as prices stayed up. 1939 saw a decline in price and a corresponding fall in production and the number of registered growers. Many switched to maize.

In 1940, after Malawi's African grown fire-cured tobacco found a new market in West Africa, the price went up to 3.92d per lb. Communal tobacco nurseries were established at four locations in the district and acreage increased. In 1942, another price rise to 4 1/4d. per lb. produced a major increase in production. The average amount produced per grower was 250 lbs. netting each farmer £4.5.0. There was a food surplus in Mulanje at the same time with 2175 tons of maize, 173 tons of beans, 153 tons of rice and a great deal of cassava sold through government-controlled markets.

The war years brought relative affluence to the Lomwe of Mulanje which became the most prosperous and most populous district in the country with a 1943 population of 235,926 Africans (80% Lomwe), 138 Europeans and 163 Asians. Although prices rose to 4.66d per lb. in 1941 tobacco production fell after 1942 due to excessive rain and the high demand for food crops. In 1945, drought in South Africa created a good market there for nandolo beans. Asian traders bought them at 2d. per lb. and made a profit of £10 per ton exported.

Asian middlemen typically profited at African expense. In 1936 they purchased African grown maize to Mulanje District at the astoundingly low price of ten or twelve lbs. per 1d. then delivered it to estates at 25/- or 30/- per ton, a profit of 2½ to 3 times. Native Authorities protested against this practice saying, "Let the Indians keep to their cloth and their stores and leave our maize alone". The tea estates, making their own considerable war-time profits, were the real beneficiaries.

In the 1930's Mulanje District Commissioners such as Keppel-Compton urged that Africans form their own producer cooperatives to get full benefit from their efforts. Nothing was done along these lines until 1943 when the Native Foodgrowers Association was formed. Members wanted to sell their maize at 3 lbs. for 1d.; the estates offered 1d. for 5 lbs. After a boycott and government intervention a compromise was reached with the Mlanje Planters Association at a price of 4 lbs. for 1d. In 1943 the Mlanje Native Association was formed. Its members, the Foodgrowers people and those belonging to the Native Committees Meeting were from the same class of people - educated government and estate clerks, mission teachers and African traders. In addition, they all belonged to the Lomwe Tribal Association.[23]

THYOLO DISTRICT

In 1928, a new Natives on Private Estates Ordinance was promulgated. Under its provisions landlords were required to grant resident tenants sites for their houses, the use of enough land to grow food, the right to obtain materials to build and maintain houses, and the right to collect firewood on the estate. Tenants were obligated to pay rent revisable every five years, or they could choose to work on the estate for wages and thus qualify for a rebate on rent at the rate of one-third for each working month between October and February or one-sixth for the months from March through September. If the tenant wanted to work but there was nothing for him to do the landlord had to provide facilities for the tenant to grow cash crops which the landlord could purchase at current market rates and this also entitled tenants to rent rebates. Tenants could be evicted for misconduct or non-payment of rent only

at the end of each five year (quinquennial) period. At that time the landlord could evict only ten per cent of his tenants after providing six months notice.[24]

In the early 1930's very few landlords took advantage of the quinquennial eviction clause. In September 1933, at the end of the first five year period, 208 or 2½% of the total tenants in Zomba District were served with quit notices; 207 or 5% in Chiradzulu District; 25 or 3% in Blantyre District; 299 or 2 1/4% in Thyolo; and 42 or 1 3/4% in Mulanje. If the tenant paid his rent the notice was withdrawn so in Thyolo only 150 of the 299 notices were actually enforced.[25]

The reasons so few notices were given were ignorance of the ordinance on the part of many landlords and their desire to retain a captive work force. In the face of labour shortages it made no sense to evict tenants who were obliged to work if they wanted to keep their homes and gardens. But towards the end of the decade and in the early 1940's land grew scarce and the major land owners began issuing large numbers of quit notices - in 1938, 2000 by the Bruce Estate and Blantyre and East Africa Company combined and 1,200 by the British Central Africa Company. Most tenants decided to pay up or work for three months to avoid being evicted. Only 42 were actually moved in Thyolo District but the quinquennial clause worried the more thoughtful district officials.

In 1939, Thyolo District Commissioner Eric Smith noted that often estate rents were too high for tenants who were self employed or worked for someone other than their landlord or were single females. The lack of Crown Land on which the government was obliged to re-settle evicted tenants was another concern. If many landlords ordered ten per cent of their tenants to quit a serious political problem could develop.[26] From the African viewpoint the five year clause added to tenant feelings of insecurity and made people reluctant to improve their homes.

Meanwhile, tea was transforming Thyolo District into a place of prosperity, at least for Europeans. After the failure of tobacco, sisal and cotton, district planters turned to tea. By 1933, the plants were maturing, finance had been found to construct some tea factories and more money was in circulation. This prompted Eric Smith to comment that, "In Cholo District, at least, the band of silver lining in the sky shows signs of widening".

The picture for Africans was still far from rosy. In 1933, the average pay for estate labour in Thyolo was 5/- or 6/- per month plus 2d. per week posho or its food equivalent. As estimated 8,000 people were employed at any one time with 3,800 children added to the work force during the peak plucking months. The children were paid 3/- per month plus 3d. per week posho for hoeing weeds.[27]

In 1933, a decade after Captain Noble's visits Dr. Harold H. Mann, a noted tea expert, visited Malawi to study

its tea cultivation with special reference to the fast-developing Thyolo District. Thyolo's higher elevation and lower rainfall made it less suitable than Mulanje for tea but the richness of its soil more than made up for its failings. The dry season of the year from May to November -- partly cold and partly very hot -- made special plucking, pruning and cultivation methods necessary. In Thyolo especially tea plants had to be pruned during the dry season or risk losing all their leaves just before the advent of the rains. The application of nitrogenous manures and sulphate of ammonia was necessary to raise the acid and organic contents of the soils. Malawi tea was characterised by low yields per acre so Mann recommended that Indian seeds be imported to increase production.

Better plucking methods were also suggested as a way of increasing yields. The "two leaves and a bud" formula followed throughout the tea world was encouraged but with greater care to take the leaf and the bud as soon as possible after it was formed. This "close plucking" required a trained work force which was not available. Mann repeated Noble's earlier call for scrupulous cleanliness at every stage of manufacturing. Summing up his impression of the Malawi tea industry he wrote,

> I must confess that while I see the possibility of a very substantial improvement in the quality of the tea produced in Nyasaland, I do not see much evidence that Mlanje and Cholo are likely to produce a really high quality product. To get even the improvement of quality that I can foresee as possible, will mean the adoption of considerable modifications in both pruning and plucking, and a good deal more control in the manufacture.[28]

The recommendations of both Noble and Mann seemed to be falling on deaf ears. In 1935, a few years after Mann's visit the Lujeri Estate tea buying department in Great Britain reported that Malawi teas on sale there including those from Lauderdale Estate, supposedly the best in the country:

> are black in liquor and taste like sea-weed. It is a great pity that they put this type of tea on the market. It gives the country a bad name for tea, and consequently, the trade now brand all tea coming from Nyasaland as common. Of course, this does not affect us as we do not have to print our Manufacture.[29]

By 1938, there were eight tea factories in Thyolo, 40,000 lbs. of green leaf were picked every day of the plucking season, and wages had risen slightly to 8/- or 9/- for

unskilled workers. The average tea plucker earned between 15/- and 30/- per month and worked for six months of the year. The more progressive planters were offering 9d. per week posho and a free hot meal to all field workers.[30] But the manner in which pluckers were paid was very unfair and undoubtedly aroused some hard feelings among African workers.

Under the task system pluckers had to pick a certain amount of tea each day in order to be paid, but frequently the daily task was not set until the end of the week. Since one was paid nothing if the task was not achieved pluckers had to keep working the entire day to ensure they would earn something. They were paid a bonus for any "overtask", i.e. any amount of tea plucked which was more than the daily task. Overtask payments were supposed to be an incentive to higher production and thus should have been paid at a higher rate but that did not happen. Instead they were paid less. For example, pluckers might be paid 7d. per day for picking a task of 25 lbs. of leaf, i.e.3 4/7 lbs per penny, but the overtask was paid at only 6,7 or 10 lbs. per penny.[31] In effect, the so-called bonus system did not encourage greater effort and ironically, the Malawian worker who had such a good reputation for hard work abroad was regarded as lazy and shiftless by European planters at home. Higher wages, better housing, more food, and improved working conditions in general were the answer to the Malawians malaise in his own country but for many years the estate owners did only the bare minimum to make their employees happier.

In 1938, there was a labour shortage caused by increased labour requirements on the estates plus a restriction on the movement of workers across the border imposed by Portuguese authorities. For the first time a few of the more progressive employers such as I. Conforze began offering improved food and better housing to their skilled workers. In 1939, the demand in Thyolo was for 13,200 workers, but most of the time around 10,000 were actually employed. Of these, 4,378 were tenants. The rest, roughly 60%, were from outside the district, usually young Lomwe men from Mozambique. These were called "chitando" labour after the name for the crude thatch huts in which they were housed. They did the hoeing which tenants refused to do preferring instead the skilled, higher paid, factory, plucking and pruning jobs. Since pluckers were in short supply there was much unplucked tea during the peak rainy season months when the tea was "flushing", growing new leaves and buds every day. This meant that the Malawi tea industry was not as efficient as it would have been but again it was the industry's own fault in its unwillingness to treat its employees fairly.

There was never any lack of bodies in Thyolo and Mulanje, but tea estate labour shortages were chronic. A 1951 government labour department investigation into the problem

by Mr M.C. Hoole revealed that the 30% absenteeism rate on the estates was largely the fault of low wages -- 17/6 for a 30 day ticket plus 2/- per week posho. As usual, Malawian wages compared unfavourably with the average Rhodesian pay of 40/- per ticket and the South African mine wage of 2/8 per shift plus relatively decent food and housing. Among other things, the planters blamed this situation on too much beer and gin drinking, laziness, too much money in circulation and not enough taxation. Housing conditions varied but much was sub-standard. Incentives for continuity of work were minimal -- in Thyolo, 1/- per ticket to workers who completed 8, 9, or 10 tickets in a single year, i.e. to people who worked virtually all the time. (Most averaged 4.4 months out of the year). Welfare and amenities were few.

The report criticized the way in which the tea business was organised with control of many estates vested in a board of directors in London who were interested mainly in dividends. The visiting agent system whereby managers of rival Thyolo and Mulanje estates were selected by the London boards to inspect and report on their estates was also questioned. A visiting agent might report negatively on any improvement scheme he was not prepared to recommend for his own estate. European managers were paid low salaries but received a commission on net profits which encouraged them to keep labour costs down since they were always the largest single estate budget item. The task was attacked as being unfair. Use of "children not much bigger than the hoes they were carrying" as estate labour was also condemned.

As a bare minimum for improving working conditions in the tea industry Hoole recommended the building up of a semi-permanent trained labour force divorced from producing its own food. The men should be accompanied by their families and offered attractive rates of pay with fixed annual leave periods. They should be provided with satisfactory housing and a balanced diet plus organised recreational and other amenities.[32] Nothing was done to implement these suggestions and the result was the 1953 Malawi uprising the largest peasant revolt in Southern Africa since 1896.

NOTES

1. B. Pachai, *Malawi: The History of the Nation* (London 1973), 158.
2. *Mlanje District Notebook for 1904*, Malawi National Archives, hereafter MNA.
3. H.L. Vail and L. White, *Capitalism and Colonialism in Mozambique* (London 1980).
4. *Mlanje District Notebook for 1907-1910*, MNA.
5. *Mlanje District Annual Report for 1932*, MNA File Number S1/43/33.
6. *Mlanje Notebook 1907-1910.*
7. R.B. Boeder, 'Malawians Abroad. The History of Labor Emigration from Malawi to its Neighbours from 1890 to the Present', Ph.D., Michigan State University, 1974, 56.
8. Ibid.
9. R. Noble, 'Practical Notes on Tea Cultivation and Manufacture in Nyasaland', in MNA File Number A3/2/240, Tea - General, December 1916-July 1923.
10. Ibid.
11. *History of the Blantyre and East Africa Company*, MNA File Number 12405 and *History of the British Central Africa Company*, MNA File Number 12258.
12. 'Sir Alfred Sharpe and Early Railway Development in Malawi', in *Society of Malawi Journal*, 2(July 1980), 46.
13. MNA 12258.
14. Interview with Dr G. Conforzi, 19 June, 1981 at Thyolo.
15. *Cholo District Annual Report for 1938*, MNA File Number NSE 5/1/5.
16. *Cholo District Annual Report for 1923*, MNA File Number 5/1/1.
17. *Cholo District Annual Report for 1944*, MNA File Number NSE 5/1/8.
18. *Cholo District Annual Reports for 1930 and 1931*, MNA File Number NSE 5/1/3.

19. *Cholo District Annual Report for 1933*, MNA File Number NSE 5/1/4.

20. *Mlanje District Annual Report for 1933*, MNA File Number NSM 3/1/5.

21. Kanjo, C.F., 'Kululila Village, Mulanje District', Fourth Year University of Malawi Unpublished Geography Dissertation, 1969.

22. Lilongwe and Dowa District African-grown tobacco figures are listed here for comparison.

Lilongwe District		Dowa District	
Year	Tons	Year	Tons
1935	1718	1935	1250
1936	2500	1936	1233
1939	2262	1939	666
1940	3007	1940	899
1941	3761	1941	996
1942	4321	1942	1051

23. *Mlanje District Annual Reports for 1935-1945*, MNA File Numbers NSM 3/1/5; 3/1/6; 3/1/7; 3/1/8.

24. *Nyasaland Protectorate Annual Report Upon Native Affairs for 1931*, MNA.

25. *Nyasaland Protectorate Annual Report Upon Native Affairs for 1933*, MNA.

26. *Cholo District Annual Report for 1930*, MNA File Number NSE 5/1/3.

27. *Cholo District Annual Report for 1933*, MNA File Number NSE 5/1/4.

28. Harold H. Mann, *Report on Tea Cultivation and its Development in Nyasaland*, published in 1933 on behalf of the Nyasaland Government by the Crown Agents for the Colonies, MNA.

29. Letter of 26 March 1935 from C.F.S. Shaw of Lujeri Estate to Dr Small, Director of Agriculture, Zomba, in MNA File Number A3/2/241, Tea Cultivation and Manufacture, 1929-1937.

30. *Cholo District Annual Report for 1938*, MNA File Number NSE 5/1/5.

31. *Report by Southern Province Labour Officer for April 1953*, in MNA File Number 23393, Tea Industry Wages and Conditions of Employment.

32. M.C. Hoole, enquiry into the Shortage of Labour in the Cholo and Mlanje Districts with particular reference to the Tea Industry', MNA 18918.

